

**THE BLOG**

The Real “Daily Show” Effect”

By Marty Kaplan

06/23/2006 01:07 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Is this good news, or bad news?

Two East Carolina University assistant professors have compared student reaction to coverage of the 2004 presidential race by CBS News and by The Daily Show. They’ve concluded that Stewart show watchers are more cynical about candidates, campaigns, the electoral system and the news media than are network news viewers.

If you read the Washington Post account of this study, which was originally published in the journal *American Politics Research*, you might think this was bad news: “This is not funny: Jon Stewart and his hit Comedy Central cable show may be poisoning democracy.... Young people who watch Stewart’s faux news program... develop cynical views about politics and politicians that could lead them to just say no to voting,” writes Post columnist Richard Morin.

But if you actually read the academic paper, or the interview with the authors in the not-so-much-MSM *Daily Reflector*, you’ll see another angle. It turns out that Stewart fans also trust their own knowledge of politics more than do network watchers. Young Daily Show viewers blame the elites who run the political-media system for the mess we’re in, not themselves. They think they really get what politics is actually all about. And, says the study, here’s an idea worth entertaining: “citizens who understand politics are more likely to participate than those who do not.”

In other words, the cynicism and discontent that the Daily Show breeds could “spawn greater involvement,” say the authors; Stewart watchers could actually “become more active voters.”

Yes, the study also contemplates the other possibility: that cynicism is a voter-turnoff. “Whether it’s a good thing or a bad thing,” say the authors, “we just don’t know.”

Is there a reason that the Washington Post piece dwelt exclusively on the half-empty side of the argument? I suppose that reflecting what the study actually says — on the one hand, on the other hand — just wouldn’t have cut it for a column. And making the half-full case exclusively instead — Jon Stewart, Fighter for Democracy — might not have gone over well in a town whose media and political elites don’t much like being nailed on television as the dickwads and asshats that they are.

Hmmm... The more that young people learn the truth about the political process, the more they get their news from multiple sources, the more gatekeepers there are for information — the more they just might want to shake things up,

throw incumbents out, and make Washington accountable for its hypocrisy, mendacity and incompetence. What a concept!

UPDATE: Thanks to an email from reporter Jimmy Ryals, the name of paper has been corrected above. It's a Cox paper, with a 21,000 daily circulation. I still think that honorably places them outside the toxic media mainstream.

UPPERDATE: Thx to a commenter, more edits above.

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