

Mesopotamia or Mess O'Potamia? Comparing 'Mainstream' and Daily Show Coverage of the Buildup to the Iraq War

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Abstract

Political communication researchers have recently started to look at how non-traditional news sources, such as tabloid programs and talk shows, affect mass behavior. Although *The Daily Show* is often placed in this 'soft news' category, in this paper I demonstrate that it stands apart from both soft news and hard news in terms of both substantive and stylistic characteristics. Specifically, I compare and contrast coverage of the buildup to the Iraq War from both *The Daily Show* and *NBC Nightly News* and find that while the two programs offered relatively similar levels of coverage, they differed in terms of who was featured in their stories and which substantive themes were addressed.

As *The Daily Show* has risen in ratings and political prominence, scholars have turned their attention toward determining what effects it may be having on its viewers. Yet they have done so without first building a solid understanding of where *The Daily Show* stands in relation to other media outlets in terms of its quantity and approach to political coverage. In this paper, I attempt to move toward a better definition of what type of news program *The Daily Show* is by comparing and contrasting how *The Daily Show* and a traditional ‘mainstream’ media outlet, *NBC Nightly News*, covered a single issue – the buildup to Iraq War. I begin with an overview of existing research that attempts to categorize *The Daily Show* and then present a content analysis that explores various dimensions of coverage. I conclude with some thoughts about avenues for future research and theoretical development.

1 Hard News, Soft News, and *The Daily Show*

Although studies of *The Daily Show* have become more prevalent as the show has grown in popularity and prominence, scholars have yet to resolve the core issue of where the show and its sister program, *The Colbert Report* fit in the broader typology of media sources. Baum (2002, 2003b, 2004) utilizes Patterson’s (2000) ‘soft news’ category, including *The Daily Show* in a diverse group that also includes *Entertainment Tonight*, *Late Show with David Letterman*, and *60 Minutes*. According to Patterson and Baum, these shows can be distinguished from ‘hard news’ programs by their emphasis on human-interest and dramatic subject matter rather than policy issues, and their use of a sensationalized presentation style. While many hard news shows, such as the nightly network news programs, include some or all of these elements, the difference is said to be one of degree, with soft news showing a much greater focus on these themes and presentation elements.

Recently, however, scholars have argued that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* occupy a unique role on the political media spectrum. For example, Baym (2007b) points out that *The Colbert Report*, via its ‘Better Know a District’ segment, pays more attention to members of Congress (MCs) than hard news programs do. Similarly, both Baym (2005) and Holbert (2005) contend that *The Daily Show* has much more in common with traditional news satires, such as the ‘Weekend Update’ segments on *Saturday Night Live* than with entertainment talk shows and tabloid programs given that *The Daily Show* has a relatively strong focus on providing factual information about politics. Further confusing this definitional issue are Jon Stewart’s frequent statements that *The Daily Show* is a ‘fake news’ program. Yet, as Brewer and Marquardt (2007) note, *The Daily Show* does not offer news that is fake but rather is more of a ‘mock news’ program, in that it parodies the conventions of traditional news outlets while still serving as a source of political information.

Some of the ambiguity about where *The Daily Show* fits is likely due to changes in the program itself. Although Jon Stewart took over for Craig Kilborn as host of the program in 1999 and it won a Peabody Award for its coverage of the 2000 presidential election, it was not until a few years later that the show had reached a notable level of public and political prominence. *The Daily Show*’s audience doubled between 2001 and 2005 (Brewer & Marquardt 2007), and by 2003, presidential hopefuls began to appear on the show and, in the case of John Edwards, use it as a platform for officially announcing his candidacy (Baumgartner & Morris 2006). In other words, as politicians

and other political insiders began to take *The Daily Show* more seriously, it is likely that *The Daily Show* had a stronger incentive to cover politics and a greater ability to do so effectively and in depth.

These definitional issues are key to sorting out the effects that *The Daily Show* may have on the mass public in terms of political knowledge and opinion formation. Baum (2003a, 2003b) points out that viewers of soft-news programs typically have less education and interest in politics than the audience for hard news shows. He uses these patterns as the basis for a theoretical argument that contends that, in line with Zaller (1992), the less-attentive soft-news audience should be exposed to fewer pieces of information but also be more likely to accept the messages they do encounter due to their having fewer and weaker predispositions. As a result, Baum (2003a) argues,¹ it is not necessarily appropriate to look for increases in factual knowledge when investigating the effects of soft news. Instead, the less-sophisticated soft-news viewers may pick up on cues that affect their opinions and decisions in ways that cannot be gauged through measures of political knowledge.

And yet, *Daily Show* viewers are actually *more* politically knowledgeable than the general public and the audiences for many other prominent political programs. A 2007 survey conducted by The Pew Research Center for People & the Press, showed that those who watched *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* were more politically knowledgeable than any other audience (tied with users of major newspaper websites), with 54 percent of respondents answering at least 15 of 23 questions about politics and world affairs correctly (*Public Knowledge of Current Affairs Little Changed by News and Information Revolutions* 2007). In comparison, 43 percent of local newspaper readers, 38 percent of network news viewers, and 35 percent of local television news viewers, were in the high-knowledge category.² Although Baum argues that *The Daily Show* falls into the soft news category based on substantive criteria, its audience is so dissimilar from that of programs like *Entertainment Tonight* that it is unlikely that his theory about effects of soft news can be generalized to both types of programs.

At the same time, the audience for *The Daily Show* also differs from the standard hard-news audience in terms of one key characteristic: age. As multiple scholars have noted (Baumgartner & Morris 2006, Hollander 2005, Moy, Xenos & Hess 2005), viewers of late-night comedy shows in general, and *The Daily Show* in particular, tend to be much younger than the general public. A 2008 Pew survey confirms this; as seen in Figure 1, over 40 percent of *Daily Show* viewers fall into the 18-29 age group, while only a small sliver are over 65 – a far different distribution than seen in the general public (*Audience Segments in a Changing News Environment: Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources* 2008). The same poll shows that 46 percent of those 18-29 regularly or sometimes watch the nightly network news, while 67 percent of those over 50 use this source. For *The Daily Show*, these numbers are 36 and 12 percent, respectively. Thus, while young adults may rely more on nightly network news shows than *The Daily Show*, they are still watching *The Daily Show* at far greater rates

¹Notably, in this article Baum is responding directly to Prior (2003), who finds no increases in political knowledge as a result of increased viewing of soft-news programs.

²A subsequent 2008 survey confirms that *The Daily Show* has a higher-than-average number of high-knowledge viewers, although the program did not rank first (*Audience Segments in a Changing News Environment: Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources* 2008). This survey used only three questions rather than the 23 on the 2007 survey, indicating that the earlier poll is likely to be a better measure.

than older Americans.³

[Figure 1 about here.]

The fact that *The Daily Show* has a relatively young audience leads to some interesting propositions about how the program might affect its viewers. Although *Daily Show* viewers display a high level of political knowledge, due to their youth they may have fewer and/or weaker political predispositions than one might expect from such a sophisticated audience. As a result, this audience may be open to a wider range of messages than an older set of viewers would be, making it important to determine where *The Daily Show* sits within the hard/soft news continuum. It could also be the case that the style and substance of *The Daily Show* makes it so it does not fit easily on this spectrum, pointing to the need for further theoretical development in this area.

Compounding the uniqueness of the *Daily Show* audience is evidence that suggests that these viewers draw on fewer media sources than many other members of the public. Baumgartner & Morris (2006) note that the *Daily Show* audience is less likely to use ‘mainstream’ news sources. In addition, in the 2008 Pew study cited above, 86 percent of those who watch *The Daily Show* say that they trust a few sources more than others (as opposed to saying that the ‘news media are all similar’). This was the second-highest rate for any news program or network, trailing only *Hannity and Colmes*. In comparison, 75 percent of Rush Limbaugh listeners and 55 percent of CNN viewers had limited trust in news sources. This limited exposure to news media alternatives among *Daily Show* viewers places further importance on investigating whether and how the show differs from other sources of information.

As stated above, some scholars, most prominently Baum (2002, 2003*b*, 2004) place *The Daily Show* in the soft news category, suggesting a tendency to stay away from policy topics in favor of sensationalized human-interest stories. However, the small set of studies that look at *The Daily Show* in more depth point to a different set of substantive and stylistic trends. For example, Baym (2005) argues that Jon Stewart engages in ‘subjective interrogation,’ or interjecting a critical perspective into the delivery of the news. Although in many ways *The Daily Show* looks and sounds like a news program, it continually reminds viewers that it stands apart from the mainstream media through Stewart’s commentary on journalistic practices and winks at the audience such as having correspondents report ‘live’ from various locations when they are actually standing in front of a blue screen in the studio. Baym (2007*a*) also points out that Stewart’s interviews blend hard and soft news approaches by adopting the same ‘access rituals’ as entertainment talk shows but also steering guests away from promotion and toward issue-based discussions. As with the main part of the program, Stewart himself maintains a position as an ‘everyman’ who emphasizes his lack of expertise but at the same time interjects critiques of the proceedings.

In addition to these stylistic patterns in *The Daily Show*’s presentation of the news, some scholars have investigated substantive trends. Fox, Koloen & Sahin (2007) compare *Daily Show* and network coverage of the 2004 presidential election⁴ and find them equal in terms of the amount of news substance offered. However, *The Daily*

³Twenty-five percent of viewers aged 30-49 and 18 percent of those in the 50-64 group watched *The Daily Show* regularly or sometimes, showing a steady decrease in viewership as age increases.

⁴Specifically, they look at the Republican and Democratic National Conventions and the first presidential debate.

Show offered more humor than substance, and the networks offered more hype than substance. Brewer & Marquardt (2007) similarly point out that substantive issue content is rare in both hard- and soft-news programs, but they note that *The Daily Show* covers politics in a majority of its stories, which sets it apart from most soft-news shows, and frequently has political and media figures on as guests for the interview segment. Brewer & Marquardt (2007) additionally find that *The Daily Show* provides ‘metacoverage,’ or coverage of media coverage, with this type of content appearing in 15 percent of the stories they looked at.

Although researchers have made headway in determining what type of content *The Daily Show* offers and how it differs from both hard and soft news, much work has left to be done in this area. In this paper, I diverge from many past studies of *The Daily Show* by focusing on a policy issue rather than an election. Specifically, I compare and contrast *Daily Show* and *NBC Nightly News* coverage of the buildup to the Iraq War in terms of both quantity and content. In doing so, I contribute to the debate over where *The Daily Show* fits in the spectrum of media sources and offer findings that may help scholars develop better theories of how *The Daily Show* affects the mass public.

2 Data and Method

The focus of this paper is on the period immediately before the start of the Iraq War, defined as the time between August 1, 2002, when members of the Bush administration first met to craft a public strategy regarding a conflict in Iraq, and March 18, 2003, the day before the start of the U.S. invasion. Key events in this time period include:

- **8/1/02:** White House Iraq Group created
- **9/12/02:** President Bush addresses the United Nations (UN) General Assembly about the threats posed by Saddam Hussein
- **9/24/02:** Great Britain releases a dossier describing Iraq’s program to build weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)
- **10/7/02:** Bush addresses the nation to describe WMD threat and build support for a congressional resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq
- **11/8/02:** UN adopts Res. 1441, calling for the renewal of weapons inspections in Iraq
- **11/18/02:** UN weapons inspectors arrive in Iraq
- **1/28/03:** Bush gives State of the Union address in which he stresses Iraq’s refusal to comply the UN and its continuing production of WMDs
- **2/5/03:** Colin Powell addresses the UN Security Council and presents evidence of Iraq’s continuing WMD program
- **3/17/03:** Deadline for Iraq compliance with UN resolution, Bush addresses the nation and offers a final warning to Saddam Hussein that he must leave Iraq or face a U.S. invasion

Although *NBC Nightly News* aired a half-hour program every evening during this time (plus one-hour ‘expanded editions’ on March 17 and 18), *The Daily Show* is

typically on Monday through Thursday when it is not on break.⁵ Using Comedy Central’s online archive of *Daily Show* episodes⁶, I determined that *The Daily Show* offered new episodes on 90 days, although eight days were dropped due to technical issues with the online video archive.⁷

The online *Daily Show* archive conveniently divides the show into individual segments. Thus, I was able to use keywords and segment descriptions to identify and view the parts of each show that discussed Iraq. A majority (54 percent) of these stories were in the ‘Headlines’ section that begins each show, in which Jon Stewart offers an overview of current events.⁸ However, the viewed segments also included correspondent reports (21 percent), Moments of Zen (17 percent), interviews (13 percent), and special features such as ‘Back in Black’ and ‘Even Stevphen’ (four percent). In all, 108 individual *Daily Show* segments were viewed and entered into NVivo8, a qualitative data analysis program.

For *NBC Nightly News*, I used the Lexis-Nexis transcript archive, searching only those days on which *The Daily Show* aired a new program. For each day, I pulled up all NBC News programming and searched for ‘NBC Nightly News’ in order to eliminate stories from *Today* and other NBC News programs. This allowed me to obtain the total number of stories aired each day.⁹ I then searched for ‘Iraq’ within the results, eliminating any stories with only a passing reference to a previous/upcoming segment about Iraq or a brief mention of the country. This left 232 stories, each of which was imported into NVivo8.

Stories from both sources were coded on a variety of dimensions. These included whether a particular actor (e.g. President Bush, Saddam Hussein, the news media) was mentioned in the segment, whether that actor was shown speaking in the segment, and if a particular theme or argument (e.g. weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), Iraq’s possible connection to al Qaeda, potential economic effects of the war) was featured in the story. The creation of this database allowed me to then look for quantitative and qualitative patterns in the coverage, which I will now turn to.

3 Results

In light of the issues involved in determining where *The Daily Show* fits in the broader universe of political media sources, I chose to focus on two dimensions of coverage: quantity and content. If *The Daily Show* is truly a soft-news program, it should have less Iraq coverage than *NBC Nightly News*, choosing instead to focus on more sensational topics such as celebrity news. In terms of content, one would expect *The Daily Show* to feature more human-interest stories, while *NBC Nightly News* offers more political and military coverage. Also, given *The Daily Show*’s reputation as having a liberal slant, I address the question of whether or not its coverage presents a different ideological perspective than *NBC Nightly News*.

⁵During breaks, *The Daily Show* airs repeat episodes, much like entertainment television programs.

⁶The archive is located at: <http://www.thedailyshow.com/videos>.

⁷The dates dropped were: September 9, December 4, 5, and 18, January 15 and 18, February 19, and March 12.

⁸Some of the Iraq portions of the Headlines segments were tagged ‘Showdown: Iraq’ or ‘Slowdown: Iraq.’

⁹I eliminated the brief intro and outro segments that begin and end each episode of *NBC Nightly News* from this count.

3.1 Quantity of Coverage

Although *NBC Nightly News* and *The Daily Show* are both half-hour programs, they have very different ways of using that time. *The Daily Show* is highly structured and is typically divided into four distinct sections divided by commercial breaks: Headlines, correspondent reports or special features, an interview, and a brief ‘Moment of Zen.’ In contrast, *NBC Nightly News* does not have such a rigid way of dividing its time. Although it generally begins with ‘harder’ political and economic news and moves toward ‘softer’ human-interest and consumer stories, *NBC Nightly News* expands or contracts the amount of time given to hard news depending on the importance of the top stories. In other words, *NBC Nightly News* has a more flexible ‘news hole’ than *The Daily Show* given the presence of the six-to-seven-minute interview segment on every *Daily Show*. Even though *The Daily Show* often features guests with some connection to politics or the media, it also frequently interviews entertainment celebrities, non-fiction authors, and other types of guests.

Due to this lower level of flexibility in the schedule, one might expect *The Daily Show* to have less Iraq War coverage than *NBC Nightly News*. This is indeed the case, although the difference is not extreme: of 913 total *NBC Nightly News* segments, 25 percent featured Iraq, while for *The Daily Show* 19 percent of 571 stories focused on the buildup to the war. Some of this near-equality in coverage can be attributed to the differing number of segments each show is divided into. While an average episode of *NBC Nightly News* has 11 stories,¹⁰ the typical *Daily Show* episode has only seven. As a result, adding one *Daily Show* segment about Iraq has a greater effect on the average over time than one story on *NBC Nightly News*.¹¹

However, this overall similarity in the level of coverage offered by these two sources masks some interesting patterns when one looks at coverage over time. Figure 2 breaks down the proportion of stories about Iraq for each program by month. The chart reveals that *The Daily Show* actually had more coverage of Iraq in August, but trailed *NBC Nightly News* in every other month, with the largest gaps in September, January, and February. The relatively high figure for *The Daily Show* in August 2002 can be attributed to two days in which half or more of the segments focused on Iraq due to interview guests and a concerted attempt by the program to update viewers on the issue. As the debate over the Iraq War intensified, both programs increased their content, although *NBC Nightly News* did so at a faster rate than *The Daily Show*, perhaps due to the scheduling flexibility issues discussed above.

[Figure 2 about here.]

Another important aspect of coverage quantity is consistency over time, or whether a program steadily covers an issue or does so in ‘bursts.’ Here, *NBC Nightly News* and *The Daily Show* diverge quite clearly, as the former had only 10 days without a single mention of Iraq compared to the latter’s 30 days (of 82 total days examined). Obviously in this time period there were other significant news stories, such as the

¹⁰I did not include the hour-long episodes of *NBC Nightly News* on March 17 and 18 when calculating this figure.

¹¹In future iterations of this paper I plan to use the number of words in *NBC Nightly News* stories and the amount of time in *Daily Show* segments as more detailed gauges of how much space each show dedicated to Iraq.

congressional elections in November, Trent Lott’s questionable racial comment and subsequent resignation in December, the explosion of the Space Shuttle *Columbia* in February, and ongoing issues with North Korea, particularly involving its nuclear capabilities. While *NBC Nightly News* tended to include at least a short update about Iraq every day, *The Daily Show* often devotes much of its first two segments (Headlines and reports/features) to a single issue, meaning that it would either devote a significant piece of time to Iraq or not mention it at all. However, both programs responded to the increasing importance of Iraq by offering more coverage, particularly in March – the peak day for Iraq stories on both shows was March 17, the deadline for Iraq to comply with the UN resolution.

Overall, *NBC Nightly News* and *The Daily Show* had largely similar levels of coverage of the Iraq War, presenting a challenge to the assertion that *The Daily Show* is a soft-news program that shies away from hard-news issues. On the other hand, *The Daily Show* displayed an intermittency in its Iraq coverage that diverges from hard-news conventions of providing at least a brief update on prominent current events nearly every day. In addition, *NBC Nightly News* and *The Daily Show* may have very different substantive foci in their Iraq War stories. In the next section, I explore whether or not this is the case by comparing and contrasting story content.

3.2 Content of Coverage

In terms of content, I looked at two primary dimensions: which political actors were mentioned in a story and which substantive themes were most prominent in coverage. In both areas, the unit of analysis is the story – in other words, multiple mentions of an actor or theme in a story do not count more than a single mention.

3.2.1 Actor Prominence

Figure 3 shows the breakdown of actor prominence for both *The Daily Show* and *NBC Nightly News*. Not surprisingly, Saddam Hussein was the most-mentioned figure on both programs. In fact, the same actors ranked in the top four for each show: Saddam Hussein, the United Nations, the international community, and President Bush.¹² Yet there also some notable differences between the two sources. Specifically, even though the UN was the fourth-most-mentioned actor in *Daily Show* stories, *NBC Nightly News* mentioned it far more often. This pattern held for each of the top four political figures, although the gap between *NBC Nightly News* and *The Daily Show* was less extreme for Saddam, Bush, and the international community.

[Figure 3 about here.]

There is even more divergence once one moves beyond the most prominent political actors. Although Figure 3 does not show the results for every political figure mentioned, the ones in which the largest coverage gaps were observed are included on the right side of the chart. In terms of Great Britain, which was one of the few nations that openly

¹²It is important to note that coding for the international community did not include mentions of Great Britain or Iraq, which were coded separately, and coding for President Bush only included mentions of the president himself. Mentions of key Bush staff members – Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, and Dick Cheney – were coded separately.

aligned itself with the United States during this period, far more coverage appeared on *NBC Nightly News* than on *The Daily Show*. In fact, Great Britain was only mentioned on six episodes of *The Daily Show* in this period, although in one show it appeared in two different segments. In three stories, mention was made of opposition to the war among British citizens and politicians, while four focused on Britain's role as a U.S. ally, at times making light of Britain's tendency to follow the U.S. no matter what, such as in this March 17 Headlines segment, entitled 'Iraq: Are We There Yet?':

Jon Stewart: Yesterday the president met with a group he calls the 'Coalition of the Willing,' and everyone else calls 'England and Spain.' . . . Let me breakdown the summit for you, if I will. First five minutes, a lot of 'How you doing?,' 'Que pasa?,' break the ice, 'How's the family?' A lot of chit-chat until Aznar's all like [points at watch on wrist], 'Fellas. . .' So now we're 10 minutes into it, but it's diplomacy, these things happen, you can't account for every contingency. But then, down to business. Bush opens up with a quick 'You know, we should attack!' and Blair's all 'Okay.' And then, after they translate that, Aznar's like, uh, and I may be paraphrasing here, 'Si.' Then, there was about 45 minutes of 'Hey, why is France such a dick?'

Other actors (not displayed in Figure 3) who were significantly more prominent in *NBC Nightly News* coverage included official and prominent government sources such as Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld. In contrast, *The Daily Show* mentioned domestic opponents to the war¹³ and the media far more often than *NBC Nightly News*.

The finding about the media is in line with Brewer & Marquardt's (2007) argument that *The Daily Show* stands out in terms of its 'metacoverage,' or coverage of media coverage. Yet it is not the case, at least in the time period covered here, that *The Daily Show* offered broad coverage of how the media was portraying the war. Instead, in three of the 10 stories mentioning the media, Jon Stewart focused primarily on the graphics used by network and cable news programs, at one point (March 18) going as far as to have a fake contest for the graphic that "best exploited emotional vulnerability." Four segments were interviews with media figures: *World News Tonight* anchor Peter Jennings (whose interview was split into two segments), former CNN president Walter Isaacson, and media expert Eric Alterman. While each of these interviews explored interesting media-related topics (the interplay between the media and the White House, reporter safety, and the media's reluctance to challenge the truthfulness of information about Saddam Hussein's possession of WMDs), these issues were not covered by *The Daily Show* at any other point in the time period covered in this analysis.

NBC Nightly News brought up the role of the media only twice. However, one of these stories overlapped with an event also covered by *The Daily Show* – a February 'boot camp' held by the Pentagon for journalists who anticipated being sent to Iraq. Not surprisingly, *Daily Show* reporter Stephen Colbert put a humorous twist on his coverage of the proceedings:

Stephen Colbert: My mission would take me deep into the heart of darkness – southern mid-New Jersey, a nightmare realm where all the rest stops have Roy Rogers . . . We marched out to the DMZ – 'Da Media Zone' – knowing that some of us wouldn't be coming back. . . until about 4:30. . . Then

¹³Opponents from nations other than the U.S., Great Britain, and Iraq are included in the International Community code.

suddenly, completely with warning, we were in the thick of it, and all our training went out the window.

Colbert goes on to describe the ‘chaos’ of not knowing which media outlet those around him were from, spills a juice box on his jacket, and ends the segment by saying, “The horror, the horror, where had I parked my Volvo?” The corresponding *NBC Nightly News* segment begins as a straight news story about the military’s decision to embed reporters with the troops, a shift in policy from the 1991 Gulf War. Yet when the story shifts to the Pentagon training camp, moments of humor peek out of more serious coverage:

Martha Brant, *Newsweek*: I mean, there’s a comedic element to this because obviously we’re, most of us, middle-aged and out of shape. I am in serious pain right now after doing physical readiness training the other day. And you know, this is the trick, how do you cover these guys up close and personal in order to really tell the story and not get killed?

Kerry Sanders, *NBC Nightly News*: The training: navigation, mine-field detection . . . first aid . . . the terrifying reality of biological and chemical attacks, and reacting to incoming artillery . . . Soldiers preparing for a different type of war . . . where possibly a reporter and a nation of viewers watch their every move. . .

Tom Brokaw, *NBC Nightly News*: [Humorously] I know what many of you are thinking. Remember, this is the Pentagon’s idea.

In segments such as these, the line between *The Daily Show* and ‘mainstream’ hard-news programs such as *NBC Nightly News* become quite clear. Although *NBC Nightly News* recognizes that journalists running around in the woods while enduring fake artillery fire is somewhat absurd, the viewer still comes away from this segment with the knowledge that there has been a change in military policy regarding reporters, and that this shift could put journalists’ lives in danger, a risk that necessitates a week-long training camp. In contrast, the *Daily Show* story is pure silliness, with Colbert engaging in a parody of a host of military practices (e.g. giving nicknames to fellow soldiers, writing a letter to a loved one – himself, not being able to find a comrade on the battlefield) rather than providing information about the event and why it was necessary.

Yet *The Daily Show* exceeded *NBC Nightly News* in quantity and, in some ways, quality in terms of its coverage of domestic opposition to the war. *The Daily Show* aired 17 stories that dealt with this topic in some way, as compared to *NBC Nightly News*’s 12. The programs also differed in terms of who they portrayed as opposing the war. *NBC Nightly News*’s opposition stories split almost evenly between looking at opposition among members of Congress (MCs) and voicing the opinions of the general public. The congressional stories either contained a montage of quotes from MCs on both sides of the debate (September 19, October 8) or contained single quotes from key opponents in the context of a broader story about the political debate (October 2, October 7, October 17). Similarly, *NBC Nightly News* coverage of public opposition was found within portrayals of both pro- and anti-war perspectives (October 2, March 4, March 18) or mentioned protests without delving into any analysis of the anti-war movement (December 9, January 20, March 17).

In contrast, *The Daily Show* offered limited coverage of MC opposition to the war (3 stories), but provided far more information about two other opposition groups: celebrities and anti-war protesters. The coverage of celebrity opposition was largely humorous, with correspondent Mo Rocca referring to them as ‘celebritizens,’ Colbert claiming that actor Mike Farrell had authority on the issue due to his eight years on *M*A*S*H*, and Stewart making a series of jokes about how the band Chumbawamba was not offering good protest music. When it came to the anti-war movement, however, *The Daily Show* presented coverage that was more critical than that of *NBC Nightly News* and highlighted the reaction, or lack thereof, of the Bush administration to the protests:

Lewis Black: Last weekend tens of thousands of ordinary Americans took to the streets across the country to peacefully register their opposition to war in Iraq. BO-RING! Here they are at the biggest expression of civil disobedience in years, and this is as angry as they can get. [Clip of protesters singing quiet folk song.] Kum-ba-yuck! When I was a young punk, we knew the key to protesting was making the cops think you were totally nuts. [Clip of protests at 1968 Democratic Convention.] In Chicago in 1968, we destroyed the Democratic Convention. The Democratic Convention! We helped elect Richard Nixon! That’s the kind of crazy I’m talking about! (January 23)

Jon Stewart: And what protest would be complete without a contingent from the embarrassing theater scene? [Clip of chanting women wearing large silver dildos.] That, of course, a scene from the upcoming Broadway hit ‘Rocket-Penis Women Sing The Doors.’ Oh, anti-war movement, I want so much for you to have a cogent position that acknowledges and counters the arguments for war. When will you learn? (February 18)

Rob Corddry, introduced as “The Mahatma Gandhi Professor of Nonviolence at the University of Miami, Ohio”: Recently millions of people around the world took to the streets to protest war with Iraq in one of the largest organized demonstrations in human history. And how did President Bush react?

President Bush: First of all, size of protests is like deciding ‘Well, I’m going to decide policy based upon a focus group.’

Corddry: It was just like a focus group. In this case the random sample of world opinion happened to be ... the world’s opinion. But the point is quantity clearly doesn’t have the power to sway. That hasn’t discouraged the protest movement, however. They’ve changed their tactics. They’re trying new demonstration techniques that replace numbers with style. [Clips and discussion of protest theater and Greek drama.] ...

Corddry: Last a group called Win without War organized a virtual march on Washington. It’s just like a real march, only without the marching, the people, or any footage worth showing on television. Instead, 400,000 people registered online for a campaign to flood the White House with anti-war e-mails. Organizers said if you’re opposed to this war, it’s the least you could do. Literally, it’s the least you could do. Any less, and your activity would be technically downgraded from ‘doing’ to ‘being.’ ...

Stephen Colbert: Well, Rob, that’s a pretty wide variety of protests. In your opinion, are any of them getting through to the Bush administration?

Corddry: That’s a good question, Stephen. With regard to protests, the Bush administration has instituted a strict policy of ‘not giving a crap.’

Colbert: And just how strict is that policy, Rob?

Corddry: Very strict, Stephen. My sources tell me that no crap shall be given under any circumstances, even if said crap is flying. (March 6)

Although *The Daily Show*’s coverage of public opinion is more clearly one-sided than *NBC Nightly News*’s – little mention is made of those who support the war – it also delves into the lack of success the anti-war movement had in changing the decisions made by the Bush administration. Stewart and company seem exasperated by the protesters and their lack of an effective strategy, an attitude that also extended to their coverage of congressional opposition:

Jon Stewart: It’s time for the Bush administration to answer some tough questions from Congress about their plans.

Sen. Max Cleland, D-GA: We’re already in a war. We already had a congressional resolution passed that authorized the president to take all necessary means to take this al Qaeda out. Is that our number-one military mission at this point, General Shalikashvili?

Stewart: Good question! Is it? Our number-one military mission, General Chelamushvili [purposefully mangles name]? Answer the question!

General Shalikashvili: Yes, war against terrorism is our number-one priority. In considering using force to do away with the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq is a necessary part of that war.

Stewart: You call that an answer? That’s gobbledygook. That’s nonsense. This Senator Cleland’s going to cut you to pieces, bud.

Sen. Cleland: [Silence.]

Stewart: Come on! Ask him something! Fight back! Ask him where his proof of these weapons is. ask him what urgency is.

Sen. Cleland: [Silence.]

Stewart: Ask him why the Bush administration thinks it can act in defiance of every other nation.

Sen. Cleland: [Silence.]

Stewart: At least ask him what kind of name Shalikashvili is! Sounds like a security risk. (September 24)

Thus, with regard to domestic opposition to the war, *The Daily Show* appears to have offered more, or, at the very least, different substance than *NBC Nightly News*. *NBC Nightly News* certainly mentioned major protests, but typically balanced their public-opinion coverage with pro-war perspectives. *The Daily Show*, in contrast, did not strive for balance in terms of the opinions portrayed, instead counterbalancing its considerable protest coverage with analyses of the tactics employed and the White House’s reactions.

3.2.2 Substantive Themes

Turning to what, rather than who, was covered by *NBC Nightly News* and *The Daily Show*, Figure 4 displays the most prominent themes in each show. For both, WMDs

dominated, which is not surprising given that the Bush administration used the potential presence of such weapons in Iraq as one of their primary arguments to invade, and much of the debate in the UN Security Council focused on the inspections process. After WMDs, however, the rankings clearly diverge. *NBC Nightly News* offered a reasonably high amount of coverage of the military, both in terms of the troop buildup and potential strategies, and made semi-regular mention of what the economic impact of the war might be.

[Figure 3 about here.]

The Daily Show, in contrast, paid little attention to the military or the economic effects of war. Yet they outpaced *NBC Nightly News* in mentions of Saddam Hussein's evilness. Notably, the two programs took very different approaches to this theme. *NBC Nightly News* conveyed a sense of Saddam's nature through the words of others, with 21 of 25 mentions of Saddam's evildoings coming in the form of quotes from the president or his staff (16 stories) or other politicians, primarily MCs (five mentions). At only one point did *NBC Nightly News* quote someone challenging politicians' use of Saddam's past actions to justify what seemed to many to be a questionable war. And when this happened, the target of the criticism was not the United States, but Great Britain:

Ron Allen, *NBC Nightly News*: Also today, more pressure from America's strongest ally, Great Britain. A scathing 23-page report charging Saddam Hussein with conducting a "deliberate policy" of torture, rape and execution to oppress his people. Human rights groups agree, but some accuse Britain of manipulating the issue now to help make its case for war.

Richard Bunting, Amnesty International: We have to be wary when we see a government using another government's human rights record in this manner. We only hope it isn't being used for foreign and strategic considerations. And of course, the fear is that it is. (December 2)

In contrast, *The Daily Show* reporters and Jon Stewart himself did not shy away from pointing out that Saddam was not an upstanding and benevolent leader. In line with the overall tone of the show, they typically did so in a humorous way:

[From a story about the Iraq Parliament's decision to reject the UN resolution to send weapons inspectors back into the country.]

Jon Stewart: In the end, it came down to a simple show of hands.

Fake Translator for the Head of the Iraq Foreign Relations Committee: Who here has a right hand? [Entire room raises right hand.]

Fake Translator: Okay, who here wants to keep their right hand? [Entire room raises right hand.] (November 12)

Jon Stewart: With the deadline less than 24 hours away ... is it still possible that Saddam Hussein would voluntarily leave Iraq. For more, we go to the Pentagon, and our Senior Military Analyst Steve Carell. [Carell in front of fake Pentagon backdrop.] Steve, at this point, I need to ask you, is there any realistic chance that Saddam would go into exile?

Steve Carell: Well, Jon, the problem is, even if he wanted to leave, there are logistical issues. Saddam Hussein has less than 24 hours, and he happens

to be the proud owner of 17 palaces. Those palaces are simply filled with stuff. Keepsakes, mementos, baubles, bric-a-brac, human skulls, tchotchkes. Just the stuff anyone would accumulate during a 24-year run of unquestioned tyrannical dictatorship. (March 18)

Stewart often also interjected comments about Saddam's evilness into interviews, at one point chastising poll respondents who said that they feared Bush more than Saddam, noting that he thought that Saddam was a "madman," while Bush "still has a decent heart" (March 10). At the same time, *The Daily Show* often coupled comments about Saddam with critiques of the tactics used by the Bush administration to build support for a war against Iraq, such as connecting Saddam to al Qaeda:

Jon Stewart: Ultimately the question ... [is], is Iraq more of a threat than al Qaeda? Let's let the president effortlessly compare the two.

President Bush: And so uh ... uh, it's a comparison that is, uh, uh, I can't make because, uh, distinguishing between the two, because they're both equally as bad. They're equally evil, they're equally as destructive.

Stewart: This is unbelievable, it's going to go to an evil tie-break. All right, here's how we're going to do it. Each of you is going to get a basket of puppies, a loaf of bread, and a commercial deli slicer ... Now could it be that these two foes, Saddam and al Qaeda, are one and the same?

Bush: The War on Terror can't distinguish between al Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the War on Terror.

Stewart: You can't? You know, I'm going to try it one more time. al Qaeda is an ideologically driven underground ultra-Islamic terrorist network. Saddam Hussein is the dictator of a secular Middle Eastern nation that seeks mild regional dominance. I DID IT! THEY SAID IT COULDN'T BE DONE! I DID IT! ... Boy it's almost a shame we're going to war anyway. (September 26)

And choosing to focus on Iraq rather than North Korea, which may have posed an equal or greater threat:

Mo Rocca, "live from Pyongyang": The situation here is rapidly deteriorating. The North's brutal dictator, Kim Jong-Il, recently deployed artillery in the Demilitarized Zone. He's booted UN inspectors, and his nuclear reactor is back online ... North Korea is quickly becoming the number-one threat to...

Stephen Colbert, "live from Baghdad": Jon, if I may interrupt here ... that's a cute little story Mo's telling, but I think we have to be careful not to lose focus. We need to keep attention here, where I am, in Baghdad. That North Korea business is a diplomatic problem. As President Bush says, the real action is right here, good versus evil, showdown in the Gulf.

Jon Stewart: All right, Stephen, is there anything specific going on there?

Colbert: Well, no, not in a 'breaking news'-specific level, but uh, Saddam gasses his own people. And nobody likes a people-gasser, Jon. [Colbert continues to try to keep attention on himself as Stewart tries to go back to Rocca.] ... Bottom line, Iraq has oil, okay, North Korea has cabbage, and that's on a good day. We can't power our SUV leaf blowers on kimchi, Jon! (January 7)

[From an interview with Les Gelb, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, who argues that the U.S. should try to remove Saddam Hussein from power.]

Jon Stewart: Just in terms of the bar for attack, the idea is he has weapons of mass destruction, he's hiding them, he will use them. Uh, the guy in North Korea appears to meet all those requirements and seems weirder, which is hard to imagine . . . So I think people are having a hard time wrapping their heads around the idea that, you know, crazy, tiny, nuclear Elvis . . . he really seems like a crazy person . . . he seems to meet every piece of criterion that Saddam Hussein does sans the madman mustache. (March 10)

This is not to say that *NBC Nightly News* neglected to cover the situation in North Korea, or note that focusing on Iraq might take attention away from this other foreign-policy crisis – it did both. Yet *The Daily Show* clearly took on a stance of questioning (although not outright opposing) the need to go to war with Iraq, and used North Korea as a key line of questioning in its critiques of the Bush administration and its tactics.

Overall, *NBC Nightly News* and *The Daily Show* differed somewhat in the content it offered viewers, but not in the ways one would expect if the split between them was based on the hard/soft news dimension. *NBC Nightly News* certainly fulfilled the expectations of a hard-news program by providing more coverage of the military and the potential economic effects of the war. *The Daily Show*, however, did not highlight human-interest stories or offer a sensationalized take on the nation's march to war. Instead, it took a critical stance that acknowledged some of the White House's arguments for war while tearing down others.

4 Concluding Thoughts

Although *The Daily Show* may present itself as a 'fake news' program, what it appears to offer instead is a valid source of political information that stands apart from both traditional 'hard news' and 'soft news' sources in structure and content. *The Daily Show* provided nearly the same amount of coverage of the buildup to the Iraq War as *NBC Nightly News*, which one would not expect if *The Daily Show* was a true soft-news show. At the same time, *The Daily Show* stands apart from hard news in its schedule and structure. The daily schedule of *NBC Nightly News* creates an incentive for it to provide a broad overview of all of the day's important events. *The Daily Show*, in contrast, airs four nights a week (Monday through Thursday) and is often off for week-long or multi-week breaks. As a result, it at times looks more like a newsmagazine such as *60 Minutes*, in that it frequently runs longer segments (or combinations of segments) on a single issue rather than striving for complete coverage of current events.

While nightly network news programs have a stricter structure in the sense that they must maintain a daily schedule, they also have more flexibility within each program. *The Daily Show* often only devotes two-thirds of its time to news and features, followed by an interview that may or may not be with someone who is connected to the political or media worlds. Meanwhile, shows such as *NBC Nightly News* can choose to cover a story in a one-minute brief or devote an entire program to it.¹⁴ One result of these

¹⁴Notably, *The Daily Show* occasionally airs special episodes that focus solely on national elections.

differences in schedule and structure is that *The Daily Show* must at times play catch-up to the networks, such as when they aired multiple stories about Iraq in mid-August 2002, a time when *NBC Nightly News* offered few or no stories about the potential for war. In addition, *The Daily Show* sometimes displays significant holes in its coverage, as seen in its lack of stories about Great Britain's alliance with the U.S.

On the other hand, being released via its schedule and its 'fake news' stance from the need to provide a record of the day's events allows *The Daily Show* to engage in a different type of coverage than its network peers. Instead of focusing primarily on official sources, such as the UN and the Bush administration, *The Daily Show* made a concerted effort to cover the anti-war movement and, to some extent, the ways in which the media were covering the debate. In addition, *The Daily Show* offered more analysis than one sees on most nightly network news programs, as seen in the above explorations of its critiques of the tactics used by protesters and its frequent questioning of the strategies employed by the Bush administration to build public and political support for the war effort.

So, *The Daily Show* is clearly not the same as standard hard-news programs such as *NBC Nightly News*. Is it then a soft-news show? Nothing in the above analysis would indicate that it is. Recall that the criteria for soft news include downplaying policy issues in favor of human-interest and dramatic stories, and employing a sensationalized presentation style. *The Daily Show* does not appear to meet any of these standards, given that it airs few human-interest stories, frequently addresses policy issues, and presents its segments in a style that reflects the conventions of hard-news programs, even if they do so in a mocking fashion.

If anything, *The Daily Show* may challenge its viewers with *harder* content than they encounter on hard-news programs. As Young (2004) and Young & Tisinger (2006) discuss in their analyses of late-night talk shows, understanding comedy requires audience participation, specifically the ability of viewers to 'figure out the riddle.' *The Daily Show* not only uses comedy liberally, it also takes time to point out the complexity of political debates rather than following the standard journalistic practice of dividing an issue into clearly delineated 'pro' and 'con' positions. Although Jon Stewart may view himself as an 'everyman,' it is likely that he not only asks the questions that average citizens have about politics, he also introduces questions that many members of the mass public had not yet considered.

Determining whether *The Daily Show* truly falls outside of the standard hard/soft news spectrum requires a more extensive study than the one offered here. First, this paper focuses on late 2002 and early 2003, a time when *The Daily Show* had only begun to hit its stride as a trusted source of political information. Expanding the time period will allow for a look at whether the trends described here hold, and if *The Daily Show*'s practices changed over time. For example, as *The Daily Show* gained access to a wider variety of potential interview guests, did it more carefully select people who could speak to the issues addressed on the remainder of the show? This line of research would also benefit from a look at the composition of entire *The Daily Show* episodes rather than just the segments that address a particular issue. Finally, although this paper demonstrates that *The Daily Show* is not a mainstream hard-news program, it would be useful to engage in a more thorough analyses of how it differs from traditional soft-news shows, such as *Entertainment Tonight*, as well.

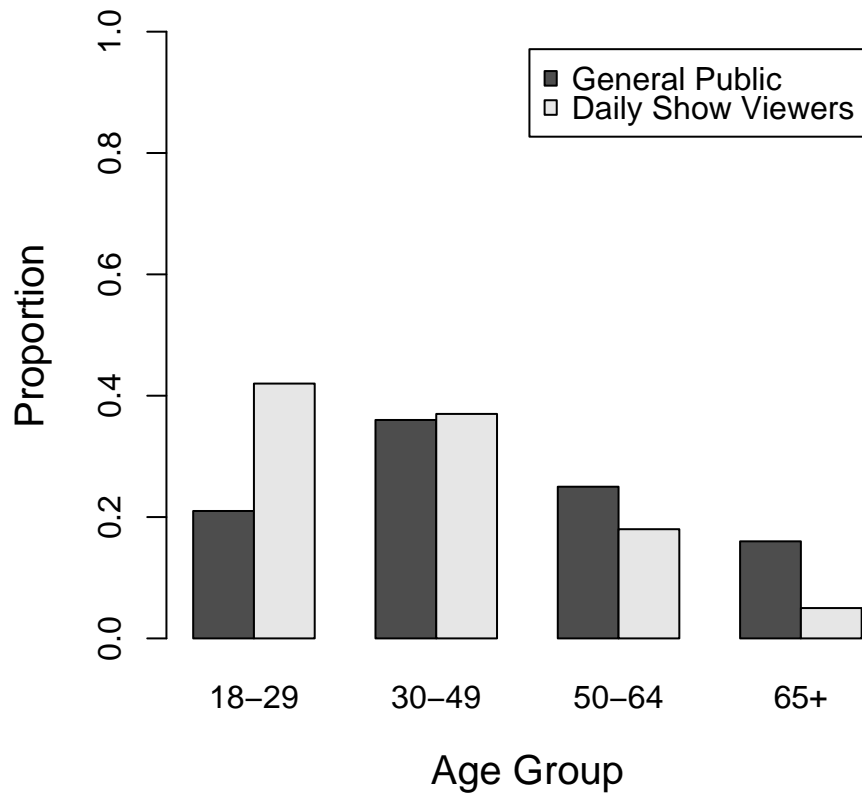
Of course, the step beyond crafting an effective definition for how *The Daily Show*

is similar to and differs from other political news sources is determining what effect it has on the mass public. Some past studies of the effects soft news (Baum 2002, Baum 2003a, Baum 2004, Baum & Jamison 2006) have posited that the politically inattentive audience for these programs pick up on cues that allow them to make decisions that come closer to those they would make if fully informed. Yet, as I show above, *The Daily Show* has an audience that is *more*, not less, politically knowledgeable than the general public, suggesting that this segment of the public would be more sophisticated in terms of accepting and rejecting information in line with political predispositions. On the other hand, the fact that *Daily Show* viewers tend to be younger than the average citizen suggests that they may not have as many or as strong of predispositions, thus opening the door for Stewart and his colleagues to affect their thinking. Future studies should explore the implications of *The Daily Show*'s unique audience, particularly in comparison to the older viewership of most 'mainstream' news programs and the less-attentive consumers of soft news.

Another important avenue for further research concerns the determining the appropriate dependent variables to consider when looking for *Daily Show* effects. One study has already demonstrated that exposure to the *The Daily Show* may increase cynicism toward political candidates and the electoral system (Baumgartner & Morris 2006), a finding that suggests a direct effect of *The Daily Show*'s critical approach to politics. Yet much work is left to be done in looking at how *The Daily Show* influences political participation and attitudes. For example, studies of late-night talk shows have found that candidate appearances and the jokes made by hosts prime certain candidate characteristics (Moy, Xenos & Hess 2006, Young & Tisinger 2006). Given that *The Daily Show* is similar to these programs in some ways – particularly their use of humor – yet largely different in content and structure, indicates the need for a comprehensive theoretical model that connects the characteristics of media sources to their effects on the mass public.

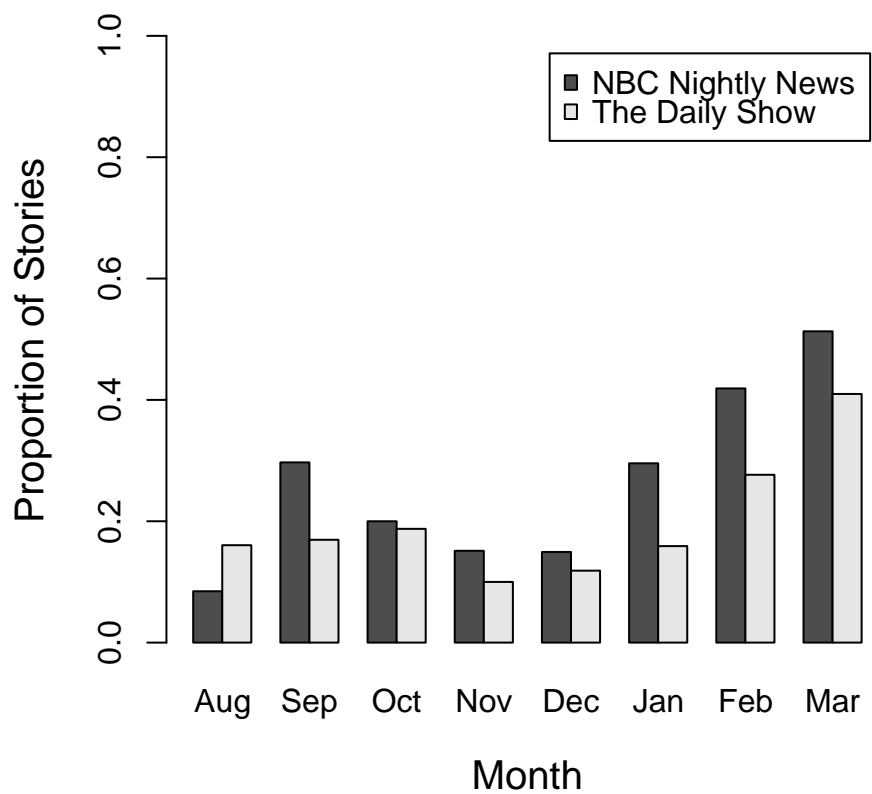
A Figures

Figure 1: Age Distribution of U.S. Public and *Daily Show* Viewers, 2008



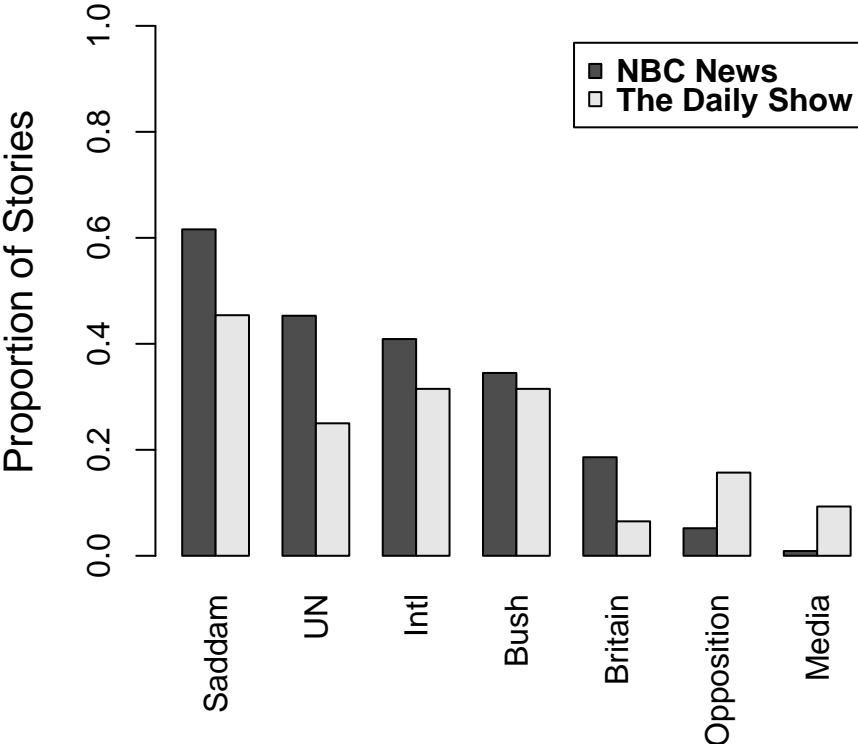
Data: Pew Center for People & the Press (2008)

Figure 2: Proportion of Coverage Focusing on Iraq War, August 2002-March 2003



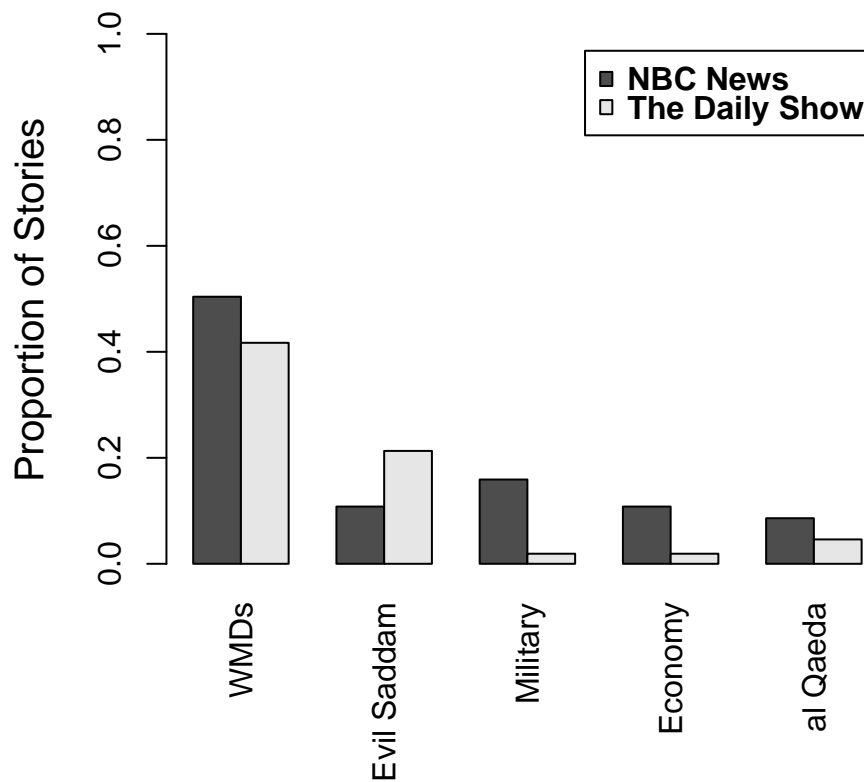
Data: Collected by the Author via Lexis-Nexis and www.thedailyshow.com/videos

Figure 3: Actor Prominence in Iraq War Coverage, August 2002-March 2003



Data: Collected by the Author via Lexis-Nexis and www.thedailyshow.com/videos

Figure 4: Thematic Prominence in Iraq War Coverage, August 2002-March 2003



Data: Collected by the Author via Lexis-Nexis and www.thedailyshow.com/videos

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