Apple TV’s The Problem With Jon Stewart: Media
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(...)

JON STEWART: The reason why I chose the Mueller Report to kind of do the autopsy on was they talked a lot about the disappointment in the Mueller Report. But that disappointment was the fruit of the seed that they planted and doesn't that kind of reporting overwhelm and cancel out all the other really interesting and smart and considered reporting that exists.

CHRIS STIREWALT: The problem is that we've become moral imbeciles as we are being spoon fed little pieces of outrage day-by-day. No, stay with the story. No, stay with the story. You can't lose any number. That's the problem. The death knell is if your numbers go down, that's why we only get one story at a time.

Producers know that that will work and that will rate. So we're gonna stick with the thing that people are expecting and that they know because if you take it away from them, they may get mad the number may go down and they may go someplace else to get it.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN: So, as long as the delta, the ratings increase from yesterday keeps going, you're gonna obviously keep doing that story, but you've got to milk it a little bit more. You know, you get a minute-by-minute ratings print out. You know exactly –

STEWART: You get a minute-by-minute ratings print out at CNN?!

O'BREIN: Everywhere, not just at CNN and it's called the minute-by-minutes. You know exactly. You can tell what story was I in when the ratings went up and what story up. Look at the end of the hour, we lost a bunch of people, whatever that was figure out. We should never do that again.

STEWART: They will say it explicitly.

O'BRIEN: Yeah.

STEWART: They will say that's a dog. People left on that Afghanistan story. So, fuck that. We're not doing that again.

O'BREIN: We can't lead with Afghanistan. It just kills us. We can't lead with Afghanistan. Look at those numbers.

STEWART: I think what people don't realize is it's a ratings driven business. But it's also driven by meetings. People have meetings and make decisions every day that affect the tone, tenor, and direction of coverage. Is that spoken about explicitly in the newsroom, like when you were at CNN?

O'BREIN: Yeah, there are tons of meetings. You have meetings that set the agenda for the network that set the agenda for the morning shows that are going to set the evening show agendas, you have to divvy up who's going to have which guests. Because you can't have everybody shared on every single show.

And then the shows themselves have specific meetings. What are we gonna start with? What we're gonna end with? Who's the guest? How long do they get?
I think this idea of you know, hey, we just report the news is, um, ridiculous because of course it’s a zero
sum game. If you’re covering something, then that means you’re not giving coverage to something else.

(...) STEWART: So, basically what the news is saying to us is, ‘this isn’t our fault, it’s your fault.’ They are
outsourcing the responsibility of news gathering and news telling to, ‘well, if they would watch better
stuff, we’d show them that.’

SOLEDAD: But that’s not the audience.

SEAN MCLAUGHLIN: They’re connected.

SOLEDAD: That’s not the audience. That’s yeah, that’s someone’s view of the audience, right? There’s
someone in an office who says, ‘listen, young people, I guess that means--’

STEWART: No, I understand that, but it takes a long time to figure out what the audience wants. And
when I first started at The Daily Show right, they were really on us to do a lot of pop culture shit. And I
was -- this was my last shot in TV and I knew it. I was 35, I’ve been down the road a ton.

And what I said to them was let’s make a deal, let me do the thing that I believe in and if it sucks and it
doesn’t sell you enough beer, you can fire me. In other words, we developed the thing that we believed
in and the audience showed up rather than doing research on what the audience wanted and backing
into it.

And there are so many good, talented, passionate journalists that are getting the life sucked out of them
by a system that is backwards.

(...) SOLEDAD: I think it’s about systems like, ‘well listen I’m in the system and this is how the system is and if
I would like to get paid – continue to be paid the money that I’m making, which is seriously good money.
Do I really want to fight the system?’

I think for most of the journalists working there when I was there, they loved journalism as I did and I
do. But I think you know it – the mission was to do the best work that you could do and win. Win is in
the ratings. Win is making sure that you’re getting picked up by the New York times. Win is not about
educating the public. It’s not so complicated.

The real housewives is a really good model. The reality show, right. This idea of the person who’s willing
to go there, go over the top. They become better known. They get paid more money. It’s successful.
Your guests who are willing to go over the top. The person who’s willing to say the thing, no one is
willing to say that person is good TV. If they’re good TV then they’re going to get booked.

(...) STIREWALT: This is to say, this is to say what differentiates news from entertainment is that sometimes
we have to tell you what you don’t want to hear. Right? We are supposed to be the vegetables. Right?
We are supposed to be the nutrient-giving portion of the plate, not dessert. What cable news has tried
to do and what local news sometimes does is get the green beans in the shortbread and you’ve got now
you’ve turned the news into entertainment and you’re treating entertainment like news. Both of those
are bad things. News should be news, entertainment should be entertainment.

STEWART: Boom!

(...)

STEWART: We’re not going to have an interview with somebody who runs a news division or used to run
a news division.

REZA (senior episode producer): So far, it’s been a resounding no.

STEWART: You’re an industry that relies on transparency and access and “democracy dies in darkness”
and you’re saying that locked in a fucking closet with the lights out and you won’t say it on camera.
These are people that stand outside of people’s homes after their child has been murdered and say,
“talk to me, come out—”

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: “You owe us!”

STEWART: “—and tell us how you feel.” And they act like they owe them. And then you ask them to just
come on and defend their fucking business model.

CHELSEA (head writer): Have you tried going outside their house and been like, “fucking talk to us!”

(...)

STEWART: let me explain to you why we’re here? Uh first of all, no one else would talk to us. So thank
you. So, we spoke with a lot of heads of news divisions and uh they are reluctant to speak on the record.
Do you have an idea of why they might be so reluctant to speak publicly?

BOB IGER: Well, I think that news organizations, there’s a sense that they are being scrutinized and
being criticized in a way that they’ve never experienced before. And I think there’s a bit of a bunker
mentality that has set in. I think it’s very, very hard when you’re constantly, constantly being criticized
by—

STEWART: Who would criticize the news, who would do such a, such a thing about that's terrible (looks
in the camera). Alright, it's my fault. But you know, it's interesting the people that we talked to would all
say, “well, you know, you gotta deliver the ratings.” They call them the minute-to-minutes, right? How
much of it is the ratings pressure and how much of it is a self-consciousness over accusations of liberal
bias or accusations of a political agenda? What concerns would they express to you in that situation?

IGER: ABC news reported to me in one form or another for probably 35 years, 30 some odd years and
my advice to them was to not hear the noise as much to continue doing the job that that we’ve
entrusted them to do, which is to tell the truth to state the facts to present the news in an accurate and
affair and in a timely basis.

But we never sought to drive ratings or even bottom-line success at the sacrifice of what we consider to
be quality. It just was, it wasn't part of our discussion.

STEWART: What they will tell you. And maybe they didn’t say it, you know, in those meetings is the
producer of the piece will be cognizant of the minute-to-minute ratings. The executive producer of the
show will be cognizant of those and the decisions that they make were almost entirely built on what
they thought might have rated.

IGER: If you're asking whether there have been incidents when news organizations fail to carry things
because they don't think they'll be of interest to their audience. I'm sure that's the case.

STEWART: I'm not saying instances. I'm saying that's been shaping –

IGER: You think it's a regular thing.

STEWART: And not told in the right way.

IGER: Not being -- see that's, that's I would, I would argue that there are stories that are not told
because there's a belief that people aren't interested them. I don't think there are stories that are told
that are told inaccurately just to make them more interesting to people—

STEWART: It's not inaccurate.

IGER – I'm defending an organization as opposed to news in general. I just don't have enough—

STEWART: But trust in news during the Cronkite era was it was one of the most valued institutions.
Today, it's somewhere between Congress and herpes. You know, in terms of its curating what
happened.

IGER: It starts with technology enabling an explosion of programming which includes news and
information. And with that I believe has come a dilution in quality. The more volume typically as it grows
and grows and grows and explodes, results in my opinion, a loss of quality. And then you look at what is
presented as news on social media; and you can immediately conclude that a lot of what is presented
that people think is news is not news as certainly we knew it when we were growing up and what we
were taught, news should be.

So, I think what people believe is news is really opinion and opinion is very different than that. Opinion is
a bias.

STEWART: But you're in a business where the first word you say, the first thing you say at the top of
every broadcast is, “our top story tonight.” That's opinion. It's subjective. There's this strange disconnect
between the high-mindedness of what they say they do: “Democracy dies in darkness;” versus the
reality of how they produce it: “breaking news tonight, everyone will die. Watch us,” because their
business model is based on engagement.

IGER: It is an editorial decision to decide what story to tell first. But you're suggesting that that in itself is
an example of a lessening of quality or bias?

STEWART: It’s bias. If you don't admit-- I'll give you an example if you lead every night with the Mueller
Report, Mueller, the Mueller investigation. They created a television show. They created the O.J. Trial
out of the Mueller report. That business model, it feels like, overwhelms whatever journalistic credibility
exists. And isn't that what needs to be fixed?

IGER: I do believe that many news organizations feeling embattled by that Trump and the Trump era
reacted to it. Um, perhaps by building up his potential demise. Another -- in other words I think I think
there was almost a glee felt.
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