KING OF THE NEWS: AN AGENDA-SETTING APPROACH TO

THE JOHN OLIVER EFFECT

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Journalists have insisted that John Oliver has inspired a new kind of journalism. They argue that Oliver's show \textit{Last Week Tonight with John Oliver} has inspired real-world action, a phenomenon journalists have called the "John Oliver effect." Oliver, a comedian, refuses these claims. This thesis is the result of in-depth research into journalists' claims through the lens of agenda-setting. By conducting a qualitative content analysis, I evaluated the message characteristics of framing devices used on Oliver's show, then compared those message characteristics to the message characteristics and framing devices employed by legacy media.
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(i do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens;only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands

—e.e. cummings
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INTRODUCTION

Comedian John Oliver hates to be called a journalist. Professional journalists insist that he is in fact a journalist and that his show, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, is capable of effecting real-world change (Wong, 2016). Since its debut in 2014, the talk show has cultivated an approach to satire that many journalists consider innovative. The award-winning program blends comedy and news.

Driven by social commentary, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* informs the viewership and stimulates conversation, inspiring dissension and public awareness of issues (Felder, 2016). *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* differs from other comedic news shows in that it appears to inspire real-world action (Carr, 2014). Journalists call the phenomenon the "John Oliver effect," which entails raising public awareness of underrepresented issues (VanNest, 2015; Klein, 2016), influencing audiences jaded with by legacy media (Nowara, 2016; Stelter, 2016), and effecting actual policy changes (Kowitt, 2015).

Oliver himself denies that the John Oliver effect even exists (Kadro, 2015). He continues a history of comedic journalists vehemently refusing the title of journalist, while the media continue a history of relentlessly hounding comedians to accept the title of journalist (Williams & Carpini, 2010, p. 183; Young, 2008, p. 241).

Every time an interviewer asks Oliver about his contributions to journalism, he groans. In response to talk show host Charlie Rose’s question about the label “disruptive journalist,” Oliver stated he hates the label because he is not a journalist but primarily a comedian, noting that comedians are disruptive by nature (Kadro, 2015). Oliver’s 2014 Peabody Award describes him as “an investigative journalist as skilled at interrogating his target as any Progressive Era muckraker” (J. French, 2015). Professional journalists refuse to accept Oliver’s assertions. They
remain convinced that he is in fact a journalist. His coverage of the 2016 presidential election has only strengthened their belief.

To add a postmodern twist to the whole matter, 2016 also saw Sean Penn take a break from his acting career to play reporter in the deserts and jungles of Mexico. The outcome was a rambling, solipsistic 10,000-word feature story for *Rolling Stone* in which Penn glorifies an infamous, murder-prone druglord. When professional journalists rushed to deny Penn’s claims to journalism, Penn argued that “‘Journalists’ [the air quotes are his] who want to say I’m not a journalist, well, I want to see the license that says *they’re* a journalist” (Rose, 2016).

Sean Penn and John Oliver exist at the same moment in journalism history: Penn has demanded the title of journalist, despite legions of news professionals telling him to stick with entertainment, while John Oliver has insisted he be considered an entertainer, despite legions of news professionals pushing the title of journalist. One is real, and the other is fake. Or rather one claims to be real the other claims to be fake. The media dispute both claims. Yet somehow the two men are advancing the profession as a whole. Both point to the ambiguities regarding what qualifies membership to the profession itself.

During an interview with Univision reporter Jorge Ramos, Oliver unequivocally said “I am not a journalist.” *Time Magazine*, which ranked Oliver as one of its Top 100 People of 2015, published an article titled “Unfortunately, John Oliver, You Are a Journalist” (Poniewozik, 2014). Other headlines include *The Guardian*’s “How John Oliver Started a Revolution in US TV’s Political Satire,” *The Daily Beast*’s “Last Week Tonight Does Real Journalism, No Matter What John Oliver Says,” and *The Toronto Star*’s “Don’t Tell John Oliver He’s Making a Difference” (Brioux, 2016). It is a semantic tug-of-war. Journalists have pursued the issue
aggressively at times. During the post-show interviews of the 68th Emmy Awards, CBS News’ Steve Futterman asked Oliver about journalistic responsibility. Oliver replied,

> Responsibility in what way? I don’t fully understand that question. You mean as a comedian? You’re really only responsible to try your hardest to make people laugh, and to not cause too much havoc in the process. That’s pretty much where it starts and ends . . . as a comedian (Cowen, 2016).

It is a bleak time for journalism. Trust in media is on a perennial downslide and the daily paper is nearly obsolete (McCarthy, 2014; Borden & Tew, 2007, p. 303). The glut of infotainment has cheapened and degraded news content (Jones & Baym, 2010, p. 283). Audiences increasingly expect news media to blend information with entertainment, which has created an environment conducive to political corruption (Kowitt, 2016). In addition, the ubiquity of digital media has allowed anyone to play the role of news-gatherer (Painter & Hodges, 2010, p 259). Standards for news continue to decline, yet more information floods in than ever before (Nolan, 2012).

To many journalists, *Last Week Tonight* has emerged as a counterforce to the downfall of legacy news. At a time when news content is increasingly overtaken by public relations and corporate influence, Oliver remains self-governing (Briggs, 2012, p.16). He spares no one. He regularly criticizes corporations, politicians, royal families, academics, and government agencies. His total freedom from allegiance to corporations allows him to maneuver current events without fear of suppression (Spicer, 2011, p. 34).

On one hand, why would a comedian interview Edward Snowden? On the other, what journalist would use the opportunity to ask Snowden about naked selfies? When Snowden’s advisors were asked why they had chosen Oliver for the interview, they said “it was because of his journalism” (Stelter, 2015). It is worth noting that of the 14 award nominations *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* has received, including Critics’ Choice, Television Critics Association,
Producers Guild of America, The Peabody Awards, Primetime Emmy Awards, GLAAD Media Awards, among others, only one has any hint of the word “comedy” in its title: The 2014 Writers Guild of America Award for Comedy/Variety (Including Talk) Series.

Oliver has commented that journalists’ obsession to prove him wrong is not only confusing but also insulting: “It almost makes me feel like, ‘Am I a terrible comedian?’” (McEvers, 2016). In short, journalists, who are in charge of selecting what issues matter and how those issues are conveyed, refuse to accept Oliver’s refusal to be called a journalist. Recognizing the tension between journalists’ labeling and Oliver’s self-definition, Poniewozik (2014) argues that

When someone calls Oliver, Stewart or Colbert a journalist, it’s often because that person wants something—for the hosts to commit themselves to a certain cause or to declare neutrality; for them to commit to a certain seriousness of purpose; for them to accept their ‘responsibility,’ however the labeler defines it; for them to fit into some one-size definition of how a journalist should behave and what they should care about. That would definitely kill Oliver’s comedy, and along with it his—well, analysis or advocacy or whatever you want to call it (para. 6).

The goal of this study is not to prove whether or not Oliver is a journalist or to kill Oliver’s comedy. Rather, the goal is to examine the features or message characteristics of Last Week Tonight with John Oliver in relation to their outcome, independent of Oliver. What was it about Oliver’s net neutrality segment that provoked 45,000 user comments to the FCC website, which caused it to crash? How did Oliver’s Miss America Scholarship monologue inspire $25,000 in contributions to the Society of Women Engineers? How has his program inspired meaningful dialogue and measurable changes? What influence, if any, has the show had on real-world activism? The terms “policy change” and “real world change” describe the measurable outcomes that the show may or may not have influenced.
So far, little to no systematic academic research has been conducted on the content of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, let alone the John Oliver effect. This study applies third-order agenda-setting theory to the journalists’ claims on the effect by analyzing the content of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, social media conversations, legacy media coverage, and actual policy changes. (McCombs, Tien & Guo, 2014). Third-order agenda setting modernizes many of the tenets of traditional agenda-setting and focuses on activism.

Traditional agenda-setting research assumes that issues are transferred discretely as individual elements from the news media to the public. Third-level agenda setting, however, theorizes that objects and attributes can also be transferred simultaneously in bundles between the agendas (McCombs, 2014, p. 669). As such, the relationship between each episode’s messages and the audience’s understanding of those messages is characterized by its outcome, but also by the interrelations that define the network salience brought to actuality (Vargo et al., 2014, p. 297).

As regards Oliver’s specific comedic approach, this study uses the term “comedic journalism.” There is no shortage of research on comedic journalism. However, nearly all of the literature examines Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Comedic journalism has evolved more quickly than the research. The term comedic journalism describes a politically-charged brand of satire in which a TV show, website, or publication interweaves playful ridicule with social criticism in such a way that serious topics are discussed in a humorous yet engaging way (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, pp. 11–13).

WTF podcast, Marc Maron describes Oliver as “the British fellow that hands us our ass” (2012). Over the course of the two-hour interview, Oliver talks about his life, his childhood, his career. The son of two teachers, he wanted to be a footballer. When his father began taking him
to Liverpool matches. As a young boy, he wore the full Liverpool kit, even the cleats “because there was a part of me as a child that if someone got injured on the field, they would just turn to the crowd and say, ‘Does anyone have a kit and we can carry on?’ And I would say, ‘Yes. My name is John. I’m 8 years old, and clearly somewhere in me I think that this is going to turn out well. That this 8-year-old is going to be able to physically compete with these 29-year-old super fit athletes.’”

While studying Literature at Cambridge, Oliver joined the Cambridge Footlights, a renowned theater troupe, where he met comedians David Mitchell (*Peep Show*) and Richard Ayoade (*IT Crowd*). After years of working as a comedian in England, he moved to New York and began his 7-year stint on The Daily Show as writer, correspondent, and—for 31 episodes—host, in Jon Stewart’s absence (Ross, 2014). Shortly thereafter, HBO offered him his own show. The first episode of *Last Week with John Oliver* aired April 27, 2014.

Shortly after beginning work on this thesis, I sent an e-mail to HBO requesting *Last Week Tonight*’s viewership numbers, demographics, anything, and maybe an interview with Oliver himself. Within hours, Tobe Becker, HBO’s VP Media Relations, had replied. There was not much information she could release, she told me, but she described Oliver and the show’s writers: “I can only tell you that having worked with this extremely talented group for the last three years, that they are extremely self-effacing. You will never see any interviews with John, or members of the staff, taking credit for real-world positive effect the show might have had” (T. Becker, personal communication, September 22, 2016).
LITERATURE REVIEW

Comedic Journalism

Kierkegaard (1843/2004) describes laughter as the test of truth, but notes that

it is exceedingly comic that a speaker with sincere voice and gestures . . . can movingly depict the truth, can face all powers of evil and of hell boldly, with cool self-assurance in his bearing, a dauntlessness in his air, and an appropriateness of movement worthy of admiration—it is exceedingly comic that almost simultaneously . . . he can timidly and cravenly cut and run from the slightest inconvenience. (p. 205)

Comedians will lie if it is funnier than the truth. Lying for the sake of a joke has become part of the routine. Most stand-up comedians have their own iterations of the liar’s paradox. Dave Chappelle, Richard Pryor, Joe Rogan, Louis C.K., Jerry Seinfeld. Comedy thrives on contradictions, so the meta-dialogue about lying makes sense in the same conflicted way the rest of humor philosophy makes sense (Schopenhauer, 1818/1969, p. 99).

A comedic event cannot happen without tension or disharmony of some kind. Yet it needs a foundation, needs gravity, needs depth, or else it will collapse into nonsense. Without proper attention to life, comedy deteriorates into the absurd. Absurdity represents the inversion of common sense and coheres to the logic of dreams instead of the truth of reality (Bergson, 1911/1999, p. 144). Such careful interplay of reality and abstraction demands comedic mastery, because performing solely within absurdity is like playing tennis with the net down: The challenge is gone, the performance feels vain (Perloff, 1956, p. 56).

Journalists, on the other hand, should not lie. The Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics emphasizes justice and accuracy: Seek truth and report it, be accountable and transparent, label advocacy and commentary, strive for clarity and fairness (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). Likewise, the Poynter Institute has a checklist that carefully stipulates the criteria of deception and the gravity of using it in newsgathering. The Associated
Press Stylebook has a section specifically for news values, and all throughout the book are reminders of the ethical standards expected of journalists. Every news outlet has its own ethics policy. As ideals, the expectations are clear, painfully cautious in avoiding contradictions.

Comedic journalism blends the oftentimes contradictory principles of humor and journalism. There is no shortage of research on comedic journalism. However, nearly all of the literature examines Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

Comedic journalism has evolved more quickly than the research. In order to understand the so-called “John Oliver effect,” it is important to first define the elements of comedic journalism (Xenos, Moy, & Becker, 2010, p. 49). The definition of comedic journalism is composed of three elements: journalism, humor, and comedic journalism (Fox, 2010, p. 136).

**Journalism**

As Wall (2015) notes, journalists belong to an “interpretive community” (p. 124). It is an occupation without formal requirements for admittance, regulation, or comprehensive governance. Journalism’s open door policy is what allows Oliver to insist he is not a journalist while the media insist otherwise.

Sean Penn also took advantage of the same ambiguity when he penned a feature story on “El Chapo” for Rolling Stone. Angered by the news media’s near-unanimous revulsion of his story, Penn explained that “‘Journalists’ [the air quotes are his] who want to say I’m not a journalist, well, I want to see the license that says they’re a journalist” (Rose, 2016). Penn’s description of the libertarian nature of news media fails to include the normative basis of journalism, with which journalists are bound to a scattershot assortment of self-imposed codes (Painter & Hodges, 2010, p. 258). As an institution, journalism is often described as the fourth branch of the U.S. government (Morris & Baumgartner, 2008, p. 315). Merritt and McCombs
(2004) argue that journalism stands as an irremovable function of democracy itself (p. 7). By instilling citizens with an attentiveness to information that is vigilant and productive, the news media keep the public attuned to the goings-on of politics (Rosen, 1999, p. 295).

Lippmann (1922/1997) promotes the idea that mass media connect people to the world. Moreover, this connection is not simply a matter of bringing information to light. Gilson (2011) emphasizes the importance of journalistic objectivity in capitalist democracies: “The public good depends on honest reporting and thoughtful analysis of basic facts” (p. 209). People need a correspondent, an informer, someone trustworthy, “[t]hey want stories that are elegantly told and compelling, with quality pictures and videos” (Abramson, 2010, p. 43). Oliver follows the same protocol, only his primary value is comedy, not journalism: “You try to be as rigorous as you can in terms of fact-checking because your responsibility is to make sure that your joke is structurally sound” (Brown, 2014). Journalists are expected to deliver the news with complete accuracy, honesty, directness, clarity (Borden, 2007, p. 303).

Journalists are expected to deliver audiences the realities of the social world “through a discipline of verification” that strives for complete accuracy (Borden, 2007, p. 303). The reality, however, is that the news itself is often a self-assuring product of media asserting ‘that’s the way it was’ (Meddaugh, 2010, p. 386). This confidence in their own objectivity has promoted its own confirmation, whereby audiences are meant to unquestioningly assume the verity of the information (Frus, 1994, p. 100) However, this is less often the case.

The public’s high expectations have not decreased in tandem with the drop-in newsrooms and professional journalists. A 1976 Gallup poll reported that 72% of Americans trusted the media (A. French, 2016). In 2015, fewer than 40% of Americans reported having trust and confidence in mass media, (Riffkin, 2015). That number dropped to 32% in 2016, marking an
all-time low (A. French, 2016). With the rise of technological innovation, audiences’ interest in conventional news has waned (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006, p. 344; Moy Xenos, & Hess, 2005, p. 112).

The digital revolution has effectively reinvented media, altering how audiences think of media and what they provide in return. Younger Americans increasingly disdain the plasticized formality of traditional media, tired of the sensationalistic approach to modern news (Buckingham, 2000, p. 211). Mindich’s (2005) research on news habits among young Americans faults the widespread mistrust for legacy media on a number of factors, most of which pertain to the corporatization of media. The cultural shift away from traditional media reflects the expectations guiding young audiences, who perceive traditional media as phony and biased (Buckingham, 2000, p. 211).

Feldman (2007) attributes the growth in young audiences of late-night comedy shows to their need for political information (p. 406). Until recently, the conventions of journalistic presentation have determined how media figures present and report the news (Jones & Baym, 2010, p. 283). Of all the media, the daily paper has suffered most from the public’s distrust. Newspaper readership has plummeted (Feldman, 2007, p. 406).

The rise of citizen journalism has been disruptive to traditional news (Painter & Hodges, 2010, p 259). In turn, comedic journalism has empowered citizen journalism. By encouraging audiences to participate, comedic journalists raise audiences to the level of the news-makers (Feldman, 2007, p. 421). Citizen journalism is largely a challenge to the journalistic assumption that audiences are meant to remain at a distance, whereby the division between citizen and journalist promotes quality reporting, and news consumption encourages better citizenship (Achter, 2008, p. 277).
Widespread cultural infantilism has severely affected how the news is made, what it is composed of, where it is broadcast, when it is expected, and, most important, how it is presented. The growing prevalence of infotainment has marked “the transformation of serious information sources into commercial entertainment products” (Jones & Baym, 2010, p. 283). Increasingly, audiences crave a kind of slot-machine news: riveting, nonchalant, immediate, furious, resplendent, addictive (Wallace, 1997). In writings published 200 years ago, Kierkegaard (1843/2004) perfectly describes our current state of indolent laxity, predicting more and more individuals will aspire to be nobodies in order to become the public, that abstract aggregate formed by the participant’s becoming a third party. That sluggish crowd which understands nothing itself and is unwilling to do anything, that gallery-public, now seeks to be entertained and indulges in the notion that everything anyone does is done so that it may have something to gossip about. (p. 249)

The ubiquity of the Internet allows for an era of profusion and satiety (Briggs, 2012, p.16). New media have evolved more quickly than media theory, in part because new media undergo constant, voracious change (Merritt & McCombs, 2004, p. 149). As Brossard (2013) notes in reference to web-based science journalism, online communities are thriving, yet “empirical research examining specifically online science communication processes and outcomes is still scant” (Brossard, 2013, p. 14100).

Schudson (1997) states that journalism “is a rhetoric written to serve particular social and psychological needs” (pp. 16–20). Achter (2008) posits that, as a service to the public, journalism could benefit from comedy’s “special role in helping societies manage in crisis mode” (Achter, 2008, p. 276).

Humor

At festivals, the ancient Greeks required playwrights to compose three tragedies and one satire, because comedy is far more difficult to master than tragedy (Wallace, 2013, p. 214). John
Oliver is aware of this dynamic, noting that “the internal logic of comedy is really hard to understand from the outside” (Seinfeld, 2016). To ignore the absurdity of the logic of humor is to violate an established truth, a truth honored since the ancients put comedy on stage (Wallace, p. 207). If there is truth to comedic journalists’ claim that they are, first and foremost, comedians, it is important to understand the functions of comedy. According to Schopenhauer (1818/1958), the opposite of humor is seriousness.

However, humor must be grounded in seriousness. Every comic effect implies contradiction in some of its aspects (Bergson, 1999/1900, p. 96). Kant’s (1790/1951) incongruity theory delineates the paradox central to comedic experience, whereby “an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” results in gratification leading to “the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between a concept and the real object thought through it” (p. 190).

As a mechanism of humor, parody is allusive and, as such, literary. It is a polemical rejoinder, a mocking response to cultural institutions or vested authority (Rose, 1993, p. 200). Parody ridicules fictional events, not real (Dentith, 2000, p. 22). Satire uses events from real life, and by interweaving life with humor it aims to improve the world it mirrors (Kaye, 2011). Parody uncovers the relativity of all authoritative languages and discourse (Dentith, 2000). In both parody and satire, there permeates a demand for change, but satire stands as the more estimable of the two, the more heroic.

_Last Week Tonight with John Oliver_ is satirical, and, as such, comedic. The program employs humor in place of journalism, although both share the aspiration to transform societal detriments by “raising conceptual questions, challenging faulty presuppositions and mocking poor reasoning” (Ruiz, p. 15, 2011).
Polk, Young and Holbert (2009) note that sarcasm differs from irony in its being overt and aggressive, with a target in sight and a certain malignance or venom in mind. Irony, the smoother of the two, demands of itself a pristine admiration, a pause for reflection (p. 204). Wallace (1997) describes sarcasm and postmodern irony as surreptitious, noisome detractions, useful in vilification, withdrawal, or avoidance, all of which occur without the speaker being held accountable. While the “irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective,” they are at the same time “agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture” (p. 49).

And make no mistake: irony tyrannizes us. The reason why our pervasive cultural irony is at once so powerful and so unsatisfying is that an ironist is impossible to pin down. All U.S. irony is based on an implicit “I don’t really mean what I’m saying.” So what does irony as a cultural norm mean to say? That it’s impossible to mean what you say? That maybe it’s too bad it’s impossible, but wake up and smell the coffee already? Most likely, I think, today’s irony ends up saying: “How totally banal of you to ask what I really mean.” (Wallace, 1997, p. 81)

People tend to regard only the lighter forms of irony when defending sarcasm, often confusing sarcasm, from the Greek word sarazein, meaning to speak bitterly, to tear flesh like dogs, with its parent term verbal irony, which contains a range of variances. Sarcasm, as a form of verbal irony, is irony of the verbal medium, and thus relies on intonation, inflection, physical gestures, and general affect. Its purpose is to communicate critical negativity (Cheanga 1394). Despite the solipsistic nature of sarcasm, comedy serves as a cure for isolation, “the lens of humor helps us pin down and examine the vastly incomprehensible” (Achter, 2008, p. 276).

Researchers have argued both in favor of and against humor as an agent of persuasion. Polk et al. (2009) examine humor in the more utilitarian sense of its having long been adept at audience persuasion, making it a potential device for political influence. The researchers’ examination of irony and sarcasm applies the concepts of argument scrutiny, message agreement, and resource allocation.
Using the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), Polk et al. argue that humor is a tool for persuasion insofar as it can lead to attitude change, a process that begins with a reduction in the audience’s capacity for argument scrutiny, which arises from the first of two possible outcomes: 1) The strenuous mental activity of decoding humor renders the audience unable to scrutinize, 2) The presence of humor serves to discount apprehension about critical message scrutiny by interpreting the message as “just a joke” (p. 206). Weinberger and Gulas (1992) argue that, while humor does affect attention and cognition, it has “no demonstrable effects on persuasion” (p. 36).

Comedic Journalism

There is a lively history of satire-based news, especially as performed by television, starting with UK Satire boom (Wagg, 2002; Carpenter, 2009), and including the shows This Hour Has 22 Minutes, This Is The Week That Was, and This Week Has Seven Days. Among new media, the form has thrived. In order to understand the so-called John Oliver effect, it is important to first define the elements of comedic journalism (Xenos, Moy, & Becker, 2010, p. 49). This definition is composed of two elements: journalism and humor (Fox, 2010, p. 136).

Last Week Tonight with John Oliver boasts an array of comedic approaches, both lowbrow and highbrow, including parody, satire, dark comedy, slapstick, irony, deadpan, sarcasm, and mockumentary.

In order to understand the comedic approach of Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, it is vital to differentiate between 1) parody and satire, and 2) irony and sarcasm. Parody uses imitation to expose character flaws or societal defects. It is more than satire carnivalesque by nature, more conciliatory. Rose (1993) suggests, perhaps erroneously, that academics have historically associated the term parody with a “lack of originality, discontinuity, distortion, and nihilism” (pp. 280–283). Dentith (2000), however, characterizes the term’s history as far more
noble and revered, if not utterly inscrutable after centuries of conflicting definitions. In a parody of itself, the term has been manhandled into opaqueness by academia despite its anti-academic nature (p. 11).

As Dagnes (2012) observes, although satirists are inherently opinion-driven and societal-minded, their primary duty is to humor (p. 41). Effective satire envelops public sentiment, turns it inward, then holds it up as a mirror (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, p. 4). Comedians use satire to express anger, mistrust, and contempt (Painter & Hodges, 2010, p. 258; Baym, 2005, p. 268; Jones & Baym, 2010, p. 283). Yet satire is positive by nature, compelled by the desire for meaningful change (Rose, 1993, p. 200).

The satirical comedian exercises meticulous parody when imitating the appearance, format, style, and/or perspective of traditional news media (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, p. 4). The thorough fact-checking and meticulous attention to detail are as crucial to faux-journalists as they are to the actual reporters, right down to the font size, backdrop, or shirt color (Achter, 2008, p. 281).

Comedic journalism occupies both comedy and journalism at once, allowing a perspective of media not possible in traditional formats (Bennet, 2007, p. 281). Moreover, comedic journalists remain aware of “conventional ideas about what is important and newsworthy” without the austerity of traditional news sources (Tally, 2010, p. 282). As imitators or performers of journalism, comedic journalists play the role of media critic by assuming the news-show form to report current events in a jocular manner.

Comedic journalism is a direct response to traditional journalism. It challenges news content by using comedy to mock the conventions of journalism (Baym, 2005, p. 268). However, comedic news does not deviate from journalism’s “traditional duty to educate citizens and to
check power” (Achter, 2008, p. 299). In this capacity, it acts as a watchdog overseeing the official watchdog, in what amounts to a kind of sociopolitical parody (Anderson & Kincaid, 2013, p. 183).

Heller (2015) describes comedic journalism as an innovation, an advancement of culture and media. The function of comedic journalism is to oversee the media itself, to expose media, to reveal what media have become, and to inform audiences that “all ‘news’ is transforming into entertainment-televison that no longer bears much, if any, relation to the ‘real’” (p. 150). The increasing scrutiny that satirists direct at media reflects the public’s widespread disenchantment with legacy media (Morris and Baumgartner, 2008, p. 315). Much of the extant research on comedic journalism details its normative relationship to traditional news (Painter & Hodges, 2010, p. 259). A major criticism leveled at comedic journalism that it is by nature cynical.

Bennet (2007) argues that it is in fact the mainstream media that are cynical, and, in turn, injurious to society, and that comedy is the antidote to serious news (p. 279). More specifically, Borden and Tew (2007) use Jon Stewart and Colbert to differentiate between the comedic journalism of comedic news-show hosts and the moral-commitment journalism unique to actual journalists, noting, however, that Stewart and Colbert, while not journalists, occupy the invaluable role of “media critics,” watchdogs of the watchdogs (p. 301). The crucial distinction Borden and Tew make is that of performance; namely, that a performer of journalism lacks the authenticity (insofar as humor becomes a kind of obstruction) and the normative austerity of a journalist bound by code and tradition. Media theorists and journalists the ethical implications of comedic journalism. Specifically, that comedic journalists too often refuse to take responsibility for their influence.
Warner (2007) refers to Stewart’s humor as “dissident,” reproaching him for the cynical approach he has taken. In an attempt to corner *The Daily Show*’s elusive host, Bernie Goldberg faced the camera and spoke directly to Stewart, “If you just want to be a funny man, who talks to an audience that will laugh at anything you say, that’s okay with me, no problem. But if clearly you want to be a social commentator, more than just a comedian, and if you want to be a good one, you better find some guts” (Tabacoff, 2010).

Comedic journalism’s unabashed self-referentiality plays on the American cultural disharmony between “the nobility of individualism [and] the warmth of communal belonging” (Wallace, 1997, p. 54). By attacking seriousness with mockery and derision, comedic journalists expose the artifice of traditional news and allowing the public to make light of the exact agenda-setting process that has long emboldened traditional media (Achter, 2008, p. 276; Polk, Young, & Holbert, 2009, p. 203).

In order to satirize the media, comedic journalists must uphold an allegiance to many of the same standards expected of institutions that they lambast. For example, *The Onion* adheres to journalistic principles, namely their use of “AP style to speak nonsense and the regular appearance of profanity destabilizes the authority of the style guide by making it look rigid and mechanical” (Achter, 2008, p. 281).

Using satire, comedic journalists infuse the staid institution with a directness, spoken in a plain voice. For audiences, it is as if they have a friend, someone looking out for them, someone devoted to common sense (Jones, 2010, p. 55). Feldman (2007) examines the impact that the growth of comedic journalism has had on traditional journalists, noting “the serious consequences that the erosion of news use among the young holds for the future of both American politics and journalism” (p. 407).
Comedic news derides the mainstream news’ inability to capture the inexorable strangeness and commotion of life. In the new media world, the conventional media’s trademark seriousness and decorated rigidness are actually being used against them (Meddaugh, 2010, p. 386). Comedic journalism can frame the phenomena in such a way that allows the audience to participate with the information through humor (Bird & Dardenne, 1997, p. 336).

As a result, the show enriches an audience that is informed of current events without experiencing the level of devastation that stories from traditional media produce. The meta-discourse of “exposing the news as ‘mere’ production and by setting an agenda” places the audience in the driver’s seat (Achter, 2008, p. 276). Likewise, the satirists’ freedom to lambast traditional media arises from the comedically perfected emulation of recognized standards in presentation, right down to the immaculate alignment with conventional news presentation (Terjesen, 2011).

However, most comedic journalists vehemently refuse the title journalist (Williams & Carpini, 2010, p. 183; Young, 2008, p. 241). Of course, this stubbornness is itself rife with ethical and authoritative complications—which will be addressed more fully elsewhere in this study. By shirking the label, satirists deny authenticity, absolving themselves of responsibility, while expecting audiences to believe that the information being presented is in fact true (Jones, 2010, p. 182).

The difficulty in challenging satirists’ claims arise from ambiguities about qualifies membership to the profession itself. The Daily Show’s description Comedy Central website was described as “a nightly half-hour series unburdened by objectivity journalistic integrity, or even accuracy” Comedic journalists claim to have “zero credibility” (Baym, 2009)
Comedic journalism blends the oftentimes contradictory principles of humor and journalism. Satire is largely anti-establishment (Feldman, 2007, pp. 417–418). Like journalism, it aims to expose wrongdoing, to reveal truth, to question power, but it does so through satire. As Dagnes (2012) observes, although satirists are inherently opinion-driven and societal-minded, their primary duty is to humor (p.41). Effective satire envelops public sentiment, turns it inward, then holds it up as a mirror (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, p. 4). Comedians use satire to express anger, mistrust, and contempt (Painter & Hodges, 2010, p. 258; Baym, 2005, p. 268; Jones & Baym, 2010, p. 283). Yet satire is positive by nature, compelled by the desire for meaningful change (Rose, 1993, p. 200).

The satirical comedian exercises meticulous parody when imitating the appearance, format, style, and/or perspective of traditional news media (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, p. 4). The thorough fact-checking and meticulous attention to detail are as crucial to faux-journalists as they are to the actual reporters, right down to the font size, backdrop, or shirt color (Achter, 2008, p. 281).

Comedic journalism occupies both comedy and journalism at once, allowing a perspective of media not possible in traditional formats (Bennet, 2007, p. 281). Moreover, comedic journalists remain aware of “conventional ideas about what is important and newsworthy” without the austerity of traditional news sources (Tally, 2010, p. 282). As imitators or performers of journalism, comedic journalists play the role of media critic by assuming the news-show form to report current events in a jocular manner. Kuipers (2015) argues that

Even the most refined, elitist, highly cultured humorist is always demoting, debunking, failing to take seriously, mocking and trivializing. Humor is at one and the same time more distant (with regard to the subject of the joke) and more involved (with regard to the person whom is laughing. (251)
During the course of my research, there was a dramatic shift in the political standing of comedic journalism. After decades of comedic journalism having a liberal bent, wherein comedic journalists railed against a society they deemed hostile, the new generation of disruptive comedians are politically right-leaning, all challenge what they consider the increasingly hostile limitations and restrictions that are imposed on culture, journalism, politics, and comedy (Rogan, 2016). The political shift in comedic journalism has challenged the wide-held belief that politically right-leaning comedians are incapable of being funny, or that they do not make good comedians. Milo Yiannopoulos, Steven Crowder, and Gavin McInnes aim to expose wrongdoing, to reveal truth, to question power, and to effect real-world change with the use of satire (Miller, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Lippmann’s (1922/1997) concept of the pictures inside our head lays the foundation for agenda setting theory. At the first level, it is a matter of asking “what are those pictures about? What’s the topic of the picture?” At the second, or attribute level it is a matter of asking “what IS the picture that we have of this object?” (McCombs, 2014a). “The World Outside and The Pictures in Our Heads” is the opening chapter of Walter Lippmann’s Public Opinion. The interchange between the two worlds is a determining factor in how public opinion forms. An irremovable part of Lippmann’s idea is the harmony. He concludes that by enacting the principles of responsible elitism, the community can achieve societal perfection (Lippmann, 1922/1997, p. 174).

Platonic idealism courses through Public Opinion. According to Lippmann, existence is a meld of the pictures in our head and the world outside. Reality is obscured by the fabricated world. Truth, or the assertion of truth, is delivered to the public through message-givers, in this
case news media (p. 167). He likens this world of opinion and reality to a pseudo-environment, the inevitable outcome of the struggle for fact among opinion, that, as Lippmann notes, “while men are willing to admit that there are two sides to a question, they do not believe that there are two sides to what they regard as a ‘fact’” (p. 140). In response, he looks toward self-contained communities and the democratic ideal, with Plato’s Edenic city-state as a model for what society could achieve (Lippmann, 1997, p. 170).

Though Cohen (1963) never uses the term agenda-setting, the theory advanced from his realization while the media “may not be successful in telling people what to think, . . . it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” Cohen’s idea is emblematic of the powerful effects approach that followed the minimal effects stage led by Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld.

A renewed interest in the effects of the media arose out of a curiosity to better understand the deep-seated relationship between public opinion and the news (McCombs, 2005, p. 552). Weary of the sterile outlook of minimal effects theorists, the emerging media academics sought to present an understanding of journalism that captured its dignity. McCombs (2014a) notes that storytelling is a crucial feature of journalism, a human aspect that the minimal effects theorists discarded.

Journalists must use storytelling in their civic responsibilities. Media effects theorists cultivated their ideas in such a way that they “link journalism and its tradition of storytelling to the arena of public opinion, a relationship with considerable consequences for society” (Kowalewski, 2014, p. 134).

and Shaw zeroed in on undecided voters, reasoning that they, not decided voters, were most susceptible to the influence of the media. McCombs and Shaw ran a content analysis of nine major news sources, then ranked the stories on the media agenda (2014a). These results were compared to the rank order of issues as determined by surveys of the undecided voters. McCombs and Shaw charted a near-perfect correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda.

The five issues were foreign policy, law, economics, public welfare, and civil rights.

McCombs and Shaw followed the Chapel Hill study with a study of the 1972 presidential campaign. They found correlations between seven issues: the economy, drugs, and bussing in order to achieve racial integration of public schools, Watergate, U.S. relations with Russia and China, the environment, and Vietnam (p. 8).

McCombs (2014c) defines agenda-setting as “[t]he role of the news media in identifying the key issues and topics of the day” with attention to their “ability to influence the salience of these issues and topics on the public agenda.” Agenda setting is a doctrine of causality, it purports to reveal a cause-and-effect relationship, namely the transfer of salience between media and public opinion.

Scheufele and Tewkbury (2007) examine the three media effects models: framing, agenda-setting, and priming. In their study, they differentiate between the three concepts, which are closely interrelated. Framing, for example, is often haphazardly used as a synonym of the term attribute agenda setting, and involves media telling how to think about what is important.

Since the Chapel Hill study, the agenda-setting model of communications has advanced beyond media studies to examine an array of topics, from professional sports (Fortunato, 2001) to sub-Saharan treatment of HIV/AIDS (Pratt, Ha, & Pratt, 2002); from Spain (McCombs,
Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997) to China (Zhang, Shao, & Bowman, 2012). By McCombs’ (2014b) account, there are five stages of agenda setting theory of communications: the transfer of issue salience, or first-level agenda setting; salience of objects, or attribute-level agenda setting; the psychology of agenda-setting effects; sources of the media agenda; and consequences of the media effects. Johnson (2015) argues in favor of a sixth stage: agenda setting in the online world, Agenda Setting 2.0.

For now, consider the final three stages, starting with the psychology of agenda-setting effects. Psychologist David Weaver is credited with having advanced the overall idea, whereby the fullness with which the media agenda is received depends on the audience’s need for orientation (Moon, 2015, p. 159).

The news media are largely responsible for how this orientation is transferred, based on two elements: relevance and uncertainty. In McCombs’ (2014a) words, “Low relevance defines a low need for orientation; high relevance and low uncertainty, a moderate need for orientation; and high relevance and uncertainty, a high need for orientation.” McCombs (2005) uses his own Chapel Hill study as an example, noting that election news bore high relevance to the subjects because they were intent on voting, just as their being undecided created high uncertainty; as a result, the voters had a great need for orientation (p. 547).

The fourth stage of agenda setting, sources of media agenda, seeks to answer the question: “If the press sets the public agenda, who sets the media agenda?” (McCombs, 2005, p.548). Intermedia agenda setting examines how different outlets influence one another. In his lecture in Valladolid, Spain, McCombs uses The New York Times as an example. Every day, he explains, the Associated Press releases a memo detailing what stories are going to be reported by The New York Times. The paper’s influence sets it apart as an agenda-setter for the media itself.
The intermedia agenda-setting stage of the theory serves as a critique of the homogeneity of the news media (Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014, p. 671).

At the fifth stage, researchers examine the effects of agenda setting on behavioral and attitudinal change (McCombs, 2014a). While fifth-level remains largely limited to the realm of opinions, opinion formation, opinion priming, and opinion shaping, it has nonetheless brought about a return to an understanding of attitudes and opinions as dependent variables (Camaj, 2014, p. 85).

Despite the seeming negativity of the idea that media are in control of message transmission, McCombs is adamant in his emphasis that, within the theory, “agenda” is a neutral descriptive term, and is not used in the same way as the meaning of the word to have an agenda, the media’s pattern of coverage that has appeared over a period of time (McCombs, 2012). Just as he repeatedly asserts that agenda setting role of the media is not a negative phenomenon, McCombs vigorously contends that there is no liberal bias in the media (2014a). It is important to note that, while McCombs describes five stages of agenda-setting, the theory is more broadly divided into three levels.

The first and second level of agenda setting look at the function of the news objects and attributes (Guo, 2014, p. 113). Agenda-setting at the first level is cognitive, it is about gaining attention, wherein “the media agenda sets the public agenda” (Kowalewski, 2014c, p.137). First-level agenda setting is also known as object agenda-setting. As McCombs (2014a) notes, the word “object” resembles the term “that social psychologists use the term attitude change.” The object is the focus of public attention, a source of public opinion, and “the kinds of objects that can define an agenda in the media and among the public are virtually limitless” (McCombs, 2014, p. 40).
Each object on the agenda has a number of attributes, or message characteristics, which define the objects. For example, Bob Dole was described as “old,” as opposed to “wise” or “experienced,” while Bill Clinton was characterized as “youthful” (McCombs, 2014a). Dole was badly irked by media’s framing, and blamed the media for the negative image, a process in which “controlling the perspective of the political debate on any issue is the ultimate influence on public opinion” (McCombs, 2014c, p. 51). The transfer of salience from the issue-ranking of the media to the issue-ranking of the public.

Dole’s contempt for the media highlights the news media’s role in the transmission of object salience, through which information is given to the public, whereby “[m]ost of our knowledge about the attributes of political candidates—everything from their political ideology to their personality—comes from the news stories and the advertising content of the media” (McCombs, 2014c, p. 48).

Second-level agenda-setting takes place at the affective level. Media tell audiences not only what to think about (Cohen, 1963) but how to think about it (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Second-level agenda setting, or attribute-level, involves comprehension (Camaj, 2014, p. 83). Second level agenda setting involves learning about key aspects of whatever is on the agenda. From the object level, the theory gains the definition of attributes. Attributes are used to add dimension to the objects, “some attributes are emphasized, others are mentioned only in passing” (Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014, p. 671).

McCombs (2005) divides attributes into two categories: 1) aspects: a general category of attributes 2) central themes: attributes that define a dominant perspective on an object. Attribute-level is driven by framing (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). The way that the media frame the issue influences how the public frames the issue: “Under what conditions does the salience of
the full array of attributes on the media agenda influence the ways in which the public thinks and talks about these objects?” (McCombs, 2005, p. 546). Entman (1993) is credited with the most accepted definition: “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 52).

Following McCombs’ (2014a) characterization of frame as a dominant attribute in a message, those “attributes defining a central theme are frames.” Both mechanisms involve the interactions between “communicators and their audiences, how they picture topics in the news and, in particular, to the special status that certain attributes or frames have in the content of a message” (McCombs, 2005, p. 546).

Compared to its predecessors, third-order agenda setting is largely unexplored. Johnson (2014) points to the growth of agenda setting research that focuses on the internet. One misconception about the theory is that audiences rely on a limited number of outlets for information. There exists an array of applications for the theory. With the dramatic increase of media sources and the precipitous dive in audience numbers, the idea of a unified media agenda has become less practical; audiences increasingly seek sources that confirm their extant belief system (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010, 2011).

In other words, “the information provided by the news media plays a key role in the constructions of our pictures of reality” (McCombs, 2014, p. 6). Within third-level agenda setting, there are several schools of thought. At its heart, it is agenda-setting 2.0. In response to critics who have vehemently challenged this claim, McCombs (2014c) argues that agenda setting has not been affected by the internet (p. 19). On the contrary, when applied to the nascent digital
world, agenda setting examines the influence of brand, and how it interrelates with object and attribute, eschewing the strictly chronological approach of first- and second-level agenda-setting. Ragas and Roberts (2009) define brand in terms of violability, meaning.

Another take on third level agenda setting is the Network Agenda-Setting model (NAS), (McCombs, Tien, & Guo, 2014). Traditional agenda-setting research assumes that issues are transferred discretely as individual elements from the news media to the public. The NAS model, however, theorizes that objects and attributes can also be transferred simultaneously in bundles between the agendas (Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014, p. 669).

As Vargo et al. (2014) note “overall, based on the concepts of network ad centrality, the NAS model suggests that the media network agendas are aligned with the public network agendas and further that the media network agendas can predict public network agendas” (p. 301). Furthering their previous work on homogeneity of mainstream news and civic osmosis, Shaw and Weaver (2014) have contributed the concept of agenda-melding (p. 145) With it, they divide media into vertical and horizontal media, noting the selectivity that many new media sources practice in covering issues.

Of the third-level approaches, Moon’s (2011) research is closest to the agenda-setting approach used in this study. Moon’s work examines the media’s on influence on behavior, combining agenda-setting with hierarchy-of-effects model (p. 14). The C-A-B sequence examines the progression wherein cognitive effects (C) lead to affective effects (A), which lead to behavioral effects (B): “In learning the hierarchy of CAB, people give more thought to those objects or attributes that they regard as important—and the greater the amount of thought, the stringer the attitudes. In turn, strong attitudes function as predictors of behaviors” (p. 20).
Elsewhere, Moon (2014) describes the influence of media agenda setting on civic engagement. Moon’s term “civic engagement” is roughly synonymous with this study’s usage of “real-world action,” “activism,” and “action.” The media select issues they deem important, then the public attaches ranks the issues, then the public forms opinions about the issues, then these opinions inspire behavioral consequences like civic engagement (158).

The agenda-setting theory of communications lends itself to media coverage of the John Oliver effect. Agenda-setting theory focuses on issue salience, how the public ranks issues in relation to how media frames issues, and how issue-ranking influences public opinion (Cheng, 2016). McCombs (2014c) describes journalists’ function in the agenda-setting role of media as “an awesome, overarching ethical question about what agenda the media are advancing” (McCombs, 2014c).
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Arpan, Bae, Chen, and Greene (2011) note that, while *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have recently garnered a significant amount of academic attention, late night comedy shows have long been categorized as soft news (p. 160). Writers and producers at *The Daily Show* embraced this label, scoffing at traditional journalistic strictures till they were beholden to nobody (Young, 2008b, p. 245). Without recourse, they were emboldened with the exact authority that Edelman (1988) had described nearly a decade earlier as the freedom to “challenge hegemony by undermining its presuppositions and offering alternatives” (p. 129).

While John Oliver’s approach to political commentary and comedic journalism builds off Jon Stewart, Oliver largely eschews the cynicism that Stewart cultivated (Hart & Hartelius, 2007, p. 271). Oliver is a skeptic, not a cynic. He expects his audience to recognize their role in the problem, not only to own up to it, but to actually do something about it. This activism element makes *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* unique. While his predecessors occasionally inspired real-world change, Oliver has adopted it as his *modus operandi*, or at least part of his comedic routine.

Since the show’s earliest episodes, journalists have insisted that Oliver’s call-to-arms approach has inspired actual change, that his unique framing techniques have dramatically affected public opinion and issue ranking. There is currently no academic research that can verify whether or not the John Oliver effect exists, let alone that the supposed effect is actually an example of third-level agenda setting capable of inspiring real-world action. The term “real-world action” describes a physical event of societal influence that was inspired by Oliver’s show, such as policy change, civil disobedience, or resignation of office by a politician or influential leader.
In order to determine whether or not *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* has inspired measurable change, it is necessary to analyze the show and its supposed effects from three perspectives: 1) frames, 2) legacy media, and 3) social media. By using a theoretical approach centered on the agenda-setting function of media, this research will examine how the frames used by Oliver affect the media and public agendas, and whether or not this process results in real-world change, as observed by legacy media and described on social media.

The following research will explore three broad questions.

Not every one of the show’s segments can be considered successful in inspiring real-world change. Journalists more or less agree on ten episodes that have been successful. The first research question examines the role and function of framing. What are the message characteristics of successful segments? How exactly does Oliver frame the topics? What patterns emerge from framing techniques?

Factuality is among the most important elements of journalistic practice. Like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert before him, John Oliver incorporates news sources in his monologue, as if to lend his argument reputability. Similarly, he often lauds his research team as “very aggressive fact checkers” (Baym, 2005; J. French, 2016). This attention to getting the details right is unwaveringly journalistic.

The show’s attention to factuality is part of what has led many journalists to insist that Oliver is a journalist, despite his having consistently denied the claims. In media coverage, persistence in framing Oliver as a journalist has often taken precedence over the issues he discusses. Therefore, the second research question examines the role of legacy media in the outcome *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*’s alleged real-world effects.
Agenda-setting researchers compare the agenda set by media with the public ranking of issues. Since the 1930’s Gallup has asked Americans “What is the most important problem facing this country today?” Consistently, researchers have proven that the elements that are prominent in the media frequently become prominent among the public. This study advances agenda-setting in many ways. It adds to Moon’s contention that agenda-setting leads to behavioral change by examining journalists’ claims about an emerging type of journalism that inspires not only behavioral change but real-world activism. The third research question examines the influence of alleged real-world effects on public opinion and societal change.
METHOD AND SAMPLING

For this study, I conducted a qualitative textual analysis of the message content within seven segments of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* in order to examine journalists’ claims that the show inspires activism. At the time of this writing, *Last Week Tonight* has three seasons.

- **Season One:** April 27, 2014 – November 9, 2014 (24 Episodes)
- **Season Two:** February 8, 2015 – November 22, 2014 (35 Episodes)
- **Season Three:** February 14, 2015 – Current (35 Episodes minimum)

Each episode is composed of several introductory segments and a primary segment, interspersed with web-exclusive-style clips. The introductory segments cover a number of topics. They feature current events presented in a traditional news format, and are shorter in duration. The main segment is an exposé-style monologue, to which Oliver devotes half or the majority of the show. The segments range in length, from less than 5 minutes to more than 20 minutes.

The seven segments (see Figure 1) examined in this study were chosen for their having resulted in real-world change, wherein “real-world change” is defined as activity or activism such as petitions, protests, law changes, i.e. action beyond mere discussion.

In order to determine which specific segments to analyze, I divided all of the segments into two categories: those that have produced action, and those that have not produced action. Any episodes that produced real-world action, seemingly caused by the show, were noted. This list was cross-referenced with the episodes most referenced by journalists as indicative of the John Oliver effect. I then examined each episode’s content, noting message characteristics, framing techniques, and comedic approaches.
Another list compiled information about episodes from social media. Social Media. The examination of social media was multi-faceted, using data from ListenFirst Media as well as hashtag/link usage to measure general social media presence on Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and Change.org. On Twitter, I examined the top ten tweets for mention of Oliver or Last Week Tonight and the segment’s topic. For example, the date restriction for the segment about net neutrality would be from June 1, 2014 to June 8, 2014 with the keywords “John Oliver” and “net neutrality,” as well as the relevant hashtags, retweets, and mentions of @iamjohnoliver. The search includes any hashtags that Oliver promoted during his segments.

Tobe Becker, HBO’s VP Media Relations, explained that she could not provide the show’s week-by-week viewership, but sent a press release for HBO’s Summer 2016 series viewership “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver continues to have a record season, averaging a gross audience of 5.6 million viewers, (up from last season’s 4.7 million)” (T. Becker, personal communication, September 22, 2016). The results from Nielsen TV Ratings detail viewership increases. For example, the August 9, 2015 episode Ranked 21st on the list of television shows with largest increase in viewership for the 18-49 age group, with a 0.8 viewership increase in “live plus 3 days” and a 0.4 viewership increase in “live plus same day.” The overall increase in percentage was +109%. With regard to measuring social media engagement, however, these numbers are of little help.

Digital Audience Rating (DAR-TV) ListenFirst Media, “measures what entertainment content is resonating most across Facebook, Google+, Instagram, Tumblr, YouTube and Wikipedia combined” (Klein, 2016, para 4). The ListenFirst Media list discontinued Twitter data after September 7, 2014. Last Week Tonight with John Oliver most often appeared in the “Late Night” section, although it also occasionally appears on the weekly top ten list.
The best metric proved to be the number of views each segment had accrued on YouTube and the search levels on Google Trends. Reddit was useful in gathering discussion points from each episode. It is the perfect platform for data aggregation and the site’s policies regarding insightful posts and its active moderation provided rich, at times combative feedback for each episode. In several cases, Reddit was an active part in a segment’s real-world effect. In the results section, these data are implemented in a far more abstract, far less specific manner. The site’s anonymous user base and their devotion to the upvote/downvote system provided unique insights into each episode. The most consistent source was r/LastWeekTonight, with about 23,300 subscribers, although the show was connected to several other subreddits, none of which boasts the subscription numbers as r/LastWeekTonight. r/JohnOliver has about 1,4000 subscribers; r/Drumpf 5,300; r/OurPerpetualExemption, 3,372; and r/HBO, 6,100.

For each episode, I searched for posts about that episode within the subreddits. The number of posts varied, but there are at least five for each segment, while two of the segments (r/Drumpf and r/OurPerpetualExemption) even resulted in the creation of new subreddits. Each segment’s popularity differs. For example, a post following the Drumpf episode titled “Make Donald Drumpf Again!” has 1,329 upvotes and 102 comments. The more popular posts yield greater feedback.

For each episode, there is also a discussion post devoted strictly to that episode.

It is important to note that, since my research approach was qualitative, I did not seek to uniformly organize the data, nor was the purpose to quantify any of the data, but rather to garner an idea for the segments’ general reception. Moreover, the ListenFirst Media results do not include every episode of the show, so it was not possible to use that data as a steadfast metric.
The resultant data was then compared back to real-world activity as well as social media engagement in order to determine what, if any, actual effect the message actually had on audiences, on both the artificial and the substantive level. Artificial success is a measurement of the episode’s viewership, rating, and social media presence, as well as media coverage. The substantive level of the message process concerns whether or not the episode’s commentary inspired real-world activism, via campaign contributions, donations, political repercussions.

As such, the sampling process was three-tiered: 1) successful segments, 2) legacy media, and 3) social media. The unit of analysis was the successful segment from Last Week Tonight with John Oliver. Content about each segment from legacy media and social media was analyzed. All three analyses were compared to the resultant activism that journalists allege the segment inspired.

At each level, the different patterns of the supposed John Oliver effect can be understood in terms of the popularity, which refers to the overall reach of the message, and influence, which refers to the maturation of any outcomes the segment might have. Specifically, the immediacy, intensity, and extent of popularity; and the immediacy, intensity, and extent of influence.

The immediacy of a segment’s popularity can be instant, delayed, slow, or nonexistent.
The intensity of a segment’s popularity can be viral, well-known, visible, or unknown.
The extent of segment’s popularity can be continuous, long-lasting, brief, or nonexistent.
The immediacy of a segment’s influence can be instant, delayed, slow, or nonexistent.
The intensity of a segment’s influence can be viral, well-known, visible, or unknown.
The extent of segment’s influence can be continuous, long-lasting, brief, or nonexistent.

The popularity of the televangelist segment, for example, was instant, with 1 million viewers. Given the dramatic amount of mail Oliver received in the week following and the
intensity of that popularity was well-known, but with majority of 13.5 million views on YouTube occurring in the first month, the extent of the popularity has been brief. Since any coverage of the effect did not emerge until over a week after the segment aired, the immediacy of the segment’s influence was delayed, and with majority of 13.5 million views on YouTube occurring in the first month, the intensity of the influence has been brief, yet, because all donations were forwarded to charities and the issue of tax exemptions for religious organizations has gained traction, the extent of the episode’s influence remains continuous. All of the seven segments chosen for this thesis exhibit at least two superlative pattern characteristics (i.e. instant, viral, continuous). The criteria vary when the effect is measured in legacy media coverage and social media.

Segments

The segments have been catalogued chronologically. After drafting a transcript of each segment, I transcribed the segment’s script and took extensive notes, cataloging the message characteristics.

The message characteristics of each segment were compared to the message characteristics from legacy media content, as well as the message characteristics from social media content. Message characteristics that worked in conjunction with legacy media, message characteristics that worked in conjunction with social media, and message characteristics that worked in conjunction with both social media and legacy media. I noted instances of disparity in the message characteristics of the show and the message characteristics of legacy media, the message characteristics of social media, and the message characteristics of both legacy media and social media. Several categories and themes emerged. The sample spread allowed for a
glimpse of the show’s progression. Of the seven segments, there are three from Season 1, three from Season 2, and two from Season 3.

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Figure 1. Episode list
Season 1

Episode 5: “Net Neutrality”

When describing the John Oliver effect, most journalists first point to the episode on net neutrality, which resulted in so many user comments, 45,000, on the FCC website that it to crashed. Journalists have credited Oliver with inspiring public awareness and governmental accountability (Brody, 2015). After the net neutrality segment, Oliver became far more than just a former Daily Show correspondent. Journalists scrambled to characterize the new-fangled approach that Oliver was taking (Ross, 2014). For many, the episode served as an introduction to Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, as well as Oliver’s essay-like monologue style. Brody (2016) notes that in the segment’s 13 minutes, “Oliver name-checked Netflix, Google, Usain Bolt, Superman, the game Monopoly, and Mein Kampf, and compared the FCC hiring former cable company lobbyists to ‘needing a babysitter and hiring a dingo’.”

Episode 7: “FIFA”

The importance of the FIFA segment was less immediate than many of the show’s other segments, it was a full year before Sepp Blatter resigned his FIFA presidency, but as Morabito (2015) notes, the segment “cemented Last Week Tonight ‘s cultural importance.” FIFA corruption had been an open secret for decades amongst soccer fans. Swiss police raided a Zurich hotel in May 2015, nearly a year to the date of Oliver’s segment, and arrested 14 high-ranking officials, who faced U.S. Department of Justice charges of wire fraud, bribery, and money laundering (Siciliano & Jamieson, 2016). In total, 40 FIFA officials and executives, from 24 countries, have been charged by the U.S. Department of Justice.
**Episode 18: “Miss America Pageant”**

Oliver describes the Organization responsible for the Miss America Pageant, “which he describes as one of the weirdest annual events on television.” The episode features one of John Oliver’s earliest mention of Donald Trump, whose rise to presidency Oliver would later devote much of his third season to, referring to Trump as “a clown made of mummified foreskin and cotton candy” and remarking that “[i]t is a little ironic that the Miss USA beauty pageant is overseen by one of the ugliest souls on” (Carvell, 2014d). The Society of Women Engineers credited Oliver for the $25,000 in donations the organization received, within days of the segment, and referred to it not as the John Oliver effect, but the “John Oliver bounce.”

**Season 2**

**Episode 33: “Government Surveillance”**

At 33 minutes running time, this is the episode in which Oliver begins explaining government surveillance, then stops, “I know this is confusing. And unfortunately, the most obvious person to talk to about this is Edward Snowden. But he currently lives in Russia. Meaning: If you wanted to ask him about any of these issues, you’d have to fly all the way there to do it. And it is not a pleasant flight. And the reason I know that...is that last week, I went to Russia to speak to Edward Snowden” (Carvell, 2015a).

**Episode 38: “Chicken Farmers”**

Instead of covering chicken farming from the animal cruelty angle, Oliver investigates the plight of chicken farmers, many of whom live below the poverty line despite unprecedented demand for chicken. Following the episode, a House subcommittee pass the Agriculture Appropriations Bill, which Oliver mentions in the segment. Journalists were quick to attribute the law change to Oliver.
Episode 49: “Churches”

After filling out lots of paperwork, Oliver created his own legally-documented tax-exempt church and christened himself Megareverend and C.E.O. of Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption Church, Pastor John Oliver. The episode examines tax-exempt churches and corruption within televangelism. On the following week’s episode, Oliver announced, “We are closing down the church. Not because we have to. We have still not broken any laws by promising you untold riches in return for sending us money.” The tens of thousands of dollars, mostly in single dollar bills, that viewers sent were donated to Doctors without Borders.

Season 3

Episode 62: “Donald Trump”

Season three took on all the drama of the U.S. Presidential elections, and Oliver homed in on his nemesis Donald Trump. For this reason, I have chosen the following two episodes from the third season. The record-setting episode “Drumpf” has gone down as the most watched piece of HBO content in the network’s history (Klein, 2016). The segment, which mocks then-presidential candidate Donald Trump, went viral instantly.

Framing

During an interview, CBS This Morning’s Gayle King asked John Oliver if he was “aware of this thing called the ‘John Oliver effect’” to which Oliver groaned and rolled his eyes. King then gave three examples that media have heralded as proof of causality between Last Week Tonight and real-world events. Oliver replies that “[t]he ripple effect has nothing to do with us. Once we’re done with the show, we’re finished. And I would argue that we had very little to do with any of those things” (Kadro, 2015).

A frame is an attribute of the object under consideration because it describes the object. However, not all attributes are frames. If a frame is described as a dominant perspective
on the object—a pervasive description and characteristic of the object—then a frame is usefully delimited as a very special case of attributes (McCombs, 2014b).

As the study is qualitative, determination of the dominate frames required that the show’s message characteristics be approached open-endedly. At the start, the only categories for specific frames being analyzed were culmination and humor, which is divided into thirteen categories (see Figure 2). After establishing the six most prevalent frames, it was a matter of noting the distinctive themes that emerged from each framing device.

The six most prominent frames were 1) The optimism frame, 2) the appeal-to-emotion frame, 3) the newsworthiness frame, 4) the low-brow refinement frame, 5) the “repurposed bovine waste” (B.S.) frame, and 6) the everyman frame. Two additional frames are examined in the results section, although because they constitute the encompassment of and foundation for all frames, only the above-listed frames will be considered for now.
Figure 2. Categories of humor
1) The optimism frame is characterized by Oliver’s persistent belief in a positive outcome. Ross (2014) defines the idea in terms of anti-apathy, namely Oliver’s refusal to succumb to apathy, and characterizes this optimism as “a combination of humor and fearlessness.” The object under consideration is often menacing, and Oliver’s framing varies from the framing practiced by traditional media in that he does not merely report the issue, he seeks to find a solution, often by recruiting his own viewership, or the audience as a whole.

2) The appeal-to-emotion frame involves Oliver’s word choice, specifically his use of emotionally-stimulating words and phrases as a means of conveying the gravity of the issue at hand. The object under consideration is not always an issue commonly associated with any kind of emotional response. In fact, many times, the topic is considered boring or harmless, and is in many cases largely unknown. With obvious exceptions, news media professionals have traditionally been discouraged from using emotionally-charged phrases (Rosen, 1999, 240). Neutrality and directness have traditionally taken precedence over emotionally-stirring approaches. Jones (2009) notes the that “journalistic professional code dictates that journalists should report the news objectively and dispassionately” (p. 117). The appeal-to-emotion is not a strictly comedic frame, either. Comedy is often an escape from emotionally-complicated experiences, whereby, in comparison to an entertainment medium such as high art, “the exaltation of humor is more physical, more exuberant, less restrained, and, in its non-seriousness, creates a certain distance” (Kuipers, 2015, 251).

3) The everyman frame involves a subtler version of the lowbrow refinement frame and a more socially-engaging version the “repurposed bovine waste” frame, although it requires neither a comedic element nor an intellectual disparity. Like the two techniques, the everyman frame is instrumental in empowering or informing the audience insofar as it plies Oliver with a
kind of relatability and trustworthiness. The technique appears most often segments that seek to expose malfeasance by corporations or people in power. When such powerful entities are the object under consideration, Oliver frames them with an “us-versus-them” enormity. The effect is the inclusivity of being in on a secret. Oliver’s refusal to categorically accept the conduct and approach of a journalist allows him to take liberties that reporters cannot, by cursing or bringing up uncouth topics for example.

4) The newsworthiness frame serves as a mechanism of validation. It is useful in communicating the seriousness of the issue. As such, it refers to the imperative nature of Oliver’s presentation. The object under consideration is often either widely misunderstood or largely unknown, so Oliver’s focus on the issue must match that seriousness. To do so, Oliver infuses the journalistic principles of objectivity, accuracy, fairness, and credibility (Rosen, 1999, 32–33). As a comedic machination, it is crucial to laying the foundation for a punchline, regarding which Oliver notes that “if a joke’s built on sand, it just doesn’t work, it collapses” (Brown, 2014).

5) The lowbrow refinement frame is used as a means of comedic relief, whereby Oliver laces serious information into an oftentimes bawdy punchline. As such, it is the obverse of the newsworthiness frame. The object under consideration is sophisticated, serious, or complex in nature, but Oliver uses imagery or language that is sophomoric, obscene, or lowbrow. By characterizing an intellectual object with an anti-intellectual frame, Oliver reduces the analysis of a high-flown concept into a social experience available to anyone (Kuipers, 2015, 116).

6) The phrase “repurposed bovine waste” is from Oliver’s segment on native adverting. After showing a clip of Meredith Levien’s statement that “Good native advertising is not just meant to be trickery, it’s meant to be a publisher sharing its storytelling tools with a marketer,” Oliver remarks, “And that’s not bullshit, it’s repurposed bovine waste.” The “repurposed bovine
waste” (B.S.) frame is exemplified by the confrontational approach Oliver takes when challenging the verity of statements, ideas, traditions, events, or beliefs being proffered by people or corporations. As in, he calls them out on their “bullshit,” oftentimes literally using the word. The object under consideration is often being touted as the truth, so Oliver’s framing technique involves exposing the object as being a lie. In doing so, he undertakes an approach much like that of an investigative journalist, which merges appeal-to-emotion framing and newsworthiness framing and infuses comedy. The result is comedic journalism.

Legacy Media

The show’s legacy media presence was determined through the analysis of publications that have regularly covered Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, notably Esquire, AV Club, Salon, The Atlantic, and TIME, L.A. Times, Vulture. For each segment, a Google News search was conducted to find the ten highest-ranked news articles published within a week of the episode’s airing. For example, the episode on net neutrality aired June 1, 2014.

The ten highest-ranked articles published from June 1, 2014 to June 8, 2014 with the keywords “John Oliver” and “net neutrality” were from Washington Post, Ars Technica, L.A. Times, NPR, Business Insider, Slate, RT, IVN News, Huffington Post, and Vice. Then, I compared the issue salience being reported within each article to the issue salience of the John Oliver segment, noting the writer’s impression of Oliver, whether they mentioned journalism, comedy, or the “John Oliver effect.” The framing (of the issue and of Oliver) within the article was compared to the framing used in the segment.

For each episode, I categorized legacy media’s framing of the particular segment in five categories: 1) positive, 2) negative/critical, 3) neutral, 4) effect-focused, and 5) humor-focused. The positive coverage differs from the John Oliver effect-focused coverage in that the latter
places greater emphasis on Oliver and his effect than on the issue being discussed in the segment.

For the most part, legacy media write about Oliver with a laudatory tone. Occasionally, articles criticize Oliver. There is an interchange between the John Oliver effect and the articles that contain a negative tone. By criticizing Oliver, they further validate his status as a journalist, perhaps more so than the positive or effect-focused articles. In other words, by taking Oliver seriously, they legitimize claims that he is a journalist. In general, the earliest articles are more likely to avoid editorializing the segment. Mentions and descriptions of the John Oliver effect increase over time.

An additional analysis was conducted without the parameters of a date range, composed of the 30-highest rated articles according the criteria “the John Oliver effect,” “John Oliver journalism,” and “John Oliver comedy.” This analysis had several objectives. It was useful in contrasting the overall progression of media coverage about the John Oliver effect with the highest all-time rated articles, as well as the short-term impact of each segment versus the long-term impact of each segment.
RESULTS

Frames

The six framing techniques and two frameworks are listed in the same order as in the method section. For each frame, there are examples from all seven of the episodes chosen for analysis (see Figure 1), beginning with the net neutrality segment and moving chronologically to the election results segment. The B.S. and newsworthy frames were most prominent, but they, like all the other frames, still belonged to one foundational frame, which will be discussed in the results section.

Frame 1: Optimism

Ross (2014) argues that the net neutrality segment is the perfect example of Last Week Tonight’s ability to transcend apathy (Ross, 2014). The episode itself begins with Oliver noting that the main topic is “the internet, AKA the electronic cat database,” to which he adds that “first, let’s take just a moment together and appreciate how amazing the Internet is” (Carvell, 2014a). As with all of his segments, the net neutrality piece contains a framework that crescendos into a closing scene, which is often a kind of clarion call.

While there are glimpses of optimism throughout each segment, most of Oliver’s optimism emerges during his conclusion, after he has delivered the unpleasant news. Oliver follows this format in the net neutrality segment, which cascades into a rallying cry to internet trolls. The message is clear: Anyone can make a difference.

The optimism that emerges in the finale of his FIFA segment has a different sentiment. After cataloguing the abhorrent misdeed of FIFA, Oliver pauses. “And by this point, I hope I’ve proven to you that FIFA is just appalling. And yet, here’s their power: I am still so excited about
the World Cup next week!” (Carvell, 2014b). He is teary-eyed as he describes the beauty of the World Cup. You can almost see him as a young boy wearing the Arsenal kit under his clothes, just in case his heroes need to be rescued.

And it’s very hard to justify how I can get so much joy from an organization that’s caused so much pain, other than going back to right where we started. It’s an organized religion, and FIFA is its church. Just think about it. Its leader is infallible, it compels South American countries to spend money they don’t have building opulent Cathedrals, and it may ultimately be responsible for the deaths of shocking numbers of people in the Middle East. But...but...but...but for millions of people, around the world like me, it is also the guardian of the only thing that gives their lives any meaning. And if that comparison does not make Americans love soccer, then frankly nothing will. (Carvell, 2014b)

Oliver’s glimmer-of-hope reporting emerges out of the most harrowing realities, like the turnaround he makes in the chicken farmer segment:

And look, look. I know this story has been depressing, and you might be wondering what you can do. You could stop eating chicken, but you’re not going to do that because chicken is delicious. I’m getting hungry just thinking about it now . . . But the truth is there is actually a glimmer of hope (Carvell, 2015b).

In the televangelist segment, Oliver’s optimism is an undercurrent of the broad-reaching issue at hand, and remains under wraps until the segment’s finale, when Oliver steps into the pulpit.

*Frame 2: Appeal to Emotion*

There are several ways that Oliver uses emotionally charged framing, the most common of which is through the use of emotionally loaded words or imagery, like his characterization of the fight for net neutrality: “What’s being proposed is so egregious activists and corporations have been forced onto the same side” (Carvell, 2014a). He describes the Miss America Corporation’s misdeeds as “unsettling,” and the process of setting up a legally-recognized church as “disturbingly easy” (Carvell, 2015d).
At times, the imagery is heart-rending, like the description Oliver gives during the government surveillance episode,

But the fact is: we have this information now and we no longer get the luxury of pleading ignorance. It’s like you can’t go to Sea World and pretend that Shamu’s happy, anymore. When we now know at least half the water in her tank is whale-tears (Carvell, 2015a).

Of course, Oliver abides by the foundations of logic necessary for a coherent perspective and a sound argument. As when he describes the upheaval and corruption of FIFA:

Brazil. Brazilians are excited about everything. This is how they celebrate the fact that it’s just about to be Lent. They love the concept of giving up chocolate temporarily. They’re also the biggest soccer fans on earth. So, they must be thrilled at the prospect of hosting the World Cup. It’s been months of unrest in some of the city’s favelas or slums with clashes between police and residents. Here people demonstrated against Brazil holding The World Cup That makes no sense. Why would you be unhappy hosting the thing that you love the most in all the world? (Carvell, 2014b)

In other words, he equally appeals to reason.

In the chicken farming segment, he calls the impoverishment of chicken farmers insane, and asks “How can the people, who make the meat we eat the most, barely be making a living?” He dons a quiet seriousness as he discusses the devastating effects of corporate greed on poultry farmers. His selection of clips, too, can provoke unexpected emotional responses, like the clip in which Kay Doby tells the story of a poultry farmer “who was terminated from his contract, about to lose his home [who] took a gun and ended his life” (Carvell, 2015b). Each time, Oliver primes the issues with an unerring seriousness: “At this point, you may be angry at the chicken industry. But careful, you need to leave a little room because you’re about to get even angrier” (Carvell, 2015b). Or his announcement that “the fact is: It is vital that we have a discussion about this now. Because an important date is just around the corner” (Carvell, 2015a).

During the televangelist segment, Oliver employs the appeal-to-emotions frame by explaining that “all of this would be amusing if the targets of all these were not often vulnerable
people like Bonnie Parker,” who chose to donate money to televangelist Kenneth Copeland in lieu of seeking treatment for her cancer (Carvell, 2015d).

One topic alone enflames an appeal-to-emotions framing that is as real or as visceral: Donald Trump. The Drumpf segment is half insult, half appeal to emotion. Oliver is electric as he paces through the reasons that Trump is a threat. His over-caffeinated fury does not stop. The Drumpf segment maintains equal measures of the “repurposed-bovine-waste” frame and the appeal-to-emotions frame. The segment’s unparalleled success is as much about the way Oliver balances the two frames as it is about Trump.

The only episodes that threatens to place any other frame above humor are the Trump episodes. Emotion threatens to blind the comedy; the issues threaten to usurp the humor. Perhaps a less-experienced comedian would lose the whole thing. There is no doubt that Oliver is aware of the seriousness of the U.S. Presidential election. It is no accident, for example, that the episode, which aired two nights before Super Tuesday, is about Trump. It is by appealing to viewers’ emotions that he intends to get his message across.

Frame 3: The Newsworthy Frame

Oliver’s approach, method, and style are meticulously consistent, like an essayist or a feature writer. For the televangelist segment alone, Oliver and the show’s writers maintained a seven-month-long correspondence with televangelist Robert Tilton in order to better understand the donation process.

The newsworthiness arc resembles the story arc of an investigative news story. There is always a lead, with a hook introduction. There is a problem, but no obvious solution. Oliver builds each scene carefully. The facts and hindrances pile up until there is no clear escape, looking hard but seeing nothing.
The midway point is important. It arrives after Oliver has catalogued an array of odious practices or outcomes, in this case the misdoings of televangelists, and made a solid case against them. The midway point contains the ultimate newsworthiness: All of the deplorable things you just have seen are legal. It is happening right before your eyes. With Oliver, there is also an element of, “why isn’t this more well-known? Why isn’t this news? Why do you have to hear it from a comedian?” Then Oliver’s tone switches, as when he describes net neutrality: “But here’s the thing. Net neutrality is actually hugely important.” Or the Exposé approach he employs to describe the FIFA World Cup Courts that FIFA created during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, the courts, he explains,

which sounds funny, you know it’s like going to the World Series and being dragged in front of judge Philly Phanatic. Except, FIFAs courts were no joke. Two Zimbabweans who robbed foreign journalists on a Wednesday. Were arrested on a Thursday. And began fifteen-year jail sentences the next day. That is unsettlingly fast. That’s like when you order Chinese food and it comes five minutes later. “Uh, thanks very much but that was too quick! You didn’t have time to make this properly” (Carvell, 2014b).

The government surveillance segment is replete with examples of the newsworthiness frame. Oliver begins by framing news coverage of the issue. In a news clip of then-Congresswoman Jane Harman describing the dangers of data collection, the news anchor interrupts her with Breaking News, just as she begins to build her imperative: “Congresswoman Harman. Let me interrupt you just for a moment. We’ve got some breaking news out of Miami. Stand by if you will. Right now, in Miami Justin Bieber has been arrested on a number of charges” (Carvell, 2015a). The subtext here is that the public does not realize the gravity of the situation, but also that the media is letting us down.

Then he provides the villain: Section 215, which “the government can ask for ‘any tangible things’ so long as it’s ‘for an investigation to protect against international terrorism’. Which is basically a blank check” (Carvell, 2015a). In the 34 years that FISA Court has overseen
requests for foreign surveillance, the “court has approved over 35000 applications and only rejected 12” (Carvell, 2015a).

In turn, Oliver completely reframes the issue of government surveillance, shifting the focus from jargon-riddled descriptions into something that Americans can find horrifying: naked photos. The culture of the NSA bothers people only after they are informed that it is common within the NSA for government to pass around naked pictures. Oliver and Snowden spend an entire eight minutes of the interview talking about naked photos. The word “penis” is used eight times and the word “dick” is used 23 times, with variations such as “dick sheriff” and “The Dick-Pic Program” (Carvell, 2015a). The newsworthiness aspect is that “the most visible line in the sand for people is not meta-data tracing or bulk collection or location tracking or wiretapping, but naked photos (Carvell, 2015a).

Oliver hands Snowden a folder. Snowden looks inside. “That is a picture of my dick.” Oliver then has Snowden walk him through everything that NSA is capable of by using the picture as an example. He moves through each NSA program and, using the picture as metaphor for personal information, impresses the far-reaching liberties that the NSA take: The FISA Amendment of 2008, including Section 702, which allows bulk collection; Executive Order 12-333, which is what the NSA uses when other authorities aren’t aggressive enough in order to access information stored in Google servers; Prism, which NSA use to deputize companies like Yahoo, Facebook, and Google to serve as “surveillance sheriffs”; Upstream, which captures information as “it transits the internet”; Mystic, which catalogues the duration, and in some cases the content, of phone calls; 215 Meta-data, which traces meta-data (Carvell, 2015b).

Oliver excels in his interpretation, his framing, of what is newsworthy, from sources, which adds an irony to Oliver’s prefacing statement that, “I know this is confusing. And unfortunately, the most obvious person to talk to about this is Edward Snowden. But he currently lives in Russia. Meaning: If you wanted to ask him about any of these issues,
you’d have to fly all the way there to do it. And it is not a pleasant flight. And the reason I know that...is that last week, I went to Russia to speak to Edward Snowden (Carvell, 2015a).

In reality, Oliver explained it most clearly, or rather Snowden did it through him.

Part of the newsworthiness frame is the possibility for unexpected news. Instead of going with a story about chicken farming and the terrors of animal cruelties, Oliver delivers a piece about chicken farmers. He explains that chicken farmers are so disadvantaged, in part, because they do not own the chickens. Major corporations tell the farmers, “you own the property and the equipment, we own the chickens. That essentially means, you own everything that costs money, and we own everything that makes money. Because typically, farmers go into a great deal of debt, just to build chicken houses and go into the business. And the moment you sign that contract, the chicken companies have a lot of leverage over you” (Carvell, 2015b).

He presents sources as evidence, “Multiple studies have shown that many growers whose sole source of income was chicken farming, live below or near the poverty line” (Carvell, 2015b). He tells us why: “chicken farmers can’t even complain because one of the reasons that you’ve not heard about this story is that to hear farmers tell it, companies take a hard line with complainers” (Carvell, 2015b).

Companies pit farmers against one another “And look, losing a tournament, and being labeled a ‘bad grower’ cannot just cost farmers their home, it can cost them a lot more” (Carvell, 2015b). The farmers’ realities are devastating:

as fast as farmers try to pay down their debts, companies can pile more on by demanding that they make expensive upgrades . . . a farmer may have borrowed over $1 million dollars for houses and improvement. But they do this, because they’re led to believe that they’ll have a steady source of income. Except, they’re actually paid, according to a tournament or gladiator system (Carvell, 2015b).
In the televangelist segment, Oliver uses Creflo Dollar’s rhetoric about getting a private jet as a way to expose rampant greed among the televangelist profession, noting that “there is a pattern of preachers wanting high-end airplanes and when they get them they’re not particularly humble about it” (Carvell, 2015d). In other words, Oliver has an insider tip and its implications run deep. Elsewhere, Oliver reveals that he and his team asked the IRS how many churches had been audited in the last several years. One in 2014, and two in 2013.

Oliver describes the predatory practices of televangelists, who encourage audiences to donate exorbitant sums to the church ministries, often at the cost of debt or financial ruin, even, as in the case of Bonnie Parker, at the cost of life. Oliver frames Parker’s story just like an investigative journalist would: It exposes corruption on a grand scale by offering one heart-rending story. A woman, dying of cancer, believes the claims that donating to the Copelands’ ministry is her best chance at overcoming cancer. Oliver exposes the practice of “healing through faith,” exposing the manipulation at play when Gloria Copeland demonizes modern medical practices by depicting doctors as clueless and chemo-therapy as insidious:

We know what’s wrong with you, you’ve got cancer. The bad news is we don’t know what to do about it except give you some poison that’ll make you sicker. Now. Which do you want to do? Do you want to sit here on a Saturday morning, hear the word of God, let faith come into your heart and be healed? Hallelujah (Carvell, 2015d).

If there is any episode that shows Oliver’s awareness of the John Oliver effect, it is the Drumpf segment. With Super Tuesday literally days away, Oliver wastes no time framing the imperative newsworthiness of Donald Trump, who had just won three states in the Republican primaries, noting that “since 1988, every candidate who’s won the most states on Super Tuesday went on to become their party’s nominee so at this point, Donald Trump is America’s back mole” (Carvell, 2016a). It is as if Oliver sees a chance to test the effect, test the power of his voice and his show.
Frame 4: Low-Brow Refinement

HBO’s paid subscription services offer Last Week Tonight a unique creative freedom. Oliver can say whatever he likes. Unlike Comedy Central, HBO does not impose parameters on language or content. In his monologue about the Paris attacks, for instance, Oliver used “premium cable profanity” to express the widespread sorrow and anger in a way no legacy media outlets could.

In an article for the New York Times, Carr (2014) notes that “Everyone loves a good donkey joke, but still, how is it that explainers of big, complicated current events—the programming equivalent of creamed spinach—have become digital catnip? I think there is, right now, a hunger for a kind of slow news, thoughtful takes that won’t fit inside a Twitter feed.” With the lowbrow refinement frame, Oliver injects crass or basic humor into serious information as a means of comedic relief, like the wordplay on Netflix during the net neutrality episode.

The FCC is endorsing new rules that could clear the way for a two-tier system. The rules will open the door for the first time for Internet providers like Comcast and Verizon to charge tech companies to send content to consumers more quickly. Netflix, for example, may pay a premium to ensure that its customers can stream movies more reliably, at a cost a start-up competitor may not be able to afford. No. This cannot happen. How else is my start-up streaming video service Nutflix going to compete? It’s going to be America’s one-stop-resource for videos of men getting hit in the nuts. You don’t even know you want it yet, that’s why it is brilliant. (Carvell, 2014a).

With this framing technique, he sneaks in the serious information, lacing in a punchline. It is a disarming technique. Even FCC employees enjoyed the joke: “Ha. And Nutflix pretty funny, too. Who knew NN could be fodder for comedy??” (Lecher, 2014).

This structure is a unifying theme within the segments. As Oliver explained in an interview, “If a joke’s built on sand, it just doesn’t work, it collapses” (Brown, 2014). John Oliver he has chosen to perform comedy on a platform that demands banality and restraint.
Oliver begins the FIFA segment by saying “I would like to talk to you about the sausage principle the theory that says if you love something, never find out how it was made. Well, tonight, I would like to show you my sausage.” He then compares FIFA’s relentless corruption, money laundering, tax evasion, and cultural exploitation to getting a Brazilian wax:

The country usually doesn’t make money. FIFA, the organization of the World Cup, is who makes the money. Brazil, let me put this in terms you might understand. Think of money as pubic hair and FIFA as wax. Oh, they’re going to be all over you during the World Cup but when they go, they’re taking all the money with them. Including some from places you didn’t even know you had any money, leaving you teary-eyed going, “Jesus, what happened here. What, what happened! I’m never doing this again” (Carvell, 2014b).

The show itself is full of examples.

In the government surveillance episode, Oliver remarks that Julian Assange “resembles a sandwich-bag full of biscuit-dough wearing a Stevie Nicks wig” (Carvell, 2015a). Oliver describes the aversion that Rep. James Sensenbrenner, who wrote The Patriot Act, has for The Patriot Act, “the legislative equivalent of Lewis Carroll seeing the tea-cups ride at Disneyland and saying: ‘This has got to be reined in. No fair reading of my text would allow for this ride. You’ve turned my perfectly nice tale of psychedelic pedophilia into a garish vomitorium’” (Carvell, 2015a). He mocks the news program’s decision to interrupt Congresswoman Harman as she’s explaining the dangers of the Patriot Act by airing news that Justin Bieber has been arrested, to say, “bad news, we’re gonna have to interrupt your interruption of the Bieber news for a new interruption, this time featuring a YouTube video of a tortoise having sex with a plastic clog. Let’s watch” (Carvell, 2015a). Then he shows the video.

Oliver begins his interview with Snowden by asking Snowden about Hot Pockets and Truck Nuts: “Not just Truck Nuts. Stars and stripes Truck Nuts. That is two balls of liberty in a
freedom sack,” which leads into a profanity-laden discussion about naked photos (Carvell, 2015a).

At the end of the chicken farming segment, Oliver demands the audience to call the representatives and threaten to call any of the 51 State Representatives who vote against the bill “chicken fuckers” (Carvell, 2015b). In the televangelist episode, Oliver exposes the absurdity of the IRS determination that religious beliefs are those that are truly held and not illegal, by noting that such a vague definition is applicable to nearly every belief, meaning “‘bros before hoes,’ that could be a religion. ‘Red Vines are better than Twizzlers,’ that could be a religion” (Carvell, 2015d). The punchline for seed is set up early in the segment, when Oliver describes the idea of “seed faith,” where in the donations given by a church’s congregations are viewed as seeds. The result is a barrage of wordplay on “seed.”

From the start, the Drumpf segment is framed with low-brow refinement: “Our main story tonight and I cannot believe I’m saying this, is Donald Trump. And I say that—I say that knowing that every time his name is said out loud, he has a shattering orgasm” (Carvell, 2016a). Oliver mocks Trumps short-lived website GoTrump.com, “whose brief existence was, I imagine, a real thorn in the side of anyone hoping GotRump.com featured a single thing worth masturbating to” (Carvell, 2016a). The real verve of the segment, however, arises from how Oliver frames Trump’s B.S.

Frame 5: “Repurposed Bovine Waste” Frame

John Oliver curses. A lot. His “quit-your-B.S.” framing technique is no exception. He usually starts it with something along the lines of “let me tell you a little story” (Carvell, 2014a). Oliver relies on the merit of exposing the absurdity of situations. But his presentation of absurdity is often used as a tool to highlight the logical appeal of whatever point he is
championing. In the net neutrality episode, for example, he jokes that net neutrality should actually be called “preventing cable company fuckery” (Carvell, 2014a).

Corporations are a regular target of his unmasking:

Is it any wonder that in a massive recent customer satisfaction survey, Comcast and Time Warner Cable came in dead last? And when you look at the companies that were scored better than them, people were basically saying: “Yes, Bank of America took my home. Yes, Taco Bell gave me diarrhea. And sure, GM tried to kill me. But Time Warner and Comcast are worse. They are the worst” (Carvell, 2014a).

His willingness to go after enormous corporations includes corrupt non-profit organizations like FIFA:

In 2003, the Brazilian government banned alcohol from stadiums because of the enormously high death rate amongst fans. Well that seems like a good idea! Potentially lifesaving even! The only problem is, Budweiser, is one of FIFA’s key sponsors, and they sell a product they reflexively insist on calling: beer. And FIFA seemed anxious to protect Budweiser from a law designed to protect people. Which is why the FIFA secretary general went to Brazil with a simple message: “I’m sorry to say, and maybe I look a bit arrogant, but that’s something we will not negotiate. I mean there will be, and there must be, as part of the law, the fact that we have the right to sell beer” . . . And the amazing thing is here, FIFA won. They successfully pressured Brazil into passing a so-called “Budweiser Bill,” allowing beer sales in soccer stadiums. And at this point you can either be horrified by that or relieved that FIFA wasn’t also sponsored by cocaine and chainsaws (Carvell, 2014b).

In reference to the negative publicity that the FIFA segment caused, Matthew (2014) writes that “perhaps corporate pressure will accomplish what mockery and muckraking have failed to do: convince FIFA to reform.” Oliver practices the same ruthless approach during his segment about the Miss America Organization, challenging the organization’s claim to be “the world’s largest provider of scholarships for women” (Carvell, 2014d). In the segment, Oliver details the investigative work that he and the show’s writers underwent in order to expose rampant corruption within the Miss America Organization (Carvell, 2014d).

Oliver makes a mockery of the Miss America Pageant Organization. He ridicules the organization at every level. When a beauty contestant is asked about ISIS’s beheading of James
Foley, Oliver says “that’s right they asked one of the contestants to solve ISIS, and she only had 20 seconds to do it” commending her answer for being “a borderline better answer than the President gave last week” (Carvell, 2014d).

He even calls out shows on HBO itself, like his mockery of Robert Durst during the government surveillance segment. To describe how routine pre-Snowden news coverage of the Patriot Act had been extended, Oliver mentions that “one newscast” mentioned it in passing: “Also in France, by the way President Obama signed in a law 4-year extension of the terrorism fighting Patriot-Act. Also in France, by the way? By the way? He threw that in like a mother telling her grown daughter that her childhood pet just died” (Carvell, 2015a). He calls out The New York Times: “So essentially a national security secret was leaked because no-one at the Times knows how to use Microsoft Paint” (Carvell, 2015a).

He even grills Snowden, following up on Snowden’s hesitation when asked if he had read all the documents he leaked, “But there’s a difference between understanding what’s in the documents and reading what’s in the documents” (Carvell, 2015a). Oliver pursues the question with the sharpness of a seasoned reporter. He does not slow his attack, either. He matches Snowden’s answers point for point, intent on getting the full answer. When Snowden remarks that the New York Times error in redaction is an inevitability of journalism, Oliver replies “Right. But you have to own that then. You’re giving documents with information you know could be harmful which could get out there” (Carvell, 2015a).

After showing Snowden the clip of “man-on-the-street” interviews with people who have no idea who Edward Snowden is, Oliver says, “I guess, on the plus side: You might be able to go home. ‘Cause it seems like no-one knows who the f*ck you are or what you did” (Carvell, 2015a). The first question Oliver asks Snowden is “How much do you miss America?”
SNOWDEN: You know, my country is something that travels with me, you know. It’s not just a geogra...

OLIVER: That’s a way too complicated answer. The answer is: I miss it a lot. it’s the greatest country in the world.

SNOWDEN: I do miss my country. I do miss my home. I do miss my family.

OLIVER: Do you miss hot pockets?


OLIVER: Okay. The entire State of Florida?

SNOWDEN: (Long pause.)

OLIVER: Let’s just let that silence hang in the air . . . Truck nuts?

SNOWDEN: I don’t know what they are.


SNOWDEN: You really thought ahead.

OLIVER: Well at least one of us did . . . You know, ‘because of the . . . um . . . the quandary... the . . . Kafkaesque nightmare that you’re in. Okay. Let’s dive in” (Healey, 2014).

In the chicken farming segment, he even calls out former-Baywatch star Pamela Anderson, referring to a PETA clip in which Anderson contends that the main ingredient in KFC is cruelty, Oliver quips that “the main ingredient in KFC chicken is not cruelty, it’s chicken. The only thing where cruelty is the main ingredient, is child stars. It goes cruelty, glitter, child, and then statistically, chicken” (Carvell, 2015b).
After showing a clip of a Chicken industry spokesman who, when asked why so many farmers live below the poverty line, replied “Which poverty line are you referring to? Is that a national poverty line? Is that a state poverty line? [audience booing] Poverty line in Mississippi and Alabama is different than it is in New York City,” Oliver said “What the fuck are you talking about? It doesn’t matter. The poverty line is like the age of consent. If you find yourself passing exactly where it is you’ve probably already done something very, very wrong” (Carvell, 2015b). By the end of the segment, Oliver rallies his audience to inspire policy change by implying bestiality

I’m talking of course about jangly guitar music to convince you that everything I’m about to say is true because listen to this. There are 51 voting members on the committee. These are their names and their states. If your representative’s name is up there and they vote against Marcy Kaptur’s amendment it is because they—and I cannot stress this enough—are chicken f***ers. They f*** chickens. That’s what they do. Every day. Every which way. And unless they want that chicken f***er label to follow them for the rest of their lives, they might want to think extra carefully about which way they are going to vote because chicken f***er accusations do not come off a Wikipedia page easily. Or if they do, they tend to go right back up because chicken companies may be able to retaliate against farmers for speaking out, but they cannot prevent us as one from screaming “chicken f***er” at the top of our lungs if any of these people vote against the farmers in this tiny, tiny amendment. All potential chicken f***ers here. Don’t be one of them (Carvell, 2015b).

The televangelist segment uses the repurposed-bovine-waste frame more than any other episode. He went so far as to set up his own church in order to “test the legal and financial limits of what religious entities are able to do” (Carvell, 2015d). Oliver quips that churches are America’s “first favorite place for redemption, and sixth favorite place for chicken,” a pun referring to Church’s Chicken. He begins the segment by noting that “churches are a cornerstone of American life” and that of the roughly 350,000 in the U.S., most of those churches are
devoted to good causes, then details how disturbingly easy it is to found a legally-recognized, tax-free church by starting his own.

In order to highlight the ridiculousness of televangelists, Oliver airs a clip of Robert Tilton in the throes of a rant. With his eyes shut and his back hunched, Tilton shifts between chanting unintelligible sounds and proclaiming things like “we’ve seen midgets grow—we’ve seen arms and legs that stop growing because gross sales stop—manda kastaba sanda—I don’t make this stuff up!” (Carvell, 2015d). Oliver says, “Oh, please, you can’t say, ‘I don’t make this stuff up’ just five seconds after you say ‘manda kastaba sanda’.”

In response to Creflo Dollar’s proclamation “you cannot stop me from dreaming,” in reference to his plans to buy a private jet, Oliver remarks that the phrase “‘you cannot stop me from dreaming’ is not how you ask for 65 million dollars. It’s what you scream at your father when he tells you you’ll never be a Broadway dancer,” at which point a Photoshopped image of a young man yelling at a father figure while dressed in full Cats: The Musical garb.

In a clip televangelist Mike Murdock brags to his audience about buying a private jet with cash, only to buy another private jet, three times the price, with cash a few weeks later, then rebukes the audience’s boos by saying, “Act happy over my blessing.” Oliver quips “I bought a jet cash, I bought a bigger jet cash, the haters act happy for me’ that’s not a sermon, it’s the first draft of a Rick Ross single” (Carvell, 2015d).

Oliver says of the televangelists’ seed metaphor, in which donating money is like burying a seed that will grow into wealth, that “as an investment you’d be better off burying your money in the actual ground, because at least that way there is a chance your dog may dig it up and give it back to you one day” (Carvell, 2015d).
After showing a clip in which televangelist Mike Murdock asserts that the way to get out of credit card debt is to donate money to his ministry, Oliver characterizes the idea as “the equivalent of saying, ‘the key to you losing weight lies at the bottom of this giant Costco bulk bag of Peanut Butter M&M’s—go find it, it’s definitely down there’” (Carvell, 2015d). Oliver mocks Gloria Copeland’s air of divine connection by saying that it is “pretty clear that woman cannot hear the word of God because if she could I’m pretty sure he’d be shouting, ‘Fuck you, Gloria’ right into her ear” (Carvell, 2015d).

In reference to the IRS’s characterization of tax laws and regulations as “a little vague,” Oliver says, they are underselling that because the films of Christopher Nolan are a little vague, a text from your mom reading ‘PLEASE CALL NOT AN EMERGENCY BUT PLEASE CALL VERY IMPORTANT DON’T WORRY’ that’s a little vague,” in reality IRS regulations are “close to meaningless” (Carvell, 2015d).

After months of sending money to Tilton’s church, in a correspondence he describes as “like having a pen pal who’s in deep with some loan sharks,” Oliver received a letter marked “check enclosed,” only to discover that the check, for five dollars, was from John Oliver, made out to Tilton’s ministry (Carvell, 2015d). Later, Tilton sent Oliver a single dollar, which he instructed to leave in a Bible overnight, then send back to Tilton the following day, in addition to 49 dollars, even warning do “not to rob God with your tithes and offerings” and “I CAN’T URGE YOU ENOUGH DO NOT LET THIS ONE DOLLAR BILL STAY IN YOUR HOUSE” (Carvell, 2015d). Oliver kept the dollar bill—but that did not stop Tilton, who sent more oil packet. In total, Oliver sent over 300 dollars and received 26 letters, which is comical until, as Oliver mentions, “you imagine these letters being sent to someone who cannot afford what [Tiltson] is asking for” (Carvell, 2015d).
One element that news media completely overlooked or disregarded is that Robert Tilton, the televangelist that Oliver references, also gained fame as a meme, after homemade VHS dubs of footage taken from Tilton’s show *Success-N-Live* were passed around. The tapes, which first emerged in the mid-1980s, feature clips of the preacher in the throes of his histrionic ministry style with overdubbed with flatulence, hence Tilton’s nickname “the Farting Preacher” (Blair, 2015). With the rise of YouTube and online video-driven meme content in the early 2000’s, Tilton’s meme status was renewed.

He even cries foul on the IRS, saying of the agency’s lax regulations for churches, that “the odds of a church getting audited are basically the same as Gloria Copeland curing your fucking cancer” (Carvell, 2015d). At one point, Rachel Dratch, playing Megareverend Oliver’s on-camera wife, shouts “Praise be to the IRS, that most permissive of government agencies!”

The insults are subtle, too. The phone number the show set up was 1-800-THIS-IS-LEGAL. There is even a “quit-your-bullshit” rebuke in the paperwork to the IRS, with the form of ritual that Oliver’s church engages in listed as a ritual in which “congregants silently meditate on the nature of fraudulent churches” (Carvell, 2015d).

Elsewhere, he grills the NSA, noting that “it is still kind of incredible that a 29-year-old contractor was able to steal top-secret documents from an organization that LITERALLY has the word ‘security’ in its name” (Carvell, 2015a).

Like the televangelist segment before it, the Drumpf segment makes full-bodied use of the “repurposed-bovine-waste” frame. Only, with Drumpf, Oliver is pursuing a man he considers the personification of bullshit. Or, in Oliver’s words, “He’s a bullshit artist.” In the Drumpf segment, Oliver engages in systematic “repurposed bovine waste” dismantlement. He starts by
proposing counterargument for each of the aspects that Trump supporters find appealing: 1) He is honest, 2) he is beholden to no one, 3) he is aggressive and bold, and 4) he is successful.

As regards Trump’s truthiness, Oliver points to the dubious rating that PolitiFact gave many of his statements. Oliver’s examples are personal, too, like Trump’s claim to have been invited to appear on Oliver’s “very boring show” (Carvell, 2016a). When Oliver made it clear that Trump had in fact never been invited, Trump responded “All of a sudden I see people saying that John Oliver—and I’m saying, John Oliver . . . I checked with my people—he asked me to be on the show four or five times, and I don’t even hardly know who he is—I wouldn’t know what he looks like” (Carvell, 2016a). In his response, Oliver employs the frame in his analysis of the situation, noting that

it was genuinely destabilizing to be on the receiving end of a lie that confident. I even checked to make sure that no one had even accidentally invited him, and of course they hadn’t. I’m not even sure he knows he’s lying. I think he just doesn’t care about what the truth is (Carvell, 2016a).

Of Trump’s argument that a self-funded campaign requires that he be beholden to nobody Oliver says that the cause-and-effect relationship of the statement “I’m rich, therefore I tell the truth” makes about as much sense as “I’m vegan, therefore I know karate” (Carvell, 2016a). Oliver counters the tough guy claim with stories about Trump’s reactions to criticism, oftentimes minor, and his proclivity to threaten to sue people.

With regard to the idea that Trump is successful, Oliver notes that much of that success was inherited, and that any consequent success is misguided, like Trump’s statement “Everybody loves me . . . I went to an Ivy League school . . . I’m very highly educated . . . I know words, I have the best words” Oliver replies Oh, please, literally the biggest word in the sentence, ‘I have the best words,” is the word ‘words.’” (Carvell, 2016a).
When Trump is the subject, Oliver never lowers the B.S. frame. The insults come in every size. Half-muttered and catty, like when Oliver quips that the Trump campaign had valued the Presidential-hopeful’s worth at nearly 10 billion dollars, “and they’ve written it in all caps, so it must be true.” When a writer insisted that the number was much lower, Trump sued the man for 5 billion dollars, which, Oliver quips, “is a pretty roundabout way of getting half the way to ten billion.” He insults Trump’s business decisions by saying of the business mogul’s 2006 investment in real estate that “I guess you can convince yourself it was a good idea when you say 30 words, and five of them are great, great, terrific, Trump and Trump.” After mentioning law suits filed against Trump in Tampa and Baja, Oliver plays a clip of Trump insisting that the way to win law suits is by never settling. “Guess what? He settled both those cases” (Carvell, 2016a). Oliver devotes the entire Drumpf segment to calling Trump out in every imaginable way. It is a steady build of Trump insults that attack every part of his being, right down to his name. According to Oliver, Donald Trump’s real surname is Drumpf, which Oliver describes as “the sound produced when a morbidly obese pigeon flies into the window of a foreclosed Old Navy” (Carvell, 2016a).

In disarming Trump’s name, Oliver has fully countered each of the four things that Oliver listed as the qualities that Trump supporters appreciated, revealing a version of the man he can hold up, a kind of straw version of Trump, as he urges, “Let us ‘Make Donald Drumpf Again’,” then the hashtag #MakeDonaldDrumpfAgain appears on the bottom of the screen.

For the episode’s finale, Oliver steps onto the stage and begins listing the reasons not to vote for Trump, as the words DRUMPF light up behind him, and as sparkles shooting out of the DRUMPF sign, Oliver says “Mr. Drumpf, I await your lawsuit in the morning” (Carvell, 2016a).
As he puts it in the net neutrality segment, “if you want to do something evil, put it inside something boring. Apple could put the entire text of Mein Kompf inside iTunes’ user agreement. And you would just go: agree, agree, agree, agree” (Carvell, 2014a). In many ways, the everyman frame is related to the bullshit frame, like the sentiment Oliver expresses with the statement “and it’s not just anti-corporate hippies who think abandoning net neutrality is a bad idea” (Carvell, 2014a).

When describing *United Passions*, the FIFA-funded film about FIFA, Oliver asks “Who makes a sports film where the heroes are the executives?” (Carvell, 2014b).

The Miss America segment features a clip in which Wendie Malick asks Miss Alabama her opinion about governmental oversight of privacy, then Ian Ziering quizzes Miss Florida about American policy on hostage exchanges. Oliver notes “it is easy to make fun of pageant contestants, but which is really crazier: that they sometimes give stupid answers or that they almost always asked ridiculously complex questions?” (Carvell, 2014d).

One variation of the frame is the abstraction-from-cliché approach he employs in references to the statement “everything tastes like chicken,” Oliver jests “Think about that, that’s amazing. There is no parallel for the other senses. If I said to you, ‘everything looks like tables’ or ‘everything feels like koosh balls’ you’d think I was insane” (Carvell, 2015b).

Other times, it is a matter of rendering an enormous thing simple:

Yes. Some controversial provisions within the Patriot Act are set to expire on June 1. So circle that date on your calendars, everyone. And while you’re at it: Circle June 2 as well. Because that’s Justin Long’s birthday. You all forgot last year...and he f*cking noticed” (Carvell, 2015a).

Or how he describes the open-ended language in Section 215 as like “letting a teenager borrow the car under the strict condition that they only use it for ‘car-related activities’” (Carvell,
2015a). Just as he did with his reframing of government surveillance, Oliver reframes the abstract duality of privacy and safety as similar to “how you can’t have a badass pet falcon and an adorable pet vole named Herbert . . . either you have to lose one of them—which obviously, you don’t want to do—or you have to accept some reasonable restrictions on both of them” (Carvell, 2015a).

As he puts it in the televangelist segment, the reason for televangelists’ success is that they preach “the prosperity gospel,” which “argues that wealth is a sign of God’s favor” (Carvell, 2015d). Oliver uses the everyman frame with the inclusion of Bonnie Parker, who eschewed cancer treatment in order to donate money to Kenneth Copeland’s ministry. Parker gave money to the church because she believed it would help her beat cancer (Carvell, 2015d). At the same time, he calls seed faith “the most disgusting seed-based concept since whatever the fuck seed pudding is” (Carvell, 2015d).

In the Drumpf segment, Oliver mocks Trump’s 3-million-dollar brand: “‘Trump’ is the sound produced when a mouthy servant is slapped across the face with a wad of thousand-dollar bills” (Carvell, 2016a).

Oliver’s Donald Drumpf segment went instantly viral. It even resulted in the creation of a new subreddit, r/Drumpf. In its first month, the clip boasted 62 million Facebook views, and over 23 million YouTube views, 10.4 million of which were on March 1 alone (Zorthian, 2016). In total, the Drumpf segment was watched 85 million during March, setting a record for any piece of HBO content (Stelter, 2016). The Drumpfinator, a Google Chrome extension that replaces all occurrences of “Trump” with “Drumpf,” was downloaded over 430,000 times. In two weeks, HBO sold all 35,000 of the “Make Donald Drumpf Again” hats. Joe Ventre, a middle-school history teacher in New Jersey, showed the clip in class and was forced to resign
after a parent complained that the clip was profane (Zimmer, 2016). Students and parents began
the hashtag #SAVEMRVENTRE, and successfully petitioned for Ventre’s rehiring. On March 1,
the first 24 hours that the video was online, there were 25.8 Google searches for “Drumpf” to
every 100 searches for “Trump,” surpassing queries for both Ted Cruz’s 20.8 and Marco Rubio’s
18.0 (Wolfers, 2016). March 1 was Super Tuesday, with Republican primaries in 14 states and
the American Samoa.

Finale

All of these frames help with the gradual build towards the most captivating frame, the
finale, culminating in the punchline. Episode 89, the final episode of Season Three, is the perfect
finale for the show as it is framed in this study. Just as the timing for the Drumpf episode was
impeccable, so too was the timing of the final episode of the season. Before examining the
episode, however, it is important to look at what makes Oliver’s finales so impressionable.

In the successful episodes, there is a certain electricity to his closing rally. Essentially, he
is telling his audience, “There is something you can do about all of this.” One of the most
referenced examples is the finale of Oliver’s net neutrality segment:

I would like to address Internet commenters out there directly. Good evening, monsters.
This may be the moment you spent your whole life training for. You’ve been out there
ferociously commenting on dance videos of adorable 3-years old, saying things like:
“every child could dance like this little loser after 1 week of practice.” Or you’ve been
polluting Frozen’s “Let it go,” with comments like “ice castle would give her
hypothermia and she dead in an hour” Or, and I know you’ve been in this one,
commenting on videos of this show, saying: “Fuck this asshole anchor, go such ur
presidents dick ur just friends with the terrorists.” Now, I don’t know what any of this
means. But I don’t think it is compliment. But this is the moment you were made for,
commenters. Like Ralph Macchio, you’ve been honing your skills, waxing cars, and
painting fences. Well guess what, now it is time to do some fucking karate. [Triumphant
music begins playing] For once in your life, we need you to channel that anger, that badly
spelled bio, that you normally reserve for unforgivable attacks on actresses you seem to
think have putted on weight, or politicians you disagree with it, or photos of your ex-
girlfriend getting on with her life, or non-white actors casted as fictional characters. And
I’m talking to you RonPaulFan2016, and you, OneDirectionForever, and I’m talking to
you OneDirectionSucksBalls, we need you to get out there, and for once in your life, focus your indiscriminate rage in a useful direction. Seize your moment, my lovely childs, turn on CAPS LOCK, AND FLY MY PRETTIES. FLY, FLY, FLY! (Carvell, 2014a).

The FIFA segment is 12 minutes of horror and brutal reality. But it turns unexpectedly. The optimism that emerges as he reveals the horrors of FIFA. He tears up as he describes the beauty of the World Cup. You can almost see Oliver as a young boy wearing the Arsenal kit under his clothes in case his heroes need to be rescued.

The Miss America segment concludes with a mock beauty pageant in which Kathy Griffin subjects Oliver to a “host of the show” contests, which she awards to a shirtless male model. The abovementioned example from the chicken farmer segment, in which Oliver rallies his audience to inspire policy change by threatening to have the representatives’ Wikipedia pages claim that they are “chicken f***ers” (Carvell, 2015b). The televangelist episode ends with Megareverend Oliver and his televangelist wife surrounded by a gospel choir as they beg viewers to call 1-800-THIS-IS-LEGAL and donate money to Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption.

Like a good storyteller, his finales are often unexpected.

The most upvoted thread on r/LastWeekTonight has 7,311 upvotes and 694 comments. It was posted on November 9, 2016, the day after Donald Trump won the U.S. presidency. It is titled: “Next Sunday: John Oliver just stares into the camera for a full 30 minutes.”

Legacy Media

When asked about his being named one of TIME’s Top 100 People of 2015, Oliver replied that if “I’m one of the hundred most influential people in the world, this planet is fucked” (Brioux, 2016). Journalists tend not to believe him.
With regard to the real-world effects of the FCC segment, Brody (2016) notes that “To be sure, the fight was far bigger than Oliver’s segment. Karr pointed to ‘dozens of advocacy organizations with email lists that numbered in the tens of millions’” (Brody, 2016).

A November 13 article for The Verge leaked internal emails between CBS’s Anne Lucey and several high-ranking FCC employees. In them, Lucey includes a link to Oliver’s segment noting that it is “Rather long, but quite entertaining ....... and your boss is featured -at around 1:18.” Employees reply that they have already been watching it, and refer to it as “classic” and “Priceless!!!!!!” noting that they “had a good laugh about it. The cable companies... not so much”

The search results for “net neutrality” in the r/LastWeekTonight subreddit return 12 posts. The most upvoted post has 66 upvotes, while the most downvoted post has 14. In this case, the most upvoted post links directly to the segment’s YouTube clip, and the most downvoted post links to an Observer article about the FCC comments. Another is titled “John Oliver should encourage its viewers to get more involved to help change the things he reports on” 61 upvotes and 14 comments. The highest-ranking post has 26 points. The lowest-ranking, a comment by u/supercrushhh, has 2 points, and reads “Maybe it’s something some people in the subreddit might be interested in organizing? Unofficial Last Week Tonight Ground Team?”

Most of the articles in the week following Oliver’s net neutrality segment are either positive or effect-focused, and one is negative. Politico refers to the segment as “a lobbying bonanza” (Romm, 2015). In an L.A. Times article, Healey (2014) charges Oliver with getting the facts wrong about the FCC segment: “Oliver misled his audience badly on a couple of key points.” The article stands out as overtly negative. Healey makes a point-by-point counterargument of Oliver’s segment, which he then concludes is “a bit too nuanced an
explanation for Oliver.” The following day, Ammori (2014), a lawyer who specializes in net neutrality issues, penned an article for *Slate* in which he bites back at Healey, encouraging readers to “feel free to share the Oliver segment with full confidence that it’s the truth and nothing but.”

There are plenty of effect-focused articles about the segment. A June 3 article in *Variety* focuses on the segment’s viral status, in reference to a statement from FCC about website issues, “Cause and effect? It seems so” (Johnson, 2014). McDonald (2014) of *The Washington Post* writes that Oliver “may be just the firebrand activist we’re looking for.” IVN article “while he got people to talk about net neutrality, the discussion has steered away from what was actually said during his segment to focus on what impact he may or may not have had on the FCC website being down temporarily” (Griffiths, 2014). *Slate* portrayed the FCC website incident as a joint attack from Oliver and Reddit, applying cartoonish war metaphors:

At the same time that the Oliverites strode into battle, Reddit users were mounting attacks of their own. The online community shared tips and tricks on how to rain Internet terror, advising one another on how to fill out the FCC’s comment form and sharing individual submissions for feedback. The alliance appears to have proven effective (Glasser, 2014).

A second *Slate* article, published the following day by a different writer, emphasizes the humor of the situation. The NPR article refers to Oliver as the “former *Daily Show* fake-newscaster and comedian,” but confers little else (Hu, 2014). A June 6 *Vice News* article about net neutrality does not include Oliver until the last paragraph.

Legacy media coverage of the FIFA segment continued the narrative of the net neutrality piece. In an article for *Slate*, Stahl (2014) writes that, with the FIFA episode, Oliver “issued a hilarious, brutal, and elucidatory rant about a galling but sometimes tedious issue [for the second consecutive week].” Manfred (2014) describes the segment as masterful, going so far as to say
Oliver destroyed FIFA. Laird (2014) of *Mashable* writes that, with the segment, Oliver “absolutely eviscerated FIFA, world soccer’s governing body, in that special form of dressing-down that only he can conjure.” *The Guardian*’s Helmore (2014) credits Oliver’s segment with starting a political satire revolution. Helmore’s article concludes with a quote from Dannagal Young, a professor at Delaware University who specializes in satire and the psychological effect of politically-charged comedy, who surmises that Oliver is “on to something, and people are going to want to get on that train. We’re going to be surprised who shows up—I feel like he’s going to become important.”

In her June 9 *Huffington Post* article, McGlynn (2014) does not include any opinions about Oliver’s FIFA segment, and only summarizes it, while Matthew (2014) focuses much of the *New Republic* article on the issue itself, mentioning Oliver as an aside. The FIFA segment took a year to reveal itself, when Oliver kept his promise to drink a Bud Light Lime on air if Blatter resigned (Morabito, 2015)

Shortly after the FIFA scandal erupted, Jack Warner, the perennially embattled ex-Vice President of FIFA, referenced an article by the satirical news source *The Onion* (Hume, 2015). In a YouTube clip, Warner presented the (satirical) article, titled “FIFA Frantically Announces 2015 Summer World Cup in the United States,” as proof that FIFA could be trusted. Pointing to a printout of the article, Warner asks “If FIFA is so bad, why is it the U.S.A. wants to keep the FIFA World Cup?” The final line of the article reads: “At press time, the U.S. national team was leading defending champions Germany in the World Cup’s opening match after being awarded 12 penalties in the game’s first three minutes.”

Legacy media coverage of the student debt segment maintained the same pattern as the abovementioned segments from the first season of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, with the
exception of one article (Gilman, 2014). The piece, by Joe Keller of Salon, titled “Bill Maher: I won’t watch John Oliver,” is an interview with Bill Maher, whose show Real Time with Bill Maher also airs on HBO. Keller’s piece is one of many that compare Bill Maher to John Oliver, often to the detriment of Maher. When Keller asks Maher if he watches Oliver’s show, Maher answers that,

I don’t think that’s a good idea. You know, George Carlin taught me that, years ago. George Carlin said, “You know, I never look at other comedians because I don’t want to be writing a bit and thinking, ‘Oh wow, is the reason why this is in my head because I saw it on some other show?’” I’ve been told by my producers, who do watch these other shows, that there really wouldn’t be that much harm in it because they say that we almost never cover the same thing the same way.

The Miss America Pageant segment is notable for many reasons. In the week following the segment, most of the media attention is basic, but an A.V. Club article published three days after the segment details the $25,000 in donations, “15 percent of the individual donations they receive in an average year,” that the Society of Women Engineers received after the episode aired, as well as a dramatic surge in the organization’s social media (Rife, 2014).

In an article for Business Insider, Macias (2014) writes about one of the segment’s clips, in which Miss Virginia eloquently answers a question about ISIS. Mention of the segment is at the end of an article in The Washington Post about Kira Kazantsev, who was kicked out of her sorority for hazing a week after being crowned Miss America. A Huffington Post article summarizes the segment’s investigation into corruption within the Miss America Organization, then concludes with the line “So how can we fix that?” (Mazza, 2014).

Every big news organization wrote about the Snowden interview, and the articles were much longer and more detailed than any before it. Kerr’s (2015) article for Washington Post is just short of 2,100 words and covers much of the background information about the interview.
Kerr charts public opinion regarding Snowden, details NSA history, and quotes passages from Snowden’s Reddit AMA.

A Reddit post from r/LastWeekTonight titled “Do you think John realizes the power he holds over the country, let alone the world?” reads “Let’s be honest. *Anything* he says on the show starts trending (practically) worldwide. Any topic he touches launches off with astounding effect. Not only did #jeffwecan trend the same night, but people paid for, themselves, promotional advertisement to put Jeff on additional billboards and other things. In just a couple days, his interview with Snowden reached 4 million hits, and I don’t think his popularity is going away any time soon. The question is, do you think he truly knows the power he holds?”

The Snowden segment is the first of the seven successful segments to receive such in-depth coverage from high-ranking media outlets. None of the articles are critical of Oliver. Robinson (2015), of *Vanity Fair*, praises Oliver for “his usual bang-up job of knitting together comedic material with serious/educational content” (para 3). Writing for *The Daily Beast*, Stern (2016) applauds Oliver for conducting “arguably the toughest interview with Snowden,” noting that, of all people, it was a comedian who broke Edward Snowden, referring to Oliver’s “unwavering commitment to practicing real journalism.” PunditFact deemed the interview itself as “Mostly True,” with quotes from anonymous “experts in national security law” providing a point-by-point verification for each of Snowden’s claims (Sanders, 2015).

Bates and Dury (2015) devote their *Daily Mail* article to criticizing Snowden. The title alone is hostile: “The damning truth about Snowden: Traitor who put Western lives at risk from terrorists reveals he didn’t even read all the top-secret files he leaked.” The writers also devote a portion of their article to rebuking the *Guardian*, or, in their words, “The Left-wing *Guardian* newspaper climbed into bed with Edward Snowden when he leaked the top-secret intelligence
documents, publishing a string of damaging stories.” The article is full of barbed language, calling the interview “one of the few occasions in which Snowden has been put on the spot over his treachery as he normally speaks only to Left-wing media who have published his leaks” (Bates and Dury, 2015). Right from the start, it refers to Snowden as “Traitor Edward Snowden,” then uses the term “traitor” as an appositive of “Snowden” throughout the article, charging him with treachery, arrogance, and destruction. The few times Oliver is mentioned are neutral in their characterization of him.

Stampler’s (2015) *TIME* article exclusively concerns Snowden’s advice to Oliver for making a failsafe password, while Perlberg (2015) writing for *Wall Street Journal* focuses on *Last Week Tonight’s* growing presence on YouTube.

Beyond sheer amazement that a comedian landed an in-person interview with one of the world’s most elusive figures, in Russia no less, there are few mentions of the John Oliver effect, although Steller (2016) writes, in an article *CNN*, that “Oliver may insist he’s just a comedian, but others know his act is sometimes journalistic, even if that’s not his main intent” (para 11). The article also quotes a Snowden source as saying that they chose Oliver “because of his journalism” (para 10). Moyer’s (2015) *Washington Post* article is a summary of the episode, although in the penultimate paragraph Moyer writes “Cue applause — that seemed to drive home Oliver’s initial point. By putting the NSA debate in terms, however ridiculous, people can understand, Oliver revived it. At least for 24 hours or so.”

OneGreenPlanet praises the segment: “Oliver’s exposé is seriously great . . . it’s pretty clear that Oliver sees a system in need of change” (Dolmage, 2015). Bort’s (2015) *Esquire* article is for the most part neutral, with a slight dig, “Oliver shows clips of chicken industry
representatives trying to save face, and they’re especially pathetic, even by embarrassing *Last Week Tonight* clip standards” (para 3).

There are a couple examples of effect-focused coverage. Locker’s (2015) *TIME* article describes “a call to arms to change their Wikipedia pages if they didn’t” (Locker, 2015, para 5). In an article for *Slate*, Anderson (2015) writes that “you might not know that the farmers who raise those birds are also pressured, exploited, and pushed to the breaking point by the conditions imposed on them by companies like Perdue and Tyson” (para 1). Leeds, (2015) in an article for *The Wall Street Journal* writes that “Oliver ended the bit by taking action: He decided to ‘use the chicken companies’ weapon against them’” (para 5).

Coverage of the televangelist segment yielded a much higher density of articles. For instance, nearly all of them were published on August 17, the day after the episode aired, although the articles posted later in the week contain greater depth. All of the next-day articles are positive or neutral summaries of the episodes, and most are brief. None of these articles mention the John Oliver effect, let alone apply it to the televangelist segment. Of the three articles from later in the week, two were published on August 23, and one on August 20.

While the first line of Locker’s (2015b) *TIME* piece is laudatory (“John Oliver is officially a church), the rest of it is a simple recapitulation of the segment. The same goes for Bradley’s (2015) *Slate* article, as well as Ohlheiser’s (2015) *Washington Post* article. Connolly (2015 begins his piece in *Entertainment Weekly* by writing that Oliver’s “blistering, investigative, commercial-free journalistic smackdowns” feel like church, but does not editorialize any of the article’s content (para 1). In his article for *The Daily Beast*, Stern (2015) notes that Oliver, whom he describes as an “intrepid British satirist,” uses his show to expose hypocrisy, but refrains from any other commentary. The most humor-focused framing is the
article’s title, “John Oliver Exposes Shady Televangelists Fleecing Americans For Millions.” In an article for The Wall Street Journal, Leeds (2015) commends Oliver and his team for their thorough investigating, but maintains the tone of all the other next-day articles.

The authorless CBS article from August 20 (“John Oliver Pressures IRS,” 2015) frames the episode in terms of Oliver’s rebuke of the IRS, and even notes that the IRS declined to comment on the subject and the televangelists included in the segment could not be found.

Of the two articles written on 23 August, Paula Mejia’s article in Newsweek and Peter Reilly’s opinion piece in Forbes, Reilly’s is the only effect-focused piece. The headline of Mejia’s (2015) article (“IRS Under Microscope after John Oliver Televangelism Segment”) implies that the Oliver’s segment has brought scrutiny to the IRS, but only ever summarizes. Reilly’s (2015) Forbes piece, a point-by-point critique of Oliver’s segment, contains the only criticism. Reilly’s counterarguments are thorough. He accosts Oliver for oversimplifying a complex matter, for attacking the IRS without factual basis, and for getting the facts wrong. Reilly includes expert opinion at the end of the article. As is often the case, the experts, in this case legal scholar Edward Zelinksky, charge Oliver with misrepresentation: “Like many John Oliver skits, this spoof, while amusing, raises some serious issues.”

In conclusion, legacy media coverage of the televangelist segment exhibits a pattern that recurs within the effect popularity-and-influence measurement of segments. Early articles are laudatory, but lacking depth. Each of them is selfsame to one another, a positive rundown of the episode, without commentary. With time, articles become increasingly critical or admiring of Oliver. The Drumpf segment remains a legacy media favorite. The tone of nearly all of the top articles is jubilance. Reed (2016), writing for Rolling Stone, calls Oliver’s segment an annihilation of Trump, while Mosbergen, with Huffington Post, writes that Oliver demolished
“serial liar” Donald Trump, a sentiment that appears in the article by *Daily Beast*–contributor Marlow Stern, whose weekly columns about *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* nearly always make it to the top. Stern (2016) describes “Oliver’s special way of combatting the Trump mystique” and refers to Trump as “the orange-colored, finger-wagging, fox-haired Republican frontrunner for the presidential nomination” (para 1). In an article for *The Wall Street Journal*, Leeds (2016) does virtually the same. Oliver’s segment landed on *USA Today* ’s February 29 “Punchlines” column, in which Rivers (2016) runs through the most humorous moments.

Three of the top-ranked articles are effect-focused, if only on a minor level. For *US Weekly*, Webber (2016) writes about the emergence of a Donald Drumpf, while Swartz (2016) pens an article for *The Chicago Tribune* detailing the 300,000+ downloads of the Drumpf browser extension. The meekest example of effect-focused coverage is of Blake’s (2016) Los Angeles Times article, which concludes by noting that Oliver ended the segment by “encouraging a bit of participation from his viewers, directing them towards a website (www.donaldjdrumpf.com) and promoting the hashtag #MakeDonaldDrumpfAgain, a play on Trump's campaign slogan” (para 5).

The only article to deviate from the overtly positive-toned pieces is a think piece by S.I. Rosenbaum which appears in *The Washington Post*. The article, like the others, is by no means pro-Trump, but rather driven by the idea that it was wrong for Oliver to use a Trump-like technique to taking on Trump:

> This stuff is ugly. It’s tacky. And it’s bigoted. Yes, even Germans don’t deserve to be tarred as shifty-eyed Nazi foreigners. Plenty of German Americans were so slandered during World War II; it wasn’t cricket then, and it’s not now. (That’s not to say that associating Trump with Hitler is always wrong: They’re both verifiably xenophobic, racist, fascist demagogues with terrible hair.) (para 6).

In other words, every single top-ranking article stood in support with Oliver.
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

On the August 7, 2016 episode of *Last Week Tonight*, John Oliver looked into the camera and spoke: “Whenever this show is mistakenly called journalism it is a slap in the face to the actual journalists whose work we rely on.” He outlined the growing demise of journalism with a journalistic prowess. Then he takes it a step further, pointing to the consequences of a world without proper journalists: “Not having reporters at a government meeting is like a teacher leaving her room of seventh graders to supervise themselves—best case scenario Brittany gets gum in her hair. Worst case scenario you no longer have a school.”

Oliver undoubtedly values journalists. In his own words, “[t]he media is a food chain that would fall apart without local newspapers.” Many of the show’s writers have backgrounds in journalism, including the *New York Times Magazine* and *ProPublica* (Bauder, 2014). In a way, it is understandable why journalists, in every interview, ask Oliver to admit that he is a journalist. But why does his answer never change? The most in-depth example if from a February 12, 2016 interview with Kelly McEvers, for *NPR*’s “All Things Considered”

MCEVERS: This episode and other episodes that you do gets at a really big question for your show—like, is this journalism? Is it investigative journalism?

OLIVER: No. There’s a pretty simple answer to that. No, it is not. No, I mean, we’re a comedy show so everything we do is in pursuit of comedy.

MCEVERS: I mean, you’re dealing in fact.

OLIVER: Of course, though, but you can’t build jokes on sand. You can’t be wrong about something otherwise that joke just disintegrates. So that’s the - that’s why it’s most important. Now, that’s a lesson I’ve learned from Jon Stewart at “The Daily Show.” We
were - you know, you try and be as rigorous as you can in terms of fact-checking because your responsibility is to make sure that your joke is structurally sound.

MCEVERS: Right, but there’s a lot of people out there telling great jokes and not tackling the issues that you are tackling.

OLIVER: But that’s a different question. Like, in terms of making sure that the things that you’re making jokes about are rooted in facts, that is one thing. Now, in terms of what we talk about then that’s just kind of a choice. It’s confusing to me somehow, the fact that this is often the line of questioning that people want.

MCEVERS: ‘Cause we’re all journalists and we’re all totally paranoid. (Laughter).

OLIVER: Yeah - it almost makes me feel like when people say, oh, but this is journalism, this is - it almost makes me feel like, am I a terrible comedian? It this almost like, well, this definitely isn’t comedy so what is this?

MCEVERS: (Laughter).

OLIVER: Is it like looking at a sculptor and saying, well, it’s not art so are you trying to build a wall? What exactly are you working on here?” (McEvers, 2016)

As noted in the literature review, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver is satirical, and, as such, comedic, insofar as it employs humor in place of journalism (Ruiz, p. 15, 2011).

Journalism’s social responsibility involves a journalistic devotion to producing media agendas that harmonize with the overall social good (McCombs, 2005, p. 556). Many journalists hail comedic journalist as a persuasive, even revolutionary social force (Morris, 2009, p. 82).

In her e-mail, HBO’s Tobe Becker said it well:

I just received an interview request the other day from Businessweek asking to speak to someone about the John Oliver effect and he is not speaking to them either—here is a bit of insight I have picked up having done this job for many, many years. If you feel you’ve reached a conclusion on something, you ought to seek out third parties to support
or challenge your thoughts. The person in question is not the one who will discuss it. John has publicly stated on more than one occasion that he does not consider himself a journalist, if you want to disprove that then speak to some journalists or some comedians and get their thoughts. (T. Becker, personal communication, September 22, 2016)

Journalists have been annoyingly forceful with their insistence that John Oliver is not a comedian. Each time they make the accusation they are calling him a liar. Personally, it has been somewhat sickening to document the arrogance of an industry hell-bent on forcing a label on someone who refuses to accept it. Why do they keep repeating themselves? I nearly abandoned this thesis because I was afraid that my work would not only make the attack on Oliver that much more pompous, but that, by anchoring the John Oliver effect to research, it would become the most arrogant iteration yet, like saying, “You may be able to dodge the journalists and their hunches, but you cannot outvie cold hard academic surety.”

In this study, I used a qualitative agenda-setting approach to examine the frames that Oliver employs, then compared those frames to the reactions from both audiences and legacy media in order to determine whether there is validity to journalists’ claims that the John Oliver effect exists. One frame remains, the most important frame: Humor. John Oliver, the comedian, frames news with humor because he is using the news for his comedy routine (McEvers, 2016). Humor is the of show’s foundation. Every other framing element relies on the humor at play.

As a comedian, John Oliver will do anything for a laugh (Seinfeld, 2016). Yet he chooses an inherently serious platform. Comedic journalism blends the oftentimes contradictory principles of humor and journalism. Last Week Tonight with John Oliver accomplishes the peculiar cohesion of humor and seriousness. At times, Oliver stares into the lens with a toppling seriousness as he pleads his case (Gadamer, p. 113). In these moments of Gadamerian play, his performance of imitation vanishes.
Any event or subject can be made funny, although the more serious the topic, the less likely it is to provoke laughter (Kuipers, 2006, p. 157). When asked why he chooses serious events as comedy fodder, Oliver explained that “you can’t build jokes on sand. You can’t be wrong about something—otherwise that joke just disintegrates. You try to be as rigorous as you can in terms of fact-checking because your responsibility is to make sure that your joke is structurally sound” (McEvers, 2016).

Humor rises from seriousness. Freud (1905/1960) suggests that “a joke is a playful judgement,” which produces a comic contrast to conceal “the ugliness of the world of thought,” then uncovers “‘the ugly’ … in the light of a comic way of looking things” (p. 45). The process of overcoming incongruity is our abrupt response to the ludicrous. Kierkegaard (1843/2004) defines the process by which comic events are intensified though opposition as the morphology of the unexpected (p. 200). Camus (1942/1983) writes that “the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus, 1942/1983, p. 121). Last Week Tonight with John Oliver accomplishes the peculiar cohesion of humor and seriousness. But as David Bauder writes in his September 25, 2015 article for Daily Mail, “Remember, this is a comedy show.”

The logic of comedy is a whirlwind of contradictions. If it immediately made sense it would cease to be funny, yet to dismiss the logic of humor as absurd is to violate an established truth, which has been honored since the ancients put comedy on stage (Wallace, p. 207). It does not have to make sense. It does not have to accept responsibility. Like a character in one of Samuel Beckett’s plays, Oliver repeats himself but nobody listens. Nobody listens to the right things, anyway. So, he has to keep repeating himself, over and over again.
Oliver has stated that the comedic effect of his routine is the ultimate measurement of the show’s success. That is his own personal measurement. Examining the John Oliver effect demands more objective measurement. As a qualitative study, this thesis threatened to become a more in-depth and thorough version of journalists’ articles about the John Oliver effect, instead of the conclusive answer to journalists’ claims. In the end, it was a matter of reshaping these obstacles into advantages.

The show has an effect on its audience. Media of every kind are influential. The cause-and-effect relationship does not prove anything. The proof of the effect is not what journalists are after. What undergirds journalists’ claims is that Last Week Tonight with John Oliver makes the world better. He makes the world better by making a thing fresh, a dying thing young again. Not just with the fleeting relief found in jokes. But by rallying people into motion, by shining light on ugly places, by delivering news with optimism, news that actually has an answer.
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