

A Decade of The Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Its Success and Participatory Approach to Social Change

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ABSTRACT: With three Peabody wins, sixty-eight Primetime Emmy nominations (and twenty-eight wins), several Writers Guild, Producers Guild, Webby, GLAAD, and Critics Choice awards under its belt, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (LWT)*, has retained its position as the leading voice on international news and policy, structural issues, and other rather solemn topics that would not be considered entertaining for a primetime show. With long investigative pieces that build on the work of other journalists, *LWT* challenged the idea that viewers are not interested in stories lasting twenty-odd minutes without any commercial breaks. As the show completes a decade since its premiere (April 2014), it is an opportune moment to reflect on and explore what attracts its audiences. While most satirical comedy is limited to critiquing politicians and public personalities, offering catharsis to its viewers, *LWT* takes this step further by tackling structural issues, outlining solutions, and soliciting viewers' participation in addressing them. This leaves the viewers on a hopeful note, making them feel that they are doing their part in standing up to metaphorical Goliath. This essay, thus, also examines the participatory nature of Oliver's "calls to action", which fosters a sense of empowerment among the show's viewers, along with the reasons why audiences connect with the show.

KEYWORDS: John Oliver; Last Week Tonight; political satire; parasocial; participatory social action; digital culture; social media

Introduction

Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, hereafter referred to as *LWT*, first aired on HBO on April 27, 2014. Oliver, fresh off the success of his stint on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, was considered a likely successor to Stewart, who wished to retire from the show. Much to everyone's surprise, Oliver announced *LWT* with HBO instead. As viewers tuned in for the first episode of *LWT*, they were greeted by Oliver, who held their attention for roughly ten minutes (out of thirty) with his segment "Our main story tonight", which covered the 2014 Indian General Elections. At a time when none of the major news networks or late-night hosts were focusing on the elections in India, this was a big gamble for Oliver, who mentioned in the show, "I've got an even more important question who gives a shit because here is the

¹ The author also created a video essay in the same sarcastic and witty tone of *The Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* to share her research findings in a standalone show episode format. It can be accessed here: https://youtu.be/QjLyyGNP_KQ?si=515LRIt4RD5BpuWg

frustrating thing, cable news does not need to be focusing on an election that is happening in 926 days when there's an important one happening right now that they are all completely ignoring" ("LWT: India Pomegranates & Lisa Loeb" 6:00-6:12). The gamble paid off. The show was well received, and with thirty Emmy Award wins (from sixty-eight nominations), three Peabody Awards, and several Producers Guild of America Awards, Critics' Choice Awards, GLAAD Awards, and Webby Awards, *LWT* and Oliver have secured popularity and critical acclaim in the competitive world of late-night shows. Currently in its eleventh season, the show has been renewed through 2026, and Oliver shows no sign of slowing down.

Most research concerning late-night shows has largely focused on the role of satire in influencing voters or raising political consciousness and knowledge (Holbert 2005; Baym 2005; Becker & Bode 2018; Feldman 2013; Young & Hoffman 2012; Baumgartner 2013; Jeong et al. 2023). Studies related to *LWT* often fall short of exploring how audiences connect with the show and how it surpasses general expectations of the format, which is typically characterized by comedy sketches, satirical takes, and celebrity interviews. Over its decade-long run, *LWT* has evolved from raising political awareness through humor – a common mode among late-night shows – to using its platform for social change by integrating deep-dive investigative journalism along with calls to action. This essay examines the factors that showcase the show's popularity, drawing on the show's format, the media landscape, and the audience's comments. It further demonstrates how *LWT*'s participatory call to action strategy has been successful in mobilizing audiences. The participatory approach utilized in this essay explicitly refers to *LWT*'s strategy of rallying viewers to engage with political and civic processes and soliciting monetary contributions. This strategy successfully enlists audience members as active participants, thus allowing Oliver and his show to create a steadfast fan base over a decade, who willingly heed his calls for aid (Becker 2022).

Methodology

With two distinct objectives, I employ a tripartite qualitative approach structured around three interconnected frameworks of analysis: the first focuses on intrinsic factors, such as the show's content and presentation; the second framework highlights extrinsic factors related to the technological and cultural context in which the show airs; and the third discusses its participatory activism. This framework facilitates a comprehensive exploration of factors that cemented the show's success and its effectiveness in reaching out to viewers. The scholarly work of Barnard and Boukes' study "The Oliver Twist: Why young adults watch Last Week Tonight with John Oliver" (2024) is foundational to this analysis, as they provide critical insights through semi-structured interviews with eleven self-identified fans of the show aged between 18 and 30 years. Their study explores the viewer's motivation within the framework of uses and gratification, highlighting the show's educational value, novelty, immersive storytelling, and the important role the host's persona plays in its popularity.

Along with Barnard and Boukes' findings, this study includes audience perspective facilitated by an examination of 2403 comments on the *New York Times* podcast episode on YouTube titled "John Oliver Is Still Working Through the Rage", uploaded on September 28, 2024. This podcast was selected for its candid and thoughtful nature, with comments reflecting viewers' longitudinal engagement with the show. The comments were downloaded using an open-source command-line Python program called YouTube Comments Downloader, created by Egbert Bouman via *GitHub*. They were then exported to a spreadsheet and subsequently analyzed in Python. The data was sorted under six categories: Humor, Information, Call to Action, Criticism, Positive Sentiment, and Mentions of the Host. A list of keywords was developed for each category. In some comments, the commenters expressed multiple reasons for either liking or disliking the show, and a code was written to ensure that this complexity is captured in the analysis. Emotional responses were also identified based on explicit sentiment expressed by the commenters. Their perception of the uniqueness of *LWT* compared to other shows was also assessed, along with their reflections on Oliver's persona. This approach helped in ensuring that the qualitative YouTube comments could be mapped to provide quantitative insights. This two-pronged approach of combining the insights from existing scholarly work and triangulating it with audience voices ensures a robust understanding of *LWT*'s appeal.

LWT's popularity was shaped by the techno-cultural factors in which the late-night show was released and aired. They include YouTube's evolving policies favoring respectable content (Alexander 2018) and *LWT* teams' decision to upload the show on a free streaming website. A review of journalistic articles, platform announcements, and media commentary reveals YouTube's pivot towards prioritizing reputable content. This coincided with *LWT*'s distribution strategy, which involves uploading complete segments of the show, producing smaller segments, creating web exclusives, and implementing a strong social media engagement strategy. Their distribution strategy further boosts the show's algorithmic prioritization, enabling it to reach global audiences. The audience comments from the *NYT* podcast validate the effectiveness of this digital distribution strategy, where global audiences highlight their reliance on YouTube to access *LWT*. Barnard and Boukes' study also underscores this reliance on YouTube, noting that their respondents mentioned accessing *LWT* through this website (268). YouTube's policies and distribution strategy in popularizing the show are validated by audience testimonials and existing scholarly work, which discuss how a free-of-charge platform that is also barrier-free provides access to a global population.

This essay also adopts a case study approach, drawing on existing scholarly research conducted by Amy Becker on satire-driven activism in her article "John Oliver as the Pandemic Fundraiser? Championing Causes and Political Participation Through Satirical Television" (2022). Her concept of "comic recruitment" details how satirical hosts use humor and low-barrier actions, such as voting, donating, and online petitioning, to facilitate civic engagement (2). The insights from Becker's work are strengthened by audience testimonials from the 2023

Pūteketeke bird election, where Oliver requests viewers to vote for a conservation contest conducted in New Zealand. The analysis applies the framework of connecting audience feedback and media discourse to *LWT*. A thematic analysis of top comments on the episode *The Tonight Show segment John Oliver Campaigns for a New Zealand Bird of the Century* (November 9, 2023), coupled with media discourse around the campaign, provides insights into viewer motivations. This mixed-method approach illustrates how *LWT*'s calls to action foster greater participation in democratic processes. By combining intrinsic and extrinsic factors, this methodology not only attempts to understand creative reasons for *LWT*'s success but also contextualizes its rise in popularity within the digital media landscape.

Why does the show work?

Barnard and Boukes' study reveals six intrinsic factors that drove *LWT*'s appeal. According to their analysis, each twenty to thirty-minute segment offered educational clarity by deconstructing complex issues in a comprehensive yet easily understandable manner. The show cultivated a sense of novelty and suspense through its unpredictable selection of a wide array of topics. Unlike the other late-night shows, where the content heavily banks on the news cycle and current events, the *LWT* episodes can range from political issues, agriculture, outdated regulations, or corrupt corporations. With no advertisement breaks and a strong script, the respondents found themselves immersed in each episode, and the presentation of ample evidence bolstered its credibility. Theatrics and humor manifested through props, mascots, and stunts enhanced the entertainment quotient of the show. *LWT*'s focus on incorporating actionability was deemed accessible and empowering by the respondents. These factors validate my findings derived from the audience comments on *NYT*'s video podcast called "John Oliver Is Still Working Through the Rage". The computational analysis of 2,403 YouTube comments confirms that "Information" (857 mentions) and "Humor" (424 mentions) dominate the comments. The viewers praise *LWT*'s approach to educate without being boring, stating that "They truly ARE funny because they ARE true" (@xxtinkioxx), indicating that comedic style and factual rigor work together to create something greater than the sum of its parts.

This *NYT* video podcast is a thirty-seven-minute interview where the host, journalist Lulu Garcia Navarro, speaks with Oliver. As of September 7, 2025, it has 2.6 million views, along with 64,000 likes and 5,399 comments. The video format of the podcast offers a retrospective view of the decade-long run and evolution of *LWT*. The video is a rich source of the show's meta-narrative, including its production process, the ethos that guides the show, Oliver's philosophy, editorial choices, and its future. The release of this interview in its video format (as opposed to just audio) also enables visual engagement with the media. The audience comments pick up on Oliver's non-verbal cues, body language during the interview: @jamespardue3055: "John comes across as every bit as intelligent and sincere as I always imagined him to be". The video podcast is uploaded on YouTube and can be freely accessed,

ensuring a diverse audience base that offers valuable data through commenters' opinions. The interview also serves as a key informant interview to understand the show's evolution from Oliver's perspective.

The comments section of the video serves as a microcosm of viewers who show a high degree of engagement with the show. Their feedback is invaluable in analyzing the show's popularity and why they return weekly to watch it. In contrast to the comments under the uploaded *LWT* episodes on YouTube, which specifically address the topic of those videos, *NYT's* interview provides an opportunity to reflect holistically on the show's philosophy and gauge how its long-term viewers perceive it. The programming code used to analyze the comment section allowed for comments to feature in multiple thematic categories. One of the strongest categories to emerge (with 752 comments) praised the show for its informational/educational value. Some examples of these comments come from viewers like @kt9166, highlighting its utility as a classroom tool: "...one that you can record and show to your middle or high school or college class to explain a very difficult subject. Maybe you aren't a journalist, John, but you certainly are an educator". Apart from *LWT's* informational value, commenters also mentioned the humor quotient, which gathered 423 responses. Terms like "golden nuggets of comedy" (@kt9166), "alleviates bleak situation" (@amandakinnett316) attest to the audience's endorsement of its comedic tones. Viewers also emphasize that humor enhances the delivery of otherwise drab topics. They add that the integration of humor does not undermine the seriousness of the issue, but rather augments its journalistic rigor, as seen in the comment by @bendixanderson4882: "Oliver's jokes demand more accuracy than traditional journalism. If the facts aren't airtight, the humor collapses...a joke only works if it's true." The comedic flair and factual rigor augment the efficacy of message delivery and boost the show's credibility. To explain this particular tonal use of comedy and satire, Becker proposes the concept of the "comic recruiter", which states that satire lowers barriers to engagement and demands factual precision (2). Becker's concept also supports Barnard and Bouke's findings and the audience analysis undertaken for this study.

Alongside the humor, commenters also compliment *LWT* for being a credible source. @mikebradt8080 praises the show for its "extensive research", while @guyrose6602 comments that "There is more rigor and competence in that weekly half-hour show than the entire Faux News circus tent", and @Bombero_Antiguo writes, "Comedy or not... the show contains more factual information in 50 minutes than Fox 'news' does in 50 weeks." respectively. These comments suggest that viewers perceive the information presented as both entertaining and reliable, but more importantly, fact-checked. The comments also indicate that viewers regard *LWT* as more nuanced and tend to favor the show over traditional media, particularly Fox News, which is known for its highly supportive and uncritical stance towards the Republican Party, its members, and their policies: @SueBee-d4x mentions that "he [Oliver] could teach a master class to the 'journalists' on FOX". Viewers feel that the topics are well-researched, and the production team consults industry insiders to have a robust

understanding of the subject. @aaronburbach2344 mentions that as a railroad worker, he was “surprised by how nuanced” their take was. He writes, “I’m almost certain they talked to insiders when researching that piece” and called the coverage “significantly more accurate than most media coverage” (@aaronburbach2344). While Barnard and Boukes’ work establishes the existence of a certain degree of parasocial loyalty and appreciation of Oliver’s personality, this analysis demonstrates how that loyalty manifests in real time (265). In the *NYT* interview, viewers perceive Oliver as an ally and passionately defend him when the interviewer repeatedly questions his journalistic credentials. This transforms passive audiences into a protective community that advocates for his legitimacy. This phenomenon, termed parasocial loyalty, was first proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956), where viewers form a one-sided relationship or an emotional connection with the performer (215-229).

Comments such as, “Exactly. I kept sensing a sort of envy from the interviewer toward John. It’s their frustrations...” (@cindye5285) speak to the audience’s observation of how Oliver positions himself on the periphery. On the one hand, he is an outsider to legacy media; and on the other hand, he is quintessentially British² within the American cultural landscape. He wears his British identity on his sleeve by often referencing colonial guilt and leaning into British stereotypes such as his accent, the stiff upper lip, emotional unavailability, and their disparaging cuisine. While Oliver often jokes that he is insignificant and that just about anybody can do his job, the commenters disagree, mentioning that he is central and indispensable to the show’s success. His trademark self-deprecating humor is characterized by a self-mockery of his appearance, his ungraceful ageing, his vocal quirks, his uncanny resemblance to birds, and his emotionally restrained Britishness. Together, these aspects of his humor function as a strategy to make him appear authentic and self-aware. The viewers interpret this admission of performed vulnerabilities as a sign of his humility and authenticity. To analyze this facet, I define authenticity as the audience’s understanding that there exists a high degree of resonance between Oliver’s on-screen persona and his real off-screen self. The audience is aware that Oliver is delivering a comedic performance, but as himself, as the following comments discuss: @ChristosKariolis:

“He (Oliver) scoffs and laughs when Lulu asks if his aim is changing the world, but he has brought to light so many important issues that pervade American society...He’s done more for the US than he gives himself credit for”.

This authenticity, deepened by his use of profanity and transparency about the show being sued, is also perceived as “spontaneous and heartfelt” (@stevennicgorski1657), “vulnerable, emotional, and teary” (@cheryl Benton7107).

Oliver’s earnestness emerges in contrast with the performative neutrality, guardedness, and aloofness of traditional journalists. @LA-qvlir comments, “Good one. Honestly, I kind of feel that journalists may be, at least unconsciously, envious of shows like *Last Week Tonight*, for

² Oliver also received his US citizenship in 2019.

all the things John Oliver said: the resources, the freedom, and the acclaim of both fans and the industry (e.g., Emmy awards)" attest to the commenter's impassioned defense of Oliver and the show. The commenters also praise him for his intelligence and work ethic. For @jamespardue3055, "John comes across as every bit as intelligent and sincere as I always imagined him to be." In the same comment, the commenter also mentions that the quality of the show demonstrates the hard work that goes behind the scenes. In addition to his work ethic, the commenters praised Oliver for leading his show to success. @a.j.ponderbooks argues that his involvement in the writer's room, his delivery of the material his team writes, and his attempts to save a joke that does not land make him a "fantastic showrunner". They appear to understand that running a show for 10 years is an arduous task, and they celebrate this accomplishment. @bettylynne7364 praised the process behind the show and ended their comment with "What a journey. 10 years of journeys, thanks team. Do carry on". @travis5481 sums it up with:

"My favorite part of this is that John Oliver has been so consistent for the past 10 years and still loves it. I think many people in these situations burn out and move on to something else. There's a service in providing this level of rigor to stories for such a long time" (@travis5481).

These comments indicate that the viewers admire Oliver and *LWT*'s team and their dedication to the show.

From the sample used for the analysis, 129 comments highlighted the participatory aspect of the show, where the viewers mentioned words like "donate," "petition," and "action" in their comments, which in turn demonstrates the success of *LWT*'s strategy of transforming viewers into active participants, while simultaneously advocating for the issue at hand. It succeeds in translating its message into tangible social impact, as illustrated by the following comments:

@ekdaufin1485: "So what can we do" is SO IMPORTANT so that we(I) don't become horribly depressed at the end of each show. And when there isn't really an actionable one for me, even symbolically, it's REALLY hard and something to have to recover one."

@CVL13: "Very true! Plus all the donations to food banks, there's a lot of actual impact there next to the alleviation through comedy."

A total of 458 commenters expressed their liking towards such initiatives. They mention feeling more connected to the show when there is demand for action, and describe experiencing positive emotions, and above all, feeling empowered or validated. The commenters mentioned how the show and Oliver make them feel hopeful while traditional media and news evoke anxious and depressive feelings: @dannachristensen1774: "Honestly I don't watch regular news, I get incredible anxiety whenever I do, but I love watching John Oliver". The show is perceived to be gentle in its handling of its viewers.

The digital-first strategy pursued by *LWT* has undoubtedly been one of the primary reasons for its success. While not the first late-night show to do so, that credit goes to *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) with its digital short called "Lazy Sunday" (2005), which became their first viral video

(NBC later removed the *SNL* video from YouTube after garnering 5 million views). *LWT* has harnessed the power of YouTube and digital-age tools like no other show before. Moylan notes in his article for the *Time* magazine, “A Decade of YouTube Has Changed the Future of Television” (2015), that YouTube became integral to the success of many television series as they would choose the platform to post extratextual material, such as trailers, recaps, bloopers, and short clips that did not make their way directly into the show.

Out of 2,403 NYT podcast comments, seventy-three commenters mentioned YouTube in their comments. Comments like @nickanthony214’s, “YouTube distribution is critical to get the message out there. That’s how I initially stumbled upon *Last Week Tonight*. JOHN OLIVER!!!!!!” demonstrate the key role played by the website as a platform for audience discovery. These comments further validate the analysis of media commentary from Barnard and Boukes’ study, where the respondents (residing outside the USA) mention watching the show on YouTube (14). For international viewers, access to *LWT* is limited due to a lack of cable subscriptions or the unavailability of network channels in their geographic region. Commenter @SunriseViewer expresses this concern: “Always on YouTube, because it’s just not accessible otherwise in my country”. A compelling insight was offered by @grumpyAF, who mentioned that due to restrictions in their country concerning accessing foreign media— they compare it to “barreling towards basically North Korea state”— they “cannot thank *LWT* staff enough for putting full episodes on YT”. They currently watch it on YouTube via VPN, illustrating the video hosting platform’s potential in ensuring access to media and information despite state-controlled restrictions. It also simultaneously highlights the role free platforms play in allowing audiences worldwide to view content that their government may not approve of otherwise. Viewers expressed that financial constraints also limit their access to paid streaming platforms, forcing them to rely on YouTube to watch *LWT*. A commenter @ethanhuntley1313 laments that they were affected by a hurricane and, due to financial loss, will not “have income for a video subscription for a while” but are still able to watch *LWT* on YouTube. Uploading the main segment of the show ensures greater accessibility for those without the means or the will to purchase an additional subscription service.

LWT has received recognition for its digital-first distribution strategy, which comprises three components: creating content specifically for its online audience; uploading its main segment on YouTube the day after its HBO broadcast; and regularly partaking in playful feuds online with other brands and celebrities to keep itself relevant on social media through strategic cross-posting (Becker, 2022). An average video on the 9.63 million-subscriber *Last Week Tonight* channel on YouTube receives 2 to 6 million views, but a viral video can receive up to 10 to 40 million views. Although the decision to upload its segment for free might have had financial drawbacks by foregoing revenue from paid subscribers, it greatly expanded the show’s potential and accessibility. The availability of *LWT* on YouTube circumvented geographic, economic, and censorship barriers, allowing anyone with an internet connection to watch Oliver and his show on their screens on Monday mornings.

The first part of the digital-first strategy involved the development of shorter segments called “Web Exclusives”, which are released only on the show’s YouTube channel. These are light-hearted segments, one of which features Oliver reading fan mail. He selects a wide variety of comments from the viewers, especially those that ridicule him, his physical appearance, or the show’s relevance and success. These segments establish a deeper connection with the viewers and enhance his likability as a public figure. This digital-first strategy was a calculated move by the executives at HBO to tap into the rising revenue from internet advertising. In 2015, the revenue from internet advertising reached a high of \$59.6 billion (IAB, 2016). This was a twenty percent increase from the previous year, marking the sixth consecutive year of double-digit growth (IAB, 2016). The trends predicted that traditional TV viewership and advertising revenue would shift to the Internet. In this context, the decision to release segments on YouTube emerged as a strategic and forward-looking move that kept pace with evolving media consumption habits and revenue streams.

This digital-first strategy adopted by *LWT* coincided with YouTube’s pivot towards becoming a platform aimed at attracting advertisers. YouTube introduced its demonetization and content ID feature to enhance its dependability as a brand in response to controversial discourse surrounding its top content creators (Alexander 2018). Julia Alexander’s deep dive article on Polygon (2018) outlines this shift and pressure on YouTube to tackle the content on its platform after creators like Logan Paul and PewDiePie were associated with the proliferation of problematic content like disturbing content aimed at children, white supremacy, fake news, conspiracy theories, etc. She writes:

“YouTube can’t promise brand safety with volatile creators on the platform – advertisers don’t want to be caught in a firestorm. The only move is to pivot, and YouTube is ready” (Alexander 2018).

This pivot was achieved by prioritizing safe content from established Hollywood celebrities, music videos, and clips from late-night shows (Alexander), which proved beneficial for *LWT*. Alexander notes that demonetization policies, algorithmic preferences, and content promoted on YouTube’s homepage prioritized polished and vetted content over its homegrown creators. Clips from late-night shows began to dominate the trending page on YouTube, thereby giving a significant boost to shows like *LWT*. Thus, the digital-first strategy ensured that *LWT* consolidated its position on YouTube by reaching a global audience and staying relevant in an evolving mediascape.

The John Oliver Effect and Participatory Activism

An outstanding feature of *LWT* is its ability to guide concerned civilians through specific paths of action in order to engage in civic processes. This phenomenon, called “The John Oliver Effect”, was coined by Victor Luckerson in the *Time* magazine article “Here’s Proof Television Is Slowly Dying” (2014), where he outlines notable outcomes attributed to the show’s

influence. The show rallied viewers to end unfair bail requirements, pursued Sepp Blatter's resignation from the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), and requested audiences to sign a petition in support of Net Neutrality, thus overwhelming the Federal Communications Commission's website.

Building on the existing scholarship on the show's impact, particularly Becker's (2022) analysis, this section explores *LWT*'s ability to inspire its audience with humor-laced activism. As discussed earlier, Becker labels Oliver a "comic recruiter" and enumerates various instances where he urged his viewers to boycott certain brands and programs (2). He often calls on organizations to treat their workers fairly, draws attention to rising health care costs, facilitates giveaways, whether by forgiving medical debt, creating an asset recovery company called CARP (Central Asset Recovery Professionals), or, in one particular case, donating proceeds from book sales that were written to counter former Vice President Mike Pence's support of conversion therapy. He does not shy away from embarking on complicated or non-traditional ways to demonstrate systemic flaws. Becker's analysis of the fundraising efforts (during the COVID-19 pandemic, raising over \$ 5 million) conceived by Oliver is vital because it provides a clear blueprint of his call-to-action approach. It explains how *LWT* goes beyond the infotainment political satire genre and is deliberate in its objective to inspire action. The show's efforts and activism are intended mainly for three groups: individuals, corporations, and the television network HBO.

While addressing individuals, that is, his viewers, Oliver makes passionate appeals, offers reassurances, and encourages them to participate in a form of activism that is both low-cost and low-barrier. We see this form of activism when Oliver sold *LWT*'s stamp sheets (14\$ per sheet) that featured key characters for the show, intending to raise funds for USPS. These stamps were readily available online, thus generating 4 million dollars for the postal service. In the episode, after a sincere appeal, Oliver shifts his tone and adopts a self-deprecating manner and requests again, "If you hate it (the segment) buy one anyway and mail me a letter about how much I suck" ("*LWT: USPS*" 17:43-17:48). Such humor fosters trust and adds to his credibility, allowing him to be persuasive. *LWT* also uses tactics to keep itself relevant outside its broadcast cycle, such as engaging in conversations with corporations on social media. The show's social media team engages in call-outs, social media challenges, banters, trolling, and attempts to provoke public responses from brands. If a brand fails to respond or comply, the *LWT* team escalates the pressure, often asking other users to chime in. Oliver also regularly manages to pull in monetary contributions from HBO, the network that produces *LWT*. As an example, Becker cites the donation to Danbury, a town that found itself at the receiving end of one of Oliver's jokes (6). After a social media banter with the town's mayor, Oliver offered to donate \$105,000 to various charities in the area if the mayor officially named the sewage plant after him. The mayor accepted the offer, and the donations were made to relevant causes on behalf of HBO. Even when reaching out to his employer (HBO), Oliver's approach is

laced with his trademark sarcasm and humor, which adds to his likability and benefits civic causes.

Oliver used a mix of these tactics, leveraging his platform and persona when he launched a campaign to mobilize the audience to elect the Pūteketeke as New Zealand’s “Bird of the Century”. This case study further illustrates *LWT*’s model of civic engagement and attests to the effectiveness of Oliver’s appeal, as seen in the comment by @BalcOra on a video titled *John Oliver Campaigns for a New Zealand Bird of the Century Contest Dressed as a Pūteketeke Bird* (2023), where he writes: “I voted... From Norway. I was asked why I voted on this bird. I simply said because John Oliver told me to do it.”. The video is the celebrity interview segment on the late-night show *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and has 864,000 views, 16,000 likes, and 1037 comments. Organized by the New Zealand conservation organization called Forest and Bird, the Bird of the Century contest allowed people to vote online irrespective of their geographic location. The *LWT* sought permission from the organizers to campaign for the Pūteketeke and, upon receiving their approval, launched what NPR called a “zany” campaign to get the bird elected (Hernandez 2023). Oliver appeared on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* in a Pūteketeke bird costume, where he disclosed that the *LWT* team commissioned billboard advertisements not only in Wellington, New Zealand, but also in various cities worldwide, such as Mumbai, London, Paris, Tokyo, Brazil, and even in a small American midwestern town called Manitowoc in the state of Wisconsin. Oliver jokingly justifies advertising in Wisconsin by mentioning that “not everybody lives in the big cities” (“The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon: John Oliver Campaigns” 03:07-03:45). @missyj3960, who mentions that she is from Wisconsin, writes that she let out “a literal spit” when he said he placed a campaign ad in Manitowoc. I need to drive there to see it in person. [sweat smile emoji]” as Wisconsin “is pretty much ignored/ not talked about unless something batshit insane goes down” (@missyj3960). These humorous spectacles ensure that *LWT* stays at the forefront of internet discourse. The campaign worked, and the bird won by 290,374 votes, far surpassing the second-place winner, who secured 12,904 votes. Comments such as “I went and voted for the Pūteketeke IMMEDIATELY after John’s show, and it’s the most important thing I’ve done in 2023. [muscle emoji]” (@DrStratComm) highlight *LWT*’s capacity to inspire action in the real world.

The primary call-to-action was to encourage the audience to vote. Local New Zealanders like @catrobinson6282 mentioned that the “voting has been the highest numbers” and the “Kiwis have absolutely loved it”. Another local @AucklandGirl21 confirmed that Oliver “advertised heavily here in New Zealand. 65000 votes came in overnight for the bird and I cannot wait to see what bird of ours he’ll campaign for next week [laughing emoji and heart emoji]” The campaign for Pūteketeke also raised awareness about conservation efforts and New Zealand’s biodiversity. As a Māori commenter states, “this is AWSOME to see our competition go overseas. Pūteketeke for the win [sweat smile emoji, trophy emoji, and bird emoji]” (@jourdainhiini6548). The commenters mentioned that Pūteketeke became the gateway to

educating themselves on New Zealand's wildlife and conservation efforts. Simultaneously, New Zealanders were enthusiastic that people across the world were learning about the local biodiversity, ecology, flora, and fauna. @Codetapper mentioned that "any attention to our unique birds is fantastic". The campaign also inspired viewers to donate to organizations leading these conservation efforts. Commenters stated that they donated a small sum to support organizations: "also donated to the conservation cause. Hope many of the folks who found out about it from John Oliver did the same!" (@amyroos). @BunkerSquirrel left a \$50 donation with their vote and wrote, "I know I'm not the only one. No matter how you shake it this is a great thing John's done here".

After a decade of *LWT*, there is a definitive style of presentation, spectacle, and humor that the viewers associate with John Oliver. @xeecec mentions, "For real, this guy knows how to blow things out of proportion in the most beautiful ways possible. John never change", and @theorcawereright calls it "probably one of the most John Oliver things I've ever seen John Oliver do [laughing with tears emoji]". Numerous commenters were amused and awed that Oliver donned a bird costume and appeared on the show. They pointed out that the costume was very well-made: @JoeBurgettMusic writes, "dressing up to get votes for it on the *Tonight Show* is probably one of the most hilarious things in the world right now. Lol" and @birbluv9595 adds, "Your costume rocks!".

Oliver's self-deprecating humor, especially related to his appearance and self-identification with birds, has been a long-running joke. Incidentally, he was the voice-over artist for Zazu, the red-billed hornbill in the live-action version of *The Lion King* (2019). This long-running gag also serves as an inside joke for the fans of the show to bond over. @PeanutsAssorted writes, "You know what I appreciate? John finally embracing his true self and dressing in an outfit that actually reflects who he is!". Oliver's self-awareness and his ability to weave himself into the narrative earn him admiration from the viewers, who see him as someone who can handle a joke at his expense. The parasocial connection explained before is also at play here as fans display protective affection towards Oliver, with @colonialstraits1069 mentioning, "like to personally thank England, for rejecting the comedic genius of John Oliver. He's an American Treasure and I will protect him at all costs" or @HyperactiveNeuron reiterating this point with "Thank you UK! You can't have him back LOL!". This parasocial bond strengthens the connection between Oliver and the audience, thus adding to his credibility.

These themes demonstrate *LWT*'s impact on fostering public engagement with a unique combination of comedy, spectacle, sincerity, and sarcasm. *LWT* has been a game-changer in the late-night television landscape. It ushered in not just a change in format, presentation, and content but also, over a decade, became activist-adjacent, shedding light on structural, systemic, and bipartisan problems. It has been successful in encouraging civic participation, promoting awareness, and getting its viewers to engage more meaningfully with the system.

Finally, it offers a compelling model for others to emulate, where entertainment is just not for laughs but can inspire social change through audience participation.

Conclusion

With its decade-long run on HBO and YouTube, *LWT* has carved a niche by attracting audiences with diverse political leanings and discussing issues such as healthcare, infrastructure, medical boards, policies, internet neutrality, and freedom of the press, which impact everyone irrespective of their political allegiances. With the help of primary data analysis and existing scholarly research, this study establishes that the show's success stems from its journalism-inspired, facts-heavy yet humor-infused format that allows audiences to participate in collective action. These aspects are not arbitrary choices made by Oliver and the showrunners but demonstrate intentionality that finds resonance with its audience. The show's intrinsic strengths include its use of satire, humor, and depth, along with comprehensive research, the absence of advertisements, and the presence of a single host. Its ability to expound on a single topic throughout the episode ensures that audiences can better grasp and thoroughly understand a problem. The show's airing coincided with specific policies adopted by HBO and YouTube, which helped it transcend the limitations of traditional cable TV and attract more viewers. By prioritizing the goal of reaching a wider audience, *LWT*'s approach of using YouTube as an essential means of distribution also democratized access to a show explaining complex civic issues.

For the show's viewers, its success lies in its ability to balance humor with an educational tone while maintaining credibility through its attention to facts. They (the viewers) are less bothered by questions like whether or not he is a journalist, as the commenter @rrael writes:

"If you can come up with a name for his style of 'info-providing comedy' I'd like to hear it. I'd totally back it, cause every language is evolving constantly and we can always add new words. But I don't think it needs to be that complicated. It's still journalism with a comedy bent. So let's just call it journalism" (@rrael).

However, the question of Oliver's credibility as a journalist frustrates media scholars and traditional journalists as they attempt to define and situate the show in the existing media genres and hierarchies. From the audience's perspective, Oliver showcases journalistic integrity, and they see him as an empathetic and trustworthy guide. His self-deprecating humility, earnestness, and rejection of appearances of conformity and respectability – evidenced by his use of profanity on the show and his open mockery of powerful institutions and public figures on social media – endear him to the audience. Their rush to his defense through strongly worded comments indicates the existence of a parasocial bond with the viewers. The admiration expressed by the commenters towards Oliver for creating and consistently maintaining the show's quality also demonstrates their connection to both Oliver and the show. The responses also highlight the existence of an emotional resonance among the viewers, who feel positive, hopeful, and empowered after watching the show. This also

reflects Oliver's personal belief in not succumbing to nihilism. He finds nihilism to be "completely useless" and "a coward's way out" (Oliver qtd. in Garcia-Navarro). He emphasizes how he generally finds light at the end of the tunnel, "albeit that light might be smaller than you would like it to be, ideally, is that activists are making small, incremental progress on the ground, and that progress is important" (Oliver qtd. in Garcia-Navarro). These values are reflected in the show and how the audience perceives it. As the show focuses on "how something is being said" and rather than "what is being said", the audience ultimately feels empowered instead of overwhelmed.

The social impact of *LWT*, colloquially known as the John Oliver Effect, is a testament to the show's success in channeling its viewers' awareness and empathy by guiding them through a series of actionable steps that result in civic engagement. As discussed, the case study of the campaign to elect the Pūteketeke bird as the bird of the century, along with Becker and Boukes' findings, illustrates that such calls to action can mobilize collective effort, whether be it in the form of netizens ensuring a landslide victory for the bird Pūteketeke or raising money for the USPS. The calls to action also transpire in the trademark *LWT* tone, with a healthy mix of sincerity, humor, and cheekiness. The show's success in influencing policy, promoting awareness, and soliciting corporate donations is a testament to the effectiveness of advocacy-driven media.

Ultimately, *LWT* exemplifies how media need not operate in the dichotomy of seriousness and humor. There exists a possibility of communicating serious issues in a way that does not overwhelm the audience and push them further into their despair. The accomplishment of the show demonstrates that the image of a cool, unaffected, and neutral persona, which public figures carefully cultivate, might not earn them the same credibility as someone perceived as earnest, humble, authentic, and genuinely caring about the issues being addressed. As we witness a highly polarized public sphere in many parts of the world, along with declining trust in credible journalism and a misinformation-disinformation crisis, *LWT* emerges as a suitable alternative. The success of *LWT* also challenges the notion that people lack the patience to watch long-form content. The show's legacy is not just its groundbreaking format, high viewership, global popularity, and successful leveraging on YouTube and social media, but also its ability to engage audiences, challenge apathy, and rally them to demand greater accountability from institutions that should serve them in a democracy.

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