Like the latest catchphrase? Not so much

By Daniel Weiss
Columbia News Service

NEW YORK — The front page of a recent issue of the Austin American-Statesman asks of congressional lobbying shenanigans: "Scandal breeds reform? Not so much."

An entry on the media gossip site Gawker.com observes, "Tom Cruise can conquer the world — but a car door, not so much."

And the talk-show host Jon Stewart responds this way when asked which Democrat he saw stepping forward to lead the party:

"I like this guy John Kennedy. Since him, not so much."

Everywhere you look these days, it seems someone is dismissing something with those three loaded words.

Helen Anders, the copy editor who wrote the American-Statesman headline, said she first heard the phrase when her twentysomething daughter used it to slough off the idea of dating a potential suitor: "Yeah, not so much," her daughter said.

"You can almost mentally see someone hurling the idea into the trash can," Anders, 54, said of the phrase.

How do these phrases come into vogue? It helps, of course, to have a celebrity standard-bearer.

For the phrase "not so much," that would be Stewart, host of Comedy Central's "Daily Show." He famously gives the words an expert, drawn-out delivery, pausing to consider whether the subject at hand passes muster before nailing it with a "not so much."

Though the phrase has become widely identified with Stewart, it appeared on several other television shows in the early 1990s, including "Mad About You" and "Friends." But it didn't achieve widespread popularity until the beginning of the current decade, when it began to appear on "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

Getty Images photo by Paul Hawthorne

Jon Stewart, host of Comedy Central's "Daily Show," uses the phrase "not so much."

It sneaked into the vernacular by becoming what linguists call a "camouflaged form" of speech, said Michael Adams, professor of English at Indiana University and author of "Slayer Slang: A Buffy the Vampire Slayer Lexicon."

Changing meaning

"It would be very easy for it to migrate, because it would change its meaning just a little bit every time it got used until suddenly it was that dismissive 'not so much.' "

Pinpointing exactly when that transition occurred is difficult, if not impossible.

Adams says that even a phrase as distinctive as "yada yada yada," which was hailed by many as a creation of the television show "Seinfeld," turned out to have been used by the comedian Lenny Bruce in the 1960s.

While Buffy may not have coined "not so much," the show's language was unusually experimental and influential, including such neologisms as "afterness," "heart-of-darkness" and "suckage."

Before its writers tackled "not so much," they had already pushed "so" and "much" into novel roles.

"We so need to get out of here," a character would say at a precarious moment, or "Morbid much?" when another dwelt on gory details. Before long, "not so much" was a regular part of Buffy's linguistic arsenal.

"You've changed," Buffy once said to a character whose appearance had improved after he got his soul back. "Not so much with the crazy."

And when another character said, "Willow's good at all that computer stuff, but me, not so much," a thousand punch lines, online quips and newspaper headlines followed.

If others pioneered "not so much," Stewart has put his unique stamp on the phrase. The way he delivers it brings out a certain foreign quality in the sequence of words.

"It's a little bit backward," said Grant Barrett, editor of "The Official Dictionary of Unofficial English." "It seems to bring to mind the 'you want I should' kind of construction we get from Yiddish: 'You want I should call you in the morning?' "

A 34-year-old New Jersey woman who runs a blog called "Eh . . . Not So Much" (eh-notsomuch.livejournal.com/tag/tv) says she likes the phrase because it is "Seinfeldy" — skeptical and cynical, but not completely in your face.

The woman, a data processor who asked to remain anonymous so her conservative parents wouldn't read her left-of-center postings, added, "You know, it's like, 'Is the president completely telling the truth about this? Eh ... not so much.' "

Like any popular phrase worth its salt, "not so much" has been featured in a number of T-shirt designs, including one for dog lovers that reads: "My Golden Makes Me Happy. You — Not So Much."

Even Borat is on board

The phrase has even been adopted by Borat, the Kazakh journalist character played by the British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. When Borat showed up at the gates of the White House recently bearing an invitation to a screening of his film for President Bush, a Secret Service agent asked him whether he had an appointment. "Uh, not so much," he replied.

For some, "not so much" has become too ubiquitous for its own good. Joel Keller, a 35-year-old freelance writer in New Jersey, said that the first time he came across the phrase, it made him laugh. The five-thousandth time, well, not so much. Now, he claims, every blogger who wants to make a joke just writes, "This thing is something and this — not so much."

But Adams, the Buffy scholar, argues that "not so much" still has some life in it. Compared with phrases such as "been there, done that" and "it is what it is," which have been dulled by overuse, "not so much," for now, still has a distinct meaning and feel.

"It's like fashion," Adams said. There are other ways of being dismissive, but none with quite the same style.

" 'Not so much' is the way you want to sound in a situation," he said. "And so you put it on."