The Dynamic Duo: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert Redefine Political Satire

Did you ever go to a taping of *The Colbert Report*? Well, if you had, you would have heard that as an audience member you had a job to do. Many of us who joined the audience over the last years heard that it was our job to cheer Colbert to an Emmy victory. Why? Because *The Colbert Report* was tired of all of the Emmys going to *The Daily Show*. The Emmy, which is the television equivalent of an Academy Award, has a number of categories for awards, and programs like *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* compete in the category of “Outstanding Variety, Music, or Comedy Series.” From 2003–12 *The Daily Show* won the Emmy in this category, beating out *The Colbert Report*, which was nominated from 2006–12. Thus Colbert began a rivalry between the shows as he plugged for *The Colbert Report* to win the coveted award. Each year that *The Daily Show* won, Colbert would bemoan Stewart’s success on the *Report*.

But that would all end in 2013 when Colbert turned the tide and his show won two Emmys for “Outstanding Variety, Music, or Comedy Series” and “Outstanding Writing for a Variety, Music, or Comedy Program,” thereby ending the ten-year winning streak of *The Daily Show*—the longest winning streak of any program in the award’s history. In typical in-character egotistical fashion, the on-air Colbert boasted about his award. In fact, he began his bit by saying that he had no idea what came over him at the awards ceremony when he thanked his staff—since, of course, he was the only person responsible for the show. He then phoned Stewart to rub in his victory, actually using his award statues to dial the phone. But Stewart wasn’t going to let Colbert call all the shots and he surprised Colbert by answering the phone while popping out in a surprise visit to the show. He then refused to humor Colbert by acting upset, congratulating him instead on an award well deserved. As the two dueled over whether Stewart would demonstrate sadness over Colbert’s win, thereby satisfying Colbert’s desire to see Stewart jealous, Stewart offered the ultimate twist: he is executive producer of Colbert’s show, so, in essence, the award is really his anyway and he has just won for the eleventh time (see Figure 4.1).
All silliness aside, and there has been lots of silliness between these two shows, the story of Jon Stewart’s _The Daily Show_ and Stephen Colbert’s _The Colbert Report_ is central to understanding the ways that satire has radically changed our nation’s politics. One telling factoid is that these shows have not only been nominated for and won in the category of “Outstanding Variety, Music, or Comedy Program” for Emmys; they have also been nominated for and won Peabody Awards. Peabody Awards recognize distinguished and meritorious public service by radio and television stations, networks, producing organizations, and individuals. Reflecting excellence in quality rather than popularity or commercial success, they are awarded to about 25–35 winners out of a pool of about 1,000 nominees. _The Daily Show_ has won for election coverage twice, in 2000 and 2004. The citation for the 2004 award reads: “Through the momentous weeks of the 2004 Presidential Campaigns, Jon Stewart and cohorts provided the kind of cathartic satire that deflates pomposity on an equal opportunity basis. Somehow this sharp commentary made the real issues more important than ever.”\(^1\) _The Colbert Report_ also won twice: In 2007 for its excellence in news and entertainment and in 2011 for its Super PAC related coverage. The 2007 citation reads: “What started as a parody of punditry is now its own political platform. Whether serving as a campaign site or ‘merely’ mocking television itself, the result is a program that inspires viewers to laugh, think, and sabotage Wikipedia. Colbert elicits fear from members of Congress, expands our vocabulary, and skewers personality-driven journalism—all while maintaining his composure as an egotistical, but lovable, uber-patriot.”\(^2\)

As these citations show, both programs have gone well beyond traditional comedy and entertainment; they signal a new era of political satire that is highly entertaining and also highly significant in shaping the way that the public thinks about major new stories. As testament to the degree to which this form of