

Conversing with the Catatonic: An Analysis of Humor and Hostility, Education and Mobilization  
in *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.



## ABSTRACT

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Conversing with the Catatonic: An Analysis of Humor and Hostility, Education and Mobilization in Last Week Tonight with John Oliver

Thesis directed by Professor Andrew Calabrese

This thesis examines the six most popular episodes from season one and season two of the HBO program *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. Discourse analysis reveals *Last Week Tonight* blends different communicative forms and models, namely revolutionary journalism, public journalism and infotainment media. This results in a new form of media, which this thesis terms *catalytic media*. Catalytic media aim to incite public reactions and encourage citizen engagement in the public sphere. Oliver asks audiences to think about sociopolitical issues, start discussions and challenge ideological, corporate and political forces. Ultimately, he asks the millions of people watching his show to embrace their power and obligations as citizens in a democratic society. Findings reveal that millions of people respond to this challenge. *Last Week Tonight* sparks a variety of social, civic and political reactions from audience members. In contemporary society, young people engage less and less with traditional forms of politics and media. This study reveals an interesting trend about the ways sociopolitical knowledge is generated, dispersed and consumed. It also examines what these new habits mean for the contemporary political environment.

## DEDICATION

To my Mother.

For giving me the physical and mental strength to do this. For knowing the Rummikub tournament will never actually be over. For teaching me the art of the To-Do list and the secret to relaxation: long walks, hot tea and lavender-scented, microwavable hugs. For being my bird of a feather, and for constantly inspiring me to be a kinder, happier and stronger person.

And to Scott Funk.

For all the Kora caretaking, the Taco Tuesdays and the hundreds of *perfectly* circle-shaped bandages. For the morning pep songs, the afternoon hikes to Couch Rock and all the late-night Catan settling. And for being the best roomie, best friend and best Co-Chief Executive Botanist a girl could ask for.

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## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

To *catalyze* is to cause a reaction—to spark a transformation. One simple element can initiate a change and produce millions of new agents. Strangely enough though, the term catalyst historically comes from the Greek word *katalyein*, meaning to dissolve. There is a curious beauty to this linguistic metamorphosis. What once meant *dissolution* evolved into a word signifying the creation of a new agent. Throughout society, we see creation, destruction and the catalytic reactions amplifying these transformations working in concert with one another, allowing for growth and development.

Every Sunday night, a peculiar catalytic reaction occurs. This reaction is not chemical or biological, but rather societal. John Oliver’s satirical late-night news show, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* airs each Sunday on HBO and attracts, on average, 4 million viewers (de Moraes, 2015). In the days to follow, swarms of young people, sometimes as many as 10 to 12 million, flock to YouTube to watch Oliver’s rants and impassioned orations. Millions of viewers watch, listen and laugh at the comedian. But, most importantly, they react.

This thesis investigates the discursive techniques used throughout the show as well as the effects these techniques have on audiences. Oliver dissolves boundaries around sociopolitical discourses and invites the public into national conversations, thus reinvigorating public interest in civic life. *Last Week Tonight* has moments where it acts as, what I will call, catalytic media. The show blends elements of age-old revolutionary journalism (Protess et al., 1991, p. 31; Robie, 2013, p. 98) with elements of new-age ‘infotainment’ or fake news journalism (Baym, 2005; McKain, 2005; Young & Vishak, 2008). Additionally, Oliver embraces the core ideology of twentieth-century public journalism (Dzur, 2002; Rosen, 1995). These devices and this blending of age-old and new-age journalistic models work with the intent at mobilizing members of the

public to engage with sociopolitical issues. Catalytic media trigger a fundamental prerequisite for deliberative democracy: Public passion and concern in civic issues.

Deliberative democracy is an expansive project that no single institutional actor can accomplish. According to Dzur (2002), “the demands of public reason—that deliberation be rational, respectful, accountable, inclusive, and fair—are demands that can only be met when a number of social and political institutions are performing their tasks well,” (p. 334). Therefore, a division of deliberative labor is needed, meaning deliberative democracy will only be successful if institutional players contribute differently to the larger project of deliberation (Dzur, 2002; Page & Shapiro, 2010).

A division of labor is necessary in order for a deliberative democracy to develop and thrive in the U.S. Catalytic media must be considered in this collaborative process, and *Last Week Tonight* is one example of the ways this hybrid media model can contribute to a deliberative political system. Catalytic media have a specific and vital role in generating public interest in sociopolitical issues. If public interest is there, and only if public interest is there, can subsequent steps be taken toward a deliberative democracy.

In today’s society where young people engage less and less with sociopolitical issues and the political process, catalytic media are crucial for reinvigorating public interest and progressing toward a deliberative democracy. *Last Week Tonight* highlights the capabilities of this hybrid media model.

## CHAPTER II. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND SIGNIFICANCE

A study of media's role in deliberative democracy is significant in media research as well as political communication research because of the particular preferences and habits of today's youth when it comes to perusing, consuming and then dispersing sociopolitical information. It is clear that young people interact with the world in a much different way than generations before them. What is less clear, and what is impossible to truly measure, is whether this generation is more or less civically engaged than their predecessors. Certain characteristics are quantifiable though. For instance, we know that millennials are the largest living U.S. generation, topping the baby boomers that previously made up the largest generational body (Fry, 2015).

Today, an estimated 75.3 million millennials walk among us, typically while sending a Snapchat or arranging an Uber ride. The term "millennial" was coined in 1991 by historians Howe and Strauss. Millennials were predicted to be unusually unified, confident and achievement-oriented. Howe and Strauss asked the public to imagine an "unstoppable mass hurtling down the track...A cadre of young people so cohesive and so directional that, if their aspirations are thwarted, they might...mobilize around a risky, even destructive national agenda," (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 5). The proverbial track millennials journey along is slicked by rapid technological development, increasingly partisan politics and a tumultuous economic system (Lawless & Fox, 2015). So what has this cadre, this hurtling force, been hurtling toward exactly?

In many ways, millennials have helped propel society forward. However, there are a handful of trends suggesting the current generation may be heading toward a state of political ignorance and apathy as well. Recent data illuminate the fact that young people engage less with

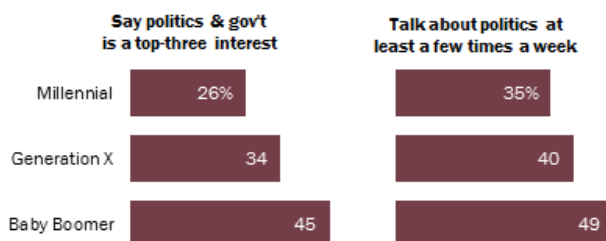
politics and political media, and are less likely to engage in traditional forms of political participation. In their book *Running from Office*, Lawless and Fox conducted a national survey of 4,000 high school and college students to examine young people’s political ambitions and interests. What they found was a startling *lack* of ambition and interest in politics. The survey revealed only 11 percent of young people had any interest in running for some kind of political office, meaning 89 percent reported they would never consider such an option (Lawless & Fox, 2015).

A Pew Research Center study from 2015 aligned with Lawless and Fox’s findings and suggested millennials are less interested in politics than both baby boomers and Generation X. The study concluded that while 45 percent of baby boomers ranked politics and government as a top-three interest, only 26 percent of millennials reported a similar interest. These rankings translated to people’s conversation habits as well. Forty-nine percent of baby boomers reported talking about politics at least a few times a week while only 35 percent of millennials claimed to discuss politics a few times a week (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Pew Research Center Poll about generational interest in politics

**Millennials Less Interested in Politics Than Older Generations; Talk About it Less Than Baby Boomers**

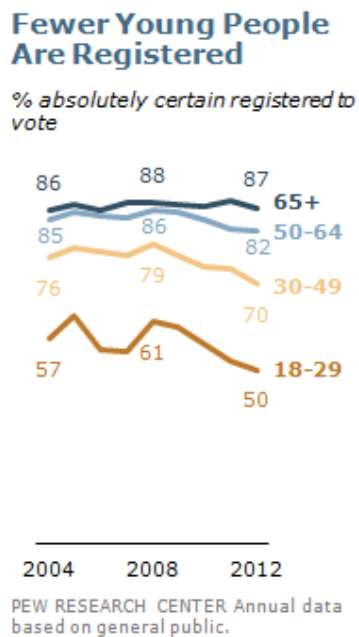
% who...



American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q1, Q2, Q41. Based on online adults.

This disinterest translates to more tangible trends. Voter registration among young people has reached its lowest since 2004, with only 50 percent of people ages 18 to 29 certain they are registered to vote. In fact, since 2004 voter registration has declined in every age category except the 65 and older category (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Pew Research Center Poll about voter registration



This political disinterest is, ironically, quite interesting considering the fact that political communication channels and messages are ubiquitous today. Between smartphones, email, Twitter, YouTube, Skype, Instagram and Facebook, to name a few, it seems young people's lives are filled, if not over-filled, with various forms of communication. An estimated 500 million tweets were posted a day in 2013 and, as of 2015, there were 1.6 billion monthly active Facebook users worldwide (Kirkorian, 2013; Statista, 2015). Society is communicating. But

what they choose to communicate about, and what they choose not to talk about, has implications for the entire U.S. political system.

As predicted, this generation's interests and actions dominate much of American life. Howe and Strauss feared that if this youthful cadre's energy was not channeled in the right way, they could hurtle off the tracks toward potentially destructive ends. Recent trends suggest the up-and-coming generation is hurtling away from traditional forms of political engagement such as voter registration, political party affiliation and political media consumption. But, do these trends prove millennials are hurtling in the *wrong* direction or merely a new direction? Could it be millennials have in fact gone off the tracks but have paved a new path and carved out new definitions of political engagement? Scholars have started to reject traditional notions of political engagement and even coined a new term that may better fit the ideologies and habits of the current generation (Dalgren, 1991; Gibbons & Reimer, 1999; Jones, 2010). The term *postmodern politics* has been used to describe the changing state of politics, which is "increasingly marked by a lack of commitment to traditional institutions (such as political parties, labor unions, and civic associations), yet composed of temporary alliances around issues and values linked to everyday life," (Jones, 2010). Citizens in the postmodern political world value "dialogue, discussion, and dissent," and "demand the voicing of one's view and having it heard," (Gibbons & Reimer, 1999). This emphasis on discourse supports the hope for a deliberative democracy because "the essence of political life for [young people] is the expression of opinions and preferences," (Barnhurst, 1998, p. 209). Due to this focus on expression, many scholars argue much of the political knowledge young people have is gained through conversations between friends and family members as well as the conversations witnessed through media and social media. For instance, Deli Caprini and Williams argue, "citizens often 'discover' their

political views in the give-and-take of discussion with others,” (1996, p. 153). Media, such as television programs, influences these conversations as well. Deli Carpini and Williams attest to this influence, arguing that television is engaged in ongoing political deliberation and “when we turn our set on, we dip into this conversation,” (1996, p. 153). The postmodern political environment is primarily discursive (Jones, 2010), and for these reasons, it is critical to understand how and why political and sociopolitical conversations start and spread.

Catalytic media thrive on these new postmodern political ideologies. *Last Week Tonight* focuses on starting complex conversations and providing ordinary citizens with clear entry points into such conversations. This strategy is able to rekindle the increasingly disillusioned generation. The show sparks young people’s interest in sociopolitical issues and mobilizes them to take various forms of civic action by offering forms of political engagement catered to their discursive habits and their preferred forms of interaction. In a society where younger generations engage less and less with traditional politics and traditional forms of media, it is crucial to understand how sociopolitical information is generated, dispersed and consumed.

The following literature frames this larger issue by detailing key concepts like the historical development of public participation, media’s relationship to public participation and movements like infotainment media, revolutionary journalism and public journalism.

### CHAPTER III. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Origins of Deliberative Democracy*

*Last Week Tonight* is a form of catalytic media, which sparks public interest. This public interest is a vital prerequisite for the process of deliberative democracy. Before anything else, it is imperative to understand the origins of the political theory. While the term was coined in the 1980s, its roots trace back far earlier. Ancients Greeks developed some of the initial concepts of democracy, and one of the first scholars to initiate a true critique of democratic practices in the U.S. was French political scientist, Alexis de Tocqueville.

Coming to the U.S. to study in 1835, de Tocqueville observed various structures and systems in place and drew a dreary conclusion. He said, “I know of no country where there prevails, in general, less independence of mind and less true freedom of discussion than in America,” (Tocqueville, 2000, pg. 111). De Tocqueville examined the “tyranny of the majority,” and explained that the pervasive nature of the majority class suffocates all voices, leading to what he called “soft despotism,” (2000). According to de Tocqueville, tyranny of the majority posed the greatest threat to all democracy in the U.S. He observed, “one would think, at first glance, that in America minds were all formed on the same model, so much do they follow exactly the same paths,” (Tocqueville, 2000, pg. 114). Throughout his writings, de Tocqueville asserts the importance of open communication.

It could be argued that the U.S. was still in infancy when de Tocqueville made these observations. However, 100 and some years after de Tocqueville’s critique, additional scholars began citing similar problems. One such scholar was Mills who accused the U.S. democratic system of being a fairy tale—nothing more than whimsical fiction. He viewed democracy as a



façade concealing the true American power system—marked by corporations, the military establishment and an inaccessible government—that provided no “intermediate associations” where citizen could speak and think freely (Mills, 1956, p. 308). Society lacked any “ebb and flow of discussion” among citizens or between citizens and government (Mills, 1956, p. 298). A democratic system required a healthy public opinion, which resulted from “each man’s having thought things out for himself and contributing his voice to the great chorus,” (Mills, 1956, pg. 299) This legitimate deliberation was missing from the American political system.

The topic of civic discourse gained momentum when Habermas formally introduced the concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989). Habermas emphasized features such as accessibility, consensus-building and social equality as intrinsic to civic discourse. According to Habermasian theory, civic discourse occurred in an unrestricted realm where citizens could discuss issues concerning the public good (Farkas, 2013a; Habermas, 1989, 1993). Despite the fact that Habermas wrote of a particular public sphere, “the idea it has come to symbolize is central to democratic theory and central to contemporary discussions for models of civic discourse,” (Farkas, 2013a, p. 82). The public sphere established an ideal framework for society, which consisted of a mediated space “between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion,” (Habermas, 1964, p. 50). This middle ground between state and society provided the intermediate associations Mills deemed necessary for democracy.

### *The Birth of a Theory*

By the late-1960s, the sociopolitical atmosphere that developed—due largely to the Vietnam War—created a sort of perfect storm prompting a cultural revolution as well as specific literature and legislation that drastically altered the concept of the public sphere and public deliberation.

In 1970, Pateman published *Participation and Democratic Theory*, which became a foundational piece of literature and helped usher in the modern political ideal of participatory democracy. Shortly after the publication of this book, Congress passed the Government in the Sunshine Act of 1976, which aimed to create greater transparency in the government and greater accessibility to government meetings and procedures (Bull, 2014). Prior to Pateman's publication and the Sunshine Act, representative democracy was the dominant political practice in the U.S. However, it wasn't until the 1970s and early 1980s that public participation was more widely recognized as a legitimate component of democracy.

Scholars throughout the ages laid the groundwork for what would become the theory of deliberative democracy. Joseph Bessette originally coined the term deliberative democracy in 1980, and it implied a democratic system that depended on public communication to spark societal action (Bessette, 1980). Fishkin demonstrated how the theory could be operationalized within society and outlined three conditions for a deliberative form of democracy: "It must achieve political equality, its decisions must embody deliberation, and it must avoid tyranny of the majority," (Fishkin, 1991, p. 12). These three conditions echo what de Tocqueville and Mills had said nearly two centuries earlier. According to the theory, "political equality without deliberation is not of much use, for it amounts to nothing more than power without the opportunity to think about how that power ought to be exercised," (Fishkin, 1991, pg. 36). Fishkin's argument asserts that public communication and discourse is a fundamental component of a just democratic system.

The legitimacy and feasibility of deliberative democracy has been debated in the decades since it was popularized. Many argue it can be effective when applied in specific instances or combined with a form of political consultation called deliberative polling (Fishkin, 1991, 1996,

2014). However, others challenge its efficacy altogether, citing its goals as too broad and its applications as too vague (Chambers, 2009; Ladd, 1996; Parkinson, 2006; Young, 2001). Page and Shapiro (2010) tried to reconcile these differences of opinion. They argue that while deliberative democracy would be beneficial for society, it is an ambitious and complex system. According to Page and Shapiro, for deliberative democracy to even stand a chance at succeeding on a large scale, there must be a division of deliberative labor (2010). Historically, many different institutional actors have assumed a role in promoting deliberation such as state and government institutions, citizen bodies and social groups, education institutions and the media (Page & Shapiro, 2010). The role of the media is examined in detail in Dzur's assessment of deliberative democracy. He aligns himself with Page and Shapiro, and argues for a division of deliberative labor where the media work alongside other institutional players to promote deliberation. Dzur deems a division of labor necessary because, when looking at all the demands of deliberative democracy, "no single institutional actor plays the dominant role of democratic catalyst," (Dzur, 2002).

This is true—no *single* institution is the dominant, democratic catalyst. However, the public is the most important component of deliberative democracy. While many other components are at work in a deliberative democracy, without an interested public, these other efforts would have no effect. The theory of deliberative democracy can be thought of as a human body. Numerous systems and parts must work together in order for the body to thrive. However, the public is the brain of the whole system. Other institutions make up the eyes, the limbs, even the heart—all of which are vital to human functions. But without a brain, a body is an empty vessel. Similarly, the public gives deliberative democracy meaning and value. While many

institutions are required for deliberative democracy to work, someone must take on the necessary role of generating public interest. Catalytic media, like Oliver's show, assume this effort.

### *The Rise of 'Infotainment'*

In the last two decades, society has seen the creation of a new form of media, termed by many as, "fake news." Rising to the forefront of the media world in the twenty-first century, fake news is a unique kind of media hybrid. Fake news "employs a form of remix—they employ parody, irony and/or satire to imitate popular news forms, sources, and content in order to critique them," (Russell, 2013, p. 104). This critical style is not, by any means, a new invention. Fake news programs borrow heavily from techniques of the French Situationists of the 1950s and '60s. A primary goal of the Situationists, and of fake news programs, was to develop a "counter discourse through stealing, plagiarizing, and expropriating speech, through reversing dominant meanings and accepted usages," (McDonough, 2007, p. 5). One of the founding fathers of modern day fake news programs is Jon Stewart and his program, *the Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (McKain, 2005). In this program Jon Stewart "draws on corporate news media culture, mocks it, offers people an alternative, and contributes to the construction of forms of engagement that are acting partly at least to revive civic culture," (Russell, 2013, p. 102). Scholars have long debated the merits of fake news like the *Daily Show*, *the Colbert Report* or *the Onion* (Baym, 2005; Hairman, 2007; Hart & Hartelius, 2007; McKain, 2005; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005; Prior, 2003, 2005). But even before Jon Stewart's show first aired the summer of 1996, scholars were already concerned with the amount of entertainment-oriented news in the world. Some, like Postman (1985), saw no place for entertainment in politics. He was particularly concerned with the ways television and broadcast news were adopting a more entertainment-focused approach to

production of their programs. The problems stemmed from a blurring of information and fiction, of entertainment and work. To Postman, the proliferation of entertainment in broadcasting means the “demarcation line between what is show business and what is not becomes harder to see with each passing day,” (Postman, 1985, p. 98). He saw this new approach as destructive for society. Postman cites television as a key culprit in this destruction because “television redefines the meaning of public discourse. Television does not extend or amplify literate culture. It attacks it,” (1985, p. 84). Postman saw entertainment as invading the political public sphere and threatening its legitimacy and efficacy. However, others thought entertainment politics and news could have positive, amplifying effects on public discourse.

For instance, van Zoonen studied popular culture that was politically oriented. Unlike Postman, van Zoonen argued that entertainment media does not destroy other forms of discourse. Rather, it adds one more voice to the conversation, and “valid knowledge and arguments in deliberations of political issues should come from a range of different sources,” (van Zoonen, 2005, p. 149). In contemporary society, more and more television shows are embracing political topics and political news is embracing entertainment techniques. With this merging of entertainment and politics, programming must accomplish dual tasks: These programs must be “entertaining in the sense that they make citizenship simply more pleasurable for more people, but they also offer instruments to think about what citizenship should mean, and they invite a hospitable surrounding for the performance of citizenship,” (van Zoonen, 2005, p. 147). It seems political society is becoming more infused with entertainment; so it is useful to understand the ways this fusion could be most beneficial to the public. Van Zoonen concedes, “popular culture does have its flaws,” (2005, p. 151). But, she also recognizes the potential benefits popular culture brings to public discourse. She states popular culture,

Needs to be acknowledged as a relevant resource for political citizenship: a resource that produces comprehension and respect for popular political voices and that allows for more people to perform as citizens; a resource that can make citizenship more pleasurable, more engaging, and more inclusive (p. 151).

Van Zoonen's advice has particular relevance when examining a program like *the Daily Show*. Scholars have debated if the program makes citizenship pleasurable, engaging and inclusive, or if it leaves citizens feeling disillusioned and bitter about political society.

### *The Realities of Fake News*

As a founder and leader in the fake news format, much of the scholarly debate on infotainment centers on Jon Stewart. Many have questioned whether Stewart highlights the good that entertainment can bring to the public sphere or if he represents the decay of such a deliberative space. There are those who believe Stewart commits a "political sin" every night he goes on air (Hart, & Hartelius, 2007). Some scholars cite Stewart as merely creating a more cynical and apathetic citizenry. For instance, Hart and Hartelius (2007) argue "Stewart does not stimulate a polis to have new and productive thoughts...he merely produces inertia," (p. 264). Others have attempted to measure whether or not *the Daily Show* increases a person's political awareness or opinions of sociopolitical issues. Some, like Hollander (2005) and Prior (2003, 2005) conclude the show has not helped bridge the political knowledge gap.

However, among scholars who have argued the show does have merit, common themes arise regarding the show's benefit of acting as a check on traditional media. Borden and Tew suggest the show is "performing a valuable auditing function, watching and covering the powerful. They play the role of speaking what goes unsaid in mainstream news, or highlighting

the non-sense of what is said,” (2007, p. 309). Much of Stewart’s show is certainly a performance. In this performance of fake news, Stewart serves as the fake newscaster who offers a satirical take on contemporary issues in the news and works closely with his team of fake reporters who often provide “live coverage” of a variety of issues. His fake reporters assume roles as experts. Often these “expert” titles are absurd, such as “senior foreign looking correspondent,” or “senior child molestation expert,” (Cutbirth, 2011). Satire is a fundamental aspect of Stewart’s program, and he uses satire to resist and critique traditional journalism. But this critique can be beneficial. According to Baym, who argues that Jon Stewart’s show lends to the reinvention of political journalism, this satire “represents a searching for truth through the process of dialogical interaction. Unlike traditional news, which claims an epistemological certainty, satire is a discourse of inquiry, a rhetoric of challenge that seeks through the asking of unanswered questions to clarify the underlying morality of a situation,” (Baym, 2005, p. 267). Baym dismisses the fake news label and argues that *the Daily Show* is a form of critical journalism, “which uses satire to achieve that which the mainstream media press is no longer willing to pursue,” (2005, p. 268). Baym argues that Jon Stewart’s program not only qualifies as journalism, but represents a form of journalism that is necessary for models of deliberative democracy. Baym states,

“For Habermas and other advocates of a deliberative democracy, reasoned conversation is the defining feature of a democratic system, a feature clearly lacking in much of the reactionary, frenzied, and often unintelligible 24-hour news media. It is this shortcoming of the mainstream news media and politicians alike that motivates *the Daily Show*’s...criticism of contemporary political communication practices,” (2005, p. 273).

Satirical media like *the Daily Show with Jon Stewart* play a valuable role in the public sphere. While Oliver does share similarities with Stewart's model, he also diverges from this model in important ways.

### *Influences from Revolutionary Journalism*

John Oliver's show blends eighteenth-century revolutionary journalism (Protest et al., 1991; Robie, 2013) with twenty-first century fake news journalism to create a hybrid form of media aimed at providing the public with access to and interest in a sociopolitical discourse. Unlike Jon Stewart, Oliver does not devote nearly as much attention to criticizing traditional media. Oliver is certainly critical, but he aims the majority of his attacks at state, corporate and societal institutions. While Oliver's set looks similar to Stewart's set, and while some of Oliver's jokes sound like *the Daily Show's* wise cracks, the underlying techniques and goals of *Last Week Tonight* are more akin to that of eighteenth-century revolutionary journalism.

American revolutionary journalism was at its height during the revolutionary war in the late 1700's. American colonies began utilizing the press as a means for educating the masses about revolt efforts, rallying support and highlighting injustice. Protest et al. identified this movement as revolutionary journalism. In 1768, "publications throughout the colonies burst forth with new challenges to British authority...During this period, the press regularly unearthed evidence of corruption and inequities in British rule," (Protest et al., 1991, p. 31). Five characteristics distinguish revolutionary journalism from other modes of communication and media. Revolutionary journalism should "justify the course advocated, promote the advantages of victory, arouse the people, neutralize logical and reasonable arguments by the opposition,



[and] explain the issues in black and white so that everybody can understand,” (Robie, 2013, p. 98; Hester & Wai Lan, 1987, p. 56; Protes, 1991).

*Last Week Tonight* embodies these characteristics of revolutionary journalism. However, Oliver also manages to present information to viewers in a modern, entertaining manner. This blended form of media is successful at engaging young people and sparking sociopolitical action.

### *Influences from Public Journalism*

In addition to influences from infotainment media and revolutionary journalism, this study is also informed by public journalism, which was most popular in the 1980s (Dzur, 2002; Rosen, 1995).

Jay Rosen coined the term *public journalism*. He argued:

“Journalism cannot remain viable unless public life remains viable... Therefore, journalists should do what they can to support public life. The press should help citizens participate and take them seriously when they do. It should nourish or create the sort of public talk that might get us somewhere, what some of us would call deliberative dialogue,” (Rosen, 1995, p. 35).

Public journalism asked reporters and media practitioners to not only inform society about current events, but also encourage society to act and engage with such happenings. Dzur advocated for a public journalism model as well, and argued that public journalism should create “civic information,” meaning information that “helps people become involved in public debate. This can be basic information about the structures of government and the roles played by different office-holders, or more complex discussions of core values at stake in particular public choices,” (Dzur, 2002, p. 317). While traditional media aimed for informative goals, public journalism aimed for transformative goals. This branch of media wanted the public to be less of a passive

audience and, instead, be active members of society. Public journalism believed “the press can help readers want to be citizens and can help citizens deliberate in more thorough and public-spirited ways,” (Dzur, 2002, p. 318). While many argued public journalism fizzled out by the early 2000s (Dzur, 2002; Ettema, 2007; Reese, 2009), elements of this kind model can be seen in more recent forms of media like explanatory journalism (Brookings, 2016). The core ideals of public journalism are also a central tenant of catalytic media like *Last Week Tonight*.

## CHAPTER IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

### *Research Questions*

This thesis analyzes *Last Week Tonight* to examine its implications on the public and for deliberative democracy. Analyzing the discourse of the show as well as societal responses to the show will shed light on these areas and provide answers to the following research questions:

- RQ#1:** What kinds of discursive strategies are employed in *Last Week Tonight*?
- RQ#2:** What does *Last Week Tonight* borrow from entertainment media and from traditional journalism? What is the overall effect of this blending of entertainment and journalism?
- RQ#3:** What evidence is there that *Last Week Tonight* can trigger legitimate reactions from the public and contribute to the larger process of deliberative democracy?

### *Methodology*

For this study I conducted a discourse analysis of *Last Week Tonight* in order to examine the inner workings of the show, as well as the show's contributions to a larger public discourse. I categorized the episodes by season. *Last Week Tonight* airs on HBO, a premium cable station. This poses an interesting financial barrier. Instead of basing my selections off viewership data from HBO, I use viewership data from YouTube. There is an official YouTube channel for Oliver's show, and the main segments of each episode are posted after it airs on HBO. Basing my episode selection off YouTube allows me to gain some insight into the preferences of the public. My analysis will not investigate what I think are the most important topics or episodes. Rather, I base my analysis on episodes the public expresses the most interest in. *Last Week Tonight* is a popular show with significant implications for democratic practices in the U.S.

Ultimately, I aim to understand why and how the show is successful in sparking reactions and conversations among the public. In order to do this, I must, in a sense, allow the public to direct me to the most influential and successful episodes. The public left a trail of breadcrumbs in the form of YouTube views, and this trail allows me to track public interest.

YouTube also has interesting implications for the future of news media. The Pew Research Center found many millennials are drawn to YouTube as a source for news. A survey asked people which kinds of social media they use as a source for news. YouTube ranked second, with 39 percent of U.S. adults between the ages of 18 and 29 citing YouTube as a source for news. In this survey, YouTube ranked ahead of Facebook and just below Twitter (Pew Research Center, 2013). For this project, I recorded the number of YouTube views each episode received as of January 1, 2016. I analyzed the three most viewed episodes from season one and from season two.

### *Influences from Critical Discourse Analysis*

My analysis also reflects influences of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1996, 2003). CDA is used to better understand the cyclical patterns of power and discourse, namely that “power is inherent in public discourse and public discourse plays an instrumental role in the exercise of power,” (Farkas, 2013a). While CDA emerged from a linguistics background, communication scholarship applied CDA to data in order to understand the symbiotic relationship between public discourse and power (Engestrom, 1999; Farkas, 2013a, 2013b; Jones et al., 2004; Taylor & Robichaud, 2004). There are many areas of communication where CDA could offer valuable insight, including critical and cultural communication scholarship (Tracy & Dimock, 2004). Critical and cultural studies have “an emphasis on how the

status quo is reproduced an/or resisted in the different realms of the public sphere” and CDA could help create a space to critique the social order (Tracy & Dimock, 2004, p. 267). This combination of research perspectives reveals the full spectrum of power dynamics and social inequality in discourse. Scholars like Fairclough and Van Dijk both argued that power, discourse and social hierarchies are all intrinsically interrelated (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1996). The powerful can act as gatekeepers, limiting others to certain discourses, thus reinforcing their superior positions. According to van Dijk, “the less powerful people are, the less they have access to various forms of text or talk,” (1996, p. 21).

CDA offers valuable insight to media studies research because of the ways journalism and media historically contributed to the development of national discourses. Discourse analysis, with influences from CDA, provides a means to examine the different texts produced, namely the dialogue during the episodes and the texts produced by society in reaction to the episodes. Discourse analysis allows my study to gain a deeper understanding of Oliver’s role in a larger social order. This analysis considers some of the primary tenets of CDA outlined by Fairclough and Wodak (1997), namely the role of discourse as a form of social action. My study’s research aligns with scholars like van Dijk, who, by using CDA, hope to study the way “social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk,” (2003, p. 352). After transcribing the six selected episodes (See Appendix 2), I analyzed and coded the text by theme and by the discursive devices used.

This study analyzes the discourse that arises during Oliver’s show. This theoretical approach and methodology allows me to explore my research questions and draw conclusions about the democratic implications of *Last Week Tonight*.

## *Overview of Findings*

On April 27, 2014, *the New York Times* ran an article in their Sunday edition about a new comedy show scheduled to air that evening on HBO. *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* was expected to be another news parody and satire show similar to *the Colbert Report* or *the Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. This expectation was warranted. Host, John Oliver worked for *the Daily Show* for seven years before venturing off on his own. In fact, *the Daily Show* was what brought the English comedian to the U.S. in the first place. Born in Bedford, England, Oliver attended Cambridge before pursuing a career as a comedian. He performed stand-up comedy and worked with British satire programs until he moved to the U.S. in 2006 to work for Stewart. On *the Daily Show* staff, he flourished. In 2009, 2011 and 2012, Oliver received Emmy Awards for outstanding writing on a comedy program, and in the summer of 2013, he guest-hosted *the Daily Show* for eight weeks while Stewart took a leave. Three months after that, HBO, who tirelessly wooed Oliver, announced he would have his own late night show (Carter, 2014).

Due to this history, it was reasonable to think *Last Week Tonight* would embrace the fake news format it was born from. However, that Sunday morning in the entertainment section of *the New York Times*, Oliver made it clear that while his show's intention was certainly to entertain, it was not to mimic Stewart or Colbert. Rather, Oliver said he signed with HBO because he saw the premium cable channel as the "most amazing place to do something completely different," (Carter, 2014). Three seasons later, it seems Oliver accomplished that. Journalist and culture columnist David Carr of *the New York Times* said *Last Week Tonight* is "counterintuitive to the prevailing conventions of television, not to mention journalism," (Carr, 2014). The show airs once a week on Sunday evenings from 11 to 11:30 p.m. Unlike many half-hour programs, Oliver's episodes are a full 30 minutes because HBO does not splice commercials throughout

their programs. Each episode begins with, as Oliver consistently calls it, “a quick recap of the week.” In this portion of the show, he skims through national and world highlights, spending approximately two to three minutes on a handful of topics. He then moves onto the main segment of the episode, where he spends upwards of ten and fifteen minutes on a single topic.

As of January 2016, only one episode ran over 30 minutes. Episode eight of season two ran for 45 minutes and included an interview with Edward Snowden in Russia. Guest interviews and appearances are common on the show, but they do not consistently occur. Oliver said he did not want to tie himself into a set structure where he had to have a guest on every show (Carter, 2014). Consistent guest appearances and interviews are a default format for late night shows and news satire shows like *the Daily Show* and *the Colbert Report*. Instead of trying to copy a structure like *the Daily Show*, Oliver said he liked “the idea of carving out [his] own space, rather than having to step into some difficult shoes,” (Carter, 2014).

The space Oliver and his crew carved out in HBO attracted loyal viewers. The show has an average audience, including live viewings and repeats, of four million people. HBO releases YouTube clips of the weekly segments as well. As of January 1, 2016, YouTube clips of the main segment of each episode had an average of 5.9 million views (see Appendix 1). Certain episodes received as many as 12 million YouTube views. To compare, when *the Daily Show* unveiled their new host, Trevor Noah, in the fall of 2015, the program received approximately 3.7 million viewers on Comedy Central (de Moraes, 2015). When Jon Stewart was host, his most popular show, according to Neilson, yielded 3.6 million views (de Moraes, 2015).

Something about Oliver’s show is resonating with viewers. Something about the program makes millions of people tune in at 11 p.m. on Sunday evenings and something makes millions

more flock to YouTube in the days to follow. John Oliver accomplished what he set out to do—create “something completely different.” And that different is working.

Many people expected Oliver to be yet another nattering mouth, spewing out comical dribble. The headline of *the New York Times* article that ran the morning before Oliver’s debut even read: “Now Nattering on His Own Throne: John Oliver introduces ‘Last Week Tonight’ on HBO,” (Carter, 2014). In fairness, no one knew what to expect from Oliver or the show, and the verb *nattering* probably seemed like a reasonable word to use. This word embodies exactly what society expected from *Last Week Tonight*. However, in hindsight and as my analysis will show, nattering is the opposite of what Oliver aimed to do episode after episode, season after season.

While Oliver often maintains a lighthearted and joking tone throughout his program, there is little that is lighthearted or frivolous about the content of his episodes. As Carr explains, “each half-hour episode contains a big explainer of a complicated issue. The list of topics sounds like the arcane scraps from the cutting room floor of most newsrooms,” (Carr, 2015). These topics include issues such as the North Dakota oil boom, mandatory sentencing, pharmaceutical marketing and LGBT rights in Uganda (HBO, 2015). In season one alone, Oliver covered topics like “the amount of hidden sugar in food, civil forfeiture, the false hopes of lotteries, [and] the failure of the American government to safeguard people who served as interpreters in Iraq and Afghanistan,” (Carr, 2015). These topics are not inherently riveting and have even been called “audience kryptonite,” (Carr, 2015). Many major news networks actively avoid these kinds of topics. Yet, when Oliver spends 16 minutes and 30 seconds covering civil forfeiture, he receives 7.1 million YouTube views, (Last Week Tonight, 2014). Carr reflected on this puzzling phenomenon, asking, “how is it that explainers of big, complicated current events—the programming equivalent of creamed spinach—have become digital catnip?” (Carr, 2015). Carr



offers an answer to his question as well, suggesting, “there is, right now, a hunger for a kind of slow news, thoughtful takes that won’t fit inside a Twitter feed,” (Carr, 2015). Interestingly, however, Oliver has always been quick to insist he is not in the news business, but the entertainment business. While his entire show is dedicated to current events and offers analysis of current events, Oliver does not believe this makes him a journalist. In an interview, Oliver reiterated this point with an analogy, saying, “if you make jokes about animals, that does not make you a zoologist. We certainly hold ourselves to a high standard and fact-check everything, but the correct term for what we do is ‘comedy,’ ” (Carr, 2015). As my findings will demonstrate, Oliver’s show relies on a variety of comedic and journalistic approaches to communicate current events to his television audience. *Last Week Tonight* is indeed a new form of media. The “something different” Oliver created has a significant impact on society’s evolving political environment. By analyzing the conversations Oliver constructs around complex sociopolitical topics, I found his show is effective at triggering societal reactions that occur and function within social, civic and political sphere.

Findings from my study reveal that in his most popular episodes, Oliver follows a three-prong approach to delivering content. First, he embraces characteristics of twenty-first century infotainment media and captivates audiences by utilizing the communicative devices humor and hostility. Oliver simultaneously relies on techniques of eighteenth-century revolutionary journalism and presents viewers with information in an educative and relatable way. Finally, he incorporates the core ideals of twentieth-century public journalism and expresses confidence in his viewers, albeit sometimes sarcastically, and acknowledges their potent role as a public. These discursive moves trigger a combination of reactions from viewers that extend into the public sphere and are social, civic or political.

Ultimately, Oliver's use of discourse is effective at captivating, informing and encouraging audiences to engage with sociopolitical issues. Or, as Carr (2015) more eloquently put, "what comes flying out of his mouth is not just a tutorial, but a kind of jeremiad, a goad to be a better version of ourselves."

### *Summary of Episodes*

For this project, I examined seasons one and two of *Last Week Tonight*. In seasons one and two, 59 episodes were produced, 24 in season one and 35 from season two. I selected the three most popular episodes, based off of YouTube views.

The most popular episode of season one aired on June 8, 2014, and covered FIFA and the upcoming World Cup. As of January 1, 2016, the YouTube video of this episode had 12.16 million views—making this episode the most popular *Last Week Tonight* episode on YouTube to date. In comparison, the official 2014 World Cup highlights posted on YouTube by FIFATV received 3.35 million views as of the spring of 2016 (FIFATV, 2015). More people watched Oliver's commentary of FIFA than FIFA's official 2014 World Cup highlights. A lot more, 8.8 million more to be precise.

In the episode, Oliver dissects the inner workings of the FIFA association, concluding that the organization is "grotesque." Oliver comes to this conclusion by revealing the exploitative nature of FIFA, its reckless attitude toward host countries and the corruption within the organization. The episode begins with Oliver addressing the location of the 2014 World Cup: Brazil. He discusses financial burdens for a country hosting a World Cup as well as the FIFA tax regulations. He then moves on to cover the officials of FIFA, and spends the majority of time roasting FIFA President, Sepp Blatter. Oliver wraps up the episode by looking into the future. He

explains the 2022 World Cup is set to take place in Qatar, a country with unbearable heat and inhumane working conditions. This segment of the episode ran for 13 minutes and 14 seconds.

The second most popular episode from season one focused on the Miss America Pageant and had 10.78 million views. On September 21, 2014, exactly one week after the annual Miss America Pageant aired, Oliver and his crew offered their own commentary of the event in a 15 minute, 25 seconds segment. Oliver initially dives into some history of the event, providing video clips documenting the early years of the pageant. He then focuses on recent airings of the pageant. Oliver provides video clips of pageant officials and newscasters attesting to the scholarly nature of the competition. Oliver draws attention to a claim pageant officials reiterated throughout the broadcast and in news segments before and after the event: That the Miss America Organization is the largest scholarship provider for women in the world, making \$45 million available annually. Oliver gaped at this immense number and explained the process he and his crew undertook to try and prove this figure. After attempting to gain access to the tax forms for all state level competitions, Oliver concludes the pageant awarded less than \$500,000 dollars in 2012. *Last Week Tonight* ends the episode with a somber fact. Even though Miss America fabricated the total amount they awarded to women, the actual amount they give still makes them the largest scholarship provider to women. Oliver says the beauty pageant provides more money than any other women-only scholarship in the U.S. He then offered links to three other women-only scholarships, which judge women on their minds instead of their bodies. The show ends by hosting a satirical 'Miss Last Week Tonight Pageant,' where Kathy Griffin stars as a contestant. She turns the tables, however, and forces Oliver to compete against an attractive male model.

The third most popular episode aired on June 1, 2014, and received 10.48 million YouTube views. The episode discussed the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) upcoming decision about net neutrality. Oliver and his crew began their episode addressing the insanely dull nature of a topic like net neutrality. He then explains the specifics of the topic and talks about Internet Service Providers (ISPs) who are in favor of ending net neutrality. He also discusses the FCC, and explains they are leaning toward ruling against net neutrality. From there, Oliver explains the cozy relationship between the government and ISPs. At this point, he mentions an open comment section created by the FCC. A month before this episode ran, the FCC opened a public comment section where the public could post comments and express their opinions of net neutrality. Oliver provides viewers with the link to the FCC public comment section and then summons all the Internet trolls of the world. He makes a direct request that people go online and comment on the FCC site. This segment ran for 13 minutes and 18 seconds.

Season two covered a wide range of topics as well. The most watched episode focused on government surveillance and the NSA. This episode received 9.82 million views. The second most popular episode aired focused on televangelism and received 8.89 million views. The third most-watched episode featured a discussion of big tobacco and received 7.95 million views.

Government surveillance, the most popular episode of season two, featured a discussion and an interview with Edward Snowden. Oliver opens the episode by explaining that an important date is quickly approaching. The Patriot Act was set to expire on June 1, 2015, and it seemed that President Obama was ready to renew the bill. Oliver introduces viewers to Edward Snowden by showing clips from the Oscar-winning documentary, *Citizenfour*. According to a Pew Study, the majority of citizens do not believe government surveillance is an issue of concern. However, Oliver believes citizens are not informed enough to make that decision. He

and his crew interviewed people in Times Square. They asked the public if they recognized the name Edward Snowden. The majority of people were unable to identify Snowden. Oliver then explains how he and his crew flew to Russia to interview Snowden.

During the interview, Oliver tells Snowden that citizens need an easier way to think about this topic. Oliver realizes the public does not understand the broad concept of government surveillance unless it's put into more familiar terms. He frames the concept in the most extreme invasion of privacy imaginable—the government accessing citizens' nude photos, or, more specifically, dick pics. Oliver and Snowden then explain each NSA program and whether it allows for government officials to access people's nude photos.

This was the only episode that ran over 30 minutes. The full episode ran for 45 minutes, and the main segment on government surveillance ran for 33 minutes and 14 seconds.

The second most popular episode focused on what Oliver calls, “predatory churches.” He begins the segment briefly touching on the history of televangelism before launching into modern forms of televangelism and seed-faith. He explains how seed-faith functions on the idea that people should give money to the church and, eventually, they will reap the benefits of the money they seeded. Oliver shows examples of prominent televangelist pastors who made millions of dollars through these seed offerings. These pastors used this seed money to buy expensive vacations and private planes.

Oliver then shows just how easy, and legal, it is for churches to get money from people. Oliver explains how he corresponded with a televangelist for months and sent the church hundreds of dollars without receiving any benefits or money in return. To demonstrate the absurd lack of regulations around religious institutions, Oliver then consults an actual tax lawyer and creates his own legally registered church, which he calls Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption.

Oliver and guest star Rachel Dratch, who acts as Oliver's wife, host a service and ask viewers to donate money to their church. This episode ran for 20 minutes and five seconds.

The third most popular episode of season two featured a discussion of big tobacco companies. Oliver begins by tracing a brief history of tobacco advertisements in America, paying particular attention to the Phillip Morris cigarette brand, Marlboro and their Marlboro Man. Oliver explains foreign tobacco sales in many countries have little to no restrictions on smoking. Certain countries have tried to establish laws against smoking to protect their people, however, big tobacco companies like Phillip Morris International (PMI) have challenged these laws. Oliver begins what he calls a "world tour of how PMI attacks laws set to protect people." He begins with Australia, who created plain packaging laws. Plain packaging laws replace cigarette branding with disturbing images of the effects of smoking, like toe tags on corpses, cancerous mouths with rotten teeth and photos of diseased lungs.

Specific data explains how, with plain packaging laws in place, Australia's smoking rates dropped to a historic low. However, Phillip Morris, who claimed plain packaging was a form of trademark infringement, sued the country of Australia. PMI lost the suit but went on to threaten lawsuits against other countries that attempted to create plain packaging laws, such as Uruguay, Togo, the Solomon Islands and Namibia. Oliver emphasizes PMI's bullying nature by pointing out that PMI has a net revenue is \$80 billion while a little country like Togo's entire GDP is a mere \$4.3 billion.

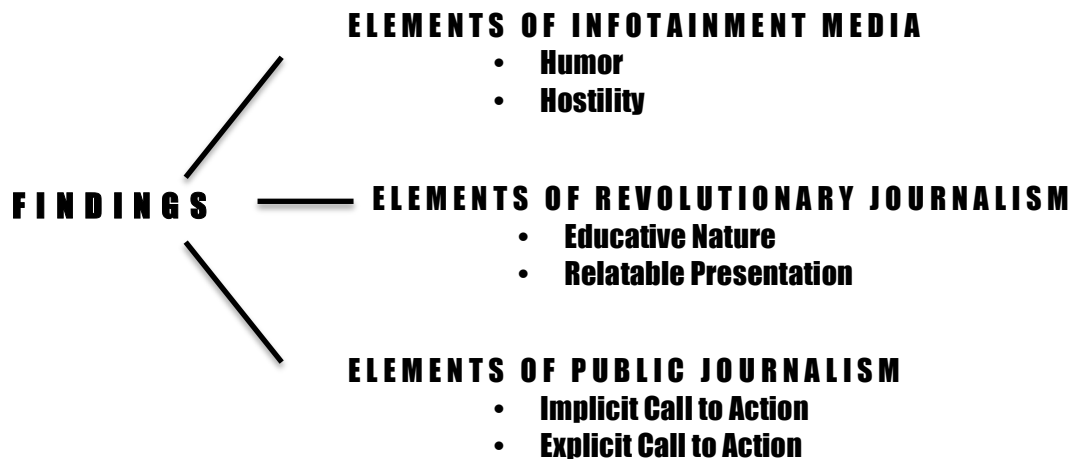
Oliver wraps up the segment by speaking directly to Phillip Morris International and offering them, what he calls, a compromise. Oliver and his crew create a new mascot for PMI that combines the Marlboro Man with aspects of plain packaging. Oliver introduces viewers to Jeff the Diseased Lung. Oliver and his crew already posted Jeff the Diseased Lung

advertisements in Uruguay and sent Jeff the Diseased Lung t-shirts to Togo. Oliver encourages viewers to tweet about Jeff and share his picture with friends. At the very end of the show, an actual Jeff the Diseased Lung mascot comes on stage to dance with Oliver. This episode ran for 18 minutes and 10 seconds.

## CHAPTER V: INTERNAL FINDINGS

Several themes emerged from these six episodes. I divided these internal findings into three categories—each with two sub-categories—based on the primary techniques Oliver relied upon during the show (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Representation of Internal Findings



Oliver borrows from three different eras of media. He embraces aspects of revolutionary journalism, public journalism and infotainment media. By stitching together media and journalistic techniques throughout the decades, Oliver is able to connect with audiences and mobilize his viewers to engage in democratic processes.



### *Elements of Infotainment Media*

Oliver was born from the fake news format popularized by Jon Stewart. Despite his roots in fake news, Oliver's ultimate goals and intentions for his show are quite different from that of Stewart or *the Colbert Report*. However, on the surface, Oliver does borrow from some of the classic techniques for fake news, namely humor and hostility, to draw audiences in and create emotional ties to the issues featured in the episodes.

#### Humor:

Humor is, perhaps, the most readily apparent technique of *Last Week Tonight*. Within the category of humor, there were three dominant techniques he repeatedly used: impressions, popular culture references and satirical reenactments and displays. Very often, his humorous moments are working in concert with other, more elaborate techniques.

For example, in every episode, there are moments when traditional humor and jokes act as the vessel to carry sophisticated points or complex facts. Humor is, in a sense, an approachable guise for the large, more advanced argument Oliver makes throughout the episode. Humor is what coaxes people into the discourse and humor is what keeps them from leaving. For instance, in four of the six episodes, Oliver made a joke within the first 15 seconds of the show. The episode on FIFA, net neutrality, tobacco and televangelism all feature jokes at the very beginning of the episode. In the segment on tobacco, Oliver drops a joke right off the bat.

**Oliver:** Tobacco. It used to be a cornerstone of American life. It used to be how we knew sex was over before the female orgasm was invented.

In the episode on net neutrality, Oliver expresses the importance and value of the Internet by referring to it as the “electronic cat database” and by providing an absurd example of the Internet’s capabilities.

**Oliver:** You can use [the Internet] to file taxes, apply for jobs— you can go online right now and buy a case of coyote urine. Do you know how difficult it used to be to obtain coyote urine? You literally had to give a coyote Gatorade and just wait. It was mess. They system was a mess.

Figure 4. Oliver and coyote urine reference



One of the most common humoristic devices Oliver uses is impression. Oliver impersonates various people throughout the episodes, including the FIFA Secretary General, a Miss America pageant contestant, Robert Durst’s second wife and even general American consumers. At times, his use of impression serves primarily as comic relief. Oliver will offer a funny impression directly before or directly after a complex, depressing or dull fact.

For instance, in the episode on government surveillance, Oliver lists several recent surveillance programs and organizations.

**Oliver:** You’ve probably heard a lot about strange sounding programs like X Keyscore,

Muscular, Prism and Mystic, which are coincidentally the names of some of Florida's least popular male strip clubs. [*Changes tone of voice*] 'Welcome to X Keyscore, our dancers are fully un-redacted and Tuesday is wing night.'

Figure 5. Oliver and NSA Programs



On their own, a list of government surveillance programs is rather dull. But, it is ridiculous to imagine these programs as failed male strip clubs in Florida. Oliver presumes the identity of an owner of one of these male strip clubs and makes a pun about fully un-redacted dancers. The absurdity of Oliver's comparison and his impression make this list of programs far more memorable and set a light, playful tone to the episode, despite the rather dull topic.

At times, Oliver's use of impression serves a more complex purpose. Oliver takes situations in society that have been accepted as social norms. He uses impressions to insert, quite literally, a different voice and perspective into the discussion to show the absurdity of a practice that goes unnoticed and un-critiqued in day-to-day life. For example, in the episode covering net neutrality, Oliver is explaining that cable companies typically receive very low customer satisfaction ratings. This point is something many people know about and have generally accepted. However, Oliver explains this situation in slightly different terms, exposing the truly

bizarre nature of such customer satisfaction scores.

**Oliver:** In a recent customer satisfaction survey, Comcast and Time Warner came in dead last. And when you look at the companies that scored better than them, people were basically saying: [*Changes tone of voice*] ‘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 the worst. They are the worst.’”

In this situation, Oliver is presenting factual information—that companies like Bank of America, Taco Bell and GM rated higher with customer satisfaction. However, by impersonating a general consumer, he illuminates how ridiculous it is that a cable company would rate lower than companies that caused financial distress and physical harm. This comparison allows the public to truly visualize what these ratings mean.

In another episode, Oliver utilizes this device to confront gender stereotypes and the demeaning processes woman go through during pageants to try and get scholarships. During the Miss America episode, Oliver uses impression to explain how butt glue should not be a necessary component of a scholarship competition.

**Oliver:** If you want a shot at winning one of their scholarships, you’re also going to need access to a can of this stuff.

[*Camera shifts to a news clip*]

**ABC newscaster:** Butt glue. A spray adhesive essential for keeping those bikini bottoms, on their bottoms.

[*Back to Oliver*]

**Oliver:** Just, just *think* about that for a second. [*Changes tone of voice*] ‘How did the scholarship interview go?’ [*Changes tone of voice*] ‘Well, my ass is still sticky, I think I got it. I think I got it.’

It is common knowledge that there is a swimsuit portion in Miss America. However, by using humor, Oliver throws this common practice under the spotlight, forcing people to consider the underlying implications of a swimsuit aspect in a scholarship competition. Oliver creates a new lens by which to examine this practice. This new lens suggests this common practice is in fact demeaning, unnecessary and inherently sexist.

The second humoristic technique Oliver embraces is popular cultures references. In all six episodes, Oliver makes humorous pop culture comparisons and references. These references tag the show as young, fresh. They also represent an effort to speak to a particular audience, mainly young adults. A clear example of this occurred in the episode focused on televangelism. Oliver explains to viewers the concept of the prosperity gospel.

**Oliver:** Wealth is a sign of God's favor, and donation will result in wealth coming back to you. That idea sometimes takes the form of seed faith, the notion that donations are seeds that you will one day get to harvest.

Oliver then plays a series of clips showing predatory pastors who ask for money from viewers. One clip features an interview with a woman whose mother did not seek treatment for cancer and instead choose to donate to a popular televangelist. The woman explains her mother believed in the gospel and gave hundreds of dollars to the church and received nothing in return. Oliver then offers his own conclusions on seed faith.

**Oliver:** I think it's clear that seed faith is the most disgusting seed-based concept since whatever the f\*\*\* chia seed pudding is.

Oliver illustrates his disgust about prosperity gospel by poking fun at a popular trend, chia seed pudding. The reference is surprising, yet relevant and helps audience members better understand the point Oliver wishes to communicate.

At times, Oliver combines pop culture references with other techniques, such as impression. This combination adds emphasis to Oliver's particular point. During the Miss America episode, Oliver explains how his investigation into Miss America began.

**Oliver:** Miss America trades on their scholarship claims so much, if you call the Miss America headquarters, this is what you hear:

**[Phone recording]:** Thank you for calling the Miss America Organization, the largest scholarship provider for women.

**Oliver:** Ok, that is suspiciously defensive right out of the gate. That is like Walter White saying, [*changes tone of voice*] 'hello and welcome to this regular car wash that is definitely not laundering money for my meth lab.'

By referring to Walter White, Oliver offers viewers examples and images that are a part of youth culture and have significance to young people. Oliver is discussing complex topics, like authority figures misusing power and deep-rooted sexism in contemporary society. However, he is discussing these complex topics in a language that young people understand. These pop culture references are a sort of signpost that Oliver plants to help young adults understand and follow him as he navigates murky discourses.

The last humoristic element Oliver consistently works into his program is satire, particularly satirical enactments of the process or organization his episodes target. While satiric phrases are woven throughout all six episodes, four episodes dedicate a significant amount of time to creating their own satirical depiction or version of a process or event. Interestingly, in

each of the four episodes where this element is most prominent, these depictions occur at the very end of the program.

In the Miss America episode, Oliver ends his segment by speaking directly to the Miss America Organization and mocking the beauty pageant process.

**Oliver:** The biggest scholarship program exclusively for women in America requires you to be unmarried, with a mint condition uterus, and also rewards working knowledge of buttock adhesive technology. Which is just a little bit unsettling. And in fact, let me try to explain why to the Miss America Organization through the only medium it seems to value: 20-second conversations with women in evening dresses and sashes. Please join me.

[*Scene change. Oliver appears on a stage with a catwalk*]

**Oliver:** Welcome to *Miss Last Week Tonight!*

Oliver then hosts the *Miss Last Week Tonight* pageant where he invites two contestants to the stage to answer interview questions. His second contestant is guest star, Kathy Griffin. Griffin turns the tables on Oliver and forces him to compete in a pageant based entirely on looks. Oliver must strut the catwalk next to a male model named Jazepi as Kathy judges the two men on their potential as a host. Kathy names Jazepi the winner and tells Oliver the reason why he lost.

**Griffin:** Let me explain why I'm giving you a lower score. I look at Jazepi, and I want to have sex with Jazepi. I look at you, and I want to have sex with Jazepi.

This satirical take on a beauty pageant illustrates the hypocritical nature of such competitions. Griffin asserts that she is fine with judging women on their bodies as long as "men are held to the same demeaning process." This mock beauty pageant is certainly comical, as Oliver is forced to pose and twirl on the catwalk, but it also bolsters the main argument about sexist institutions and standards in the U.S.

While the tone of *Last Week Tonight* fluctuates from comical to serious, to angry to satirical, humor is a steady constant throughout all episodes. Many episodes began on a humorous note and many ended on a humorous note. Humor softens the blow of heavy, dense issues and allows audience members to be entertained and, simultaneously, educated. Humor serves multiple functions, but its primary intention is to captivate audience members so they are present, engaged and ready to receive the more serious, and educative messages Oliver and the show attempt to communicate.

#### Hostility:

The next element Oliver embraces that is common to infotainment or fake news programs is the concept of hostility. Late-night comedy hosts like Jon Stewart, Bill Maher and Stephen Colbert are known to go off on impassioned diatribes and orations. In fact, their use of anger and rage is one of the many reasons fake news programs are criticized and accused of causing society to become cynical and less engaged in civic and political issues (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Hart & Hartelius, 2007). Despite these accusations, passion, anger, disgust and outrage are all common emotions seen during episodes of *Last Week Tonight*. These hostile feelings present themselves in three ways.

The most obvious way that outrage and hostility are displayed is through verbal remarks like cursing and exclamatory statements. Because *Last Week Tonight* airs on a premium cable network, Oliver is allowed to say whatever he wants—and I mean whatever. In all six episodes analyzed in this study, Oliver says some form of the F word at least twice an episode. During the episode on televangelism, Oliver dropped the F word 8 times in 20 minutes. During the episode



on net neutrality, Oliver weaves the word in along with a graphic reference to a sexual act as he describes his distrust in cable companies like Comcast and Time Warner.

**Oliver:** And I know, I know, cable companies will say they support net neutrality protections or they remain committed to the open internet or, just the tip. But, let me remind you, they also say they will be at your house between 2 and 6 tomorrow afternoon and does any part of you really expect them to f\*\*\*ing turn up?

In the episode on big tobacco companies, Oliver describes how Phillip Morris International (PMI) threatened to sue the country of Togo for logo infringement when the small African country considered implementing plain packaging laws like Australia had done. PMI sent Togo a threatening letter stating that if the case went to court, Togo would lose just as Australia had lost. Oliver points out, though, that PMI lost the lawsuit against Australia. Despite their loss, PMI spliced together language from the courts to make it seem like they had a strong case and had won. Oliver points out the shady, misleading behavior and expresses his frustration toward the tobacco company.

**Oliver:** That's like when a shitty movie engineers a good review out of a bad one, like 'Mortdecai is a pile of...great.'

This letter is bullshit! And yet, Togo, justifiably terrified by threats of billion dollar settlements, backed down from a public health law that many people wanted.

Oliver uses obscene language to express his rage and to call people and organizations on their bluffs or their poor behavior. Often, this language is combined with another technique used to communicate hostility—sarcasm.

Sarcasm could be considered the defining feature of many fake news segments. Oliver has moments of sarcastic language or tone throughout all episodes. The sarcasm mainly communicates his dislike toward something. For instance, in the tobacco episode, a couple moments after he describes how Phillip Morris intentionally misled Togo to bully the country into dropping its public health law, Oliver lists other small countries tobacco companies have bullied out of public health initiatives.

**Oliver:** British American Tobacco sent a similar letter to Namibia, and one of their subsidiaries sent on to the Solomon Islands, a country with a population of 600,000. At this point, it's safe to say, if you live in an apartment with at least two other people and you ask one of them to please smoke outside, you can look forward to a letter from a tobacco company *very* soon.

And look, I could get angry and I could call tobacco companies assholes, or monsters, or open sores on Satan's dick. But instead, let's rise above it and let's try and broker peace.

Clearly Oliver is not actually warning people in apartments to be wary of big tobacco companies. He uses sarcasm to suggest a particular practice is ridiculous, over-the-top or immoral. This moment is emphasized even more when Oliver couples the sarcasm with obscene language at the end, referring to tobacco companies as "assholes" and "open sores on Satan's dick." Oliver uses this sarcasm during the FIFA episode as well to communicate his true thoughts about FIFA officials.

Oliver introduces audiences to, what he believes, is one of the most corrupt officials within FIFA, President Sepp Blatter. Oliver gives viewers a "taste of Sepp Blatter as a human being," by showing a brief news clip where Blatter suggests women's soccer could be improved and made more popular if the female players wear shorter shorts. Oliver uses sarcasm to respond to Blatter's suggestion.

**Oliver:** Great idea. Put the ladies in hot pants, call it foxy soccer. And while you're at it, tighten up the jersey, maybe replace the ball with a plate of hot wings and—F\*\*\* it, let's just open a hooters.

Figure 6. Oliver and Blatter's suggestion for women's soccer



Oliver uses sarcasm to express his anger in a humorous way. By sarcastically agreeing with Blatter and extending Blatter's suggestion for sexier uniforms, Oliver illustrates the ludicrous nature of the remark.

The final aspect of hostility that is crucial to *Last Week Tonight* relates less to specific language or linguistic devices and more to the overall approach Oliver takes. The topic of each main segment centers on a powerful institution. Oliver consistently directs his rage toward this dominant institution. One of the show's writers, Kevin Avery, described this process as shooting up, meaning jokes and anger are directed toward systemic issues and the higher-up people who have significant influence over such issues. The show works to hold power accountable. In all six episodes, there is some kind of powerful and oppressive force. The episodes on FIFA and

tobacco tackle corporate power. The episode on net neutrality addresses government power, and the episodes covering Miss America and televangelism confront deep-seated ideological powers about gender and religion. All episodes have significant crossover as well. For instance, the net neutrality issue demonstrates an intersection of government power as well as corporate power because of the financial influence cable companies have over the government. The important point is, in each episode, Oliver and his team aim up and challenge these infallible forces within society. Because of this upward aim, the hostility and rage expressed lands on warranted shoulders. Harsh critiques and cruel jokes directed toward private citizens and the common public would feel jarring and would most likely leave a sour taste in viewers' mouths. However, Oliver's hostility is always directed toward a corporation or organization—like Phillip Morris International—or toward a public figure who is susceptible to public scrutiny—like elected FIFA president, Sepp Blatter.

At one point, Oliver begins directing jokes and hostility toward a less powerful public, but he quickly redirects his aggression toward the underlying institution. In the episode about the Miss America Organization, Oliver plays a video clip that went viral a couple years ago showing a pageant contestant giving a completely incoherent answer to an interview question.

*[Video clip of pageant contestant providing answer to interview question]*

**Pageant contestant:** I believe that ou, our ed-education, like, such as South Africa and the Iraq, everywhere like, such as, and I believe that they should, our education over here in the U.S. should help the U.S., or should help South Africa and should help the Iraq and the Asian countries.

*[Back to Oliver]*

**Oliver:** Now, now, to be fair, the question she was asked was, 'can you do an impression of a dictionary in a washing machine.' And I think everyone agrees, she nailed that, she nailed that.

Now, now, look, look, no, it is *easy* to make fun of pageant contestants. But which is really crazier: That they sometimes give stupid answers, or that they are almost *always* asked ridiculously complex questions.

Oliver plays a compilation clip of complex interview questions and then shows a specific question from that year's pageant.

**Oliver:** In fact, last Sunday, *this* was an actual question.

[*Camera shifts to video clip*]

**Pageant judge:** The savagery of the ISIS threat to our security was demonstrated by the gruesome videos of two journalists and an aid worker being beheaded. What should our country's response be?

[*Back to Oliver*]

**Oliver:** That's right. They asked one of the contestants to *solve* ISIS. And she only had 20 seconds to do it. How did she do?

[*Camera shifts to video clip*]

**Contestant answer's:** This is an absolute outrage and something definitely needs to be done, but I don't think America needs to be the only one to do it. I really think it's important for the world, for the UN to come together to decide what's the best thing, united, that we can do to come together as a bigger, more impactful source to end this horrid, horrid thing that's happening.

[*Back to Oliver*]

**Oliver:** Holy shit. That is a *much* better answer than I could have done in that amount of time. That is a borderline better answer than the president gave last week. In fact many of last Sunday's contestants were genuinely impressive.

Oliver pokes fun at pageant contestants, but quickly redirects his commentary toward the Miss America Organization as a whole and at the sexist processes. Techniques and devices like swearing and sarcasm are used throughout the program to channel and express hostility. This hostility is only effective because it is directed toward powerful players who, in some way, perpetuated or contributed to the problematic situation in the first place.

Humor and hostility are common elements to 21st-century infotainment and fake news programs. Oliver embraces these elements, but still manages to put his own twist on them. To communicate humor, Oliver capitalizes on impression, pop culture references and satirical displays. He brings hostility to his show by adopting obscene language and a sarcastic tone. He ensures these hostile elements are effective by choosing episode topics that confront an infallible political, corporate or ideological force. Ultimately, humor is used to catch and keep the attention of viewers. Hostility is used to invite viewers to feel alongside Oliver. He incites viewers to care about sociopolitical topics. Humor and hostility lead viewers to watch the episodes and feel something about the topics. The following elements I will discuss encourage viewers to do more than watch and feel. Oliver's use of elements inspired by 18th-century revolutionary journalism encourages viewers to truly think about these complex topics.

### *Elements of Revolutionary Journalism*

Oliver has many things in common with his comedic predecessors. However, he also deviates from the traditional fake news model, and these deviations are what make Oliver effective on the democratic stage. While it is most likely unintentional, there are several elements of 18<sup>th</sup>-century revolutionary journalism throughout the episodes of *Last Week Tonight*. The five characteristics of revolutionary journalism state that this kind of media should: “Justify the course advocated, promote the advantages of victory, arouse the people, neutralize logical and reasonable arguments by the opposition, [and] explain the issues in black and white so that everybody can understand,” (Robie, 2013, p. 98; Hester & Wai Lan, 1987, p. 56; Protes, 1991).

I organized these traits into two general categories: Information that is educative in nature and information that is presented in a relatable manner. Three of the five traits—justifying the

advocated course, promoting the advantages of a particular course and neutralizing the opposition's argument—fall under the category of educative in nature as these traits aim, largely, at providing information about complex arguments and issues. The remaining traits of revolutionary journalism—arousing the people and explaining the issues in black and white—fall under the category of a relatable presentation, as the primary goal of these traits is comprehension. I will first address the specific devices Oliver utilizes to ensure his program is educative and not merely entertaining.

#### Educative Nature:

Oliver's show is loaded with news clips, documentary clips, government and corporate documents and his own investigative evidence. Within these six episodes, there are two general ways Oliver ensures the content of his show is educative. First, he aggregates statistics and information from news sources, government websites and corporate documents. And second, he and his crew conduct their own independent reporting and gather their own information.

Aggregation is a key component of Oliver's program. He frequently splices news and video clips into his show. Within the episodes selected for review, Oliver averages about 13 video clips per episode. Granted, some of these clips are aimed, merely, to amuse. For instance, during the FIFA episode, Oliver explains FIFA President Sepp Blatter's suggestion to tighten women soccer players' shorts. He also lists Blatter's numerous corruption and bribery scandals. Oliver then plays a clip from YouTube showing Blatter in an unfortunate circumstance.

**Oliver:** The greatest film about Sepp Blatter has already been made. It's ten seconds long and it's on YouTube.

*[Camera shifts to YouTube clip showing Blatter fall off a stage]*

**Oliver:** That is the *one* time you can genuinely say, I'm glad that old man fell off that stage [*Oliver slaps desk while making falling motion*]

Figure 7. Oliver imitating Blatter falling off of a stage



In this instance, Oliver uses a video clip as a way to combine humor and to direct his aggression toward a powerful person he believes has misused his power. While this clip supports the categories of humor and hostility discussed earlier, the majority of video clips Oliver plays serve a more educative nature. In the six episodes analyzed for this study, I found *Last Week Tonight* regularly features clips from a wide variety of major news outlets including PBS, CNN, CBS, Al Jazeera, C-Span, ABC, MSNBC, Bloomberg and NPR. The show also pulls from local news programs like, 9News, Vegas Net TV, WUSA and News 8 as well as foreign news programs. *Last Week Tonight* plays video clips from the UK, Australia, Togo and Uruguay and provides translations for clips in languages other than English. Oliver often weaves the video clips into his program and allows the clips to present facts. Oliver then explains the information from the clip in his own words and offers commentary. During the televangelism episode, Oliver explains how



a pastor used seed money to make an extravagant purchase. Oliver then explains that a local media outlet from north Texas, News 8, uncovered some disturbing facts about that purchase.

**Oliver:** Kenneth Copeland along with his wife Gloria are among the most successful TV evangelists. A few years back he asked his followers to help buy a \$20 million jet, promising it would only be used for church business. But, a local news crew did some digging and what they found will probably not surprise you.

*[Camera shifts to news clip]*

**News 8 anchor, Brett Shipp:** It was a News 8 investigation last February which first raised questions about Copeland's apparently personal use of his new church jet...most notably for a ski trip to Colorado and visits to an exotic game ranch in South Texas. Here's Copeland and his son, John, proudly posing with a pair of Axis deer, indigenous to India and Sri Lanka.

*[Back to Oliver]*

**Oliver:** Holy shit. This guy's like a psychotic, reverse Noah. *[Changes tone of voice]* 'Two by two, male and female came to Kenneth Copeland and he doth shot them right between the f\*\*\*ing eyes.'

Here, Oliver relies on the investigative abilities of a local news station and couples their findings with his own humorous reactions.

In addition to pulling information from traditional news sources, Oliver also mines through relevant press conference interviews and documentaries. For example, in the episode on government surveillance, Oliver shows a clip of a press conference with President Obama that was posted on the official White House website, [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov). He shows this clip to explain the government's side of the surveillance issue.

**Oliver:** Now, the government will point out that under 215 they hold phone records and not the calls themselves.

*[Camera shifts to clip of press conference]*

**President Obama:** What the intelligence community is doing, is looking at phone numbers and durations of calls. They are not looking at people's names and they are not looking at content.

*[Back to Oliver]*

**Oliver:** Yes, but that's not entirely reassuring. Because you can extrapolate a lot from that information.

Oliver presents the clip, acknowledges the information within the clip and offers his own commentary. Within that same episode, Oliver also shows clips from the Academy Award-winning documentary, *Citizenfour*.

**Oliver:** It is still unclear exactly how many documents Edward Snowden has stolen. Although, he has consistently tried to reassure people that he put them in good hands.

*[Camera shift to clip from Citizenfour]*

**Snowden:** Honestly I don't want to be the person making the decisions on what should be public and what shouldn't, which is why rather than publishing these on my own or putting them out openly, uh, I'm going through journalists.

*[Back to Oliver]*

**Oliver:** That sounds great, but of course it's not a fail-safe plan.

In addition to video clips, Oliver also uses information from websites and official documents. In that same government surveillance episode, for instance, Oliver pulls information from a document from Authenticated U.S. Government Information from the United States Government Publishing Office. He refers to a document from October 26, 2001 titled, "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA Patriot Act) Act of 2001." Oliver provides an image of the document and zooms in on the crucial piece of the text.

**Oliver:** Section 215 says 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.

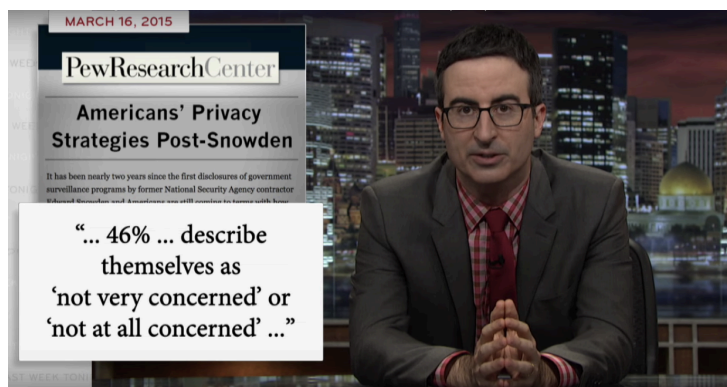
Figure 8. Oliver and text from the Patriot Act



Later on in the episode, Oliver refers to a Pew Report from March 16, 2015 that surveyed Americans about their opinions on government surveillance.

**Oliver:** A recent Pew Report found that nearly half of Americans say they’re not very concerned or not at all concerned about government surveillance. Which is fine, if that’s an informed opinion, but I’m not sure that it is, because we actually sent a camera crew to Times Square to ask some random passers by who Edward Snowden was and what he did.

Figure 9. Oliver and text from the a Pew Research Center report



This example of the Pew Report shows how Oliver mines material from news outlets, government documents and research centers to present viewers with comprehensive information about a subject. However, at times, Oliver and his crew found a hole or informational gap. In order to fill this gap, *Last Week Tonight* conducts their own independent research and reporting.

In the example of the Pew Report, Oliver challenges the results of the poll. He does not doubt Pew's ability to conduct a poll, but he does suggest the Pew Center polled individuals about a topic they were uninformed of and therefore, got misleading results. To backup this claim, Oliver and his crew took to the streets to interview people in Times Square.

**Oliver:** These are the responses that we got.

*[Camera shifts to interview footage]*

**Interview A:** I have no idea who Edward Snowden is.

**Interview B:** I have nev--no idea who Edward Snowden is.

**Interview C:** I've heard the name but I can't just pic-, think right now, exactly what it is.

**Interview D:** Edward Snowden? *[Hesitates]* No, I do not.

Figure 10. People Interviewed in Times Square



*[Back to Oliver]*

**Oliver:** Just for the record, that wasn't cherry picking. That was entirely reflective of

everyone we spoke to, although to be fair, some people did remember his name they just couldn't remember why.

*[Camera shifts to interview footage]*

**Interview E:** He sold some information to people.

**Interview F:** He revealed some information that, uh, shouldn't have been revealed.

**Interview G:** I think from what I remember, the information that he shared was detrimental to our military secrets? And keeping our soldiers and our countries safe.

**Interview H:** I think he leaked documents about the U.S. Army's operations in Iraq.

**Interview I:** Edward Snowden revealed a bunch of secrets I guess, or information, into wiki, wiki leaks.

**Interview J:** Edward Snowden leaked, uh, he's in charge of Wiki Leaks.

**Interview K:** Edward Snowden revealed a lot of documents through Wiki Leaks?

Figure 11. Additional people interviewed in Times Square



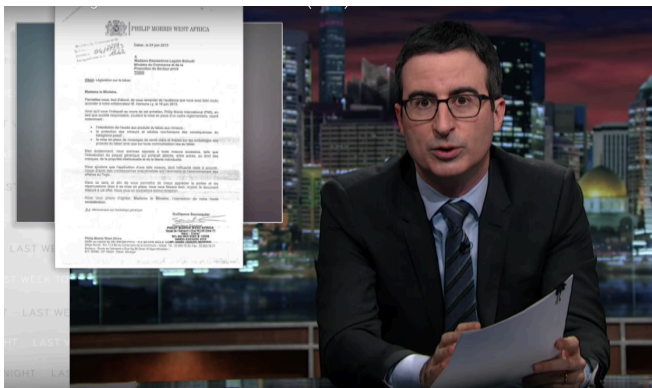
*Last Week Tonight* conducted independent reporting and obtained their own interviews in order to explore a topic they felt had not been adequately addressed in previous studies or by previous news outlets. *Last Week Tonight* featured this kind of independent reporting in four of the six

episodes I analyzed, including the government surveillance episode, the big tobacco episode, the televangelism episode and the Miss America episode.

Sometimes this independent reporting was simple, as with the episode on tobacco. In this episode, Oliver and his team connected with the Togolese government to get a closer look at the interactions between small countries, like Togo, and tobacco companies.

**Oliver:** Now we actually reached out to Togo and asked to see their correspondence with the Tobacco companies, and they gave us this letter from PMI. We had to translate it from French, but it was worth it because this thing is almost comically appalling. It informs Togo that plain packaging laws would result in an incalculable amount of international trade litigation, suggesting Togo would lose any legal challenge.

Figure 12. Oliver and text from Togo's correspondence with PMI



While contacting a foreign government, obtaining legal correspondence with a multi-billion dollar company and translating such correspondence may not sound simple, this independent reporting was far less elaborate than what Oliver and his team went through during the Miss America episode and the televangelism episode.

When researching the topic of beauty pageants and the Miss America Organization, Oliver and his crew were skeptical of the claim that Miss America provides \$45 million in scholarship money annually.

**Oliver:** \$45 million? That is an unbelievable amount of money. As in I literally didn't believe that.

His team then goes to the Miss America website and learns the organization is a registered non-profit. They pull the public tax forms from the national level competitions and find the organization only spent \$482,000 in 2012, meaning there was still supposedly 44 and a half million dollars unaccounted for. That led *Last Week Tonight* into their own search, which required them to, for the first time, hire investigative reporters to assist them with their research.

**Oliver:** And at this point, we really had a clear choice. We could have just thought, sure, the numbers really don't add up, but it's only Miss America who really gives a shit. Or, or, we could try to pull the tax forms from every state level competition in the country cause this was starting to drive us f\*\*\*ing insane. [*Puts big stack of papers on table*] It's been a weird week here. We got 33 states 990 forms and attempted to contact everyone else.

Oliver and his team then called the Miss America Organization as well as several of the colleges and universities where scholarships are awarded in order to find the real amount of money that is awarded to women each year.

All of this digging and rummaging through tax forms, however, does not come close to the amount of time Oliver and his crew invested into researching the televangelism episode. For this episode, Oliver began by finding actual IRS training videos instructing employees on the rules and regulations, or lack of regulations, for churches and religious institutions. Oliver plays

footage from the training video and walks viewers through the actual tax codes for religious institutions.

Figure 13. Oliver and text from the IRS tax guides



Oliver explains the training video and the tax codes and concludes there are little to no regulations for religious entities. He then explains exactly what this means for a church that abuses the prosperity gospel, like televangelists. Oliver reveals he essentially infiltrated the televangelist process.

**Oliver:** When you can operate with so little oversight, it is amazing what you are able to do. Look at Robert Tilton. If you ever send him a donation, you cannot imagine what happens. And luckily, you don't have to imagine because, and we should probably come clean here, we have been involved in a correspondence with Robert Tilton's church for the last seven months to try and find out what he tells people. So, settle in because this gets incredible. Back in January, I sent him \$20 and a letter asking to be added to his mailing list.

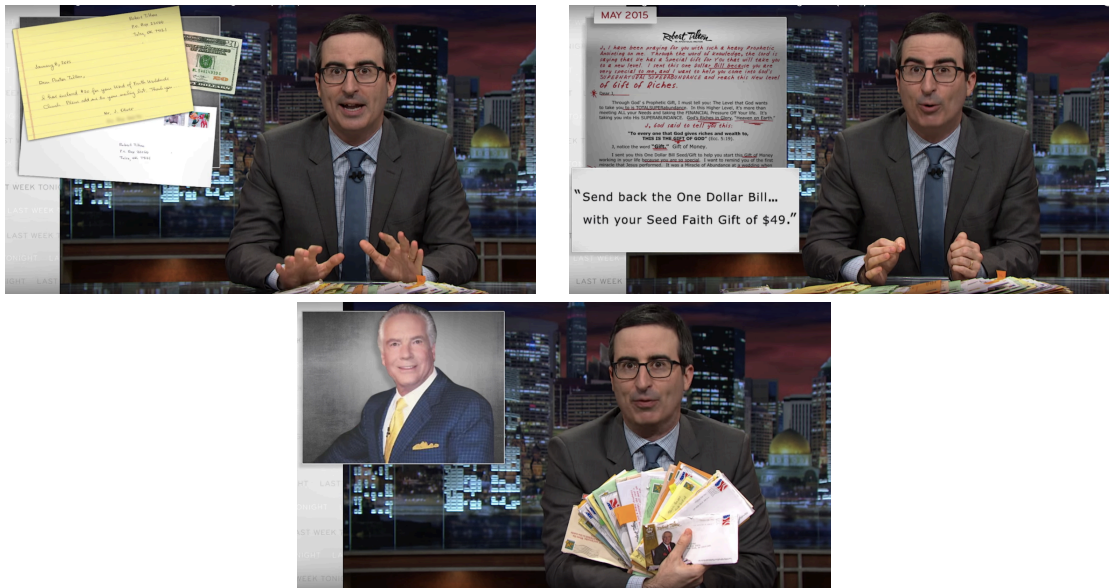
During those seven months, Oliver explains how Tilton would consistently send letters and ask for more and more donations without ever giving Oliver any money in return. Oliver walks viewers through the process and shares actual letters that Robert Tilton sent him. He also reveals how much money Robert Tilton suggested Oliver donated during the past seven months.

**Oliver:** So, as of tonight, I've sent him \$319 and received 26 letters. That's almost one a



week. And again, this is all hilarious until you imagine these letters being sent to someone who cannot afford what he's asking for.

Figure 14. Oliver and his correspondence with Robert Tilton



Seven months, 26 letters and \$319 later, Oliver and his crew were able to give viewers an inside look at predatory churches and present this information in a way research polls and investigative news outlets hadn't done before.

While it is entertaining to hear about Oliver's escapades and quests looking into tax forms and fraudulent churches, this kind of independent reporting is, at its core, highly educative. Through this independent reporting, viewers learn about the inner workings of state and corporate organizations. The independent reporting, as well as the aggregation of news and official information, makes *Last Week Tonight* something more than an entertaining form of media. These techniques make the program educative as well.

### Relatable Presentation:

While revolutionary journalism promoted reasoned, educational information, it was also crucial that this educative information was presented in an understandable and relatable way. In order to do this, the information must be approachable, attractive and explained in a way that makes sense to audiences. Oliver incorporates this ideology into his work in two ways. First, he takes time to clarify issues and alerts audiences to this clarification by using terms that indicate an explanation. Words and terms such as, *basically*, *meaning that* or *essentially*, signify that an idea will be clarified. This simple discursive move helps viewers navigate through complex topics. Oliver planted a sort of signpost for viewers when he made pop culture references. Clarifying terms like *basically*, *meaning that* or *essentially* act as another kind of signpost, this time working to ensure viewers don't become confused by, overwhelmed with or disinterested in the overall topic.

Oliver presents viewers with statistics, descriptions of government or corporate processes and data or trends that can be dull, overwhelming or complicated for viewers. However, his clarifying language helps viewers to digest this heavy information and keep trekking onward to understand the big picture. Table 1 tracks how many times key, clarifying terms were used in each show.

Table 1:

Episode	Oliver says some form of “meaning,” or “basically that means” or “essentially that means”	Oliver says some form of “that is the equivalent of...”
Season 1, episode 6: FIFA	4	0
Season 1, episode 5: Net Neutrality	1	1
Season 1, episode 18: Miss America	2	0
Season 2, episode 8: Government Surveillance	6	1
Season 2, episode 25: Televangelism	3	1
Season 2, episode 2: Tobacco	4	1

Of the six analyzed episodes, each episode utilizes this kind of clarifying language at least twice.

The episode on government surveillance had seven instances where these select terms were used.

A clear example of this language appears during the episode on Miss America. Oliver is explaining how the Miss America Organization deliberately exaggerated and manipulated the amount of scholarship money they provide. Oliver throws out a lot of numbers and information but ends his thought with a simple, clarifying sentence.

**Oliver:** Miss Alabama, in its 2012 filing, said it provided nearly \$2.6 million in scholarships to just one school, Troy University, which blew my mind. Because if that’s true, that must be the single prettiest school anywhere in America. But, when we contacted Troy, it turns out the pageant got to that 2.6 million by multiplying the value of a single scholarship by 48, the number of competitors who could theoretically accept it. Even though, the actual number of contestants who accepted a scholarship that year was, and you’re not going to believe this, zero. Absolute zero. Meaning, the difference between the money they “provided” and the money they “awarded” was, all the money they provided.

This ending sentence helps to summarize the information Oliver presented. The phrase, “you’re not going to believe this,” is a playful way to keep viewers engaged a moment longer in order to hear the true takeaway from this example. The word “meaning,” in the last sentence indicates the final summary of this oration about the Miss Alabama competition. This kind of clarifying language comes up again during the tobacco episode. Oliver dives into a trend about tobacco, followed by a video clip and his explanation.

**Oliver:** All these restrictions helped lower smoking rates in the US from about 43% in 1965 to 18% today, which you would assume would decimate the tobacco industry, which is what makes this clip from 2008 so surprising.

*[Camera shifts to news clip]*

**News Anchor:** Tobacco is what you might call, smoking hot. Is this the best time ever to be a tobacco farmer?

**Tobacco farmer:** Probably the most profitable.

*[Back to Oliver]*

**Oliver:** Wow, so it’s an aging product that’s decreasing in popularity and yet somehow it just can’t stop making money. It’s basically the agricultural equivalent of U2.

Oliver uses simple language and a simple comparison that viewers can wrap their heads around. This example also leads into the second device Oliver utilizes in order to present the program’s information in a relatable and clear way. In addition to clarifying phrases, Oliver’s episodes are filled with absurd and comical metaphors and similes. Take, for example, a moment from the net neutrality episode. Oliver is explaining how President Obama appointed a man named Tom Wheeler as the chairman of the FCC, the government branch designed to protect and regulate interstate communications. However, prior to his appointment, Wheeler used to work for the

cable industry. Oliver uses clarifying language and a simple comparison to explain why this may be problematic.

**Oliver:** Yes, the guy who used to run the cable industry’s lobbying arm is now running the agency tasked with regulating it. That is the equivalent of needing a babysitter and hiring a dingo.

Figure 15. Oliver and babysitting dingo reference



These kinds of comparisons take dull or complex facts and pair them with or position them against something ridiculous or seemingly unrelated—like a babysitting dingo. The juxtaposition is often humorous and involves a subject that viewers are familiar with.

Absurd comparisons are one of the most popular devices used in *Last Week Tonight*. In the episode on government surveillance, for instance, Oliver is trying to communicate the real conundrum the country faces when it comes to government surveillance. He addresses the issue of balancing a person’s right to privacy and their desire for security.

**Oliver:** We all naturally want perfect privacy and perfect safety. But those two things cannot coexist. It’s like how you cannot 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 accept some reasonable restrictions on *both* of them.

Figure 16. Oliver and pet falcon and pet vole reference



While it is difficult to envision the ways broad, abstract concepts like privacy and national security function, an average person can clearly visualize the way a falcon and a small rodent would function. Oliver even pulls up images of a falcon and a vole to illustrate why these two creatures cannot occupy the same vicinity without some restrictions and barriers. This comparison dumbs down the concept of government surveillance without patronizing or boring audience members.

A humorous simile is successfully applied during the FIFA episode as well, when Oliver is simplifying a video clip from CNN. The country hosting the World Cup has to spend millions of dollars to build stadiums and hotels and what not, but they do not actually receive profits from ticket or concession sales. Rather, all profits go to FIFA. This is a surprising and somewhat confusing fact, because most people assume there is a partnership between FIFA and the host

country. Oliver explains the illusion of partnership by comparing it to a common and comical process. He speaks directly to the World Cup host country for that year, Brazil, as he explains.

**Oliver:** 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 [*makes ripping motion*] including some from places you didn't know you had any money, leaving you teary-eyed going, 'Jesus what happened here! What, what happened? I'm never doing this again!'

Viewers can visualize, and perhaps even feel, the pain of body waxing. By using this relatable experience, Oliver is able to offer viewers' insight to the process of World Cup revenue allocation as well as the pain of such a process. Finally, Oliver will create absurd examples and apply it to an actual situation. This side-by-side view of a fictionalized situation and an actual situation can expose a societal reality. This kind of comparison occurred during the episode on net neutrality. Oliver explains the FCC is likely to rule in favor of Internet Service providers, and this may be due to the confusing and dull nature of the topic of net neutrality.

**Oliver:** Government looks set to end net neutrality and let these companies run hog Wild. And we're just going to let them. And you know why? It all comes back to this.

*[Camera shift to news clip from C-Span]*

**Speaker at a net neutrality hearing:** It seeks comment on ways to construe additional language on section 706 and even suggests using section 230B to broaden the scope of the commissions you served authority.

*[Back to Oliver]*

**Oliver:** Oh my god how are you still so dull?! And that's the problem. The cable companies have figured out the great truth of America: If you want to do something evil, put it inside something boring. Apple could put the entire text of Mein Kampf inside the iTunes user agreement and you would just go, agree, agree, agree, whaa, agree.

These kinds of similes and metaphors are sprinkled throughout all six episodes and are used to highlight the absurdity in a situation or clarify a complex point. Oliver avoids sounding patronizing by keeping the comparisons humorous as well as embracing a third and final technique: in-grouping.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that in-grouping relies on terms such as *us* and *we* where as out-grouping embraces a *you* and *them* discourse. Oliver plays with both in-grouping and out-grouping throughout his episodes. However, he generally uses in-grouping during his serious moments to align himself and sympathize with viewers about the difficulties of understanding and caring about certain sociopolitical issues. This technique is best seen during the episode about, arguably, the dullest of the six topics: government surveillance. Oliver opens the episode with a strategic use of in-grouping.

**Oliver:** Our main story tonight is about government surveillance. And I realize most people would rather have a conversation about literally any other topic, including ‘Is my smartphone giving me cancer,’ to which the answer is, probably. Or, ‘do goldfish suffer from depression,’ to which the answer is yes, but very briefly. But the fact is, it is vital that we have a discussion about this now because an important date is right around the corner.

Oliver continues to use the *we* pronoun throughout the show. As he goes deeper and deeper into the issue, he frequently sides with viewers and speaks to a *we* instead of the more accusatory, *you*.

**Oliver:** And, and look, you can think that Snowden did the wrong thing or did it in the wrong way, but the fact is, we have this information now and we no longer get the luxury of pleading ignorance... But here’s the thing, it’s now two years later and it seems like we’ve kind of forgotten to have a debate over the content of what Snowden leaked.



This strategic alignment with the public aims to incite action instead of merely place blame.

Oliver is even more literal with this goal later in the show, when he specifically states that his intent is not to blame or accuse the public of being ignorant.

**Oliver:** And I don't blame people for being confused. We've been looking at this story for the last two weeks and it is *hard* to get your head around. Not just because there are so many complicated programs to keep track of, but because there are no easy answers here. We all naturally want perfect privacy and perfect safety.

Oliver explicitly states this is a confusing issue. His use of in-grouping helps to make viewers not feel dumb or uninformed. The simple use of 'we' over 'you' positions Oliver, the authoritative voice of the program, in the same group and social position as the viewers watching him. This positioning creates more trust and intimacy between Oliver and his viewers (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This discursive move is yet another example of how Oliver aims to empower viewers, not belittle them. In-grouping, humorous comparisons and clarifying language are all efforts to ensure viewers engage with and fully understand the information in *Last Week Tonight*. Oliver understands the intrinsic power in knowledge. By presenting the public with educative and comprehensible information, Oliver offers the public newfound power and invites them into a sociopolitical discourse.

The third and final category of findings relates directly to this invitation. Earlier findings suggest Oliver embraces the techniques and ideologies of fake news and of revolutionary journalism in order to draw audiences in and provide them with educational and comprehensive information they understand and can relate to. These techniques encourage viewers to watch the episodes and to care and think about the topics being discussed. This final category of findings highlights the ways Oliver challenges viewers to engage with the topics.

### *Elements of Public Journalism*

The first two categories of findings exhibit ways Oliver encouraged viewers to watch the show and think about the content of the show. This final category of findings has a slightly different aim. By embracing the core ideals of 20th-century public journalism, Oliver encourages viewers to transform. Using either implicit or explicit language, Oliver calls his viewers to become more than just that—more than viewers. At times it is a subtle nudge. Other times, it is a forceful prod. Through both methods, Oliver embraces a goading voice and leads viewers to harness their power and embrace their role as an active and engaged public.

#### Implicit Call to Action:

In every episode analyzed, there is a language that frames a topic as a significant issue worthy of viewers' attention and consideration. At times, this language merely suggests viewers dedicate more thought to a specific issue. In the episode on government surveillance, Oliver lays it out quite literally when he explains how Edward Snowden exposed vital information.

**Oliver:** 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 is happy anymore when we now know that at least half the water in her tank is whale tears. We know that now, you can't un-know that information, so you have to bear that in mind.

Here, Oliver directly calls out public ignorance. As discussed in the previous section, he chooses to use the word 'we' to avoid sounding accusatory, but he speaks to the idea that for many issues, such as government surveillance, people remain actively ignorant. By citing this tendency, Oliver pushes this topic out of the shadows and into the forefront of people's minds. His

language works in a similar way during the FIFA episode and the Miss America episode. During the segment on FIFA, Oliver opens the episode by offering his feelings toward the topic of the World Cup.

**Oliver:** The World Cup starts this week, and I am both excited and extremely conflicted about it.

He ends the episode by tying back into his initial statement, and re-expressing his opinions on the matter.

**Oliver:** And by this point I hope I've proven to you that FIFA is just appalling. And yet, here's their power—I'm still so excited about the World Cup next week. And it's very hard to justify how I can get so much joy from an organization that's caused so much pain.

In this closing section, Oliver explains how he is facing a moral dilemma. Oliver illustrates how he tangles with this dilemma, which subtly implies that viewers should be thinking and forming opinions of their own.

These kinds of implicit mobilizing statements become more direct during the episode on Miss America. By the end of the segment Oliver has disproved the Miss America Organization's claim that they spend \$45 million annually on women-only scholarships. He and his team could only account for less than half a million dollars. Despite this, Oliver plays a news clip and draws a conclusion.

*[Camera shifts to news clip]*

**Fox news anchor:** The Miss America Organization is actually the largest

provider of scholarships to women in the world.

*[Back to Oliver]*

**Oliver:** Yeah, because even their lowest number is more than any other women only scholarship that we could find. More than the Society of Women Engineers, whose website is here *[displays web address]*, more than the Patsy Mink Foundation, here *[displays web address]*, and more than the Jeannette Rankin Women's scholarship fund, here *[displays web address]*, all of which you can donate to if you want to change the fact that, currently, the biggest scholarship program exclusively for women in America requires you to be unmarried with a mint condition uterus and also rewards working knowledge of buttock adhesive technology.

Oliver offers viewers an option to take steps to engage and donate money to demonstrate their disapproval of sexist ideologies. By providing the web addresses to scholarship organizations that value women's minds and thoughts over their evening wear and bikini bodies, Oliver points to a tangible space where the public could act out against gender biases and discrimination.

While this language is implicit, it demonstrates Oliver's efforts to draw viewer attention to, what he views to be, important and often overlooked societal issues. By crafting this narrative and framing issues as worthy of public thought and input, Oliver essentially alerts viewers to national issues in need of deliberation. In the remaining four episodes, Oliver goes even further than identifying societal hot spots. Rather, he makes an explicit call to action and directly invites the public into the heart of the issue.

#### Explicit Call to Action:

The majority of episodes I analyzed for this study explicitly asked viewers to step out of their passive, viewing role and become active players in the featured issues. While the actual action Oliver called for differed show to show, there was a pattern to his mobilization tactics. In all four episodes where there was an explicit direction, Oliver began by providing viewers with some

kind of tangible thing, be it a hashtag, a government link or a physical address. He then asked, sometimes even pled, for a specific kind of action from viewers.

The most literal call to action came during the episode on televangelism. After presenting his argument about the lack of tax regulations for religious institutions and fraudulent nature of televangelist churches, Oliver came up with a way to challenge these practices.

**Oliver:** And that is when I realized...I should set up my own church to test the legal and financial limits of what religious entities are able to do. So, that is what we have done. We filed paperwork last week establishing a church called, Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption. And, it was disturbingly easy. To make sure we did this correctly, we had this actual tax lawyer walk us through the process.

Oliver explains to viewers how he and his tax lawyer made sure they met the IRS standards for a church. They registered Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption as a nonprofit corporation in Texas, a state that allows a person to incorporate a church despite the fact that Oliver had never lived there. Following a scene change, Oliver takes viewers to church with him.

**Oliver:** there is only one thing left for us to do. Let's go to church.

*[Scene change—Oliver now sits in a home setting]*

**Oliver:** Brothers and sisters, welcome to Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption. I am your mega reverend, thank you brothers and sisters, your mega reverend and CEO John Oliver. And can I tell you, I am so blessed tonight. So blessed to be joined by my radiant wife, Wanda Jo Oliver. Please welcome her. Please welcome her *[Guest star Rachel Dratch enters]*.

Oliver and his 'wife' then ask viewers to plant their seed in Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption.

**Oliver:** Praise be. And praise be to all of you watching us tonight, or joining us online at [www.ourladyofperpetualexemption.com](http://www.ourladyofperpetualexemption.com). But most of all, praise be to the IRS, that most permissive of government agencies. Wanda Jo, I have heard the word of prophecy tonight.

**Dratch:** Hallelujah! What did it say ma' John?

**Oliver:** I'll tell you, Wanda. It says the viewers at home must plant a seed!

**Dratch:** A seed! An almighty seed! Preferably in the form of cash although we do take checks.

**Oliver:** It can be \$5, it can be \$10, it can be \$77. We need you to sow your biggest seed.

**Dratch:** That's, that's money—don't send us seeds.

**Oliver:** That's right, Wanda. Please do not send us actual seeds...Please send us your actual money to this address at the bottom of your screen.

*[Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption P.O. Box 1954 NY, NY 10113 appears on the bottom of the screen].*

**Oliver:** If you do this, and this is real, great things will happen to you. And that's apparently something I'm allowed to say.

Oliver also provides viewers with the phone number 1-800-THIS-IS-LEGAL so they call and give money. The segment ends with Oliver and Dratch instructing viewers to give money, and Oliver explains what it would mean if the IRS were to intervene or audit his church.

**Oliver:** Call it. On your screen. Actually do it. Actually do it now. Because if Robert Tilton, Kenneth Copeland and all these bastards can get away with it and we get stopped, truly we have witnessed a f\*\*\*ing miracle tonight!

Figure 17. Oliver and guest-star Dratch with gospel choir



This call to action is as direct as it gets. Oliver provides viewers with an actual church and a physical address. He then asks, or rather demands, viewers send money to this church either by phone or by mail. This episode illustrates Oliver's process to try and get viewers to engage. During the episode on televangelism, this mobilizing effort is quite literal. However, this is not always the case. Oliver often makes requests that require viewers to put more time, energy and thought into an issue. Even though these requests get more complex, Oliver follows his same pattern—he provides some kind of resource and then requests some kind of action.

For instance, in the episode on big tobacco, Oliver explains how countries have tried to adopt plain packaging, a health initiative that covers packs of cigarettes with disturbing photos like cancerous lungs instead of the normal tobacco branding. Tobacco companies like Phillip Morris International (PMI) have sued countries for using plain packaging, arguing that it is a form of trademark infringement. Oliver ends the segment by offering a satirical compromise.

**Oliver:** It's clear what each side wants. Countries want to warn their citizens about the health dangers of smoking tobacco. Um, tobacco companies want to be able to present branded images, which they have spent time and money to cultivate. So, may I suggest a compromise?

I present to you, the new face of Marlboro, Jeff the Diseased Lung in a Cowboy Hat. We are offering Jeff to you, Phillip Morris International, to use as you wish. Put him on your billboards, put him on some ads, in fact, and, don't be mad, we've, we've already started doing that for you. This is an actual billboard that we have put up in Uruguay of Jeff the Diseased Lung.... Oh, one more thing. Um, to be completely honest, we didn't just do it in Uruguay. Um, because we also, and don't be mad, we made some Jeff branded t-shirts and we shipped them to Togo yesterday where they've been quite a hit.

Figure 18. Oliver and Jeff the Diseased Lung



After showing viewers the steps they'd taken to make Jeff popular, Oliver calls on the public to keep the trend going. Oliver ends the segment by speaking to Phillip Morris International (PMI) and explaining how he is confident that viewers will help popularize the new logo for Marlboro. .

**Oliver:** And I know our viewers would love to help you, eh, get the message out there. In fact you can tweet about Jeff using the hash tag #JeffWeCan to get him trending worldwide and get PMI's attention. Post Jeff's photo on Google Plus and tag him Marlboro, which might push him to the top of Marlboro's Google image search. We can do this everyone!

While the logo is a satirical jab at Phillip Morris, the request that viewers chime in and promote Jeff is quite serious. Oliver not only provides viewers with the new mascot, but with a specific hashtag so the public can make a unified statement. This diseased mascot and the hashtag build toward Oliver's final explicit call, which he makes in the last sentence of the program: "Let's make Jeff happen!" The last statement viewers hear from Oliver is a humorous, but explicit call to action.



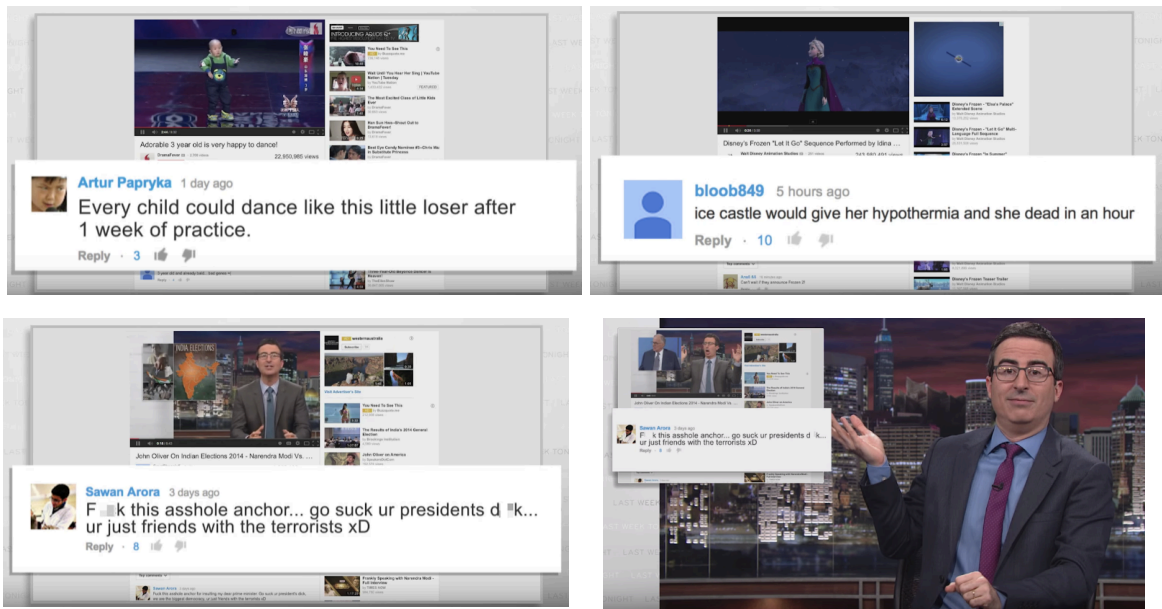
This final comical sendoff also occurred in the episode on net neutrality. Oliver explains that, even though it looked like the FCC was set to vote against net neutrality, there was still a way the public could make a difference. He states that the FCC opened a public comment section on their website, seeking public input on the matter of net neutrality. Oliver displays the FCC web address on the screen and makes a formal address to all the Internet commenters of the world.

**Oliver:** And at this point, and I can't believe I'm about to do this, I would like to address the Internet commenters out there directly.

*[Oliver turns to face viewers]*

Good evening monsters. This may be the moment you've spent your whole lives training for. You've been out there furiously commenting on dance videos of adorable 3-year-olds 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'd be dead in an hour.' Or, and I know you've done this one, commenting on a show like this one saying, 'f\*\*\* this asshole anchor...go suck your president's dick...you're just friends with the terrorists.' Now, I don't know what any of that means, but I don't think it's a compliment.

Figure 19. Oliver and Internet comments



*[Oliver walks across set to screen with FCC web address]*

**Oliver:** 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's time to do some f\*\*\*ing karate.

For once in your life *[inspirational music plays, and Oliver walks across set where a large screen displays the FCC web address]*, we need you to channel that anger, that badly spelled bile that you normally reserve for unforgivable attacks on actresses you seem to think have put on weight, or politicians that you disagree with, or photos of your ex-girlfriend getting on with her life, or, non-white actors being cast 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 lives, focus your indiscriminate rage in a useful direction

*[Inspirational music builds, and Oliver begins jumping and waving his arms]*

Seize your moment my lovely trolls. Turn on caps lock and fly my pretties, fly, fly, fly!

Figure 20. Oliver encouraging viewers to comment on FCC site



This call to action is, again, comical in nature. As with the episode on televangelism, the last statement viewers hear is a funny plea, this time to “turn on caps lock and fly!” Despite the humor, there is a deliberate request, which is legitimized by the link Oliver provides to the FCC public comment section. This web address appears on the screen for a total of 49 seconds

and at the end, Oliver purposefully walks across the set to stand in front of the link. This conveys the seriousness of Oliver's mobilizing intentions.

The final episode that includes an explicit call to action occurs during the segment on government surveillance. This call for mobilization is certainly explicit, but it is also the most abstract request and demands higher thinking from the public. Throughout the episode, Oliver primes viewers by using implicit language to encourage critical thought about the balance between public privacy and national security.

**Oliver:** So, maybe it is time for us to talk about where the limits should be. And the best place to start would be section 215, not just because it's the easiest to understand, but because there is widespread agreement it needs to be reformed... If we let section 215 get renewed in its current form without serious public debate, we're in trouble. Because section 215 is the canary in the coal mine. If we cannot fix that, we're not going to fix any of them... And again, I'm not saying this is an easy conversation. But we have to have it. I know this is confusing.

Using in-grouping, he sympathizes with viewers and asserts that government surveillance is a hard issue to talk about. In this episode, Oliver doesn't just lecture about the need for discussion and deliberation on this topic. Rather, he listens to his own instructive statements and engages in a thoughtful discussion with, arguably, the best person to have this discussion with: Edward Snowden. Oliver and his crew flew to Moscow, Russia for 48 hours to interview the man who put this topic in motion. After a few joking questions, Oliver dives into serious questions.

**Oliver:** So, did you do this to solve a problem?

**Snowden:** I did this to give the American people a chance to decide for themselves the kind of government they want to have. That is a conversation that I think the American people deserve to decide.

**Oliver:** Oh, there's no doubt it is a critical conversation. But is it a conversation that we have the capacity to have? Because it's so complicated. We don't fundamentally understand it.

**Snowden:** It is a challenging conversation. I mean it's difficult for people to even conceptualize. The problem is, the Internet is massively complex and so much of it is invisible. Eh, service providers, technicians, engineers, the phone op—

**Oliver:** Ok, let, let, let me stop you right there, Edward. Cause this is the *whole* problem.

**Snowden:** Right.

**Oliver:** This is the whole problem. I glaze over. Cause it's like, the IT guy comes into your office and you go, oh, shit...Oh shit...Don't teach me anything. I don't want to learn. You smell like canned soup.

**Snowden:** It's a real challenge to figure out, how do we communicate things that require, sort of, years and years of, of technical understanding and compress that into seconds of speech. Uh, I'm sympathetic to the problem there.

At this point in the interview, Oliver offers a solution to this confounding challenge. He shows Snowden footage from interviews the *Last Week Tonight* crew conducted in Times Square.

**Oliver:** Everything you did, only matters if we have this conversation properly.

**Snowden:** [*Shakes head in agreement*]

**Oliver:** So let me help you out there. You mentioned in an interview that the NSA was passing around naked photos of people?

**Snowden:** Yeah, this was something where it's uh, it's not actually seen as a big deal in the culture of NSA, uh, because you see naked pictures all the time.

**Oliver:** *That* terrifies people. Cause when we asked people about that, this is the response you get.

[*Camera shifts to interview footage*]

**Interview A:** The government should not be able to look at dick pictures.

**Interview B:** If the government was looking at pictures of Gordon's penis, I'd definitely feel it would be an invasion of my privacy.

**Interview C:** Uh, yeah if the government were looking at pictures of my penis that would upset me.

**Interview D:** They should never, ever, the U.S. government should never have a picture of my dick.

**Interview E:** If my husband sent me a picture of his penis and the government could access it, I would, I would want that program to be shut down.

**Interview F:** I would want the dick pic program changed.

**Interview G:** I think it would terrific if the program could change.

**Interview H:** I would want it to be tweaked, I would want it to have, have clear and transparent laws that we knew about. Um, and that were communicated to us to understand what they were being used for or why they were being kept.

*[Voice-over of interviewer asking question]*

**Interviewer:** Do you think that program exists?

**Interview I:** I don't. I don't think that program exists at all.

**Interview J:** No

**Interview K:** No

**Interview L:** No

**Interview M:** No

**Interview N:** If I had, knowledge that the U.S. government had a picture of my dick, I would be very pissed off.

Oliver then explains to Snowden what this, albeit, ridiculous interview footage means in terms of the national debate about government surveillance.

**Oliver:** *This* is the most visible line in the sand for people: Can they see my dick? So, with that in mind, look inside that folder. *[Hands Snowden folder]*

**Snowden:** *[Opens folder and laughs]*

**Oliver:** That, is a picture of my dick. So let's go through each NSA program and explain to me its capabilities in regards to that photograph of my penis. So, 702 Surveillance. Can they see my dick?

Oliver and Snowden work their way through six NSA programs and Snowden explains if and how each program could potentially allow government officials to see nude photographs sent by text or email. Oliver offers commentary when Snowden starts to get too complex.

**Snowden:** Prism is how they pull your junk out of Google with Google's involvement. All of the different Prism partners, people like Yahoo, Facebook, Google, the government deputizes them to be uh, sort of their little surveillance sheriff.

**Oliver:** They're a dick sheriff?

**Snowden:** Correct

In each program, Snowden's answer is essentially: Yes; this program could give government officials access to nude photos. Oliver summarizes with an explicit call to action.

**[Oliver voice-over]:** So there you have it America. All of us should now be equipped to have this vital debate. Because by June 1st, it is imperative we have a rational, adult conversation about whether our safety is worth living in a country of barely regulated, government-sanctioned, dick sheriffs.

In this segment, Oliver follows the pattern established in the previous episodes, only in a more abstract way. In the government surveillance episode, Oliver does not provide viewers with something concrete like an address or a hashtag. Instead, he offers viewers an entry point into a complex discourse. By finding a relatable example of the consequences of government surveillance, Oliver opens the conversation to the general public, who were previously restricted from this conversation due to the cloudy and complex nature of the topic. After offering viewers this entry point—can they see my dick—Oliver asks for a simple, yet somewhat ethereal,

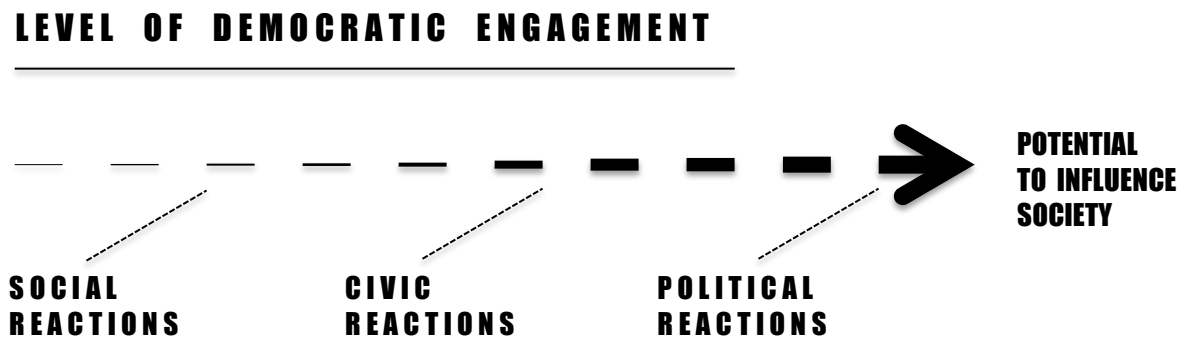
concept: deliberation. Oliver asks people to have a rational, adult conversation on this topic. Throughout the episode, Oliver provides two examples demonstrating the feasibility of this request. First, his interview with Snowden is an example of what a discussion on this topic may look like. And secondly, he presents regular citizens as proof of the public's ability to engage with the topic. The interviews he conducted with citizens in Times Square show how the public is capable of discussing and forming opinions about this complex issue.

While it is most evident in the episode on government surveillance, throughout all six episodes, Oliver provides viewers with entry points to complicated topics and requests, either implicitly or explicitly, public consideration, deliberation and engagement. This feature of his show distinguishes Oliver from both late-night comedy and fake news shows as well as more traditional news programs. This mobilization feature of *Last Week Tonight* is more reminiscent of public journalism, whose aim was to stimulate and even facilitate public debate (Rosen & Merritt, 1993). This element of the show is rousing in nature and encourages viewers to step away from their prescriptively passive role. It is important to note that this element works in concert with the other elements addressed in my findings section. Humor and hostility are blended and applied simultaneously with a call to action. The relatable and educative presentation of material, which often has comical or aggressive tones, is what allows for the final mobilizing statements to truly resonate. The combination of these three elements triggers responses from viewers. In the next section of this project, I will discuss the social, civic and political reactions that correlate with the six analyzed episodes.

## CHAPTER VI. EXTERNAL FINDINGS

By looking into society, I found the public reacted to Oliver’s show in a variety of ways. Some reactions were mild and took the form of personal reflections and opinions. Other reactions were more dynamic and demonstrated citizens’ ability to engage with complex issues and formulate sophisticated responses. There were three general categories of reactions that occurred: social, civic and political. These categories represent the kinds of spheres the public inserted themselves into, be it their own social sphere, a civic or community sphere or a political sphere. The categories also correlate with the potential for societal impact, as demonstrated in Figure 21.

Figure 21. Representation of external findings



The more civic and political a reaction is, the more it functions within the kind of public sphere imagined by Habermas (1989) as they aim to speak to or challenge state, corporate and political powers. In terms of sheer quantity, audiences largely responded in a social way or in a civic way. In terms of quality of reaction, the political responses have the greatest potential for significant societal change and demonstrated the most effort and thought from citizens. Fewer audience members responded in a political way, but the political responses that did occur effectively engaged with a Habermasean public sphere. All of the reactions—social, civic and political—are significant in the sense that they demonstrate a growing trend. People, particularly young people,

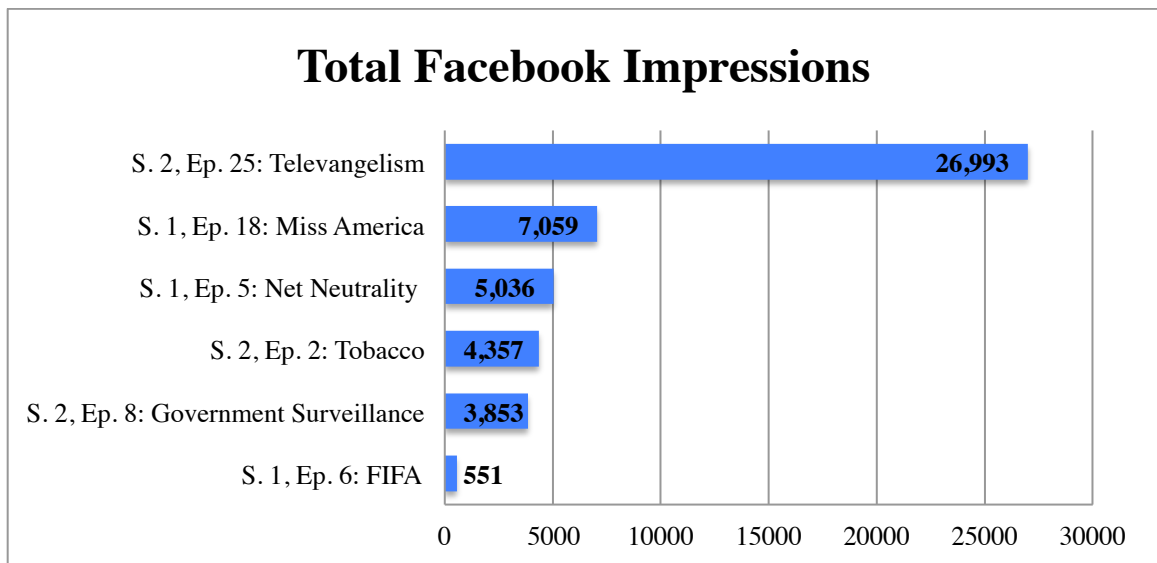


are listening to Oliver and are responding to the issues he raises during *Last Week Tonight*. The social, civic and political reactions are evidence that *Last Week Tonight* triggers enough interest in various sociopolitical issues to drive audiences to tangibly engage with society.

### *Social Reactions*

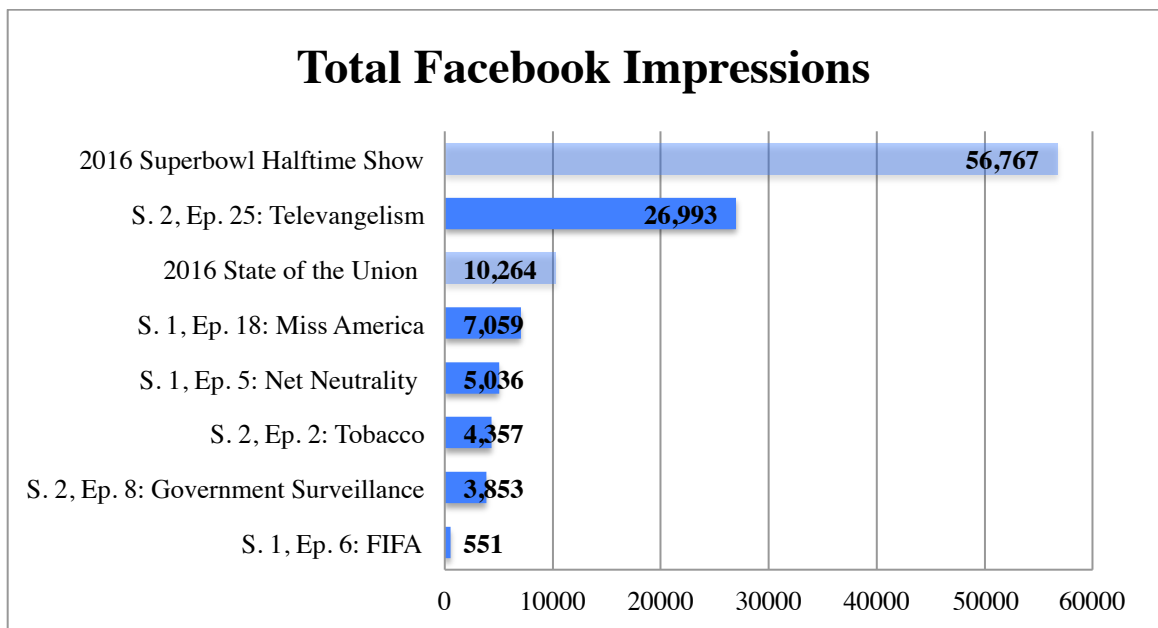
Social responses involve a person expressing an action that has relatively internal effects. That is, effects that are felt on a personal or social level. Social media provides unique—and quantifiable—insight into a person’s interactions. I tracked social media, namely Facebook, to see how many times individuals expressed some kind of opinion or made some kind of statement about the six episodes. Using the social media analytics tool Like Scraper, I calculated and graphed the number of total Facebook impressions each episode’s YouTube link received. I tracked how many times a person posted the episode’s YouTube link on Facebook, and how many people commented, shared or liked this link. Figure 22 illustrates these findings.

Figure 22. Impressions for episodes of *Last Week Tonight*



In order to understand what these impressions mean on a broader scale, I compared them to the number of impressions from an important political event and a wildly popular social event from 2016: The State of the Union Address and the Super Bowl Halftime show. On January 12, 2016, *the New York Times* posted a YouTube video of President Obama’s State of the Union Address, which received a little more than 10,000 impressions. A little less than a month later, the NFL posted the official video of the 2016 Super Bowl halftime show featuring Cold Play, Beyoncé and Bruno Mars. This YouTube video received nearly 57,000 impressions on Facebook. Figure 23 shows this data alongside the clips from *Last Week Tonight*.

Figure 23. Impressions for *Last Week Tonight* compared with other events



Oliver’s coverage on televangelism drew more interest than the President’s formal address to the nation. However, it seems Beyoncé and Bruno attracted more viewers and lead more viewers to express an opinion or make a statement on Facebook. While there are many differences between

something like a halftime show and a television episode, one of the most significant differences is the frequency of both events. The Super Bowl halftime show, as well as the State of the Union, occurs once a year. That rarity is important to consider, as it adds to the interest of the event. *Last Week Tonight* is a far more regular occurrence, yet it regularly generates a stir on social media. Certain episodes, like the televangelism episode, spill into the Facebook realm more than others, but the average number of impressions for an episode in season one and season two is still in the thousands. The average number of impressions per episode in season one is 3,763.13. That number nearly doubled for season two, with an average of 6,232.01 Facebook impressions per episode.

The data from Figure 22 and 23 relates to the number of times people posted the actual *Last Week Tonight* YouTube clip to Facebook. While this is a very direct way to investigate the reactions to the show, there are other interesting correlations that arose. For instance, during the episode on Miss America, Oliver provided viewers with links to three scholarship organizations for women that award scholarships based off women's thoughts and intellectual capabilities instead of their bikini bodies. Oliver flashed the website for the Society of Women Engineers (SWE) on the screen for 3 seconds. In the week to follow, the number of people who linked to the SWE site skyrocketed to 2,450 (Gregory, 2014). The week before the show aired, that number was at 124 (Gregory, 2014).

In addition to social media activity, this episode illustrates the ways people sought out additional information and knowledge after viewing *Last Week Tonight*. The week before the Miss America episode aired, the SWE website had about 1,250 views. The week after the show aired, views to the scholarship site more than doubled to 2,561 views (Gregory, 2014). The spokeswoman for the Society of Women Engineers referred to this spike in activity as "the John

Oliver bounce.” While this data suggests a correlation and cannot prove causality, the increase is quite striking. There was a 1,876 percent increase in social media impressions and a 104 percent increase in website viewership. These spikes, combined with the sheer volume of Facebook impressions, illustrate the magnitude of societal reactions to the show. Between season one and season two, there were over 300,000 total Facebook impressions from 58 episodes.

Young people are watching and talking about *Last Week Tonight*. As the civic and political reactions will demonstrate, they also move beyond personal and social expression and are engaging in democratic conversations.

### *Civic Reactions*

For a response to be deemed civic, the audience members must have intended for their action to bolster some tenant of communal life (Habermas, 1989). The Miss America episode provides a clear example of the difference between a social reaction and a civic reaction. When an individual posts the Society of Women Engineers website link to their Facebook page, they are making a personal statement to their inner circle of friends, family and acquaintances. This is a social reaction. However, there is evidence to suggest that many reacted in a civic way as well.

The SWE expects about \$166,666 a year in individual donations. In the two days following the episode, the organization received about \$25,000 in individual donations, which is 15 percent of their annual earnings. A donation to a nonprofit or humanitarian group is a civic statement, as an individual making the donation does not personally know the eventual recipient of this money. There is no direct personal gain from this kind of action. It is fair to assume this spike in SWE donations can be attributed to *Last Week Tonight*. However, it is impossible to know why exactly individuals decided to donate in those two days following the episode, and

therefore this paper can only suggest a correlation between the two events. However, the aftermath of other episodes *can* prove a direct casual relationship between a civic act and Oliver's show.

Oliver held follow-up segments to the televangelism episode and the tobacco episode due to societal reactions that occurred in the days and weeks after the original episode. For instance, one week after Oliver created Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption during the televangelism episode, he provided viewers with an update on church donations.

**Oliver:** We launched our own church, Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption, and asked you [*crowd cheers*] praise be, praise be, and we asked you to send us money at this address [*points to address on screen*] To be honest, slightly more of you responded than we were expecting... I would like to show you a little of what we received because look at this harvest [*presents boxes of mail*] you gave unto us.

Figure 24. Oliver and thousands of seed offerings from viewers

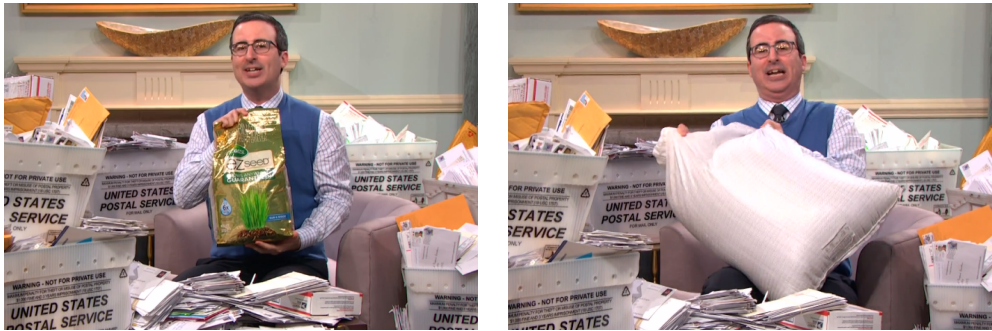


Oliver explained that, in the week since he established his church, thousands of seed offerings were mailed in, some of which were not money.

**Oliver:** It was so disappointing that someone sent this gigantic bag of seeds to us through

the mail. It was the biggest bag of seeds I'd ever seen, until the next day, when this actual bag of seeds turned up.

Figure 25. Oliver and additional seed offerings from viewers



Other offerings viewers made were money, but were not the kind of money Oliver wanted.

**Oliver:** We have received currency from all over the world, including this, one hundred trillion dollar bill from Zimbabwe. I was actually, genuinely excited about this and was about to send one hundred trillion blessings your way, until I checked the exchange rate and found out that this is worth about 40 cents, so now, I wouldn't even bless you if you f\*\*\*ing sneezed.

Despite these comical offerings, Oliver reported that his church received thousands of cash donations. He ended this segment instructing viewers to continue seeding their faith. During the next episode, nearly a month after the church was formally established, Oliver and his fake wife Rachel Dratch addressed viewers once again, this time in a room filled with boxes and bins of fan mail.

**Oliver:** Behold the bounty that you have sown upon us. You sent in, and this is true, tens of thousands of dollars, mostly in single dollar bills, which was a little annoying.

Oliver and Dratch said they received thousands of offerings. While the majority of these offerings were money, a handful were not. And it was because of these more creative

interpretations of the term *seed* that Oliver and Dratch decided to close down Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption, which they announced during the second follow-up episode.

**Oliver:** I am sorry to report to you that tonight, we are closing down the church. Not [*crowd boos*] no, no, not because we *have* to. We have still not broken any laws by promising you untold riches in return for sending us money... We are also not closing down because you kept sending us actual seeds, even though we explicitly told you not to... Nor are we closing down because someone sent us 12 bobble heads of Minnesota Timberwolves flame out Johnny Flynn, which, lets be honest is at least 11 too many. We're not even shutting down because someone sent this, four-foot carved wooden penis with a sign attached to it reading, 'rub this, for the seed you seek.' That's not even why.

Figure 26. Oliver and creative seed offerings from viewers



**Oliver:** The reason we are shutting this church down, is we received a different kind of seed. We received, and this is all *too* true, not one, not two, not three but four packages containing jars and or vials of semen. And some looked fake, but others, did not.

**Dratch:** We live our lives by one hard and fast rule: When someone sends you jizz through the mail, it's time to stop doing whatever you're doing.

**Oliver:** Testify to that, Wanda. So we are shutting this shit down, shut it down boys, shut this shit down. And I'll tell you why, because setting up churches is all fun and games until someone gets sperm in an envelope... So, we are shuttering up Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption. And we will be giving all the money to Doctors Without Borders.

The viewers who sent money, items, and yes, even sperm, into the church did in fact act civically. As it turns out, Oliver donated the money to an established nonprofit, Doctors Without Borders. Ultimately, the donations from viewers supported this internationally acclaimed humanitarian group. But, even before Oliver closed the church and sent the money to charity, viewers were still acting in a communal way. By donating, viewers were supporting the Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption and what the church stands for. Clearly, Oliver is mocking the religious institutions that, he believes, manipulate people and extort money from vulnerable populations. The church he created is a satirical jab at these sorts of morally corrupt institutions. Therefore, viewers who donated to the church are contributing to this satirical protest. In this sense, viewers are embracing their rights as citizens to critique and challenge the powerful institutions of society.

This kind of civic action occurred during the episode on tobacco as well. Oliver ran a follow-up segment to the tobacco issue a little less than a month after he introduced the world to Jeff the Diseased Lung, his proposed mascot for Phillip Morris International. During this follow-up, he applauded viewers for helping popularize Jeff.

**Oliver:** We encouraged the rest of the world to spread the word about Jeff using the hashtag, JeffWeCan and, to our absolute joy, Jeff you did. Jeff you did very much. But, it didn't stop there because, and we had nothing to do with the rest of this, there are now shockingly good animated videos of Jeff on YouTube as well as this bus stop ad in Germany featuring text, which roughly translates as "Break The Tobacco Industry..." It actually gets one step better cause, incredibly, someone made an elaborate, full Jeff costume and sent us a video from Mexico City of him dancing around on stage at a rally.

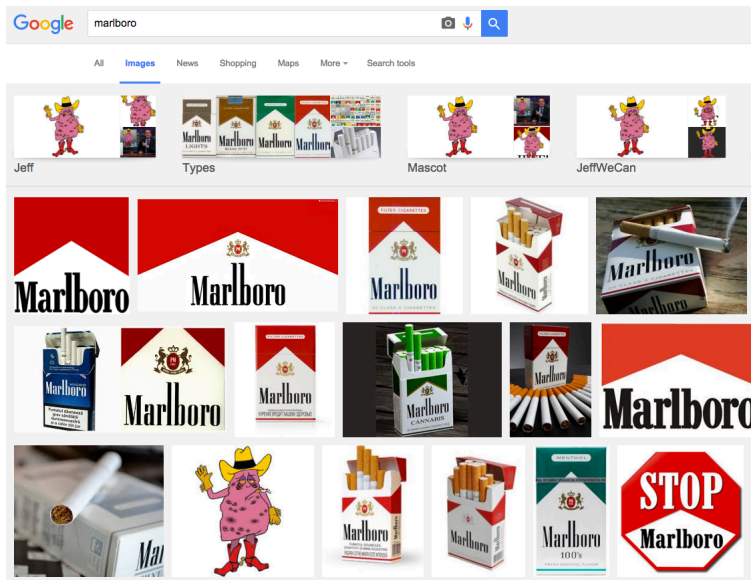


Figure 27. Oliver and images of Jeff the Diseased Lung sent in from viewers



Jeff the Diseased Lung is the physical embodiment societal discontent. The hashtag JeffWeCan is the rallying chant of this quirky protest. While Oliver was the first to express this discontent, the examples he mentions during the follow-up segment are evidence that people from around the world heard his protesting cry and answered back. Bus stop ads in Germany, animated videos on YouTube and life-size costumes in Mexico prove viewers embraced the comical and accessible platform created by Jeff the Diseased Lung. Thousands of other viewers contributed to this conversation in more subtle ways as well. In the original tobacco episode, Oliver asked viewers to go to Google Plus and tag Jeff as *Marlboro*, so he would appear on Google Images when people searched for the tobacco product. Viewers answered this call as well. As of March 2016, when a person Googles *Marlboro*, Jeff the Diseased Lung is one of the top images to come up, as demonstrated by Figure 28.

Figure 28. Results on Google Image for search term ‘marlboro’

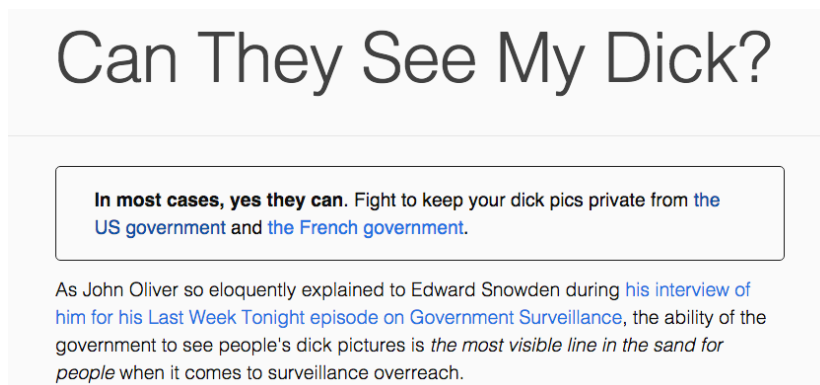


Together, these reactions form a unified voice, which speaks out against big tobacco industries. These responses are civic in nature, as their intention is to contribute to a national, even international audience about a widespread public health issue. Civic reactions aim to strengthen communities, spread public knowledge and engage broad audiences. In general, these reactions scrape the surface of the sacred public sphere imagined by Habermas. These kinds of reactions have the potential to incite societal change, but they are not politically oriented in nature. The final category of societal findings is, in fact, political in nature and works with the intention of creating change. While there are not nearly as many examples of political reactions, the reactions that did occur function well within the public sphere and contributed to moments of political change.

## *Political Reactions*

An important quality of civic reactions is that they are intended to speak to and benefit a broad audience. Political reactions have this same feature but, unlike civic responses, the action is geared toward state or governmental systems. The episode on government surveillance demonstrates a blending of a civic and a political reaction, but is ultimately politically orientated. During the episode, Oliver worked with Snowden to construct a more understandable conversation about surveillance programs and national security. Oliver asked Snowden which NSA programs provided government officials with the capability to access nude photos citizens' sent through text messages and email. Soon after the episode aired, a man named Olivier Lacan created a website titled, "Can They See my Dick," where he summarized Snowden's points about the capabilities of NSA programs. Lacan offered details about NSA programs like Mystic and Prism and presented the information in the same context as Oliver and Snowden did, structuring the information around the framework of nude photos. Lacan also expressed his own personal opinions in the website and urged his audience to "fight" against these programs. Figure 29 shows the headline from Lacan's website and features the persuasive language he uses.

Figure 29. Banner from Lacan's website



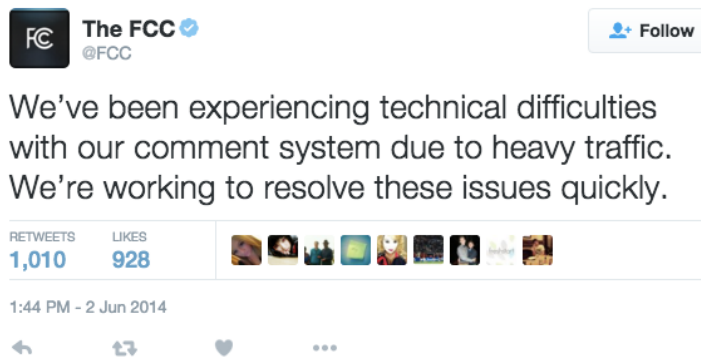
In addition, Lacan provides links to other civil liberty organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation and Fight215.org. These sites offer additional information and resources on specific NSA programs.

As of March 2016, there were 4,060 people who posted links to Lacan's site on Facebook. Lacan's site aimed to enhance public knowledge on a political issue and expand the discourse around government surveillance. Lacan offers a public critique of government power and attributes the creation of his website to *Last Week Tonight*. Lacan's website is a clear example of a political reaction, as it stretches into a political sphere and speaks toward state powers.

About two months after the episode on government surveillance, the Senate passed the USA Freedom Act, which works to end the government's bulk collection of U.S. phone records. While surveillance programs still exist, this act demonstrates how these programs are being reined in and regulated. It would be a leap to say that *Last Week Tonight* had anything to do with this. It is, though, a curious coincidence. And curious coincidences pile up when it comes to analyzing political reactions to Oliver's show. In one particular instance, the correlations between an episode and a federal ruling that passed eight months later were so strong it would be hard to pass it off as mere coincidence.

On June 1, 2014, during the episode on net neutrality, Oliver summoned all the Internet trolls and commenters of the world and asked them to "seize the moment" and express their opinions on the FCC public comment section regarding net neutrality. On June 2, 2014, at about 2 in the afternoon, the FCC tweeted out a message (Figure 30).

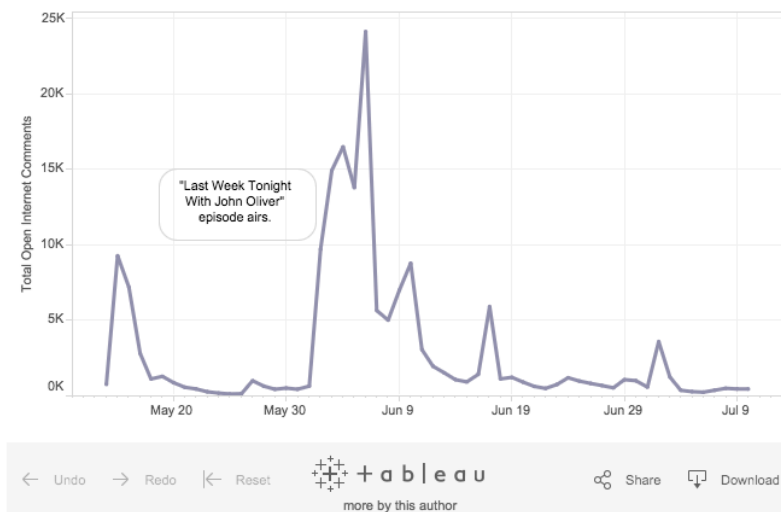
Figure 30. FCC tweet from June 2, 2014 when public comment site crashed



The FCC site was flooded with so many comments it crashed. All sorts of news outlets, from *the Washington Post* to *the New York Times*, to *CNN* to *NPR*, suggested the spike was due to Oliver’s program. *The Washington Post* ran an article a few days after the show. They said Oliver “may just be the firebrand activist we’re looking for—because Oliver’s rant and subsequent call to action may have crashed the FCC’s website, or at the very least slowed it to a crawl (McDonald, 2014).” The data editor for *U.S. News and World Report*, Lindsey Cook, found the timing of this tidal wave of comments curious as well. Cook mined through the FCC’s electronic comment filing system and compiled data about the number of comments posted during a portion of the initial open comment period, from May 14, 2014 to July 10, 2014. In the eight days after Oliver’s episode aired, there were 96,498 comments posted to the FCC site (Cook, 2014). According to Cook, it would be difficult to attribute the high volume of engagement to anything but Oliver’s show. These 96,000 comments did not come at the very beginning of the comment period, or at the end. Rather, they fell oddly in the middle of the comment period. Cook could not find any major announcements from the FCC around the first week of June that could account for the high volume of comments either. Oliver’s show seems to be a sole factor for the drastic increase. And I do not use the word *drastic* lightly. In the eight

days leading up to the episode, there were 3,510 comments posted (Cook, 2014). This is more than a 2000 percent increase in comments. If anything, the phrase *drastic increase* is an understatement. Cook graphed the amount of comments per day to illustrate the sizable difference in the numbers before and after the episode aired (Figure 31).

Figure 31. Graph of number of FCC public comment site over time



Lindsey Cook for USN&WR; Source: FCC

The FCC extended the comment period due to the influx of public interest. By the close of the comment period on September 15, 2014, there were 3.9 million submissions filed to the FCC concerning net neutrality (Sohn, 2014). This was the most commented-on topic in FCC history, beating out the roughly 1.4 million comments the agency received after the indecent exposure incident during Janet Jackson’s Super Bowl halftime performance (Sohn, 2014).

The timing of these comments isn’t the only connection between *Last Week Tonight* and the sudden spike in political engagement. Many of the commenters directly cite Oliver in their comment to the FCC. In fact, between the day the show aired on June 1, and the day the

comment period ended on September 15, there were 1,236 comments filed under the net neutrality issue that included the phrase *John Oliver*. Some people simply attribute their reason for commenting to Oliver's episode.

Figure 32. FCC public comment from Chris Buttino and Kenny Ames

**Proceeding Number:** [14-28](#)  
**Name of Filer:** Chris Buttino  
**View Filing:** [View \(1\)](#)  
**Type of Filing:** COMMENT  
**Exparte:** No  
**Date Received:** 07/18/2014  
**Date Posted:** 07/21/2014  
**Address:** 31 Jewett Ave Cortland, NY 13045

7521710380.txt  
It is vitally important to keep all internet traffic open and equally accessible. It needs to be considered that by limiting the openness of the internet and our ability to receive content that we are limiting the ability not only to speak freely but also to view, hear or read freely. This is a core principal of our democracy and to believe it can be sold to those who will pay the most damages this nation. Also if it were not for HBO I probably would not be submitting this comment, Thanks John Oliver.

**Proceeding Number:** [14-28](#)  
**Name of Filer:** Kenny Ames  
**View Filing:** [View \(1\)](#)  
**Type of Filing:** COMMENT  
**Exparte:** No  
**Date Received:** 06/09/2014  
**Date Posted:** 06/15/2014  
**Address:** 3411 17th Street, NE Washington, DC 20018

7521277667.txt  
Please keep net neutrality. It is vital for a free and open democracy. Plus, ending net neutrality would permit telecom monopolies. I was inspired to write by John Oliver and agree with his points.  
<http://www.upworthy.com/john-oliver-goes-off-on-an-epic-fact-checked-mic-dropping-rant-for-13-minutes-that-you-need-to-see?c=upw1>

Kenny Ames, in his comment from June 9, 2014, claims Oliver inspired him to write the post while Chris Buttino goes further to say he wouldn't have engaged in the process if it were not for Oliver. Both of these comments also show examples of citizens using politically charged language and engaging with sophisticated topics like first amendment rights and principles of democracy. This was a common feature in posts that cited Oliver. Pamela Fettig posted a comment in September of 2014 and spoke to issues of capitalism, corporate monopolies and

equality. In her comment she also goes into more detail about the role Oliver played in triggering her engagement.

Figure 33. FCC public comment from Pamela Fettig

**Proceeding Number:** [14-28](#)  
**Name of Filer:** Pamela Fettig  
**View Filing:** [View \(1\)](#)  
**Type of Filing:** COMMENT  
**Exparte:** No  
**Date Received:** 09/02/2014  
**Date Posted:** 09/02/2014  
**Address:** 245 Coatsville Drive Westfield, IN 46074

7521826934.txt  
The issue of Internet neutrality is gaining steam, and I'd like to weigh in. The segment John Oliver recently did on his show perfectly explained the issue flawlessly to all of us who have been confused by what's really going on in Washington. The Internet needs to remain an equal space for all and should not be turned into a tier system for the cable companies. These companies are certainly monopolies and no one but the cable companies and government would argue otherwise. The citizens of our country deserve services that don't, at the same time, jack up prices just because they can. Surely capitalism and fairness can coexist in America.

Thank you,  
Pamela Fettig

Fettig speaks to Oliver's ability to communicate complex information in a relatable and understandable manner, and she wasn't the only one to highlight his captivating qualities.

In late June, Nicolette Cook wrote a comment and took the time to explain the appealing nature of Oliver's show. She refers to his presentation as "informative and non-boring."

Figure 34. FCC public comment from Nicolette Cook

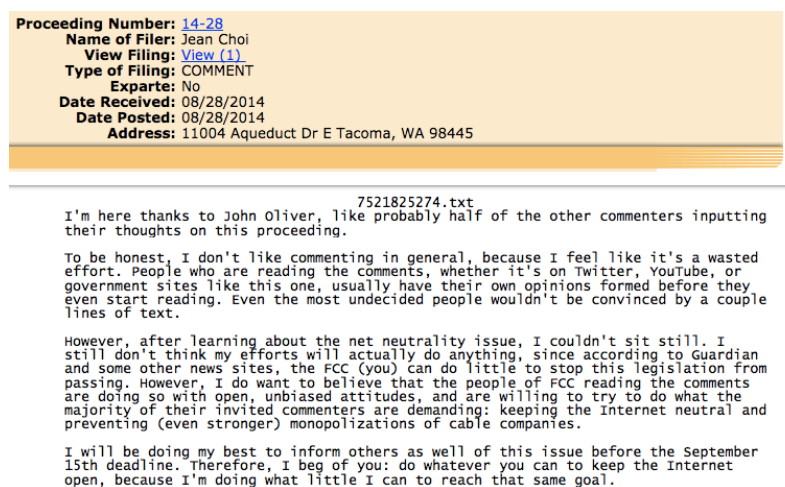
**Proceeding Number:** [14-28](#)  
**Name of Filer:** Nicolette Cook  
**View Filing:** [View \(1\)](#)  
**Type of Filing:** COMMENT  
**Exparte:** No  
**Date Received:** 06/24/2014  
**Date Posted:** 06/24/2014  
**Address:** 3849 8th Avenue San Diego, CA 92103

7521341840.txt  
Stirred by the very informative and non-boring presentation John Oliver gave regarding the FCC's intent to alter net neutrality, I am herein contacting my government directly to demand that they do their job, which is to represent and protect the concerns of your citizenry to have equal access for all. A two-tiered internet is not a free and competitive market place, or put another way, a two-tiered internet is bullshit. We should endeavor to protect the values of democracy, which I believe includes free speech and free speech at the same download or streaming rate. FCC do not do this. It is a violation of our country's core values, the right to be heard and not having to pay more to do so.



Cook also identifies her participation in a democratic practice. She explicitly states that this comment is her effort to speak to state powers and hold them accountable. Cook draws attention to the governmental systems in place and she, whether consciously or sub-consciously, identifies her position in this process. Cook requests a specific policy action from the FCC, as she realizes her power is limited to expressing an opinion and hoping it is heard. Cook was far from the only person who understood and spoke to the democratic process. In late August 2016, Jean Choi commented and expressed her lack of faith in democratic processes.

Figure 35. FCC public comment from Jean Choi



Like many of the others, Choi begins by acknowledging Oliver's program. However, Choi deviates slightly and addresses her skepticism about forms of public engagement, specifically public commenting. She recognizes that a couple lines of text from some faceless source are not likely to cause change. But, despite her deep-seated skepticism, Choi says she "couldn't sit still" after learning about net neutrality from Oliver. She expresses a hope that the government agency will act in a democratic fashion and listen to what common people are asking of them. It is important to note that Choi was right about the opinions of the majority of commenters. Three

weeks after the comment period closed, the Sunlight Foundation analyzed over 800,000 comments released by the FCC and found that less than one percent of comments were opposed to net neutrality (Sunlight Foundation, 2014). Choi also mentions her intentions to continue to engage politically and to try and encourage others to engage as well.

She ends on a somewhat bittersweet note, stating “I beg of you: do whatever you can to keep the Internet open because I’m doing what little I can to reach that same goal.” With these few words, Choi summarizes the role of a citizen in a democratic society. Jean Choi, from Tacoma, Washington, has little influence over the government. In the grand scheme of things, Jean Choi is a small pawn overshadowed by state and corporate powers. Many others who posted on the FCC public comment section understood their limited power as well. Nicolette Cook of San Diego, Pamela Fettig of Indiana, Kevin Ames of Washington D.C. and Chris Buttino of New York realized—with the help of Oliver—that they do have one, infallible power: They can express their opinions and speak to the state systems. Jean Choi was doubtful that her voice would be heard, but Oliver inspired her to speak anyway. And, less than a year after Choi and Cook, Fettig, Ames and Buttino posted their comments to the FCC, something remarkable happened. It worked.

On February 26, 2015, the FCC passed regulations supporting net neutrality, despite the fact that they were all but set to rule against it in May of 2014. The chief of the FCC Wireline Competition Bureau told NPR in an interview that the ruling “builds on the views of some 4 million Americans” who expressed their views on the public comment section (Chappell, 2015). Again, it is impossible to say *Last Week Tonight* caused the FCC to rule in favor of net neutrality. But, the FCC themselves say the reason they ruled the way they did was due to the fact that millions of Americans like Jean Choi, Nicolette Cook and Kevin Ames took the time to

speak out and express their opinions. The direct references to Oliver in public comments and the timing of nearly 100,000 of these comments suggest that *Last Week Tonight* did in fact contribute to the FCC's ruling.

Most importantly, though, these examples are proof that Oliver's program is capable of triggering viewers to reach beyond social and civic spheres and engage with political issues. While political reactions, like those that occurred during the net neutrality episode and the government surveillance episode, have a greater chance of influencing changes in national policy and governance, all forms of reactions reveal a significant truth. Audiences are watching, listening to and caring about the sociopolitical issues raised in *Last Week Tonight*. These reactions—whether a post on Facebook, a donation to the Society of Women Engineers or a comment to a government website—prove that *Last Week Tonight* is in fact a catalysis, initiating social, civic and political reactions from millions of people.

## CHAPTER VII. DISCUSSION

To catalyze is to cause a reaction—to spark a transformation. Sometimes it is easy to isolate and identify the sole agent of such transformations. However, for large-scale, societal transformations, it is not so easy. Dzur noted this complexity when he explained, “when we look at the demands of deliberative democracy, we see that no single institutional actor plays the dominant role of democratic catalysis,” (2002, p. 333). Dzur is right to note the demanding intricacies of a political system. We have not seen deliberative democracy fully enacted in the U.S., despite many calls for the necessities and benefits of such a system (Bessette, 1980; Dzur, 2002; Fishkin, 1991, 1996, 2014; Page & Shapiro, 2010; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Sirianni, 2009). When implementing a shift in political ideologies, many are quick to suggest the action must come from the top down (Bessette, 1994; Dzur, 2002; Sirianni, 2009). This assumption is not misguided, as state and government powers ultimately determine societal structures. Scholars Reisigl and Wodak explain the “exercise of power should follow the deliberative principle that decisions which concern the welfare of a political community take the form of the result of a free and reasonable weighing of arguments among individuals who are recognized to be morally and politically equal,” (2001, p. 265).

Certainly those with access to power must adopt a deliberative principle. But, even if those in power abide by such principles and are receptive to public input, this requires that public input is there to be received. In a deliberative democracy, the citizenry must be robust and roused by the happenings in society. This kind of robust public means that “political participation of the citizens has to go far beyond the periodic legitimization of the state exercise of power qua votes or elections,” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, pg. 266). Essentially, members of the public cannot be

passive, or merely reactive to the political system. Rather, they must proactively insert themselves into deliberative spaces. Reisigl and Wodak describe this public participation as communicative interactions in deliberative public spheres (2001).

It is clear the road to a deliberative democracy is long and somewhat treacherous. No single institutional actor—including media like *Last Week Tonight*—can “deliver” society to this political promise land alone. Many institutional players must work together toward this end goal, if society is to have a viable chance at attaining this political system. However, public engagement and participation are, arguably, the most important prerequisite for deliberative democracy, and John Oliver triggers public engagement. Many conversations and debates about topics of public welfare are not easily accessible to the public. These conversations are confined by complexity, dullness or confusing political and technical jargon. These confinements mean that only a select variety of people have access and this select group is typically those who are already powerful because, as van Dijk observed: “The less powerful people are, the less they have access to various forms of talk or text,” (1996, p. 21).

But, by utilizing a variety of techniques Oliver dissolves such barriers to the conversations and offers talk and text to ordinary citizens. He provides citizens with entry points into conversations and encourages participation in the political process that extends beyond the periodic elections. *Last Week Tonight* produces the more regular civic and political participation scholars like Reisigl and Wodak called for. This participation is more representative of the postmodern political environment described by Jones (2010) and Dalgren (1991), as it is expressive and discursive in nature. This is the heart of catalytic media—media that incite public reactions and encourage engagement in the public sphere.

### *Defining Catalytic Media*

Catalytic media are a blending of different communicative forms and models, namely revolutionary journalism, public journalism and infotainment media. Each of these models lends something different to the aims of catalytic media. I am purposefully cautious of using the term *journalism* when referring to catalytic media. While there are journalistic features of catalytic media, many of their core tenants do not allow for them to be categorized as a form of journalism. For instance, one of the most apparent influences is infotainment media, which are a form of entertainment, not journalism.

A fake news model captures the attention of a millennial audience. It is crucial to note that this up-and-coming generation is over-stimulated and under-enthused by their current surroundings. These Internet natives have the world at their digitally equipped fingertips. Standing out among endless options and catching and holding their attention is one of the hardest feats. Techniques from the fake news model popularized by Jon Stewart help accomplish this task. Once catalytic media have millennials' attention, they must generate a connection to the topic. They must stir up some sort of feeling or opinion on the issues at hand. This is where elements of revolutionary journalism come to aid.

Revolutionary journalism seeks to bring about change. This method rarely embraces objectivity or fairness and instead aims to “overcome exploitation, corruption and human rights violations; or to improve the living conditions of ordinary people,” (Robie, 2013, p. 99). Some of the earliest forms of revolutionary journalism in the U.S. occurred in the late 17th and early 18th century when American colonists battled against British rule. Publications like *Publick Occurrences*, the *New York Journal* and the *Journal of Occurrences* “spotlighted specific evidence of outrageous conduct” and “questioned established public policy,” (Protest et al.,

1991, p. 30). These kinds of publications were far more educative and persuasive than balanced or impartial. The publications aimed for revolution. Media are “instrumental in the battle for independence, both by extolling its virtues and by exposing official misconduct,” (Protest et al., 1991, p. 31). Catalytic media embrace this ideology as well. The main segments of each episode of *Last Week Tonight* spotlight some kind of misconduct or abuse of power. Oliver often asserts his opinion or position on matters and supports his position by extolling the particular virtues of his desired outcome. These influences from revolutionary journalism are, ironically, another example of why catalytic media is not called catalytic journalism. This biased approach goes against the core tenets of journalism—that it be independent, comprehensive and, at the very least, aim for a neutral and transparent approach (Hart & Hartelius, 2007; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). However, it is because Oliver inserts his opinion and attempts to persuade viewers about particular issues that the third tenant can effectively come into play. Catalytic media embrace the core ideals of public journalism and promote engagement from the public. This final aspect of catalytic media may be the most challenging to accomplish. However, this component is also what elevates this form of media to the democratic stage.

In the Information Age, the trick is not providing young people with more options. Youth already have options. As of 2015, there are an estimated 1.6 million apps available through app stores like Google Play and Apple (Statista, 2015). The trick, then, is creating an option that strikes a very particular balance: An option that caters toward young people and gains their attention without compromising the intent of the message. Catalytic media must be able to walk that narrow line between attractive and edifying.

*Last Week Tonight* found that delicate balance. It catches the attention of young adults while still managing to infuse legitimate concepts and messages into its program. There are more

than 500 million YouTube channels, and new channels are created each day (YouTube, 2015). And yet, out of all these choices, millions of people consistently—and increasingly—choose to watch *Last Week Tonight*. Oliver has tapped into the current generation. Maybe it's the mix of humor and hostility that draws in audiences. Perhaps people find his relatable and educative tone refreshing. It could be that late and great media critic David Carr was right when he said, "there is, right now, a kind of hunger for slow news, thoughtful takes that won't fit inside a Twitter feed," (Carr, 2014). Carr believed the *Last Week Tonight* is a reaction against the norms of many news outlets. And these newsroom norms do not help expand public knowledge and engagement. Many outlets routinely cover predictable topics and sum up complex issues in 140 characters or less. This shallow analysis suggests that media industries, whether consciously or sub-consciously, assume and encourage society's short attention span (Lawless & Fox, 2015; Starkman, 2014). Thorough, investigative news is deteriorating across the board (Lawless & Fox, 2015; Starkman, 2014). Broadcast, print and digital news outlets rely on dramatic headlines, frenzied sound bites and a 24-hour news cycle. But, Oliver does not bend to the techniques and standards of this new media-scape. Instead, he contorts these so-called standards. He breaks them or disregards them altogether. Oliver appears on air once a week. He spends upwards of 20 and 30 minutes on a single, and usually dull-sounding, topic. He offers his opinion. And he instructs, sometimes even demands, his audience to challenge their prescriptively passive role as a viewer and engage with the topic. Through a range of discursive techniques, Oliver challenges his audience to learn more about the issues, to form opinions and share those opinions. He asks the audience to start discussions, contribute to society and challenge the ideological, corporate and political forces sewn into the fabric of our society. Essentially, each Sunday, Oliver asks the



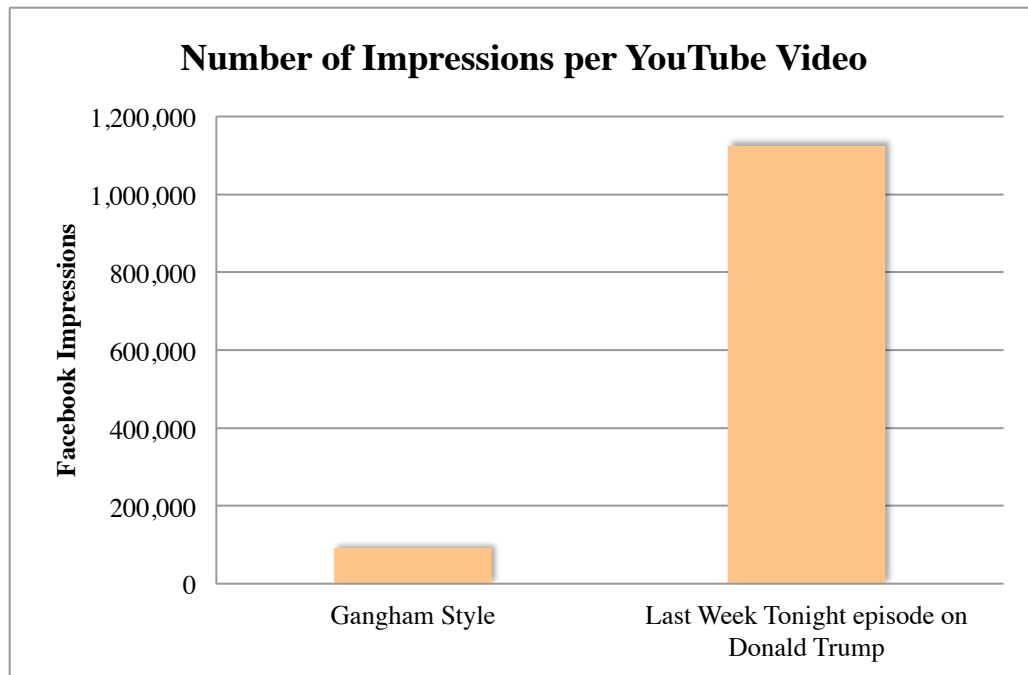
millions of people watching his show to embrace their power and obligations as citizens in a democratic society. And, often, the millions of people accept that challenge.

By no means is *Last Week Tonight* an adequate replacement for traditional media. Rather, this thesis suggests catalytic media, of which *Last Week Tonight* is a prime example, must be factored into the long-term plan for deliberative democracy.

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

On February 14, 2016, season three of *Last Week Tonight* began airing on HBO. Moments after the final credits rolled, the main segment was uploaded to YouTube. In typical form, the episode covered a quite drab topic: voter ID laws in the U.S. In the seven days after the episode aired, the YouTube clip received 73,843 impressions on Facebook. The next week, Oliver featured a segment on the funding of abortion clinics. This clip received 85,275 Facebook impressions. Finally, on February 28, 2016 Oliver ran a 20-minute segment on Donald Trump's presidential campaign. In the seven days after this episode aired, the video received 1.1 million impressions. To put this into context, the most-watched YouTube video in history was the music video Gangnam Style by PSY. As of March 6, 2016, the Gangnam Style YouTube clip received 2.5 billion views but only 91,421 impressions (Figure 36).

Figure 36. Impressions from Last Week Tonight compared with popular music video



For more than a decade, political scientists and scholars have cited an unsettling trend: Young people do not engage in the political process to the same degree or in the same way as previous generations. Graphs and charts display plummeting lines all indicating a drop in forms of political engagement like voting, voter registration, traditional media consumption and even political interest. A Pew Research Center study found that only 35 percent of millennials talk about politics at least a few times a week and a mere 26 percent reported that politics and government were a top-three interest (Pew Research Center, 2015). However data about *Last Week Tonight* throw some of these trends into question.

The 19.9 million people who took the time to watch a 20-minute video about a presidential candidate and the 1.1 million people who posted that video to social media seem to be, at the very least, trying to engage with their political process. This begs the question: Are young people hopelessly disengaged from civic life, or should definitions of engagement include

new, sometimes, unrecognizable forms of political communication and interaction? Additional research is necessary in order to fully examine these possibilities.

There is no question, though, that from a viewership standpoint the popularity of *Last Week Tonight* is rising exponentially. In future studies, it would be beneficial to shift the central focus toward audience reaction and conduct more quantitative and mixed-method approaches, such as surveys and focus groups.

The term catalytic media could be greatly expanded as well. While *Last Week Tonight* serves as a prime example of the way catalytic media function, it would be beneficial to examine other contemporary forms of communication that blend different models of media in order to captivate, educate and mobilize today's youth. Finally, additional research into the capability and feasibility of deliberative democracy would allow for a more robust discussion of the relationship between media and democracy.

### *Concluding Remarks*

*Last Week Tonight* is not a replacement for traditional media. Rather, catalytic media, like *Last Week Tonight*, must be factored into new conceptions of deliberative democracy. Since the birth of the term in the 1980s, scholars have both praised and doubted the capabilities of a deliberative democratic system (Bessette, 1980; Chambers, 2009; Fishkin, 1991, 1996; Young, 2001). A deliberative democracy demands a fully engaged public. But today, we find ourselves at a perplexing intersection. We live in the digitally advanced, yet communicatively stunted 21st century. The current political process is dull, confusing and both physically and intellectually inaccessible to the common person. These barriers leave people, particularly young people, in a catatonic state.

But, using terms like dick sheriff, Oliver cracked through that shell. By likening powerful institutions to babysitting dingoes, Oliver got people to feel and think about the complicated issues. These discursive moves prompted thousands of young people to post political content on Facebook, to build websites about complex government systems and to converse with and challenge the authoritative forces in their lives. So, perhaps public engagement is occurring, just in a different way. Perhaps it is time we fully embrace a postmodern political environment and start viewing politics as more than voting in periodic elections and affiliating with one party or another. It is necessary to understand that “politics is built on deep-seated cultural values and beliefs that are embedded in the seemingly nonpolitical aspects of public and private life,” (Deli Caprini & Williams, 2001). Young people value dialogue, discussion and dissension more and more and this increasing concern for discourse supports what Gibbins and Reimer said about the contemporary political environment. Not only is politics constructed by and expressed through language, but “politics *is* language,” (Gibbins & Reimer, 1999, p. 70).

I am encouraged to think, after discovering the wide variety of social, civic and political reactions to *Last Week Tonight*, that young people are in fact embracing their duties and rights as citizens. There is still much to learn about the political habits of youth and the ways media effect these habits. But, this study does offer a promising conclusion: By explicitly inviting young people into national conversations, Oliver encourages the up-and-coming generation to shake off their stupor and step into the public sphere.

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**APPENDIX 1.**

<b>Season</b>	<b>Episode</b>	<b>Air Date</b>	<b>Episode Topic</b>	<b>YouTube (million)</b>	<b>Facebook Impressions</b>
1	1	4/27/14	POM Wonderful LLC v. Coca Cola Co.	2.81	335
1	2	5/4/14	Capital Punishment	6.18	974
1	3	5/11/14	Global Warming	5.87	3,158
1	4	5/18/14	Right to be Forgotten	3.82	116
<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6/1/14</b>	<b>Net Neutrality</b>	<b>10.48</b>	<b>5,036</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6/8/14</b>	<b>FIFA</b>	<b>12.16</b>	<b>551</b>
1	7	6/15/14	Immigration Reform	4.9	4,408
1	8	6/22/14	Dr. Oz Senate Hearing/Dietary Supplement Act	8.47	2,589
1	9	6/29/14	Burwell v Hobby Lobby/LGBT Rights in Uganda	4.49	633
1	10	7/13/14	Income and Wealth Inequality	9.45	3,882
1	11	7/20/14	Incarceration in the U.S.	6.85	2,483
1	12	7/27/14	Nuclear Weapons and the U.S.	8.03	10,433
1	13	8/3/14	Native Advertising	5.93	19,991
1	14	8/10/14	Payday Loans	6.29	3,785
1	15	8/17/14	Michael Brown/Police Militarization in Ferguson	7.65	342
1	16	9/7/14	Student Debt	6.66	1,346
1	17	9/14/14	Scottish Independence Referendum	7.17	447
<b>1</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>9/21/14</b>	<b>Miss America 2015</b>	<b>10.78</b>	<b>7,059</b>
1	19	9/28/14	Drones	7.99	1,517
1	20	10/5/14	Civil Asset Forfeiture	7.1	6,578
1	21	10/19/14	Special Immigration Visa	6.1	2,132
1	22	10/26/14	Sugar	8.22	1,324
1	23	11/2/14	U.S. Legislative Exchange Council	4.86	605
1	24	11/9/14	Lottery	6.33	10,591
2	1	2/8/15	Pharmaceutical Marketing	5.88	5,661
<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2/15/15</b>	<b>Tobacco</b>	<b>7.95</b>	<b>4,357</b>
2	3	2/22/15	Judicial Elections	3.59	800
2	4	3/1/15	Infrastructure	5.91	2,821
2	5	3/8/15	U.S. Territories	4.78	4,009
2	6	3/15/15	NCAA	5.66	1,360
2	7	3/22/15	Municipal Violations	4.34	1,401

<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4/5/15</b>	<b>Government Surveillance</b>	<b>9.82</b>	<b>3,853</b>
2	9	4/12/15	IRS	3.94	382
2	10	4/19/15	Patents	3.65	566
2	11	4/26/15	Child Labor and the Fashion Industry	5.9	3,733
2	12	5/3/15	Standardized Testing	6.18	6,417
2	13	5/10/15	Paid Parental Leave	5.01	3,169
2	14	5/17/15	Contract Farming	4.99	959
2	15	5/31/15	2015 FIFA Corruption Case	5.66	268
2	16	6/7/15	Bail	3.92	770
2	17	6/14/15	Senate Intelligence Committee Torture Report	4.16	879
2	18	6/21/15	Online Harassment and Revenge Porn	5.41	1,574
2	19	6/28/15	Transgender Rights	4.78	1,537
2	20	7/12/15	Stadiums, Removal of S. Carolina Flag	5.15	7,994
2	21	7/19/15	Food Waste	4.58	7,959
2	22	7/26/15	Mandatory Sentencing	3.52	937
2	23	8/2/15	D.C. Voting rights and Statehood Movement	3.85	1,463
2	24	8/9/15	Sex Education in U.S.	7.65	8,956
<b>2</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>8/16/15</b>	<b>Televangelism</b>	<b>8.89</b>	<b>26,993</b>
2	26	8/23/15	LGBTRights in the U.S.	4.17	1,079
2	27	9/13/15	Public Defenders	4.25	2,375
2	28	9/27/15	Eupoean Migrant Crisis	6.39	28,217
2	29	10/4/15	MentalHealthin the U.S.	4.53	7,915
2	30	10/11/15	North Dakota Oil Boom	3.99	1,622
2	31	10/18/15	20 Canadian Federal Election	6.44	1,310
2	32	11/1/15	2015 US Election and Medicaid Expansion	2.87	26,349
2	33	11/8/15	Prisoner Reentry	3.27	16,881
2	34	11/12/15	Daily Fantasy Sports	3.55	20,536
2	35	11/22/15	Pennies, Paris Attack and Syrian Refugees	3.59	13,020