

## Politainment and the evolution of the late-night talk show

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### Abstract:

Today in America entertainment is playing a bigger and bigger role in the media news model. Concurrently, another event has brought about enormous change to the media landscape: the election of Donald Trump in 2016. This historic change has accelerated the emergence and use of “politainment” a portmanteau word combining political news and entertainment, showcased predominantly during late-night talk shows. To understand the growing politainment phenomenon on late-night TV this article endeavors to look into the beginnings and history of late-night TV then focus on the emergence of politainment and finally assess the current situation from 2015 to the present marked by the election of Trump and his presidency.

**Keywords:** politainment, late-night talk show, Donald Trump, political satire, *The Tonight Show*, *The Daily Show*

Today in America, it's becoming more and more difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction as entertainment is playing a bigger and bigger role in the media news model. In the last thirty years the media environment has dramatically changed, blurring the lines between hard and soft news<sup>1</sup>, as media studies scholars Michael X. Delli Carpini and Bruce A. Williams clearly affirm: “...the form and content of news and entertainment [have] come to resemble each other more closely.”<sup>2</sup>

Concurrently, another event has brought about enormous change to the media landscape: the election of Donald Trump, a former TV reality star, in 2016. This historic change has accelerated the emergence and use of “politainment” a portmanteau word combining political news and entertainment, showcased predominantly during late-night talk shows on TV like *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (CBS, 2015 - present).

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<sup>1</sup> News media can be divided into two types: hard and soft news. The former concentrating mainly on serious “hard” issues such as politics, international relations and the economy and the latter giving priority to lighter more sensationalistic “soft” subjects such as the entertainment industry, sports and fashion.

<sup>2</sup> Delli Carpini, Michael X., Williams, Bruce A., “Let Us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Environment.” In L. Bennett and R. Entman. (Eds.), *Mediated politics: Communication in the future of democracy* (pp. 160-181). New York: Cambridge University Press. 2001. p. 164.

Indeed, now there are a flurry of these late-night talk shows that devote large segments of the host's opening monolog to US politics. Other examples of these shows include: *The Late Late Show with James Corden* (CBS, 2015 - present), *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* (NBC, 2014 - present), *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (HBO, 2014 - present), *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* (Comedy Central, 2015 - present). Soft news politainment on late-night TV is now finding its way into hard news as evidenced by numerous "Best of Late Night" rubrics in the newspaper, on Television and YouTube channels<sup>3,4,5</sup>.

To understand the emergence of the politainment phenomenon on late-night TV this article endeavors to look into the beginnings and history of late-night TV and the initial standard setting *Tonight Show*, then focus on the emergence of politainment and finally assess the current media landscape dominated by the era of Trump (start of the presidential election campaign in 2015 to end of Trump presidency in 2021).

### ***A brief history of late-night TV***

On May 29 1950 Pat Weaver the president of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) decided to put entertainment on late at night launching the first nightly comedy-variety network TV show called *Broadway Open House* which ran for 15 months (May 29, 1950, to August 24, 1951), airing weeknights from 11pm to midnight.<sup>6</sup> As the first TV show on at such a late hour it would become "the template for every late night show in the years that followed."<sup>7</sup> They hired comedian Jerry Lester and then later added a statuesque blonde called Dagmar to be his foil and this created a hit show that tapped into the previously ignored late-night audience. The show was remembered for its vaudeville slapstick routines, seat of the pants improvisation and overall unpredictability which enchanted a young George Carlin<sup>8</sup> who remarked "I never missed *Broadway Open House*, that one really got my attention".<sup>9</sup>

After this initial foray into late-night TV<sup>10</sup> NBC made another more ambitious attempt three years later in 1953 when it created the show *Tonight* a local New York show hosted by Steve Allen<sup>11</sup>. Weaver explained the premise of the show. "The idea will be that after ten or eleven at night, a lot of people will still want to see something funny."<sup>12</sup> The show was then broadcast nationally and later changed its name to *The Tonight Show*. 70 years and 6 hosts later<sup>13</sup> it is still on the air and is the longest running TV show (NBC, 1954-present) ever. *The Tonight Show* was the perfect launching pad for numerous comics<sup>14</sup> and it would become the standard for all subsequent late-night TV shows that would follow. The first host, Steve Allen (1954-1957) was notable for his unpredictability and capacity to improvise, sometimes going into the public and asking audience members questions in order to get more laughs. In an era of live TV Allen was a master of adlibbing and he loved to carry out vaudeville type stunts and

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<sup>3</sup> Russonello, Giovanni, "Late-Night TV Highlights in 2017: Trump, Russia, Weinstein and More." *The New York Times* December 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/27/arts/television/late-night-tv-in-2017-trump-russia-weinstein-and-more.html> Accessed Aug 5th 2020.

<sup>4</sup> CNN "Colbert mocks Trump's administration picks on CNN's Late Night Laughs" CNN YouTube channel, Sept. 09 2016 [originally Aired on *New Day*, CNN Sept. 09 2016] <https://youtu.be/PYIK5xJz4Bw> Accessed Aug 10th 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Washington Post "late night laughs Trump and Russia" Washington Post YouTube channel, May 10 2017 <https://youtu.be/YcrUeAGDjhM> Accessed Aug 10th 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Vincent Terrace. *Encyclopedia of Television Shows, 1925 through 2010*. McFarland & Company, Inc, 2011 p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> Nesteroff, Kliph. *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels and the History of American Comedy*, Grove Press, 2015 p. 127.

<sup>8</sup> Carlin, a famous stand-up comedian, was considered by his peers to be one of the most important and influential of all time.

<sup>9</sup> Nesteroff p. 128.

<sup>10</sup> Late-night refers to a period of time after the News from 11:30 pm to 2 am local time.

<sup>11</sup> D'addario, Daniel, and L. Rothman, 2015. "Stephen Colbert, David Letterman and the History of Late-Night Torch Passing." *TIME*, 16 December 2015. <http://time.com/3599738/stephen-colbert-report-david-letterman-lateshow/> Accessed Aug 12th 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Nesteroff. p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Allen, Jack Paar, Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, Conan O'brien, Jay Leno and Jimmy Fallon.

<sup>14</sup> Don Rickles, Jerry Seinfeld, Jay Leno, David Letterman, Garry Shandling, Bill Maher, Roseanne, and many others.

antics<sup>15</sup> like jumping into a vat of jelly. As funny and talented as Allen was, he was not known for his capacity to interview guests. That skill would be the domain of his successor Jack Paar who took over in 1957.<sup>16</sup> Paar knew that unlike Allen his talent did not lie in sketches and goofy stunts, his forte was in engaging the conversation with guests. *The Tonight Show* became a real “talk” show. Paar also started off his show with an opening monolog where he would stand in front of the audience and tell jokes, setting the template for the opening monologue of *The Tonight Show* that would continue with each successive host. As the host of the show Paar became a star in his own right, he was unfiltered, moody, neurotic and spontaneous or as Nesteroff aptly described “an unsanitized personality, veering in unscripted directions. He thought nothing of crying on air or throwing a tantrum.”<sup>17</sup> After one of those tantrums he abruptly announced he was leaving the show because NBC censored one of his jokes. He came back six weeks later but in 1962 he decided to definitively leave *The Tonight Show*<sup>18</sup>. From October 1<sup>st</sup> 1962 to May 27 1992 Johnny Carson took over hosting.<sup>19</sup> Carson, described by his peers as the “King of late-night”, ushered in the golden era of *The Tonight Show*. No one had hosted for such a long time (30 years without interruption) and the show had been virtually unopposed during the late-night slot of the TV schedule. Like Allen, he created sketch characters such as Carnac the Magnificent but also incorporated the monolog segment that Paar had introduced and developed it into a fine art. As Carson success grew the other networks tried to challenge his supremacy. They used various formats and hosts but no one could knock Johnny off the perch as the number one late-night TV program. Johnny became a cultural icon, a permanent fixture of the media landscape with huge star making power. Stand-up comics knew that just one appearance on Johnny’s show could make or break their career.<sup>20</sup> As The New York Times media reporter Bill Carter recounts everyone who watched TV knew who Johnny Carson was his “theme song, “Da-Dat-Dat-DA-DA,” as familiar to anyone who owned a television set as the National Anthem was to anyone who’d gone to a ball-game”.<sup>21</sup> The signature line “Heeeeeeeere’s Johnny” was even used during Kubrick’s thriller *The Shining*.

Carson’s success was not based on humor that catered to a specific partisan political ideology (left or right) but on appealing to an audience that comprised the broadest possible political spectrum in its tent. He knew where the fine line was between a funny joke and an offensive one. Although Johnny came from Nebraska, a pro-Republican state, he never expressed his political opinions wanting to be “everything to everybody. He wanted to be a Middle American kind of guy.”<sup>22</sup> He “was scrupulous to never share a political view with his viewers” explaining “why should I lose 50 percent of my audience?”<sup>23</sup>

From 1964 to 1975 reruns from *The Tonight Show* called *The Best of Carson* were shown by network affiliates either on Saturday or Sunday night. In 1975 NBC moved *The Best of Carson* to Tuesday night at Carson’s request thus allowing him to work only four days a week. The then president of NBC Herbert Schlosser and Dick Ebersol the vice president of late-night programming asked Lorne Michaels, a producer and former writer for *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-in* (NBC, 1968-1973), to create and produce a new show for its affiliates to be shown on Saturday night. Michaels came up with a variety show that would combine comedy sketches, political satire and a musical guest and would

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<sup>15</sup> His parents, Billy and Isabelle Allen, were a famous husband and wife Vaudeville comedy team.

<sup>16</sup> Allen was moved to primetime in order to compete with *The Ed Sullivan Show* (CBS, 1948-1971).

<sup>17</sup> Nesteroff. *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>18</sup> D’addario, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> History.com editors. “Johnny Carson makes debut as ‘Tonight Show’ host”, *HISTORY website*, A&E Television Networks, September 30, 2019 <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/johnny-carson-makes-debut-as-tonight-show-host> Accessed Aug 12<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>20</sup> “Pioneers of Television: Season 1: Late Night” (documentary series aired originally on PBS 01/09/2008) DVD, Boettcher/Trinklein Television Inc, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Carter, *Late Shift*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Bill Carter from Brian Stelter: “Late Night in the age of Trump,” (aired originally on CNN 11/22/2017 01:00 pm. ET) <https://youtu.be/6PuvUXdDYwg> Accessed Aug 5<sup>th</sup> 2020 [15:55].

<sup>23</sup> Bushkin, H., 2013. *Johnny Carson*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. p. 154-155.

appeal to the 18-34 age demographic. This new show, *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975-present), extended NBC's late-night influence to 11h30pm-1am Saturday night.

Johnny Carson had also requested that his show be cut from 90 minutes to 60 minutes. This gave NBC another opportunity to extend the late-night empire even further into the night by adding another show after *The Tonight Show*. Carter explained the network's rationale "late night was the signature programming of NBC. From Allen to Paar to Carson and 'Saturday Night Live,' late night was cutting-edge television—and only NBC had it."<sup>24</sup> So *The Late Show with David Letterman*<sup>25</sup> (NBC, 1982-1992) was added in 1982 which immediately followed *The Tonight Show* at 12h30 am. NBC had created a block of programs which dominated late-night TV six days a week Monday through Saturday.

However, this monopolistic position would not last. In 1992 when the late-night king Johnny Carson announced he was leaving *The Tonight Show* two princes in wait vied for his throne: David Letterman and Jay Leno. The former, a frequent guest host for Johnny was considered by many including Johnny himself, to be the rightful heir to *The Tonight Show* throne but NBC chose to give the show to the latter, who like Letterman, was also a frequent Carson replacement. A disappointed and disgruntled Letterman left NBC and took his show to the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) a rival network. During the next two years Letterman's *Late Show with David Letterman* on CBS beat out *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* on NBC and ended *The Tonight Show*'s ratings reign. Although *The Tonight Show* clawed its way back to the top of the ratings in 1995 the late-night market was no longer dominated by just one network but was now disputed between NBC and CBS<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless, the new competitive late-night market did not change *the Tonight Show* consensus formula that required steering clear of partisan positions. Although Leno and Letterman did not refrain from making political jokes, they did not target a specific party and cultivated a non-partisan position. Carter described Leno's political stance as "you can't tell how I vote. You have no idea how I vote from listening to me." and described Letterman's political beliefs as "I don't know anything. I'm just an idiot who tells jokes."<sup>27</sup>

The loss of the NBC late-night monopoly was not the only change to occur in the media landscape since *Tonight* first aired in 1954. Back then there were only three national commercial networks, referred to as "the big three",<sup>28</sup> NBC, CBS and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC). If a program was on TV you had to watch it on that particular day at that specific time and on that specific channel. The advent of video in the 80s changed that. The price of home video cassette recorders came down and enabled more households to buy one allowing people to video record their favorite program or just rent a video instead of watching TV. The number of available channels started slowly changing too. In the 1980s Fox (1986), a fourth network, was created as well as a channel that showed exclusively music videos called MTV (1981). In 1987 the fairness doctrine, which determined whether programming was in the public interest<sup>29</sup>, was revoked. This was meant to promote "a healthy climate for private investment and job creation."<sup>30</sup> Yet, by doing away with numerous Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules and regulations the message was clear: profit was more important than public interest. This laid the groundwork for profit driven television and hypercommerciality.

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<sup>24</sup> Carter, Bill, *The Late Shift: Letterman, Leno, & the Network Battle for the Night*, Open Road Media. 2019. p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> Letterman, David was a talented comedian, who had guest hosted already 29 times for Carson on *The Tonight Show*.

<sup>26</sup> All of these events are recounted in detail in Bill Carter's book *The Late Shift*.

<sup>27</sup> Carter, Bill from Brian Stelter: "Late Night in the age of Trump," (aired originally on CNN 11/22/2017 01:00 pm. ET) <https://youtu.be/6PuvUXdDYwg> Accessed Aug 5th 2020 [17:20].

<sup>28</sup> Douglas Blanks Hendman, and Kenneth Wiegand "The Big Three's Prime-Time Decline: A Technological and Social Context", *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, March, 2008. <http://robertoigarza.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/art-the-big-threes-prime-time-decline-hindman-2008.pdf> Accessed Aug 13th 2020.

<sup>29</sup> McChesney, Robert and Nichols, John. *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution That Will Begin the World Again*, Nation Books. 2010. p. 161.

<sup>30</sup> Brooks Boliek, "FCC Kills Fairness Doctrine" *Politico*. Aug 22 2011. <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/08/fcc-finally-kills-off-fairness-doctrine-061851> Accessed Aug 10th 2020.

In the 90s these changes started to accelerate and notably in the cable and satellite TV industry. In 1991 Ted Turner's Cable News Network (CNN) using satellite transmission and mini cams brought the world live coverage of the Gulf war. All of a sudden the news of what was happening all over the world was given live coverage, 24 hours a day. Numerous other cable channels would soon follow. Another important development of the 90s was the spread of personal computers and the Internet. "By 1995, 37% of American households had at least one personal computer....By 1999, almost 200 million people—80 million of them in the United States—used the Internet."<sup>31</sup>

The number of late-night TV shows started to increase as well. In the 90s, among the original "big three", only NBC and CBS possessed popular long lasting late-night TV talk shows. ABC experimented with several different late-night Talk shows and different formulas but the end result was always the same: the new show would be canceled after a season or two. In their search for a new show that could endure the long haul against their competitors they noticed an up and coming late-night TV talk show that dabbled in political entertainment on the cable channel Comedy Central. In 1997 they convinced Bill Maher to take his show *Politically Incorrect* (Comedy Central, 1993-1997, ABC, 1997-2002) and move it to ABC. Ironically Maher's late-night talk show *Politically Incorrect* on ABC would be cancelled in 2002 because of something he said that was ... politically incorrect.<sup>32</sup>

The late-night talk show that ABC created to take over Maher's spot in 2003, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* (ABC, 2003-present)<sup>33</sup>, would turn out to be the successful long running late-night talk show that ABC had coveted for such a long time. Now viable late-night programs were present on all of the big three networks. At the same time that the late-night landscape was evolving another news media trend was emerging: politainment.

### ***The emergence of politainment***

Politainment, defined earlier as a combination of politics and entertainment, is built on the same model as infotainment (information + entertainment). The general idea is to provide, in the words of a certain Mary Poppins, a "spoonful of sugar (entertainment) to make the medicine (politics) go down". In 1989 the ground breaking documentary film *Roger & Me* by Michael Moore did just that by successfully combining entertainment with a serious political message. Moore used sarcasm and black humor to denounce the economic layoffs carried out by General Motors during the 1980s and highlight the ensuing devastating consequences for the city of Flint Michigan. The film's success allowed Moore to explore other avenues of expression and in 1992 he met with NBC to pitch his idea for a new TV show called *TV Nation*:

It [*TV Nation*] would be a cross between *60 Minutes*<sup>34</sup> and Fidel Castro on laughing gas. [...] Each week we'll pick one of our advertisers and go after them like a barracuda [...] then we'll go after organized religion, starting with our fellow Catholics. [...] I'll go to confession in twenty different churches and confess the same exact sin to see who gives out the hardest penances. We'll run the results and call it 'A Consumer's guide to the Confessional.'<sup>35</sup>

The TV executives were in stitches and greenlit the TV show for production. Moore then recruited Merrill Markoe, the co-creator of the *Late Show with David Letterman* as well as other comics and actors from the TV world to help him out with the new show.<sup>36</sup> It would be a newsmagazine that conveyed a serious political message with humor and at the same time poked fun at itself and the

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<sup>31</sup> Henretta, James et al, *America a Concise History*, Bedford St Martin's Boston, 1999. p. 922.

<sup>32</sup> He said the 9/11 terrorists were not cowards and that "we have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away." Bill Maher. "When Can We Finally Be Funny again?" *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 10 2006. <https://www.latimes.com/news/la-op-maher10sep10-story.html> Accessed Aug 13th 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Carter, Bill. *The War for Late Night: When Leno Went Early and Television Went Crazy*, Plume. 2011. pp. 124-126.

<sup>34</sup> *60 Minutes*, created by Don Hewitt, is a CBS newsmagazine that has been on air since 1968.

<sup>35</sup> Moore, Michael, Glynn, K., *Adventures in a TV Nation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998) p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Lipson, David, "Michael Moore et la sérialité documentaire", Anne Crémieux, Ariane Hudelet (ed.), *La sérialité à l'écran. Comprendre les séries anglophones*, Tours, Presses universitaire François Rabelais, coll. "Sérial", 2020. p. 103.

supposed “objective” reporting of newsmagazines<sup>37</sup>. *TV Nation* (NBC and FOX, 1994-1995) showcased a new irreverent and subversive way of combining politics and entertainment.

Moore took advantage of his TV series to conduct political and societal experiments to see how far he could push the envelope as well as the network censors. During one episode he held the *Health Care Olympics* pitting the health care workers of Cuba, Canada and the USA against each other to highlight the problems in the US healthcare system.<sup>38</sup> In another episode he denounced the racial problem in America by seeing who could get a taxi first in Manhattan pitting Emmy nominated black actor Yaphet Kotto against white convicted felon Louie Bruno who had served in four different prisons. As expected a taxi always stopped for the white felon and the black actor was ignored.<sup>39</sup> Another example of politainment was when he denounced the hypocrisy of Newt Gingrich, the speaker of the House who took back Republican control of the House of Representatives in 1994 on the platform of reducing federal spending but at the same time the district he represented in Georgia, Cobb County, was awash in federal money. Moore went down to Cobb country to confront Gingrich in person and call him out. He attended a parade where Gingrich was and held up a sign that said “get federal money out of Cobb county” as he noticed that he was being booed by the crowd he concluded “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” and he proceeded to change his sign to “Get federal money out of anywhere but Cobb” which then received cheers from the crowd.<sup>40</sup>

While Moore was experimenting with *TV Nation* in 1994 over at Comedy Central Maher had just launched a year earlier the aforementioned *Politically Incorrect*. Politainment scholar Jefferey P. Jones situates the birth of the politainment genre at around this time citing Maher’s show as well as *Dennis Miller Live* (HBO, 1994-2002).<sup>41</sup>

Along with the emergence of political content in late-night TV, another new development emerged during this time: access to politicians. Media scholar R. Lance Holbert noted:

Political candidates in the 1992 American presidential campaign began to regularly appear on entertainment-based television outlets as a means by which to reach potential voters and to also bypass journalists who serve as filters between a campaign and the electorate.<sup>42</sup>

Bill Clinton’s appearance playing the saxophone on the short-lived late-night talk show *The Arsenio Hall Show* (broadcast syndication, 1989-1994)<sup>43</sup> was a perfect example of this and turned out to be one of the most iconic political moments seen on television. Of course these initial forays into politainment would be taken to the next level by the show that would replace Bill Maher’s *Politically Incorrect* on Comedy Central: *The Daily Show*.

*The Daily Show* (Comedy Central, 1996-present) did not start out where Maher’s *Politically Correct* left off. Although the two creators Liz Winstead and Madeleine Smithberg initially felt the show should be news-driven and sought to hire Jon Stewart as both had worked with him before on the *Jon Stewart Show* (MTV, 1993-1994; broadcast syndication, 1994-1995). However, Stewart was not available. Instead, Comedy Central chose an ESPN *Sportscenter* anchor named Craig Kilborn<sup>44</sup> who thought *The Daily Show* should be host driven. Looking back on his years as the first host of *The Daily Show* he confirmed this stating “I wasn’t hired at Comedy Central to do a politics-heavy show,

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<sup>37</sup> Jones, Jeffrey P. “Moore Muckraking: The Reinvention of TV Newsmagazines in the Age of Spin and Entertainment” Matthew Bernstein (ed). *Michael Moore, Filmmaker, Newsmaker, Cultural Icon*. University of Michigan Press, 2010. p. 248.

<sup>38</sup> Moore and Glynn pp. 154-162. He would later develop this idea into a full movie called *Sicko* in 2006.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid* pp. 74-80.

<sup>40</sup> Lipson *op. cit.*, pp. 106-108.

<sup>41</sup> Jones *op. cit.*, p. 249.

<sup>42</sup> Holbert, R. Lance. “A Typology for the Study of Entertainment Television and Politics,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, n°3 (2005) p. 443.

<sup>43</sup> Saal, Matthew A. (January 1, 1993). “Road warriors”. *Washington Monthly*. Free Online Library. <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Road+warriors.-a013318850> Accessed Aug 18th 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Bogdanovich, Peter. “Lizz Winstead Returns ... and So Does Marv” *New York Observer*. April 1 1999. <https://observer.com/1999/04/lizz-winstead-returns-and-so-does-marv/> Accessed Aug 12th 2020.

and I would never do one — I have no interest.”<sup>45</sup> Kilborn further explained in his interview that while he enjoyed doing *The Daily Show* what he really wanted to do was a standard late-night TV Talk show<sup>46</sup> In 1998 Kilborn got his wish when CBS asked him to replace Tom Snyder on *The Late Late Show*. In 1999 a new host for *The Daily Show* was needed and this time Stewart was available.<sup>47</sup>

Jon Stewart was seen by many at that time as the latest up and coming future late-night TV host. Jones situates him as a direct descendant of Moore’s experimental TV antics.

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (1999 - ) is perhaps the best example of Moore’s legacy on political entertainment television. Similar to Moore’s employment of the television newsmagazine, *The Daily Show* simulates a newscast (with anchor and reporters) as its means for offering stinging critiques of both political life and the news media that report on it. *The Daily Show* is also indebted to Moore’s newsmagazines when its reporters file reports from the field. Like Moore and his correspondents, they deftly use interviews to allow either bizarre people or politicians with bizarre ideas to incriminate themselves. They realize that by using the strategy of serious reporting in the right places, the satirical often presents itself without much need for further comedic treatment. <sup>48</sup>

Moore, himself, considered the work Stewart and Stephen Colbert were doing on *The Daily Show* as an example for documentary filmmakers to follow on how to combine successfully nonfiction and entertainment to get across a political message.

These are nonfiction shows and they are hugely popular. They use humor, but they’re doing it in order to tell the truth. Night after night after night. And that to me makes it a documentary. That makes it nonfiction. People love to watch Stewart and Colbert. Why don’t you make films that come from that same spirit? Why wouldn’t you want the same huge audience they have? ...they [the audience] want the truth AND they want to be entertained. Yes, repeat after me, they want to be entertained!<sup>49</sup>

A direct link can also be drawn from Stewart to David Letterman who admired the *Late Show* host and like Letterman he had worked the comedy clubs as a stand-up comic.<sup>50,51</sup> When he took over *The Daily Show* from Craig Kilborn in 1999 he decided that it would be more interesting to focus on politics rather than pop culture. He found that there was no unifying theme and that the jokes were often punching down making fun of people who were down and out did not hold any power. Stewart felt they should, on the contrary, be punching up and attacking the people in power: politicians, the media and heads of big corporations. He combined the political advocacy and satirical aspects of Moore’s TV Series and integrated them into a late-night talk show format that resembled *David Letterman*’s late-night tenure. Not only did Stewart bring to the show successful ratings and Emmys,<sup>52</sup> he also created a faux news genre that covered the same political subjects as the cable news programs that it was parodying.<sup>53</sup> In fact, the politainment show became the main outlet where the youth demographic would turn to in order to get their news even though it was a comedy show. This was born out in a Pew research study where Americans ranked Jon Stewart among the top five most admired journalists.<sup>54</sup> This is also attested to by the title of the National Public Radio’s interview “Jon

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<sup>45</sup> Cooper, Josh. “Q&A: For former ‘SportsCenter’ host Craig Kilborn, ‘Instagram is enough for now’” June 19 2020 *The Athletic* <https://theathletic.co.uk/1880327/2020/06/19/qa-for-former-sportscenter-host-crag-kilborn-instagram-is-enough-for-now/> Accessed Aug 14th 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> D’addario, and Rothman, *op. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> Jones *op. cit.*, p. 249.

<sup>49</sup> Moore, Michael, “13 Rules for Making Documentary Films,” *Huffington Post*, November 17, 2014. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-moore/13-rules-for-making-docum\\_b\\_5834954.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-moore/13-rules-for-making-docum_b_5834954.html) <accessed on November 20, 2018>.

<sup>50</sup> Carter, Bill. *The War for Late Night*, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-102.

<sup>51</sup> Stewart even auditioned for the job of replacing him on Late Night on NBC when Letterman left for CBS but in the end the job was given to a young comedy writer from SNL named Conan O’ Brien *Ibid* pp. 70-75.

<sup>52</sup> The show won 23 prime time Emmy awards during Stewart’s tenure.

<sup>53</sup> Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. “The Daily Show: Journalism, satire, or just laughs?” May 8, 2008. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/829/the-daily-show-journalism-satire-or-just-laughs> Accessed Aug 13th 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Stewart: The Most Trusted Man in Fake News”<sup>55</sup> and even Rachel Maddow took him to task about the encroachment of *The Daily Show* on traditional news programs and journalism. She ended the interview by saying “I think a lot of people who watch your show and who watch cable news think of what we do as not being that different”<sup>56</sup>

The biggest legacy of Jon Stewart’s passage on *The Daily Show* in terms of influence and politainment lies in the number of talented correspondents on the show that have gone on to host their own shows like for example Stephen Colbert.<sup>57</sup>

Stewart left the show in 2015 and was replaced by Trevor Noah, just at the moment when the political landscape was also being shaken up by the candidacy and ultimate election of Donald Trump.

### ***Late Night TV in the era of Trump***

In 2014, one year before Trump would announce his run for president, Jay Leno announced he was leaving *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (NBC, 1992-2009, 2010-2014). At the end of the same year David Letterman also announced that he was leaving *The Late Show with David Letterman* (CBS, 1993-2015). This was the end of an era as both hosts had been doing their respective late-night Talk shows for the last 22 years and late-night TV had been marked by their bitter rivalry.<sup>58</sup> What ensued was a changing of the guard or game of musical chairs. Jimmy Fallon the current host of *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* (NBC, 2009-2014) replaced Leno becoming the new host of *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, Seth Myers replaced Fallon to host *Late Night with Seth Myers* (NBC, 2014-present), Stephen Colbert left the *Colbert Report* (Comedy Central, 2005-2014) and took over Letterman’s chair at the Ed Sullivan theater for the *Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore* (Comedy Central, 2015 – 2016) replaced *The Colbert Report*.<sup>59</sup>

The late-night landscape had totally changed since there was just one program on NBC in 1954. After the war for Johnny Carson’s succession in 1992 NBC had three shows competing against one on CBS and two short lived shows in syndication *The Arsenio Hall Show* that lasted only five years and *The Whoopi Goldberg Show* canceled after just one season (see figure 1). 22 years later in 2015 late-night programming supply had exploded. Now there were 14 different shows on three main networks and four cable networks all competing for the same market share of the audience (see figure 2). NBC had lost the market they had cornered from 1954 to 1992 and among the new hosts that had emerged only two came from NBC (Fallon and Myers from *Saturday Night Live*) whereas three came directly from *The Daily Show* (Colbert, Willmore, Oliver) with two others to follow in the future (Bee and Klepper).

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<sup>55</sup> Gross, Terry. “Jon Stewart: The Most Trusted Man in Fake News” Terry Gross interview of Jon Stewart Podcast audio. *Fresh Air*, NPR Oct 4 2010 <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130321994> Accessed Aug 17th 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Maddow, Rachel, “The Jon Stewart Mission” Jon Stewart Interview by Rachel Maddow, *MSNBC* 2010 [30:41] <https://youtu.be/ApRiu9DkJzk> Accessed Aug 17th 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Other hosts include John Oliver, Samantha Bee, Hassan Minhaj, Jordan Klepper, Larry Wilmore as well as unofficial copycats that emerged in other countries.

<sup>58</sup> Cunningham, Bridger. “Before Late Night Became A Toilet of Trumpster Fire Jokes -- The 1991-2015 Late Night Talk Show Ratings.” Dec. 16, 2017 *TVRGO* <http://www.thetvratingsguide.com/2017/12/before-late-night-became-trumpster-fire.html> Accessed Aug 14th 2020.

<sup>59</sup> D’addario, and Rothman, *op. cit.*



Show	Host(s)	NETWORK	Viewers (Millions)	OVERALL NETWORK RANK	STATUS	SEASONS
<b>1991-92</b>						
Tonight Show	Johnny Carson	NBC	6.5	1st	RENEWED	30
Arsenio Hall	Arsenio Hall	Syndicated	4.1	2nd	RENEWED	4
Late Night	David Letterman	NBC	3.2	3rd	RENEWED	11
Later	Bob Costas	NBC	1.6	4th	RENEWED	4
<b>1992-93</b>						
The Late Show	David Letterman	CBS	7.8	1st	RENEWED	1
Tonight Show	Jay Leno	NBC	5.6	2nd	RENEWED	31
Arsenio Hall	Arsenio Hall	Syndicated	3.2	3rd	RENEWED	5
Late Night	David Letterman/Conan O'Brien	NBC	2.8	4th	RENEWED	12
The Whoopi Goldberg Show	Whoopi Goldberg	Syndicated	2.3	5th	CANCELLED	1
Later	Bob Costas	NBC	1.6	6th	RENEWED	5

Figure 1 : TV ratings for late-night TV 1991-1993. Source: CUNNINGHAM, Bridger. “Before Late Night Became A Toilet of Trumpster Fire Jokes -- The 1991-2015 Late Night Talk Show Ratings.”

<b>2013-14</b>						
Tonight Show	Jay Leno, Jimmy Fallon	NBC	4.1	1st	RENEWED	52
The Late Show	David Letterman	CBS	2.8	2nd	RENEWED	22
Jimmy Kimmel Live!	Jimmy Kimmel	ABC	2.6	3rd	RENEWED	12
Late Night	Jimmy Fallon, Seth Meyers	NBC	1.9	4th	RENEWED	33
The Daily Show	Jon Stewart	Comedy Central	1.5	5th	RENEWED	19
The Late Late Show	Craig Ferguson	CBS	1.4	6th	RENEWED	20
The Colbert Report	Stephen Colbert	Comedy Central	1.2	7th	RENEWED	9
Last Call	Carson Daly	NBC	1.0	8th	RENEWED	13
Arsenio Hall	Arsenio Hall	Syndicated	0.9	9th	CANCELLED	1
Conan	Conan O'Brien	TBS	0.8	10th	RENEWED	4
At (A@) Midnight	Chris Hardwick	Comedy Central	0.6	11th (T)	RENEWED	1
Chelsea Lately	Chelsea Handler	E!	0.6	11th (T)	CANCELLED	7
Pete Holmes Show	Pete Holmes	TBS	0.4	13th	CANCELLED	1
<b>2014-15</b>						
Tonight Show	Jimmy Fallon	NBC	3.6	1st	RENEWED	53
The Late Show	David Letterman, Stephen Colbert	CBS	3.0	2nd	RENEWED	23
Jimmy Kimmel Live!	Jimmy Kimmel	ABC	2.6	3rd	RENEWED	13
Late Night	Seth Meyers	NBC	1.5	4th	RENEWED	34
The Late Late Show	Craig Ferguson, James Corden	CBS	1.4	5th	RENEWED	21
The Daily Show	Jon Stewart	Comedy Central	1.3	6th	RENEWED	20
The Colbert Report	Stephen Colbert	Comedy Central	1.2	7th	CANCELLED	10
Last Call	Carson Daly	NBC	0.8	8th	RENEWED	14
Conan	Conan O'Brien	TBS	0.7	9th (T)	RENEWED	5
The Nightly Show	Larry Wilmore	Comedy Central	0.7	9th (T)	RENEWED	1
At (A@) Midnight	Chris Hardwick	Comedy Central	0.5	11th	RENEWED	2
The Grace Helbig Project	Grace Helbig	E!	0.2	12th	CANCELLED	1

Figure 2 : TV ratings for late-night TV 1991-1993 Source: CUNNINGHAM, Bridger. “Before Late Night Became A Toilet of Trumpster Fire Jokes -- The 1991-2015 Late Night Talk Show Ratings.”<sup>60</sup>

This multiplication of programs on the Late Show market has led shows to pursue a specific niche in order to be successful or as scholar Dominic Stephens puts it “...as the number of late-night shows increases, it follows that smaller, more loyal audiences are subsequently formed as viewers seek out which hosts most espouse and align with their own views.”<sup>61</sup>

At the same time that all this was going on the candidacy of Donald Trump, was also providing late-night shows with an unending stream of material based on the outlandish and over the top statements that he made...daily. From the eyebrow-raising statement he made about Mexicans when he announced his intention to run for president “They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and

<sup>60</sup> Missing from the table are the two late Night TV Shows on HBO *Real Time with Bill Maher* (2003 – present) and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (2014 - present).

<sup>61</sup> Stephens, Dominic, “The Ides of Laughs: The Politicisation of American Late-Night Talk Shows Over Time and Under Trump.” *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 6 (3), 301 – 323. 2018.

they're bringing those problems with us [sic]. They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”<sup>62</sup> to his promotion of conspiracy theories like his claim that Ted Cruz's father was closely connected to John F. Kennedy's assassin Lee Harvey Oswald.<sup>63</sup> Trump's candidacy was becoming a circus and the media and especially late-night Talk show hosts were eating it up. However, they made fun of Trump casting him in the role of the likely loser of the 2016 election but when Trump won the tone abruptly changed. Especially for Stephen Colbert who decided that he would now become part of “the resistance” to Trump. As Colbert's attacks on Trump became more and more incisive, his ratings started to go up as CNN media reporter Brian Stelter recounts: “By February, Colbert edged out longtime rival, Jimmy Fallon, when he ripped apart Trump's first solo press conference.”<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, Jimmy Fallon's ratings had started to fall when the public felt that he had been too soft on Trump when he mussed up Trump's hair during his tonight show appearance and humanized him as a candidate.<sup>65</sup> Two years later, Fallon's producer Jim Bell was fired because of the lackluster ratings.<sup>66</sup> NPR's Eric Deggans summed up Fallon's problem:

I mentioned Jimmy Fallon's "Tonight Show" earlier, and he seems to be losing viewers. One theory for his problems is that he's known as a nice guy who plays games with his guests and doesn't really do trenchant political comedy. And that may not fit the moment right now.<sup>67</sup>

The traditional *Tonight Show* tack of appealing to a wide audience not wanting to offend anyone no longer fit “the moment” of the Trump presidency. Jimmy Kimmel, known up to that point for being an apolitical middle of the road guy would also be pushed to adapt to the new late-night climate. Kimmel had a personal reason for this: his son Billy had a congenital birth defect. He made an emotional plea for health care during his show:

Before 2014 if you were born with a congenital heart disease like my son was, there was a good chance you were never going to get health insurance because you had a pre-existing condition. And if your parents didn't have medical insurance you might not have lived long enough to get denied because of a pre-existing condition. If your baby is going to die and it doesn't have to, it shouldn't matter how much money you make. I think that's something that whether you're a Republican or a Democrat or something else, we all agree on that, right? I mean, we do....No parent should have to decide if they can afford to save a child's life it just shouldn't happen not here.<sup>68</sup>

The moment went viral on YouTube (as of today more than 14 million views). From then on he didn't let up on the health care issue in subsequent shows as efforts to repeal Obamacare were being discussed in Congress. Kimmel not only emerged as a heroic figure but also as the conscience for America this didn't hurt his ratings either as they increased as well.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Gabbatt, Adam, “Golden escalator ride: the surreal day Trump kicked off his bid for president” *The Guardian* June 14 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/13/donald-trump-presidential-campaign-speech-eyewitness-memories> Accessed Aug 18th 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Gopnik, Adam, “Trump and the Truth: Conspiracy Theories.” *The New Yorker* Sept 3 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trump-and-the-truth-conspiracy-theories> Accessed Aug 17th 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Stelter “Late Night in the age of Trump,” [04:51] *op. cit.*

<sup>65</sup> Koblin, John. “Jimmy Fallon's Producer Leaves NBC as 'Tonight Show' Ratings Slide” *The New York Times*, Nov 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/business/media/jimmy-fallon-producer-bell.html#:~:text=the%20main%20story-.Jimmy%20Fallon's%20Producer%20Leaves%20NBC%20as%20Tonight%20Show'%20Ratings%20Slide.the%20show%20a%20year%20ago.> Accessed Aug 12th 2020.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Deggans, Eric “Late Night TV Shows Take Aim At Trump, Score Well In Ratings” Podcast audio. *All Things Considered*, NPR Feb 22 2017 <https://www.npr.org/2017/02/22/516695471/late-night-tv-shows-take-aim-at-trump-score-well-in-ratings> Accessed Aug 5th 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Kimmel Jimmy, “Jimmy Reveals Details of his Son's Birth and Heart Defects” *Jimmy Kimmel Live YouTube Channel* May 2 2017, <https://youtu.be/MmWWoMcGmoo> Accessed Aug 18th 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Carter, Bill. “How Jimmy Kimmel became America's conscience», *CNN Business*. Oct. 3 2017. <https://money.cnn.com/2017/10/03/media/jimmy-kimmel-las-vegas-conscience/index.html> Accessed Aug 5th 2020.

Unlike Kimmel, Samantha Bee's *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* (TBS, 2016 – present) made no bones about being partisan from the get go. A former *Daily Show* alum like Colbert her show has constantly made pointed critiques of the Trump presidency and even got into trouble for calling Ivanka Trump “a feckless cunt” on air.<sup>70</sup> The media uproar caused by her comment led her to apologize on her next show.

Jon Oliver, another *Daily Show* alum still going strong, left in 2014 after successfully subbing for Jon Stewart when the latter was turning his first movie *Rosewater* during the summer of 2013. Oliver launched *Last Week Tonight*. The show is 30 minutes long broadcast once a week on Sunday which has led some critics to consider it an in depth version of *The Daily Show* concentrated into one day. Because of the timing Oliver has to choose subjects that have not been so visible in the media during the week and he uses the full 30 minutes to deconstruct, break down and analyze the subject. Although some consider what he does as investigative journalism Oliver dismisses this saying "it's not journalism, it's comedy—it's comedy first, and it's comedy second."<sup>71</sup> This has been such a successful formula that after only six years on air the show has garnered numerous awards, including 16 primetime Emmy awards and two Peabody awards.<sup>72</sup> Stephens organized the current plethora of late-night shows into three categories: superficial, analytical and partisan.<sup>73</sup>

In the superficial categories would be shows like *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* which even though it has been losing ratings since the famous Trump hair tousele has remained apolitical. Another entry in this category is *The Late Late Show with James Corden* famously known for his carpool Karaoke segments, where his monolog tends to be broad and non-partisan. These are shows that eschew rocking the boat and try to remain as neutral as possible.

*Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* would be considered analytical as well as *Late Night with Seth Meyers*. These are shows that take the time to critique in fine detail and develop in-depth arguments as well as investigative journalism. Of course the original analytical show was *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. “Stewart was using comedy to fact-check and break down complex issues, laying the groundwork for shows like Meyers’ and Oliver’s.”<sup>74</sup> It is worth noting that both Oliver and Myers stress the fact that they are doing comedy and not journalism. The latter remarked “I feel like I'm doing a disservice to people who actually practice journalism to say I'm doing it as well. I like doing comedy the most, so that's what I would like to stick with.”<sup>75</sup>

Finally the partisan category has shows like *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* and *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. For some people *Late Night with Seth Meyers* is also part of this group<sup>76</sup>. The difference between *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and *Late Night with Seth Meyers* and the other two is that partisan comedy and politainment was not the rule before whereas once Jon Stewart took over it has always been the rule for *The Daily Show* and its spinoffs.

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<sup>70</sup> Lutkin Aimee, “All of Our Favorite Conservatives Are Pissed About Samantha Bee Calling Ivanka a 'Feckless Cunt'” *Jezebel* May 31 2018. <https://jezebel.com/all-of-our-favorite-conservatives-are-pissed-about-sama-1826453169> Accessed Aug 17th 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Suebsaeng, Asawin “'Last Week Tonight' Does Real Journalism, No Matter What John Oliver Says”. *The Daily Beast*. September 29, 2014 <http://www.thedailybeast.com/last-week-tonight-does-real-journalism-no-matter-what-john-oliver-says> Accessed Aug 5th 2020.

<sup>72</sup> There is even a Wikipedia page “List of Awards and Nominations Received by Last Week Tonight with John Oliver” *Wikipedia* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_awards\\_and\\_nominations\\_received\\_by\\_Last\\_Week\\_Tonight\\_with\\_John\\_Oliver](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_awards_and_nominations_received_by_Last_Week_Tonight_with_John_Oliver) Accessed Aug 18th 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Stephens *op. cit.*, p.314.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Seth Meyers in Stelter “Late Night in the age of Trump,” *op. cit.*, [07:18].

<sup>76</sup> Stephens *op. cit.*, p. 314.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the latest phase of late-night TV is dominated by the influence of Trump and the acceleration of the use of politainment and political satire. Russonello makes this clear stating: “You really see a Jon Stewartisation of late-night. It was really pushed along by the Donald Trump presidency.”<sup>77</sup> The current US president, becoming very often the exclusive subject of the late-night monolog, highlights the fact that this is indeed uncharted territory. As Carter observes: “We've never had this many late-night people before, so we've never had teams of 10 or 12 comedy writers all writing jokes about the same guy all the time.”<sup>78</sup>

Politainment is now the norm and people expect it as Russonello notes: “The line between late-night comedy and news reporting is so thoroughly blurred. People want a kind of a front-line style late-night show.”<sup>79</sup> In today's environment Late-night TV hosts are not rewarded for sitting on the fence, but rather for taking a stand.

These changes in late-night TV involving increased politainment are not only specific to the industry but also represent an overall general trend in American society and popular culture. After the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, media regulation decreased significantly. The 24-hour news cycle led to the rise of Fox News and MSNBC, the former on the right and the latter on the left, both channels are positioned on the extremes of the political spectrum. The availability of cable channels and widespread internet accessibility has led to the redistribution and splintering of media consumption. The American public has become more fickle, less loyal with a shortened attention span. Shows have to work harder to get people's attention. All of these factors have led to the increased polarization of an already partisan environment during the Trump era (2015-2021). Any late-night host who wanted to be successful had to become a partisan politainer i.e. an entertainer that uses politainment, in order to appeal to a specific slice of the audience that all have the same views. Time will tell, if this is a permanent trend or whether this will also change now that Joe Biden, elected in 2021, is now serving as the current President of the United States of America.

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<sup>77</sup> Giovanni Russonello in Stelter “Late Night in the age of Trump,” [08:10] <https://youtu.be/6PuvUXdDYwg> Accessed Aug 5th 2020.

<sup>78</sup> Carter in “Late Night in the age of Trump,” *op. cit.*, [05:46] <https://youtu.be/6PuvUXdDYwg> Accessed Aug 5th 2020.

<sup>79</sup> Giovanni Russonello in Stelter “Late Night in the age of Trump,” *op. cit.*, [07:42] <https://youtu.be/6PuvUXdDYwg> Accessed Aug 5th 2020.

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