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Emmy for Ethos

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Jon Stewart and his team on *The Daily Show* recently won an Emmy. While this may not come as a shock to most regular viewers of the show, I was proud of my newly found television show. As an avid viewer of award ceremonies, I, of course, tuned in Sunday night with the rest of my floor to catch a glimpse of the action. The usual awards were given out to *Modern Family* and its cast, who were all deserving. But, to my surprise, the show that I'd recently started watching over the past few weeks as part of a class assignment won an award as well. *The Daily Show* picked up its tenth Emmy award for "Outstanding Variety Series" (Emmy Winners and Nominations). An award previously given to the "Greats" like *The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson* and *The Carol Burnett Show*, *The Daily Show* has consistently won this same award since 2003 (Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Variety Series). And after watching the show for almost a month and reading the article "The Arete of Amusement: An Aristotelian Perspective on the Daily Show" by Jonathan Barbur and Trischa Goodnow, I can see why.

Barbur and Goodnow set out to prove how *The Daily Show* gains its viewers trust through its effective and skillful use of ethos and its components of good sense, good character and goodwill. And they successfully did just that. Through an organized, thoughtful and interesting

approach, Barbur and Goodnow use Aristotle's rhetorical theory of Ethos to prove that *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is more than just a late-night talk show but rather an informational tool used to educate and entertain the population on matters of politics and media.

Barbur and Goodnow see the *Daily Show* separating itself from the pack of other late-night talk shows due to its skillful exhibition of the rhetorical device, ethos. They begin their argument by assessing the current state of the news media, which they identify as “a commoditized, profit-centered business rather than a unique, public centered profession...expected to turn a profit” (Barbur and Goodnow 3). Then, they point out in their thesis that because *The Daily Show* does not subscribe to a higher journalistic standard of being “objective and serious” and blends entertainment with their critiques of politics and the media, “the show exhibits qualities that lead its viewers to see it as trustworthy in its own right...qualities that leads its audience to judge it as possessing ethos” (Barbur and Goodnow 5).

Barbur and Goodnow then attempt to further define ethos and its elements. They identify ethos as the speaker's awareness of the complexities of the human character and how the speaker then uses this knowledge to project a favorable self-image and to better relate to the audience (Barbur and Goodnow 5). Pointing out that ethos has three components within it—phronesis, or good sense; arete, or good moral character; and eunoia, or goodwill towards the audience—they state that a speaker possessing all three qualities will inspire trust in his or her audience.

The authors then attempt to exemplify the different ways that *The Daily Show* inspires

trust in its audience using the different components of ethos. The authors give examples from a collection of secondary sources for the different ways that the show expresses their good sense, good moral character and goodwill. The show's use of remediating clips, exaggerated parodies of journalistic conventions, intelligent interview segments, and simply the type of news that is covered lend to its good sense. They continue to explain how the show's "wittiness and good temper" demonstrate its good moral character and how its dedication to and general interest in the public add to the show's goodwill.

In their conclusion, Barbur and Goodnow establish that because of its mastery of the characteristics of ethos, *The Daily Show* "seems to enhance people's sense of internal political efficacy...and engage in the political process to make a difference in the world" by bringing politics to the realm of the everyday citizens (Barbur and Goodnow 17).

From describing the modern media as being a "floodlight" of theatrical exposure to explaining how *The Daily Show* inspires its audience to make an impact in their own communities, Jonathan Barbur and Trischa Goodnow had me hooked from beginning to end. Because of the thoughtfulness and organization of the article, I was not only able to more clearly understand the exact points they were trying to make, but to also see their arguments as valid. For example, when first describing how *The Daily Show* exhibits the phronesis, or good sense, component of ethos, the authors list the four ways in which this trait is shown: through the content of the show, the remediating of clips, exaggerated parodies of news reports and journalistic conventions, and its guest selection for the interview segments. They continue to describe each element further, saying that

within the content of the show, there is the same amount of “substance” in *The Daily Show* as in a regular newscast. And the show even tends to devote far more time to each story than is given to each topic in a typical news broadcast, including extensive discussion of the events’ background as they quote from an article by J. R. Fox (Barbur and Goodnow 9). The authors continued in the same format of examples first, connection second, to describe how clip remediation, parodies and interview segments display the show’s use of phronesis as well. This method allowed the reader to see through the lens of the authors, understanding what the authors wanted you to take away from their article. The multitude of examples provided the strong evidence needed to convince the readers of the validity of their argument.

In addition to providing evidence for each concept, their effective organization also included subsequent conclusions after their discussion of each component of ethos exhibited by *The Daily Show*, further adding to the appeal of their argument. For example, after explaining each of the examples of phronesis, the authors extrapolate that these examples “illustrate the show’s reasoning ability, broad knowledge base, cleverness and good judgment” (Barbur and Goodnow 12). These qualities add to the show’s stance as an intellectual authority in the world of news reporting. Barbur and Goodnow explain that it is the specific ways in which the show displays the hosts’ vast knowledge that continues to draw in more viewers every day. Their ability to organize their case with examples and explanations made Barbur and Goodnow’s argument all the more convincing.

While I was persuaded and impressed by the caliber of interpretation and

exemplification exhibited by Jonathan Barbur and Trischa Goodnow, two things remained to be challenged: their lack of evidence supporting their claims against modern journalism and the type of sources from which their evidence was pulled. When discussing how the broadcast industry has changed over the years from “a light of public inquiry and political accountability” to a “theatrical light of exposure...packaged to sell,” Barbur and Goodnow have one quote from Geoffrey Baym’s *The Daily Show and The Reinvention of Political Journalism* to support this change (Barbur and Goodnow 3). They continue to deduce that due to the increase in pressure from news on the Internet and competition in the field, reporters are producing news that contains “inadequate investigation and background research,” a statement that once again comes from Baym (Barbur and Goodnow 4). I do not deny that a man who is called the “Jon Stewart of Journalism Studies” by his students at the University of Pennsylvania does not know what he is talking about (Geoffrey Baym, Ph.D.). This point would simply be better supported were there additional evidence claiming a similar point drawn from a different source. The sources from which Barbur and Goodnow drew quotes and facts, while reliable, were never actually from an episode of *The Daily Show* itself. Throughout the article, they quoted Jon Stewart in interviews, referenced material written by Geoffrey Baym countless times, and pulled information from other scholarly articles. While all their sources revolved around *The Daily Show*, referencing a specific episode could have held more weight than quoting someone else’s reaction to that episode.

What Goodnow and Barbur want the reader to walk away with is the idea that *The Daily*

Show is a leading intellectual authority in the political and media news world. They point out that while *The Daily Show* is a comedy show first, there is a great deal of substance to it as well. The mock-reporters, bleeping of profanity and satirical expressions of anger serve as the sugar that helps to diminish the bitter taste of reality that is political news. These elements of the show should not be taken as an insult to the journalistic world but rather be seen as adding to the show's ethos. And the show's ethos, as demonstrated by the Aristotelian argument made by Barbur and Goodnow and the recent television awards show, is what is needed by a good variety show to earn it a tenth Emmy award.

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