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The Daily Show: Satire Restyled

The redesigned set aims to give the Comedy Central hit a fresh visual identity since the program has evolved beyond just a "parody news show"

It's not often that an interior-design decision prompts an Internet-driven protest campaign. But that's what happened when *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* moved to its new studio location in July and its producers took it as the opportunity for a set redesign. "We wanted to give the show a more unified look, bringing the set and graphics and everything into the same universe," says executive producer Ben Karlin.

The show's identity had evolved. "It started out as a parody of a news show. But I think it's way beyond that and into its own kind of highbrow satire," says James Biber, an architect with the New York firm Pentagram who led the set project.

The Daily Show needed its own visual identity, one that wasn't overly "parody news show" or "talk show," since it's really neither. It has become its own sort of thing.

MORE PROBING QUESTIONS? In keeping with a talk show that's not a talk show, they scrapped the couch. Guests now join host Jon Stewart at an ovoid conference table, sitting on an Eames-designed Herman Miller Aluminum Group chair. Turn the sound down, and it looks vaguely like a crisp, sober sibling of *Washington Week in Review*.

"I thought it was important to get Jon more at the center of things, so that he was more clearly the epicenter of the visual set," says Biber. "And to strip away a lot of the talk-show cues, like the couch. It's not a talk show."

The couch's removal has spawned everything from a blog to bring it back, to one reviewer's assertion that since the redesign, Stewart's questioning had grown more probing and incisive.

FUNNY, EASY READ. Karlin says that claim reminds him of musicians who respond incredulously to the overzealous interpretations of their songs. "They're like, 'Whoa, I didn't write it like that, but if you want to interpret it like that....' We don't have any mission statement to make the show more serious. Our agenda is just to keep the show funny and not rely on old tropes."

Pentagram was asked to rethink the set -- as well as the show's graphics -- after its successful collaboration with the Stewart team on *America: A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*, the high-school civics textbook parody that has spent more than a year on the *New York Times* best-seller list, including a stint at the top. Significantly, it's the only abundantly illustrated, four-color book to ever do so.

While *The Daily Show's* penetrating humor and the public's recent appetite for political books no doubt factor in *America's* success, ample credit must also be given to graphic designer Paula Scher and her Pentagram team. They pulled off a difficult task: Creating a visual parody that evoked its intended target -- but is actually better designed. *America* is more fun -- and easier -- to read than a textbook.

"DELIBERATELY UNPLEASANT." Now, Pentagram wants the show that is more fun to watch than the news to look better than it as well. For book and show, the designer's first exercise was to understand

what was being parodied.

"We went and got some actual textbooks," says Scher, who has worked on everything from the Citibank logo to the identity of The Public Theater. "They're grim affairs. They have lots of charts and graphs and diagrams, but in fact they're mean -- they're designed to bore you. Textbook companies have some kind of homogenized methodology they use to make the thing deliberately unpleasant."

Scher's challenge: To make the book look lively and energetic, without straying too far from the textbook vernacular. Her tack was to dress cluttered textbook convention -- timelines, call-out "Did You Know?" boxes -- in good graphic-design principles.

UBIQUITOUS NEWS SETS. For typefaces, she went with Akidenz Grotesque and URW Clarendon, a mixture of modern and classical. "If you're a designer and you're looking to create texture and interest and color with just two typefaces, these two will do it for you." Then there were little tricks, like color-coded chapters, which are sorely lacking from actual textbook design.

At the end of the day, however, graphic design had to be in service of the joke. A pullout "family-tree" style poster on "The Shadow Government," for example, contained much more visual information on the lower right side of the page than the lower left. "It made the composition imbalanced, which drove me nuts," says Scher. "I kept trying to reorganize the charts, and they kept saying no."

"Biber went through a similar process in redesigning the stage. He collected myriad images of news sets. "It's amazing how alike they are," he says. "There's a kind of ubiquitous mahogany and blue palette, and every single one has to have maps or globes."

"VISUAL JUNK." His goal, he says, was to provide the minimal DNA of a news program, "without all the cloying visual cues." This distinction is most evident when *The Daily Show* runs a feed from Fox or CNN containing screenfuls of scrolling stock reports and news briefs (not to mention the ubiquitous logo "bug" in the corner of the screen).

"It's visual junk," says Scher, who holds a dim view of television-news design in general. "They tend to be more concerned with what the technology can do -- how you can make something spin and move -- than whether the type will hold up because it's too thick or thin, or making choices of beauty of letterform on the screen."

While the missing couch provoked outcry, the new graphics have flown under the radar. "The best design is the things that insinuate themselves into your mind without overtly doing so," Karlin notes.

BEST FAKE NEWS SHOW. *The Daily Show's* new veneer of seriousness is not accidental. "One of Jon Stewart's points is that the success of the show derives in large part from his ability to impart authority to the material," says Biber. "He has said that's why he wears a suit."

And so, perhaps appropriately for an age in which, for some, *The Daily Show* functions as a "real" source of news, Pentagram's designers want the show to visually outperform its counterparts.

"You could argue that the other news shows are fake news shows, and that of all the fake news shows, it's the best news show on the air. Our view is that CNN should look at *The Daily Show* titles and say, 'We should make it look like that,'" Scher says.

RUMSFELDIAN SPIN. As for the hue and cry over the changes, Karlin says viewers should understand that changes are happening on the fly and undergo constant refinement. "If we were dark for three months, we would be doing test shows," he says, adding a Rumsfeldian spin: "You go on the air with the equipment you have, not the equipment you want."

So far, he reports, progress is good. "We're probably 54% there," he says. "No, 57%. We had a good meeting this morning, so that added 3%."