



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on January 24, 2011

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Jon Stewart: America's Leading Journalist?

The question sounds like a joke, made up by one of the talented writers for Comedy Central's *Daily Show* itself: Is the *Daily Show's* Jon Stewart the journalistic reincarnation of Edward R. Murrow? But this was the serious question posed by *New York Times* writers Bill Carter and Brian Stelter on December 27, after Stewart rallied the media toward granting federal healthcare funding for September 11 first responders.



AP Images

Carter and Stelter ask: "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?" And their "yes" conclusion was not very funny for the state of journalism in America.

Though he might prefer a description like "advocacy satire," what Mr. Stewart engaged in that night — and on earlier occasions when he campaigned openly for passage of the bill — usually goes by the name "advocacy journalism."

Carter and Stelter even coaxed a media professor into agreeing publicly with their conclusion. "The two that come instantly to mind are Murrow and Cronkite," Professor Robert J. Thompson of the prestigious media school at Syracuse University told the *New York Times* of Stewart's activism.

Of course, Murrow and Cronkite became famous for using their prominent media positions as supposedly neutral "journalists" to rally the public for liberal causes. Stewart has done the same for a host of causes, many of which are liberal, but others about which constitutionalists would cheer. While providing healthcare for local firefighters, paramedics, and policeman is not an enumerated power of the federal government under the U.S. Constitution, Stewart has provided some real reporting of news that has gone unreported in many of the establishment print and broadcast channels. He has exposed government torture, warrantless wiretapping, the insane Homeland Security airport screening process, how the Austrian economic school predicted the housing bubble, and a host of other positive issues.

The December 27 article was not the first time the *New York Times* has hinted that Stewart was the "most trusted man in America." It stated that in 2008 as well.

National Public Radio recently noted much the same about Stewart's activism on behalf of 9/11 first responders on December 26. "He's a satirist who has perfected the art of being taken seriously when he wants to and being taken frivolously when he wants to," communications professor Bob Lichter of the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University told NPR. "Here's a guy who will tell all comers that he's got a fake news show. It's not a real news show. And yet he bludgeons CNN into taking *Crossfire* off the air. Presidential candidates announce on his show. The president is a guest. He's become an influential insider."

A clue about how influential he has become is a 2009 non-scientific web poll taken by *Time* magazine that listed Jon Stewart as America's most trusted newsman, beating NBC's Brian Williams 44-29



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percent (ABC's Charlie Gibson got 19 percent, and CBS's Katie Couric got seven percent).

The reality is a little less dramatic, even if it is more revealing. A September 2010 scientific poll by the Pew Center for the People and the Press reported that no network reporter garnered more than five percent of the American people's vote of "most admired" news reporter. The 2010 poll results showed a sharp departure from the trusted news anchor role that had been in place over the past few decades.

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. Let that sink in for a moment: a "fake news" comedy show has as much substance as a regular network "news" broadcast. While Stewart fills in the spaces between the substance with unsavory jokes and other humor, the national networks fill in the void with celebrity fluff and other useless information.

Fox's study was confirmed by additional studies, including a Pew Center 2007 report that found *Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* viewers are the most knowledgeable about current events among national news consumers, while noting that Fox News Channel viewers were the least knowledgeable among national sources. Clearly, the television news channels are not educating their audiences about what's happening in the nation and the world.

Is there any more proof needed of the absolute lack of substantive news in the "news" business?

The *New York Times* called Stewart the modern Edward R. Murrow because the major news networks are denying viewers the real news, not because he's any great newsman. But unlike the national news networks, Stewart at least entertains with his humor. And despite his liberal bias, he does provide his audience an occasional genuine glimpse of the world as it is.



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