

Drawing Lines in the Journalistic Sand: Jon Stewart, Edward R. Murrow, and Memory of News Gone By

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Abstract

In mid-December 2010, *The Daily Show* host Jon Stewart asked Congress to address the health care needs of 9/11 rescue workers—which it did. Shortly after, the *New York Times* published an analysis piece comparing Stewart to the legendary broadcaster Edward R. Murrow. This article explores how collective memory of Murrow was used by both mainstream media and the blogosphere to negotiate membership boundaries of journalism itself, with analysis conducted through textual analysis of online mainstream news texts and blog postings.

Keywords

collective memory, Jon Stewart, Edward R. Murrow, interpretive community, qualitative textual analysis

On the day after Christmas 2010, the *New York Times* published an analysis piece positing that a federal health-care bill for 9/11 responders passed Congress in the eleventh hour only because of an on-air appeal by *The Daily Show* host Jon Stewart. *Times* media writers Bill Carter and Brian Stelter then went one step further in explaining Stewart's role in the bill's passage, asking, "And does that make that comedian, Jon Stewart—despite all his protestations that what he does has nothing to do with journalism—the modern-day equivalent of Edward R. Murrow?"¹

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Even though the news article focused on Stewart, the question was actually revisiting a larger, long-standing debate about professional boundaries: Who owns legitimate status as a journalist? By evoking Murrow's name, this question now sought an answer through *collective memory*, the concept that "social groups construct their own images of the world by constantly shaping and reshaping versions of the past."² Through collective memory, social groups find a convenient tool for defining themselves, creating boundaries that provide distinctions from similar groups claiming parts of the same cultural turf—in this case, the nation's dominant professional news organization.

This article builds on the concepts of collective memory and journalistic boundary work, arguing that collective memory can serve as a useful means for mainstream journalism—and the blogosphere—to maintain boundary lines for defining acceptable journalistic practice. Data come from news, blogs, and opinion pieces gathered through a Google News search, with items examined through qualitative textual analysis.

Conceptual Foundation

Since the introduction of blogs and the widening of online journalistic voices and outlets, what constitutes journalism—and a journalist—has been a confused conversation.³ Blogs have transitioned from merely hosting the opinions of citizens to a growing number of sites focused on news critiques by citizens and journalists.⁴ Tensions between "old media" and "new media" or "professional" and "popular" have emerged in both professional and scholarly journalistic communities. This tension is formed, in part, by the economic competition between the "old" and the "new" emerging in a crowded news field.

As a group that shares common frames of reference for understanding and explaining society, traditional journalists often need to measure and redraw their professional and ideological boundaries.⁵ The journalistic paradigm—a belief system that provides its interpretive community with agreed-on standards, values, and practices—helps journalists bind to their profession.⁶ These journalistic boundaries separate journalism from other forms of communication and help separate various types of journalistic practice.

Boundary work that strengthens journalism's cultural authority has included attempts by journalists to reinforce the ties of their own community, to reset the original standards of the field, and to rebuild public confidence for journalism's social role. Journalistic communities have attempted to correct threats to journalistic boundaries, in terms of both who counts as a journalist and which actions raise public questions about journalistic authority. For example, journalists performed boundary work when they openly critiqued behaviors of pack journalists.⁷ And in less explicit ways, the journalistic community also attempted to distance itself from some of its members,⁸ such as in the paparazzi-led chase that led to the death of Princess Diana.⁹

Boundary lines of who is in a group, who is not, and what standards and practices are acceptable for a group can shift over time to reflect changes in technology, culture, and social demands.¹⁰ Though the community may incorporate some elements of

outsiders to reduce a boundary threat, enduring boundary lines are often constructed and maintained by dominant members of a journalistic group.¹¹ Overall, traditional news media have been hesitant to expand their community beyond its boundaries of conventional practice. However, as lines between entertainment and news continued to blur toward the end of the 1990s, for instance, traditional news media found themselves sharing authority with those outside of the traditional media landscape. Such an example occurred in 2000 when movie star Leonardo DiCaprio interviewed President Bill Clinton for an ABC Earth Day special.¹² At that time, journalists proved hesitant to yield journalistic authority to a movie star. In more recent years, boundary work has faced a media landscape adopting new technologies and roles.¹³

More recently, the introduction of “fake news” from cable TV comedians, such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, has further altered recognizable boundaries of the journalistic community.¹⁴ Sentiments surrounding the newsy nature and “truthiness” of Stewart’s *The Daily Show* and Colbert’s *The Colbert Report* have revolved around the shows’ comic, political, and partisan discourse.¹⁵ In addition, debate has considered these comedians’ roles as media watchdogs,¹⁶ much like accolades made to political blogs.¹⁷ A long-standing media debate has frequently raised the question, should *The Daily Show*’s Jon Stewart be considered a journalist as well as a comedian? Although considerable disagreement exists, an online poll in 2009 by *Time* magazine found that a large proportion of readers named Stewart “America’s most trusted newscaster,” placing him ahead of NBC anchor Brian Williams, CBS anchor Katie Couric, and ABC’s Charlie Gibson.¹⁸

To help make professional boundaries clearer, collective remembering of journalists *by journalists* has become a tool for shaping or strengthening their interpretive community.¹⁹ When NBC reporter David Bloom and *Washington Post* columnist Michael Kelly died in the Iraq war in 2003, for example, journalists rallied behind the sacrifice, the bravery, and the social contribution of these journalists.²⁰

Remembrance also allows journalists to create benchmarks for journalists of today that are drawn from legendary journalists of the past. Former MSNBC commentator Keith Olbermann has been compared to Murrow for being politically outspoken,²¹ as has Dan Rather because of his criticisms of corporate news media.²² Bloggers also have compared conservative commentator Glenn Beck and *CBS Evening News* anchor Katie Couric to Murrow.²³ It has been rare, however, that a guardian of the journalistic paradigm like the *New York Times* has made such a pointed comparison between a news comedian and a news legend in order to bolster—and possibly expand—the journalistic community.

The act of remembering performs a dual function. Revisiting journalistic legends affirms the status of figures from the past to secure their places in history and to pay homage to their values, practices, and cultural importance. Public remembrance of journalists also allows the one doing the remembering to take a place in the journalistic hierarchy as an expert, a respected figure worthy of commenting on the past. Both meanings of remembrance have been suggested as occurring in the public memorialization of news anchor David Brinkley and Mary McGrory, a newspaper columnist.²⁴

When legendary CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite died in 2009, remembering his achievements, ethics, and prominence provided journalists an opportunity to measure the current state of TV news. In coverage of the newsman's iconic stature as "The Most Trusted Man in America," journalists were able to encourage the public to reflect on the past efforts and contributions of Cronkite in an attempt to share in the values and standards of the past.²⁵ Journalists conducted this public remembrance of Cronkite to cast a positive and recharged perspective on current-day practice, while acknowledging a bygone era of journalism.

Cronkite's legend has also set a standard by which to measure the evolution of the media environment. In 2006, a *Rolling Stone* cover heralded Stewart and Colbert as "America's Anchors," a title lauded by *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, who wrote an interview for the magazine. While this is a far cry from the *Times* itself deeming Stewart as a new Murrow, the continued return to Cronkite as a gold standard reveals the blurred lines between what news is and isn't.²⁶ Such a return also reveals the role of collective memory in bridging the divide between "fake news" and "real news." Ultimately, the remembrance of legendary news workers allows today's journalistic community to perform boundary work by relying on the standards and accomplishments of the past, shaping the current paradigm, and adjusting membership boundaries. In this regard, it is important to note Tenenboim-Weinblatt's concern that research should approach journalistic boundary work through the relationships "between different media players"²⁷ to better understand the deeper cultural meanings of media.

This case study of journalism's comparison of Jon Stewart to legendary journalist Edward R. Murrow leads to three research questions. First, what is the meaning of the *Times*' Stewart–Murrow comparison for understanding contemporary journalism? Second, how was collective memory used to accomplish boundary work related to membership in the mainstream journalistic community? Third, how does the discourse surrounding the Stewart–Murrow comparison contrast between mainstream media and the blogosphere?

Method

This study turns to qualitative textual analysis of mainstream and alternative media coverage to explore professional discourse about a changing journalistic community.²⁸ Both mainstream news articles and blog posts were obtained through Google News because of its ability to locate a broad collection of viewpoints on an issue.²⁹

The search terms "Jon Stewart Murrow" yielded forty-two articles and blog posts beginning on December 26, 2010, the day when the *New York Times* compared Stewart to Murrow. Debate about Stewart's role as a journalist was renewed following his somber monologue decrying America's political culture in relation to the shooting of U.S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in Arizona on January 8, 2011. The collection of items ended on January 11, 2011, as the media conversation waned. Of the forty-two items gathered for analysis, sixteen came from mainstream news sites. The remaining twenty-six articles appeared in blog posts.

The authors conducted an analysis to find dominant themes, using the interpretive lens of boundary work and collective memory, an approach often used in qualitative analysis of news work.³⁰ Repeated readings were made of the forty-two items, with special concern for discussion of membership in the journalistic community, of boundary work articulating a rationale for inclusion/exclusion, and for specific references to Murrow (and other legendary journalists). References to the *Times* comparison of Stewart to Murrow were also noted within the context of their medium. Researchers met as the analysis unfolded to discuss findings and interpretations of the items from within the conceptual interpretive lens.

As the textual analysis began, it became clear that a definition was needed to distinguish between media outlets within the mainstream press and those within the blogosphere. It was decided that newspapers, TV stations, magazines, and websites acting as part of the traditional media (such as Politico.com and blogs related to established media outlets) were considered as a part of the mainstream media. Blog postings coming from private individuals and media commentators (such as Mediaite.com and Newsbusters.com) were considered to be part of the blogosphere. The analysis that follows addresses these news texts in relation to the study's research questions. The intent here is not to make normative judgments about the ongoing debate, but rather to explore the debate's cultural meanings to journalism.

Exploring Meanings of the *Times*' Endorsement

The *New York Times*' Stewart–Murrow comparison was far from a neutral assertion. By avoiding the 9/11 responders health-care issue until Stewart highlighted it, the *Times* had missed an obligation for covering a socially important story. When Carter and Stelter wrote their article about Stewart's effort, though, the *Times* connected itself to what he had done through a coattails effect. And in its—albeit late—news story about the health-care bill, the *Times* also used the story as an opportunity to comment on Stewart's journalistic qualities. To do so, *Times* reporters drew on its frequently quoted popular culture expert,³¹ Syracuse University professor Robert Thompson, to reconnect to the glory days of broadcast news through collective memory, suggesting that the dream of journalism-as-it-should-be was still alive:

“I have to think about how many kids are watching Jon Stewart right now and dreaming of growing up and doing what Jon Stewart does,” Mr. Thompson said. “Just like kids two generations ago watched Murrow or Cronkite and dreamed of doing that. Some of these ambitious appetites and callings that have brought people into journalism in the past may now manifest themselves in these other arenas, like comedy.”³²

From there, other forms of online media could respond to the *Times* story in a way that either brought them into the same journalistic fold or offered a boundary distinction that placed their organization in its preferred location. In other words, the *Times*

endorsement of the Stewart–Murrow comparison bore multiple meanings, depending on how a news organization could further its own journalistic position.

In the widespread commentary that followed the *Times* piece, noticeable distinctions appeared among the articles from mainstream news, news-oriented blogs, blogs by media critics, and blogs professing a distinct political ideology. In many cases, the debate about Stewart’s connection to the memory of Murrow was once again less central than the opportunity to engage in boundary work that could draw new lines in the journalistic sand. Those with the most to gain were blogs expressing a distinct political ideology. The blog *Mind Your Own Damn Business*,³³ for example, asserted about Stewart that “he has more of a news program than the news programs,” following with another snipe to separate itself from the mainstream media:

Thanks to Stewart, bloggers and many of the alleged “news” organizations around the country jumped on Congress and as a result, Congress passed the bill. Thank you Jon Stewart for bringing this issue to my attention. And folks, in that is where We the People have a problem.

This blog went on to call the *Times* story a “sneaky apology by *The New York Times* for a failure,” adding,

My problem is not with Stewart. It is with real journalists, and it is with We the People. *The New York Times* report is about a comedian that did the news media’s job for the news media.

By explaining the *Times* story this way, this blog was able to identify itself as a hard-hitting organization looking out for America’s citizens, something far from the irresponsible, arrogant mainstream. Likewise, *NewsBusters* expressed the view that the *Times* had perpetuated “the myth of Murrow” by comparing him with Stewart, firmly staking out its turf as a conservative media organization:

As it would only ever do for a liberal, the *Times* lauded Stewart as the exemplar of righteous journalistic advocacy.

But if the *Times* revealed its bias by bestowing the honor upon Stewart, its counter-factual recollection of Murrow’s legacy speaks to its willingness to take mythical journalistic folklore at face value.³⁴

Rightside News went one step further, using the Stewart–Murrow controversy as an opportunity to take shots at Stewart, the *New York Times*, Senate Democrats, and liberals in general:

Liberal funny man Jon Stewart is being praised by *The New York Times* as a giant of the journalism profession for having done a serious show.

. . . He saw a chance to act as the self-appointed guardian of the Ground Zero workers. The ploy worked, garnering him fawning coverage in the *Times*.

Not surprisingly, surveys show that Stewart's wisecracks about conservatives and seeming indifference to the terrorist threat attract an overwhelmingly liberal audience.³⁵

Commenting on the State of Traditional Journalism

Criticism of the *Times* and other mainstream institutions continued across many blogs that found an opportunity to shore up their own journalistic standing while downplaying the mainstream media. *NewAmerican*, a blog leaning toward the left, capitalized on the controversy to delineate its boundary from the mainstream media. Depicting the mainstream media as derelict of their responsibilities to society, *NewAmerican* called the situation "not very funny for the state of journalism in America."³⁶ The *Times* story, *NewAmerican* writer Thomas Eddlem asserted, "was not the first time" that the paper had referred to Stewart as most trusted, quoting what pundit and George Mason University professor Bob Lichter told NPR: "He's a satirist who has perfected the art of being taken seriously when he wants to and being taken frivolously when he wants."

This was also an opportunity for *NewAmerican* to tout itself as knowledgeable about the sad state of broadcast news in particular, pointing to a poll by the Pew Center for the People and the Press:

But perhaps more importantly, the study illustrates that Americans have wised up to the absolute vacuity of network news. Proof of that vacuity emerged in a 2006 study by Indiana State University Professor Julia R. Fox that compared election coverage by major network television stations with reporting by the *Daily Show*. Fox found that 2004 election coverage on the *Daily Show* contained as much electoral substance as the major networks.³⁷

Although the Stewart–Murrow comparison had multiple meanings for multiple commentators, one thing was consistent: Stewart and his program became a moveable standard for locating journalistic boundary lines and making a statement about where a particular organization lay within the journalistic terrain. Furthermore, the Stewart controversy became a means for an organization to strengthen its own position by selecting the aspect of the controversy that best suited its own positions.

Collective Memory and Boundary Work in Mainstream Journalism

Because the Stewart–Murrow comparison drew on collective memory as an authoritative reference point, it becomes important to assess how the mainstream media

actually undertook this boundary work. Likewise, it is necessary to understand *why* that boundary work took place. At the moment of the Stewart–Murrow comparison, the news media were facing challenging times. Mainstream news audiences were shrinking, while alternative news sources were springing up on a frequent basis. Broadcast news audiences had lost confidence in traditional mainstream newscasters, in addition to losing one of the most legendary American journalists: Walter Cronkite.

By reporting on the Stewart–Murrow comparison at the end of 2010, mainstream news organizations had an opportunity to reconnect with journalism of the past and regain ground for their social standing. This boundary work could help close the door on the belief that membership in journalism had broadened to include cable news humorists—even if they sit behind a news desk. One strategy was to reject the *comparison* between Stewart and Murrow, rather than to discredit Stewart. *ABC News*, for one, took this strategy:

For some, the comparison between the Comedy Central host and the television news giants seems obvious.

“I think it’s incredibly apt,” said Rachel Sklar, editor-at-large of the blog *Mediaite*. “There’s no question that Jon Stewart has used his platform to advance, strongly, what he thinks is right.”

For others, it’s hopelessly flawed.

“It is childish, it is garbage, it is ignorant garbage,” said Todd Gitlin, a professor of journalism and sociology at Columbia University. “[Stewart] is not a news person. He’s a satirist and when he chooses to be blunt, he has the luxury of being blunt.”³⁸

A blog from *The Atlantic* went further, suggesting that a comparison with the memory of Murrow was not necessary to validate Stewart’s accomplishments:

Stewart doesn’t need to be the next Murrow to play a significant and laudable role in the public life of this country. The men, their deeds, and their times defy easy comparison. Stewart has become an eloquent and eminent prosecutor against much that is wrong about Washington (and sometimes the people who cover it).

Jon Stewart may or may not be the most important journalist of the 21st Century—it’s early still, plus he’d have to cop to the label and I’m not sure he would. But it should be clear from this episode, if it somehow weren’t before, that Stewart (Murrow-like, you might say) wields enormous power and prestige through the medium of television (and the Internet).³⁹

An *Orlando Sentinel* blog opined in the same direction, suggesting that Stewart might not relish the comparison:

Stewart like Murrow? I can't believe that's what any comedian wants. Yes, it's nice to be compared to the serious, dignified, truth-seeking Murrow. But a comedian needs to be, well, funny.

Stewart did something admirable in helping the 9/11 responders, but let's not get carried away. Losing perspective isn't funny. The comparisons make me wonder if people know Murrow.⁴⁰

The *New York Observer Media Mob* agreed:

No longer is it merely a question of whether the host occasionally commits journalism. Now it's "Is he the next Walter Cronkite or Edward R. Murrow?"

So does that make him a Cronkite for our time? Stewart himself declined to comment, and forbade his entire staff from weighing in on his Murrovian nature, but no bother.⁴¹

The real point of this debate was echoed by the *Pocono Record*: "When a comedian is compared to news legends Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite, journalism school deans must be scratching their heads about what it means."⁴²

In sum, collective memory appeared in positively oriented strategies for mainstream media that could maintain their boundary separation from Jon Stewart and other news comedians. These strategies were aimed at rejecting the validity of the comparison, suggesting that Stewart himself was not eager for the comparison for the sake of his own career.

Capitalizing on the Controversy in the Blogosphere

While the mainstream media were engaged in boundary work to reassert their ownership of the journalism institution, ideologically oriented blogs spoke to their legitimacy as alternative voices for society. For blogs and websites remaining as neutral observers or conveyors of information, though, the Stewart–Murrow controversy provided a source of "sexy" content to help draw and maintain an audience, while also signifying cultural hipness, such as this example from *ScreenCrave.com*:

If you had doubts about Jon Stewart's ability to inform the public we've got news for you! On Tuesday the *New York Times* compared the *Comedy Central* TV anchor to the likes of Edward R. Murrow, and for some reason that's really pissed people off. Murrow was a serious newsman who worked on both radio and television (on CBS) during the early days of its inception.⁴³

After providing more background on Murrow and Cronkite, the site offered a three-option poll:

—No! He’s a comedian who just happens to know politics.

—Yes! He tells it like it is just in a funny way.

—There are similarities but Murrow may be pushing it.

The news site *ThirdAge* similarly mixed celebrity news with controversy:

Jon Stewart has a career adorned with awards and high ratings, and the “Daily Show” anchor received another pat on the back Tuesday when the *New York Times* compared Stewart to Edward R. Murrow. The comparison has the media buzzing as those on the left congratulate and those on the right become infuriated.⁴⁴

Taking the celebrity connection one step further, *SpliceToday* tied the Stewart–Murrow comparison to a larger, bolder scenario:

Not exactly an “I have a dream” moment, but it got everyone from Howard Stern to Oprah Winfrey wondering aloud whether Stewart should make the leap forward from commenting on politics to becoming a politician. Stewart dismissed the idea on Winfrey’s show, saying, “If I really wanted to change things, I’d run for office. I haven’t considered that, and I wouldn’t—because this is what I do well. The more I move away from comedy, the less competent I become.”⁴⁵

In all, unlike the mainstream media and the political blogs, these news-oriented blogs drew on a more commercial purpose for writing on the Stewart–Murrow controversy, an effort to reaffirm commitment to their followers.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how a single incident can be interpreted and discussed in multiple ways by different media organizations, each one adjusting professional boundary claims of vested journalistic interests. Here, collective memory helped media organizations locate themselves in relation to their preferred boundaries of practice. For the media mainstream, memory served as a way to reassert credibility and regain social value that had come into question. For blogs, the controversy became a means of asserting their status as an alternative voice, creating distinctions between themselves and the mainstream.

This study raised three research questions. The first question asked about the meaning of the *Times*’ comparison of Stewart and Murrow for understanding contemporary

journalism. Most simply, the initial endorsement became a direct form of boundary adjustment to recapture ownership of a lost journalistic opportunity. As the endorsement became more controversial, it served as a broader institutional moment for a variety of mainstream organizations and blogs to engage in boundary work that addressed a broader media spectrum. In all, this study suggests that news discourse is not created just for audiences, but serves as a conversation within the broader media institution as well.

The second research question asked how collective memory was used to accomplish boundary work related to membership in the mainstream journalistic community. Because the comparison became an opportunity to regain ground lost to a purveyor of fake news, to ignore it would be to lose ground further yet. Drawing on collective memory became a way of asserting a standard for journalistic authority. The third research question asked about differences between the discourse of the mainstream news organizations and blogs. For the mainstream media, the comparison represented the resolution of a threat, a way of solidifying a journalistic boundary. For blogs, though, the comparison provided an opportunity to demonstrate commitment to a specific media mission, while also gaining authority and stretching boundaries a little further.

The argument put forth by this study is that collective memory can serve as a way of drawing and redrawing journalistic lines through the authority that memory brings. What should be clear is that the *Times*' anointing Jon Stewart as the next Murrow was not really about Stewart at all—he was more the vehicle for boundary work by mainstream media and the blogosphere. As the controversy unfolded, rightful ownership of the memory of Murrow actually became less clear. For the Stewart–Murrow comparison, the institutional conversation became one of inclusion and exclusion—of reassessing professional boundaries after most media organizations failed to report on the plight of the World Trade Center rescue workers. To join in the discussion required little more than acknowledging the comparison, doing a little background work to revisit collective memory, and then offering an opinion connected to some aspect of the story that would firm up an organization's stance.

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