

The King of Comedy: Reformatting Journalism to Rescue Democracy

BY MYLES LESLIE

I didn't vote in the last federal election. I have an excuse, but that's beside the point, most people my age didn't vote. If you look at the electoral turnout rates, we 25 to 35 year-olds are apparently an apolitical lot. We watch more comedy than politics. The general consensus is that we are amusing ourselves, if not to death, at least out of the democratic process.

Our tendency not to vote might indicate a shrunken political capacity, but the dire assessment of our TV viewing habits is up for grabs. In fact, the ratings for political satire shows suggest we are as engaged in the issues as any other generation. We just don't like watching the news. If the Canadian media wants to bring this cohort back into full democratic participation, it needs to lighten up. Things need not be as dark as Neil Postman claims.¹ For those who are already uncomfortable, this is not another call for snappier graphics and street-wise quips from the national news anchors. No, the proposal is much more radical, and unlike attempts to get Peter Mansbridge telling jokes, it might just work.

Rather than renovating the newscast yet again, Canadian journalism needs to build alternative production models, entirely new formats. The good news is that the formats aren't new at all, they're just new to the journalism business. The bad news is journalists aren't going to like it. They are not going to like the idea of popular drama, satire, and satirical interview shows becoming the new outlet for their work. What follows is an argument that this kind of move into drama and satire is not a sell out – that a formatting change does not represent the permanent loss of journalistic values.

The craft has thrived on format innovations in the past, including the development of wire services, the inverted pyramid style, or the first easy to hold and easy to read tabloid papers. None of these innovations spelled the end of print journalism, in fact they increased circulation.² Both of them impacted the way news was delivered by the highest and the lowest outlets of the day. They made the stuffiest papers more appealing, as they expanded the market for democracy's core product: information. Delivering the information that people need to be part of their government should be the journalistic craft's first goal. How that delivery is accomplished is of very little consequence.

The Canadian media continues to be fascinated with why the viewers bolted from the barn, rather than *where* they went. In my cohort's case, we're watching *This Hours Has 22 Minutes* instead of the

evening news. We have forsaken the national anchors, spending our days hooked up to Internet news sites and our evenings to political satire shows. Research indicates we're not alone in preferring a steady diet of headlines, and little else, off the Internet.³ Disturbingly, the journalistic credibility and values of the sites that supply our headlines appear to be irrelevant. The research, verification, and writing that go into a ticker headline don't seem to matter. In a world filled with too much information we just want a hint of the action. We're suspicious of attempts at relevance made by anyone other than those waving a badge of loyalty to our cause – whatever brand of conservative or liberal ideology that might be. We want none of the possibly tainted content on the news sites, none of the inherently subjective stories. Whether it is out of sloth, mistrust, or information overload we prefer our facts so boiled down they're nearly boiled away. We're force-feeding ourselves 'objectivity' as we consume only headlines.

This is entirely true until we turn off our computers and switch on our TVs in the evening. Then, the TV ratings reveal, we are happy to start engaging the substance of the major stories of the day. The catch being, we get our content from news satires or dramas. On the one hand we abhor, and snore through, the Ottawa dominated grind. On the other we make TV appointments to watch *The Rick Mercer Show* poke fun at the Ottawa dominated grind. Where an older generation's content and analysis came from *The Journal with Barbara Frum*, we prefer *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

The ratings have skewed so radically that the news is no longer feeding viewers to the evening dramas.⁴ Instead, savvy network executives are commissioning docudramas to feed viewers into the nightly broadcast. Trina McQueen, a former executive at both the CBC and CTV, tells of documentaries produced and aired around the goal of getting people to return to, or start watching the evening news. As McQueen herself says, *The West Wing* can handle a policy issue, like drug patent law and its impact on the third world, not only more intelligibly, but more convincingly than any TV news spot.⁵ The ratings support her, with something like three times the number of people who watch the news tuning in to the evening dramas.

Looked at from this perspective, this is not a generation amusing itself to death. Instead, it is a group with a very different formatting preference for its political discussion. Packaged as News or *The West*

Wing, it is the same content. The writers and the producers of the dramas and satire shows get all their stories from journalistic accounts. In fact, the ratings make it seem like they're the only ones actually reading or watching the news before repackaging it as an interview, or episode.

The politicians have figured all this out. Call it opportunism or simply smart, it's worth queuing up to get onto one of these shows. A pie in the face on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* or a good grilling on *The Daily Show* is the new way to get to the electorate. Or is it? As I admitted off the top, very few of the much cherished demographic are voting. Well, not for the moment they're not. Not while Canada's journalists continue to debate why it is the young have forsaken newsy facts and formatting for the unverified slapstick and satire interview of evening television. The longer we spend getting huffy about this apparent abandonment, the longer people will stay away from the polls in droves.

The journalism community has backed itself into a corner over this formatting issue. Rather than remember we come from the humble but fiery stock of Joseph Pulitzer, we've taken to feeling like a profession. We're not the media, we're *journalists*. This is a distinction no one outside the craft makes – especially in the CNN age when, despite protestations to the contrary, most TV journalism is at least mildly entertaining. Journalists are the media, literally. We are the medium through which our society's stories pass. Media mogul Jack Fuller describes our job as being “to tell the truth so that people will have the information that they need to be sovereign.”⁶ The people are not sovereign and the democracy is not strong if they are not getting the information and using it to vote. It is not part of our mandate to be picky about how they get that information.

TV excels at telling stories in pictures – as a medium it is inherently entertaining. The reporters and producers who work in TV know this as they gather their clips and b-roll. The search for human drama, for a personal face to put on a policy story, for the most representative clip, the most telegenic face, or most typical interview location are already a part of the job. These are all entertainment format decisions. The key here is to remember that *entertaining* does not necessarily mean *content-free*. It is unclear how entertainment values can be so evil when the medium excels at it, and every first year journalism course exhorts its students to ‘just tell the story.’ They're called stories for a reason. Journalists are, at the end of the day, storytellers – storytellers with a special responsibility to the democratic functioning of our society.

Is there really such a gulf between the details journalists select for their stories and the details *West Wing* writers select for their scripts? Usually, the drama writers aren't working to a five o'clock deadline and they have more than a minute and thirty seconds to tell their tale. Perhaps their take on the issues might be more thorough. They might be willing to tackle stories that just won't fit in the existing news format.

Given that a large segment of the population has simply stopped engaging the existing news format we have a number of options. On the one hand, Canadian journalism can insist it is separate from the entertainment media, and continue to discuss why the viewers ran away. Marshall McLuhan cautions this is a tenuous position at best. More importantly, the ongoing debate about the next renovation of the news doesn't seem to be getting the viewers to come back. On the other hand journalists, many of us working out of nominally 'converged' newsrooms can start working towards a better and more open relationship with not just the current affairs section, but variety and entertainment. The public has proved itself to be interested in politics by watching these shows and reading these sections of the paper.

For the media to serve Canada's democracy we need to realize that Northrop Frye may have been on to something when he argued that drama is the most compelling genre.⁷ Canadian journalism's considerable talents, resources, and unique skills can make shows that people are already watching, shows that politicians are already appearing on, shows that are already dealing with democracy's issues, even more compelling. Perhaps even compelling enough to get people voting again. It is time that drama and satire story meetings included real live journalists, not just clippings from the paper and vague memories of last night's newscast.

There will continue to be a place for traditional journalism in all this. Just as the craft adapted to the arrival of the telegraph, radio broadcasts, and television, we can and must adapt again. A new area of journalism, peopled by the best researchers and creative non-fiction writers the craft has to offer, should be opening up. This is not a bastardization, or sell-out, it is a needed response to the current state of democracy in Canada.

- 1 See Postman, N. 1985. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: public discourse in the age of show business*. New York: Viking
- 2 Kovacs, W. and T. Rosenstiel. *The Elements of Journalism: what newspeople should know and the public should expect*. New York: Three Rivers. p39
- 3 Liu, Brian. 2003. *The E-Generation and the Evolving News Media*. Masters thesis. University of British Columbia School of Journalism.
- 4 See Ericson, R., P. Baranek and J. Chan. 1987. *Visualizing Deviance: a study of news organizations*. Milton Keynes: Open University. p354
- 5 McQueen, T. *Is the News on the News? How popular culture deals with current events*. University of British Columbia School of Journalism Lunchtime Speakers Series, UBC School of Journalism, UBC. March 2, 2004.
- 6 Fuller, J. Committee of Concerned Journalists Forum. Chicago, IL. November 6, 1997.
- 7 Frye, N. 1966. *Anatomy of criticism: four essays*. New York: Antheneum