

A partial transcript of Jon Stewart on C-Span
At Newhouse Press Breakfast, October 14, 2004, New York City

A conversation between Jon Stewart and Ken Auletta of The New Yorker Magazine

NOTE: This is not a full transcript: Firstly, I missed the first few minutes of the broadcast. Secondly, I have cut out some parts that didn't seem as interesting. Also note, the conversational dialogue has been cleaned up a bit to make it easier to read – so technically this is NOT a “raw” transcript. (laughter) refers to laughs coming from the crowded room of press sitting at tables filling the room.

JON STEWART:

I thought the debate last night was very interesting, in that I think they should have stopped at two. I really think that they ran out of things to talk about. I remember at one point about 45 minutes in... Kerry just turned and said, “Did anybody see the OC last night?” (laughter) That was a real sign that things had slowly begun to wind down. I thought Bush was well coached, he wasn't angry Bush from the second debate, or retarded bush from the first. (laughter)

[snip]

But Kerry could have ended it last night, and didn't, by deciding that “Presidential” was to ignore the odd aura of un-reality that was emanating from the other podium.

[snip]

KEN AULETTA: So, to ask the favorite press question, who won? Who won the debate?

JS: That is the favorite press question, and that's why people don't respond to it. Because it's not a win or a lose. The idea that there's an insta-poll, that people in America will immediately digest whatever scripted banter had just occurred right before them, enough to make a snap judgement about the winning team of the debate, is absolutely – to put it in pugilist terms – is the mistake that is made...to put it in those terms of win/lose – now Kerry's 2-in-1, he's 3-in-0. It's not the playoffs. Those were on another channel.

KA: Yesterday, Matthew Cooper of Time Magazine was held in contempt by the Federal District Judge in Washington, as Judith Miller of the Times was last week...

JS: First of all, as someone who is held in contempt by much of the country, it's really not that bad...Bob Novak could end this whole thing tomorrow...He obviously knows the issue – this thing has gotten way out of hand. It's a simple issue.

[snip]

KA: Have you asked Novak on your show?

JS: Novak? No. I would not have him on. I have standards! (laughter) I would not have him on...He shouldn't be on television – CNN should not have him on the air. He should not be amongst civilized people...Let's face facts: this wasn't the Pentagon Papers. He didn't do something for the national good. He didn't reveal a CIA source, and a CIA agent – he did it for punitive reasons, for ugly partisan purposes.

KA: So you don't believe him when he says that he didn't know that she was not known?

Do you? (to audience) Do any of you? I mean it's a game we all play with each other...We know why he did it, and we know what he did. And this idea that we sit around and pretend that we don't seems silly.

KA: You had a chapter in your book...

JS: Don't go to the book man – I got your feet to the fire! (laughter)

KA: (Ken looks down at his notes, then changes the subject)

[snip]

KA: But your chapter is called “Democracy’s Valiant Vulgarians.” About the Press. What do you mean?

JS: I mean that the lowering of the discourse is done with tenacity. (laughter) The press has bravely and nobly eroded the public trust, and I celebrate that.

KA: You also said on Charlie Rose recently... about politicians, who you said “seek above all else to retain power.” Quote: “When you go to a zoo and see a monkey throwing poop, you go, ‘that’s what monkey’s do – what are you going to do?’” Then you went on to say, “What I wish the media would do more frequently is say, ‘Bad monkey.’”

JS: ...The gist, the essence, to distill that...What I’m advocating is that the media come work for us again. Remove themselves from the symbiotic relationship that they have developed with the power structure of corporations and of the politicians... (applause)

[snip]

It is altogether too comfortable. Look, we’re busy in the world. We have things to do. The corporate mentality and the political mentality is to create layers of obfuscation, that make it difficult to penetrate what’s going on. And that the media – and the print media, by the way, is very different. Most of what I’m talking about is television. The print media is much better at providing context, but you’re providing it a week later and by then, everybody’s moved on. That’s the sad truth of it – the world moves much more quickly now. The real responsibility now lies where the people set the agenda, and the agenda is set on the 24 hour networks. And unless you’re keeping up with them, and unless they are held to a certain level of accountability, that’s where the deficit lies.

[...]

It’s about holding to account, this idea that debate is two advocates for two corrupt organizations. To have a Democratic strategist and a Republican strategist is not a debate; that’s Coke and Pepsi discussing beverage supremacy. And it’s not real...what I’m suggesting is, that the person mediating that has to have some expertise. Has to have a job, and their job can’t be “What do you think Donna Brazile, OK what do you think Bay Buchanan, we’ll be right back.” That’s not a job, that’s doing nothing.

And it’s allowing two people to dominate a debate that are strategists, and understand – the television press is getting their asses kicked, and they’re doing it willingly. And that’s the thing that I think is so frustrating to watch at home, because they have a roll, and they have a job, and they’re not doing it. And that drives you insane when you watch.

[...]

Everybody wrings their hands about Fox ...OK, maybe they are not fair and balanced. But CNN used to have the slogan “You can depend on CNN.” Guess what? I watch it – no you can’t. So, what’s the difference?

[snip]

This idea of liberal bias by the way, that’s a strategy. There’s a difference between what Fox does – which is activism – and a so-called liberal bias. If you watch the news networks, who would have covered the war differently, as a network, if a Democratic president was in office? There’s only one network that would have, and that’s Fox. So that’s an activist stance.

The bias of the media is not liberal. It’s lazy, and it’s sensationalist, but it’s not liberal. There is no active strategy employed on Fox, an active strategy of advocating for conservative or right causes. [snip] But

they [Fox] are part of an overall 30-year strategy of putting together a way to reconsolidate power. By the way – well within their rights, I don't have a problem with that, because I don't consider them news. I consider them an active political arm.

KA: But when they say "We're fair and balanced," it doesn't bother you?... You don't think that's false advertising?

JS: Oh I absolutely believe it's false advertising – when did we start worrying about that? (laughter)
That's my point.

If the Presidential the election commercials are not held to that standard, why should news organizations? We've lost accountability.

And just because they are, why whine about it? Why not create a television organization that's not liberal, but credible? [Fox has] shown the way to a new paradigm, a new media paradigm. That this type of programming can be successful, and profitable... Fox didn't come out of the gate and earn its conservative street cred... They earned it over time, by presenting a narrative.

I don't think that narrative is helping, just like I don't think Al Jazeera's narrative is helping. I think it helps make them popular, but I don't think it helps the country, I think there's a responsibility within the media to help. But you could create a paradigm of a media organization that is geared towards NO BULLSHIT. And do it actively. And stop pretending that we don't know what's going on, and stop pretending that it's a right-left question. I don't buy that the world is divided into bi-chromatic thought like that.

[snip]

KA: When you fine tune the show, does everything run through you? Are you the quality control officer?

JS: I function, oddly enough, very similarly to a managing editor at an actual television news place. We have an editorial meeting in the mornings – the difference between our show and an actual news show is, we're not reporting anything. We're just part of the digestive process, so we are writing stories about it. But, we discuss it in the same way – we just don't ever have anyone leave the building. ..When we finish a show, the meeting that night is about setting the stage for the next day's editorial. Our day is basically focused on getting as much material as we can... We're writing, literally, up until tape time.

The most important editorial meeting is post-rehearsal. That's where I'm putting everything more into my rhythm. That's where we're really doing... the finest work, and the most crucial work in terms of re-jiggering structure of jokes, placement of jokes, placement of stories.

[snip]

KA: You've said publicly before that, if you were Bush or Kerry, you would not appear on the [Daily Show].

JS: ...If I were Bush or Kerry, I would want to conduct myself with an air of Presidential aura. And our show is like stepping in poop on your way to the library. I don't think we would enhance your reputation.

But they are salesman, they are looking for votes. And we have been deemed as having a condensed, distilled, aromatic bucket of voters, that is very hard to reach - that apparently only beer companies know how to get at. (laughter) If they can tap into that unbelievably pristine and delicious vein of voters, and pull some of them, they win the election. So they view us in a purely functional manner.

KA: If Bush ever appeared [on The Daily Show], what would you like to ask him?

JS: What am I missing? Why is it that when I look at you, I'm scared. But yet clearly there are people who love you. What is it that I'm not getting? Because I'm clearly not getting it. I don't get the - when he stands up and goes "Tell Tony Blair about the coalition!" I sit at home and go, "Holy shit – the President just went apeshit!" (laughter)

So, I'm not understanding. I'm not understanding the Bush doctrine. I don't understand the standard of pre-emption. Now I'm missing something, because he's not getting crushed in the polls. But I don't understand how, you know, "Saddam Hussein was a unique threat!" How? "Weapons of mass destruction." So does Iran. "Um...ties to Al-qaeda." So does Iran. "Fuck!" You know, I'm not getting it. [snip]

KA: People say Bush is the kind of guy they'd like to have a beer with. You don't feel that way?

JS: You know, I don't like to drink with people who are alcoholics. (Laughter) I always find that to be tacky. [snip]

[snip]

KA: Who are you gonna vote for?

JS: Right now it's looking like Kerry...I would be stunned if something happened to change my mind. And that's not– I'm not endorsing anybody. I'm just telling you honestly, I have never seen reality distorted in a manner that makes me feel like they're trying to gaslight me, you know. And I don't think effective policy means say it louder and more times. Doesn't work for me.

And Iraq was a mistake. Mistake. And when the President says, "History will judge if I made mistakes." You know what? We don't have the luxury for history to judge it, you better judge it now. We don't have the time. The idea that he can't think of one mistake – I got a list. Be happy to talk to him about it.

And as far as I'm concerned, does it mean Kerry will do a better job? I have no fucking idea. But – if one guy drove me into a ditch, and says "Don't worry, I know how to drive us out of this." (laughter) I'll give the keys to a seven-year-old at that point. (laughter)

[While taking questions from the audience]

Q: I'm a Muslim-American. How do we win the peace by reaching out to the billion-two Muslims in the world, and seven million in the U.S., who are yearning for the same thing?

JS: [in Bush voice] "Freedom is on the march! I can't tell ya, how good I feel about liberty! Electricity and water – that's fine, but liberty! Oh, sweet, delicious liberty! Seven layer cake of liberty! "

[Back to his own voice] If I knew that – aw, listen – we don't understand the Muslim community. The Muslim community doesn't understand us. And certainly, the stubbornness of an administration that has, um – I would think that the main tenet of a war on terror is to strengthen the moderates in the Muslim world, who clearly need strengthening.

And I would have no idea how to do that. Literally, I'm a Jew – I'm just glad you didn't take a swing at me. (laughter) You know – I don't know, I know we're supposed to be fighting, and in Israel. (laughter) First of all, what was God thinking, in putting all his holy sites in one area? (laughter) Two blocks from each other! Is the idea for God to put all the chosen peoples in there and be like "I just want to see who wants it more!" (laughter)

[snip]

Q: Jenny Anderson from the New York Post. [snip] You frequently comment on how scary it is that a growing number of young people get their news from you.

JS: Yes.

Q: Now that you know that for a fact, do you look at your responsibility any more seriously?

JS: No no no – I don't look at it – (laughter)

Q: Since you've commented on how bad the media is...

JS: Yes. And it's clearly, bad – and I meant you mostly (huge laughter)... Who better than an Australian to tell us what we need to know. (laughter)

The issue is this: that I have found – people – my complaint when people say that kids are getting most of their news from me is not that I'm worried that they're getting their news from me. The truth is, I know they're not. Because you can't. Because we don't do it...

Kids are more informed, and more inundated by information. They learn by osmosis, to a certain extent. If they came to our show without knowledge, our show wouldn't make any sense to them... We assume so much knowledge on our show, we do not instruct ever... I'm very impressed with most young peoples' base of knowledge. The only study that I had heard that validated any of it was an Annenberg study that our viewers were better informed than people who actually watch the news. So, they're not getting their news from us, they're coming to us to find out what the funny is on it.

[snip]

Q: John Higgins, of Broadcasting & Cable Magazine. So how would you like the kind of news network that you would want to see done and still be able to make money at it?

JS: ...I'm saying that the point of view doesn't necessarily have to be partisan. You can create a network with passion, that is interesting... Everybody thinks the way to copy Fox is to make it louder and flashier. That's not it, that's not why it's working. It's working because they know where they're coming from – and these other networks don't.

[snip]

Why can't you hire people that care about the truth? You know them, I know them, they're good. You got people on blogs that are fact-checking as things happen. Some of those people are conspiracy theorists, some of them are really smart – have somebody at the center of it, who can be an arbiter of what's real and what's not. And make that network reactive. Fox is reactive. That's why it's working. Find one that is reactive to the devastating game of strategy that's being played in Washington. I think it would make a shitload of money, and not only that you'd be able to sleep at night.

Q: Frank Radis from NBC. How did you know about the death ray? (laughter) I'm curious to know – short of a stroke with Kerry – what might make you vote for Bush?

JS: If I got a sense that he understood the fear, and the interest that people have in seeing him have a learning curve and a maturation process. If I felt like, at some level, his definition of leadership in any way matched up to mine. That would do it, maybe. He seems like a very decent man. Clearly there's people around him that are unbelievably loyal to him. Smart people, good people. So there's clearly something there.

But his vision of the world so differs from mine. His vision of his strength seems so different from mine. Unless that cognitive dissonance is fixed, I don't see how I could do it.

[snip] I think he's a decent guy, who has in some respects, had an administration that has done the opposite of what he set out to do. Made their decisions politically. I don't think his decision to go into Iraq was principled, he's a guy who doesn't want to do nation-building. He said it in 2000.

[question about the FCC fines on CBS and Fox, and the Sinclair decision to run the anti-Kerry doc]

[snip]

The way I look at it, NBC's hit show is girls in bikinis eating mealworms. As long as you're topping that, no one should fine you. (laughter)

These fines are politically motivated – not from the right or the left, but from the sense of, “We have to do something – let’s pick something that doesn’t matter so we don’t have to actually do something.” [snip] It’s that very wonderful straw man and red herring that politicians do in order to not have to do something about it. “Janet Jackson’s teat was an outrage!” No, it’s not. It’s a tit, it’s fine. The Cialis commercial came right before it. You know – when you have a commercial with a guy going, “If you have a four hour erection call a doctor?” (laughter) Alright, I’ll remember that. (laughter) So the whole FCC thing is a joke.

And I think you’ve already seen that there’s ramifications to it. I think Howard Stern is a really smart funny guy, and he does a smart funny show. And the idea that he has to leave public broadcasting to go to Sirius, because of this, makes me sad. I think it’s a loss, it’s a loss that people have to pay money to hear him now. And they have to do it because the FCC got stupid.

And Sinclair? It’s a joke, those guys have no business being in the business. They never have.

[snip] [He is asked again about Bush]

Does he feel [all the big problems in our world right now]? Probably not, but I don’t know anybody in that insulated bubble that would... Again, it’s the responsibility of the media to permeate that bubble, not to create it and exaggerate it.

You know Alexandra Pelosi ‘s documentary – the first one, I haven’t seen the second one – the interesting shot to me on that, wasn’t having anything to do with George Bush. It had to do with the cluster of reporters around the candidates, completely out of context with the rest of the world. And they fall into the same trap, and lose context. Did you ever see a bunch of 6-year-olds playing soccer? [snip] Nobody is on the outside looking at the whole.

[snip]

Ken ends the Q&A. The mikes are still on and you can hear this private exchange at the end:

JS: (to Ken) I hope I didn’t scare anybody.

KA: (to John) Don’t worry about it. It was hilarious.

JS: (to Ken) I figured that’s what they need – a little wake up.

[end]