

Title:  
Spin Cycle

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Summary:  
Jon Stewart has become a very influential political voice in the media, and he's an unabashed comedian. That speaks well of him, but what does it say about the American media?

Keywords:  
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Article Body:  
It's possible that a seminal moment in the history of electronic news occurred when a comedian confronted commentators ...

Not long after Jon Stewart --- host of the Comedy Central cable channel's amusing newscast, The Daily Show --- appeared on CNN's staid Crossfire and roundly scorched its principals in a well-publicized confrontation over journalistic integrity (or the lack thereof), the news network announced that Crossfire was being cancelled. Ostensibly, the network said this move was due to the departure of conservative commentator Tucker Carlson. However, he wasn't the original 'right-wing' representative on that show and there were surely more of that flock who would have willingly stepped into the position. CNN has probably assembled a litany of rationalizations for their decision to dump the program, but none of them will dare to broach the actual undertone of perception that would trump anything on their list.

In this day an age in the USA, a comedy show is more adept than a news show at presenting current events.

The crux of the matter is that contemporary electronic journalism is just as subject to the Prime Tenet of Marketing as any sales campaign would be, ie- to be successful, it is imperative to 'sell the sizzle and not the steak.'

Viewing this contention from another angle, respected newsman Ted Koeppel almost saw his redoubtable Nightline program shelved in favor of yet another late-night talk show featuring a comedian. Now that he's retiring, it's notable that the

program will shift directions anyway, seemingly to assume a 'lighter' appearance in presentation to presumably better compete with the entertainers.

The sorrowful corollary of this point is that not only do the news operations overly heed the 'sizzle' mantra, so do many of the organizations who feed them their details. In the battle for dominance and perception, 'spin' is paramount.

Slanting a report to influence its perception has been in existence since the dawn of time, when Reporterpithicus --- or whatever version of man existed back then --- first related to someone else what someone told him. The tendency to spin has now evolved to where it has innately seeped into a troubling number of major news organizations. Anyone who has viewed a moment of Fox News can see for themselves how blatantly they have embraced this trend to promote their conservative leanings. MSNBC seems to be unusually beholden to the corporate world. CNN appears to abide the techniques of spin so as to not have their ratings erode any further.

Such policies clearly resonate in the minds and actions of their reporters in the field. Most seem to blithely absorb the spin given them by corporate and government spokesmen, given the bulk of milquetoast questions that now populate press conferences. Such practices and policies allow the Tucker Carlsons, Bill O'Reillys and Robert Novaks of the world to run amok, apparently encouraged to talk over any dissenting viewpoint as if they were thinly-veiled Jerry Springer clones in a stodgier setting.

Add the consideration that so many of those corporate and government spokesmen are so singly simple-minded about the message they're spinning, and it's no wonder a comedy offering like The Daily Show has risen in pop credibility to a level of perception that rivals the news programs. With so many thin platforms of substance just waiting to be skewered, Jon Stewart and his staff gladly accept a veritable cornucopia of material with every day's harvest of sound bites. The punch lines contained therein seem to literally grab them by the lapels and insist to be written.

If you want to confirm that point, watch an episode and see how many times Mr Stewart merely needs to raise his eyebrows after a sound bite in order to draw guffaws.

Toss in the fact that Comedy Central's video-to-mobile service is better defined for content than any of the news organizations, and The Daily Show is further cementing its image as the 'cool' news outlet for the younger set of voting age.

It's notable that, in late-20th century American politics, when media 'cool' was

on the ascent, Democrats won elections. It was true for John F Kennedy, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, and if that party could ever find a leader, it might be true again.

One would think the Republicans might take a hint and go back to the straight talk that struck enough of a nerve with voters to put them in the majority. Currently, that would advisably include an element of fallibility and contrition over recent policies and events. It remains to be seen if anyone in that camp is forthright enough to admit as much.

Otherwise, it's all but inevitable that the obfuscation of news spin and comedy fodder will further lower the quality of daily electronic information to a series of straight lines that grew from Chevy Chase's Weekend Update on Saturday Night Live portraying Gerald Ford as a bumbler to The Daily Show becoming an A-list stop on the itinerary of any legitimate candidate.

With all due respect to that excellent comedy series, if such a thing ever happened, it wouldn't be breaking news. It would be broken news.