

Television satirist Jon Stewart takes on Wall Street's media mouthpieces

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Jon Stewart, host of US cable channel Comedy Central's "The Daily Show," has to be given credit for his recent exposure of CNBC, the financial news channel owned by conglomerate General Electric, as little more than a mouthpiece for Wall Street and its various corrupt and criminal or semi-criminal dealings.

After a period of stagnation, in which his satirical powers seemed blunted, Stewart has rightfully attacked the unconscionable role played by financial "reporters" who covered up for the powerful banking and corporate interests that looted the national economy and are now receiving trillions in public funds.

Stewart's recent confrontation with CNBC began after that channel's correspondent Rick Santelli erupted on the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade February 19. Santelli angrily denounced President Barack Obama's meager mortgage reform plan, proclaiming: "We really [don't] want to subsidize the losers' mortgages ... and reward people that should carry the water instead of drink the water."

Santelli continued, turning to traders on the floor, "This is America! How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor's mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills?" The traders cheered on the CNBC correspondent, shouting abuse at those facing foreclosure. This staged, right-wing episode was treated by the media as average Americans "speaking out."

Stewart invited Santelli onto his program March 4. The latter first accepted, then cancelled the appearance. On the show that evening Stewart proceeded to rake Santelli and CNBC over the coals.

The "Daily Show" host noted that Santelli had done "some critical reporting on the hundreds of billions of dollars of bailout money going to failed banks and failed automakers ... and insurers of failed banks and automakers." But, he continued, when it appeared that Obama "wanted a small percentage of that money to go to actual homeowners: Oh-ho! David Banner [the television alter-ego of the super-strong Incredible Hulk] became the Incredible Santelli."

Stewart ran a video of Santelli's reactionary rant and then commented: "Yeah, man! Wall Street is mad as hell! And

they're not gonna take it any more! Unless by 'it' you mean \$2 trillion in bailout money. That they will take."

Thereupon viewers were treated to an extended sequence devoted to CNBC's coverage of the financial industry and markets. The segment included Jim Cramer of "Mad Money" defending Bear Stearns less than a week before the investment banking firm went under. "Bear Stearns is not in trouble," Cramer tells his viewers.

We also see CNBC's Maria Bartiromo interviewing John Thain of Merrill Lynch, who comments, "I think that the view is that, yes, the US is going to slow down, but there's still a lot of optimism around the world." Bartiromo obsequiously remarks: "It's amazing we've had a lot of executives on who say the same thing, that, in fact, their businesses are doing okay." Merrill Lynch had to be acquired by Bank of America in the face of possible bankruptcy last September.

Stewart followed the Bartiromo clip with: "That is amazing. I mean these CEOs saying their own businesses are doing okay! I mean, it makes sense to take the CEO's word for it. For instance, I know O.J. Simpson. He told me that he didn't kill anybody, and he should know—he was there!"

(Bartiromo, it should be noted, was exposed in 2007 for her repeated appearances at events sponsored by CNBC advertisers, including Citigroup, with whom she was particularly cozy. In response to the revelation that Bartiromo had addressed a group of Citigroup clients in Asia in 2006 and flown home on the bank's company jet, the *New York Times* commented, "It is unusual for a financial journalist to make a public appearance on behalf of a major advertiser.")

The "Daily Show" segment continued with a CNBC interview of now disgraced Ponzi scheme operator "Sir" Allen Stanford, in which correspondent Carl Quintanilla asks Stanford: "Before we let you go, is it fun being a billionaire?" Stanford replies: "Well, uh, yes. Yes, yes, I have to say it is fun being a billionaire."

The comedy program's next confrontation came with Cramer of "Mad Money," a former hedge fund manager whose antics on his CNBC program include a good deal of screaming, throwing books, chairs and other objects, setting off sound effects and other stupidities. One of Cramer's rants against Federal Reserve policy in August 2007 prompted *Financial*

Times correspondent Martin Wolf to term the cable channel host's view "not just offensive," but "catastrophic."

Stewart had Cramer on the "Daily Show" March 12. The contest was not an even one. The host told his somewhat cowed guest early in the extended segment, "It's not just you. It's larger forces at work. It is this idea that the financial news networks are not just guilty of a sin of omission but a sin of commission. That they are in bed with them [the Wall Street firms]."

He showed a video of Cramer explaining how to manipulate stock prices and observed, "I gotta tell you. I understand that you want to make finance entertaining, but it's not a f---ing game. When I watch that I get, I can't tell you how angry it makes me because it says to me, 'You all know.' You all know what's going on. You can draw a straight line from those shenanigans to the stuff that was being pulled at Bear and at AIG and all this derivative market stuff that is this weird Wall Street side bet. ...

"Listen, you knew what the banks were doing and yet were touting it for months and months. The entire network [CNBC] was and so now to pretend that this was some sort of crazy, once-in-a-lifetime tsunami that nobody could have seen coming is disingenuous at best and criminal at worst."

Cramer protested that executives like Richard Fuld of Lehman Brothers had lied to him, although "I've known him for twenty years." Stewart responded with mock amazement, to the audience's delight, "The CEO of a company lied to you."

Cramer's miserable defense brings to mind the arguments of media figures and Democratic Party leaders after the launching of the Iraq war, that they had been "misled" by the Bush administration. In this case as in that one, individuals who claim they were lied to are either lying themselves or such fools that they have no place in public life.

When Cramer argued that there was a market for shows that offered get-rich-quick schemes, Stewart countered, "There's a market for cocaine and hookers. What is the responsibility of the people who cover Wall Street? Who are you responsible to? The people with the 401(k)s and the pensions and the general public or the Wall Street traders."

Toward the end of the extended segment, Cramer plaintively asserted, "I'm not Eric Sevareid. I'm not Edward R. Morrow [investigative television reporters from the 1950s and 1960s]. I'm a guy trying to do an entertainment show about business for people to watch. But it's difficult to have a reporter to say I just came from an interview with [Treasury Secretary] Hank Paulson and he lied his darn fool head off. It's difficult. I think it challenges the boundaries."

Stewart responded, "I'm under the assumption, and maybe this is purely ridiculous, but I'm under the assumption that you don't just take their word for it at face value. That you actually then go around and try and figure it out."

To give him credit, Cramer for once had the decency to be more or less speechless on Stewart's show. He seemed to express a degree of genuine moral reservation about his own

actions and those of his colleagues.

For his part, Stewart had a good day. In this effort, growing public outrage over the banks and the bailouts clearly played a role. US public opinion is deeply hostile to Wall Street and its shills at CNBC and elsewhere.

Of course, in right-wing publications and on "free market" web sites, Stewart was the villain. The *National Review's* Mark Hemingway labeled Stewart a "bully" who delivered "a predictable sandbagging," with the host "hopped up on faux-indignation." Hemingway argued that Stewart was attacking Santelli and Cramer to divert attention from the failure of Obama's economic policies. Stewart undoubtedly remains in the Democratic Party orbit, but that takes nothing away from his scathing attacks on Wall Street and CNBC.

Chiming in to defend Cramer, and this is perhaps nearly as inevitable, was the *New York Times* and its television critic, Alessandra Stanley. In a contemptible piece, Stanley accused Stewart of treating his guest "like a CEO subpoenaed to testify before Congress: his point was not to hear Mr. Cramer out, but to act out a cathartic ritual of indignation and castigation." Stewart, she wrote, had adopted a "prosecutorial tone." A shyster like Cramer treated rudely, and on American television, that is shocking! Stewart, a comic, is obliged to intervene precisely because Congress, prosecutors and the media will do nothing.

Stanley suggested that Stewart "has always had a messianic streak to his political satire," i.e., that he takes his comedy somewhat more seriously than most. Her main argument, entirely tangential to the issues at hand, that Cramer "may yet have the last laugh," because the feud might help CNBC's ratings, speaks to her own concerns (above all, career and income) and cynicism.

Stanley's reaction was a social response. Whatever Stewart's political limitations and agenda, he is tapping into popular anger and, for the moment, nourishing it. Hatred of the banks, hatred of the politicians who are bailing out the banks with public money ... where is this leading? Instinctively, this makes the *New York Times* and the political establishment nervous. And so it should.



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