

INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE DAILY SHOW WITH TREVOR NOAH

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“The Daily Show” (TDS) on Comedy Central has a heralded history of critical, comedic inquiry on what is going on in society. In 2015 the longtime host Jon Stewart (1999-2015) left and the show was taken over by South African comedian Trevor Noah who had been a correspondent on the show for a few years prior to becoming the host. With the viewership Stewart built during his tenure Noah was able to take an already popular show and bring it further into the public eye by using intersectionality intentionally to create a diverse and critical show. Through the analysis of how the intersections of race, nation and capitalism we can start to answer the following questions: How does “The Daily Show” establish socially agreed upon meaning and power (power meaning the production of cultural knowledge and access to resources) among young audiences, understood as audience members between the ages of 18 and 24? How has “The Daily Show” used its power among young audiences to establish itself as a critical tool to understanding social justice from an intersectional point of view regarding race, nation and capitalism? Through analysis of the show’s history, episodes of the show, Noah and the correspondents, the guests Noah has on the show and the platforms the show publishes itself on we can see the cultural power it holds and the impact it has on audiences between the ages of 18 and 24.

A large reason TDS is so impactful has to do with the global perspective Noah and the correspondents bring to the table. Many of the on air talent for TDS, Noah included, are either from different countries around the world or are first generation Americans. Noah is from South Africa and grew up during apartheid. He uses his lived experiences to deconstruct complex topics in America and provide a perspective unique to specifically him. Ronny Chieng, a current correspondent, is Malaysian. He grew up in New Hampshire and Singapore and then went to college in Australia. On TDS he takes on stories that have to do with what’s going on outside of the United States or what people from around the world think about what’s going on in the U.S.

For example, in the episode “Votegasm 2020: What Could Go Wrong? (Again)” (The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, 2020) Chieng reports on if voting should be required by law in the U.S. He interviews Americans and then goes to Australia, where it is required to vote, to ask people on the street what they think about mandatory voting. By doing this comparison Chieng is doing critical inquiry, meaning that he is “[invoking] a broad sense of using intersectional frameworks to study a range of social phenomena” (Collins & Bilge, *Intersectionality: Key Concepts*, 2016) to show mandatory voting is effective. Due to his experiences living all over the world he is able to use his access to resources and knowledge to create a story through his own identity and intersections. Another example of how impactful nation has been on TDS is from former correspondent Hasan Minhaj. Minhaj’s parents immigrated from India and Minhaj identifies as Indian, Muslim and American. He uses his nation effectively to identify, analyze and comment on issues that have to do with Muslim and Middle Eastern topics in America. For example, one of the most viewed videos on the TDS YouTube channel, with over 12 million views, is a story Minhaj produced called “Confused Islamophobes Target American Sikhs” which was released in 2016 (The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, 2016). Minhaj talks about how Americans commonly mistake Sikhs for Muslims and are Islamophobic towards them because of this. Minhaj uses his identity of being Muslim and Indian to comically explain a topic that is invisible to many. This video shows how popular the bits of the show that deal directly with intersectionality, in this case nation and religion, are created by the show’s correspondents who identify with different nations do very well online and make important topics visible. There is a lot of power in seeing diverse representation on mainstream television. By giving people the platform to see themselves represented allows them to learn and relate to what is being said. Relating to the reading “Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster” where Mitsuye Yamada says “By now, riding along with the minorities’ and women’s

movements I think we are making a wedge into the main body of American life, but people are still looking right through and around us, assuming we are simply tagging along.” (Yamada, 1979) This show actively works against this by putting people of many nations and race on the screen and in charge so they aren’t “tagging along” they are leading the way and are clearly visible and listened to by a large audience who can relate to them.

Race also plays into how impactful identity intersectionality is to the success of the show. Through having racially diverse guests on the show and hiring a racially diverse cast TDS is able to speak to many different backgrounds and identities. The 2020 election coverage clearly shows the racial diversity of the show and how it impacts the story the show tells. In the episode “Votegasm 2020: What Could Go Wrong? (Again)” every correspondent does a bit on the show, pretty much all of which are directly related to the correspondent’s race. For example, Desi Lydic, a white woman, reports “from the Trump headquarters” to talk about the election results and since the vast amount of Trump supporters are white she was “sent” to talk about it. Dulce Sloan, a Black woman, does a story on how voter suppression impacts Black people. She says in her bit “The lines are so long and that’s how you know I’m voting in a Black district because they only gave us one voting booth ... You know what Trevor? I’m not even here trying to vote in the 2020 election. I’m trying to vote for Hillary.” (The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, 2020) Also, both the guests on this episode are Black. One is actor and activist Don Cheadle and the other is professor of sociology at UNC and MacArthur Genius Grant winner Tressie McMillan Cottom. The show always has on guests of color to provide diverse perspective and on this episode in particular it was very effective in teaching the viewers about how people of color, specifically Black people, are impacted by voter suppression. McMillan Cottom says:

“For all that we talk about race in this country, and it is significant, and it matters. For all that we talk about class is it is significant, and it does matter. What we have learned is that gender also

matters. There has always been a conservative streak or impulse of conservatism among African American community. It gets drowned out by our shared oppression relative to white people ... what we see is that there has been enough time between the Civil Rights Movement and the young to middle aged African American voter that they think they can actually vote their class interest separate from their class interest when really what they are doing is voting from their gender interest ... They are attracted to the presentation of masculine strength in Donald Trump.” (The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, 2020)

By having guests like McMillan Cottom on the show TDS is able to teach its audience about important topics in an intelligent and critical way and it does really well online because this content reflects the diversity of the show’s viewership. It can be clearly seen that when TDS uses its diversity to tell stories that provide commentary and critical inquiry audiences listen, care and respond.

TDS is a show that airs on Comedy Central every day. They also upload all their videos and full episodes to YouTube. This show’s ability to take advantage of social and multimedia platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram they have seen mass response from audiences and growth in viewership. Comedy Central’s large viewership along with its willingness to let the show expand outside of just showing content on the television channel shows the companies interest in appealing to younger audiences. “Audiences are responding. The show has increased its viewership by more than 50% and has logged more than 2.8 billion views on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube so far this year – the most of any late-night show, according to data tracking site Domo and data measurement platform Tubular.” (Ordon, 2020) While 2020 saw the most notable growth TDS has been seeing consistent growth since 2017 among their target demographic: millennials and Gen Z. In March of 2017 TDS had its highest rated night in show history and then again in May of 2017 (Comedy Central, 2017). Comedy

Central acknowledges and welcomes TDS's use of social media and multimedia to bring in a young audience. In a media release from March 2017 TDS said "'The Daily Show with Trevor Noah' also continues to succeed and grow digitally and socially, exemplifying the true multiplatform nature of the series and how it connects with Comedy Central's target millennial audience." (Comedy Central, 2017) From a capitalistic perspective this shows that Comedy Central is willing to use its resources and power to push the show in a new direction that appeals to young audiences. Being on a show that airs on a major television channel also gives it the power to make positive change. This year TDS has put fundraisers on the vast majority of its videos highlighting a new charity each month. Because the show reaches millions of people with most of its videos are able to raise a lot of money for many charities. Examples include TDS raising over \$346 thousand for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund on the video "George Floyd, Minneapolis Protests, Ahmaud Arbery & Amy Cooper", \$42.5 thousand for Meals on Wheels on the video "Why Are Americans Going to the Dentist in Mexico?" and \$32.5 thousand for the World Central Kitchen & #ChefsForThePolls on the video "Florida Man Bulldozes Biden Yard Signs & Trump Hates on Kamala". By using the company's capital, power and support TDS is able to provide a platform for its viewers to get involved in critical discussion and social justice by watching the videos and donating to the monthly organizations.

Putting all of this together the intersectionality of nation, race and capitalism has created a message that is diverse and effective tool for young audiences to learn about and engage in social justice and it also shows the show's allyship. Allyship is defined as: "the practice of individuals with some form or forms of social privilege uniting politically and publicly with marginalized groups to forward liberatory projects. Allies leverage their privilege to bring attention and resources to issues that do not directly affect them, with the understanding that this practice is

useful not only in uplifting more vulnerable groups but also to creating a more just society as the whole.” (Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020) The best example of how these intersections work together to create allyship is through the work of the host Trevor Noah. Noah is a biracial (Black and white) man, from South Africa and the now long time host of TDS. He actively works to provide access and education to his audience by conducting interviews with prominent and important figures, like Dr. Anthony Fauci and Bill Gates, and commenting on important cultural moments in current history like the coronavirus and the killing of George Floyd and the protests that followed. In the video “George Floyd, Minneapolis Protests, Ahmaud Arbery & Amy Cooper” all of these intersections come together to create both critical inquiry and critical praxis, meaning how people “produce, draw upon, or apply intersectional frameworks in their daily lives.” (Collins & Bilge, *Intersectionality: Key Concepts*, 2016). In the video Noah speaks directly to the audience from his phone. He explains that everything going on during this time was connected: the coronavirus, what happened to Amy Cooper, the killings of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd and the protests. Later in the video he speaks about the social contract society signs, citing Malcom Gladwell’s book “David and Goliath” and his principals of legitimacy. He is able to use critical inquiry to start a discussion that ultimately creates critical praxis by attaching his video to a fundraiser for the NAACP Legal Defense fund and educating people on the topic so they can go out and discuss it with those around them. Noah keeps a calm presence throughout the video and explains everything very clearly, but you can tell how angry he is about the topic. In this video and in many others Noah and his correspondents use anger with precision (Past, 2012) as Audre Lorde would say when crafting their stories. Noah also uses his capital of having a successful show on Comedy Central as leverage to bring on powerful guests like Dr. Anthony Fauci back in March when the pandemic was just starting. This speaks to the power Noah has with young audiences

because Fauci asked to be on the show to address Noah's audience specifically (Lopez, 2020). Through this interview and many others Noah and TDS have been able to effectively understand and use intersectionality to create a diverse, impactful and educational show viewed by millions.

Overall, TDS clearly knows its audience and wants to engage with them in complex and important conversations. By hiring a racially diverse cast from all over the world throughout the show's history it has been able to produce content from unique points of view not seen anywhere else on television and make marginalized voices visible within mainstream media. Then by utilizing its capital of being on a major network it is able to reach a wide audience and provide content that helps the audience learn and then act on the knowledge they have gained. This is a prime example of how a show can use intersectionality as a tool for social justice and it has set the standard not only on late night television but across the internet.

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