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Tracing the decay of a communication event: the case of *The Daily Show's* "Seat of Heat"

Abstract: This work proposes an innovative use of the ethnography of communication in tracking diachronic changes in an event. The object of the analysis is a segment on *The Daily Show*, entitled the "Seat of Heat," which is conceptualized as a communication event, and which, I argue, exhibits a phenomenon formulated here as *symbolic decay*. The analysis suggests that symbolic decay is characterized by a decline of symbolic investment accomplished through a shift of sequential structure, ends (explicit goals/outcomes), and keying (emotional tenor) that inhibits the coordination of conjoint action, and through which interactants communicate the declining symbolic import of a communication event. Implications are drawn for future applications of the concept and the utility of the theoretical and methodological framework employed herein.

Keywords: symbolic decay, *The Daily Show*, ethnography of communication, cultural discourse analysis, communication event, social interaction

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1 Introduction

As cultural members in some number of communities we are often participants in a variety of communication events that persist over time. These may be cherished events of high value and intense cultural commitment, or more perfunctory ones that we continue to perform despite ourselves (Bauman 1977: 26). What is clear is that anyone who participates in a communication event over time is likely to notice some change in its performance and symbolic meaning to participants. We may even come to notice that the value of participation is declining. Eventually, the event may disappear entirely. It is this phenomenon, something I have come to call *symbolic decay*, which this work concerns itself.

It has been noted in a variety of disciplines that not all events endure over time, and are often subject to many factors in their demise, or evolution (Silverman 1979; Elias 1982; Smith 1982; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Comaroff 1985; Sahlins 1985; Bracken 1997; Bell 1997; Lincoln 2000). While participants in these

events often sense this change, we are deficient in our empirical engagement of the diachronic changes that occur in these events. In this work, I propose an innovative use of the ethnography of communication to track changes in a particular event over time, and identify the shifting features of its performance along Hymes's SPEAKING model (Hymes 1962, 1964, 1972; Gumperz and Hymes 1986).

Since communication events do not simply decay on their own, without the assistance of those who participate in them, we can formulate the problem as a communicative one. How do we communicate to one another that an event is no longer valued by its participants and ought not be? The key then to investigating such a phenomenon is to identify an event that can be observed in its totality, where the event can be investigated in early routine enactments, and where an identifiable form can be delineated against which subsequent performances can be compared.

As a frequent watcher of *The Daily Show*, with host Jon Stewart, I happened to be watching when Stewart introduced a new segment on the show which he entitled, "The Seat of Heat," in September of 2006. The segment took place during the interview portion of the show and purported to differ from the interview segment in that during the "Seat of Heat" the interviewee would be asked "one tough question," reminiscent of the more traditional journalistic form of the "Hot Seat." It was my sense as a viewer that for the majority of its appearance the segment accomplished what it purported to do – asking a "tough question" and watching the guest squirm as they attempted to find an interactional path through some form of question trap.

The last five instances of the segment, however, were dramatically different, after which the segment disappeared entirely and has not since returned. I wondered if what I had witnessed was not an admittedly compressed example of an event forming, becoming routinized, and then decaying before its abandonment, and whether conceptualizing and tracking it as such would prove useful and generative. Two questions can then be posed: (i) can we conceptualize *The Daily Show* "Seat of Heat" as a communication event with a routine structure?; and if so, (ii) can we track any changes that may have occurred before the segment ultimately disappeared?

In order to answer these questions, I employ Hymes's conceptual units of communication event and communication act, along with the elements of the SPEAKING model to track changes in the event as they occurred from the first to the last instance of the segment. These conceptual units, initially developed by Hymes (Hymes 1962, 1964, 1972; Gumperz and Hymes 1986), have been widely and successfully applied in identifying and comparing forms of communication across cultures (Carbaugh 1990; Philipsen 1992), making its utility for diachronic comparison of a single event an intriguing possibility.

In conceptualizing the "Seat of Heat" (SOH) as a communication event, I employ a working definition of the concept offered by Carbaugh (2007) in the ethnography of communication tradition. Carbaugh suggests that:

> A communication event is understood to be, from the point-of-view of participants, an integral, patterned part of social life. Like gossip sessions, talk shows, and political meetings, communication events typically, but not always involve a sequential structuring of acts, can be understood by formulating rules about them, and involve culturally bounded aspects of social life such that participants can identify their beginning and ending. (Carbaugh 2007: 2)

In order to understand the SOH as a communication event we must then identify (i) a clear beginning and end; (ii) a structured sequence of symbolic acts; and (iii) shared norms and rules. This understanding informs the methodology and analysis to follow.

2 Methodology

2.1 Data collection

Twenty instances of the SOH were collected over the period it was active on the show, from mid-September 2006, to mid-November 2006. At the time of this writing, this is an inclusive data set, with every occurrence of the SOH accounted for. Since the SOH has not appeared on *The Daily Show* since the end of 2006, it is likely that the segment will not return.

Instances range in length up to two minutes, but are typically around 45 seconds. Instances were collected from the Comedy Central log of *Daily Show* interviews, and were cataloged chronologically, noting the date and guest for each event. Whenever possible video data were obtained, with audio data supplementing missing video pieces. Relevant instances were transcribed using notation developed by Jefferson (2004) for inclusion in this work and are included in Appendix B.

2.2 Data analysis

Data were analyzed, paying particular attention to the participant identities at play in the event, the act sequence, norms, ends (explicit goals, outcomes), and

key (emotional quality) – all elements of the SPEAKING model, to focus analysis and to provide a framework for comparison of data. Additionally, Goffman's (1967: 5) conceptualization of "face," or the positive social value one claims for oneself, and particularly those actions that may be perceived as threatening to one's face (Brown and Levinson 1987), were employed to attempt to track just how "hot" the SOH actually was.

After analyzing the 20 collected instances it became clear that the majority of the instances (15) followed a routine pattern which will be described in detail below. It struck me that these 15 instances were also the first 15 aired chronologically. The last five instances aired exhibit significant differences, which form the basis for the argument presented throughout that the SOH was shifting in important ways before its disappearance.

In order to make clear the routine patterning of the 15 instances of the SOH, I present a detailed analysis of one such performance, which ran in late September with Pervez Musharraf, then President of Pakistan as the guest. Since, the primary interests of this work lie in the tracking and comparison of changes prior to the disappearance of a communication event, and because space is limited, I have chosen to carve out more territory for those analyses at the expense of reviewing multiple of the "routine" cases, though an additional instance does appear in Appendix A in support of the claim that a routine form did exist, and was active regardless whether the guest was a politician (Musharraf) or comedian/entertainer (Norm McDonald).

To be clear, these 15 instances of the routine prototypical form cross a variety of participant boundaries with guests such as Ben Affleck, Pat Buchanan, Trent Lott, Dennis Miller, Lou Dobbs, John Ashcroft, and Johnny Knoxville. This mix of pop-media icons and politicians is typical of Stewart's guests on the show more largely and each holds to the routine form I elaborate in the Musharraf data below. This is not to say that all instances are identical since the challenges posed by the layered complexity of Stewart's attempt to perform a parodied genre (The Hot Seat) within his interview segment, within the larger context of his satirical news show, are formidable. Nonetheless, it is my contention that the first 15 instances of the show do *not* vary in the ways the last five episodes do, and it is in this variance where I believe we can identify the shifts that accomplish the SOH's move from a valued communication event to a perfunctory one.

In an effort to clearly demonstrate the changes apparent in the last five episodes aired, I present a complete analysis of the last three of those instances chronologically. These instances serve to demonstrate structural and aesthetic changes that occurred immediately before the event's disappearance and include interviews with Jerry Seinfeld, Dustin Hoffman, and Tina Fey.

3 *The Daily Show* "Seat of Heat"

The SOH is always accompanied by dramatic audio and video that is played during the segment. The multimedia effects consist of a shift from calm blue lighting characteristic of the pre-SOH environment and *The Daily Show* more generally, to an intense red that ominously re-casts the studio in the threatening light. The large wall-sized monitor behind Stewart's desk is suddenly taken up by a silhouette of a man in a chair against a red background, surrounded by the words, "Seat of Heat," written in large orange-yellow letters superimposed above animated crackling flames.

Portraying a man seated in something that looks much like an interview chair engulfed in red flames is likely meant to convey the potential danger anyone in the SOH will encounter, and contributes to the key of suspense that distinguishes the SOH from the larger interview segment, of which it is part, but distinct. The suspense is, however, in keeping with the parodied nature of the event – a bit over the top, and is suggestive of the delicate balance between mock and real social danger that the event purports.

The following transcript from Musharraf's time on the SOH, which aired on 26 September 2006, illustrates the routine form of the event, and its apparent ends, act sequence, and key. References will be made back to this data throughout the text, with pieces embedded for illustrative purposes where appropriate. In this instance, Stewart attempts to place Musharraf in a discursive trap where he will have to politically ally himself with either George W. Bush, or Osama Bin Laden, in responding to an either/or question. Since accepting this dichotomy could certainly have political consequences for Musharraf, it becomes necessary for him to demonstrate his interactional guile in navigating such a trap to the audience's delight.

(1) *Pervez Musharraf – The routine performance (9/26/2006)*
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1    JS:   alright (.) uh mister president we're delighted that
2          you're here but we have to put you ↓on (.) the
3          daily show Seat of Heat (.) ↓so (4.7) (Seat of heat
4          multimedia begins) (applause) let's say (2.0) if
5          there were an election held in Pakistan >today< (.)
6          >and not< uh >clearly for your job< because
7          you're doing a wonderful job (.) uh for let's say
8          the mayoralty of karachi, °or° ombudsman or
9          ↓something (.) u:::h and we put up two candidates
10         (1.2) george w ↓bush (.5) and osama bin ↓laden
11         (.4) be truthful (1.3) who would win in a popular
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12      vote (.5) >in pakistan
13  PM: u(.hh)h (.7) (laughter & applause) I think (1.5)
14      they'll- (.) they'll both lose miserably
15  JS:  (4.0, audience applause) (Seat of heat multimedia
16      ends) (Stewart offers handshake) you're off- your
17      off the seat of heat sir (.5) well done
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3.1 Ends and outcomes

The ends in this instance can be seen as successfully navigating a potentially socially dangerous question, or to borrow from Goffman (1967), a question that is highly face threatening, while performing particular cultural competencies including comedy, cleverness, wit, and intelligence.

We can find evidence for these ends by asking whether the question posed by Stewart is threatening to Musharraf's face. If we evaluate the question Stewart asks we can begin to see some evidence that it is.

(2) *Question to Musharraf*
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1   JS: alright (.) uh Mr. president we're delighted that
2       you're here but we have to put you ↓on (.) the
3       daily show Seat of Heat (.) ↓so (4.7) (Seat of heat
4       multimedia begins) (applause) let's say (2.0) if
5       there were an election held in Pakistan >today< (.)
6       >and not< uh >clearly for your job< because you're
7       doing a wonderful job (.) uh for let's say the
8       mayoralty of Karachi, °or° ombudsman or
9       ↓something (.) u:::h and we put up two candidates
10      (1.2) George W ↓Bush (.5) and Osama Bin
11      ↓Laden (.4) be truthful (1.3) who would win in a
12      popular vote (.5) >in Pakistan
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The very uttering of this question is arguably already a threat to one's negative face (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62), or the want of every face to be unimpeded, since this question functions as a linguistic trap. The question format is highly restrictive and attempts to force Musharraf into one of two unfavorable choices, either of which could have potentially undesirable consequences for him. If Musharraf answers that Bush would lose, he may satisfy Stewart's largely liberal in-studio audience, but it may harm his relations with the Bush presidency, from

whom he had been accepting money and political support (Abramowitz and Wright 2007). Here, we can see some conflict in the dual roles of president/interviewee that Musharraf brings to the show. As President of Pakistan he is a major political figure and as a result, everything he says in a public forum can be consequential for him in that arena, particularly if he says that Bush would lose to Osama Bin Laden in a popular vote in Pakistan. However, in this comedic entertainment environment there is pressure to please the audience, and provide a satisfying comedic performance, which may have occurred had he answered, "President Bush."

Musharraf's other option, saying Osama Bin Laden would lose, would probably have little comedic value, and likely not satisfy the largely liberal audience who take issue with Bush's international politics. Additionally, since there is an international audience watching the show, and copies of parts of the show are available on popular media sharing sites like YouTube, Musharraf's response could be heard in the Middle East as well. These listeners may find an answer of Osama Bin Laden disturbing, and endanger Musharraf's position at home.

The solution Musharraf takes is to choose neither of these options, instead claiming that Bush and Bin Laden would "both lose miserably". The audience erupts with applause at this declaration and Stewart laughs heartily. Now both Stewart's liberal audience is satisfied, who may enjoy seeing Bush criticized by another international leader, and Bush supporters, potentially along with many other Americans, will be less offended at not having their president placed below Osama Bin Laden. The answer Musharraf provides is not without social danger, but is likely a better option than the either/or setup he was initially offered by Stewart.

We can now see evidence for the claim that one end of this event is successfully navigating this dangerous question with interactional skill. In the above instance, Musharraf displays this capacity by evading the trap set by Stewart's either/or question, instead, escaping this frame by suggesting "both" instead of one or the other, for which he is congratulated with Stewart's affirmatory, "well done", on line 17.

We can also find evidence for the claim that Stewart's question is face threatening in the "redressive actions," or actions that serve to "give face" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 69) prefacing his question. In lines 1 and 2, Stewart offers his first redressive move for the potential threat to follow saying, "we're delighted that you're here but", which serves to affirm the value of Musharraf's face and participation before it is threatened by Stewart's question. However, Stewart does not rest there, he goes on to pay Musharraf more face saying on lines 5–7, "if there were an election held in Pakistan >today< (.) >and not< uh >clearly for your job< because you're doing a wonderful job", thereby recognizing the potential for his

question to be heard as a call for an election in Pakistan, which would certainly be a threat to Musharraf's face. This contributes to the complexity of Stewart's question and calls to attention the delicate dance he performs in paying and threatening face, weaving in hot political topics, while toeing the line between mock and consequential social danger. The redressive actions Stewart performs then serve multiple ends, functioning both to pay Musharraf positive and negative face so as to soften the threatening question to follow, but also act as a signpost to the audience that a threatening question is ahead, thereby heightening the key of dramatic suspense that is integral to the SOH.

It is possible that the redressive action Stewart performs here is the result of the particular importance of this guest, relative to the others reviewed here, which makes it particularly interesting that later guests like Seinfeld, Hoffman, and Fey do not receive threatening questions, as it would presumably be safer for Stewart to threaten their face than it was to play with Musharraf's. It is also possible that Musharraf has been given the question he will be asked in advance of the show, thereby lessening the potential threat to his face, but two things should be said about this. First, knowing what question will be asked does not relieve the performative danger of a failed response in the moment. Musharraf may still have failed to exhibit valued competencies of humor and wit, and as a result, a significant threat to face still existed. Second, it is important to note that regardless whether Musharraf had the question in advance, Stewart takes steps to communicate to the audience, and to Musharraf, the purported danger of the question through his redressive efforts, which he fails to do in the final days of the event.

In sum, the ends evident in an analysis of the Musharraf data are the skillful navigation of a potentially threatening question that highlights Stewart's ability to set, and the guest's ability to escape, linguistic traps with comedic effect. In so doing, the audience, Stewart, and Musharraf celebrate the verbal artistry (Bauman 1977) of Stewart and guest, and their command of relevant genre forms.

3.2 The routine act sequence – accomplishing a structured set of symbolic acts

The SOH begins with a formal commencement where Stewart declares that the guest is now, "on the Seat of Heat," (instance 1, line 3). Once the event has been established through the illocutionary force of the utterance (Austin 1975), as well as through the synchronized start of the multimedia effects that run throughout the event, the sequence typically associated with one genre of the event – the

"interview" – is performed. This consists of the traditional question/answer – interviewer/interviewee – form (Clayman and Whalen 1988). The event consists of one and only one interchange of this sort (interviewer questions – interviewee answers), followed by the formal closing announcement by Stewart that the participant is now, "off the Seat of Heat" (line 17), as seen in the Musharraf instance.

It is permissible, but not obligatory, for Stewart to evaluate the interviewee's answer before formal closing, and/or immediately after. Following the closing, Stewart generally comments on whatever the guest is promoting – a new book, movie, TV series, or political campaign – which is the beginning of a new sequence that serves to both bound the event and establish a normative rule base for its performance. This distinction is important as we can see in later instances that the SOH is only finished by implication when Stewart moves to this new "promotion" act without formally declaring the SOH's end.

Finally, it should be noted that part of the act sequence is controlled by some participants off-camera who run the multimedia effects associated with the event, mainly, the addition of red lighting, flames, and sound effects. The multimedia effects begin when Stewart formally announces that someone is now "on" the SOH and ends when Stewart announces they are now "off" the SOH. As we shall see, in the instances that follow, Stewart's abandonment of the routine act sequence creates problems for coordinated action between Stewart and the off-stage actors who synchronize the multimedia to his cues.

3.3 Key – affective tone

The affective tenor of the event is distinguishably different from the larger interview sequence in which it is embedded. While the interview environment is characterized by playful small talk and friendly banter, the SOH, operating as a comedic parody of the traditional "Hot Seat," must in some measure at least play at harm for it to be a recognizable constituent of this genre and is, hence, keyed in the appropriately suspenseful manner.

The maintenance of the suspenseful keying as distinct, and additional, to the light-hearted comedic enterprise that is *The Daily Show* more largely, is then imperative in distinguishing the SOH segment from the rest of the show, and particularly from the interview segment of which it is part. As I demonstrate in what follows, the absence of this suspenseful keying, accomplished through purported and actual face-threatening questions and multimedia effects, further contributes to the decay of the event as the SOH becomes indistinguishable from the larger interview.

4 Tracing the decay

This section of the analysis focuses on drawing comparisons between the three final instances of the SOH that were aired, and the Musharraf data which represents the routine form performed across the first 15 instances of the event. Of primary concern will be variations in the ends, act sequence, and key of the event, which I claim inhibit Stewart, his production team, and the other guests' ability to coordinate their actions toward the successful maintenance of the event.

4.1 A shift in ends and outcomes

To begin an analysis of the final performances of the SOH, we might ask the same question posed in the earlier analysis of the Musharraf data – is the question threatening? This was used to determine the legitimacy of the claimed end of successfully navigating a potentially socially dangerous question, or, a question that is highly face threatening. In the Musharraf data, I concluded the question was in fact face threatening in its formulation as an either/or question trap, and that Stewart treats it as such through his redressive actions. In the analysis below, I review data from Stewart's interviews with Jerry Seinfeld, Dustin Hoffman, and Tina Fey, and argue that these instances should be understood as not of the same type or degree of threat as the question posed to Musharraf and other participants. This is because threats to face in the routine form are constituted in three primary ways which are absent in the data below. First, the question itself can be threatening as structured in the routine form to produce a linguistic trap that limits the available response of the guest. Second, the content of the question can risk to a greater or lesser degree discredit to the guest's face because of the social embarrassment a clumsy answer may bring, or because the question poses a conflict to the multiple roles each guest holds. Finally, questions can purport to threaten, as in Stewart's meta-discourse about the question: "are you ready . . . ready? this is one tough question?". These claims are supported in the following analysis. The questions posed by Stewart to each of the three last guests are included below.

(3) *Question to Jerry Seinfeld*
10 JS: if you were to uh- for show business (.) let's say
11   change your name let's say (.) anglicize it like
12   some (.2) did=
. . .
16 JS: a::h where would you have gone with it >what
17   would you have done

(4) *Question to Dustin Hoffman*

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9    JS:    more harrowing uh uh for you to do as an actor (.)
10          have your teeth pulled by a Nazi- in marathon
11          man[- >drilled [ (.) u::h or to be=
12   DH:         [yeah      [yeah
13   JS:    =groped by Charles Durning in tootsie
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(5) *Question to Tina Fey*

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12   JS:    (.) Alec Baldwin uh uh very well known for being
13          a wonderful actor >but also having a bit of a
14          temper (.4) when he flies into an uncontrollable
15          rage (.5) what music must you play to calm him
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None of these questions seem to pose the same level of social danger the question to Musharraf did, which is particularly strange given the high status of Musharraf as then President of Pakistan. Stewart's question to Seinfeld, "how would you anglicize your name?" is in form nothing like Stewart's question to Musharraf. It is an open-ended question that does not force Seinfeld to choose from two bad options, but instead allows him considerable freedom to come up with an answer that will be satisfying for both him and the audience.

Stewart's question to Hoffman does have the same either/or structure as Musharraf's, but the choices he is being offered are not particularly socially dangerous for him. If he says it was more harrowing to have his teeth drilled by a Nazi, it is simply less funny than if he suggests that being groped by another man was worse than physical pain. At worst, if he answers the question in this way, he may be seen as homophobic, but this is unlikely given the comedic frame operating. This makes either answer generally low-risk.

Stewart's question to Fey also does not follow the either/or format, and sets no question trap, allowing Fey to answer with any variety of response provided it is humorous. The only dangerous thing Fey concedes by responding to this question is that Alec Baldwin has a temper, which as Stewart points out, is already common knowledge. This question allows Fey the opportunity to make fun of herself and Baldwin in whatever way she chooses. The question is open-ended, only requiring that Fey associate a song that would be comical in its application to soothing someone angry. Fey's response, that they "play the Knots Landing theme," serves that function, and places her in little social danger when weighed against the question posed to Musharraf.

It is worthy of note that there is pressure to be humorous across all instances, given the larger context of the event, but the display of skillful maneuvering out of dangerous linguistic traps is gone in these last three instances. This also has a

significant impact on the key of suspense that was present in Musharraf's data, since the social threat promised by the dramatic multimedia effects and Stewart's redressive actions fail to materialize in these instances.

It is clear that, initially, Stewart was posing potentially dangerous questions possibly meriting the title, "Seat of Heat," but at the end of the segment's life he had stopped structuring questions in this manner, and had abandoned the maintenance of the suspenseful key, suggesting a change in the ends and symbolic import of the event over time. The suspenseful maneuvering that showcased for our delight the communicative abilities of Stewart and guest to dance the delicate edge of social danger, while evading the fall through the performance of valued cultural competencies of humor, wit, and poise are now absent. The ends of the SOH are now indistinguishable from the larger interview event in which it takes place and the meaning of the event is muddled at best.

4.2 The decay of the act sequence

In what follows I analyze the three above instances for changes to the routine structuring of acts in the event as it neared disappearance. I argue that the act structure changed in four primary ways that were consequential for the performance of the SOH. These were a shift to a murky commencement of the event, an absence of redressive facework in the opening turns, a multi-question, rather than single question–single answer sequence, and the absence of formal closing of the event.

4.2.1 Murky commencement

As mentioned above, the act sequence is performed in routine ways in the Musharraf data and larger corpus, but deviates importantly in the three instances reviewed below. One difference to note between the Musharraf data and the other instances is the opening act that commences the SOH. In the Musharraf data we see the following:

(6) *Commencement of Pervez Musharraf*
1 JS: alright (.) uh Mr. president we're delighted that
2   you're here but we have to put you ↓on (.) the
3   daily show Seat of Heat (.)

In the remaining instances we find:

(7) *Commencement of Jerry Seinfeld*
1 JS: O:::H we gotta go- No seat a heat (.) real quick (.)
2   do we have time?
3   [(Seat of heat audio and video begin)
4 JS: [alright seat a heat real quick (.2) I apologize

(8) *Commencement of Dustin Hoffman*
1 JS: Alright we're gonna grab you here we're gonna
2   put you on the Seat of Heat real quick here we go
3   (Seat of heat audio and video begin)
4 JS: Here's an acting question [(.4) °here's° an acting=
5 DH: [okay
6 JS: =question [(.) this is about your career=

(9) *Commencement of Tina Fey*
1 JS: uh uh alright (.) here's the u:h here's the deal I've
2   gotta ask you the- the tough question cause for
3   some reason (.) uh we're married to this bit now

Immediately we can see some differences between the Musharraf data and these three instances. In the Musharraf data, Stewart's commencement of the event is clearly a more integral part of the show given the attention paid in transition from the prior interview segment to the SOH, and its accompaniment by softeners like "we're delighted that you're here but . . ." that serve to pay Musharraf positive face by expressing approval that he is here and by extension, approval of, and regard for, his face.

The commencement in Seinfeld's instance is more of an afterthought. Stewart's "O:::H we gotta go-" cut-off, followed by "No seat a heat", suggests that Stewart was prepared to close the show, and had possibly forgotten to perform the SOH. In the Hoffman data, the transition to the SOH is treated quite casually, with assurance from Stewart that it will be "real quick". Hardly a setup that merits the flaming dramatic sound effects that follows the announcement. Finally, in the Fey data we can see that Stewart has abandoned any attempt at treating the Seat of Heat with even mock-seriousness, and actually calls into question the continued legitimacy of the event saying, "I've gotta ask you the- the tough question cause for some reason (.) uh we're married to this bit now".

4.2.2 Absence of facework in the opening

We might also point out that the redressive facework done when announcing the SOH to Musharraf is not done in any of these instances. The much shorter and

more direct "alright seat a heat real quick" is all Seinfeld gets to orient himself to what is about to follow, which is perhaps why Seinfeld is the only guest to ever explicitly ask what is happening when the SOH begins. Regardless whether the question to Seinfeld in this instance is dangerous, as I have argued it is not, Stewart certainly does not treat it as dangerous when he announces it.

In the Hoffman instance, the language Stewart uses could be seen, if anything, as threatening to negative face, not protective of it, as references to "grabbing", and "putting" him on the SOH suggest very little concern for the wants of the grabbed and their negative face want to be unimpeded. If Stewart really thought, or wanted others to think that the question to follow was particularly dangerous, we would likely see redressive facework here to communicate the debt that needs paying for the violation to follow.

Not only does Stewart fail to communicate that the question to follow risks some discredit to the guest, but his own meta-discourse about the question actually downplays any potential threat that might have been, as seen in the Fey question below.

(10) *Question to Tina Fey*
1   JS: uh uh alright (.) here's the u:h here's the deal I've
2   gotta ask you the- the tough question cause for
3   some reason (.) uh we're married to this bit now=
4   TF: =okay=
5   JS: =alright here we go (.) seat a heat (.) here we go
6   [(Seat of Heat audio and video begin)
7   TF: [oh my god (looking around in shock at the audio
8   video)
9   JS: here's the problem with the graphics and
10   everything (.2) now it appears that I have prepared
11   something really great (1.4) I have not

One is left to wonder, then, how invested Stewart is in the maintenance of this event given his own assertion that the "bit" only continues because for some unknown reason "we're married to it now", and when he further asserts that he has not prepared "something really great".

4.2.3 A multi-question sequence

A further deviation from the routine sequence is the introduction of a multi-question, instead of single question–single answer sequence. It is important to

note that a multi-question sequence is employed in the larger interview event, not the SOH, and as such, is one of the acts that distinguishes the SOH from the interview event. The introduction of a multi-question sequence in these last instances, and toward the end of the segment's life on the show, introduces a variety of problems for the interactional management of the show's actors, including those off-stage who manage multimedia effects.

This new multi-question sequence is evident in the Hoffman data below. Stewart's first question asks Hoffman to choose between either the Durning groping or Nazi drilling as his most harrowing acting experience.

(11) *Question to Hoffman*
9   JS: more harrowing uh uh for you to do as an actor (.)
10   have your teeth pulled by a Nazi- in marathon
11   man-[>drilled [(.) u::h or to be=
12   DH: [yeah   [yeah
13   JS: =groped by Charles Durning in tootsie=
14   DH: =yeah (1.0) Durning (1.0) yeah

Hoffman replies, "yeah (1.0) Durning" (line 14) constituting an arguably complete response to the question. However, Stewart requests elaboration:

(12) *Continued*
15   JS: because of the size of the man's hands=
16   DH: =AND he really groped
17   (laughing)

Hoffman answers this request for elaboration by adding even more information, "AND he really groped". Again, the question–answer sequence could now be seen as complete, not only in terms of turn exchange, but also as having satisfied the need to attain a comedic effect through the interchange as signaled by the audience laughter on line 17.

Stewart then asks yet another question on line 18 below, "how many takes you think you went". In asking this additional question, Stewart introduces a new line that is not about the initial choice posed to Hoffman, but is likely a setup for the sexual innuendo to follow. Hoffman responds to the question, and again adds more information, jokingly implying that Durning might be a homosexual.

(13) *Continued*
18   JS: so in other words he went for it=how many takes
19   you think you went

```
20   DH:   well there were about 47 takes we were on
21          location (.) I mean he's reputed to be heterosexual
22          but (.2) Cha:rlie
23          (laughing)
24   JS:   >so there was some bruising=
25   DH:   =yes=
26   JS:   =alright fair enough (.) uh thank you so much for
27          joining [us  uh we truly appreciate it=
28   DH:          [thank you for having me
29                 [(Seat of Heat audio and video end)
```

This sequence then goes far beyond that of the single question–single answer form that is prevalent in the larger corpus. Instead, this sequence looks more conversational, like two friends joking around, picking up and extending each other's prior turns, which is what Stewart's interaction with guests is like before the SOH. In employing this multi-question sequence, Stewart fails to distinguish what we are doing now (SOH), from what we were doing before (interview), muddying participants' understanding of what the SOH is for.

This multi-question sequence can also be found in the Tina Fey data below, and like the Hoffman data above, is littered with opportunities for closing the sequence, but where instead Stewart engages in easy banter indistinguishable from talk in the larger interview event.

(14) *Tina Fey multi-question sequence*

```
16   TF:   U::h w:e just play the knots landing theme
17          an[d he goes right to sleep
18   JS:     [re(.hh)ally
19   JS:   and that's what soothes the beast=
20   TF:   =he's like a ba:by=
21   JS:   =Oh Really=
22   TF:   =yah
23          (1.0)
24   JS:   you know that also works on alligators
25   TF:   .hhh it does
26   JS:   you flip em over and rub the belly yeah (.4) uh
27          congratulations on the show the show is
28          [moving to Thursday nights . . .
29          [(Seat of Heat audio and video end)
```

4.2.4 Absence of formal closing

Finally, we can notice that Stewart never formally closes the SOH in either the Fey or Hoffman instances, which were the last chronologically before the SOH disappeared. The closest thing to a formal closing we can find in the Hoffman instance is Stewart's "alright fair enough" (line 26), that could function to suggest that Hoffman has provided something Stewart finally deems acceptable.

(15) *Hoffman, no formal closing*
24   JS: >so there was some bruising=
25   DH: =yes=
26   JS: =alright fair enough (.) uh thank you so much for
27   joining [us uh we truly appreciate it=
28   DH: [thank you for having me
29   [(Seat of Heat audio and video end)
30   JS: =the movie is stranger than fiction . . .

This can be contrasted with the formal announcement offered to Musharraf and other guests in the corpus of "you're off the Seat of Heat". Furthermore, Stewart's evaluation of Hoffman's performance ("fair enough", line 26) is significantly downgraded in comparison with Musharraf's "well done". Stewart then moves immediately to thanking Hoffman for coming on the show, bypassing the formal closing, and reminds the audience about Hoffman's new movie coming out, both acts that are usually reserved for the end of the show, not the end of the SOH.

Stewart's failure to formally close the SOH with his typical "you're off the Seat of Heat" announcement has additional consequences for coordinating his actions with off-screen actors who handle the multimedia effects. Normally, the multimedia is synchronized to end when Stewart announces, "you're off the Seat of Heat", as it does in the Musharraf instance, which serves to transform the environment from the suspenseful key of the SOH to the cool blue of the interview frame. The multimedia in the Hoffman instance ends halfway through Stewart thanking Hoffman for coming on the show. Since Stewart fails to formally close the SOH, abandoning the typical ordering of sequential acts, the multimedia operators are unable to bring their actions into coordination with Stewart's. The result is the de-synchronization of the act sequence and the failure of the setting shifts to co-occur with the symbolic verbal closing of the segment. This failure to formally close the event, and the resulting de-synchronization of the multimedia effects, is also evident in the Tina Fey data below.

(16) *De-synchronization of media effects*
26   JS: you flip em over and rub the belly yeah (.4) uh
27   congratulations on the show the show is
28   [moving to Thursday nights . . .
29   [(Seat of Heat audio and video end)

Through analyzing the act sequence of these instances we can see that the structured sequence of symbolic acts that makes up the routine form of the SOH had shifted from its prototypical incarnation in the Musharraf instance in important ways. The lack of formal opening and closing announcements, the abandonment of the single question–single answer sequence, the absence of redressive facework that functioned to imply a threatening question and pay face to the guest for doing so, all contribute to the participants' inability to coordinate their actions toward the accomplishment of the original ends of the SOH.

5 Discussion

The data and analyses presented here address the research questions in important ways. The primary question asked whether the SOH could be conceptualized as a communication event, and whether changes in this event could be usefully traced longitudinally. We can now answer this in the affirmative. This work concludes that communication events do undergo changes over time and can be tracked and compared through the consistent application of the Hymesian model.

Additionally, this work sought to better conceptualize the phenomenon of interest. To that end I have formulated a concept to describe the features of the kind of decay that I suggest occurs here. Relying on the above analysis, I suggest we might usefully understand this phenomenon as a kind of *symbolic decay* characterized by a decline of participants' symbolic investment in the event as communicated in the accomplishment of a shift of sequential structure, ends, and keying that inhibits the coordination of conjoint action.

Such a phenomenon is evident in the case of the SOH, as we witness the shape and meaning of the event move from a highly structured, formalized, symbolically valued event, to a loose, inconsistently performed one, where the meaning the actors purported it to have once had is no longer visible.

More specifically, we can note that the decay evident in later performances of the Seat of Heat is at least in part accomplished by changes in:

- the Act Sequence, primarily, in poorly maintained boundary signifying acts;
- Key, in the suspension of the affective experience of danger and the sequential acts meant to signify the appropriateness of that affective state; and
- Ends, in the abandonment of skillful verbal maneuvering in escaping face-threatening traps.

We can then say that symbolic decay involves a relative lapse, or relinquished performance of acts, keys, and ends with regard to the originating form of the event. The boundaries of the event may become soft, with formal signifiers of those boundaries being abandoned altogether or transformed in such a way that they no longer retain their original function, potentially causing the relationships of sequence throughout the rest of the event to become disjointed. Keys will also likely be affected in instances of symbolic decay since without adherence to the structure of the event it can become unclear what we are all doing here, muddling the affective tenor of the experience. Finally, ends may also be affected in instances of symbolic decay where questions arise about why we are continuing to do this when it has become unclear that it has any symbolic import left. This is not to say that other factors will not come into play in the accomplishment of symbolic decay in different circumstances, particularly norms, which could certainly become weaker as an event becomes perfunctory, but the data reviewed here support the highlighting of these particular elements. Further research may confirm if symbolic decay is usually visible in changes in these particular features.

Implications that can be drawn from this work suggest that one potentially interesting way of looking at events is not solely how the event is performed in a singular occurrence, or how similar events are performed across cultures, but how an event's performance compares to itself over time, not only tracking its evolution, but also its demise. In this way, this work has both methodological implications, suggesting new and useful ways to apply foundational concepts in ethnography of communication, but also has implications for further research where claims about the evidence for symbolic decay being at least partially located in the act sequence, key, and ends can be investigated in the hope of producing some limited generalizations about the process of such decline.

Appendix A

Stewart interviews comedian Norm McDonald in the first instance of the SOH, aired on September 14.

```
1   JS:   =it's a new thing called <the daily show> (.) seat of
2         heat (.) roll [the- the thing (1.0) ya ready for
3                    [(multimedia begins)
4         it? (3.0)] ya ready? (1.0) Secretary of state
5                  ] (multimedia ends)
6         Condoleezza Rice and Canadian foreign minister
7         Peter Mckay (.) they met yesterday (.) here's some
8         of their repartay
9         (video of CR begins
10  CR:   I slept so well y'know the air is so great (.)
11        terrific uh air to sleep in
12        (video of CR ends)
13        (video of PM starts)
14  PM:   she loves (.) <the cool Atlantic breezes>
15        here in Atlantic Canada >she left her window open
16        last night
17        (video of PM ends)
18  JS:   alright here's my question to you Norm
19        McDonald↓ (.5) are they fu[kin?
20                                  [(BLEEP)
21        [(4.0)
22        [(audience applause)
23  NM:   hmm
24  JS:   TAke your time (.) take your time
25  NM:   Hot=
26  JS:   =Mull it over
27  NM:   It's Hot (.5) Hot in here >well [(.7) I am a
28                                        [audience laughter
29        Canadian [(.) as you know (1.5) >but I love=
30  JS:          [hmm
31               [(audience cheers)
32  NM:   =America better↓ [(.5) but (2.0) I am a Canadian
33                         [(audience cheers)
34        'n I know this Peter McKay character (.) I've
35        known 'im for ye[ars=
36  JS:                   [thought you'd
37        have some [insight
38  NM:             ['n if I was Condoleezza Rice I wouldn'
39        be too flattered (.) °c'z tha:t guy'll fuck'nything
40  JS:   [(2.0)
41        [(laughing)
```

42   NM: I swear'ta God
43   JS: (hhh)a(h)alright (.) NORM MCDONALD IS OFF
44   THE HOT SEAT (.) YOU'RE OFF

Appendix B

Transcription symbols used throughout, reproduced in part and adapted from
Jefferson (2004).

[Beginning of overlapping utterance
]   End of overlapping utterance
=   No gap between turn exchange
(0.0)   Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time in seconds and tenths.
(.)   Less than a tenth of a second gap
__   Underscoring indicates stress in pitch or amplitude.
:   Prolongation of immediately prior sound
↓   Especially low pitch
WORD   Especially loud
°soft°   Spoken softly
(h)   Plosive sound, as in laughing
.hh   One or more h's preceded by a period indicates audible in-breath
hh   One or more h's indicates audible out-breath
<word>   A word slowed down in relation to surrounding speech
><   A word sped up in relation to surrounding speech
-         Cut-off utterance
(word)   Transcribers description of an action, as in non-speech sounds or non-
          verbal actions.
'   Dropped or contracted sound

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Bionote

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