

5-2017

Not a Laughing Matter: John Oliver, Burkean Frames, and the Performance of Public Intellect

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**Not a Laughing Matter: John Oliver, Burkean Frames, and the Performance of
Public Intellect**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Rhetoric

Bates College

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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Lewiston, Maine

March 24, 2017

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
“Our Main Story Tonight Is...”: Introducing John Oliver	4
The Men Behind the Desk: A History of the Political Comedy News Host	10
Watching the Watchers: A Review of Existing Literature	33
Burkean Frames: A Theoretical Foundation	43
Laughing and Learning: John Oliver’s Comic Performance of Public Intellect	63
John Oliver and the Performance of Public Intellect	65
John Oliver, the Comic Comic	70
Oliver vs. the Walking, Talking Brush Fire	78
Oliver’s Barrier	84
John Oliver and the News Media	86
“That’s Our Show”: John Oliver and the Future of Civic Discourse	89
Works Cited	92

Acknowledgements

Though mine is the only name appearing on the cover page of this thesis, it would be folly on my part not to acknowledge that this work is the product of the efforts of many people other than myself, a fact for which I am endlessly grateful.

It seems fitting to start by thanking the Bates College Department of Rhetoric for giving me this opportunity. Thank you, Professors Kelley-Romano, Cavallero, Hovden, and Nero, for helping to make my academic experience more amazing than I ever could have imagined.

Professor Kelley-Romano, your advice and direction has been invaluable to the completion of this project. Thank you for guiding me through this process, it has truly been a pleasure working with you.

To my family, thank you for everything. Mom and Dad, I'm thankful for your love, your guidance, and your patience. Sadie, thank you for being a role model and for getting me into Kanye West back in 2007. You are the reason I came to college in Maine, so I guess you could say none of this would have happened without you.

I am also thankful to all the friends who supported me through this process. When I was stressed out or overwhelmed, you all provided a stability which was much-needed. Shout out to the Manic Optimists, shout out to WRBC, shout out to the folks at Le Ronj for providing coffee when I needed it, shout out to all my reading partners.

Lastly, I feel a warm sense of gratitude for all the music that stayed with me as I read, thought, and wrote. The music of, among other artists, Animal Collective, Beach House, Brian "Big Bri" Eno, Kadhja Bonet, Kendrick Lamar, Parquet Courts, Porches, and Tame Impala provided an incredible soundtrack to this experience. I am immensely thankful to them.

To the reader, thank you for reading! Please know that I would not have been able to complete this work without the support of all these people. As you read, do so with the knowledge that this thesis is the product not only of my efforts, but also of theirs.

“Our Main Story Tonight Is...”: Introducing John Oliver

There was a time, only decades ago, that Americans in search of something to watch had a relatively limited selection. An American viewer of the 1950s and 1960s might sit on the couch and look at ABC, NBC, or CBS, but would have little choice outside those three major networks. This lack of choice extended not only to entertainment television, but also to the news. Anyone itching to learn about current events on television could only do so by watching one of the main networks. Thus, the anchors of those shows were important figures in civic discourse, and were widely listened to by the public. Events like Edward R. Murrow’s rebuke of Senator Joe McCarthy’s witch hunt for communists or Walter Cronkite’s call for a diplomatic end to the war in Vietnam were journalistic shots heard round the country (Adams, Martin). The newsman, though few in number, was a crucial voice in America’s discourse.

Since those halcyon days, the medium of television has undergone several rounds of tectonic shifts. Viewers who, fifty years ago, would have heard the news from Cronkite on CBS, John Daly on ABC, or Chet Huntley and David Brinkley on NBC, now hear it from Christiane Amanpour, Ashleigh Banfield, Wolf Blitzer, Anderson Cooper, or Don Lemon—and that’s just CNN. The television news genre has ballooned from the evening slot on three channels to include a whole collection of networks—CNN, MSNBC, and FOX News, most notably—that broadcast the news all day, every day.

The wealth of available news sources has both positive and negative implications. On one hand, the constant broadcast of news programming allows the American public to learn about important events going on around the world as they happen. No longer is

informational broadcasting sequestered to an hour each night; if you're interested in hearing about what's happening in the world, that information is only a channel change away. However, the expansion of the news media market also presents problematic elements. The American news media environment has become increasingly saturated and politicized compared to its state half a century ago. Networks and their anchors often seem to view the events of the day through a progressive (as on MSNBC) or conservative (as on FOX News) lens, and commentators like Rachel Maddow on the left and Bill O'Reilly on the right have become major and politically-biased voices in a field once entirely focused on objectivity (Mitchell et. al). Cronkite's vocal opposition to the Vietnam War was notable partly in that, at the time, it was uncommon for a newscaster to openly state their opinion on the government's decisions. Now, it's uncommon if a FOX News anchor doesn't do that by noon.

The freedom of the press given by the Constitution positions American news media outlets as watchers for the American democracy, but the expansion of the news media industry has affected the nature of this coverage in ways that no one could have imagined decades ago. This begs the question: who watches the watchers? After taking over for Craig Kilborn in 1999, Jon Stewart weaponized Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* as a site not only of news parody, but also of news critique. Stewart drew from the blueprints laid out by *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update" and by his predecessor to create a show that not only lampooned the seriousness and content of the news, but also criticizing the efficacy with which the news media was fulfilling their duty.

While Stewart was initially the only one performing this role, he would soon be joined by an enclave of similarly-minded comedian-critics, many of whom were themselves graduates of *The Daily Show*. *The Colbert Report* (2005), hosted by Stephen Colbert, introduced a parody with personalities like O'Reilly to the genre, using the rhetoric and tropes of conservative punditry as a vehicle through which to criticize that very same punditry. When Colbert left Comedy Central to fill what had been David Letterman's seat on CBS' *The Late Show* in early 2015, his post-*Daily Show* slot was filled by Larry Wilmore's *The Nightly Show*¹, which was cancelled in 2016 (Carter 2015). Wilmore, who had a recurring role on *The Daily Show* as the shows "Senior Black Correspondent," was the first host of a show in the *Daily Show* mold who was not a white male. Later that year, Stewart left *The Daily Show*, to be replaced by Trevor Noah, a biracial South African man and another *Daily Show* alumnus. In 2016, longtime *Daily Show* correspondent Samantha Bee released her own show, *Full Frontal*, on TBS, becoming the first woman to host such a show (Chavez). In the years following Stewart's rise as a cultural critic, the humorous alternative news source genre has expanded to include a number of different hosts from a number of different backgrounds.

Another *Daily Show* alum who has gone on to find success on his own is John Oliver, a British comedian who spent the summer of 2013 filling in for Stewart behind the desk of *The Daily Show*, now hosts his own show, *Last Week Tonight*, which premiered on HBO in April of 2014. Oliver has made a few important changes to the political comedy-news genre yet to be explored by his fellow *Daily Show* alumni. A team

¹ Originally, the show was slated to be named *The Minority Report with Larry Wilmore* (Carter 2015).

of correspondents like the ones on *The Daily Show* and *Full Frontal* is nowhere to be found on *Last Week Tonight*. Oliver speaks as himself, not through a parodic pundit persona. Furthermore, the interview segments that were a staple of *The Colbert Report* and continue to be of *TDS* are almost always absent. On *Last Week Tonight*, John Oliver abandons elements like correspondents, interviews, and personae, distancing himself from the news parody on which the genre cut its teeth.

More so than any of its predecessors or contemporaries, *Last Week Tonight* is more than just a platform for critique. Every episode of *Last Week Tonight* has what Oliver refers to as a “main story,” one issue or topic to which Oliver typically devotes 15 to 20 minutes of discussion. These segments focus not only on entertainment, but also on information. The topics Oliver chooses are generally political, and in discussing them, Oliver hopes to alert his viewers to the political problems tied to those topics. In the past, Oliver has used these segments to cover a wide range of topics, including student debt, the tobacco industry, transgender rights, and daily fantasy sports. Whereas Stewart and the hosts who followed him largely limit their focus to current events, Oliver exercises more discretion by switching between topics related to current events and more general topics as he pleases. As the regular presence of jokes, sarcasm and humor attests, *Last Week Tonight* does not represent a move away from the entertainment-focused side of the alternative news source, but the show does represent a substantial move toward the informative. Whereas Jon Stewart used his show to show his audience that the American news media wasn't doing their job the way they were supposed to, Oliver's focus was more on highlighting issues the mainstream American news media wasn't.

This is especially evident in Oliver's coverage of the 2016 presidential election. The 2016 election was characterized, as Oliver argues in his season-ending post-election discussion, in part by a mainstream news media that "waited far too long to take Trump seriously" (Oliver 2016g 10:17). On his show, it would seem, Oliver worked to avoid this pitfall. While mainstream news outlets marvelled at the outrageous statements continually made by Trump on his twitter, Oliver conducted an examination of the viability of his proposed border wall (Oliver 2016b). As most news outlets were witnessing dramatic primary seasons on both sides of the aisle, Oliver sought to convey how the processes worked, and how they could be reformed (Oliver 2016c). After Trump's victory, the comedian offered his audience a laundry list of things they could do to resist the new president (Oliver 2016g). In these segments, Oliver wasn't just making jokes or critiquing the media; he was working to give his audiences the knowledge and resources they would need to participate in American democracy most effectively.

Thus, on *Last Week Tonight*, John Oliver attempts to strike a balance between political humor and informative programming. This balance is, as prior academic study of Stewart and Colbert has revealed, a difficult one presenting a number of potential problems. However, Oliver's show and its particularities as an alternative news source remain relatively new, and academic work on the subject remains scant. This study seeks to contribute to early academic conversations of the late night host.

In this paper, I examine the seven "main story" segments of *Last Week Tonight's* third season whose topics pertained directly to the events and major candidates of the

2016 Presidential election². Using Burke's theory of frames of acceptance and rejection to analyze Oliver's rhetoric in these segments, I argue that John Oliver uses evidence-oriented argument and contextual clash to speak with knowledge to a nonspecialist audience on a variety of issues relevant to their decision in the upcoming election, thereby embodying a performance of public intellect. In doing so, Oliver frames himself as a hero attempting to correct villains of two types: voters *tricked* by the allure of Donald Trump and his conservative platform, and politicians and media members *mistaken* in their contentedness with the political status quo or in their support of their agenda. At the same time, Oliver's use of humor attacks those politicians, reducing their beliefs and actions to absurdities, thereby compounding the perception of those villains as mistaken and unintelligent. Thus, I argue that Oliver's performance is one both of comic acceptance and burlesque rejection designed to encourage his viewers towards a more active and complex understanding of their democracy as well as their role within it.

² They are, in chronological order: "Donald Trump" (Episode 303; February 28, 2016), "Border Wall" (Episode 306; March 20, 2016), "Primaries and Caucuses" (Episode 313; May 22, 2016), "Republican National Convention" (Episode 318; July 24, 2016), "Democratic National Convention" (Episode 319; July 31, 2016), "Scandals" (Episode 323; September 25, 2016), and "President-Elect Trump" (Episode 330; November 13, 2016).

The Men Behind the Desk: A History of the Political Comedy News Host

As a politically-focused late-night comedy news program, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* situates itself within an already existing canon of topical political news shows. However, political comedy was not nearly as popular a genre in the early days of television as it is now. Late night hosts like Johnny Carson of NBC's *The Tonight Show* would comb headlines for stand-up material, sharing their "sardonic insights into the absurdities of the American experience," but this humor was rarely political (Buxton 380). Carson, a nationally beloved figure, remained as apolitical as possible, for fear of losing a large portion of his audience (Bushkin 154-155; Buxton 380). For example, on the 5th anniversary of Richard Nixon's ouster from the presidency, Carson told his audience that Nixon had celebrated the occasion "by reciting his famous 'Checkers' speech" (Carson 0:55). Making jokes about Watergate was easy for Carson because outrage against the Nixon administration was more or less universal, and even then, Carson's joke poked fun at Nixon's ego rather than his transgressions. More controversial topics, such as abortion, were simply avoided entirely (Buxton 380). *The Tonight Show* gave Americans an outlet that used topical comedy to talk about politics which was unlikely to offend their sensibilities because it was averse to stating a political opinion.

Carson's desire to avoid politicizing the content of his show was shared across television at the time (Peterson 2008a 32-33). While there were some exceptions to this rule, forays into the realm of politics were usually met with significant resistance, often on the part of the networks. *That Was the Week That Was* (or *TW3*), a news parody show preceding programs like *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update" and *The Daily Show*,

was one such program which laid important groundwork for the shows that would follow. The show, which premiered in 1964, was an American adaptation of a 1962 British show by the same name which was cancelled only a year after its initial release for political reasons (Hastings). *TW3*'s format featured a theme song recapping the week's events, then alternated between newscast-esque monologues from David Frost, the show's host, and skits satirizing important events of the week ("That Was The Week That Was"). The show, whose regulars also included Alan Alda, Pat Englund, and Buck Henry (who would later write for *SNL*'s "Weekend Update"), was no stranger to controversy, readily discussing political issues throughout its 16 month run ("That Was"). Like its British precursor, it was cancelled in 1965, only a year after it premiered (Peterson 2008a 33). While political comedy seemed ready for primetime, primetime remained unready for political comedy.

As the sixties drew to a close and "left in their wake a more skeptical and cynical nation," shows like *All in the Family* began to address issues such as racism, sexism, and the Vietnam War and were well received by the public (Peterson 2008a 34). However, it was not until the 1970s that political comedy reached the mainstream of American television. Peterson argues that the event begetting this change was Richard Nixon's 1972 Watergate scandal (Peterson 2008a 34). The scandal, which Peterson names as one of the few occasions "in which reality literally outstripped satire," made political humor accessible because it "played to Americans' basest anti-political suspicions, revealing corruption so deep and so fundamental as to transcend partisan argument" (Peterson 2008a 34). Whereas issues such as the Vietnam War or the Civil Rights movement were

divisive enough to warrant networks prohibiting their discussion by comedy shows, Nixon's transgressions were universally agreed upon to be wrong, offering Americans an opportunity for unity via popular disgust. Comedians across the country seized the opportunity to make light of the incident, perhaps most prominently Johnny Carson (Peterson 2008a 34-35). Critic John Leonard noted that, "When [Johnny Carson] began making Watergate jokes,... we knew it was permissible to ridicule the president" (Leonard quoted in Peterson 2008a 35). The Watergate Scandal acted as somewhat of a watershed moment for political comedy because it created an environment where the genre was more publicly accepted.

Public warming to political ridicule allowed for the introduction of a program which would play a formative role in the development of televisual political comedy: *Saturday Night Live*. Premiering in 1975, *SNL* was a hit from the start, attracting the attention of tens of millions of viewers (Reinheld 190). The show's format was that of a sketch comedy variety show whose sketches took place in a variety of different contexts, including political ones. Political sketches frequently involved the use of some sort of impression on the part of the actors, and these impressions were highly influential. Chevy Chase's impression of President Gerald Ford—which was more based on Chase's acting confused and falling down a lot than it was on looking or sounding like the 38th president—became so popular that Ford's press secretary went on the show hoping to seal the wound the impression's popularity had created (Peterson 2008a 36). The popularity of the impression had enough of an effect on public perception of the President as to compel the administration to respond. From early on in its run on NBC, *Saturday Night Live*

demonstrated the capacity of comedy shows to discuss politics in a popular and humorous context.

But impression is not the only means through which *Saturday Night Live* practices political comedy. Since the show's inception, a fixture of the program has been "Weekend Update," a news parody segment generally lasting between five and ten minutes (Reincheld 191). The segment—which first featured Chevy Chase as its anchor—aired at the midpoint of the program, serving as an incentive for people to continue watching through the first half of the show and providing a "second start" to retain viewers' interest (Reincheld 192). "Weekend Update" featured one to two cast members dressed as newscasters "sitting behind an anchor's desk, reading the news of the week... accompanied by pictures, copies of newspaper clippings, and graphics" (Reincheld 191). Rather than impersonating another news anchor, "Weekend Update" anchors such as Chase and those that followed used their own names. The stories they reported were real stories from the previous week, sometimes even from half an hour before *SNL*'s 11:30 start time (Reincheld 193). It even drew its name from a similarly titled 10 PM news program on NBC at the time (Reincheld 192). In many ways, "Weekend Update" seemed quite similar to its mainstream news counterparts, and this proximity was by design.

Once the segment began, however, its status as a news parody would become immediately apparent. Chase began each segment with the same refrain: "Good evening. I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not." The catchphrase was a play on similar catchphrases

used by mainstream news anchors such as Roger Grimsby³, designed to poke fun at the self-importance of such slogans (Reinheld 192). Following Chase's departure after the show's first season and subsequent replacement with the duo of Dan Akroyd and Jane Curtin, the segment began to borrow more elements from its mainstream counterparts. One such addition to the segment was a parody of "Point/Counterpoint," itself a segment on CBS's *60 Minutes* (Reinheld 191). In its original, non-parodic form, "Point/Counterpoint" featured two political commentators—one liberal and one conservative—debating an issue or question for a few minutes each episode ("James J. Kirkpatrick"). The "Weekend Update" version did much the same, with Curtin representing the liberal point of view and Akroyd the conservative, though their version came complete with insults such as the now-famous "Jane, you ignorant slut" (Reinheld 192). In taking its aesthetic and formal cues from mainstream news, "Weekend Update" provided a strong platform for parody and critique of those programs.

Reinheld notes that, while the focus of "Weekend Update" was largely comical, showrunner Lorne Michaels intended Weekend Update "to be considered a serious voice in the American political landscape and to serve an informational purpose" (Reinheld 191). Though *SNL* made political jokes throughout its programming, "Weekend Update" offered a more direct outlet for political humor.

SNL was an important step forward in the political comedy genre not only because of its content but also because of its popularity. Reinheld notes that "between 1975 and 1980, Weekend Update reached an audience of about 30 million people,

³ Grimsby was known for his slogan, "Good Evening, I'm Roger Grimsby, here now the news" (Reinheld 191).

disseminating alternative points of view on the sometimes important and sometimes outlandish events of the week” (Reincheld 190). The sustained popularity of the show made it a consistent presence in popular culture, thus entrenching its news parody firmly within American civic discourse. Furthermore, the political focus of *Saturday Night Live* was far from unintentional. Michaels “intended ‘SNL,’ and Weekend Update especially, to be considered a serious voice in the American political landscape and to serve an informational purpose” (Michaels quoted in Reincheld 191). *Saturday Night Live* set a precedent for explicitly political comedy shows, and the weekly inclusion of “Weekend Update” popularized the comedy news model that many would build on in the future.

One of the most significant programs to follow *Weekend Update*’s lead was *The Daily Show*, which premiered on Comedy Central on July 21, 1996 (James 1996).

Created by Lizz Winstead and Madeleine Smithberg and first hosted by Craig Kilborn—who hosted the show from its first episode until December of 1998—*The Daily Show* took several cues from “Weekend Update” (Adalian 1998). Like “Update” before it, *The Daily Show* took many of its aesthetic and formal cues from mainstream news programs. After a brief introductory graphic, the opening shot would be on Kilborn, wearing a suit and sitting behind a desk (Grimes). Unlike its predecessor, however, *The Daily Show* ran a full half hour (closer to twenty-one minutes once commercials were accounted for) for each installment, rather than the five to ten minutes allotted to “Weekend Update.”

Winstead, Smithberg, and Kilborn used this extra time to pursue a more involved and developed parody of mainstream news programs. Though their proportions varied,

most episodes of Kilborn's *Daily Show* involved three main ingredients: an "Update" style reading of the news of the day by Kilborn, "investigative" reports pursued on location by the show's faux news correspondents, and an in-studio interview with a celebrity who would have to answer Kilborn's "Five Questions" (MacGregor). The show even included commercial lead-outs such as "This Day in Hasselhoff History," "Last Weekend's Top-Grossing Films, Converted into Lira," or an audio recording of Winstead's parents reading the question and answer from the previous night's "Final Jeopardy" into an answering machine, a clear parody of shows like *Entertainment Tonight* (James). Thus, *The Daily Show* used its more substantial runtime to critique a not only the news television, but also celebrity television and game shows.

Despite its brief forays into poking fun at programs like *E.T.*, *The Daily Show* focused on mimicking mainstream news programs. The behind-the-desk monologue was quite similar to the format employed by Chase and those who followed him on "Update": Kilborn would sit behind the "news" desk, offering irreverent takes on the day's important events (James). As with "Update," Kilborn appeared as himself, and the news stories he reported were ripped straight from the headlines. However, Kilborn's monologues made light of the events in the news rather than using those events as a platform for political critique; if there was a story in the news one day about Bob Dole, Kilborn's take was likely to have more to do with Dole's age than with his political beliefs (James). While some stories covered politics, others stayed away from the subject (Roberts). The focus of Kilborn's monologue was to offer a recap of the day's events

while lampooning the way mainstream newscasters fulfilled the task with such seriousness; thus, it was more or less a “silly” version of the news.

The “investigative” reports on the show were similarly irreverent in their parody of mainstream news. The correspondents, who frequently flew to locations across the country for their reports, approached their segments with an irreverence similar to that of Kilborn. On one episode, for example, Brian Unger ventured to the Warner Brothers store on 5th Avenue in New York City in search of answers as to why the cartoon character Speedy Gonzalez received such a small part in the 1996 film *Space Jam*. On another, Winstead donned a flak jacket while reporting “from the front lines of America’s least-known ethnic conflict:” that between Norwegians and Swedes in Minnesota (Grimes). As with the news stories Kilborn covered during his monologues, the stories the correspondents covered were real, often lifted from the headlines of local newspapers around the country (Grimes). *The Daily Show*’s investigative correspondents covered stories which, by the very act of being covered by a “news” program of any kind, were hilarious.

In another recurring segment, “God Stuff,” correspondent John Bloom simply presented humorous moments from speeches given by television evangelists, without comment (Grimes). In presenting real stories, correspondents and recurring segments on *The Daily Show* highlighted the absurdity of the events and people they covered, as if to ask audiences, “can you believe that real news shows actually cover this stuff?” Much like “Weekend Update,” *The Daily Show* drew its aesthetic and formal cues from real news programs, using real events, excerpts of speeches, and local news stories to point

out the general absurdity of news shows, while not quite reaching the level of satire or critique which would later be brought to the program.

Craig Kilborn's *Daily Show* was well received, but was criticized for lack of originality. Reviewers found the show funny, but frequently made comparisons to "Weekend Update," lamenting how close an approximation TDS was to those five- to ten-minute segments (Grimes; James; MacGregor). Though the format remained unchanged, complaints of the show's proximity to "Update" were not the reason for Kilborn's departure. Even as the show began to develop more popularity in the year and a half following its premiere, Kilborn and Winstead's working relationship had already begun to deteriorate. Tensions between Kilborn and Winstead boiled over when Kilborn made inappropriate remarks in an interview with *Esquire Magazine* released in December of 1997 about the female members of the show's writing staff, adding that Winstead found him attractive and would perform sexual acts on him if he asked (Richmond 1997). Kilborn was suspended without pay for one week, and when he returned in January for what would be his last year with the show, Winstead had left the program (Richmond 1998). That summer, Kilborn signed a contract to replace Tom Snyder on CBS' "Late Late Show," and Comedy Central's replacement, a comedian named Jon Stewart, officially took over on January 11th, 1999 (Katz). This switch jumpstarted a transition in *The Daily Show* which made it one of the most important alternative news programs in the history of television.

While the two iterations of *TDS* shared a great deal of similarities, the focus and subject of their parody—and, more so in Stewart's case, satire—were different. The Kilborn

iteration was, above all, a spoof of local news, and any national or international news was presented in such a way as to “highlight the glib superficiality of a smarmy local-news anchor” (Tally 155). The correspondent reports also had the trappings of a local news spoof rather than a national one, complete with a news van and handy technology like the TDS 5000 color copier (Tally 155). On Kilborn’s show, the subjects of critique were the content of the news and the manner in which it was delivered.

In contrast, Stewart’s iteration of the show was “a satirical critique *of* the media *by* the media;” Stewart was making fun of the people who read the news while also criticizing them for what Stewart felt was an insufficient fulfilment of their duty to inform the American people (Tally 157). Stewart’s show focused on trying to understand why some issues or discussions dominated the media while other important social issues remained undiscussed (Tally 157). Because of this satirical focus on the media rather than a parodic focus on the content of the news, Stewart’s version of the program was able to execute a more effective critique of mainstream news media than his predecessor.

Without making meaningful changes to the formal structure of the show, Jon Stewart enacted a major shift in the subject. Stewart maintained a much sharper focus on national news, preferring to stay as up to date as possible on current events (Tally 157). This focus extended to his team of correspondents as well. In 2007, correspondent Rob Riggle—who years earlier had served a tour of duty as a Marine in Afghanistan—gave a week of reports from Iraq in a recurring segment called "Operation Silent Thunder: 'The Daily Show' in Iraq," lending an exceedingly authentic perspective to *The Daily Show*’s coverage of the Iraq War (McCarthy). In the introductory segment, Riggle reports in from

an American military base in Iraq and competes with Aasif Mandvi (appearing in front of a green screen) to convince Stewart that he is truly in Iraq (Stewart 2007, 0:31). To demonstrate the veracity of his claim, Riggle offers Stewart and the audience a clip compilation of him riding in several different military vehicles. Stewart believes him, and asks Riggle for his report, at which point Riggle reveals he has no information to share. Riggle's segment is thus simultaneously a parody of reporters traveling to Iraq to cover the war and a statement on the general uselessness of similar reports from mainstream news outlets. With Stewart at the helm, *The Daily Show* was able to substantially shift the scope of its coverage, expanding its critical vision to include international stories.

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, as it came to be called once he took the reins, was markedly more popular than the show had been with Kilborn at the helm. This popularity, however, would not come all at once. Despite a strong opening week, Stewart's ratings during his first few weeks as anchor were 14% lower than his predecessor's during the same time span a year earlier (Adalian 1999). By March, his third month with the show, Stewart and his producers were able to turn things around, beating out August 1998 to become the show's most successful month in its three year history (Katz). By his third month behind the *Daily Show* desk, Stewart had already surpassed his predecessor in his popularity.

As Stewart's tenure continued, the show became increasingly popular, and Stewart began transcend his role as a comedian, becoming a stronger voice in American pop culture and contributing more meaningfully to civic discourse. This development in Stewart's voice came on the heels of tragedy. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist

attacks, several major television personalities—Stewart included—cancelled their shows until the beginning of the next week (Carter 2001). When they did return, they did so on a more somber note; David Letterman substituted his usual stand-up monologue for a statement on the tragedy, and Bill Maher's *Politically Incorrect* left an open chair at the table for a series regular who had perished in one of the plane crash (“When Can We Laugh Again”). Stewart stayed off the air a little longer than his colleagues, not returning until Thursday, September 20th (“Jon Stewart Returns to TV”). In the opening segment of the show, usually reserved for comedy, Stewart asked of the audience, “Are you okay?” and apologized in advance for starting the episode with another “overwrought speech of a shaken host” (Stewart 0:15). In the nine-minute monologue which followed, Stewart fought through tears as he lauded first responders and discussed the capacity of Americans to come together and break down barriers in the face of tragedy. In the episode, Stewart made himself vulnerable, and became someone with whom the show's audience could not only laugh, but empathize. When Stewart stepped down from the show's anchor chair in 2015, his September 20th monologue was considered by many journalists to be one of the defining moments of his tenure (Berman; Poniewozik 2015).

That one of the moments that helped make Stewart one of the most prominent voices in American popular culture was arguably also his least comedic is ironic, but also revealing of the type of figure Stewart was becoming. The September 20th episode set a precedent for Stewart's use of a more serious and earnest voice, and this put him in a complicated position within American civic discourse. Through the use of this voice, Stewart established himself not only as a comedian, but as an important cultural critic.

Stewart's transition from a comedian to a media critic is also evident in his September 2004 interview on *Crossfire*, a CNN program in which two pundits—one from the left assisted by liberal host Paul Begala, and one on the right assisted by conservative host Tucker Carlson—would debate a relevant political issue (Stanley 2004). Stewart opened the interview by imploring Begala and Carlson to “stop,” arguing that the two were “failing miserably” in their “responsibility to the public discourse” (“CNN Crossfire”). The ensuing discussion featured many moments of conflict between Stewart and Begala and Carlson. In one, Stewart called the duo “partisan hacks,” arguing that shows like *Crossfire* and their emphasis on theatricalized debate had become “part of their/[politicians'] strategies” (“CNN Crossfire”). In another, Carlson chided Stewart's refusal to play the role of the comedian, adding that he found Stewart's lectures “boring” (“CNN Crossfire”). The interview provided Stewart an opportunity to criticize the media from a setting other than behind his desk, further strengthening his status as a media critic.

The *Crossfire* interview was immensely important, both for Stewart and for CNN. The interview was streamed or downloaded from online over 1.5 million times, ironically exceeding the average viewer count of a *Crossfire* episode (Cave). Early the next year, CNN cancelled *Crossfire*, and when asked about the reasons for the cancellation, then-network president Jonathan Klein cited Stewart's appearance on the show, adding that he “[agreed] wholeheartedly with Jon Stewart's overall premise” and that “the rest of CNN's prime-time lineup will be moving toward reporting the day's events and not discussing them” (Carter 2005). Stewart's *Crossfire* interview triggered a change in the

nature of CNN's programming, and thus presents a strong example of his influence as a media critic within America's civic discourse.

However, the *Crossfire* interview also raised an important question about Stewart's role in American pop culture and civic discourse. Throughout the interview, Tucker Carlson called Stewart a hypocrite for criticizing *Crossfire*, citing the soft questioning then-presidential hopeful John Kerry had received during a recent appearance on *The Daily Show* ("CNN Crossfire"). In response, Stewart argued that *The Daily Show* was not a news show, but a comedy show on a comedy channel, pointing out that "the show that leads into me is puppets making crank calls" ("CNN Crossfire"). Carlson's complaint that Stewart was holding *Crossfire* to a higher standard of journalistic integrity than *The Daily Show* was grounded on a strictly dichotomous conception of civic discourse "explicitly dividing comedic and non-comedic discourse" (Carlson & Peifer 339). The mainstream news media's questioning of Stewart's role points to an important truth about Jon Stewart, and about those who would follow in his footsteps: that the format provided by their comedy shows gave them leeway to speak on important issues while remaining unbounded to journalistic commitments to objectivity.

This is evident in Stewart's continued public advocacy in the years following the *Crossfire* interview. In 2010, Stewart co-hosted the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear with Stephen Colbert. The event was partly a tongue-in-cheek response to the Restoring Honor rally led by Glenn Beck a few months prior, but during it, Stewart also made a sincere plea for a return to more civil political discourse (Tavernise & Stelter). Later that year, Stewart devoted the entirety of his last episode of the year to discussing the Zadroga

Bill, a measure to offer medical care to 9/11 first responders which was stalled in the senate at the time (Carter & Stelter). Over the course of the episode, Stewart openly criticized not only the lawmakers responsible for the bill's stalling, claiming Senate Republicans had years before "turned 9/11 into a catchphrase," and also the mainstream news networks for not sufficiently reporting on the bill (Carter & Stelter). Five years later, when the Zadroga Act was set to expire, Stewart filmed a guest segment for *The Daily Show* (at this point hosted by Trevor Noah), traveling to Washington, D.C. with a group of 9/11 first responders to ask senators why they hadn't come out in support of the act's reauthorization (Kreps). In his March to Restore Sanity and his full-throated support of the Zadroga Act and its reauthorization, Stewart played the role of public advocate, something seldom done by his contemporaries at the time.

The two instances were clear calls for action—in one case, Stewart advocated a return to more civil discourse; in another, he fought actively and openly for legislative progress. It was a move that drew Stewart even further away from the traditional late-night host and closer to the likes of Edward R. Murrow or Walter Cronkite, two newscasters who had spoken publicly against Senator Joe McCarthy's heavy-handed anti-communist policies and the Vietnam War, respectively (Bushkin 154-155; Carter & Stelter). However, rather than being a part of the mainstream news media like Cronkite and Murrow were, Stewart conducted his activism in the context of the media criticism. Stewart's tendency to speak out on important issues, coupled with his show's network news-like aesthetic, was thus a critical part of Stewart's development as a central pop

culture voice; by being more than a comedian, he was able to craft himself as someone with whom Americans could empathize.

In the summer of 2013, Jon Stewart took a twelve-week hiatus from the show in order to direct the movie *Rosewater*, which would be his directorial debut (Carr 2013). For that summer, his seat behind the news desk was occupied by John Oliver, a British comedian born and raised in Birmingham, England who had joined *The Daily Show* as its “senior British correspondent” in 2006(Carr 2013). Over the course of Oliver’s summer as host, he covered stories such as the search for Edward Snowden, Paula Deen’s racist comments, and Anthony Weiner (Busis). As the interim anchor of *The Daily Show*, Oliver received predominantly positive reviews, with one reviewer calling the show without Stewart “almost too good,” though another did concede that Oliver was “not exactly great at steering interviews” (Paskin, Stanley 2013). Stewart returned at the end of the summer, and Oliver resumed his role as correspondent until leaving the show a few months later to start his own project, further detailed later in this chapter.

The Daily Show’s critical success during Stewart’s tenure speaks to the popularity of this voice. The show won its first Peabody Award for its “Indecision 2000” coverage of the 2000 presidential election (“The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: Indecision 2000”). Four years later, the show won another, again for its election coverage, and it received an institutional award in 2015 (“The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: Indecision 2004”; “Institutional Award”). Between 2001 and 2015, the show won twenty-three Emmys, and was nominated for sixty (“The Daily Show With Jon Stewart | Television Academy”). In September of 2004, Stewart and his team of correspondents (who at that point included

Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee, Ed Helms, and Rob Corddry) ventured outside the medium of television and released a book titled *America (the Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*; by October of the same year, it was on the *New York Times'* nonfiction Bestseller List ("Best Sellers"). In 2010, Stewart released *Earth (the Book): A Visitor's Guide to the Human Race*, another fake textbook which used "a faux-scientific tone to explain the planet, its life forms and their quantifiable characteristics" to hypothetical alien visitors (Maslin). Also like its predecessor, it spent several weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller list ("Hardcover Nonfiction"). During Stewart's tenure, *The Daily Show* went from a modest success to a much larger one.

The extent of *The Daily Show's* success suggested that the show's model of satirical news parody as social and political criticism could be successfully replicated. This theory was first tested by former *TDS* correspondent Stephen Colbert. Colbert, who joined *The Daily Show's* correspondent staff in 1997, described his persona on the show as that of "a fool who has spent a lot of his life playing not the fool" while still able to cover the news "at least well enough to deal with the subjects that he deals with" (Colbert quoted in P. 4). He also tried his hand at pundit mockery; he and Steve Carrell, who at the time was also a correspondent for the show, hosted a regular segment called "Even Stephen," [sic] another lampoon of "Point/Counterpoint" where the two took opposite sides of an issue, quickly foregoing any semblance of civil discourse to begin screaming at one another (McGrath). Colbert became one of the most popular correspondents on the show, even occasionally filling in for Stewart when the need arose (Mnookin). In 2005, after eight years as a *Daily Show* correspondent, Colbert leveraged this popularity into his

own spinoff show directly following Stewart in *The Colbert Report*, which first aired on October 17, 2005 (Steinberg).

Formally speaking, *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* were relatively similar. Both drew aesthetic cues from mainstream news programs, and while Colbert's show did not often feature correspondents, both shows generally had two segments of original content followed by an interview with a celebrity or important political figure during the last segment of the show. Furthermore, both *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* enacted satires of mainstream news networks. However, the two shows were distinguished by a crucial difference: Jon Stewart hosted his show as himself, while Colbert hosted his in character. Colbert built upon the pundit persona he had developed as a correspondent, using it as a medium through which to parody and satirize cable news shows "dominated by the personality and sensibility of a single host," and especially that of Bill O'Reilly, who Colbert's on-show persona referred to as "Papa Bear" (Steinberg; Day). In fact, *The Colbert Report* was such a pointed sendup of *The O'Reilly Factor* that Colbert regularly featured a segment called "The Word," a clear parody of O'Reilly's "Talking Points Memo" segment, where Colbert's vocal comic persona shared the screen with satirical text meant to illustrate the absurdity of the vocal Colbert's argument (Waisanen 125). Rather than simply discussing the absurdity of network news punditry, Colbert chose to enact it.

Just as Jon Stewart had done on *The Daily Show*, Colbert used his particular brand of criticism for more-than-comedic purposes; he became a cultural critic in his own right. In assuming a persona similar to that of a network news personality, Colbert sought to

reveal the absurdity of those personalities—as well as the political beliefs they held—by “first embodying the opposition by way of his character, and then exposing it as the fool” (Bishop 553). He accomplished this in part by taking an “illustrating-absurdity-by-doing” approach to his satire. In 2010, Colbert appeared before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law to testify in “support” of the “Take Our Jobs” program—an effort by the United Farm Workers of America to challenge American citizens to take on farm jobs typically done by undocumented workers—in which he had participated for a day as a segment on his show (Bishop 548). Conducting his whole testimony in character, Colbert brought his comedic voice into a non-comedic space, embodying the position of someone against the use of migrant labor in order to dismantle the argument from the inside out (Bishop 551). A year later, Colbert shifted his focus to illuminating the absurdity of Super PACs—by founding a Super PAC (Carr 2011). This satirical critique was an effective one; Colbert’s Super PAC saga not only increased viewers’ knowledge of Super PACs, but did so more effectively than other types of news media (Hardy et al. 330). Stephen Colbert’s hands-on approach to satire increased the show’s effectiveness as a vehicle for cultural critique.

Much like *The Daily Show* before it, *The Colbert Report* was an immense commercial and critical success. The show’s premiere garnered 1.13 million viewers (Crupi). A year later, that number had ballooned to an average of 1.5 million nightly viewers (Spitznagel). *The Colbert Report* also received significant recognition from the award circuit. When *The Colbert Report* ended its run in December of 2014, the show had been nominated for forty one Emmys, winning seven (“The Colbert Report”). Two of

Colbert's books—*A Colbert Christmas: The Greatest Gift of All!* and *America Again: Re-Becoming the Greatness We Never Weren't*—won Grammys in 2010 and 2014, respectively (Rich). Though he got his start as a correspondent on *The Daily Show*, by the end of his tenure as a faux-conservative pundit, Colbert had cemented a legacy both for his show and his role in civic discourse on par with that of Stewart's.

The resounding success of *The Colbert Report* encouraged networks to consider ordering similar shows with hosts in the mold of Stewart and Colbert. The next comedian to be tapped for such a role would be John Oliver, Stewart's substitute host in the summer of 2013. Impressed by Oliver's turn at the helm of *TDS* in the summer of 2013, HBO offered him his own show, titled *Last Week Tonight*, first airing on April 27, 2014 (Pennington). Airing once a week (each Sunday) rather than four nights a week, *Last Week Tonight's* basic premise shared common characteristics not only with *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* on a conceptual level, but also with *That Was the Week that Was* and *Weekend Update* (Pennington). Rather than focusing on recapping the events of each day, *Last Week Tonight* seeks to comedically and satirically reflect on the events of the week.

Last Week Tonight and John Oliver draw important strategies from both Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, as well as from other important comedy news programs of the past. Like many of its predecessors, *Last Week Tonight's* set is distinctly similar to that of any mainstream news program; Oliver sits at a news desk, wearing a shirt, tie, and jacket, against a backdrop of a city skyline, albeit one featuring the Empire State Building, the Burj Khalifa, and the Sagrada Familia. By using this image, Oliver parodies

the backdrops often used by news programs. Like Stewart, Oliver avoids playing a character, instead choosing to represent himself in earnest. Also like both Stewart and Colbert, Oliver uses his show as a platform for cultural critique.

Though *Last Week Tonight* draws many formal cues from its predecessors, it also features some crucial differences. Because it airs on HBO, *Last Week Tonight* has no commercial breaks; thus, each episode runs about twenty eight minutes total rather than the twenty one minutes given to Stewart or Colbert (Poniewozik). The format of the show is also different from that of *TDS* or *Colbert* in its lack of a weekly interview segment. Rather, Oliver spends the first segment of each week's episode recapping a few important events or stories the week (Framke). Following this, Oliver embarks on a longer, more thematically-oriented segment meant to inform viewers on issues such as "exploitative televangelists, child labor exploitation, transgender rights, the widespread corruption in FIFA," among other things (Framke). These segments typically range between fifteen and twenty minutes in length, and often occupy the remaining time in an episode. Though whole episodes are available only to HBO subscribers, these main segments are published on Youtube and can thus be viewed by anyone with access to the website.

Social media is more of a focus for Oliver than it was for his predecessors. After abstaining from discussing presidential candidate Donald Trump throughout much of the 2016 election season, Oliver devoted a 22-minute segment to questioning Trump's reputation as a successful businessman (Pereira). After referencing a tweet from Trump chastising Jon Stewart for changing his last name from Liebowitz, Oliver pointed out that Trump's ancestors had changed their name from Drumpf upon immigrating to the United

States and encouraged his viewers to use the hashtag “#makedonalddrumpfagain” (Pereira). The segment was immensely popular, garnering over 19 million views on Youtube in the eight days following its release, and the hashtag became popular on several social media sites (Koblin). The show also made baseball caps using the same slogan from the hashtag, which sold out in less than two weeks (Koblin). The practice of creating a hashtag has become established as a frequent strategy which Oliver uses to promote the visibility of his show. Through the inclusion of social media, Oliver was not only reached out to more viewers, but also used audience participation as a means of advancing his critique.

On *Last Week Tonight*, Oliver has also taken an approach similar to that taken by Colbert in order to illustrate the absurdity of certain rules or laws. Perhaps taking a page out of Colbert’s playbook, Oliver implemented an interesting approach during an August, 2015 segment on the tax-exempt status of televangelist churches: he founded one himself. Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption collected thousands in donations, all of which were donated to Doctors Without Borders (Holmes). Just under a year later, to help his viewers understand the practice of debt-buying, where “companies that buy debt at pennies on the dollar and then either resell it even cheaper or try to collect it,” Oliver formed his own debt-buying agency, bought over \$15 million in medical debt for just over \$60,000, and then began the process of forgiving that debt (Holmes). When discussing both televangelism and debt-buying, Oliver used a hands-on strategy in illustrating the absurdity inherent in how both systems function.

Thus far, *Last Week Tonight* has found both no shortage of success, both commercial and critical. Reviews noted its proximity to the way *The Daily Show* had been during Oliver's run, but many also noted that "that is, of course, not a bad thing at all" (Poniewozik). After five months on the air, *Last Week Tonight* was averaging 4.1 million views per week "across TV airings and DVR, on-demand and HBO Go" (O'Connell). By February of 2016, that number had increased to 4.7 million viewers per week (Hensch). In 2015, *Last Week Tonight* won its first Emmy for Outstanding Interactive Program, and it has won three since, having been nominated for ten in total ("Last Week Tonight"). Now in the midst of just its third season, *Last Week Tonight* as a show, as well as John Oliver as a figure within American civic discourse, have become incredibly popular. Much like "Weekend Update" in 1975, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in 1999, or *The Colbert Report* in 2005, *Last Week Tonight* presents a new development in the comedy news genre, one where the line between information and satire is further blurred than it was under either Stewart or Colbert. Therefore, I argue that the rhetorical study of the show is not only instructive, but crucial to our understanding of our ever-developing discursive landscape.

Watching the Watchers: A Review of Existing Literature

Having premiered only a few years ago, *Last Week Tonight* is still a relatively new program, and has thus far been the subject of little academic work. However, its growing influence within the landscape of alternative news sources (as well as within American civic discourse generally) situates it squarely within an ongoing academic discussions of the role and function of alternative news sources. Principally, scholars have focused their attention on Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* and Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report*, two shows known for using the visual trappings of news media television as a platform to critique news media organizations.

Part of this discussion has concerned the role of alternative news sources in American civic discourse, and whether their presence has constituted a positive development or a negative one. Hart and Hartelius argue Stewart is hurting civic discourse in America, going so far as to label him a "cynic" (Hart & Hartelius 264). They assert that, through the use of two tropes, the diatribe and the *chreia* (a "brief statement of an incident or situation followed by a pungent remark" (Cutler quoted in Hart & Hartelius 266)), Stewart makes cynicism an atmospheric mist "that hovers over [the American people] each day" (Hart & Hartelius 264). Hart and Hartelius see Stewart as a promoter of cynicism, consequently arguing his influence over American political discourse to be negative.

Other scholars take a more positive view on Stewart's influence. Bennett grants that Stewart may be a cynic, but argues that "singling out a comedian such as Jon Stewart with a charge of cynicism implies that the manners and conventions of our political times

are more generally high-minded and above reproach” (Bennett 279-280). For Bennett, Stewart’s cynicism is a product of his environment, and he asserts that “cynicism, when properly targeted, can redress the corruption of a political order that is widely and perhaps wisely held suspect by the public” (280). In contrast, Hariman offers that Stewart is not a cynic, but rather “rather a parodist, a satirist, a comic engaging in political humor in the manner of Aristophanes, Erasmus, Mark Twain, Will Rogers, Richard Pryor, Garry Trudeau, and many, many others, all of whom also could be accused of the additional crime of being popular” (Hariman 274). Further, he posits that Stewart’s show “continually calls the audience to informed participation, civil speech, and rational argument on behalf of sound public policy” (Hariman 274). In direct response to Hart and Hartelius, both Bennett and Hariman offer more positive accounts of Stewart’s comedy.

Many scholars have come to understand late-night comedy news shows as watchdogs of sorts, using criticism to hold the media accountable. Borden and Tew argue that Stewart and Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report* engage in a “performance of journalism” in which they “parody the news while simultaneously presenting and criticizing it,” but add that the two hosts should not be considered journalists because they are not required to adhere to the same rules regarding objectivity (Borden & Tew 306). Rather, they label the two as “media critics” who “seem to occupy a place on the line between internal and external criticism” (309). Painter and Hodges, examining *The Daily Show*, concur with this assessment of Stewart as a media critic tied closely to the Fourth Estate (Painter & Hodges 272). They argue that “Stewart and his Daily Show cohorts attempt to hold traditional broadcast media accountable to the public in four

ways:” pointing out falsehoods, pointing out inconsistencies, pointing out when inconsequential news is blown out of proportion, and by critiquing such practices common among news organizations as naming recurring segments (Painter & Hodges 268-271). According to Borden, Tew, Painter, and Hodges, Stewart and Colbert engage in a process of metacriticism where their role is to hold the American news media accountable by correcting their failings.

Other scholars have identified several more rhetorical tools Stewart and Colbert have used in their criticisms, expanding on the list originally outlined by Painter and Hodges. Howell investigates Stewart and Colbert as epideictic rhetors who use blame-based rhetoric to “position their audience to both validate their definitions of civic virtues and praise itself for possessing those virtues” (Howell 7). In functioning as such, Howell posits that “Stewart and Colbert meet a civic need,” offering “well-argued and entertaining assessments of civic virtue and vice” and modeling “how America might construct a critical, civic discourse in which individual citizens can take an active part” (Howell 16). Waisanen shares Howell’s view on Stewart and Colbert’s potential to change public discourse, asserting that the two hosts use three strategies—parodic polyglossia, satirical specificity, and contextual clash—to “refashion public discourse” (Waisanen 122). By parodically using multiple voices to embody multiple positions, using satire to critically analyze the words and actions of various political figures, and using apolitical comparisons to explain political concepts, Waisanen argues that Stewart and Colbert “teach us that a public sphere is healthy to the extent that participants can engage in vigorous debate and reflective advocacy, take the perspectives of others, and

make critiques in a playful rather than combative manner” (135). According to Howell and Waisanen, Stewart and Colbert use rhetorical genres and strategies as a means of forging new possibilities for civic discourse.

While many scholars see comedy news anchors as performers of criticism rather than journalism, others argue that the two are more closely related. Faina writes that “Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s impact on the mass mediated public sphere can benefit from characterizing them as public journalists,” arguing that the type of criticism they practice draws them closer to the traditions of public journalism than many scholars think (Faina 544). Baym concurs with this assessment. Framing the emergence of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* against the backdrop of an American news media increasingly struggling to hold its constituency’s trust, he argues that *TDS* offers a new form of political journalism combining elements from both traditional network news and entertainment and comedy genres (Baym 2010, 104). In combining these two forms, Baym asserts that Stewart and Colbert “reinvigorate the practice of reasoned discourse, both demanding and enacting the ideals of deliberative democracy” (Baym 2010, 173). For Faina and Baym, Stewart and Colbert’s comedic media criticism does not preclude them from being journalists, but rather constitutes some form of journalism in and of itself.

The discussion about where these shows fall on the spectrum between information and entertainment opens avenues of inquiry for political scientists seeking to determine how effective alternative news sources can be in shaping audience perceptions of American politics. Cao (2010) analyzes two Pew Research Center polls, one from 2002

and another from 2004, which surveyed respondents on the relationship between viewership of *The Daily Show* and attentiveness to the War in Afghanistan and the 2004 presidential election, respectively, finding that politically inattentive viewers of the show (about 20% of its viewership) became more attentive to those issues following *Daily Show* coverage (Cao 2010, 38-40). Feldman and Young find that viewers of late-night comedy shows such as *TDS* became more news attentive over the course of the 2004 presidential primary than those who did not watch late-night comedy, suggesting that such shows can function as a gateway to traditional news (Feldman & Young 416). Cao (2008) finds that this correlation intensifies among younger and more educated viewers, a conclusion likewise reached by Hollander (Cao 2008, 58; Hollander 411). Furthermore, Fox, Koloen, and Sahin find that *The Daily Show* and traditional news sources were equally substantive in their coverage of the 2004 Presidential election (Fox et al. 222). These studies suggest that *The Daily Show* and political late-night comedy shows like it share a capacity to share information and affect political attentiveness in a manner similar to their more traditional counterparts.

Other scholars have examined the way that Stewart's criticism affects the way viewers of his show view political candidates. Using a sample of 732 college students, Baumgartner and Morris found that students shown clips from *The Daily Show* focusing on 2004 presidential candidates John Kerry and George W. Bush had a more negative view of the two candidates than a group of their counterparts, who were shown clips from *CBS Evening News* of the same subject and length (Baumgartner & Morris 349). Furthermore, they found that those who viewed to *The Daily Show* were "significantly

less likely to agree” with the statement “I have faith in the U.S. electoral system” than their mainstream news-viewing counterparts (Baumgartner & Morris 352). Baumgartner and Morris’ study is crucial because it indicates that *The Daily Show* is successful not only in its humor, but also in its ability to influence audience perceptions through the use of that humor.

Considering this capacity of late-night comedy shows to influence perception, it comes as no surprise that scholars have also paid attention to how traditional news outlets view the programs which lampoon them. Berkowitz and Gutsche write on a *New York Times* article comparing Stewart to Edward R. Murrow following the former’s advocacy for the 2010 9/11 Health and Compensation Act, using that comparison to argue that “collective memory can serve as a way of drawing and redrawing journalistic lines through the authority that memory brings” (Berkowitz & Gutsche 653). “Most simply,” they assert, “the initial endorsement became a direct form of boundary adjustment to recapture ownership of a lost journalistic opportunity” (Berkowitz & Gutsche 653). Carlson and Peifer also studied media reactions to Stewart’s support for the 9/11 Health and Compensation Act, as well as his role in organizing the March to Restore Sanity and/or Fear earlier that year, arguing that news media organizations engaged in a form of “boundary maintenance” by criticizing Stewart’s open advocacy for certain political positions and use of humor in discussing political issues (Carlson & Peifer 346). In questioning whether Stewart was crossing a boundary, becoming too serious and involved in the public sphere, Carlson and Peifer assert that mainstream news media outlets were claiming ownership of those roles within American civic discourse (345).

These studies suggest that, in addition to informing and changing audience perception, shows like *The Daily Show* have caused mainstream news outlets to reconsider and re-draw boundaries around what constitutes journalism.

The civically-minded criticisms offered by figures like Stewart and Colbert observed by scholars also tie those figures to another role in society: that of the public intellectual. According to Etzioni, public intellectuals “opine on a wide array of issues, are generalists rather than specialists, concern themselves with matters of interest to the public at large, and do not keep their views to themselves” (Etzioni 1). She further asserts that public intellectuals “must engage in moral deliberations because all major public and social policies that they routinely criticize have important moral dimensions” (Etzioni 3). Brouwer and Squires offer a concurrent explanation, defining public intellectuals as “well-traveled and broadly educated [individuals] of letters who [can] speak on a myriad of topics and [are] listened to by important sectors of the public and, in the case of some who [gain] access to political powerbrokers, public policy” (Brouwer & Squires 204). They should be able to speak on a wide range of “serious or grand issues... with exquisite depth of knowledge” (Brouwer & Squires 204). Public intellectuals thus face two concerns: becoming too academic and losing their public audience, and becoming too public, thereby losing their ability to speak with authority on a wide range of issues (Etzioni 11). Public intellectuals, then, can be most effectively defined as individuals who write on important issues and cater this work to a larger audience.

While scholars of public intellectualism generally agree on this basic definition, they are less united on the settings in which public intellectualism occurs. Etzioni argues

it is useful to divide public intellectuals into two groups: the bohemian intellectual, a freestanding writer who often takes up residence in a city; and the academic intellectual, generally to be found in the university (Etzioni 10). Jacoby argues, however, that emphasis has increasingly shifted to the academic intellectual. Noting that the American university boom resulted in a massive increase in the number of college teachers (from 50,000 in 1920 to 500,000 in 1970), Jacoby posits that “the newly opened and enlarged colleges allowed, if not compelled, intellectuals to desert a precarious existence for stable careers,” thus recasting both the lives of intellectuals and intellectual life (Jacoby 14-15). Consequently, he argues, academic journals have become the primary site of public intellectual writing.

Jacoby’s conception of the public intellectual’s migration from the city to the academy and of their current role within civic discourse puts the public intellectual in a state of decline. He believes that as the academic intellectual continues to overtake the bohemian, the work of the public intellectual is consumed by an increasingly smaller and academic audience. Posner agrees, asserting that “today... the typical public intellectual is a safe specialist, which is not the type of person well suited to play the public intellectual’s most distinctive... role, that of critical commentator addressing a nonspecialist audience on matters of broad public concern” (Posner 5). For these theorists, the public intellectual is somewhat of an endangered species, receding into the academy and becoming increasingly esoteric.

Some theorists, however, dispute this explanation. Etzioni challenges the argument that increased association with the academy removes public intellectuals from

their nonspecialist audience by pointing out that some of the most prominent intellectuals of our time, such as Noam Chomsky, Cornel West, and Howard Zinn, are academics (Etzioni 10-11). Academic public intellectuals, she argues, “seem to be able to serve as independent critics at least as well” as their free-standing counterparts (Etzioni 11). Faflak and Haslem take their disagreement further, refuting the notion that the public intellectual can be separated from the public at all. They argue instead that “the intellectual *is* part of the public and the public *is* intellectual, both in its structural formation as a sphere of (inter)action and in its constituent, individual parts. If the public sphere is an intrinsic part of intellectual life, culture becomes the space that connects the two” (Faflak & Haslem 8). Even as the number of bohemian intellectuals decline while the number of academic intellectuals rise, these theorists argue that the public intellectual remains an important part of civic discourse and remain vital to the public.

The majority of academic work on public intellectuals, however, relies on definitions similar to those outlined above. Some theorists argue that, given the changes American civic discourse has undergone as a result of the evolution of our media landscape, the definition of what constitutes a public intellectual ought to be broadened. Some theorists argue that modern public intellectual comes from a somewhat unlikely source: the 11 PM slot on Comedy Central. MacMullan argues that Jon Stewart ought to be considered a public intellectual because “behind all the jokes, both witty and sophomoric, is an unalloyed faith in the power of the American political project to improve people’s lives” (MacMullan 66). In making his criticisms—which touch on a wide variety of issues—Stewart satisfies a desire felt by Americans for critical

commentary; he strives to “explain why we should be skeptical about our government, which often seems dangerously disconnected from reality” (MacMullan 63). Parsi agrees with MacMullan, going further to posit that Stewart is “our greatest public intellectual” (Parsi 3). Parsi references two examples, a report on a clean campaign being run in Connecticut and Sarah Palin’s invention of the term “death panels,” where Stewart used news stories and brought on guests to inform his audience on the nature of altruism and the bioethics of health care, respectively (Parsi 5). While Stewart is in no uncertain terms not an academic, these theorists argue that he remains a public intellectual because he uses his platform to speak to a nonspecialist audience on a wide variety of issues.

This view opens new avenues of examination of the state of civic discourse in this country. Whether or not a figure like Stewart, Colbert, or John Oliver can be described as a public intellectual is at least somewhat disputable, but it is far less disputable that, on their respective shows, the three perform some form of public intellect, as all three use their programs to speak to nonspecialist audiences about important issues. The format of *Last Week Tonight* is different from its predecessors, allowing Oliver to devote meaningful time each week to discuss a different issue of national import with his audience. Thus, Oliver performs public intellect on a near-weekly basis. The aim of this study is to fill a gap in existing research, using Oliver’s informative “main story” segments on *Last Week Tonight* as an artifact to help understand the performance of public intellect by personalities on the liberal side of the American news media.

Burkean Frames: A Theoretical Foundation

This research grounds itself in the writings of Kenneth Burke. Specifically, his writings on frames of acceptance and rejection are of particular interest. Burke asserts that “one constructs [their] notion of the universe or history, and shapes attitudes in keeping” (Burke 3). Based on these attitudes, one “singles out certain functions or relationships as either friendly or unfriendly,” preparing to welcome them if they are deemed friendly, or weighing “objective resistances against [their] own resources, to decide how far [they] can effectively go in combating them” (Burke 3-4). Taking this into consideration, he argues that “we must name the friendly or unfriendly functions and relationships in such a way that we are able to do something about them,” adding that “in naming them, we form our characters, since the names embody attitudes; and implicit in the attitudes there are the cues for behavior” (Burke 4).

It is these names, and these attitudes, that form the basis of Burkean frames. Arguing that “all symbolic structures are designed to produce... acceptance in one form or another,” Burke states that these structures “shape our relations with our fellows,” preparing us “*for* some functions and *against* others, *for* or *against* the persons representing these functions” (Burke 4, his emphasis). However, Burke goes further than this, arguing that the same names and attitudes suggest “*how* you shall be for or against” (Burke 4, his emphasis). Thus, Burke defines frames of acceptance as “the more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking [person] gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it” (Burke 5).

Burke illustrates this by providing an example in the form of the epic frame. In referring to the epic, Burke recalls the form of the epic poems of Ancient Greece, ones which arose “under primitive, non-commercial, conditions” (Burke 34). Burke considers this origin, remarking on the “*deliberately* archaic” quality of the Homeric poems, and argues that the purpose of this form is identification with commonly held values:

The epic is designed, then, under primitive conditions, to make men “at home in” those conditions. It “accepts” the rigors of war (the basis of the tribe’s success) by magnifying the role of the warlike hero. Such magnification serves two purposes: it lends dignity to the necessities of existence, “advertising” courage and individual sacrifice for group advantage—and it enables the human man to share the worth of the hero by the process of “identification.” (Burke 35-36)

A story of war, told through the epic frame, justifies the warrior in the eyes of the audience, because it advertises the virtue of doing what is necessary for the tribe’s success. The epic was also important in that its hero was generally humanized, having flaws and strengths just as any human would (Burke 36). Thus, identification with the epic hero necessarily “the invitation to seek the flaw in oneself,” promoting an “attitude of resignation” to both the flawed nature of humans and to the necessity of sacrifice (Burke 37). Through this example, Burke illustrates that people use frames in order to contextualize themselves within history and within their environments; in this case, the epic frame identifies practices like sacrifice and war as virtuous to make the necessity of those practices more palatable.

For Burke, frames are lenses which influence the way we approach and consider our history, but also discursive forms used in attempt to influence the attitudes of others, which Burke argues is important because an attitude constitutes an “incipient program of action” (Burke 20). Crucially, Burke argues that humans use frames as a means by which they adopt attitudes towards the symbols of authority⁴ within their society (Burke 4). He divides these frames into two principal categories: frames of acceptance, among which Burke identifies the tragic and comic frames, prepare people to accept symbols of authority (Burke 19), while frames of rejection, which include the plaint or elegy frame, the satiric frame, and the burlesque frame, prepare people to reject them (Burke 21).

The tragic and comic frames are united by a few important characteristics. Firstly, both frames are built around the presence of the hero. In the case of the comic frame, the hero is an intelligent figure attempting to set straight the fools standing opposite to them; in the tragic frame, the hero stands opposed to villains committed to opposing attitudes (Burke 41). Furthermore, the epic, comic, and tragic frames are united in that within them, “the element of *acceptance* is uppermost” (Burke 43). Ultimately, both the tragic and the comic frames of acceptance undergird themselves in accepting existing attitudes and symbols of authority.

In the tragic frame, events occur more or less without any means of preventing them from doing so. The tragic frame is one where divine, superhuman, or inhuman “dispositions are concerned with human destinies” (Burke 38). Histories in the tragic

⁴ Burke notes symbols of authority is a term “designed for pointing-in-the-direction-of-something rather than for clear demarcation of that-in-the-direction-of-which-we-would-point” (Burke 329). It is thus a catch-all term Burke uses to refer to “rulers, courts, parliaments. Laws, educators, constabulary, and the moral slogans linked with such” (Burke 329).

frame are considered “complex trials by jury... we get in one piece the offence, the sentence, and the expiation” (Burke 38). This view is derived from a forensic approach imposing “*scientific* concepts of causality upon earlier patterns of magic and religion,” (Burke 38). Events in the tragic frame are “made to grow out of one another in keeping with the logic of scientific cogency, the Q.E.D. of Euclid and the political oration” (Burke 38-39). Discourse in the tragic frame accepts events as they happen, approaches those events with an attitude of resignation; a person who falls, breaks their leg, and simply complains aloud at having done so considers that event through a tragic frame.

Because tragedy frequently “deals in crime,” so too does the tragic frame (Burke 39). Thus, attitudes in the tragic frame necessitate the existence of a criminal, as well as the existence of an authority by whom the criminal will eventually be brought to justice (Burke 39). However, the tragic frame deals “*sympathetically* with crime;” in considering events through the tragic frame, “we are made to feel that [the criminal’s] offence is our offence, and at the same time the offence is dignified by nobility of style” (Burke 39). We sympathize with the villains because their crimes are ultimately a result of “the basic sin” – pride. We view the crimes of Brutus and Cassius, “offenders against ‘ambitious’ Caesar,” sympathetically; so too do we have sympathy for MacBeth, as the thoughts of regicide were planted in his head by witches (Burke 40). In addition to the criminals (in these cases Brutus and Cassius and MacBeth), we also have villains; both in Caesar’s pride, and in the witches, for awakening MacBeth’s pride. These villains, the agents who bring about the offence, are a necessary part of the tragic frame.

However, the necessitated presence of a villain makes changing attitudes through discourse difficult. To “call a man a villain,” Burke says, brings a choice of either attacking further or cringing (Burke 4). In contrast, to call him mistaken is to “invite yourself to attempt setting him right” (Burke 4). This is the crucial difference between the tragic frame and the comic frame. Rather than understanding stories from a perspective of a virtuous hero and an evil villain, the heroes and villains in the comic frame are intelligent and mistaken or tricked, respectively (Burke 4-5).

Burke argues that “the progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*” (Burke 41). Unlike the tragic frame, wherein events “are made to grow out of one another in keeping with the logic of scientific cogency,” events in the comic frame can be changed because the ideas or people the frame is aligned against are not evil, but mistaken. By changing the villain’s mind, the rhetor in the comic frame uses discourse to create change in their society.

The comic frame thus also differs from the tragic frame in its scope. Whereas the tragic frame deals with “the *cosmic man*,” framing stories such that the motivating forces are either “superhuman” or “in-human,” The comic frame deals with “*man in society*,” and is as a result “essentially *humane*, leading in periods of comparative stability to the comedy of manners, the dramatization of quirks and foibles” (Burke 42, his emphasis). Thus, the comic frame “should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*” (Burke 171, his emphasis). The comic frame is better suited for changing attitudes, as it is firmly grounded in the humane, allowing people to change attitudes within themselves or others;

a person who falls, breaks their leg, and thanks God they didn't break their neck is viewing the event from a comic frame.

In discussing comic frames, Burke makes the important distinction between comedy and humor. Whereas the comedy is heroic, with an informed hero working to change the attitudes of mistaken foes, humor is “the opposite of the heroic” (Burke 43). Burke argues that “the heroic promotes acceptance by *magnification*,” elevating the hero so that the audience may identify with them, humor “takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by *dwarfing the situation*. It converts downwards, as the heroic converts upwards” (Burke 43).

Because it tends to gauge the situation falsely, humor “does not make for so completely well-rounded a frame of acceptance as comedy” (Burke 43). Burke describes the frame of humor as a “customary method of self-protection” underlying an “attitude of ‘happy stupidity’ whereby the gravity of life simply fails to register” (Burke 43). The humor frame is thus unideal in working to create change because it falsely gauges the situation to begin with.

Just as there are frames of acceptance, so too are their frames of rejection. Rather than seeing rejection as an opposite to acceptance, he sees it as a “byproduct” of it, remarking that the main distinction between the two “involves primarily a matter of emphasis” (Burke 21). A crucial factor, then, is the subject's attitude towards the symbols of authority around them. “If the king is well thought of in most quarters,” Burke argues, “the [person] who would build [their] frame to accept the necessity of deposing the king is almost necessarily... shunted into a negative emphasis” (Burke 22). In making the

argument for communism in the Communist Manifesto, it would be unwise for Marx to frame capitalism as a well-intentioned-but-flawed system; to be effective, it must be a “specter that haunts” (Burke 22). Burke argues that, in this approach, frames of rejection are defined by partiality, and the lack of a complete understanding of the situation (Burke 22).

The first frame of rejection Burke outlines is the elegiac frame. Noting that “once a man has perfected a technique of complaint, he is more at home with sorrow than he would be without it,” he quotes Augustine, arguing that the elegiac frame allows a person to “avenge oneself by weeping” (Burke 44). The elegiac frame allows people to accept life, even while “symbolizing its rejection” through constant complaint (44). Discourse in the elegiac frame is little more than a list of complaints about the state of things, without any proposal for how the situation might be altered. A person who sees the world through an elegiac frame offers many complaints, but has no desire to remedy them. Thus, Burke argues that the frame is similar to humor in that it “does not properly gauge the situation: when under its spell, one does not tend to size up [their] own resources accurately” (Burke 44).

The satiric frame is somewhat less negative than its elegiac counterpart. The satirist, Burke argues, “attacks in others the weaknesses and temptations that are really within themselves” (Burke 49). In explaining this further, Burke uses an example of two politicians who share a secret vice. During a debate, one criticizes the other’s political stances, drawing on imagery of their shared vice. In doing so, he both excoriates his opponent and “gratifies and punishes the vice within himself;” thus, he is “whipped with

his own lash” (Burke 49). To the audience of such a debate, this may be seen as one politician attacking another’s externalities, when in reality the politician is attacking his own internalities onto his opponent. Discourse in the satirical frame, then, is fundamentally based on scapegoating; one person identifies a flaw within themselves, and then rejects it by attacking another for having the same flaw. Thus, though the satirist attacks another, that which they wish to attack is within themselves.

DuBois disagrees with Burke’s explanation of the satire frame. He argues that, rather than focusing on attacking in others “the weaknesses and temptations that are really within” oneself, discourse in the satiric frame “criticizes by incongruities between an ideal or real, accepted mode of behavior and a real, rejected mode of behavior” (DuBois 353). While DuBois admits that “as satire grows cosmic in scope and laughs at or with all mankind,... it may appear to make the author lash at [their] own vices or mortality,” he counters that, by pointing out incongruities between accepted and rejected modes, the satiric frame necessarily lashes “out” rather than “in” (DuBois 353-354). DuBois thus argues that the satire frame does not attack an inner weakness, but instead points out incongruities between accepted and rejected modes of behavior.

The burlesque frame does not concern itself with such complexities. Rather than attacking in others what is really in oneself or pointing out incongruities between ideals and behavior, the burlesque frame really does constitute an attack on externalities, and is thus enjoyable as an “occasional dish,” but not as a full discursive diet (Burke 54). The rhetor in the burlesque frame “makes no attempt to get inside the psyche of [their] victim;” the objective here is not to persuade them, but to destroy them, to demonize

them, and to “convert every ‘perhaps’ into a ‘positively’” by selecting the externals of behavior and driving them to a “‘logical conclusion’ that becomes their ‘reduction to absurdity’” (Burke 54-55). Thus, the burlesque frame also “does not contain a well-rounded frame within itself,” and can be used to the ends of wisdom only insofar as as “we ourselves provide ways of making allowances for it” (Burke 55). It can be used only to lower others in comparison to oneself, and thus rejects important parts of discourse in favor of serving that purpose.

It is rare to find a rhetorical situation in which only one frame is at work. Burke argues that “none of these poetic categories can be isolated in its chemical purity;” rather, frames “overlap upon one another, involving the qualitative matter of emphasis” (Burke 57). Adding that sharp differentiation between acceptance and rejection is impossible (the acceptance of A necessitates the rejection of non-A), Burke asserts that “epic, tragedy, and comedy gravitate towards the positive side, while elegy, satire, and burlesque stress the negative” (Burke 57). This distinction suggests the existence of two transition frames: a grotesque frame built around mysticism, and a didactic frame built around propaganda (Burke 57). Both these frames arise when there are discrepancies in the frames being used within society.

The grotesque frame can be found where an objective set of values cannot be agreed upon. Burke argues that “mysticism as a collective moment belongs to periods marked by great confusion of the cultural frame, requiring a radical shift in people’s allegiance to symbols of authority” (Burke 57-58). The grotesque frame, then, is a “cult of incongruity” much like humor, except that the grotesque does not provoke laughter

(Burke 58). The grotesque comes to the fore when “confusion in the forensic pattern gives more prominence to the subjective elements of imagery than to the objective, or public, elements” (Burke 60). Thus, the world within the grotesque frame is a world in which multiple values are promoted, and thus in which objective truth is difficult, or even impossible, to determine.

In the chaotic situations where a grotesque frame is at work, some symbol of authority, such as a regime, may propagate the attitudes of their frame through propaganda, thus creating a didactic frame. The didactic frame is characterized less by conflicting information and more by attempts at obfuscating one truth and substituting another. The didactic frame seeks to change attitudes “by coaching the imagination in obedience to critical postulates” (Burke 75). Actors within a didactic frame attempt “to avoid the confusions of synthesis by a schematic decision to label certain people ‘friends’ or ‘enemies’” (Burke 79). This procedure consequently leads “naturally to oversimplifications of character and history that can, by the opposition, be discounted as sentimentality” (Burke 79). This attempt to reshape widely-held attitudes requires the muddying of discourse to the point where the difference between fact and fiction becomes unclear. Thus, a grotesque frame becomes didactic when one part of society engages in this muddying in attempt to convert others to holding their attitudes.

Burke’s conceptions of frames are an important tool in understanding discourse in society. They allow academics to understand how certain people and groups define themselves in relation to other people and groups, and in relation to dominant symbols of authority. While both frames of acceptance necessarily accept symbols of authority, the

comic frame gives its hero an opportunity to correct their mistaken villains, thus leaving the door open for them to change the way the symbols of authority around them function without rejecting their legitimacy. In contrast, frames of rejection necessarily reject those symbols of authority. The reform to an existing system which can be achieved through the comic frame is insufficient in situations of rejection; rejectors must break symbols of authority to allow new ones to take their place.

Immediately following their publication, Burke's arguments on acceptance and rejection received largely positive attention from other academics. DuBois largely agrees with Burke, but notes a few important disagreements. Generally, he finds Burke's definitions of the terms Burke uses in differentiating between types of frames to be somewhat incomplete; he uses the genre of the mock-epic as evidence that Burke's positioning of the humor as an opposite of the heroic is mistaken (DuBois 352) and argues that the elegy and the plaint "are not synonymous," but rather that the latter is part of the former (DuBois 354). DuBois ultimately notes that, "though one may add to or detract from Burke's discussion of terms," the notion of frames of acceptance and rejection—and with it the notion that the two are connotative—is "a useful addition to the vocabulary of criticism," and applauds Burke for his position that criticism ought to be comic (DuBois 355-356). Schlauch takes a similar position, finding a compelling, if somewhat incomplete argument within a book presenting "both charm and challenge" (Schlauch 128). While Schlauch agrees with Burke's argument that acceptance and rejection are inherently related in that the acceptance of A necessitates the rejection of non-A, she argues that "forms of thought are given a position of primary importance in

Burke's scheme of history, despite other passages which seem to disclaim this" (Schlauch 130). As a consequence of this, she argues that Burke "fails to realize the importance" of his admission (Schlauch 130). Though both reviewers of Burke's frames had their criticisms, both DuBois and Schlauch find the theory to be interesting and compelling.

Burkean frames are somewhat underused in the analysis of public discourse, but the body of academic work that has been done finds the comic frame a useful tool in enacting societal change. Murphy examines the comic frame in the rhetoric of John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential election, arguing that both used the comic frame in articulating "the philosophical groundwork for broadening the terms of the American covenant and opening the process to previously excluded people" (Murphy 267). By portraying Nixon as "a comic clown," Kennedy's rhetoric served "to redeem the country of the mistake of prejudice and invigorate the principles of freedom, justice, and democracy enshrined in the American covenant" (Murphy 271). In this analysis, Murphy makes the argument that the study of presidential discourse is insightful not only in understanding a candidate's victory, but in understanding shifts in American culture at large. In this example, Murphy demonstrates the role of the comic frame in shifting public attitudes.

Carlson and Powell also confirm Burke's argument of the comic frame as an agent of change by charting its use by civil rights leaders advocating for reform. Carlson argues that Mahatma Gandhi's independence movement in India was "rhetorically significant because his strategy and tactics create a form of action which reflects a 'comic frame'" rather than the tragic one through which revolutionary movements are often

viewed (Carlson 1986 447). She asserts that a tragic view of revolution justifies the use of violence on the grounds that no social change would be possible without it, whereas the end of a movement from the comic perspective is “to free society by creating a consciousness of the system as a system, revealing its inherent weaknesses, and preparing an aware populace to deal with them” (Carlson 1986 447). Carlson specifically identifies the strategy of nonviolent resistance as an example of this, arguing the tactic “creates a drama which demonstrates an unjust situation on so large a scale that the community has no choice but to confront it” (Carlson 1986 450). Powell, writing on the efforts of The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, argues that the group used four strategies—spirituality, identification, juxtaposition, and repudiation—to build a comic discourse that “did not seek to destroy the existing social order, but recognized the error which had developed within the social system, and sought to correct it” (Powell 86)⁵. Agreeing with Burke’s argument that the comic frame pushes people towards maximum consciousness, Powell contends that the comic frame employed by ASWPL succeeded by “prodding the consciousness, or change from within the individual, instead of forcing change through victimage” (Powell 96). Carlson and Powell illuminate the comic frame as an ideal perspective from which to issue a nonviolent call for reform to a system because it accepts the status quo while also making the case for reform.

The comic frame, however, is only useful insofar as it does not threaten the status quo to too great an extent. Thus, scholars have noted that, as movements become more radical, the frame they use tends to shift. Appel (1997) identifies a shift in the rhetoric

⁵ As Powell notes, the ASWPL “maintained itself as a segregationist group,” situating itself firmly within the same power structures it sought, if only in part, to destroy (Powell 92).

used by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., arguing that King “moved from a mostly comic style, from 1955-1966, to a mostly tragic style, in 1967-1968” (Appel 1997 376). He observes that King’s early speeches “did not attack the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, or America’s capitalist economy,” and contends that these speeches “sought innovation, not revolution, in their nation’s way of life” (Appel 1997 385). In contrast, Appel argues, King’s later work discussed problems such as poverty, the need for housing reform, a substandard education system, and the Vietnam War (Appel 1997 385). These problems were “markedly more onerous and criminal,” and the blame for them was “more clearly localized in the leaders of the United States of America” (Appel 1997 396). According to Appel, King’s rhetoric in the last year of his life shifted to a tragic frame, positioning American symbols of authority in a more villainous light to advocate the need for a more radical change.

Scholarly attention also reveals that, in advocating for radical change, a rhetor might move not only from one frame of acceptance to another, but from a frame of acceptance to one of rejection. Carlson analyzes the writings of early women humorists between 1820 and 1880, contending that these writings “became less and less truly comic, eventually sliding into satire, and finally into burlesque” (Carlson 1988 311). Carlson argues that, whereas early writings from that period accepted “the prevailing notion of social hierarchy while attempting to correct its failings,” the later writings acknowledged a need for a more meaningful shift away from that prevailing notion (Carlson 1988 312). Thus, she finds that the rhetoric of women humorists advocating a more meaningful change to the system shifted over time to a burlesque frame through

which the prevailing social hierarchy could be reduced to absurdity. In these pieces, Carlson and Appel argue that the comic frame is a useful form of discourse in advocating for change only insofar as that change does not upset prevailing notions of social hierarchy, and note that when the need for more radical change arises, the rhetor must switch from the comic frame either to a tragic frame of acceptance or a burlesque frame of rejection.

Other scholars have noted that some civil rights leaders spoke through multiple frames at the same time. Striking a contrast with the rhetoric of Dr. King, Selby examines the rhetoric of Ralph David Abernathy, another prominent leader in the Civil Rights movement and a close friend of King's, and argues that Abernathy "consistently portrayed Whites from the perspective of burlesque humor, a perspective that invited a reaction to them not of fear or pity, but of scoffing laughter" (Selby 135). Abernathy's rhetoric consistently portrayed "Whites in general and White opponents of racial justice in particular as bumbling, ridiculous, and impotent" (Selby 142). Selby asserts that, through this portrayal, Abernathy "declared that Whites were ultimately powerless either to grant or to stand in the way of Blacks' demands for justice" and cultivated a discourse through which Blacks could express their anger nonviolently (Selby 142-143). Thus, in this example, the burlesque frame is used as a complement to more comic frames by creating a discourse through which people could express frustration while also portraying opponents as unable to stand against them.

Appel (1996) concurs with this assessment. he discusses the rhetoric of William F. Buckley, Jr., a prominent leader in the conservative movement during the middle of

the 20th century and argues that, through rhetorical strategies including black-and-white schematization of political problems, a heartless caricature of bumbling opponents, and the rejection and limited banishment of the retrograde opponents, Buckley's rhetoric positions the burlesque frame as a mediator between tragedy and comedy which allowed both author and audience to "adopt a frame of acceptance and a frame of rejection at the same time" (Appel 1996 281). Appel's work expands upon and amends Burke's original description of the burlesque frame by positioning the frame as one used to both accept and reject authority, rather than solely to reject it.

Because the burlesque frame can be used to simultaneously accept and reject, it makes itself a useful tool in redefining group boundaries. Analyzing letters written to the editors of various Arizona newspapers during the short-lived gubernatorial career of Evan Mecham, Buerkle, Mayer, and Olson found that letters written in support of Mecham positioned him as a tragic "champion of social conservative values... and a righteous martyr at the hands of the liberals" (Buerkle et. al 196). In contrast, they argue that the drive for a recall election provided more moderate conservatives in the state an opportunity to "redefine Arizona conservatism by rejecting" the more extreme positions Mecham championed (Buerkle et. al 199). Thus, the burlesque frame was useful in this case because it allowed for rejection "that would not require Republicans to completely jettison conservative ideology, just the portion that they found offensive" (Buerkle et. al 199). In rejecting the more radical wing of the Arizona conservative movement, moderates also engaged in a process of accepting and affirming their conception of conservatism.

Other scholars have explored how the burlesque frame can be used to justify atrocities. Hubbard uses “the underutilized Burkean concepts of the burlesque frame and entelechy” as a means of understanding the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, “the central event in our nuclear memory” (Hubbard 353). Drawing from the writings of President Harry Truman, the norms and morals of war, and popular indicators, Hubbard argues that the decision to bomb the two cities was a consequence of a pervasive burlesque frame which “distorts ethics, creates caricatures of the enemy, and prevents explorations of more rational alternatives” (Hubbard 356). In Hubbard’s view, the consideration of this frame presents a “missing context” for revisionist re-readings of the event, which ignored the role of frames (Hubbard 354). In this example, the use of the burlesque frame to create caricatures of the enemy served to make the perceived wartime necessity of dropping an atomic bomb more acceptable; thus, the burlesque frame was used in this case to justify that tragic conclusion. This example is also significant in that it demonstrates the situational utility of frames; when fighting a war, the application of a burlesque frame to the enemy is useful because it makes the acts that seem tragically necessary easier to justify.

Frames have also played an important role in academic discussions surrounding artifacts of American comedy⁶. In her analysis of political cartoons that criticized former Interior Secretary James Watt, Bostdorff argues that the burlesque is “the most appropriate framework for understanding the rhetorical attitude of political cartoons”

⁶ It is crucial here to draw a distinction between comedy and the comic frame. In referring to “artifacts of American comedy,” I mean artifacts designed to entertain, and specifically to make audience members laugh. As we shall see, these artifacts frequently but do not necessarily make their critique in the comic frame.

because audience members “typically approach such artifacts with an aggressive attitude of their own” and because the burlesque frame is most compatible with the simplistic form of editorial cartoons (Bostdorff 46). Bostdorff finds that the burlesque criticism carried out in political cartoons about Watt was guided by four tropes, being metaphor, irony, synecdoche, and metonymy (Bostdorff 48). In this example, Bostdorff demonstrates that the burlesque frame remains useful in comedy as a means of reducing the stature of villains.

Other scholars have turned their attention to the genre of satire⁷, specifically with regard to alternative news sources. Waisanen argues that Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert “are comic rhetorical critics, who both make important contributions to public discourse and civil society” (Waisanen 119). He contends that both rhetors use the rhetorical strategies of contextual clash, parodic polyglossia, satirical specificity, which he identifies as “comic-frame strategies of incongruity that permit a communicator to be multi-voiced, to deflate abstractions and mystifications, and to symbolically span a variety of situations” (Waisanen 134). Meier, focusing on Colbert’s establishment of a legally recognized Super PAC during the 2012 presidential election cycle, concurs with Waisanen’s assessment. In creating a Super PAC in order to illustrate the problem posed by Super PACs, Meier argues that Colbert performed the role of a fool, making it easier for his audience to find fools in the heads of Super PACs, “where we would otherwise

⁷ Again, differentiation between the genre of satire and the satiric frame is useful here. Fife defines satire as “a popular form of comedic social critique frequently theorized in terms of Kenneth Burke’s comic frame” (Fife 322). In contrast, the satire of which Burke speaks is a frame in which the framer attacks in the framed what really lies within themselves.

see villains” (Meier 276). In these articles, we see that Stewart and Colbert are comic rhetors encouraging change in attitude among their audiences.

However, Stewart is no longer on the air. Colbert is, but his persona on *Late Night* conspicuously lacks the tongue-in-cheek conservatism practiced by his *Colbert Report* persona. The two have been succeeded by a slew of new hosts, themselves all members of the proverbial *Daily Show* alumni association. *The Daily Show* desk, where Stewart found his fame, is now manned by Trevor Noah. Samantha Bee, a longtime correspondent on *The Daily Show*, has reached mainstream success on her new show on TBS, *Full Frontal*. John Oliver, the focus of this study, is in the midst of his fourth season of his HBO show *Last Week Tonight*.

More so than *Full Frontal* or the new *Daily Show*, Oliver parts from the format common among his show’s predecessors. Gone is the supporting cast of correspondents, who report on multiple stories over the course of a season. No matter where one looks, the satirically-assumed persona of a news personality talking head is nowhere to be found. Airing only once per week, *Last Week Tonight* is freed from the demands of a daily news cycle, allowing Oliver more agency in choosing what he discusses. As a result, the “main story” segments which occupy the bulk of his episodes’ runtimes are often oriented more thematically than episodically. The evolutions that *Last Week Tonight* has begat upon the alternative news source genre highlight the need for further study. In the section that follows, I apply the concepts of Burke’s comic and burlesque frames, using them to contextualize Oliver’s comic criticism within the developing alternative news source genre. Specifically, I argue that Oliver performs a version of

public intellect through which he enacts a mostly comic criticism of the American political system at large, and of the Republican Party and its candidate in particular.

Laughing and Learning: John Oliver's Comic Performance of Public Intellect

Since its premier in 2014, *Last Week Tonight* has developed its own, unique contribution to the genre of alternative news, making a few important changes to the segment-segment-interview format popularized by *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. While the first segment satirically recaps some of the important events of the previous week, the following, “main story” segment typically lasts between fifteen and twenty minutes, often times occupying the remainder of the episode. These segments focus on topics of political or public importance, and may or may not be directly relevant to events which took place in the week prior to the release of the episode. As a means of making room for this extended, “main stories,” the “interview” portion of the program is notably absent.

These “main story” segments are of particular interest in part because of the extent of their availability as compared to the rest of the show. *Last Week Tonight* airs on HBO, and thus the ability to watch it in full is contingent upon either having HBO or knowing someone willing to lend you their account information. Viewers using HBO GO or HBO NOW, the channel's two online streaming services, have access only to the past year's worth of episodes. However, following every episode, the newest “main story” segment is posted to the show's Youtube channel, where it remains indefinitely and can be viewed by anyone.

The rationale behind this decision is, no doubt, at least partly motivated by financial considerations. Making these highly popular segments⁸ available on Youtube

⁸ The February 28th, 2016 episode of *Last Week Tonight*—containing the “Donald Trump” segment—garnered around 6 million viewers on HBO and its streaming affiliates, while the Youtube video of the segment garnered 23.3 million (Zorthian).

earns the show and its parent company large amounts of money in ad revenue. However, whether or not it is motivated by factors other than money, the effort to make these segments widely available also bears a great deal of rhetorical significance. It is undeniable the wide availability of these segments also makes Oliver's rhetorical criticism more widely accessible. Rather than being available only to HBO subscribers, the availability of those Youtube segments help Oliver's long-form, thematically-oriented political critiques reach a much wider audience. Any number of internet users have access to these informative segments, whether they be about law enforcement, education policy, or Donald Trump; thus, the power they have to inform and change audience attitudes about those topics is dramatically increased.

While Oliver has used this segment to speak on a wide variety of political issues since his show began, *Last Week Tonight's* third season took on a somewhat different character. Over the course of the season, which was filmed against the backdrop of the 2016 presidential race, the election became increasingly difficult to ignore, becoming the focus of seven of Oliver's "main story" segments between late February and late November. However, these analyses seldom, if ever, discussed polling data or which candidate was winning. Rather, Oliver used his time on camera to elucidate the complicated rules governing the presidential primary process, to investigate the feasibility of one of Donald Trump's crucial policy positions, or to educate his viewers on the resources at their disposal in resisting Trump's presidency.

In this chapter, I conduct a Burkean frames analysis of these seven segments, using Burke's ideas of the comic frame of acceptance and the burlesque frame of

rejection as a means of helping to understand Oliver's performance of public intellect within American political discourse. This analysis will be divided into sections. First, I compare the role Oliver performs on *Last Week Tonight* to the role of the public intellectual, arguing that, while Oliver is a comedian and not a public intellectual, he does engage in a performance of public intellect not entirely unlike those performed by real public intellectuals. Second, I discuss the inherent relationship between Oliver's performance of public intellect and the comic nature of his criticism. Third, I examine and discuss the implications of Oliver's use of burlesque attacks in his humor, illustrating that Burkean frames often not as distinct as they seem. Finally, I contextualize Oliver's model for civic discourse within the current landscape of American news media discourse.

John Oliver and the Performance of Public Intellect

The world of the public intellectual is, at least in some respect, the world of academia. As noted earlier, Etzioni identifies the academic intellectual as one of two major types of public intellectual (Etzioni 10), and she and Jacoby both note that the university has increasingly become the home of the public intellectual (Etzioni 10-11, Jacoby 14-15). Jacoby further argues that academic journals have become the dominant means through which public intellectuals communicate with their audiences (Jacoby 15). As Etzioni asserts, this shift has not necessarily affected the ability of the public intellectuals to reach their audience, but public intellectualism has, in the modern day, become an increasingly academic pursuit.

It is difficult to envision John Oliver as a member of this predominantly academic group. A tenured position at an accredited university may not be a requirement for the title of public intellectual, but it has certainly become a common characteristic. Oliver's criticism, delivered not in writing or in person on a college campus but in front of a camera from behind a desk, is markedly different from those that typically characterize the public intellectual. Furthermore, *Last Week Tonight*, at least in part, functions explicitly as a vehicle through which Oliver delivers satirical jokes and humorous jabs. Though these jokes and jabs undoubtedly serve purposes both rhetorical and political, seldom are they anywhere to be found in the writings of public intellectuals like Noam Chomsky, Cornel West, or Howard Zinn. Furthermore, the popularity of the university as a site of employment for public intellectuals exemplifies the devotion of public intellectual to explicitly intellectual pursuits. Oliver does not seem to share this devotion; despite its informative elements, *Last Week Tonight* is principally a comedy show, meant to make people laugh.

However, while Oliver cannot be said to be a public intellectual himself, I argue that Oliver's rhetoric on *Last Week Tonight* constitutes a performance of public intellect in that it fulfills some of the same important functions as the rhetoric of the public intellectual. Brouwer and Squires argue that the public intellectual speaks on "serious or grand issues... with exquisite depth of knowledge," and is "listened to by important sectors of the public" (Brouwer & Squires 204). Furthermore, Posner sees the public intellectual as a "critical commentator addressing a nonspecialist audience on matters of broad public concern" (Posner 5). The performance of public intellect shall thus

characterized by two characteristics: knowledge in matters of broad public concern, and the ability to convey that knowledge in such a manner that it can be easily understood.

Even a cursory examination of Oliver's 2016 election coverage on *Last Week Tonight* reveals Oliver's knowledge of matters of public concern. Between February and November of 2016, Oliver speaks knowledgeably on a myriad of topics. In one segment, he explains Donald Trump's proposed border wall, approaching it from economic, logistical, and moral perspectives (Oliver 2016b). In another, he displays a sophisticated knowledge of the American democratic process while discussing primaries and caucuses (Oliver 2016c). In a third, he identifies a trend of conservative politicians likening feeling to fact, and argues this way of thinking is dangerous (Oliver 2016d). Even though he is not a public intellectual, the breadth of topics Oliver discusses on his show demonstrates a wide range of knowledge in various matters of public concern and covers these matters with a depth that goes beyond typical coverage.

Oliver uses evidence-oriented argument as a means of shaping his critique so it can be easily understood by a non-specialist argument. In the "President-Elect Trump" segment, Oliver illustrates the problem of fake news by referencing a May 2016 study conducted by the Pew Research Center which found that 44% of American adults got news on Facebook (Gottfried & Shearer). He questions the effectiveness of a border wall in curbing unauthorized entry into the US by citing a separate Pew Research Center study which found that almost half of the undocumented workers in the United States had entered legally and overstayed their visas ("Modes of Entry for the Unauthorized Migrant Population"). In explaining the controversy surrounding the Trump Foundation, Oliver

includes a clip of a CBS news report detailing the misappropriation of funds by the foundation to purchase a portrait of Trump, which was then hung up at a Trump-owned hotel (Oliver 2016f 17:23). In each of these cases, Oliver gives his audience the means to find the source from which he learned that information. If he is referencing an article or poll, a box to the left of his face shows the title of the article and the name of the publication that released it. By openly referencing his sources, Oliver not only provides evidence for his knowledge—thereby increasing his credibility—but also makes that evidence available to his non-specialist audience for further scrutiny so they can reach their own conclusions.

Oliver also makes his arguments more accessible to his non-specialist audience through the use of a rhetorical strategy called contextual clash. Contextual clash, as defined by Waisanen, refers to the act of comparing one thing to another from a different context as a means of understanding it (130). This strategy is a favorite of Oliver's, who compares political concepts to apolitical ones as a means of elucidating those concepts. In response to a clip wherein then-DNC chair Debbie Wasserman-Schultz claimed that superdelegates would never determine the party's nominee, Oliver argues, "you're basically keeping rat poison in a jar next to the sugar saying 'hey, it hasn't been a problem yet'" (Oliver 2016c 8:42). This comparison uses the widely popular trope of rat poison in the kitchen to illustrate Oliver's argument that superdelegates represent a problematic element of our democratic system not in their precedent of influencing election results, but in their theoretical capacity to do so. Oliver also compares building a wall to keep immigrants out to wearing a condom to prevent head lice, arguing neither

would be effective at solving the problem it was meant to (Oliver 2016b 12:40). In each of these examples we see Oliver use an apolitical, hypothetical example in order to illustrate the political implications of Wasserman-Schultz's comments. In doing so, he translates a political issue into an everyday context that his viewers can more easily understand.

Oliver also uses emotional expressions of incredulity and frustration to build identification with his audience. Oliver begins each discussion of the 2016 election by providing an elaborate alternate name for the process as an indication of how frustrating it had been. On various occasions, he calls the 2016 election "A Horrifying Glimpse at Satan's Pinterest Board 2016" (Oliver 2016e 0:04), "The electoral equivalent of seeing someone puking so you start puking and then someone else is puking and pretty soon everyone is puking 2016" (Oliver 2016f 0:01), and "I thought I wanted it to be over but now that it's over I wish it was still going on because it turns out the ending is even worse, Twenty-Fucking-Sixteen" (Oliver 2016g 0:15). Furthermore, early in the "Primaries and Caucuses" segment, Oliver shows a clip of a screaming protester at the Nevada State Democratic Convention, and plays it again after explaining the process he sees as needlessly complicated, adding, "I don't know if there's a better summation of the primary process so far than that sound" (Oliver 2016c 6:30). Amidst the horror of the 2016 election, Oliver builds identification with his audience by using humor to express his own frustration with the process.

While John Oliver does not fit the traditional definition of a public intellectual, he does fulfil the same rhetorical roles as a public intellectual. The breadth of topics he

covers over the course of a season demonstrates Oliver's knowledge of a wide variety of topics and issues. Oliver's use of evidence-oriented argument and contextual clash allow his audience a more accessible means to understand his argument, and his humorous frustration helps him build empathy with them. However, Oliver also performs public intellect in that his arguments engage in and contribute to moral deliberations. Etzioni argues that the public intellectual "must engage in moral deliberations because all major public and social policies that they routinely criticize have important moral dimensions" (Etzioni 3). Thus, in criticizing major public and social policies and the political status quo in general, Oliver necessarily engages in moral deliberation.

John Oliver, the Comic Comic

Given the importance of contributing to moral deliberations inherent within the performance of public intellect, it comes as no surprise that Oliver approaches the topics he discusses through Burke's comic frame of acceptance. The comic frame positions the hero as intelligent and the villain who stands against them as mistaken or tricked (Burke 41). The hero in the comic frame can affect change through discourse by correcting those mistaken elements of the villains' thought. Thus, when used in public discourse, the comic frame has the capacity "to free society by creating a consciousness of the system as a system, revealing its inherent weaknesses, and preparing an aware populace to deal with them" (Carlson 1986 447). Oliver's performance of public intellect, then, is inherently comic in that it promotes, encourages, and attempts to create awareness among its audience in order to affect change in their political system.

The application of the comic frame to *Last Week Tonight* reveals a pair of comic heroes and two comic villains. By constructing evidence-based arguments for a non-specialist audience, John Oliver positions himself as an intelligent comic hero working to influence how his audience participates in the American political system through discourse. In that act, Oliver necessarily enlists the help of a second hero in his audience who, by using the information he gives them to increase their democratic participation, might affect change to the system themselves. Oliver portrays himself as a comic hero because, through discourse, he seeks both to affect change himself and to compel his audience to do so.

Standing opposite to Oliver and his audience is a shifting comic villain. In some segments, Oliver questions the reasoning of American voters tricked into believing Donald Trump was a strong candidate for president; through discourse, Oliver intends to reveal this trickery. In these segments, Oliver attempts directly to correct the mistaken political beliefs of American voters; thus, though his argument may give his audience the means to correct those misconceptions in Trump voters they know personally, he does not explicitly enlist his audience to join him in his effort. In other segments, Oliver's villain is politicians like Donald Trump, party officials, or media outlets who are mistaken in their contentedness with the political status quo. In combating these villains, Oliver must enlist his audience as the second hero because the desired result of discourse in the comic frame is change to the status quo which, in a democracy, can only be achieved through public participation. Depending on the villain Oliver is contesting, he asks more or less of his audience as a secondary hero.

Oliver uses his performance of public intellect to embody a comic hero by correcting the mistaken ideas of voters tricked into supporting Donald Trump. In Oliver's first segment on Trump, which was also the first "main story" segment related to the 2016 election, Oliver disputes three claims about Trump commonly made by his supporters: that he tells the truth, that he is a strong leader, and that he is a successful businessman whose business acumen would translate well to the presidency (Oliver 2016a 2:20). He contests these notions in order; first, he points to several occasions on which he had lied, including a one case in which Trump falsely claimed to have been invited on *Last Week Tonight* (Oliver 2016a 2:51). Then, he calls Trump's toughness into question by pointing out how poorly Trump receives comments about the size of his hands (Oliver 2016a 6:00), then disputing Trump's business success by providing several examples of his business failures, including Trump Steaks, which could only be purchased at The Sharper Image (Oliver 2016a 11:02). In this segment, Oliver directly refutes claims made of Trump by his supporters, hoping to enlighten voters who have been tricked by Trump's public persona by revealing the candidate's true nature in the process.

In the "Scandals" segment, aired just before the first presidential debate, Oliver addresses the misconceptions of voters who opposed Hillary Clinton because of the scandals that dogged her throughout the campaign and positions those voters as villains tricked into a false belief that the ethical failings of Clinton and Trump were equivalent. After opening the segment with a supercut of news clips relating to Hillary Clinton's scandals (Oliver 2016f 0:26), Oliver examines two often-discussed examples—her use of a

primate email server and the activity of the Clinton Foundation during her time as Secretary of State—and argues that both look bad, but that “the closer you look, the less [wrongdoing] you actually find” (Oliver 2016f 12:15). Oliver argues that Trump’s scandals, which include his refusal to leave his company to a blind trust should he become president, the Donald J. Trump foundation’s misappropriation of funds to purchase portraits, and an ongoing class-action lawsuit related to Trump University, are “quantifiably worse” (Oliver 2016f 12:28). Though Oliver laments the extent to which scandals dominated the 2016 election, he argues that it is “dangerous” to believe them to be equal on both sides (Oliver 2016f 20:00). In this segment, Oliver attempts to set right the attitudes of voters tricked by conservative politicians and the news media into believing this false equivalency, fulfilling an essentially comic duty.

In the case of Oliver’s analysis of Trump’s proposed border wall, there are two villains: Trump, and the voters who mistakenly believe the wall to be a good idea. Oliver notes the popularity of the proposal among Trump’s supporters, and the central role it played in Trump’s platform, and acknowledges the need to “take a serious proposal by a serious candidate, seriously” (Oliver 2016b 1:26). First considering the proposal from an economic perspective, Oliver argues that the wall would cost significantly more than the \$4-10 billion projected by Trump, instead referencing a *Washington Post* article which in turn referenced a report issued by Bernstein Research quoting the cost of the wall at around \$25 billion (Oliver 2016b 1:48, 3:42). Oliver further asserts that the construction of the wall would logistical challenges beyond its cost, would be ineffective in preventing undocumented workers from entering the country, and that the perceived threat of

undocumented immigrants was overblown (Oliver 2016b 9:34, 12:25, 14:45). In this segment, Oliver frames Trump as a villain for being wrong about the cost and effectiveness of the wall, and his voters as villains for believing those misconceptions.

The framing of Trump's supporters as the villains in this case is at least somewhat implicit. In justifying his discussion of the wall by citing the proposal's popularity, Oliver ties that discussion to not only Trump, but his voters (Oliver 2016b 0:52). Thus, in using evidence-oriented argument to argue that building the wall would be a mistake, he necessarily argues that the people supporting Trump because he would build the border wall are also mistaken. This in turn requires that Oliver also frame Trump as a villain because he is proposing a misguided project. By disputing Trump's projected cost and illustrating that it would in fact cost a great deal more both initially and over time, Oliver establishes that Trump's idea of what the wall would cost is mistaken. Oliver further argues that the wall would be ineffective by pointing to evidence suggesting it would do little to stem the illegal immigration and drug trafficking that it sought to prevent. In correcting the misconceptions about the economic feasibility and effectiveness of the wall, Oliver engages in an attempt to change the attitudes of Trump supporters towards their preferred candidate.

Oliver also identifies politicians, parties, or other groups as the villains in Oliver's criticisms. In the "Primaries and Caucuses" segment, Oliver argues that both political parties have been misguided in their formulation of primary rules by the desire to preserve the wishes of the party (Oliver 2016c 13:48). In the "Republican National Convention" segment, he attacks Republican politicians like Newt Gingrich for equating

widely-held feelings with facts (Oliver 2016d 4:00). In his season-ending “President-Elect Trump” segment, Oliver attributes Trump’s victory in part to bad coverage by a news media more interested than covering the oddity of his candidacy than the implications of it (Oliver 2016g 10:10). In these situations, Oliver does not attack misled voters, but figures in politics and news media who are mistaken in their support for or contentedness with the political status quo.

In combatting these more institutional villains, Oliver enlists his audience as comic heroes themselves by raising their awareness of the figures and systems of authority in American government, thus empowering them to reform those systems themselves through discourse. Oliver also uses his main segments as a means to explain important processes in American democracy to his viewers, as is evident in his segment on presidential primaries and caucuses. In this segment, filmed against the backdrop of a tumultuous Democratic primary battle between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, Oliver decries what he sees as a needlessly complicated process on both sides of the aisle, arguing that “almost every part of [the primary process] is difficult to defend” (Oliver 2016c 3:22). Outlining the frequently complicated procedures by which both the Democratic and Republican parties select their nominees, Oliver illuminates several safeguards built into both processes which give the two parties considerable say in choosing their nominee, including an example in which the North Dakota Republican Party chose to have neither a primary nor a caucus, instead just choosing their state’s delegates on their own (Oliver 2016c 11:09). Concluding that the American primary system is in need of reform, Oliver encourage his viewers to advocate for such reforms

when the election is over (Oliver 2016c 13:48). In this segment, Oliver frames the two parties as mistaken villains who can only be defeated through more institutional reform. Oliver combats these villains by highlighting the need for reform then proposing to his audience a discursive means by which they might advocate for that reform, thereby engaging in a process of hero-making where Oliver passes the role of the comic hero from himself to his audience.

Following Trump's electoral victory, Oliver fulfils his role as a comic hero by offering his audience a discursive solution to the new problem posed by Trump's presidency. Oliver uses the segment to answer two questions: "how the fuck did we get here, and what the fuck do we do now?" (Oliver 2016g 4:34). After accusing the mainstream news media of failing to take Trump seriously early in his campaign and detailing the problem posed by the propagation of misinformation by hyper-partisan news sites, thus answering the first of his questions, Oliver turns his attention to what can be done in the next four years (Oliver 2016g 10:10). He implores his audience to "fight constantly," and provides his audience with a long list of organizations in need of donations that would help to resist Trump (Oliver 2016g 18:24). Here, Oliver seeks to raise audience awareness on a number of issues, among which are the failings of the American news media, the dangers posed by Trump's policy agenda, and the avenues of resistance available to his audience. In so empowering his audience, Oliver prepares them to work to amend the weaknesses of the American political system.

Throughout his 2016 election coverage, Oliver consistently produces segments whose tricked or mistaken villains are generally Donald Trump, other republicans, and

the misguided ideas they advocate, or the citizens who support those politicians and ideals. He seeks to mitigate the problems posed by these villains through discourse by correcting voters' and politicians' mistaken beliefs or by revealing some form of trickery. In doing so, he also raises his audience's awareness of these issues and offers them advice on how they might work to correct him.

However, Oliver's criticism is also comic in that it seeks not to destroy the existing social order, but to correct the problems within it. Discourse in the comic frame necessarily accepts the structures of authority before it, arguing for reform rather than revolution. Oliver firmly argues that both parties ought to make changes to their primary rules and implores his audience to hold them accountable to do so by encouraging them all to call their representatives on the same date (February 2, 2017), but does not go far enough as to suggest that primaries should be abandoned (Oliver 2016c 13:30). Likewise, Oliver finds it lamentable that both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have their ethical failings, but urges his audience to accept that most politicians have "at least a few" such failings rather than encouraging them to hold politicians to a higher standard (Oliver 2016f 20:00). In these cases Oliver clearly identifies problems within the system, but ultimately argues that the solution to these problems can be found through targeted reform of the system rather than a complete overhaul. The comic frame is thus the dominant frame of Oliver's rhetoric, because it accepts existing systems of political authority while positioning himself and his audience as intelligent heroes ready to use discourse to correct the wrongs done to that system by mistaken or tricked villains; his

rhetoric does not advocate total revolution, but nonetheless works to build hope for change.

Oliver vs. the Walking, Talking Brush Fire

But while the comic frame is the dominant frame of Oliver's rhetoric, it is not the only one at work in his arguments. As noted earlier, Burke argues that no one frame can be "isolated in its chemical purity," and that frames "overlap upon one another, involving the qualitative matter of emphasis" (Burke 57). So while Oliver's arguments are given predominantly through a comic frame of acceptance, they also contain elements of a burlesque frame of rejection. The burlesque frame, as described by Burke, is a frame through which one rejects a structure of authority by attacking its externalities (Burke 54-55). In doing so, the discursive actor in the burlesque frame seeks to reduce their opponent to absurdity (Burke 55). It can be argued, then, that the burlesque frame is the frame of the insult comic.

In his humor, Oliver directs burlesque insults at his mistaken politician villains, using a variety of rhetorical strategies to reduce their character and beliefs to absurdities. Oliver frequently refers to Trump not by name, but by a series of burlesque jabs. Depending on the week, Oliver might refer to Trump as "America's walking, talking brush fire" (Oliver 2016c 0:20), an "unambiguously racist scarecrow stuffed with crunched up copies of Jugs magazines" (Oliver 2016f 1:33), or "a human 'what is wrong with this picture'" (Oliver 2016g 5:40). Like many other media personalities, Oliver made jokes at the expense of the size of Trump's hands (Oliver 2016b 2:00), and the

orangey hue of his skin (Oliver 2016f 16:15). In his discussion of the Democratic National Convention, Oliver played a clip from Trump's speech at the RNC in which the candidate remarked that, under Obama, the United States had endured "one international humiliation after another," then stating that Trump was the only recent international humiliation he could think of (Oliver 2016e 9:07). Even the very mention of Trump by Oliver frequently entails the inclusion of a photo of the candidate making a face the audience finds humorous. These burlesque attacks criticize Trump by portraying him in ridiculous or absurd terms.

These burlesque insults do not reject Trump's candidacy, but they do reject his legitimacy as a potential leader of the American people and impugn his intelligence. Oliver recognizes the danger posed by Trump's candidacy, framing the candidate and his policies as the threat that might be defeated through comic discourse, the burlesque insults by which Oliver refers to Trump and the photos he uses to represent the candidate also frame him as an absurd figure. Even after Trump's victory, Oliver portrays the newly-elected president as an utter buffoon, dubbing the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* theme song over a video clip of Trump meeting with President Obama to suggest that Trump is in over his head (Oliver 2016g 3:09). Oliver's consistent tendency to refer to Trump in humorous insults and to frame the candidate as a fool echoes the rhetoric of civil rights leader Ralph David Abernathy, who portrayed white segregationists "as bumbling, ridiculous, and impotent" figures who were "ultimately powerless either to grant or to stand in the way of Blacks' demands for justice" (Selby 142-143). Oliver's use of burlesque insults within his comic criticism simultaneously accepts and addresses the

reality of his threat while also portraying his very existence as absurd and even laughable, thus making him less dangerous and more easily defeated as a villain.

Oliver uses contextual clash not only as an informational tool, as discussed earlier, but also as a weapon with which to attack his opponents with burlesque humor. In the “Border Wall” Oliver argues the wall is “a big, dumb thing that only gets more expensive over time,” comparing the proposal to the act of buying a pet walrus (Oliver 2016b 4:43). Oliver’s mention of the idea of buying a pet walrus is accompanied by an edited photo of a young man standing on a city street holding a walrus on a leash. By portraying a walrus and its owner in a metropolitan environment, Oliver tacitly calls the viewer to question the logistics of such an arrangement. What landlord would be willing to let a tenant keep a walrus in their apartment? How would the walrus’ owner get it up and down stairs? Are they financially prepared to pay for a bucket of sea cucumbers on a regular basis (Oliver 2016b 4:48)? There are no easy answers to these questions; taking care of a walrus in a city is an obviously absurd thing to attempt. By comparing Trump’s wall to such an act, Oliver ties the proposal to that same absurdity.

We find a similar, though more complex, case in Oliver’s analysis of the Democratic National Convention. Oliver claims that other western democracies do not understand Trump’s candidacy “any more than they understand the menu at Guy Fieri’s American Kitchen,” impersonating a Frenchman to ask Americans, “Why do you do this to yourself” (Oliver 2016e 3:51). Oliver compares Trump to Fieri, a chef and food television personality known for his frosted tips, his “high-wattage passion for no-collar American food,” and his loud and rambunctious mannerisms (Wells). Thus, when he asks

why Americans would do “this” to themselves, he identifies two things as “this:” Guy Fieri’s absurdly American cuisine and personality, and the viability of Donald Trump as a candidate. In doing so, Oliver necessarily applies the absurdity of the former to the latter.

Oliver’s assumption of a French accent in making this comparison is crucial to the effectiveness of his burlesque contextual clash because, in using that accent, Oliver employs a strategy called parodic polyglossia. Waisanen describes parodic polyglossia as the mixing of two voices to expand perspectives on social issues within American politics and culture (Waisanen 123). In this example, Oliver switches between two voices; his own, and that of the Frenchman. That the impression Oliver calls upon is that of a Frenchman is significant in that it contextualizes both sides of the comparison. It would be unsurprising for someone from France, a country known for its love of fine dining, to question why an American would willingly subject themselves to the offerings of Fieri’s definitively un-fine dining establishments. Likewise, it is easy to imagine someone from France, another western democracy known for high culture, to find Trump’s candidacy perplexing and hard to comprehend. In this case, Oliver’s use of parodic polyglossia contextualizes foreign bewilderment at both American concepts, thus acting as a lynchpin for Oliver’s contextual clash comparison.

Oliver also uses parodic polyglossia independently of contextual clash as a means of reducing certain politicians and their ideas to absurdity. In the “President-Elect Trump” segment as a means of delegitimizing figures and ideas with which Oliver disagrees. In these examples, Oliver speaks both as himself and as the politicians he is attacking. Oliver uses this strategy twice in the segment. In illustrating the hypocrisy of

Republican politicians who had, at first, opposed Trump but later came to support him, Oliver plays a clip of Senator Ted Cruz phone banking for Trump, comments as himself on how sad it makes him to watch Cruz campaign for an opponent who he fought hard against in the primary. Then, switching voices, Oliver imagines aloud his own version of what Cruz might be saying to his callers: “Hi, this is Ted Cruz. Just calling to remind you to vote for a man who insulted my wife and said my dad helped kill JFK. Anyway, life has no meaning, thank you, I want to die” (Oliver 2016g 16:42). In engaging in a parodic impersonation of Ted Cruz making calls for Trump, Oliver specifically mentions two personal or conspiratorial attacks Trump made on Cruz’s family, then closes with an ironic expression of regret. The mention of those events serves two purposes. Firstly, it makes clear the reasons why one in Cruz’s position might find the idea of campaigning for Trump unappealing; secondly, Oliver’s parodic statement that “life has no meaning” frames Cruz’s willingness to campaign for Trump as an embarrassing and demoralizing betrayal of self-respect. In doing so, he seeks to reduce Cruz’s stature as a candidate while also pointing out the hypocrisy inherent within the Republican Party’s embrace of Trump.

Just minutes after his Cruz impersonation, he uses parodic polyglossia a second time, assuming both his own voice and a puritanical parody of Vice President-elect Mike Pence’s voice to compare Pence’s views on abortion to Puritan fears of witches. Oliver laments that his hopes that Trump might be impeached are dashed when he considers that Pence would be the one to replace him, then showing a photoshopped picture of Pence dressed as a puritan mocking his position on abortion by assuming his voice to jokingly

ask, “Oh, what’s that you say? Her pregnancy was terminated before birth? Well, clearly, she’s a witch. Hold a funeral for the fetus and throw the mother in a lake” (Oliver 2016g 18:01). In this instance, Oliver references both Pence’s stance as a long-time, unapologetic opponent of abortion (Ertelt), a position many of his fellow conservatives share, and a specific law passed in the state of Texas requiring “funerals” to be held for aborted fetuses (Schmidt). Oliver’s use of parodic polyglossia in this example portrays Pence and his colleagues’ views on abortion as draconian, outdated, and absurd and also makes reference to an example of why people holding that outdated mindset are dangerous when given political power, both acknowledging the danger of the pro-life position while rejecting its legitimacy.

Thus, this example demonstrates an important truth about the mechanics of Burkean frames. As Burke argues, no frame can be “isolated in its chemical purity;” rather, frames “overlap upon one another, involving the qualitative matter of emphasis” (Burke 57). While Oliver’s burlesque attacks function partly as a means of comedy, they also function as comic criticism because the delegitimization of political figures and positions constitutes an effort to change the status quo through discourse. Within every name Oliver calls Trump lies the comic argument that Trump’s candidacy presents a negative situation for American democracy. Oliver firmly encourages his viewers to take whatever steps necessary to remind themselves that Trump’s victory “is not normal” (Oliver 2016g 22:23). In making several jokes at Trump’s expense, Oliver essentially refuses to take Trump seriously, thus implicitly reiterating the abnormality and unacceptability of Trump’s candidacy, and subsequently, his presidency.

Likewise, the parodic polyglossia Oliver uses to criticize Cruz and Pence is both burlesque and comic because, in poking fun at the two politicians for their beliefs and actions, it both makes legitimate comic criticisms of both Cruz and Pence's views and actions, and frames those views and actions as absurd. Within Oliver's caricature of Cruz campaigning for Trump lies the argument that Cruz in particular, as well as politicians in general, ought to be more principled in their actions. Likewise, Oliver's portrayal of Pence may seem, at least to some extent, an exaggeration, but in framing it as such, Oliver asks his to consider the the religious pro-life argument through a similar lens through which they already understand the pro-witch-drowning argument. Thus, this criticism attempts creating change through discourse by attempting to persuade viewers to consider the pro-life argument as a less legitimate political position.

Oliver's Barrier

However, even as these jokes serve as comic criticism meant to frame these candidates and ideas as mistaken or foolish, they also create a barrier that may dissuade some members of the American electorate—specifically conservatives—from watching the show. When Oliver opens his segment on Trump's proposed border wall by comparing his supporters' enthusiasm for the proposal to a high school health teacher's enthusiasm for dental dams and follows the comparison directly with a joke about dental dams sounding good but not being so in practice, he risks alienating viewers who do not already agree that that enthusiasm is high (Oliver 2016b 0:47). Likewise, conservative viewers may not stick around to hear Oliver's explanation of why both parties' primary

systems are dearly in need of reform when Oliver opens the segment by calling their candidate of choice a “walking, talking brush fire” (Oliver 2016c 0:16). Oliver’s important discussion of the Republican Party’s representation of feeling as fact can’t reach viewers who closed the video three minutes prior, when he referred to the RNC as “the most apocalyptic thing ever to happen” to Cleveland, a city whose river “has repeatedly caught fire” (Oliver 2016d 0:04). Oliver’s comedy often frames his political positions not as opinions, but as undeniable precepts; in doing so, he risks alienating those who do not already agree with him.

This barrier is not necessarily problematic. Oliver openly admits that his show “has a viewpoint,” and argues that a healthy media diet must include more than just sources which confirm one’s viewpoint (Oliver 2016g 11:51). As was the case for Jon Stewart before him, Oliver is not a journalist, and therefore need not adhere to the same rules of objectivity as journalists due. Rather than being tied to objectivity, Oliver openly and explicitly ties himself to a notion of earnestness. Oliver’s inclusion of evidence for the majority of his claims, whether that evidence takes the form of polls, studies, news media artifacts, and the words of politicians themselves, indicates a desire to demonstrate an informed position, and his frequent expressions of exasperation show his viewers that he truly believes his arguments. In building his arguments as such, Oliver expresses an earnest desire to inform his viewers, even as he makes his own opinion clear in the process.

This barrier also aids Oliver in his process of making a comic hero out of the audience. While conservative Americans might be dissuaded from watching *Last Week*

Tonight because of Oliver's use of burlesque humor to reject the legitimacy of conservative politicians and their political beliefs, progressives are unlikely to run into the same problem; of all the "main story" segments discussing the 2016 election, only two—"Democratic National Convention" and "Scandals"—devote significant time to Hillary Clinton or the Democratic Party. In these segments, Oliver never questions the legitimacy of progressive political positions, and while he does criticize the Democratic Party for their imperfect primary system (Oliver 2016c) and Hillary Clinton for her ethical failings (Oliver 2016f), he reserves burlesque insults for the "walking, talking, brushfire" running against her. In reducing to absurdity politicians and policy positions progressives already tend to find contemptible, he frames those villains as being weak, thereby empowering his audience to affect change.

John Oliver and the News Media

In conclusion, it is necessary to contextualize *Last Week Tonight* and John Oliver as a new development in the genre of progressively-oriented comedy-news shows hosted by comic humorists bound by a commitment to earnestness. Like his predecessors, Oliver uses rhetorical strategies such as evidence-oriented argument, contextual clash, and parodic polyglossia to make a comic criticism of the American political system, but his performance of public intellect is more pronounced than that of any late night comedy-news hosts before him. Oliver's attempt to arm his voters with the necessary knowledge and resources to better understand and participate in their political system is explicit; he asks his viewers to call their representatives to demand reform to the primary

process (Oliver 2016c), and offers them a rubric for how to resist the Trump administration (Oliver 2016g). While someone very well might learn from *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight* constitutes a new evolution in the genre because Oliver continually and actively works to inform his audience.

However, the political bias which has characterized this genre remains present in *Last Week Tonight*. Like his predecessors in Bill Maher, Stewart, and Stephen Colbert, as well as his contemporaries like Samantha Bee, Stephen Colbert, Seth Meyers, Trevor Noah, and Larry Wilmore, Oliver is unabashedly liberal and openly biased. Like his predecessors and contemporaries, the villains of Oliver's frame of perception are necessarily mistaken, foolish, ridiculous, and absurd. This situates him firmly within a larger American political discourse, one firmly characterized by division.

Last Week Tonight exists during a time in which the American news media environment is fundamentally divided. By and large, our news is presented to us through a transition frame not unlike the Grotesque and Didactic frames described by Burke; because there is a lack of consensus on what the truth is, different news outlets propagate different narratives supported by different facts (or, in some cases, feelings). These different narratives are frequently offered along partisan lines, and this environment frequently breeds conflict. That Oliver and his fellow late night comedy news hosts are part of this politically fraught discourse is undeniable; of the seven segments pertaining to the 2016 election that aired in *Last Week Tonight's* third season, only two devoted significant time to Hillary Clinton, while Donald Trump and his candidacy received significant time in all seven. It is encouraging, then, that Oliver does not deny it, and

more encouraging still that he urges his viewers to work to get their news from a variety of sources, and not just from biased like *Last Week Tonight*. Oliver's openness about his bias thus provides an example that other political commentators, on both the progressive and conservative sides of the spectrum, would do well to follow.

Furthermore, while the political bias inherent within *Last Week Tonight* makes it a far-from-perfect source of news, the show does present an interesting model for civic discourse worthy of emulation by more official news sources. In the entirety of his 2016 election coverage, Oliver rarely mentions polls on candidate preference, choosing instead to focus on sharing important information about the candidates with his audience. This stands in sharp contrast to mainstream news outlets, for whom such polls are an all-too-frequent topic of conversation. Furthermore, Oliver approaches his topics thematically rather than episodically; rather than covering the election as a series of new developments, he devotes one major segment to Trump's business ties, one to his border wall proposal, one to the primary processes of both parties, one to each party's convention, one to each candidate's past scandals, and one to understanding how to proceed following Trump's victories. This allows his audience to understand the election topic-by-topic rather than development-by-development. The application of this model to a mainstream news context could be helpful because it would help American voters make a more informed decision, thus working to fulfill an important duty of the news media at large.

“That’s Our Show”: John Oliver and the Future of Civic Discourse

This study is an initial exploration of John Oliver as a social critic in American civic discourse. Like his predecessors and contemporaries, he uses both humor and satire as vehicles to conduct a criticism of the American political system and the media that covers it. However, *Last Week Tonight* is unique in its focus on constructing arguments meant to inform the show’s audience. In making these arguments, Oliver works to prepare his viewers for political participation both during and after the 2016 election season, engaging in a performance of public intellect. Evidence-oriented argument, contextual clash, and parodic polyglossia all prove themselves useful tools for Oliver, who uses them to frame himself as an intelligent comic hero setting out to correct mistaken media members and conservative politicians, and to prevent or mitigate the damage posed by the voters tricked into supporting those candidates’ mistaken ideas. The burlesque attacks Oliver humorously hurls at the villains of his criticisms are both a boon and a hinderance to the informative goals of his comic criticism; they strengthen his argument by reducing those villains’ beliefs to absurdity, thus compounding the perception of those villains as foolish and mistaken, but also reveal Oliver’s own biases, thereby acting as a potential barrier between him and conservative Americans.

However, *Last Week Tonight* and its host remain a topic ripe for further academic research. This study includes only election-related “main story” segments because those segments provide a strong example of Oliver’s arguments as a means of arming his audience for political participation. Thus, a number of questions remain to be answered. How does his rhetoric in his discussions of organizations like FIFA or topics like prisoner

reentry differ from that of his election-related coverage? How is his role as a rhetor speaking to a predominantly American audience influenced by his status as a British ex-patriot? In what ways does Oliver's satirical founding of a televangelist church or a debt buying agency draw from and expand upon similar strategies used by Stephen Colbert? These are only a few avenues of academic inquiry into *Last Week Tonight*.

Academics should also look further than John Oliver, studying his contemporaries as well. Stephen Colbert still remains an active voice in late night comedy via his show on CBS, and the nature of his rhetorical performance has undoubtedly changed since he filed his last *Colbert Report*. On *The Daily Show*, Trevor Noah, a mixed-race comedian born in South Africa, lends his unique background to his coverage, speaking as both a black man and an immigrant. Samantha Bee's *Full Frontal* brought, at long last, a female voice to the genre, offering a crucial new perspective to the comedy-news conversation. With four hosts making important contributions to this country's political conversations, the late night comedy-news show is thriving, and scholars should explore the rhetoric they use as fully as possible. Do these hosts speak through the same comic and burlesque frames that Oliver does? To what extent, and through what means, do they work to inform their voters? How do their strategies differ from Oliver's?

These questions offer important insight not only to the study genre of comedy-news and alternative news sources, but to the study of American discourse in general. The study not only of *Last Week Tonight*, but also of *The Late Show*, *The Daily Show*, and *Full Frontal*, as artifacts of civic rhetoric is crucial to developing a complete understanding of this moment in American civic discourse. In an environment where the

news is so highly politicized, and where different outlets offer different versions of the truth, the need for metacriticism of the American news media is as great now as it has ever been. Thus, the most important duty Oliver and his fellow hosts fulfil as comic heroes is that informing their viewers. Within American democracy, no one person can make a change; even presidents can only reach office after garnering the support of tens of millions of voters. Thus, although they are billed as comedy shows, the arguments made by Oliver or Noah or Bee are no laughing matter. These hosts affect change by affecting the American public's attitudes. By understanding their rhetoric, we gain crucial insight into the function of how these hosts conduct that communication.

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