THE JOHN OLIVER EFFECT: POLITICAL SATIRE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

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Introduction

Within just six months, two television legends departed from the spots that brought them to international stardom: *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (*TDS*) and Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report* (*TCR*) were given a series of eulogies from media outlets and fans' tweets. One *Washington Post* headline read, "Jon Stewart is leaving the 'Daily Show.' Where will young liberals get their news now?" (Blake, 2015). In Schwartz's (2015) sendoff to Stewart and Colbert, he said the most important part of these shows was not the news they gave, but the critical thinking and participation they encouraged. "Rather than telling viewers what to think, as Cronkite and his kind did generations ago, Stewart and Colbert—almost certainly inadvertently—taught viewers *to* think" (Schwartz, 2015). The comedy gods giveth, and the comedy gods taketh away, but now that they are off the air what will happen to the genre and the viewers of political satire?

It is not just fans who have taken note that there is something more going on here than jokes and silly characters; academics have been trying to unpack *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Repor*t for years (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Baym, 2007; Bennett, 2007; Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007; Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011; Hoffman, & Young, 2011; LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009; Painter, & Hodges, 2010; Teten, 2012; Xenos, & Becker, 2009; Xiaoxia, 2010). Is it news or is it entertainment? Do viewers actually obtain information from watching these shows? And, if they do, what do they do with that information? The wealth of research on these fathers of the genre is a

great starting point, but now that these two shows are off the air we must start looking at the next comedians to take the torch, what they are doing to change the field, and what these changes may mean for viewers.

Studying political satire and parody is as essential to understanding media as any other type of "news." Polk, Young, and Holbert (2009) explained,

> As mass mediated content continues to shift from 'hard news' to 'infotainment,' the study of political messages embedded in a humorous context becomes increasingly important. We are only beginning to understand how differences between *TDS* and *World News Tonight* shape our perception of the American political system. These revelations will help us understand how citizens think about and are engaged by political messages as we move deeper into the 21st century (p. 217).

The entertainment and news divide is breaking down rapidly, and if these "infotainment" programs are serving the same function as traditional news, the divide soon may not even exist.

Some are skeptical of this cross of entertainment and news and politics and what engagement it may or may not create in the viewer, and are skeptical rightfully so. When Stephen Colbert spoke in his Republican pundit character at a Congressional hearing on migrant labor in 2010, some said he made a joke of the process and mocked the importance of the issue; yet, others said he used comedy to make his point and, in the end, brought a large amount of publicity to the issue (Jaffe & Wolf, 2010). And when

Colbert made a satirical (but very real) super PAC in 2011, *The New York Times* writer David Carr raised a similar question: Does making fun of a political process do anything to resolve or help people understand the issue, or does it simply push the problem further? When considering the thousands of contributors and over a million dollars that came in for the "joke," Carr (2011) considers that, "[m]aybe the whole system has become such a joke that only jokes will serve as a corrective."

After looking at how the giants of the past (Colbert and Stewart) shaped viewers' learning, news knowledge, and participation, I will consider how HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* is taking up the torch that has been passed on and what kind of effects the show has on viewers' knowledge, self-efficacy, and intent to participate politically in the digital age. Oliver often gives calls to action at the end of his segments (e.g., tweet this hashtag, go to this website, share this video), but I will look at how effective these calls are in encouraging viewers to participate. His encouragement of participation is reminiscent of the greats before him, and if it works even half as well as stunts like Stewart's and Colbert's, it may actually have a lasting effect on its viewers and the larger political system.

Literature Review

The Importance of Political Satire & "Infotainment"

Only 40% of the public trust the media to report "fully, accurately, and fairly" (McCarthy, 2014). When breaking it down by party identification, only slightly over half

(54%) of Democrats trust the media and barely a quarter (27%) of Republicans say the same (McCarthy, 2014). Technology's rapid advancement and journalism's adoption of it make it so the days of a few, or even a few dozen, main news outlets no longer exist. "Consumers are the CEOs of their own content channels," says Linda Ong, the CEO of TruthCo (Albiniak, 2015). And if a news organization want to keep them tuning in, she says, it needs to give consumers what they want. The new generations of viewers do not want a simple reading of headlines (what they already get in their social media feeds), and instead want journalists to play the role of "world explainer" (Albiniak, 2015). Elise DeCamp (2015) found that this is a key way standup comedians get their audience on their side: It's about "teaching, not soapboxing," and comedians who act as satirical journalists have been doing the same for years (p. 461). Comedians pull their audience in with the jokes but once they are tuned in, it is time to make a point.

In 2011, *The Colbert Report* taught its viewers about the state of campaign finance regulation (or lack thereof) after the *Citizens United* case. Colbert's completely real and legal super PAC, called *Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow*, (later transferred into the name of Jon Stewart and named *The Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC),* showed viewers step-by-step how a super PAC is created and how it can be used to keep campaign donations from being transparent. The names of the PACs were humorous and jokes were made throughout the process, but the results were completely serious. Hardy, Gottfried, Winneg, and Jamieson (2014) found that *The Colbert Report* did a better job at educating viewers about campaign finance than any

other news outlet tested (including CNN, MSNBC, FOX, newspapers, broadcast nightly news, and talk radio).

While many, including the entertainers themselves, may argue that these shows and others like them (including *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update" segment) are not news, Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) explained, entertainment and news are not opposites. "Entertainment media often provide factual information, stimulate social and political debate, and critique government, while public affairs media are all too often diversionary, contextless, and politically irrelevant" (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001, p. 161). According to Baym and Jones (2012), news parody is universal and can be found in any country where television news is prevalent, but the act stems largely from distrust of institutions. Parody "encapsulates a search for truth and meaning in a time when populations have grown increasingly suspicious that traditional discourses no longer suffice" (Baym & Jones, 2012, p. 12). Comedians like Stewart, Colbert, and Oliver use parody to mock and exaggerate the actions and commentary of both politicians and media personalities. Bishop (2015) said that "the absurdity lies not in the comedy, but rather in the reality that the comedy mocks" (p. 553). Its purpose is not to make light of serious situations in a way that belittles them, but instead it is to point out that the things the media and politicians portray as normal are actually often completely asinine.

A modern democracy needs both a diverse chorus of voices for conversation, but also for the conversation to be a rational one. Much of today's political landscape,

however, is filled with consultants creating neatly packaged brands for politicians and their well-framed policies. In stark contrast, Warner (2007) argued that Stewart and his brand of satire and parody act as a dissident voice against the everyday canned messages. Hariman (2008) argues that democracy as a free and open debate is enhanced and sustained by parody. Humor helps people not otherwise involved access political debate and therefore participate. Participation is necessary for a healthy democracy, and if comedy is encouraging the participation then maybe, as Carr (2011) suggested, jokes can be the corrective to a broken democratic system.

The buzzwords "clicktivism" or "slacktivism" have been popular in media recently to explain younger generations' digital form of activism, including Facebook likes and retweets to share a cause rather than donating money or participating off the computer screen (Khazan, 2013; Morozov, 2009; White, 2010). But by educating their viewers on a variety of topics and pointing out issues with the current system, shows like *The Colbert Report* and *Last Week Tonight* have helped organize "slacktivist" efforts into true activism. Thousands of Colbert fans contributed to his super PAC and raised $1,023,121.24 (Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow, 2012). In March 2012, the satirical super PAC had more cash-on-hand than one supporting Ron Paul's candidacy and had raised more to date than Herman Cain's at the time (Goldman, 2012; Ericson, Park, Parlapiano & Willis, 2012).

Most leading super PACs in early 2012 had donations of $25,000 or more from single donors, and 96% of Priorities USA Action's came from said large donations,

which is not uncommon (Ericson, Park, Parlapiano & Willis, 2012). According to Drutman (2012),

> Among nine super PACs that raised at least $500,000 and have spent on the presidential election so far, almost half of the itemized contributions (47.9%) came from just 22 donors who gave more than $500,000. And 90 donors who gave more than $100,000 accounted for 78.6% of the contributions.

Though Colbert's super PAC may not have been able to compete with Priorities USA Action's (the super PAC known to support Obama) $9 million raised at the time, Colbert's super PAC raised nearly all of its $1.2 million in donations under $200, and 0 donations of over $25,000, meaning thousands of people participated rather than a few wealthy elites (Ericson, Park, Parlapiano and Willis, 2012).

Stewart and Colbert have been ranked as the most admired and fearless political pundits in America , and in a 2009 *Time* poll Stewart was voted the most trusted newsman in America (Lambert, 2015). The power to mobilize the youth in the political process is invaluable, by building trust with their viewers and sharing the news with both side-splitting laughter and poignant insight, these comedians have done it. Considering the impact they have had, Teten (2012) may have been correct when arguing that "both 'fake' and 'left-leaning' may be unethically contrived misnomers for a show that serves the newest American cohort better than 'real' media outlets do" (p. 80). But do not expect the comedians to lay off the jokes as they do it. As super PAC President Colbert said in his introductory statement to the Federal Election Commission paperwork submitted by

Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow (2012), "Yeah! How you like me now, F.E.C? I'm rolling seven digits deep! I got 99 problems but a non-connected independent-expenditure only committee ain't one!"

News on News

Just as there has been interest in what kind of effect these shows have, there has also been interest in who is tuning in. Hmielowski, Holbert and Lee (2011) built a measurement of affinity for political humor to identify predictors of viewing political television satire, which helps identify some different reasons audience members may tune in. But just as the comedians who host these shows say, political humor is primarily seen as entertainment, not news. Young (2013) says that "80% of respondents who ranked TDS/CR in their top three found the shows appealing because they are funny, entertaining, or put them in a good mood" (p. 162). Other top reasons respondents said they tune in to these shows are because they are good sources of information and they "make news fun." Some respondents (10%) also said they see these shows as honest and unbiased.

People may turn into these shows *for* news, but *are* they news? Borden and Tew (2007) argued that journalists are held to particular standards and moral commitments: gatekeeping (quality control), factuality, objectivity, reliability, truthfulness, and independence. "They are not the activities of journalists unless they are motivated by the self-conscious pursuit of excellence as a journalist" (Borden and Tew, 2007, p. 302). The

argument is that as non-journalists they do not hold themselves to the same list of standards, but this assumption is not necessarily true. One cannot assume the makers of these shows do not hold themselves accountable for their content just because they are not "journalists," just as one cannot assume journalists automatically have given themselves a moral obligation to excellence simply because they identify themselves as a "journalist." There have been plenty of incidents of journalists fabricating stories or reporting inaccurately, with one recent and highly-publicized example of this being Brian Williams' inaccuracies in his reporting and his subsequent suspension from NBC (Koblin and Steel, 2015). Stewart himself has said that though he and other political satire comedians are not journalists, they do have standards: "You know, satire isn't journalism. That's not to suggest that we're not responsible for the content that we put out there" (Weber, 2014).

By teaching media literacy and holding news outlets accountable for the service they are supposed to provide to their audience, *The Daily Show*, through comedy and satire, serves its own public good of reporting on those who report (Painter & Hodges, 2010). TDS foreign correspondents are one example of parodying both the news and those who report on it by using their own traditional conventions against them. With a range of silly titles and self-centered reporting, *The Daily Show* uses its correspondents to mock "television news's overuse of the live shot, its insistence that the reporter's physical presence is isomorphic with good journalism" (Baym, 2005, p. 269). Mocking traditional news can be its own type of news for these shows, commenting on problems within the

media and holding them accountable. Satirical news shows question these common conventions to make the viewer consider both the content of their news and how they are receiving the content (McKain, 2005).

Part of Borden and Tew's (2007) argument is that factuality in journalism is partially proven by original reporting, rather than taking news secondhand. The argument that these shows do not do their own reporting (and therefore are not factual) is not so much the case with a show like *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, where main stories may take information from other news sources but provide their own information and insight from original reporting, just as a "real" journalist would. All three of these shows mentioned above also have original interviews with politicians, public figures, authors, and celebrities, and interviewing is an essential part of reporting. Baym (2007) argued that The Daily Show interviews can offer "a multi-voiced, dynamic exchange that blends social chat with public affairs content, televisual style with rational-critical discourse, and entertainment with understanding" (p.113). Stewart, Colbert, and Oliver may not be journalists by training or even by intention, but their viewers do end up consuming news (both primary and secondary) by watching the show. As Young (2013) pointed out, even if they are not the primary source of news, viewers "are deriving some form of enhanced meaning or understanding through these shows," (p. 166).

These programs surely are not part of the traditional journalism practices that have been considered "proper": objective and serious, with quick sound bites and clean quotes. But through a different process they often serve the same purpose the news does

(or is supposed to) serve: they inform the viewer (discussed in detail below). That being said, they are also not necessarily untruthful or "fake news," though this is what they are sometimes referred to as, with some referring to Stewart as "the most trusted name in fake news," (Kakutani, 2008; Love, 2007; NPR, 2010). Calling them "fake news" implies that the news which they are reporting is not real (e.g., *The Onion*), but shows like *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight* take a comedic approach to reporting the same ("real") news traditional networks are reporting on. Instead of following the traditional news conventions, however, *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*, and *The Colbert Report* all have used these conventions to point out major flaws with the way broadcast news operates.

> Stewart said to a political commentator on *Fox News*,
>
> You can't criticize me for not being fair and balanced. That's your slogan, which, by the way, you never follow… To say that comedians have to decide whether they are comedians or social commentators—comedians do social commentary through comedy. That's how it's worked for thousands of years (Jones & Baym, 2010, p. 279).

But according to a content analysis of *The Daily Show*, "Stewart appears to be an impassioned observer of both the right and the left, and takes the time to skewer both" (Teten, 2012, p. 79). The analysis looked at TDS episodes from January to June 2008, and though there was more coverage of democratic candidates during the lead-up to the 2008 election, Teten (2012) pointed out that this followed the conventional news cycle's

election coverage as well, and though there was more airtime on the democratic candidates it was met with an equal amount of jokes made about them.

Moreover, this argument continues to fall apart in cases like *The Colbert Report*, where it is unclear which side he is choosing. LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam (2009) found that the ambiguity of a character like Stephen Colbert can make the viewer to interpret that his beliefs align with their own personal political ideology. Colbert may not be objective, but he also is not biased to any particular side if those processing the message cannot tell. Baumgartner and Morris (2008) also found that Colbert's humor confused some viewers, and after watching TCR some even had more of an affinity toward Republicans and Republican policies, the same group Colbert was parodying with his exaggerated Bush-worshiping pundit character he played.

In cases like *Last Week Tonight*'s, the show often focuses more on the system, rather than individual politicians or political parties. DeCamp (2015) says this is a tool used by standup comedians to avoid dividing their audience based on ideology. Finding these broader, non-partisan topics means less divisiveness than most mainstream news outlets could be guilty of themselves. These programs may not be always totally objective, as Borden and Tew's (2007) definition of a journalist requires, but they also don't claim to be to their audience.

The Pew Research Center Journalism and Media Staff's article, "The Daily Show is NOT Journalism" (2008), has a main argument that because *The Daily Show* follows a production cycle different from traditional news it cannot be news, which factors into

Borden and Tew's (2007) argument that they do not have the same gatekeeping and quality control as traditional news programs. Some stories do not get reported on because the show only airs four times a week, with long breaks often cutting in during the year. *Last Week Tonight* only airs once a week and also has significant breaks, but there may be some benefits to this production cycle that actually helps them cover the news more thoroughly than traditional news. *LWT* has 30 straight minutes of airtime with no commercial breaks, giving Oliver the time to cover topics in-depth, spending up to 20 minutes on one story. Though they may not cover every story that is newsworthy at the time, the stories they do cover are explained particularly well. Ross (2014) argued that this same aspect, taken as a limitation to its reporting ability, is actually "the magic of John Oliver… the *Last Week Tonight* team has found a way to take a seemingly complicated issue, remove the talking points and cultural baggage surrounding it, break it into understandable parts—and then slowly rebuild it." The show is also not under pressure to get stories out within a particular timeframe. Oftentimes the stories they report are not in the mainstream, and without the pressures of a news network standing over their shoulder (as well as the significant funding from an organization like HBO) they can take the time to put investigating and bringing light to new stories or telling old stories in a new way.

In the end, it is difficult to make an argument that these comedians are ethical without seeing the inner workings of their "newsrooms," but by using the pillars of Borden and Tew's argument, it is also difficult to say they are not ethical, as they do

seem to follow many of these journalistic standards. Satirical journalism can make political discourse both "silly and important" (Baym, 2007, p. 112). Viewers are not watching television in a vacuum. They are not watching just entertainment programs or just news programs, and arguing if it is one or the other is futile. Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) said that the news vs. entertainment distinction is arbitrary. Satirical journalism programs can be, and oftentimes are, simultaneously both.

Learning from Comedy

Even though these comedians are just playing the part of journalists, they can do an equally good job at informing their viewers on current events as would a traditional outlet. Though the shows are more comedy than substance, the overall amount of substance is equal to that of broadcast networks, as broadcast networks tend to have more hype than substance (Fox, Koloen and Sahin, 2007). Brewer and Marquardt (2007) found that political topics, world affairs, and the news media are among the primary topics of The Daily Show, and can be found even in the celebrity interviews.

Feldman (2013) found that by considering The Daily Show to fill both news and entertainment gratifications, the viewer actually enacts in more processing and therefore more learning than those who consider it to be solely entertainment. Those who watch the show more frequently were less likely to consider TDS to be solely entertainment. This information suggests that these programs can be informative to their viewers, especially if one is looking for information while watching. The comedy in these shows can go hand-in-hand with the information, as Jones and Baym (2010) argue that laughter can be

an important “antidote” and provides a type of sincerity to the current United States political landscape which he says is “hyperpartisan” and “deeply divisive” (p. 282).

John Oliver exemplified this type of entertaining but educational programming when he interviewed Edward Snowden and attempted to explain Section 215 of the USA PATRIOT Act in a way any citizen, even with very little political knowledge or involvement, could understand (LastWeekTonight, 2015):

> **SNOWDEN:** I did this to give the American people a chance to decide for themselves the kind of government they want to have. That is a conversation that I think the American people deserve to decide.
>
> **OLIVER:** There is no doubt it is a critical conversation, but it is a conversation that we have the capacity to have? Because it’s so complicated we don’t fundamentally understand it.

Government policy is typically complex and difficult to explain, but Oliver says to Snowden, though it may not be easy to explain to the public, “everything you did only matters if we have this conversation properly” (LastWeekTonight, 2015). When *Last Week Tonight* asked people on the streets of New York City who Edward Snowden was, most people either had no idea or thought that he was Julian Assange. However, when they asked whether or not they would be concerned if the government was collecting their “dick pics,” overwhelmingly the answer was yes. Following the videos, Snowden says, “Well, the good news is there’s no program named the dick pic program, but the bad news is they are still collecting everyone’s information-- including dick pics”

(LastWeekTonight, 2015). Oliver then has Snowden explain every NSA program in the context of a "dick pic:"

> **OLIVER:** Edward, if the American people understood this they would be absolutely terrified.
>
> **SNOWDEN:** I guess I never thought about putting it in the context of your junk.

This kind of mix of entertainment, humor, and information can educate and inform viewers and the general public in an engaging and interactive way for the viewer (e.g., watching Colbert make a super PAC and then donating to it oneself, rather than simply reading about what one is). The White House's YouTube video of President Obama's statement on net neutrality does not have even one million views, meanwhile *Last Week Tonight*'s video on net neutrality has nearly ten million. Oliver said in his segment regarding net neutrality and the FCC, "The cable companies have figured out the great truth of America: If you want to [do] something evil put it inside something boring" (Ross, 2014).

Some things need to be simplified, not because the public is not smart enough to understand but because no common citizen has hours and hours to read through and pick apart government documents. This is, and always has been, the primary purpose of the media: to inform the public. In some situations, as Hardy et al. (2014) showed with Colbert's super PAC, it seems as though these satirical news programs can even do a better job at informing its viewers than traditional outlets.

Kim and Vishak (2008) found that entertainment shows like *TDS* did not do as well at informing their audiences as traditional news, but this seems incongruent with recent research done by Hardy et al. (2014), which found that entertainment shows (in particular, *The Colbert Report*) did a better job than traditional news at informing its audience. However, the studies were done on two completely different political topics that were told in two different formats and with different types of comedy. Just as one news show or traditional news network may do better than another with a particular topic or major event, it may not be traditional news or satirical news that is better than one another at informing its audience, and instead it is oftentimes probably contingent on the story. As Schill (2014) points out, "satirical effects are complicated and multidimensional," and to the same degree so are the people who make up their audiences (p. 758). Just as these shows can be both funny and serious, entertaining and informational, their effects can be both positive and negative. If you want people to participate in the political process properly, they need to understand the issues and they need to be motivated to participate.

Given the evidence presented above regarding learning from political satire programming, the following hypothesis is advanced:

> H1: Compared to those in the control group, those in the two experimental groups will demonstrate greater knowledge of the topic covered by *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*.

Humor's Effects on Message Outcomes

Through the knowledge it provides, political comedy can also be persuasive and motivational. “Political comedy has power,” said Peifer (2012, p. 267). By pointing out problems in politics and the media, viewers begin to question what they see. “Satire, through its irony, complicates and problematizes the way we see things, and therefore it can challenge viewers in unexpected ways” (Coletta, 2009, p. 872). Seeing things in new and unexpected ways, Coletta (2009) argued, could inspire some to become more tolerant of others’ viewpoints, and in a field as divided as politics being able to see things in a new light is important for both voters and policymakers. With constant complaints of people not working “across the aisle,” new viewpoints could also lead to new or different actions not previously realized. By motivating action and stimulating conversation, political comedy can make democracies stronger (Peifer, 2012).

Baumgartner and Morris (2008) point out that that humor can make a source of information more likeable, but the humor itself also plays a role in persuading an audience. The Elaboration Likelihood Model says there are two modes of message processing, one by a peripheral route of little consideration of the content of the message, and another by a central route, involving in-depth elaboration of the message’s arguments and content (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). “ELM theory suggests that humor makes it less likely that the receiver will critically question the message accompanying it, making it more likely that the individual will agree with the message” (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008, p. 625). Additionally, the type of humor being used by the comedian (e.g., irony or sarcasm, horatian or juvenalian) can cause different amounts of processing, leading to

less argumentation against the jokes (LaMarre, Landreville, Young & Gilkerson, 2014; Polk, Young & Holbert, 2009). Different types of humor may play more of a role in this type of programming than we yet have discovered.

More than just the type of humor, the type of viewer also plays a role in how messages from these shows are perceived. Cao (2010) found that *The Daily Show* can lead to increased attentiveness to politics for those who are not already politically inclined. Similarly, Xenos and Becker (2009) found that political comedy can increase attentiveness to news media, once again especially for those who tend to be unattentive politically. Additionally, Feldman and Young (2008) found that watching late-night comedy is associated with watching more traditional news coverage of the presidential campaign.

As previously mentioned, humorous messages are also processed differently. Another way this could factor in is through distraction, where the cognitive effort put in to "get" the joke means less effort put in to scrutinize the message (Sternthal & Craig). Related humor is especially persuasive, which is how most of these segments are done, with jokes scattered within informative pieces with corresponding information (Gulas & Weinberger, 2006).

H2: Those who view the content as more humorous will report greater intention to participate politically than those who view the content as less humorous.

Political Satire's Effects on Political Participation (via political efficacy)

Citizens' views of the political system can be shaped and affected by the media they watch. This is part of what shapes their attitudes on the system and what kind of participation they want to take place within it (Gastil and Xenos, 2010). Gastil and Xenos (2010) found that "attitudes about one's competence in political and community arenas are important predictors of civic and political participation," (p. 332). Political efficacy can be divided into two dimensions: external efficacy and internal efficacy. These individual competence attitudes can be described as internal efficacy, or "the perception that one has the requisite skills and resources to influence the political system," (Clarke and Acock, 1989, p. 558).

Baumgartner and Morris (2006) found that, although viewing *The Daily Show* caused young viewers to have decreased support for presidential candidates, increased cynicism, and lower trust in the media and election processes, it also increased these viewers' internal efficacy by making politics more understandable. Greater cynicism could lead to less political participation, but a better understanding of politics and increased internal efficacy can lead to more participation. Additionally, some cynicism is not necessarily a bad thing. Bennett (2007) asked, "When the public is being deceived or misled, is it, in fact, cynical to expose the deception or distortion or is it simply being realistic?" (p. 279). Cynicism is part of the process of questioning those in power, one of the main purposes of political comedy. According to Hoffman and Thomson (2009), cynicism may not even be correlated with the viewing of late-night political comedy (such as *TDS*), and more than that, cynicism had no effect on civic participation anyway.

Political satire can affect a viewer's internal efficacy, but internal efficacy also determines the effects of the satire. Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, and Carlton (2007) found that those who are low in internal political self-efficacy, or their perceived ability to understand and participate in politics, are particularly impacted by watching *The Daily Show* before watching CNN, and report weaker political gratifications. Whether *TDS*'s effect on these viewers could keep them from seeking out information from other information sources or replace them is unknown, but it is clear that internal efficacy and internal political self-efficacy is an important factor in understanding how a show like *TDS* can affect its viewers' political knowledge and participation. While it can help those who are not particularly into politics, Young and Tisinger (2006) also found that the *TDS* audience contains some of the most knowledgeable viewers already. Based on the research discussed above, the following hypothesis is advanced:

H3: Compared to those in the control group, those viewing the political satire clips will demonstrate greater internal political self-efficacy.

Lee (2012) studied how late-night comedy programs may affect political participation through interpersonal conversation and found that "late-night comedy programs play no less an important role than do traditional news sources in fostering political participation" (p. 668). Though it may be persuasive and attention-directing, how these shows affect participation is still not totally clear.

Hoffman and Thomson (2009) found that "internal political efficacy did indeed mediate the relationship between late-night TV comedy viewing and civic participation,

as well as local TV news viewing and civic participation," but the study did not distinguish between late-night comedy and political satire. Later research from Hoffman and Young (2011) did find that political satire and parody (like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*) led to political participation via the mediator of self efficacy:

> Because we see a direct effect between consuming both satire and parody, as well as traditional TV news and political efficacy, we can conjecture that there is something about these media that increases the salience of one's efficacy. The key difference, of course, is that satire or parody is entertainment and meant to be humorous, whereas news is meant to be informative. At the very least, this research suggests that the effects of humorous entertainment compared with informative news can be similar when it comes to direct effects on efficacy and indirect effects on political participation (p. 165).

Peifer (2012) says that "political humor often lacks a constructive dynamic," and simply points out problem after problem without offering solution (p. 268). On Stephen Colbert's first episode of *The Colbert Report*, he spoke to his audience about their discontent with the world today and their want to do something about it but joked about their (what we now may call) slacktivism. Colbert called his audience heroes, saying "You're the folks who say something has to be done. And you're doing something. You're watching TV" (Schill, 2014, p. 755). But the "Colbert Nation" and other viewers of these late-night programs have done much more than just watch. Colbert's super PAC

received more than one million dollars in donations and raised thousands of dollars for charities. The viewers have supported him in not one but two presidential campaigns and submitted votes to name a Hungarian bridge after him (in competition with Stewart) and won the competition. Stewart and Colbert also got thousands of viewers to participate in their "Rally to Restore Fear and/or Sanity" in Washington, D.C. This is in addition to the more common sharing and posting clips from the show online, tweeting, hashtagging, posting on online forums (such as "The Colboards") and other online participation that is evident from the viral videos the shows have had.

H4: Exposure to the political satire clips will increase the likelihood of self-reported civic participation via increased political efficacy.

Last Week Tonight & the "John Oliver Effect"

With Jon Stewart's recent retirement from *The Daily Show* and Stephen Colbert's network switch to CBS, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* is positioned to become one of the top staples in current political entertainment programming. Ross (2014) argues that John Oliver's form of reporting is "an ingenious formula that's making a difference in the real world." In only his second season on air, Oliver has had significant successes getting his *Last Week Tonight* audience to participate in different political actions (and jokes). After his segment on the FCC and net neutrality, Oliver called on viewers to go to the FCC's website and comment with their thoughts on the issue, and shortly after the episode aired so many people visited the website they crashed it (McDonald, 2014). In an FCC open meeting on net neutrality, FCC chairman Tom Wheeler even referenced

Oliver's report and his reference to Wheeler as "a dingo." When *LWT* had a segment on the Miss America pageant's convoluted claim of being the number one provider for scholarships for women, Oliver encouraged viewers to give to organizations like the Society of Women Engineers instead, and the same week a spokesperson for the organization credited Oliver for a significant bump in their donations (Luckerson, 2015).

These are just a few examples of what Luckerson (2015) has called "The John Oliver Effect," referring to his ability to break down an issue in order to explain it to his audience and the subsequent coverage and actions people take in response. While it cannot be proven the actions listed above happened *because* of Oliver, governments, politicians, and company spokespeople have responded to him specifically about his segments or reports. The D.C. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton reportedly plans on showing his clip on D.C. voting rights during their next session, and tobacco company Philip Morris International responded to his piece on their legal practices with a statement in the Los Angeles Times (Parker, 2015; Sherman, 2015). Poynter Institute media blogger Andrew Beaujon said of *Last Week Tonight,* "I don't know what else you'd call that kind of digging through public documents except journalism… Maybe it's a more iterative, bloggy form of journalism, but I think it's inarguably legit" (Suebsaeng, 2014). Parse.ly, a web analytics site, studied internet buzz of particular topics *LWT* covers before and after an episode, and found that there is a relationship between online media coverage of a topic, especially of a lesser-known topic, and John Oliver's coverage of it (VanNest, 2015). This was found to have even more of an impact on the digital

media than *60 Minutes*, a more traditionally thought of news source. As stated, lesser-known topics seem to benefit especially from *LWT*, as was the case with chicken farmers. Craig Watts, an advocate for the cause, said “In 18 minutes, he did what we've been trying for 30 years to do and that is just reach a general, broader audience. The story that he told, I cannot tell you how hard that is to tell to someone that is not really familiar with it,” (Abbruzzese, 2015).

Why John Oliver has had such an impact on his audience or the subjects of his reports has not been thoroughly studied before, which makes sense considering it is still such a young show, still in its second season on HBO. Though he comes from working on *The Daily Show* as a correspondent, there are some changes in his show from Stewart’s. He focuses less on the politicians and more on social issues, and because his own show is relatively new it is uncertain what kind of assumptions (if any) exist around it. Edwina Rogers, CEO of the Center for Prison Reform (another topic covered by a *LWT* sketch), said “every social justice cause has hopes of getting covered in his show" because of the attention it brings and how widely the audience spreads his messages.

In his book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell considered how something goes viral. He points out the three types of people essential to make something go viral: mavens, connectors, and salespeople. Keller and Barry (2003) (as cited in Gass and Seiter, 2011) called these people the “influentials,” or the “opinion leaders who shape others’ opinions.” Oliver’s ability to cover stories other media outlets are not focusing on in a way others cannot may make Oliver one of these influentials or mavens. By getting

his audience to participate, often by tweeting or posting online, they become connectors and salespeople who spread the message and can shift focus on different policies. This kind of buzz can be particularly effective in reaching audiences exponentially and through interpersonal channels (oftentimes online), making it both inexpensive and highly persuasive (Gass & Seiter, 2011): In other words, it is the type of political communication a politician would hope to have.

But in order for people to share the message of a maven the message itself must have particular characteristics. An idea has to have "stickiness," or appeal (Gass & Seiter, 2011). Humor is the appeal all of *Last Week Tonight*'s messages are wrapped in. It must also have scalability and effortless transfer, meaning it has to be easy to disseminate and communicate (Gass & Seiter, 2011). Online participation or "word of mouse" has the benefit of how cheap and easy it is: one click can share a message with thousands.

Where someone like John Oliver has a leg-up on a large news corporation or politician is his likability, genuineness, and overall persuasiveness. He is a celebrity, so well known that Comedy Central had him fill in for Jon Stewart on one of the most popular shows on the network when Stewart was on a summer-long break. Humor can increase how well the audience likes the persuader (in this case, Oliver), and therefore could increase persuasion (Gass and Seiter, 2011; Sternthal and Craig, 1973). Humor also can increase perceptions of the trustworthiness of the communicator (Gass & Seiter citation of many others, p. 278).

H5: The inclusion of a clear call to action with an easy method at the end of the political satire clip will increase likeliness of intended civic participation.

Method

A total of 193 students in an introductory communication studies course at a large midwestern university participated in the study to receive research credit for their course. The survey had three randomized conditions: a control group with no video clip ($N = 62$), a clip that was cut before a clear call to action ($N = 60$), and a full clip with a call to action at the end ($N = 71$). The clip was from *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and highlighted issues regarding sugar content labels and their potentially misleading information. The clip was particularly timely being sent out the week of Halloween. The full clip was about 11 minutes and 30 seconds, while the cut clip was about 10 minutes and 30 seconds. The average time for completion for the call to action condition was about 21 minutes, the average time for completion for the condition without the call to action was about 15 minutes, and the average time for completion for the control condition was about seven minutes.

Measures

Demographics: Students were asked their age, which ranged from 16 to 36, with an average age of 19 ($SD = 1.78$). Students we also asked their sex, which was 37% male and 63% female. Participants were also asked their political orientation on a 5-point scale, using a measure from Hoffman and Young (2011), with higher values indicating greater conservatism: ‘‘Generally speaking, would you describe your political views as:

very liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative, or very conservative?'' (M = 2.94, SD = 0.94). Participant interest in public affairs was assessed using a measure from Hoffman and Young (2011): ''Generally speaking, how INTERESTED are you in what is going on in government and public affairs?" (M = 2.78, SD = 1.21). Responses were on a five-point scale from not at all interested to very interested.

Media use: Participants were asked about the frequency of their social media use on a five-point scale ranging from "never" to "very often." The platforms listed included (with percentage who indicated they use these platforms at least sometimes): Pinterest (42%), Facebook (76%), Instagram (81%), Twitter (68%), Tumblr (23%), Snapchat (90%), Google+ (37%), YouTube (91%), LinkedIn (18%), Reddit (9%), and Vine (28%).

Participants' frequency of watching political satire was measured using three shows currently on air (*The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore, and Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*) and how many times in the past week participants watched each of these shows (see Table 1). No participants indicated watching all of the shows, and only four participants reported watching more than one.

Prior political participation: Participants in all three groups were asked about their prior participation both online and offline. Questions came from Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project's 2012 Civic Engagement Tracking Survey and included questions on whether participants follow political figures online social networking sites (19% indicated they did) or if they are part of any groups with a political or social cause online (31% indicated they did).

Frequency of participation was measured on a five-point scale ranging from never to very often, by asking, “How often do you discuss politics and public affairs with others in person, by phone call, or by letter?” (M = 2.59, SD = 1.02) and “How often do you discuss politics and public affairs with others ONLINE-- such as by email, on a social networking site, or by text message?” (M = 1.76, SD = 0.86) (Pew Internet & American Life, 2012).

A list of political activities one may do was adapted from Pew’s 2012 Civic Engagement Tracking Survey to ask about the likeliness that one may participate in one of these activities. Activities included things such as “attend a political rally or speech,” “work or a volunteer for a political party or candidate,” and “work with fellow citizens to solve a problem in your community” (see Table 2) (Pew Internet & American Life, 2012).

Humor: Participants were asked how humorous they found the clip to be using a 5 point scale, ranging from “very funny” to “not at all funny” (M = 2.44, SD = 1.92). This question was not included for the control group because they did not receive a clip. An independent samples t-test was run on the two experimental conditions in order to determine whether humor varied by condition. Results indicate that participants in the call to action condition (M =3.54, SD = 1.27) found the clip to be equally humorous to those in the condition viewing the clip without the call to action (M = 3.65, SD = 0.92), t = 0.582, p =0.562.

Learning/Recall: Four multiple-choice knowledge questions were listed in all three survey conditions, including: (1) What amount of money is it estimated America will spend on sugar this year?, (2) In one year, the average American eats…, (3) Which organizations were referenced in the clip to have made statements about the dangers of sugar?, (4) Companies who make money off of sugar or sugary products want it to be measured in _____, while those worried about the dangers of sugar think it should be measured in _____.

Efficacy: Questions were taken from Hoffman and Young's (2011) adaptation of Niemi et al.'s (1991) scale. Participants responded using a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Questions included: ''I consider myself to be well-qualified to participate in politics'' (M=3.26, SD=1.03), ''I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country'' (M = 2.95, SD = 1.07), ''I think that I am better informed about politics than most people''(M = 3.33, SD = 1.08), ''Sometimes politics seems so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on'' (reversed scored; M = 3.04, SD = 1.14), and ''People like me have no say over what the government does'' (reverse scored, M = 2.64, SD = 1.09). This was included in all three conditions (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$).

Intent to participate: Finally, participants in all three conditions were asked about their intent to participate politically (yes or no) regarding the topic of sugar content labels. The list of activities was prefaced with, "Some propose that nutrition labels are confusing to consumers, and do not present sugar content in a way that is easily

understandable to the general public, which could be dangerous for the consumer," due to the fact that those in the control group would not have seen the video outlining the issue. The list of potential activities and questions following were adapted from Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project's 2012 Civic Engagement Tracking Survey, and included actions in three general categories: 1) traditional participation, 2) online participation, and 3) participation on social networks. Means were calculated for each category and indicate the average number of items in the category toward which participants indicated a "yes" response.

There were four items assessing traditional participation. Examples include: "Contact a state or local government official in person, by phone call or by letter about this topic," "Sign a paper petition regarding this topic," "Send a 'letter to the editor' by regular mail to a newspaper or magazine about this topic" ($M = 1.15$, $SD = 0.96$).

There were six items assessing online participation, including some traditional activities conducted in an online sphere. Items include: "Sign a petition ONLINE regarding this topic," "Contact a state or local government official in person ONLINE, by email or text message regarding this topic" and "Send a 'letter to the editor' to a newspaper or magazine ONLINE, by email or text message about this topic," as well as some online-specific activities such as, "Comment on an ONLINE news story or blog post to express an opinion about this topic," "Post PICTURES or VIDEO ONLINE related to this topic," and "Send text messages to others about this topic" ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.88$).

There were six items assessing participation via social media. Items included, "Post links to political stories or articles about this topic for others to read," "Post your own thoughts or comments on this topic," "Encourage other people to take action on this topic," "Encourage other people to vote on this topic," "Repost content related to this topic that was originally posted by someone else," and "'Like' or promote material related to this topic that others have posted" ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 2.23$).

Results

H1: Learning and Recall

The first hypothesis proposed that those in the experimental conditions would demonstrate greater knowledge of the topic covered by John Oliver than those in the control condition. The study included four knowledge items. This first item had participants identify how much money Americans spend on sugar annually. Approximately 54% of those in the call to action condition answered the question correctly, 52% of those in the condition lacking the call to action answered the question correctly, and 47% of those in the control condition answered the question correctly. These differences were not shown to be statistically significant, X^2 (2, N = 193) = .630 p = .73. The second item had participants identify how many pounds of sugar the average American consumes annually. Approximately 83% of those in the call to action condition answered the question correctly, 57% of those in the condition lacking the call to action answered the question correctly, and 39% of those in the control condition answered the question correctly. These differences were statistically significant, X^2 (2, N = 193) =

28.89 p = <.001. The third item had participants identify which organizations have made public statements about the hazards of consuming too much sugar. Approximately 38% of those in the call to action condition answered the question correctly, 33% of those in the condition lacking the call to action answered the question correctly, and 40% of those in the control condition answered the question correctly. These differences were not shown to be statistically significant, X^2 (2, N = 193) = 6.16 p = .72. The fourth question had participants identify how the sugar industry currently reports sugar content (grams) and public health recommendations for how it should be reported for greater consumer clarity (teaspoons). Approximately 82% of those in the call to action condition answered the question correctly, 68% of those in the condition lacking the call to action answered the question correctly, and 62% of those in the control condition answered the question correctly. These differences were shown to be statistically significant, X^2 (2, N = 193) = .662 p <.05

H2: Humor and Persuasion

Hypothesis 2 proposed that those who view the content as more humorous would report greater intention to participate politically than those who view the content as less humorous. A series of Pearson correlations were run between perceived humor and the three intent to participate variables. Results indicate no association between perceived humor and intent to participate traditionally, $r(186) = .071$, $p = .337$, and no association between perceived humor and intent to participate online, $r(186) = .067$, $p = .364$. Results

did, however, indicate a marginally significant positive association between perceived humor and intent to participate via social networks, $r(185) = .135$, $p = .06$.

H3: Effect of Clip on Internal Political Self-Efficacy

Hypothesis 3 proposed that compared to those in the control group, those exposed to the John Oliver clips would demonstrate increased internal political self-efficacy. Results did not support this hypothesis. There were no differences in self-reported internal political self-efficacy across the conditions: call to action condition ($M = 3.00$, $SD = .68$), no call to action condition ($M = 2.98$, $SD = .68$), control condition ($M = 3.16$, $SD = .83$), $F(2,185) = 1.07$, $p = .344$.

H4: Effect of Exposure on Intended Participation Via Efficacy

Hypothesis 4 proposed an effect of exposure to the political satire clips on intended civic participation by increased internal political self-efficacy. Since hypothesis 3 indicated no effect of exposure on efficacy, this test of mediation was not run. Hypothesis 4 is not supported.

H5: Effect of Call to Action on Intended Civic Participation

The fifth hypothesis proposed that inclusion of a clear call to action at the end of the clip would increase intended civic participation. Results were somewhat supportive of this hypothesis. A series of one-factor ANOVAs were run with condition as the independent variable, and intended civic participation as the dependent variables. Three types of intended civic participation were assessed: online participation (e.g., signing an online petition), traditional participation (e.g., calling into a TV or radio show), and

participation through social media (e.g., sharing content about this issue to those in one's social networks). Results did not indicate any differences across the conditions for online participation: call to action condition (M = 2.36, SD = 2.01), no call to action condition (M = 2.10, SD = 1.81), control condition (M = 2.05, SD = 1.78), $F(2,183) = 1.73$, p = .489, nor did they indicate any differences across the conditions for traditional participation: call to action condition (M = 1.22, SD = 0.97), no call to action condition (M = 1.13, SD = 0.95), control condition (M = 1.07, SD = 0.97), $F(2,183) = 0.393$, p =.675. They did, however, indicate significant differences across conditions for participation via social networks, which is consistent with the type of call to action Oliver promoted in the video: call to action condition (M = 2.99, SD = 2.27), no call to action condition (M = 2.73, SD = 2.21), control condition (M = 2.03, SD = 2.05), $F(2,182) = 3.05$, $p<.05$. Tukey post hoc comparisons indicated that those in the call to action condition reported significantly greater willingness to participate than those in the control condition ($p<.05$).

Discussion

When political satire television like the shows discussed in this research are framed to be a primary source of news and trusted by millennials and upcoming generations, it is necessary to assess their effects on viewer political participation in a frame that is fitting to the age group: online social networks. Though the homogeneity in age may have some apparent limitations, this is a fitting demographic for this research. Thanks to a strong call to action and the persuasive quality of a humorous delivery, the

effects of political satire can begin to take place after just one clip, as this research suggests. This online participation, sometimes referred to as "slacktivism," has more of an impact than some may think, as Americans who show their support for causes on social media are also more likely to participate in more traditional ways, such as volunteering for the cause or asking others to get involved (Ogilvy & Georgetown University, 2011).

Though we saw no effects on viewer's political efficacy in this survey, there is prior research suggesting that long-term viewers are affected by viewing of political satire (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006; Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, and Carlton, 2007; Hoffman and Thomson, 2009 (further outlined above)). In the case of assessing political satire's effects on efficacy, it is a limitation of the study that viewers saw just one clip from the show, rather than multiple clips on various political topics.

There was, however, support for the hypothesis that viewers of these shows do learn, and in this case by assessing people after viewing just one clip instead of assessing frequent viewers of the show, it is easier to separate some of the confounding variables of where the knowledge is really coming from. Young and Tisinger (2006) say that *TDS* viewers are some of the most knowledgeable viewers already, and those who watch these shows may already have current events knowledge or interest in politics, but this study supports that, though also humorous and entertaining, these shows can give their audience news.

Lack of pretesting in the knowledge items did present an issue, shows in the first and third questions where there was no statistically significant difference among conditions. The first question only had about half of each group able to answer. The third question had only just over a third of people able to answer correctly, suggesting it was too difficult. Additionally, there was no "don't know" response available, meaning those who did not know simply guessed.

Hoffman and Young's 14 measures of participation were aimed to be adapted for a "young adult sample," but with only two of the potential actions taking place online it no longer fits how those in this age group typically interact. I adapted measures available from Pew that did include these online forms of participation, but responses limited statistical power, including only "yes," "no," or "I don't know."

This is not the only measure that needs to be adapted to a digital age. Figuring out what defines a "viewer" of a show is not so straightforward anymore. In an era where many shows' linear ratings are dwarfed by streams on YouTube, Facebook, Hulu, and Snapchat, should a viewer no longer be defined by episodes, and instead be defined by the number of clips they have seen that week in their news feeds? Is a YouTube subscriber today's equivalent of a viewer (Weiner, 2015)? With a show like *Last Week Tonight*, its YouTube subscribership (2,565,191) is double that of the most-viewed cable news network (*Fox News*) at primetime in a day, and some *LWT* videos currently have upwards of 10 million views (LastWeekTonight, 2015; Kissel, 2015). This first begs the question of whether or not these clip-watchers are considered "viewers," and further

asserts that these shows are influencing large numbers of people, potentially more people than cable news networks.

If all of these people are really being affected by watching these shows, what kind of effects might their participation have on this larger scale? These questions need to be addressed in further research on the genre, and especially on John Oliver, considering the little prior research done on his new show. With Oliver's particularly fitting style of call to actions for younger generations (taking to social networks to share opinions) it may be that the simple act of asking people to participate might actually make them more inclined to do so. Between the persuasiveness of humor and the audience-relevant modes of participation, the genre is changing and along with it seem to be the habits of its viewers.

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Table 1: Frequency of viewing political satire programs

Show	*% who indicated they are a viewer*	*% of those who indicated they are a viewer said they watched at least one episode the past week*
The Daily Show with Trevor Noah	31%	18%
The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore	19%	7%
Last Week Tonight with John Oliver	12%	7%

Table 2: Prior political participation

Here's a list of activities some people might do. For each, please say if you would…	*% Yes*
Attend a political rally or speech	44%
Attend and organized protest of any kind	28%
Attend a political meeting on local, town, or school affairs	44%
Work or volunteer for a political party or candidate	29%
Become an active member of any group that tries to influence public policy or government, not including a political party	23%
Work with fellow citizens to solve a problem in your community	64%