

Chapter 1

Rallying Against the Conflictinator

**Jon Stewart, Neil Postman,
and Entertainment Bias**

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While *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is certainly entertaining, it can also deliver a deeper analysis of our contemporary media environment. Indeed, hidden within many of host Jon Stewart's funniest jokes are implicit critiques of the way television tends to conduct its public discussions of important issues. For instance, Stewart's opening rundown of the news as covered by the 24-hour cable networks doesn't merely ridicule the day's major players and events; often, it goes even further, making fun of television's most basic reporting and presentation techniques. In this way, over-the-top visual and audio elements, attractive but superficial "Senior Correspondents," and all the other trappings of TV newscasts become fodder for *The Daily Show's* writing staff. Not simply a "fake news" program, then, *The Daily Show* offers a rare brand of humor that requires its audience to recognize a more serious and philosophical criticism of contemporary television journalism.

From time to time, Stewart takes these implicit criticisms of contemporary media and makes them explicit. Such was the case during his October 2004 appearance on CNN's *Crossfire*, during which he begged his hosts to "stop hurting America" with their substitution

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of entertaining pseudo-journalism for serious reporting and debate. Through this bold, format-breaking effort, Stewart highlighted the difference between thoughtful discussion and the theater of today's vapid television punditry. Subsequent exchanges with CNBC's Jim Cramer and Fox's Chris Wallace allowed Stewart to further advance his argument. And as we will see, Stewart's analysis echoes that of the celebrated New York University media theorist Neil Postman, whose discerning insights seem to ground some of *The Daily Show's* sharpest comic bits.

Amusing Ourselves to Death

Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is a book that aims to show how the media we use to communicate with one another can influence the content of our conversations. Postman acknowledges a significant intellectual debt to Marshall McLuhan, and sees his own thesis as something of a revised version of McLuhan's famous pronouncement that "the medium is the message."¹ However, Postman extends McLuhan's ideas in ways that are both distinctive and significant.

For example, consider Postman's discussion of smoke signals. While the medium of smoke might be an effective way to communicate relatively simple messages over intermediate distances, many other types of messages can't be carried this way. Philosophical arguments, for instance, would be especially difficult to conduct with smoke signals because, as Postman puts it,

Puffs of smoke are insufficiently complex to express ideas on the nature of existence [or other philosophical concepts], and even if they were not, a Cherokee philosopher would run short of either wood or blankets long before he reached his second axiom. You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content.²

So, the medium of smoke has a significant influence on the kinds of content it can convey. At a minimum, smoke signaling restricts both the complexity and the duration of the messages it carries. Likewise, we shall see that television influences its content, and that *The Daily Show's* jokes often poke fun at these effects.

The Huxleyan Warning

Now, as Postman sees it, *all* media shape their content, and in a multitude of different ways. He writes: “[Mine] is an argument that fixes its attention on the forms of human conversation, and postulates that how we are obliged to conduct such conversations will have the strongest possible influence on what ideas we can conveniently express.”³ This goes not only for smoke signals, but also for speech and written language, and even for the electronic media that are so important in our lives today.

Of particular interest is the ubiquitous medium of television, which Postman sees as a historic extension of such earlier media as the telegraph, photography, radio, and film.⁴ How does television influence its content, according to Postman? His theory is complex, but in essence it maintains that television’s inherent “bias” implies a tendency to render its content—even its most important news reporting, political and religious discussion, and educational instruction—more *entertaining* than it would be otherwise, and consequently less serious, less rational, less relevant, and less coherent as well.⁵

The fact that television provides entertainment isn’t, in and of itself, a problem for Postman. However, he warns that dire consequences can result for cultures in which the most important public discourse, conducted via television, becomes little more than irrational, irrelevant, and incoherent entertainment. Again, we shall see that this is a point often suggested by *The Daily Show*’s biting satire. In a healthy democracy, the open discussion of important issues should be serious, rational, and coherent. But such discussion is often difficult and time-consuming, and thus incompatible with television’s drive to entertain. So, it’s hardly surprising to see television serving up important news analyses in short sound bites surrounded by irrelevant graphics and video footage, or substituting half-minute ad spots for substantial political debates. On television, thoughtful conversations about serious issues are reserved for only the lowest-rated niche programs. Just as ventriloquism and mime don’t play well on radio, “thinking does not play well on television.”⁶ Instead, television serves as a hospitable home for the sort of “gut”-based discourse satirically championed by *Daily Show* alum Stephen Colbert.⁷

When we grow comfortable with the substitution of televised entertainment for serious public discourse, we begin the process of

(to use Postman's words) "amusing ourselves to death." As Postman explains, this form of cultural corrosion is like that described in Aldous Huxley's classic novel *Brave New World*, in which the citizenry is comfortably and willingly distracted by the pleasures of *soma*, Centrifugal Bumble-puppy, and the feelies.⁸

Postman and Television News

To exemplify these points, Postman details some of the many ways in which television tends to degrade the presentation of its news content. Consider his explanation of the ironic title of his chapter on television news, "Now ... This": "There is no murder so brutal, no earthquake so devastating, no political blunder so costly—for that matter, no ball score so tantalizing or weather report so threatening—that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying 'Now ... this'."⁹ As Postman sees it, then, the use of "Now ... this" is a tacit admission of the incoherence of television news, and "a compact metaphor for the discontinuities in so much that passes for public discourse in present-day America."¹⁰

Of course, Postman believes that television does more to the news than disrupt its coherence. Revisiting his general thesis about how television influences its content, Postman also claims that televised news is irrational, irrelevant, and trivial. As he explains, television presents us "not only with fragmented news but news without context, without consequences, without value, and therefore without essential seriousness; that is to say, news as pure entertainment."¹¹ So, even weighty news subjects are driven to become entertaining under the influence of television, as the typical American newscast showcases a company of attractive reporters skipping from spectacular (if insignificant) local stories to spectacular (if insignificant) international stories, to celebrity gossip, to weather forecasts, to sports scores, to a closing story about babies or puppies or kittens. Commercials are scattered throughout. Music, graphics, and captivating video footage add touches of theater to the program. Quick transitions from one segment to the next ensure that audience members don't become bored—or troubled—for long.¹² Instead of useful and important information, then, viewers are treated to the impotent but entertaining trivia that Postman calls "disinformation," which isn't necessarily false

but *misleading*, creating the *illusion of knowing* and undermining one's motivation to learn more.¹³ Consequently, Postman writes, "Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world."¹⁴

***The Daily Show* and Television News**

Now, as far as we can tell, the writing staff of *The Daily Show* doesn't publicly acknowledge Postman's intellectual influence.¹⁵ Nonetheless, it's clear that these general ideas about television news, whatever their sources, can help us to see the significance of some of the program's wittiest and most inspired jokes. *The Daily Show* is often described as a "fake news" program, but in fact, it's more than that. Much of its humor rests on Postman-like insights that highlight the peculiar ways in which the medium of television inevitably influences the news that it conveys.

For example, many episodes of *The Daily Show* begin with Stewart's selected rundown of the day's headlines as reported by the major television news networks. A comedy show that only does "fake news" could simply build jokes around the content of such headlines, or perhaps report fictional news stories in a humorous manner. On *The Daily Show*, though, the way in which television seems destined to render its news as entertainment frequently serves as the basis for these opening segments. Stewart and company often joke about the major networks' coverage of natural disasters, for instance. In many of these cases they simply replay absurd clips of television reporters standing outside during hurricanes and snowstorms, sitting in cars with giant thermometers during heat waves, or paddling canoes through inch-deep "flooded" city streets. Other pieces mock the way hordes of television reporters cover celebrity weddings, arrests, and criminal trials. Segments like "The Less You Know" and "International Pamphlet" poke fun at the shallowness of typical television news coverage. Exchanges between Stewart and his Senior Correspondents—"The Best F#@king News Team Ever"—parody their good-looking but sometimes ill-informed journalistic counterparts.¹⁶ Clever graphics packages ("Indecision 2012," "Clusterf#@k to the Poor House," "Baracknophobia," "Mess O' Potamia," "Crises in Israfgghyanonanaq," and so on) offer mocking imitations of the logos, diagrams, and pictorial illustrations so essential to today's television

newscasts. With these segments and graphics, *The Daily Show* is clearly doing more than just “fake news.” It is offering deep satire that relies on its audience’s appreciation of the substance of Postman’s thesis, that television has a significant and sometimes adverse influence on the news content it reports.

At this point, one might be tempted to suggest that *The Daily Show* simply furthers the unfortunate transformation of reporting into entertainment, as if *The Daily Show* were itself a source of news to its audience members. For instance, Bill O’Reilly (host of the Fox News program *The O’Reilly Factor*) once famously dubbed viewers of *The Daily Show* “stoned slackers” who “get their news from Jon Stewart.”¹⁷ However, at least one prominent study from the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that viewers of *The Daily Show* were better informed about the positions and backgrounds of candidates in the 2004 US Presidential Campaign than most others. More recent surveys by the Pew Research Center and Farleigh Dickinson University’s PublicMind project have also found relatively high levels of current affairs knowledge in *The Daily Show*’s audience.¹⁸ Indeed, it’s difficult to see how the deepest *Daily Show* jokes could be appreciated by an audience unaware of the relevant social, political, and other newsworthy issues. As Annenberg analyst Dannagal Goldthwaite Young put it in a press release announcing the Center’s Election Survey results, “*The Daily Show* assumes a fairly high level of political knowledge on the part of its audience.”¹⁹

Conversation and Crossfire

Postman’s ideas about television also illuminate Stewart’s legendary October 2004 appearance on CNN’s *Crossfire*. First aired in 1982, *Crossfire* was a long-running staple of CNN’s lineup that featured curt discussion by hosts and guests supposedly representing both left- and right-wing positions on controversial political issues. Co-hosting for Stewart’s visit were the unsuspecting Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson, neither of whom seemed prepared for what would become an extraordinary exchange. Instead of simply participating in a typical *Crossfire*-style debate (described by more than one observer as a “shoutfest”), Stewart quickly launched into a Postman-like criticism of the shallow and partisan punditry that passes for serious discussion on such programs.

In fact, this theme is one that Stewart had explored before his *Crossfire* appearance. An earlier *Daily Show* segment called “Great Moments in Punditry as Read by Children” drew laughs simply by having children read from transcripts of shows like *Crossfire*. Moreover, during a 2003 interview with Bill Moyers, Stewart claimed that both *Crossfire* and its MSNBC counterpart *Hardball* were “equally dispiriting” in the way their formats degrade political discourse.²⁰ And in a 2002 interview with CNN’s Howard Kurtz, Stewart foreshadowed his *Crossfire* appearance by chiding the news network for offering entertainers instead of “real journalists” and pleaded, “You’re the news People need you. Help us. Help us.”²¹

On the *Crossfire* set, Stewart offered a sustained attack against the superficial conversational style of television. Before either Begala or Carlson could catch his balance, Stewart was already begging them to “stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America” with their “partisan hackery,” which he claimed serves only politicians and corporations and does nothing to help ordinary citizens make informed decisions.²² “We need help from the media,” Stewart said, “and they’re hurting us.” Carlson tried to counter Stewart’s charges with the allegation that Stewart himself had been too lenient during the *Daily Show* appearance of 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry. Stewart replied that there was a fundamental difference between journalism and comedy, snapping back, “I didn’t realize that ... the news organizations look to [*The Daily Show*’s home network] Comedy Central for their cues on integrity.” And when Begala tried to defend the *Crossfire* format by claiming that it was a “debate show,” Stewart pointed to Carlson’s trademark bow tie and charged, “you’re doing theater, when you should be doing debate.” Finally, Stewart charged, “You have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you fail miserably.” Because of such remarks, Stewart’s *Crossfire* appearance produced a rare opportunity for reflecting about the effects of television on public discourse. Indeed, the incident sparked a great deal of follow-up conversation in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and countless other outlets.

We can see, once again, that these are the sorts of criticisms developed by Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. His deepest discussion of such issues concerns ABC’s controversial 1983 broadcast of the film *The Day After*, which depicted the bleak effects of a nuclear strike on the American Midwest. Given the film’s grave subject matter, ABC decided to follow it with a roundtable session moderated by Ted

Koppel and featuring such notable figures as Henry Kissinger, Elie Wiesel, Carl Sagan, and William F. Buckley.²³ With a serious theme and a guest list of unquestionable distinction, Koppel proceeded to march his cast through a fragmented 80 minutes of “conversation” in which the participants rarely engaged one another on points of substance. Instead, they used their camera time to push whatever points they had decided to make beforehand, without regard to the contributions of their fellow participants. Postman writes:

Each of the six men was given approximately five minutes to say something about the subject. There was, however, no agreement on exactly what the subject was, and no one felt obliged to respond to anything anyone else had said. In fact, it would have been difficult to do so, since the participants were called upon seriatim, as if they were finalists in a beauty contest.²⁴

To put it another way, this wasn’t a genuine discussion, but a *pseudo-discussion* warped by television’s drive to entertain. “There were no arguments or counterarguments, no scrutiny of assumptions, no explanations, no elaborations, no definitions,”²⁵ and yet each of these elements is essential to genuine and thoughtful dialogue.

So, how did ABC go wrong? According to Postman, the root problem remains that thoughtful conversation just isn’t entertaining, and thus plays poorly on television. As a result, televised discussions about even the most serious of subjects tend to be rendered in forms that are more amusing or dramatic than reflective. On this, both Postman and the writing staff of *The Daily Show* seem to agree.²⁶ Moreover, CNN President Jonathan Klein cited Stewart’s critique when he announced the cancellation of *Crossfire* in January 2005. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Klein said, “I think [Stewart] made a good point about the noise level of these types of shows, which does nothing to illuminate the issues of the day.”²⁷

Business News, CNBC, and Jim Cramer

Stewart’s *Crossfire* appearance is noteworthy because it offers an unusually direct expression of his deeper media critique. Here we can find a relatively clear and sharp indictment of television news, rather than a more ambiguous presentation filtered through assorted bits of

comic material. And as if to make his critique even more forceful, Stewart followed up the *Crossfire* exchange with several additional instances of straightforward media criticism.

For example, Jim Cramer's March 2009 appearance on *The Daily Show*, tagged "Brawl Street," followed an extended buildup in which Stewart made repeated jokes at the expense of Cramer's employer, the business news network CNBC.²⁸ According to Stewart, CNBC and other such outlets had failed to adequately foresee (and perhaps forestall) the global financial crisis of 2008.²⁹ Of course, this line of attack is a specific version of Stewart's now familiar, Postman-like critique of television news; by focusing on popular entertainment-driven shows like *Fast Money*, *Squawk Box*, and Cramer's own *Mad Money*, CNBC was (in Stewart's view) neglecting its journalistic duties. Thus, CNBC and the other business news networks were in part responsible for a financial disaster that ultimately produced trillions of dollars worth of losses.

As he settled in for his *Daily Show* interview, Cramer offered a tepid defense of CNBC's work. "We've made some mistakes," he admitted. But when he claimed that "the regulators" needed to do a better job of policing short sales and other such "shenanigans," Stewart pounced:

When you talk about the regulators, why not *the financial news network*? That's the whole point of this. CNBC could be an incredibly powerful tool of illumination.

Once again, then, we see Stewart's call for a more robust and vigilant form of television journalism. With the network's significant talent and resources, CNBC might help to educate its viewers, thereby protecting them from nefarious CEOs, traders, hedge fund managers, and financial advisors. But as Stewart sees it (perhaps following Postman's line), shows like *Mad Money* do little to further this sort of "illumination." And to the suggestion that business news networks might provide the kind of serious journalistic inquiry that could have helped to lessen the destructive effects of the 2008 collapse, Cramer offered this sobering reply:

I'm not [legendary CBS journalist] Eric Severeid. I'm not [legendary CBS journalist] Edward R. Murrow. I'm a guy trying to do an entertainment show about business for people to watch.

In the end, under the heat of Stewart's repeated calls for journalistic reform in financial news reporting, Cramer relented: "How about if I try it?" The two men ended the interview with a handshake, and Stewart has offered few criticisms of Cramer in the years since.³⁰ Nonetheless, the exchange became a sensation, with many commentators applauding Stewart's performance.³¹

***Fox News Sunday* and TV's Entertainment Bias**

Stewart's roving critique of 24-hour cable TV news has included a June 2011 exchange on *Fox News Sunday*,³² an hour-long public affairs show that typically features extended newsmaker interviews followed by roundtable discussions with a rotating team of pundits. Stewart's appearance on *Fox News Sunday* was particularly noteworthy given his steady criticism, over many years, of the entire Fox News network. Indeed, after a bit of banter, host Chris Wallace opened the conversation with a selection of quotes in which Stewart charged that Fox's ideological conservatism undermined its journalistic integrity. To Stewart, Fox News was "a biased organization, relentlessly promoting an ideological agenda under the rubric of being a news organization." Instead of a genuine news source, he maintained, Fox was "a relentless agenda-driven 24-hour news opinion propaganda delivery system."

To counter such sweeping claims, Wallace suggested that mainstream news outlets promoted liberal causes and viewpoints; Fox News, then, could serve as an ideological counterweight to the left-leaning news divisions of networks like ABC, CBS, and NBC. Stewart's response to Wallace largely bypassed the question of *political* bias to focus on the more fundamental issue of how *the medium of television itself* subtly shapes the content of television journalism. As he explained, the principal biases of television news are not political at all. Rather, "The bias of the mainstream media is toward sensationalism, conflict, and laziness." To attract and maintain audiences, television news needs to follow the familiar formulas that make TV amusing, dramatic, or otherwise compelling. For example, zealous pundits who are quick to disagree and who are outrageous in their attacks on the opposition are especially welcome on the news networks.³³ Meanwhile, careful and thoughtful discussion is marginalized, or edited out entirely. The resulting content

may be more entertaining for audiences, and more profitable for networks. But it is hardly informative or enlightening; from a journalistic standpoint, there is little to recommend it.

This concern about television's need to entertain, its tendency to render even its journalism as amusement, is of special interest to Postman, too. As he puts it in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, "The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining."³⁴ In particular, news reporting must pursue a mission that goes beyond mere entertainment if it is to be truly instructive. But of course, for so many reasons we now see, television news has a very difficult time overcoming its entertainment bias. The unfortunate result is that we are well entertained but poorly informed.

The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear

Finally, we have the October 30, 2010 Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear in Washington, D.C., a curious co-production of *The Daily Show* and its Comedy Central spinoff, Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report*.³⁵ Part variety show, part political assembly, it brought some 200,000 people to the National Mall for an afternoon consisting largely of music and comedy performances. But given its timing just a few days before the 2010 midterm elections, the Rally had deeper aims as well.³⁶

Indeed, the highlight of the day may have come as Stewart moved to close with "a moment, however brief, for some sincerity—if that's OK." Countering his Rally critics, Stewart stated emphatically that the event was not intended "to ridicule people of faith, or people of activism, or to look down our noses at the heartland, or passionate argument, or to suggest that times are not difficult and that we have nothing to fear." Rather, his principal target was once again television's detrimental influence on our public discourse.

On TV, Stewart argued, reporting and debate are run through a "24-hour politico pundit perpetual panic conflictinator" that exaggerates our political disagreements. This makes it difficult to reach the kinds of compromises that are essential in a democracy. So while this so-called "conflictinator" may produce dramatic and entertaining results, it cannot provide the critical exchange of ideas that our democratic system requires. As Stewart put it,

The image of Americans that is reflected back to us by our political and media process is false. It is us through a fun-house mirror; and not the good kind that makes you look slim in the waist, and maybe taller, but the kind where you have a giant forehead and an ass shaped like a month-old pumpkin and one eyeball. So why would we work together? Why would you reach across the aisle to a pumpkin-assed forehead eyeball monster?

But in the end, there is still hope. Stewart continued:

We hear every damn day about how fragile our country is, on the brink of catastrophe, torn by polarizing hate, and how it's a shame that we can't work together to get things done. But the truth is, *we do* ... impossible things, every day, that are only made possible through the little, reasonable compromises we all make.

In Stewart's view, then, television can complicate the democratic process, giving us another kind of "disinformation" that exaggerates our differences. But if we remember how the content of television news and commentary is shaped by the medium of television itself, we may be able to forge ahead with a more productive public discourse.

A Huxleyan Moment of Zen?

So, it appears that much of *The Daily Show's* sharpest comedy requires its audience to grasp a Postman-like criticism of television news. In addition, Stewart himself seems to offer a more general critique of today's televised public discourse that is reminiscent of Postman's in several significant ways. This isn't to say, however, that Postman and Stewart are in perfect agreement. For one thing, Postman argues that the transformation of serious discussion into entertainment is all but inevitable when this discussion takes place on television. Stewart, on the other hand, seems to believe that television can do better. He's told *Rolling Stone* that "the [24-hour news] mechanism could be used to clarify rather than obfuscate," and that "CNN feels like an opportunity squandered."³⁷ And as we've seen, he has even appeared on the 24-hour cable news networks and used their own programs to issue his call for reform.

Postman and Stewart might also disagree about the suitability of television as a vehicle for sophisticated media criticism. Postman

writes, for example, that any televised critique of television would likely be “co-opted” by the medium, and thus rendered in the typical fashion as mere entertainment.³⁸ In his eyes, television is simply incapable of carrying serious public discourse, including serious public discourse about mass communication itself. That Stewart uses television in his various attempts to address this issue suggests that he believes otherwise. No doubt this is a question worthy of further consideration, and through any medium capable of carrying thoughtful discussion.

Notes

1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); see especially 7–21.
2. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 7.
3. *Ibid.*, 6.
4. Postman develops his sweeping history of American media in Chapter 5, “The Peek-a-Boo World,” 64–80.
5. *Ibid.*, 67–80, 85–98.
6. *Ibid.*, 90. Postman acknowledges that, in other parts of the world (85–86) or in non-commercial contexts (105–106), television may serve different purposes. However, as he sees it, this does nothing to change the way that television most typically functions in contemporary American society.
7. Colbert mocked the use of one’s gut in the search for truth during the debut episode of *The Colbert Report* (October 17, 2005) with this absurd bit of “insight”:

That’s where the truth comes from, ladies and gentlemen: the gut. Do you know you have more nerve endings in your stomach than in your head? Look it up. Now, somebody’s going to say, “I did look that up, and it’s wrong.” Well, mister, that’s because you looked it up in a book. Next time, try looking it up in your gut. I did. And my gut tells me that’s how our nervous system works.

For more on Colbert’s thoughts about truth, see Amber L. Griffioen, “Irrationality and ‘Gut’ Reasoning: Two Kinds of Truthiness,” in this volume.

8. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, vii–viii, 155–156.
9. *Ibid.*, 99.

10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 100.
12. As Postman writes, “While brevity does not always suggest triviality, in this case it surely does. It is simply not possible to convey a sense of seriousness about any event if its implications are exhausted in less than one minute’s time” (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 103).
13. Ibid., 107.
14. Ibid., 106.
15. However, Postman did appear on the show’s July 14, 2003 episode to discuss his book *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992). In a segment titled “Lies of the Machines,” correspondent Rob Corddry applied Postman’s ideas in a rather ridiculous warning about the dangers of smart bagel toasters.
16. See also “Stephen Colbert’s Guide to Dressing and Expressing Like a TV Journalist” in Jon Stewart, Ben Karlin, and David Javerbaum, *America (The Book): A Citizen’s Guide to Democracy Inaction* (New York: Warner Books, 2004), 142–143.
17. *The O’Reilly Factor*, Fox News (September 17, 2004).
18. For the Pew studies, see “What Americans Know: 1989–2007” (April 15, 2007), 13–14, “Audience Segments in a Changing News Environment” (August 17, 2008), 42–44, and “Ideological News Sources: Who Watches and Why” (September 12, 2010), 69–70. The PublicMind results appear in “What You Know Depends on What You Watch” (May 3, 2012).
19. “National Annenberg Election Survey” (Press Release), *Annenberg Public Policy Center* (September 21, 2004), 2.
20. *Now*, PBS (July 11, 2003).
21. *Reliable Sources*, CNN (November 2, 2002).
22. *Crossfire*, CNN (October 15, 2004). All quotes below are from CNN’s rush transcript of this episode.
23. Postman actually cites Buckley’s own legendary program *Firing Line* as a rare example of television as a “carrier of coherent language and thought in process” that “occasionally shows people in the act of thinking but who also happen to have television cameras pointed at them” (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 91). *Firing Line* never received high ratings, though, and spent most of its 33 years on public television.
24. Ibid., 89.
25. Ibid., 90.
26. Postman’s son Andrew sums up all of this nicely in his “Introduction” to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, writing: “When Jon Stewart, host of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*, went on CNN’s *Crossfire* to make this very point—that serious news and

- show business ought to be distinguishable, for the sake of public discourse and the republic—the hosts seemed incapable of even understanding the words coming out of his mouth” (xiii–xiv).
27. Howard Kurtz, “Carlson & ‘Crossfire’: Exit Stage Left & Right,” *Washington Post* (January 6, 2005), C1.
 28. *The Daily Show*, Comedy Central (March 12, 2009).
 29. See, especially, the March 4, 2009 episode of *The Daily Show*, which included a brutal segment titled “CNBC Financial Advice.” Quipped Stewart: “If I’d only followed CNBC’s advice, I’d have \$1 million today. Provided I’d started with \$100 million.”
 30. Indeed, Stewart even mocked his own work during the Cramer interview in a March 17, 2009 segment titled “IndigNation! Populist Uprising ’09—The Enragening.” But for some later jokes directed at Cramer, see for example “Lenny Dykstra’s Financial Career” (July 14, 2009), “Indecision 2010—The Re-Changing” (January 20, 2010), and “These F@#king Guys—Goldman Sachs” (April 19, 2010).
 31. For a brief survey of such commentary, see Eric Etheridge’s “Fight Night: Cramer vs. Stewart,” <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/13/fight-night-cramer-vs-stewart>, accessed January 30, 2013.
 32. *Fox News Sunday*, Fox News (June 19, 2011).
 33. In a moment that was unfortunately cut from the final broadcast, Stewart elaborated:

In the absence of [truly major news events like the September 11 terrorist attacks], they’re not just going to say, “There’s not that much that’s urgent or important or conflicted happening today. So we are going to gin up, we are going to bring forth more conflict and more sensationalism because we want you to continue watching us 24 hours a day 7 days a week, even when the news doesn’t necessarily warrant that type of behavior.”

34. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 87.
35. The Rally’s comically awkward name was a result of the fact that it was originally conceived as two distinct and opposing events: Stewart’s Rally to Restore Sanity and Colbert’s March to Keep Fear Alive.
36. As Stewart explained on MSNBC’s *The Rachel Maddow Show* (November 11, 2010), “I felt like, in 12 years, I’d earned a moment to tell people who I was. And that’s what I did.”
37. See Eric Bates, “Jon Stewart: The *Rolling Stone* Interview,” *Rolling Stone* (September 29, 2011), 44–52.
38. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 161. In the final chapter of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman describes a then-hypothetical but subversive anti-television television program that’s eerily similar to

The Daily Show. According to Postman, this program would serve an important educational purpose by demonstrating how television recreates and degrades news, political debate, religious thought, and so on. He writes: "I imagine such demonstrations would of necessity take the form of parodies, along the lines of *Saturday Night Live* and *Monty Python*, the idea being to induce a national horse laugh over television's control of the public discourse" (161–162). In the end, Postman rejects the idea of such a show as "nonsense," since he thinks that serious and intelligent televised discussion could never attract an audience large enough to make a difference.