

John Oliver

Forging a New Type of Satire

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Politics have always been targets for comedians and some comedians, like Stephen Colbert and John Oliver, are known to make their comedy “real” by interacting with politicians and driving people towards civic action. Scholars have only begun to study “satiractivism” and one key issue in its study has been defining it. In this paper, I show how one definitions of satiractivism has been insufficient in describing the work of one satiractivist, John Oliver, on his show Last Week Tonight. To form the theoretical framework of my research, I employ the criticism of James Caron, George Test, and Marcus Paroske and their definitions of satiractivism, satire, and a satirical technique called participatory satire, respectively. Using three episodes of Last Week Tonight, I conclude that even though Oliver’s work sometimes falls into contemporary definitions of satiractivism, ultimately he has forged a new type of satiractivism that relies on indirect participation with his audience and politicians and on participating and engaging with civic issues directly. My conclusions demonstrate that definitions of and relating to satiractivism should be expanded or new ones coined if we are going to continue to seriously study how these comedians are trying to do more than make people laugh.

Since his show *Last Week Tonight* debuted in 2014, John Oliver has become famous for using his show to unpack complex public policy issues with comic flare. He has tackled seemingly boring topics such as the decay of American infrastructure and the IRS to more popular matters like all things Trump related, the death penalty, and more recently, marijuana legalization. However, there is more to what he does than just entertainment, as Oliver has used his show to try and affect change, utiliz-

ing his satire to either stir action amongst his viewers and fans or take action himself. Even though many of his shows take on serious tones, mirroring those of some cable news shows, Oliver can still maintain the satirical nature of his program with a veneer of comedy.

I postulate that over the course of his four seasons, Oliver has been changing the shape and landscape of two types of satire: satiractivism and participatory satire. Using three episodes of *Last Week Tonight*, I will demon-



I am currently a senior honors student majoring in English with a minor in French. While this article is on contemporary American television, I have dreams of pursuing graduate study with a focus in Early Modern England. This article is a revised version of the final paper I wrote for my English 491 course, a senior honors seminar focused on contemporary satire, that I took in Spring 2017. The challenge in writing this article is that the topic I tackle is not well-researched as scholars have only really begun to look at it in the past three to five years. This lack of research, though, was also encouraging because it gave me the intellectual room to really flesh out my ideas without feeling constrained by already-established ideas.

strate how Oliver has been making those changes by comparing him to other satiractivists, namely Stephen Colbert and to a lesser extent, Jon Stewart, and showing how Oliver both aligns with, breaks away from, and broadens contemporary definitions of satiractivism and participatory satire. This broadening can begin to change the way we look at these two types of satire and the way we evaluate whether or not someone's satire is participatory and/or activist. With broader definitions of satiractivism and participatory satire, we can strive toward a better understanding of them, which can lead to a better understanding of their impact on society.

The concept of satiractivism is likely best summarized by James Caron in his article "The Quantum Paradox of Truthiness: Satire, Activism, and the Postmodern Condition":

Satiractivism appears as performative utterances in which the joking material in a standup routine, comic sketch, sitcom, stage play, or fictional narrative does not just imply a promise for political reform but at a certain level apparently performs that change. (163)

Satiractivism, then, is a comic form of political speech, but it cannot be considered political speech alone. It cannot be considered political speech because while it behaves like protesting and it may have the same effects as protesting, it is ultimately not the same as actual protest (Caron 2016). Given that satiractivism is not political speech or real protest, how can it be considered "activism"? Caron argues that satire is kept apart from activism in a two-step process: "such satire first has the greatest potential to change minds, which might then lead to political or social action," (Caron 2016, 168). How satire changes minds varies, though. Caron points out that some forms of satiractivism rely on an active audience to engage with the issues that a particular satirist highlights. He goes on to explain that the ridicule involved in satire "operates ethically" to subvert and perhaps reverse the directions taken by the prevalent social and political forces (Caron, 2016: 174). Caron uses satiractivist Jon Stewart to illustrate satiractivism and his two-step process.

Stewart is famous for his lobbying for the Zadroga Act, a piece of legislation that provides medical care for 9/11 first responders. Stewart lobbied for the bill before it was passed and when it was up for renewal, appearing on talk shows even after he left his own *Daily Show* to plea to voters to make their representatives vote for the act's re-

newal. Caron uses Stewart's Zadroga pleas to discuss and illustrate his two-step transition that I explained above and he offers the idea that when the transformation from comic to political speech occurs, satire promotes the possibility of change. Thus, Caron evaluates the efficacy of Stewart's satire not based on how it changed public policy or intervened in actual politics, but rather that it possesses the potential to instigate reform. Caron summarizes this idea more broadly: "Satire is not a reforming mechanism per se, but it can promote reforming mechanisms" (Caron, 2016, 168). To further discuss the nature of and better understand satiractivism, one must explore the idea of silly citizenship.

Silly citizenship, a concept coined by John Hartley, has emerged as media citizens, those who use popular media to form identities and create relationships, have become sillier. This silly citizenship is rooted in the idea of "DIY" (Do-it-Yourself) and "DIWO" (Do-it-With-Others) citizenships (Hartley 2010, 240). These types of citizenships are more individualized because it is driven by voluntary actions, but it also more activist in nature because DIY and DIWO citizens collaborate with each other and share knowledge. As DIY, DIWO, and media citizens become sillier, platforms like satirical television have gained a foothold as destinations for political updates and news (Hartley 2010). This realm of satirical television is where satirists like John Oliver, Jon Stewart, and Stephen Colbert have thrived. Colbert has been used as the exemplar of a satirical technique that I have previously mentioned and that Oliver plays with: participatory satire.

Participatory satire, according to the idea's founder Marcus Paroske, occurs when satirists like Colbert and Oliver physically relocate their satire to engage with government entities, "erasing the boundaries between the stage and the world at-large," (Paroske 2016, 209). Paroske uses the example of Colbert's testimony to a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee on immigration and his engagement with the Federal Election Commission as the basis of his argument for participatory satire. Paroske argues that Colbert's actions and direct engagement with the government set new precedents for satirists:

When satire enters an institution such as a bureaucratic agency or deliberative legislature, it lays bare a tension between the pretenses of these bodies as noble agents of the public good and as political actors.... (Paroske 2016: 210)

The key component of participatory satire for Paroske that must be emphasized is venue: satire becomes participatory when it leaves the comic space and enters a political one.

Paroske continues his argument by saying that when satirists like Colbert violate “pieties,” the rules of interaction in a particular space, it can enhance the satire’s criticism while also leaving room for the satirist’s targets and audience members to resist that criticism (Paroske 2016, 217). That is to say, when Colbert enters the House subcommittee on immigration to expose the flaws in immigration policy, while he could be strengthening his critique, he is also opening the door for others to reject his criticism and side with those legislators pushing for the very immigration policy Colbert is trying to criticize (Paroske 2016). Furthermore, Paroske argues that within a policymaking arena like Congress, policymakers are constantly violating the pieties of one audience or another in order to make legislative compromises. This violation of pieties creates distrust in the system, creating a fractured arena into which Colbert brings his satire in order to draw attention to the absurdities of certain policies. The most important point to be emphasized for Paroske, though, is the venue: engagement at a particular venue leads to participatory satire (Paroske 2016).

To begin our discussion of Oliver’s satiractivism, it is necessary to show how he can, at times, fall in line with contemporary criticism about what constitutes standard satiractivism. The fifth episode of the show’s first season is concerned with net neutrality, the principle that all data on the internet is delivered at an equal speed with no one individual or company being able to buy more speed. What Oliver does in this episode is similar to what was done in a Canadian play on climate change that was the subject of an article, “Laughing in the Face of Climate Change? Satire as a Device for Engaging Audiences in Public Debate,” written by Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore and Grace Reid. In the article, Bore and Reid analyzed the effects of using satire to get people to care more about climate change. The play they examine, a comedy, was about an individual escaping to Alberta from the real pacific nation of Tuvalu which is apparently sinking as a result of climate change.

Bore and Reid say that the satire of this play helped facilitate reflection on the issue, further investigation into it, and eventual action, civic or otherwise. They also add that humor helps audiences cope with feelings of fear or guilt. Bore and Reid elaborate on their analysis of the satire and humor of their play by saying that it did not

ridicule people for being ignorant about climate change or not taking enough action. They explain that the play was thought-provoking because it made viewers consider how the relationship between Tivo, the Tuvaluan refugee, and Al, his Canadian host, is representative of the local and global impacts of climate change. Bore and Reid highlight the curiosity that the play sparked in its audiences and how it made them want to educate themselves more about climate change and the issues presented in the play (Bore and Reid 2014). Oliver, in his net neutrality episode, uses techniques similar to this play.

In the net neutrality episode, Oliver begins his discussion by emphasizing how boring the topic is: “Yes, ‘net neutrality,’ the only two words that promise more boredom in the English language are ‘featuring Sting’” (“Net Neutrality” 0:58–1:02). In the thirteen-minute segment, Oliver breaks down what it means to have a neutral internet, how important that neutrality has been, and the monopolization of the internet providing industry (“Net Neutrality”). The audience is pummeled with information in a strictly non-fiction setting with only a veneer of comedy, something that contrasts the fictional nature of the play Bore and Reid analyzed that they said made people want to seek more information as opposed to just giving the audience the information outright like Oliver does (Bore and Reid 2014). But what is similar between the two is that neither Oliver nor the play in Bore and Reid’s article blame the audience for being ignorant about the topic at hand. There is no judgement, no animosity towards apathy about the subject matter. Also, while Oliver chooses to educate his audience directly, he still follows a similar process to Bore and Reid’s play: Oliver sparks curiosity in the subject matter by telling the audience how important net neutrality has been for the internet, which leads to a desire for more information, which Oliver himself provides, and ultimately, Oliver spurs the audience into some kind of action. Essentially Oliver did for the audience what Bore and Reid’s play wanted the audience to do for themselves.

Oliver takes the last few minutes of his Net Neutrality segment to bring up the fact that the FCC was soliciting public feedback on net neutrality. This is the jumping off point from which he then makes a plea to internet trolls, people who leave purposely mean comments on internet videos: “for once in your life, focus your indiscriminate rage in a useful direction,” (“Net Neutrality” 13:01–06). The whole bit can be considered satirical because it meets George Test’s four criteria for satire: judgement, aggression, play, and laughter (Test 1991). There is laughter be-

cause as Oliver reads off the ridiculous comments that internet trolls have left, including those left on Oliver's own episodes, the audience can be heard laughing, it is playful because he includes self-deprecating humor in his plea when he includes comments left on his own videos, it is aggressive because of the insults he hurls at not only trolls but at the FCC, and the aggressive language is also indicative of Oliver's judgement of both trolls and the FCC. Barely a day or two after the episode aired, the nation saw the tangible effects of Oliver's call to action because so many comments (more than 45,000) had been submitted to the FCC that its commenting system crashed (McDonald 2014). Given that Oliver made a call to action and then action was taken, we can clearly see that Oliver's comic speech has made the transition from comic to political, per Caron's article (Caron 2016). This act, then, falls perfectly in line with Caron's definition of satiractivism.

Oliver, in this episode, engages with his audience and spurs them into taking action, but that is not all his segment accomplished. In an FCC hearing, a testifier asked FCC commissioner Tom Wheeler, who was also one of the subjects of Oliver's criticism, if he had seen the episode on net neutrality, which Wheeler had. In that exchange, Oliver's stage is inadvertently brought into the arena of political discourse, similar to Colbert's testimony before House members. Oliver, then, is participating with politicians, albeit unwillingly, in way that resembles Paroske's definition of participatory satire; however it did not stop there, as Oliver responded to Wheeler's comments in another episode, thereby deepening the conversation on net neutrality. We can see now that Oliver has engaged in participatory satire in a Paroskian sense, a concept whose definition he later reshapes.

In the net neutrality episode, Oliver's techniques align with other instances of satiractivism and what critics have said about satiractivism, however he has also slightly revised Caron's two-step, comic to political speech transition. This can be observed in his ongoing commercial campaign to educate President Donald Trump on political and social issues. The campaign started with Oliver's episode entitled "Trump vs. the Truth" throughout which he emphasizes Trump's disconnect with reality and how little he knows about issues with which a president should be familiar. Oliver and his staff, capitalizing on the President's television preferences, then created a series of infomercials that are parodies of a catheter commercial which played earlier in the episode. In each ad, the starring catheter cowboy gives a brief lec-

ture to the camera, explaining topics such as the nuclear triad, how the unemployment rate is calculated, and the difference between an appetizer and a dinner fork. With these commercials, Oliver is playing with Caron's two-step process.

Oliver, with this commercial campaign, appears to be trying to use his satire as a reforming mechanism by indirectly engaging with the leader of the free world. Given Caron's ideas, if action is taken as a result of Oliver's commercial campaign, his comic speech, marked by the catheter commercial parody and the inclusion of unpolitical topics, would, according to Caron, turn into political speech. Yet other than the President making some form of official comment on the commercials, there is no way to know if these commercials have or ever will have an effect on the President or spark action. But it is implied that there is some effect because these ads air on the same shows that Trump is known to watch; however, this is merely speculation. Oliver's speech, then, is stuck in a liminal state for now: it is both comic and political. Also, while the ads are directed at Trump, he is never explicitly mentioned in the ads and since they air in the D.C. area, everyone watching with the President is being educated too.

To add to the complexity of this campaign, it is not even Oliver in the commercial, it is a paid actor and Trump can only engage with the commercials through an intermediary: the television. These levels of deferral of Oliver's interaction starkly differ from Colbert's directness in his participatory satire. With these commercials, Oliver is indirectly engaging with two of audiences at once: those who watch his show and those in the D.C. area who will see the commercials during their airtime. When Oliver's commercials engage with this latter group of people, though, he has moved from appealing to an active audience to the general public. Through two digital spaces, the internet (through which many watch Oliver's stories) and television, Oliver is indirectly engaging with two different audiences, giving them the same message, that the president is ignorant about many key issues, while also indirectly engaging with a politician, President Trump. Oliver, with these commercials, is also changing peoples' minds, but not towards a particular action, therefore there is no PSA moment, no moment when the satirist issues a call to action; thus, given all that has been said here, one could say that Oliver has gone about Caron's two-step process in a new way by not driving his now expanded audience to political action. He uses a call to awareness as opposed to a call to action. These com-

mercials are also what I would call indirect participatory satire: participation from different venues and with more people than just politicians, while still engaging with politicians. On one level, Oliver's participation is participation in Paroske's terms, but on another level, Oliver has expanded the geography of Paroske's satire and made it possible to participate without directly engaging with people and/or politicians.

To further punctuate Oliver's break from Paroske's definition of participatory satire, his flavor of participatory satire is starkly different from that of Colbert's because instead of participating with lawmakers, Oliver engages with the issues that require the lawmaker's attention. Colbert did something similar in his TV segments on immigration policy by working with immigrant workers in farm fields, but this engagement was purely comical and not nearly as serious as his still comic testimony before the subcommittee was. Also, Paroske does not consider Colbert's working with immigrants to be participatory, only his engagement with House members (Paroske 2016). Oliver does not bother to engage with politicians, but rather he focuses his energies on comically engaging with and highlighting specific issues, in order to expose their flaws to his audience. The most noteworthy instance of Oliver executing this tactic is his episode on debt buyers.

In his debt buying episode, Oliver tackles the issue of, as the name implies, debt buyers, people who purchase control of someone else's debt. After purchasing a person's debt, a debt buying firm has the right to collect on that debt, and sometimes these firms try to collect on debt even after it has been paid. Oliver spends the first half of his twenty-one-minute segment explaining the debt buying industry, how it works, and the flaws of both the industry and the laws that govern it, namely how easy it is to buy someone's debt and how debt buyers can collect on already-resolved debt. Jokes are sprinkled throughout Oliver's explanation, making the topic lighter and more satirical as Oliver tries to stay playful with a serious issue. Oliver's satire becomes something in-between being comic and being participatory when he decides to send some of his staff members undercover to a debt buying conference and film some of the proceedings ("Debt Buyers"). This bit is in-between being comic and participatory because, as I will explain shortly, it is comic, but not exactly participatory because Oliver's employees do not appear to engage with anyone.

Oliver summarizes the findings of his staff members, highlighting and ridiculing video clips in which

debt buyers justify their industry and their practices. In response to a clip of a panelist claiming that debt buyers help people struggling with debt and the economy at large, Oliver said this: "Oh yeah, they're really helping them get their ducks in a row, but only in a window of a Chinese restaurant sense," ("Debt Buyers": 15:30–15:33). Oliver goes on to discuss what to him is the lowest moral way of collecting debt: collecting it after the debtor dies. He then deepens his critique by exposing those debt buyers who complain about laws put in place to protect debtors. He ends his criticism of the conference and use of his original footage with this summary statement that leads to the next part of the episode: "debt buying is a grimy business and badly needs more oversight because as it stands, any idiot can get into it, and I can prove that to you because I'm an idiot and we started a debt buying company," ("Debt Buyers" 17:12–22).

Oliver begins using participatory satire and directly engaging with the issue he is criticizing when he and his show spend \$50 to start their Mississippi-based company, Central Asset Recovery Professionals (CARP, for the bottom-feeding fish and to add to the comic nature of the bit). After setting up a website, CARP was offered by an unnamed source \$14,922,261.76 of out-of-statute medical debt for nearly 9,000 people, which they bought for less than \$60,000. Out-of-statute debt is debt which is so old that the debtor cannot face legal penalties over it, according to Oliver. Oliver then emphasized that he had the power to have people call the debtors and collect on their out-of-statute debt, but, instead of doing that, Oliver does something else: "instead of collecting on the money, why not forgive it? Because on one hand, it's obviously the right thing to do, but much more importantly, we'd be staging the largest one-time giveaway in television show history," ("Debt Buyers" 18:47–57).

Clearly, by forgiving the medical debt of 9,000 people, Oliver's participatory satire has a much more real and tangible impact on society as opposed to Colbert's subcommittee testimony. But can what Oliver did, from his original reporting to forgiving millions of dollars of debt, be considered satire let alone participatory satire? Or is it a Public Service Announcement/Act with jokes? As was mentioned before, Colbert's participatory efforts are about him comically demonstrating before policymakers the issues with certain policies and Oliver's are designed to target the public at large. Oliver bypasses the policymakers and instead directs his participation at their constituents by engaging with a specific issue. Oliver's goal is to create widespread awareness about debt buy-

ing and create pervasive discontent among his millions of viewers. He also relies on the monetary resources of his show to make a difference and punctuate the flaws in debt buying. By inserting himself in the debt buying industry and then subverting their principles by forgiving the debt, Oliver is asserting his moral superiority, adding the exclamation point to this critique. This episode and Oliver's actions are not satiractivism according to Caron, but it appears that Oliver has created a new type of comic speech by finding a way to cross the boundary between satire and activism, bypassing Caron's two-step process. There is no changing of minds to open up the possibility of change, just Oliver's taking action. The question remains though: is what Oliver has done in this episode satire?

Using George Test's criteria for satire again, judgement, play, laughter, and aggression, one can evaluate whether or not what Oliver did can be considered satire (1991). There is clearly judgement of the debt buying industry when he says things like they need reforming because any idiot can get into the business, and laughter can be heard from his live studio audience when Oliver makes jokes about the debt buying panelist and the debt buying convention. This laughter indicates the playfulness of the show, and Oliver is indirectly aggressive when he plays audio clips of debt buyers threatening debtors and shows news clips describing the immorality of debt buying. His final criticism, his multimillion dollar giveaway, is done both seriously and playfully, as he offers a final call to awareness about debt buyers and then performs the giveaway under the guise of parodying Oprah's famous car giveaway, in which she gave each member of her audience a new car. Oliver makes a spectacle of his giveaway, complete with falling money, a jibe at Oprah, and the declaration that he is "the new queen of daytime talk," ("Debt Buyers" 20:36-41).

In short, the serious act of debt forgiveness is wrapped in comic spectacle. Therefore, given Test's criteria, Oliver's episode can necessarily be considered satire of the debt buying industry, instead of being a funny, in-depth news investigation. However, this episode, like the net neutrality one, is mostly serious, with only a veneer of jokes—enough jokes, though, that one can still consider the episode satirical.

Given what Oliver did with his debt buying episode can be considered satirical, one can better analyze how his brand of satire not only breaks away from Colbert's participatory techniques, but could also expand Paroske's definition of participatory satire again. Paroske limits his

analysis to Colbert's engagement with politicians, emphasizing the venue of the politicians. However, given what Oliver has done in this episode, participation can also be with an active audience and voters and that participation, if done in a way similar to Oliver's, can still be satirical. Oliver's participation is meant to highlight the issue and enrage the population at large, and for Paroske, participatory satire is about the erasure of the distinction between the stage and the real world (Paroske 2016). From his stage in his studio, Oliver engages with the real world and solves 14.9 million real problems for nine thousand real people. Oliver, then, can be considered a participatory satirist who strives to make a more tangible impact on the world than just simply offering testimony to politicians.

Oliver's approach to satiractivism sets him apart from other satiractivists. He uses participatory satire sometimes, but he goes about it in a new way. Paroske has defined participatory satire as when a satirist brings their satire into the realm of public debate and politics, but Oliver does not solely rely on engaging with politicians. Instead, Oliver's participatory satire is about engaging with audiences, both the general public and active audiences. An example used in this article, Oliver's debt-buying episode, is illustrative of how Oliver exposes the flaws of an issue while still retaining what could be considered a satirical tone. He punctuates this participation by starting CARP, buying, and then forgiving millions of dollars of medical debt. In this last instance, Oliver, while still remaining comical and playful, offers his last critique of the industry: that Oliver himself, a self-proclaimed idiot, has higher moral standings than the debt buying industry itself.

There are times though, when Oliver appears to engage in the kind of participatory satire that Paroske discusses. In particular, with the unveiling of Oliver's catheter cowboy campaign. With this campaign, Oliver is indirectly engaging with President Trump to educate him on what he thinks are issues that the president should be aware of. The ads themselves are comic as Oliver includes topics that are probably less relevant for the leader of the free world. This may seem to be more of the kind of participatory satire that Paroske is getting at, however Oliver is not just participating with a government official, he is also participating with those people watching the commercials with Trump. Oliver is then participating with more people than just his viewers, and he is doing so indirectly, making this what I have called indirect participatory satire. These ads are also stuck

in satirical purgatory: they are both comic and political speech because it cannot be determined if anything has happened or action has been taken as a result of these ads. The ads are also a different take on Caron's two-step transition, because Oliver goes about it in a less direct way than what Caron describes.

Oliver's satiractivism takes on a more conventional form in his net neutrality episode. In it, Oliver exemplifies Caron's discussion of satiractivism: Oliver changes the minds of his audience to get them to take action. He educates the audience, gives them a reason to be upset, and finally gives them the tools to try and make a change. This is the quintessence of Caron's argument that satire's ability to effect change lies in its abilities to affect minds and thinking. However, this example also is a clear indication of how Oliver's speech can turn from comic to political because action was taken as a result of his comic speech. So while Oliver's speech can remain comic, it is mostly serious and there are times when he rides the line between comic and political, falling on both sides of it occasionally.

It is clear that Oliver's brand of satiractivism does not always fall neatly into any one critic's definition of it. His participatory satire is both different and similar to Paroske's definition. He has expanded that definition: his speech is both comic and political, and his participatory satire is not always direct participation or even voluntary participation. The dual nature of so many facets of his satiractivism makes Oliver's beautifully complex. Despite its indefinable nature, Oliver's satire has had tangible, measurable effects on both the government and real people. As his catheter cowboy campaign continues to presumably educate Trump and until his show is cancelled, Oliver will continue to change the face of satiractivism and what the term means.

Satire is becoming an increasingly used tool to engage with politics and the news, and it is important to understand the nature of satire and its many forms if we are to understand how it is affecting contemporary society. Certain satirists have been using their satire to try and affect change, and scholars of satire are only beginning to analyze this satiractivism as Caron and I have been calling it. Given my conclusions about what Oliver has done to alter the definition of satiractivism and participatory satire, we now have more tools to evaluate someone's satire as participatory and/or satiractivist. We can begin to better understand the nature of satiractivism and its associated techniques like participatory satire and

a better understanding of this can lead to more informed criticism of the two. More informed criticism then leads to a better, broader understanding of how satiractivism and participatory satire are being used to shape the world around us.

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