

# **Breaking the news: English humour and new modes of journalism in John Oliver's 'Last Week Tonight'**

**Renata Miranda**



*A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Master in British Studies*

Centre for British Studies  
HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN  
March 2015

**INTRODUCTION**

3

**CHAPTER 1**

*CRACKING THE NEWS: WHEN HUMOUR IS APPLIED TO THE  
TRADITIONAL VALUES OF BROADCAST JOURNALISM*

8

**CHAPTER 2**

*IRONY AND SATIRE AT THE HEART OF ENGLISH HUMOUR*

26

**CHAPTER 3**

*THE ENGLISH FACTOR IN OLIVER'S 'LAST WEEK TONIGHT'*

36

**CONCLUSION**

54

**ANNEXES**

59

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

60

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

69

**STATUTORY DECLARATION**

70

## INTRODUCTION

By the end of April 2014, India was in the middle of its nine-phase general election. While candidates Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi competed to lead one of the most populous countries in the world in a very tight race, the American television newscasts were largely ignoring the developments of the biggest election on the planet, where around 814 million people were eligible to vote—a number that corresponds to more than two times of the entire American population. The story, however, was about to make a turn.

On the 27th day of that month, a Sunday, at 11 pm Eastern Time in the United States of America, HBO debuted *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*—a new show that promised, within its thirty minutes, to give a new satirical look into the week’s main events. Anchored by English comedian John Oliver, the first episode of *LWT*—as we will abbreviate it throughout this dissertation—touched upon a wide range of topics, such as the racism controversy within the National Basketball Association (NBA); the sainthood of former popes given by the Vatican; and healthcare costs in the state of Oregon. Nevertheless it was the segment<sup>1</sup> about the Indian elections that gave a hint of what the show’s tone over its first season was going to be.

In a little over nine minutes, Oliver presented a ‘solid piece’<sup>2</sup> on the topic, introducing both candidates —“Let’s deal with Gandhi first and I realise that it is not the first time that sentence’s been said in a British accent” (7’39”-7’45”)<sup>3</sup>, joked the host; giving historical background; and

---

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this particular segment was not made available on the show’s YouTube channel. However, it is possible to watch it at HBO GO, if you are a subscriber, clicking on the following link: <http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver#/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver/episodes/01/01-april-27-2014/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Along this dissertation, when we use the term ‘solid piece’ it is in regards of a news story that is considered to be ‘complete’, fulfilling the following criteria: it is clear, well researched and analytical, giving the audience reliable information.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this dissertation, every time Oliver is being directly quoted in a segment, the exact minute marks of when such quotes were said will appear after the quotations. The minute marks indicated correspond to the videos used for the analysis that are listed in the Bibliography of this masters thesis.

highlighting the importance of the election. Oliver called out the American media ineffectiveness in covering relevant stories when it chose to devote more air time to the US presidential election of 2016 than the ongoing ballot in India —“Here is the frustrating thing: cable news does not need to be focusing on an election that is happening in 926 days when there is an important one happening right now that they are all completely ignoring” (6’05”-6’18”), vented Oliver.

The English comedian was not necessarily reinventing the wheel here, since there is a variety of satirical news shows not only in the United States but also in the United Kingdom<sup>4</sup>. TV shows such as *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*, in the USA, and *The Mark Thomas Comedy Product*, in the UK, have been exploring this formula for over a decade now. Nonetheless, Oliver’s programme brings something new to the table: high quality journalism. Unlike the shows that preceded Oliver’s, that focus mainly on news commentary, *LWT*’s segments are built around journalistic practices, such as comprehensive research and investigation of topics, usually reaching out to ‘the other side’ of the story so that the audience can gain a more ‘balanced’ piece.

One of his first sentences on the show’s debut episode was “Welcome to whatever this is”. The first season started on 27 April 2014 and ended on 9 November 2014; in this period, viewers were introduced to a unique combination of comedy and accurate reporting —even though Oliver himself rejects that the label of “journalism”<sup>5</sup> should be attached to his comedy<sup>6</sup>. Despite being a US-based show —even though it is broadcasted in the UK by Sky Atlantic—, this is a topic worth delving into for a masters

---

<sup>4</sup> Although both countries have a considerable amount of television programmes devoted to political and news satire, it is in the United States where the genre has flourished the most in the recent years.

<sup>5</sup> Suebsaeng, Asawin. “‘Last Week Tonight’ Does Real Journalism, No Matter What John Oliver Says”. *The Daily Beast*. 29 September 2014. Web. 3 February 2015. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/09/29/last-week-tonight-does-real-journalism-no-matter-what-john-oliver-says.html>

<sup>6</sup> Since *LWT* is a relatively new show, with only one full completed season, there is not enough academic materials published about it. Having said that, some articles used as secondary sources throughout this masters thesis were published by the learned press, such as reviews, analysis and basic information about the show and its host.

thesis in British Studies, since Oliver's English identity is at the core of his humour.

The show has been ground-breaking not only in terms of comedy, but, as already stated above, in the journalism field. *LWT* gives air time to certain stories that would never be given enough space in traditional newscasts. The time devoted to certain segments and the research that goes into them are remarkable —and some might argue that such practices have even become rare in the daily procedures of 'real' journalists.

The aim of this dissertation is to discuss how the use of comedy and English humour assist Oliver in overcoming the barriers and traditions of broadcast journalism. The central question is: does the appliance of satire and irony when covering the news allow its practitioner to go further than journalists in obtaining a solid piece? And how well can the story be told, by the journalistic point of view, while making fun of the events reported? These are some of the questions that this masters thesis will attempt to answer.

Following this introduction, this dissertation is structured in three chapters and a conclusion. The methodology used during the course of this masters thesis will be to define the core concepts of broadcast journalism and humour with the aid of academic research. The object of study —Oliver and his show—will be subjected to an analysis in which we will look at both content and narrative, while making a comparison with his peers.

In Chapter One, we will define what qualifies as broadcast journalism and discuss its traditions and values, while analysing what happens when humour is applied to the 'sacred virtues' that reporters, ideally, have to live by —“independence, inquiry and verification”<sup>7</sup>, as well as “accountability”<sup>8</sup>, “transparency”<sup>9</sup> and “impartiality”<sup>10</sup>:

---

<sup>7</sup> Baym, Geoffrey. “The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism”. *Political Communication*, 22:3 (2005): 259.

<sup>8</sup> “Code of Ethics.” Society of Professional Journalists, 1996. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

While other values are undoubtedly important to good journalism (e.g. accuracy, good writing, a deep interest in the world and its people), we conclude these to be central: Making discerning pursuit and effectively disseminating needed information; Sufficiently attending to society's pulse to clearly and effectively convey common social desires; Enhancing clients' autonomy by reporting on vital information and acting as a watchdog of powerful institutions, and; Drawing upon and powerfully conveying those human interest stories that serve to build community (Elliott and Ozar 8).

How does Oliver fit in a world where journalism itself is struggling to survive and reinvent its practices in order to become more attractive to the general public? It might be argued that Oliver is, indeed, “the future of journalism”<sup>11</sup> when it succeeds into making “what is important [i.e. the news] interesting”<sup>12</sup>. In this chapter we are also going to examine the particularities of the apparent crisis<sup>13</sup> the media is currently in and the effects it has in creating this new form of reporting stories.

The comedic approach by shows similar to *LWT* have already given substantial results. Studies<sup>14</sup> conducted by respectable institutions revealed that more and more young people have news satire shows as their primary source of information and hold their anchors to the high standards imposed on ‘real’ journalists—Jon Stewart’s performance on *The Daily Show* has earned the comedian the fourth position in a list of the most admired journalists in the USA<sup>15</sup>. We will examine other news shows —be them ‘real’ or ‘fake’ news shows— and try to pinpoint what ideas and formats are similar, and where Oliver’s *LWT* stands out.

Chapter Two will be centred around irony and satire, and the part they play within English humour. The main goal will be to define what we

---

<sup>11</sup> DeWolf Swenson, Molly. “The future of news”. *TEDx Talks - Berlin*. 30 September 2014. Web. 6 February 2015. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKoR\\_kFv7Dg#t=577](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKoR_kFv7Dg#t=577)

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, Jeffrey P. *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010:181.

<sup>14</sup> “Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe”. *Pew Research Center For The People & The Press*. Washington: 11 January 2004.

<sup>15</sup> “Today’s Journalists Less Prominent”. *Pew Research Center For The People & The Press*. Washington: 8 March 2007.

identify as English humour and how it relates with the concept of “Englishness”. In doing so we will be able to answer: what is so funny about being English?

In Chapter Three we explore and then analyse the English factor in Oliver’s *LWT*. We are going to take a deeper look into what the show is and how it was received —from its outstanding debut, drawing 1.1 million viewers<sup>16</sup>, to the critical appraisal it received in its first season<sup>17</sup>.

In this chapter we are also close-reading three segments of *LWT* that had some connection with Oliver’s British background —either used as a tool for comparison between US and UK immigration policies or when it is a central topic when discussing the Scottish independence referendum. How does Oliver use his English identity to transcend journalistic norms? Does his humour work better in the USA than it would in a British context?

The concluding chapter of this dissertation will explain how Oliver, aided by his application of English irony and satire, manages to do thorough journalistic work, attaining a level of excellence that might never be accomplished by the traditional broadcast news shows currently on air. Why is this approach to journalism successful? Furthermore, what this could mean to the future of the profession?

---

<sup>16</sup> Adelian, Josef. “Long Live Oliver: HBO’s ‘Last Week Tonight’ Debuts to Solid Ratings”. *Vulture* .28 April 2014. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://www.vulture.com/2014/04/ratings-last-week-tonight-has-a-solid-opening.html>

<sup>17</sup> In February 2015, the show, currently in its second season, won a Writers Guild of America Award in the category for “Comedy/Variety (including talk) - Series”, and has already been renewed by HBO for two more seasons.

## 1. CRACKING THE NEWS: WHEN HUMOUR IS APPLIED TO THE TRADITIONAL VALUES OF BROADCAST JOURNALISM

For decades, television has presented audiences the news within clearly defined parameters. These parameters were first established, in the United States, in the late 1940s, when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) instated the Fairness Doctrine, a policy that, until its elimination in 1987, required broadcasters to “give adequate coverage to public issues”<sup>18</sup> and provide reports that were “fair in that it accurately reflects the opposing views”<sup>19</sup>. Traditionally, anchormen —and, more recently, anchorwomen— have stood behind a desk to report to their audience the most significant events of the day —locally and worldwide. This formal setting was designed to convey a professional and trustworthy presentation of factual content. For a newscast to be considered trustworthy, the journalism practiced by its staff should be accurate and objective<sup>20</sup>. Newscasters always had “the duty to be impartial”<sup>21</sup> and, above all, look serious in order to convey a credible image for their audience. When the news was broadcasted, there was no space for jokes. Ethically, along with the values mentioned above, journalists have always been committed with providing information that was “fair and thorough”<sup>22</sup> as well as acting with integrity<sup>23</sup>. But what happens once comedy is thrown into this equation?

---

<sup>18</sup> Lefevre-Gonzalez, Christina. “Restoring Historical Understandings of the ‘Public Interest’ Standard of American Broadcasting: An Exploration of the Fairness Doctrine”. *International journal of communication*, 7 (2013): 96.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Harrison, Jackie. “Exploring news values - The ideal and the real”. *Broadcast Journalism - A critical introduction*. Eds. Jane Chapman and Marie Kinsey. New York: Routledge (2009): 60-63.

<sup>21</sup> Fuller, Jack. *News values: ideas for an information age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996: 28.

<sup>22</sup> “Code of Ethics.” Society of Professional Journalists. 1996. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

As argued by Holland, broadcast journalism owes its public trust to “its legal commitment to objectivity and impartiality”<sup>24</sup>. This confidence entrusted by the audience into the work of journalists, according to Holland, constitutes an integral part of the “authority”<sup>25</sup> broadcast journalism has been benefiting from since the Post-war years. Much of this scenario is a result of the effort television channels have made to keep the perceived ‘sacred’ separation between news and entertainment.

Over the last decade, however, the landscape of broadcast journalism has gone through some significant changes and the lines between genres have become increasingly blurred<sup>26</sup>. Market forces and technological developments have created a much more dynamic media environment. Information flows constantly and is being consumed through many mediums just as quickly. In this setting, first attaining and then holding the audience’s attention has become one of the main challenges of journalists everywhere. According to Holland, when TV networks start to compete for the public’s attention, “the nature and professional values of journalism”<sup>27</sup> become jeopardised:

Competition for audiences has brought a further set of contradictory pressures which have changed the ways in which broadcast journalism communicates. The news programmes themselves have moved towards an increasingly informal approach; meanwhile, across the schedules, there has been an explosion of material on the margins of journalism, involving popular formats, light-hearted, innovative styles and an embrace of celebrity. Precisely at the time when ‘public service content’ is expected to distinguish itself, the boundaries between ‘serious’ programmes and the rest of the output are becoming ever more blurred (Holland 218).

---

<sup>24</sup> Holland, Patricia. “Conflicting pressures - News and representation”. *Broadcast Journalism - A critical introduction*. Eds. Jane Chapman and Marie Kinsey. New York: Routledge (2009): 216.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Holland, Patricia. “Conflicting pressures - News and representation”. *Broadcast Journalism - A critical introduction*. Eds. Jane Chapman and Marie Kinsey. New York: Routledge (2009): 218.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

This phenomenon is referred by many scholars as “infotainment”<sup>28</sup> and has been adopted extensively by television journalists, who are desperately trying to improve their shows’ ratings in a competitive environment when this is even more difficult to achieve. The concept of “infotainment”, nevertheless, might be detrimental not only to the quality of the information people are receiving, but also harmful to the core principles of journalism itself<sup>29</sup>. In order to amplify its audiences, some of the newscasts may rely on a sensationalistic approach when broadcasting the news.

The traditional newscasts who refuse to use such approach have an even more difficult challenge to hold its audience’s attention on topics that might be perceived as ‘boring’ by the general public. For example the coverage of net neutrality; although the topic of imposing restrictions on the internet is extremely important in the contemporary society we live in, it is very difficult to hold the viewer’s attention when reporting on such a complicated issue in the limited amount of time offered by the traditional news TV shows. It is difficult to go over all the particularities of this subject and to explain to the public why it is so important during the few minutes reserved in these journalistic programmes for the news segments<sup>30</sup>. The “brevity”<sup>31</sup> of such segments are also linked with the phenomenon of “infotainment”. As argued by Postman, the few seconds (“the average length of any story is forty-five seconds”<sup>32</sup>) given to each story reinforce the perception of news as entertainment<sup>33</sup> —“It is simply not possible to convey a sense of seriousness about any event if its implications are exhausted in less than one minute’s time” (Postman 103).

---

<sup>28</sup> Holland, Patricia. “Conflicting pressures - News and representation”. *Broadcast Journalism - A critical introduction*. Eds. Jane Chapman and Marie Kinsey. New York: Routledge (2009): 223.

<sup>29</sup> Harrison, Jackie. “Exploring news values - The ideal and the real”. *Broadcast Journalism - A critical introduction*. Eds. Jane Chapman and Marie Kinsey. New York: Routledge (2009): 63.

<sup>30</sup> Newscasts on television are usually 30 minutes long. This forces segments to be concise while transmitting as much information as it is possible to do in, sometimes, just a few seconds.

<sup>31</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death - Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. London: Penguin Books, 2005: 103.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

The ability to make an important story interesting has become one of the biggest challenges for broadcast journalists today. It does not take a long time in front of a television set to realise that this is, unfortunately, a battle traditional newscasters are losing. The challenge for broadcast journalism is: how can an audience be successfully attracted while the journalists themselves remain faithful to the ethics and principles intertwined with the practice of a transparent and objective journalism?

Comedians appeared to have found an answer to this question. A pertinent set of examples can be found in the recent history of television content. In the late 1990s and early 2000s new television comedy shows started emerging in the US and in the UK. Blending satire with some elements of journalism, these programmes echoed previous acclaimed enterprises, such as *That Was The Week That Was*, broadcasted by the BBC in the 1960s, and *Saturday Night Live's Weekend Update*, first aired by NBC in the 1970s —and still on air 40 years after its original debut.

It could be argued that comedy and journalism have nothing in common; yet when we close down the scope of comparison between comedy and broadcast journalism we find they share a common fundamental element: performance —“newsreading is the point where the business of information and the game of show-business meet” (Boyd, et al. 177). When put behind a microphone, both the newscaster and the comedian are expected to perform, be it as reporting some breaking news —in the case of a broadcast journalist — or making a joke about a specific topic —in the case of a comedian. How each of them choose to perform, however, is what set them apart.

According to Holland, the manner in which broadcast journalists behave in front of the camera is directly connected to the values of the profession they are required to meet —i.e. the reliability they are supposed to convey to the audience. Holland argues “the nature of their performance will affect the content of the news they report”<sup>34</sup> and that even the slightest change in their facial expressions could be interpreted as comment:

---

<sup>34</sup> Holland, Patricia. “Conflicting pressures - News and representation”. *Broadcast Journalism - A critical introduction*. Eds. Jane Chapman and Marie Kinsey. New York: Routledge (2009): 221.

Reporters and newsreaders have a double presence on the broadcast media. On the one hand, they must express/perform/act out the neutrality and impartiality which underpin the authority of a news broadcast; on the other, they are individuals with their own diverse characters, emotions and opinions (Holland 221).

Comedians, however, are not bound by the same standards journalists are. While journalists must be faithful to the facts, the truth of the comedians is laughter. Comics have the freedom to say whatever they think is funny and will get some laughs —whether it is true or not. Unlike journalists, they have the privilege of not being held accountable for the things that they say. In other words, the ethical principles of journalism restrain the extent to where a newscaster can go.

Nevertheless, the emergence of shows like the British *The Mark Thomas Comedy Product*, in 1996, and the American *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*, in 1999, contributed to mixing the lines between the activities of both journalists and comedians. In these programmes their presenters used their humour as a shield to cross the boundaries between comedy and journalism. To understand how these two genres interact in these shows it is important to do a brief presentation and analysis of each one of them.

*The Mark Thomas Comedy Product* debuted on February 1996 and lasted for six seasons, totalling 45 episodes of 30 minutes each. Hosted by English comedian Mark Thomas, the show was broadcasted by Channel 4 until May 2002 and presented a combination of comedy and journalistic reports. The approach chosen by Thomas to deliver such reports, however, differs in style and form from a traditional newscast.

Throughout the six seasons, Thomas presents himself as a comedian and does not try to pass as a journalist. He wears informal clothes —usually a t-shirt and jeans— and stands on a stage in front of a live audience, spread around small tables in an environment reminiscent of comedy clubs. Behind him, there are three big screens, used during the course of the programme to show previously recorded clips, official documents, pictures and graphics. Thomas holds a microphone in one hand while passionately gesticulates with the other, always illuminated by a spotlight. He presents his reports as

they were a part of his stand-up act and not the product of a journalistic investigation.

In the fifth episode<sup>35</sup> of the second season, broadcasted in 1998, Thomas explored the use of lottery grants in the United Kingdom. During the show's 30 minutes, he presented a detailed piece of how the money was being misused in the restoration of Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire, a grade 1 listed building closed because of debts. Thomas used press releases, highlighting some of the official quotes listed on them, and challenging the information presented by the government on the subject —“That is the official line and every word of it is shit. And I am going to prove why that is the case to you now”, promised the comedian. Thomas constantly relied on his humour and irony to make a point. While reading from official documents, he made use of a certain intonation to underline the sarcasm in his comments. He even made dramatic pauses when he knew his comments were going to get a laugh.

Thomas went on showing pre-recorded clips and intersected them with his live comments. Some of the footage shown relied on secret-filming, a resource commonly used in investigative journalism reports. The comedian interviewed sources close to the topic and when the protagonist of the case refused to talk to him, Thomas disguised himself as a delivery man and went to the source's home bearing a bouquet of red flowers —he, then, finally got the interview. By the end of the show, he invited his audience to take action on the topic and write to the House of Commons' Committee of Public Accounts demanding a review of lottery grants' policies.

When it heavily relied on dramatisation, sarcasm and comments made from his own point of view, Thomas's 'journalistic stand-up act' —as we might call it— transcended the “commitment to impartiality that is central to broadcast journalism” (Harcup 252). Yet, when Thomas used the tools provided to him by comedy to make journalism, the final product of his investigations were successful in attaining a greater concentration of

---

<sup>35</sup> Thomas, Mark. “The Mark Thomas Comedy Product - Series 2, Episode 5: Lottery”. *Channel 4*. 21 February 2011 (originally broadcasted in 1998). Web. 19 February 2015. <http://youtu.be/rk88-vOkonI>

information, providing his audience a journalism of higher quality than the one offered by the traditional broadcast news:

Combining stand-up and investigative journalism, Thomas has scored several coups. He has managed to get Indonesian military chiefs to admit on camera that their government tortured dissenters to “protect the security of our society” and exposed a loophole that required art collectors to exhibit some works publicly if they wanted to avoid paying tax on them (Hall 156).

Thomas’s approach to journalism, filled with nonsense and foolishness techniques, could never be adopted by journalists bound to the code of conduct imposed on them —no serious journalist would ever consider dressing up as a delivery person in order to get an interview; or could ever make sarcastic comments and still be considered a trustworthy professional.

Comedy is also used as a transformational device for journalistic practices by American comedian Jon Stewart, who took over *The Daily Show* franchise, broadcasted by Comedy Central since 1996, in 1999. Unlike Thomas’ show, Stewart’s makes a point out of classifying itself as a ‘fake news’ programme —a concept we will explore later on. The presentation of the news in *The Daily Show* is also completely different from *The Mark Thomas Comedy Product*. At the same time Stewart does not present himself as a comedian or as a journalist, he embraces the traditional setting of broadcast newscasts, wearing a suit and sitting behind a desk. The programmes’ intro also evokes the ones used by traditional news shows, with an announcer stating the date and place where the news is coming from —“From Comedy Central’s world news headquarters in New York, this is *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*”. On the background there is a world map and, to his left, a big screen to project clips and graphics.

The similarities with the traditional format used on newscasts stop there. One of the most important differences between Stewart and other news shows is that his programme has a live studio audience. This audience plays a tremendous part as *The Daily Show* progresses. They loudly applaud and cheer as Stewart presents the segments; most of the time Stewart even has to stop talking and wait until the people in the audience have calmed

themselves down in order to continue the show. The camera movements are also a significant element to be considered. Differently from the steady camera plan used by the traditional media, *The Daily Show* employs a distinct technique, with the camera gliding over the audience and Stewart's desk.

The structure of *The Daily Show* is a combination of news commentary, segments that were previously recorded and an interview in the studio — guests range from celebrities to political figures. Unlike Thomas, however, Stewart usually does not produce original content and relies on clips that have been already broadcasted by the traditional media. He constructs his segments showing these clips and interacting with them, usually asking a question that will be surely answered by the video played in the sequence.

The new content presented by *The Daily Show* usually comes from its 'correspondents' —comedians that act as the show's reporters; John Oliver started his career in America as one of them. They normally undertake controversial topics that are currently a part of the public debate and use sarcasm and irony to convey their story. In the episode broadcasted on 11 February 2015<sup>36</sup>, 'correspondent' Jordan Klepper presented a segment on the controversy around sex education classes in the city of Las Vegas, in the American state of Nevada. He reached out for both sides of the story, interviewing students and educators. His interview techniques, however, stood out from the ones used by traditional reporters when he sarcastically questioned author Susan Patton, who was against the improvement of sex ed classes, in order to expose her ignorance on the subject. Klepper is clearly taking the student's side, dishonouring the 'sacred values' of impartiality and objectivity that real reporters have to live by. Yet, he still manages to inform the show's audience on the matter, giving substantial information and data about the topic.

Despite being comedy shows, it is indisputable that both *The Mark Thomas Comedy Product* and *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* have contributed to the public debate, providing its audiences with relevant

---

<sup>36</sup> Stewart, Jon. "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart". *Comedy Central*. 11 February 2015. Web. 19 February 2015. <http://on.cc.com/1vmN9Fy>

content and demanding that public figures be held accountable for their wrongdoings. In a way, they are doing journalism; yet, they refuse to label their work as such and insist that it is all ‘only a joke’. Moreover, it is curious that *The Daily Show* continues to sustain that what it does is ‘fake news’ even when what it is reporting on is broadcasted everyday by the most important newscasts around the world. What is, then, the difference between ‘fake news’ and ‘real news’, and where does comedy play a role in such distinction?

Harrison defines news journalism as the “disposition towards truthfulness”<sup>37</sup>, that has as its “normative values”<sup>38</sup> accuracy and sincerity. For decades, journalists —working in print, television, radio or the internet — have been bound by these normative values so that they can be perceived as legitimate to their audience<sup>39</sup>. So how can a ‘fake news’ television show present journalistic pieces if it is not committed to truthful reporting? Furthermore, it is even more intriguing to question how these shows, sometimes, can achieve a level of journalistic excellence that goes beyond those obtained by traditional newscasts. How is that possible?

It is the interaction between comedy and journalism that allows comedians like Thomas and Stewart to overcome the normative values associated with the journalism practice. According to Jones, the “faux journalistic style”<sup>40</sup> employed by *The Daily Show* is at the root of its success. When discussing the coverage of the 2004 presidential elections in the USA made by Stewart and his staff, Jones argues that the ‘fake news’ label was what enabled the show to provide its viewers with a better product than the one given by the mainstream media:

---

<sup>37</sup> Harrison, Jackie. “Exploring news values - The ideal and the real”. *Broadcast Journalism - A critical introduction*. Eds. Jane Chapman and Marie Kinsey. New York: Routledge (2009): 61.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>39</sup> Jones, Jeffrey P. *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010: 113.

<sup>40</sup> Jones, Jeffrey P. *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010: 168.

Even though *The Daily Show* is a fake news show, its faux journalistic style allows the show's writers and host to question, dispel and critique the manipulative language and symbolizations coming from the presidential campaign while simultaneously opening up deeper truths about politics than that offered by the "objective" reporting of mainstream journalism. By actually showing the high levels of spin and rhetoric produced by the candidates and their campaigns, then offering humorous retires that cut to the heart of the matter, *The Daily Show* offers its viewers particular (and perhaps more useful) information about the campaign that is often missing from "real" journalistic reports on the news networks, and hence, informs its viewers in ways that mainstream journalism rarely does (Jones 168).

It could be argued that is exactly the subversion of this objective approach that makes Stewart —and Oliver— successful, since "the conventions of objectivity would disallow comment"<sup>41</sup>. By being subjective, comedians challenge the whole concept behind the objectivity in journalism and the mistrust that surrounds it —"Completely objective television news is seen by many as impossible, owing to the subjective nature of journalistic value judgements" (Harrison, *Objectivity and Television News* 114). Some might argue that the work done by television programmes such as *The Daily Show* prove that objectivity in journalism is, in fact, a myth —"No one has ever achieved objective journalism, and no one ever could. The bias of the observer always enters the picture, if not coloring details at least guiding the choice of them" (Fuller 14-15).

By subverting journalistic norms and employing subjectivity in its reports, it is even more interesting to notice how *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight* are close in comparison to the work done by the New Journalism movement of the 1960s and 1970s —a movement "that tried to expand the definition of journalism by arguing that feature writers could use the same techniques to write stories about real-life events that novelists used to write about imaginary worlds" (Fazakis 947):

In engaging in this debates over what counts as truth in journalism, the New Journalists were contributing to widespread discussion over

---

<sup>41</sup> Baym, Geoffrey. "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism". *Political Communication*, 22:3 (2005): 267.

the nature of “truth” and our ability to know and represent it objectively in stories, paintings, photographs and other representational arts. The New Journalists engaged in this larger debate by writing stories that challenged the ideology of “objectivity” and its related practices that had come to govern the profession (Fazakis 948).

As the New Journalists, by overcoming the barriers imposed on the practice of journalism, comedians like Thomas, Stewart and Oliver came up with a new way of reporting the news; one that is more enjoyable to watch and is easier to engage with, making “what is important interesting”<sup>42</sup>. Aided by comedy, they were able to transcend journalistic values such as accuracy, objectivity and impartiality. In the case of Stewart, who still is on air every day<sup>43</sup>, this new way has become profitable and keeps drawing the attention of more and more people —especially amongst the young<sup>44</sup>.

So could the ‘fake news’ shows be the salvation for ratings broadcast journalists have been looking for? Furthermore: are these television programmes creating a new genre of journalism? Baym argues that Stewart’s show may be “better understood not as ‘fake’ news, but as a new form of critical journalism, one which uses satire to achieve that which the mainstream press is no longer willing to pursue” (Baym, *The Daily Show* 268). It is unfair, however, to state that the press is ‘unwilling’ to pursue critical journalism. As we have already seen above, the normative values of the profession narrow the extent to where journalists are allowed to go when reporting a story —humour, irony and satire are tools that cannot be used by serious reporters. The crisis that broadcast journalism is going through over the last years is also a factor to be considered, especially when it has a direct influence on the quality of the news presented to the public<sup>45</sup>.

---

<sup>42</sup> DeWolf Swenson, Molly. “The future of news”. *TEDx Talks - Berlin*. 30 September 2014. Web. 6 February 2015. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKoR\\_kFv7Dg#t=577](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKoR_kFv7Dg#t=577)

<sup>43</sup> In February 2015, however, Stewart announced that he will step down from his host duties at *The Daily Show* by the end of the year.

<sup>44</sup> “Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe”. *Pew Research Center For The People & The Press*. Washington: 11 January 2004.

<sup>45</sup> Baym, Geoffrey. “The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism”. *Political Communication*, 22:3 (2005): 259.

### **‘Last Week Tonight’**

Although some might claim that Oliver’s show is a ‘rebooted’ version of *The Daily Show*, *LWT* goes beyond the formula presented by its predecessors. Oliver is, indeed, a pupil of Stewart and has been influenced by him; he started out as a correspondent of *The Daily Show* and got his ‘big break’ when he replaced Stewart as the host of the show for a little over two months in 2013 —it was after this that came the opportunity for him to host his own television programme at HBO.

However, while *LWT* shares the same premise of both *The Mark Thomas Comedy Product* and *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*, the segments that it presents stand out as true journalistic pieces. Contrary to what his predecessors do, Oliver does not limit his act on his show to news commentary or to a stand-up act; every week he presents thorough stories that are put together with the help of a team that is not limited to comedy writers —Oliver has among its staff real journalists and researchers<sup>46</sup>. The final result are segments that, if not for the satire and irony inserted by Oliver and the length of their run (usually around ten minutes), could easily be broadcast by traditional newscasts. Over the course of one season, *LWT* was able to touch upon controversial topics —such as the death penalty and nuclear arsenals— but has also shed some light into themes sometimes ignored by the mainstream media —like net neutrality and anti-gay laws in Uganda.

Another important factor to take into account is that unlike journalists working in daily television newscasts, Oliver has the luxury of time. His show is on only once a week and this allows him and his staff the opportunity of exploring a story in greater depth, resulting in a more complete piece that is presented in a less time constricted way, sometimes taking almost 20 minutes of his show’s half an hour. This time is used wisely; a combination of news clips, exclusive interviews, official

---

<sup>46</sup> Bauder, David. “Oliver adds journalism to his comedy”. *Associated Press*. 25 September 2014. Web. 3 February 2015. <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ea1d53d73d0e4a199b65d19181660e9e/oliver-adds-journalism-his-comedy>

documents and humorous commentary come together into originating a new, consistent and meticulous piece.

An example of the success attained by Oliver's formula is his segment about anti-gay laws in Uganda, broadcasted in 29 June 2014<sup>47</sup>. When compared with other journalistic pieces<sup>48</sup> on the same topic, *LWT*'s stands out. The story shown by the traditional television newscasts was fragmented; every day the audience got a new piece of the story as it was developing. On 24 February 2014, the day Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni, signed the bill toughening penalties for the gay community in his country —among them life sentences for gay sex and same-sex relationships —, the BBC limited its story<sup>49</sup> to the fact of the day, showing a 39-second clip of Museveni announcing the new legislation. CNN broadcasted a similar story<sup>50</sup>, one day later, but included an exclusive interview with the president. Over the next days, as new events unfolded, both broadcasters continued covering the story. The coverage, however, was strictly factual, with no comprehensive analysis of what the developing facts actually meant —there was no historical background that explained how and why the situation in Uganda got to this extreme. The BBC clip did not contained a voice-over from a journalist explaining what the audience was seeing, and the CNN journalist who interviewed Museveni kept a professional tone throughout the entire interview and positioned herself as impartial to the issue.

Oliver's approach to the topic was distinctive to the ones used by both the BBC and CNN. Firstly, *LWT* had a clear advantage over the traditional broadcasters: time —it played a crucial role into differentiating *LWT*'s segment (a little over 17 minutes long) from the ones presented by the BBC

---

<sup>47</sup> Oliver, John. "Last Week Tonight: Uganda and Pepe Julian Onziema Pt. 1 (HBO)". *HBO*. 29 June 2014. Web. 23 February 2015. <http://youtu.be/G2W41pvvZs0>

<sup>48</sup> Since it was not possible to get the live newscasts in its entirety, here we are taking into account clips posted on the internet by the BBC and CNN.

<sup>49</sup> "Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni signs anti-gay bill". *BBC*. 24 February 2014. Web. 23 February 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26320102>

<sup>50</sup> Landau, Elizabeth and Zain Verjee and Antonia Mortesen. "Uganda president: Homosexuals are 'disgusting'". *CNN*. 25 February 2014. Web. 23 February 2015. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/24/world/africa/uganda-homosexuality-interview/index.html?eref=edition>

and CNN. Secondly, while the traditional broadcasters reported the story as it was being developed, *LWT* aired its segment about four months after the discussion started; this enabled the show to present a more complete piece. Thirdly, the comments made by Oliver, an exclusive interview held in the studio, and the dramatisation provided by actors helped to turn the story into an informative, yet interesting, story.

The segment started with Oliver praising the advances the LGBT community had conquered in the United States; it used clips from MSNBC to show these advances, and counted with the help of a group of cheerleaders and an actor dressed like George Washington playing a keyboard guitar to commemorate such progress. The party on the set was interrupted when Oliver called attention to the critical situation of the LGBT community in other countries and, then, focused on what was going on in Uganda. He used clips from Al-Jazeera and MSNBC to explain the new legislation and criticised how the media was downplaying the seriousness of the issue —after the Al-Jazeera anchor called Uganda’s laws on sexuality “harsh”, Oliver replied: “Calling Uganda’s laws ‘harsh’ does not really do them justice. That is like calling Stalin ‘a bit of a grump’” (1’35”-1’42”).

Oliver, as Jon Stewart normally does, adopted here —and in most of his segments throughout the show’s first season— a journalistic technique coined by Fuller as “the adversarial approach”, a model inherited by the methods of conflict resolution imposed by the American law:

The journalist postures himself as a relentless cross-examiner, hostile to every assertion by those he faces. He begins with the supposition that everyone in authority is a liar. Both his questioning and, inevitably his reports may reflect this supposition. The adversarial journalist has no trouble figuring out what to do about a presidential statement he doubts. He simply lets his doubt show (Fuller 26).

His questioning of the remarks made by Museveni and other authority figures in Uganda are a way of achieving “some degree of the truth”<sup>51</sup>. The segment goes on until Oliver announces the presence of transgender activist Pepe Julian Onziema to discuss the issue. During the interview, we see a

---

<sup>51</sup> Fuller, Jack. *News values: ideas for an information age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996: 26.

very serious Oliver, asking relevant questions and giving his interviewee the chance to expose his point of view. Eventually, both of them lighten the mood with some jokes and laughter.

It is important to stress that unlike *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*, *LWT* relies only on the figure of Oliver and does not have correspondents; the English comedian presents the show by himself. Oliver, occasionally, has interview guests and, sometimes, counts upon dramatisation —be it with Sesame Street puppets or an actor dressed like Abraham Lincoln doing break dance. This tool is usually used as comic relief, but, sometimes, is an integral part of making some sense out of the topic being discussed.

Oliver’s mockery, however, is not only restrained to the facts contained in his journalistic segments, but also directed towards the media, constantly ridiculing the coverage of certain events by the press. One of the most resounding examples of this critique can be observed in the “And Now This” segment —a portion of the show that echoes the continuously fragmentation of the news. As argued by Postman, the “Now... this” phrase is “used on radio and television newscasts to indicate that what one has just heard or seen has no relevance to what one is about to hear or see”<sup>52</sup>:

We are presented with not only fragmented news but news without context, without consequences, without value, and therefore without essential seriousness; that is to say, news as pure entertainment (Postman 100).

Oliver repurposed this device in his show, using a tool that is commonly employed by television news shows to mock these same television shows. In one of these segments, American senator John McCain is shown telling the “same joke six different times in six different places” (“Russia is a gas station masquerading as a country”, says the politician in six different interview shows). Another “And Now This” segment shows journalists influencing the answer their interviewees give (“‘60 minutes’ anchors prompting people to deliver the exact sound bite they need”, says the *LWT*

---

<sup>52</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death - Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. London: Penguin Books, 2005: 99.

announcer). Oliver uses this segment to expose the inefficacy of the media, while revealing that, sometimes, in order to get a good story some journalists seem to ‘forget’ honouring the ‘sacred values’ of the profession.

Another important component of *LWT* is the engagement it promotes with its audience. This is specially important to create proximity with the public in the information age we are currently living in and draws a parallel with what traditional media outlets are doing in order to stay relevant:

Not only has the Internet embraced all the traditional storytelling tools of traditional media, but it has incorporated new tools as well, which allows journalists to tell stories with increasing dexterity. The Internet has also introduced a new degree of interactivity to journalism, in which news consumers increasingly participate in the news-creation process, and professional journalists must cater to more fragmented audiences (Holcomb 1299).

Apart from the usual invitation to check the show’s content online, Oliver is always calling the public to interact and be a part of the story he is presenting. One striking example is the segment<sup>53</sup> done on the missing Russian space geckos, sent to space to have their mating activities observed in zero gravity. Suggesting that the Russian government was not treating the issue with “the urgency it deserves” (0’52”), Oliver issued a “challenge to humanity” (1’47”) —and, mostly, his audience— to participate into bringing the geckos back to Earth. He suggested his viewers to go to the Kremlin webpage (he gave the specific URL address) and write a letter to Russian president, Vladimir Putin, telling about their ideas to get the geckos back. About a month before the gecko plea, Oliver made a similar call to his audience during a segment<sup>54</sup> on net neutrality. When reporting that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) would be taking public comments on the issue, Oliver invited “internet commenters” (11’15”) to participate —“Good evening, monsters. This may be the moment you spent your whole lives training for” (11’21”-11’29”), said the comedian. The

---

<sup>53</sup> Oliver, John. “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: #GoGetThoseGeckos (HBO)”. *HBO*. 27 July 2014. Web. 23 March 2015. [http://youtu.be/b436uUuf\\_VI](http://youtu.be/b436uUuf_VI)

<sup>54</sup> Oliver, John. “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Net Neutrality (HBO)”. *HBO*. 1 June 2014. Web. 23 March 2015. <http://youtu.be/fpbOEoRrHyU>

result was remarkable and within hours of the broadcast of the episode, the FCC website reported technical difficulties “due to heavy traffic”<sup>55</sup>. It could be argued that *LWT*’s approach to its audience fulfils and goes beyond the “social function”<sup>56</sup> journalism has of bringing enlightenment to the public<sup>57</sup>. In this case, the show is not only reporting on facts, but it is also inviting its viewers to take action and participate in the making of the story —and even history. Therefore, Oliver manages to deliver a more contemporary way of doing journalism —one that is interesting and instigates its audience to act not only as consumers of the news, but as actors in the changing process of society. This participation of the audience also fulfils the “social function”<sup>58</sup> of journalism, while enabling the “autonomy”<sup>59</sup> of the society:

Every profession enables those it serves to overcome aspects of powerlessness, to take (or resume) control of something important in their lives. Many journalists are uncomfortable with a claim they are somehow responsible to empower others, but we see this as an indirect commitment: by doing their jobs well, by accurately reporting on vital information, and by acting as a watchdog of powerful institutions, journalists enhance society members’ autonomy (Elliott and Ozar 6-7).

When Oliver manages to get his audience involved in issues it is interesting to notice that it is precisely this kind of ‘autonomy’ that he is contributing to enhance —the same result that a serious and ‘committed’ journalist would get when doing his or her job well.

Over this first chapter, we discussed the values associated with the practice of journalism and how they can, sometimes, limit the actions of

---

<sup>55</sup> Holpuch, Amanda. “John Oliver’s cheeky net neutrality plea crashes FCC website”. *The Guardian*. 3 June 2014. Web. 21 February 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/03/john-oliver-fcc-website-net-neutrality>

<sup>56</sup> Elliott, Deni and David Ozar. “An Explanation and a Method for the Ethics of Journalism”. *Journalism Ethics: A Philosophical Approach*. Christopher Meyers. United States: Oxford University Press - Special, 2010: 3-4.

<sup>57</sup> “Code of Ethics.” Society of Professional Journalists. 1996. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

<sup>58</sup> Elliott, Deni and David Ozar. “An Explanation and a Method for the Ethics of Journalism”. *Journalism Ethics: A Philosophical Approach*. Christopher Meyers. United States: Oxford University Press - Special, 2010: 3-4.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem.

journalists pursuing a story. By labelling its programme as a comedy show, Oliver is able to overcome the barriers imposed on journalists by ethical values and present pieces that are thorough and have a higher degree of information than the ones broadcasted by the traditional media. It would be unfair to say that he fits in the journalism spectrum when what he actually does is stand out from it and expose the limitations of the press. His comedic approach creates a new mode of journalism, one that makes what is important attractive to audiences everywhere.

## 2. IRONY AND SATIRE AT THE HEART OF ENGLISH HUMOUR

“Apart from the spelling of the word”<sup>60</sup>, what is the main difference between American and British humour? Although some scientists might argue that the issue could be explained through genetics<sup>61</sup>, English comedian Ricky Gervais is sure of one thing: when it comes to comedy, what sets these two nations apart is how each one of them deals with irony. “Americans don’t use it as much socially as Brits. We use it as liberally as prepositions in every day speech. We tease our friends. We use sarcasm as a shield and a weapon”, wrote the comedian in an article for *Time* magazine published in 2011. Irony is, indeed, one of the main characteristics<sup>62</sup> of the humour encountered in the United Kingdom.

The purpose of this chapter, however, is not to analyse the particularities of British humour —if there really is such a thing; instead, we are going to focus on the kind of humour practiced in England and by the English. The reasons for the decision to limit this discussion to the English spectrum are two: 1) John Oliver, whose show and comedic style are the focus of this master thesis, was born in Birmingham, England and, therefore, is English; 2) It would be dubious to assume that there is only one kind of humour that encompasses all national identities living within the United Kingdom — using the term “British” can be “problematic in its assumption of a common identity amongst a nation which comprises such heterogeneous nationalities as Welsh, Irish, Scottish and English” (Giles and Middleton 3). It is even more ‘problematic’ to make such a generalisation when we take into account how the United Kingdom has become an increasingly multicultural society since the Post-Colonial period. Even though “Britishness” is the word used

---

<sup>60</sup> Gervais, Rick. “The Difference Between American and British Humour”. *Time*. 9 November 2011. Web. 26 February 2015. <http://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>

<sup>61</sup> Dobson, Roger. “Joking aside, British really do have unique sense of humour”. *The Independent*. 9 March 2008. Web. 26 February 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/joking-aside-british-really-do-have-unique-sense-of-humour-793491.html>

<sup>62</sup> Easthope, Antony. “The English sense of humour?”. *International Journal of Humor Research*, vol. 13 (2000): 60.

by people who “identify themselves individually or collectively as ‘being British’”<sup>63</sup>, the term, as explained by Ward, may have imperialistic connotations within the economical and cultural spectrums for the Scottish, the Welsh and the Irish. It was not only outside England that the term faced resistance. Historically, “Britishness”, as pointed out by Langford, was a word that even the English preferred to avoid —“The English themselves had some difficulty with Britishness. Despite official encouragement following the Union with Scotland in 1708 they showed a notable reluctance to describe themselves as South Britons” (Langford 13). Therefore, throughout this dissertation, we are leaving the “Britishness” concept aside and concentrating instead on “Englishness”.

Before we can look into the peculiarities associated with the comedy practiced in England, however, it is pivotal to define first what we understand as “Englishness” and how it is associated with the ‘English humour’. Although some scholars find it almost impossible to determine the concept of “Englishness” because of all the complexities entangled when defining what constitutes a national identity, others argue that the term could be simply explained. The meaning of the term has also been through significant changes since the end of the Second World War<sup>64</sup>. According to Featherstone, the struggle to find a definition for “Englishness” is connected with the resistance of the English into defining themselves and their repeal to nationalistic standards —“One of the enduring strengths of the English state has always been its avoidance of classic models of nationalist description, representation and symbolism” (Featherstone 9). Nevertheless, Giles and Middleton offer a more straightforward approach to the concept:

Nationalism and concepts of national identity are, of course, not unique to England. They are a means of collective and individual self-definition which can be seen as part of a broader process in which economic, social and historical forces interact with cultural processes to produce a range of identities which may be taken up, rejected, opposed, or adapted for individual or group need.

---

<sup>63</sup> Ward, Paul. *Britishness Since 1870*. London: Routledge, 2004: 3.

<sup>64</sup> Giles, Judy and Tim Middleton (Eds.). *Writing Englishness 1900-1950: An introductory sourcebook on national identity*. London: Routledge, 1995: 8-9.

Englishness is not simply about something called ‘the national character’ but has to be seen as a nexus of values, beliefs and attitudes which are offered as unique to England and to those who identify as English. In other words Englishness is a state of mind: a belief in national identity which is part and parcel of one’s sense of self (Giles and Middleton 5).

Having this definition in mind it is important to notice that the concept of “Englishness” itself is a shifting one and is directly influenced by the ‘zeitgeist’ of a determined period of time<sup>65</sup>. Therefore, it is fair to say that what an individual considered to be associated with being English in the 1950s is different from what it is considered to be English in contemporary society. For example, during the mid-1990s being English was closely linked with the concept of “Cool Britannia”<sup>66</sup>, a term originated in the 1960s and rebranded in 1996 to represent the “cultural renaissance”<sup>67</sup> of the time that brought to the world creative minds like the fashion designer Alexander McQueen; the artists Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin; the bands Blur and Oasis—in the mid-1990s, England was seen by the rest of the world as a ‘cool’ place to be. Even in politics the country seemed to be going through a ‘revolution’, since Tony Blair had just been elected to become the first Labour prime-minister after almost two decades of Conservative rule. It is also important to notice that the whole concept of “Britishness” was also being questioned during this period, since the multiculturalism aspect in the UK society was under scrutiny<sup>68</sup>. Thus, during this period, New Labour, Britpop and the Young British Artists (YBAs) were some of the images that represented the political and cultural period of that time. Yet it would be incorrect to assume that such imagery remains as symbols for what being English represents today. In other words, times change and, with them, so does the significance of “Englishness”.

---

<sup>65</sup> Giles, Judy and Tim Middleton (Eds.). *Writing Englishness 1900-1950: An introductory sourcebook on national identity*. London: Routledge, 1995: 6.

<sup>66</sup> Bach, Les and Michael Keith, Azra Khan, Kalbir Shukra and John Solomos. “New Labour's white heart: politics, multiculturalism and the return of assimilation”. *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 73 (4) (2002): 446-447.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>68</sup> Modood, Tariq. “Is multiculturalism dead?”. *Public Policy Research*, Volume 15, Issue 2 (2008): 84.

While the cultural and political climate in England has shifted throughout the past decades, the characteristics associated with one of the foundations<sup>69</sup> of “Englishness” appear to have remained unchanged: the English humour —“In other countries, if they find you inadequate or they hate you, they will call you stupid [...]. In England, they will say that you have no sense of humour. This is the final condemnation” (Mikes 10-11). Moreover: as Nicolson points out, the English sense of humour serves as a unifying device in English society, transcending class —“The poor are amused by the same forms of the laughable as are the rich, the only difference being the degrees of subtle apprehended by the educated or the uneducated” (Nicolson 23).

There are many definitions to what constitutes the English humour. To Mikes, “laughing at yourself”<sup>70</sup>, “understatement”<sup>71</sup> and “cruelty”<sup>72</sup> are the three main ingredients that, together, create something as “unique”<sup>73</sup> as the kind of humour practiced by the English. Easthope adds to the sum “irony; the exposure of self-deception; a tendency towards fantasy and excess”<sup>74</sup> as the major components of the concept. Both authors also agree that satire plays an important part in the composition of English humour. Hitherto it is safe to say that although these characteristics are not unique to the English population, when combined together they do produce a unique kind of humour that is commonly attributed to the one that has its origins in England. Such components result in a wry product that has been praised, exported and copied worldwide.

Although all components of what characterises the English sense of humour are fundamental to this discussion, in this chapter we are going to

---

<sup>69</sup> Easthope, Antony. “The English sense of humour?”. *International Journal of Humor Research*, vol. 13 (2000): 59.

<sup>70</sup> Mikes, George. *English Humour for Beginners*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1980: 44.

<sup>71</sup> Mikes, George. *English Humour for Beginners*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1980: 52.

<sup>72</sup> Mikes, George. *English Humour for Beginners*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1980: 55.

<sup>73</sup> Mikes, George. *English Humour for Beginners*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1980: 44.

<sup>74</sup> Easthope, Antony. “The English sense of humour?”. *International Journal of Humor Research*, vol. 13 (2000): 61.

examine in more depth the concepts of irony and satire since these are the ideas that are at the core of Oliver's performance in his show on HBO. Albeit some authors might argue that there is a tension between the two genres<sup>75</sup> —“While irony insists on a sense or ‘said’ behind what we ‘say’, satire points to the meaningless conditions of speech: all those experiences that are not yet organised into concepts or ideals” (Colebrook 112)—, both satire and irony have similar historical roots, as we will discuss in more detail throughout the next pages.

We will first consider satire; although the origins of the genre can be traced back to Arabia and Ireland<sup>76</sup>, the “Greco-Roman satiric tradition”<sup>77</sup> is considered by Elices Agudo and many other scholars as ‘decisive’ in shaping what we understand as satire today. Within this tradition there are two polarised sides which each satirist must choose from: the Horatian satire and the Juvenalian satire. While the Horatian satire is usually described as “mild”<sup>78</sup> and “elegant”<sup>79</sup>, being “predominantly designed to comment on the ruling elite and microlevel norms of social behaviour” (Hill 330); Juvenalian satire is defined by its “acidic tone”<sup>80</sup>, and it aims at “more universal considerations, such as corruption in politics, hypocritical behaviours, the pointlessness of the Roman crowd or the deficiencies of the Roman legal system” (Elices Agudo 11) —it is this one that is employed by Oliver in his show.

The English “satirical tradition”<sup>81</sup> dates back to the 17th century and when discussing its role within English humour it is important to notice that, historically, the genre was considered to be substantially controversial

---

<sup>75</sup> Colebrook, Claire. *Irony - The New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 2004: 114.

<sup>76</sup> Elices Agudo, Juan Francisco. *Historical and Theoretical Approaches to English Satire*. Munich: LINCOM, 2004: 6-11.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>80</sup> Hill, Megan R. “Developing a Normative Approach to Political Satire: A Critical Perspective”. *International journal of communication*, 7 (2013): 330.

<sup>81</sup> Hall, Julian. *The Rough Guide to British Cult Comedy*. London: Rough Guides, 2006: 164.

—“England forbade its publication in 1599” (Hill 329)— and, in the beginning, it was commonly associated with literature<sup>82</sup>. It was only in the middle of the 1960s<sup>83</sup> that the ‘non-literary satire’ started to emerge — according to Elices Agudo television programmes such as BBC’s *That Was The Week That Was* were pioneers and crucial to the establishment of the genre outside literature. The presence of satire itself as a fundamental component of English humour is also critical for the differentiation of the humour practiced in England from the one presented in other parts of the world since it contrasts with one of the purposes of humour in general —“the presenting of an optimistic view of life” (Gordon 129). As seen above, both schools of thought on satire —Horatian and Juvenalian— promote exactly the opposite of an ‘optimistic view of life’. It is the promotion of such antagonistic values that makes satire correlate so closely with the ideas identified with English humour —i.e. cruelty and self-deprecation.

As satire, the concept of irony also has its origins in Ancient Greece<sup>84</sup> —“Aristotle (384-322 BC), also referred to irony, most notably in his *Ethics* and *Rhetoric*, but it was the Platonic and Socratic use that became definitive for later thought” (Colebrook 6). Historically, the concept of the genre, as argued by Colebrook, was directly linked with rhetoric and it was mainly employed to reference “the artful double meaning”<sup>85</sup> applied by Plato and Socrates. This definition developed, through the following centuries, to become what we know today as irony: “The art of dissimulation through which the author manages to express one idea implying a different one” (Elices Agudo 80). Understanding irony, however, is a more delicate

---

<sup>82</sup> Furlong, Norman. “Introduction”. *English Satire - An Anthology*. Ed. Norman Furlong. London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1946: preface.

<sup>83</sup> Simpson, Paul. *On the Discourse of Satire: towards a stylistic model of satirical humour*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003: 11.

<sup>84</sup> Colebrook, Claire. *Irony - The New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 2004: 1-6.

<sup>85</sup> Ibidem.

task, since the genre can be sorted in five different subcategories<sup>86</sup> —verbal, dramatic, cosmic, situational, and structural:

The most habitual is the so-called verbal irony, which simply seeks to imply the opposite of what is said. In this like manner, it responds to the premises that were postulated by Greek and Roman scholars. It depends on wit and lexical playfulness because there are some times in which the ironic implication of a particular statement resides in the use of a word in a purposefully decontextualised situation. Apart from verbal irony, the other fundamental variable is the dramatic, whose appearance is not exclusively restricted to the stage. It occurs whenever the audience or reader possess more information than the characters, provoking an incongruous situation since we anticipate what is going to happen before the characters (Elices Agudo 84-85).

Either way, it is essential to notice that in both cases, in order to understand the irony, the audience has to be aware of the topic that is being discussed —Oliver is aware of this and, perhaps, this is the reason that his show's segments always include detailed background information, so that the viewer that is not completely familiarised with the topic can catch on what is being discussed and get the joke he is making. Colebrook states that the necessity of the audience's awareness on what is ironic is the main reason why irony is always seen as “diagnostic and political”<sup>87</sup>: “To read the irony you do not just have to know the context; you also have to be committed to the specific beliefs and positions within that context” (Colebrook 12).

While discussing the concept of irony and how it fits into the English humour spectrum it is fair to argue that it is tied with the ‘self-deprecation’ element encountered in the kind of humour manifested in English culture. It is this, as stated in the beginning of this chapter, what separates England from the United States —and, perhaps, the rest of the world— when it comes to humour: while the Americans “don't hide their hopes and fears”<sup>88</sup>,

---

<sup>86</sup> Elices Agudo, Juan Francisco. *Historical and Theoretical Approaches to English Satire*. Munich: LINCOM, 2004: 84-85.

<sup>87</sup> Colebrook, Claire. *Irony - The New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 2004: 12.

<sup>88</sup> Gervais, Rick. “The Difference Between American and British Humour”. *Time*. 9 November 2011. Web. 26 February 2015. <http://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>

the English “are more comfortable with life’s losers”<sup>89</sup>. As Mikes points out, “the English have the gift [...] of being able to laugh at themselves and their own weaknesses”<sup>90</sup>. The ‘self-deprecatory’ feature attached to English humour, nevertheless, should not be confused with a possible contempt for being English:

It is often stated that the faculty which distinguishes the English sense of humour from other perceptions of the ludicrous is the faculty (which they claim to possess so pre-eminently) of being able to laugh at themselves. It is undeniable that the English are less sensitive than, let us say, the Germans or the Americans, to ridicule directed against their institutions, climate, cooking, habits and foibles. To some extent this insensitiveness arises, not from a superior sense of humour, but from superior self-assurance, complacency and pride (Nicolson 43).

Therefore, it is curious to see how the English humour is used, at the same time, to deconstruct and consolidate the English national identity. This is even more evident when analysing Oliver’s work at *LWT*; the English comedian is able to dismantle the stereotypes attached to his nationality while reinforcing the values aligned with the type of humour originated in England. The use of irony in English humour is also historically<sup>91</sup> connected with the stand-up tradition in Britain —“The stand-up comedian is the observer, the commentator, the myth-exploder, the therapist, the propaganda destroyer, the scourge of etiquette” (Hall 166). Oliver, who apart from hosting *LWT* also has a career as a stand-up comedian<sup>92</sup>, uses irony as a tool constantly when commenting on issues presented in his show. When analysing the first season of *LWT*, it is possible to notice that Oliver uses a mixture of satire and irony not only to report on controversial topics like the use of drones or nuclear arsenals; the English comedian is often blending both concepts to challenge some of the values connected with his

---

<sup>89</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>90</sup> Mikes, George. *English Humour for Beginners*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1980: 47.

<sup>91</sup> Hall, Julian. *The Rough Guide to British Cult Comedy*. London: Rough Guides, 2006: 163-164.

<sup>92</sup> “John Oliver’s Biography”. *I am John Oliver*. Web. 3 February 2015. [http://www.iamjohnoliver.com/?page\\_id=6](http://www.iamjohnoliver.com/?page_id=6)

“Englishness”. In several *LWT* episodes Oliver uses his nationality as a source of comic relief. He often subverts some of the ideas —and stereotypes— associated with the English identity when making a joke. For example, when reporting on the Hong Kong protests for democracy in an episode<sup>93</sup> broadcasted on 5 October 2014, Oliver played clips of newscasts praising the organisation and politeness of the protesters. After showing the images, he said: “It seems Hong Kong may have left the British Empire, but we clearly left our manners behind” (1’38”-1’44”). Here he is, ironically, saying that there were positive outcomes of the British interference in the region, despite the negative connotations associated with the British imperialistic role in Hong Kong. It is ironic that he is the one stating this because he is English and, therefore, a part of the ‘British Empire’ he makes fun of.

Two weeks later, Oliver employed the same technique when discussing the ebola outbreak in West Africa. During the segment<sup>94</sup> on the topic, Oliver singled out the case of an American nurse who contracted the virus while treating a patient; in her first public statement she thanked the support and help of the community caring for her. After showing a quote of her statement, Oliver commented: “Holy shit! She caught ebola while helping people and her first reaction is to write a thank you note. I find that excessively polite and I’m British” (1’11”-1’24”). Again, the comedian takes a characteristic commonly associated with his nationality —politeness— to make a humorous comment while poking fun at his own identity, lifting up the spirits when discussing serious matters.

Comments like this are present throughout most of the first season of *LWT*. It is fair to say that, in a way, Oliver’s comedic approach to current events is a result of the interaction of the principles that constitute the English humour —i.e. satire, irony and self-deprecation— with the concept

---

<sup>93</sup> This episode is also not available on YouTube. To access, via HBO GO, click on the following link: <http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver#/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver/episodes/1/20-october-5-2014/index.html>

<sup>94</sup> This segment was a part of another episode that is not available on YouTube. To access, via HBO GO, click on the following link: <http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver#/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver/episodes/1/21-october-12-2014/index.html>

of “Englishness”. In the next chapter, we are going to see how these principles interact with journalistic norms and contribute to the creation of new modes for the practice of journalism, while close reading some of the segments presented throughout the first season of *LWT*.

### 3. THE ENGLISH FACTOR IN OLIVER'S 'LAST WEEK TONIGHT'

John Oliver was born on 23 April 1977 in Birmingham. He read English at the prestigious Christ's College, Cambridge, and began his career in comedy doing stand-up in small clubs throughout the United Kingdom<sup>95</sup>. His 'big break' came in 2006, when he was invited to be the 'senior British correspondent' at *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*. Around the same time, Oliver started co-hosting *The Bugle*, a satirical podcast that was first sponsored by *The Times Online* but is currently running independently<sup>96</sup> — *LWT* echoes some of the approaches adopted by Oliver and his co-host Andy Zaltzman in the podcast.

*Last Week Tonight's* first season consists of 24 episodes and started being broadcasted by HBO on 27 April 2014, drawing 1.1 million viewers in its debut<sup>97</sup>. Its season finale aired on 9 November the same year and had an audience of around 796.000 viewers<sup>98</sup>. The show has also a massive online presence, with a Twitter account<sup>99</sup>, a Facebook page<sup>100</sup> and a YouTube channel<sup>101</sup> —on 6 March 2015, *LWT's* YouTube channel had 1.399.157 subscribers. Containing several clips from the show and some 'web exclusive' videos, the channel had, in total, 212.956.681 views since its was set up on 18 March 2014. A difference between the clips displayed on the internet and the ones broadcasted originally on television is that while HBO

---

<sup>95</sup> "John Oliver's Biography". *I am John Oliver*. Web. 3 February 2015. [http://www.iamjohnoliver.com/?page\\_id=6](http://www.iamjohnoliver.com/?page_id=6)

<sup>96</sup> "The Bugle". *The Bugle*. Web. 6 March 2015. <http://thebuglepodcast.com/photos/>

<sup>97</sup> Adelian, Josef. "Long Live Oliver: HBO's 'Last Week Tonight' Debuts to Solid Ratings". *Vulture* .28 April 2014. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://www.vulture.com/2014/04/ratings-last-week-tonight-has-a-solid-opening.html>

<sup>98</sup> "John Oliver's 'Last Week Tonight' Ratings: 796,000 Viewers In Finale's First Run". *Deadline*. 11 November 2014. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://deadline.com/2014/11/john-olivers-last-week-tonight-ratings-796000-viewers-in-first-season-finale-premiere-1201280776/>

<sup>99</sup> At the time of writing, the *LWT* Twitter account had around 345.000 followers: <http://twitter.com/lastweektonight>

<sup>100</sup> On 6 March 2015, the show's Facebook page had over 718.000 likes: <http://www.facebook.com/LastWeekTonight?ref=ts&fref=ts>

<sup>101</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/LastWeekTonight>

does not censor the constant swearwords profaned by Oliver, YouTube bleeps out the language considered ‘offensive’. Since its debut, *LWT* has been praised<sup>102</sup> by television critics and although the show is currently in its second season, HBO has already renewed Oliver’s contract until 2017<sup>103</sup>.

In this chapter we are going to close-read three segments that were broadcasted during the first season —they discuss, in chronological order, the death penalty; the immigration reform in the USA; and the referendum for independence in Scotland— while exploring and analysing the ‘English factor’ in the way they were presented by Oliver. These segments were chosen precisely because they illustrate how the comedian uses his English humour to transcend journalistic norms of ethical standards, objectivity and impartiality. The elements that we are taking into consideration during this three close-reads are the narratives presented in each of them; Oliver’s performance —voice tone, body language and facial expressions—; additional information used to complement each story —like clips extracted from traditional newscasts, photo montages, official documents, etc—; and the live studio audience reaction to these features.

First, however, it is important to describe the show in general aspects. *LWT* is recorded before a live studio audience in New York City, in the US. The programme runs around 30 minutes and it has some recurrent segments — among them are “And Now This”, used commonly to poke fun at the traditional media; and “Why Is This Still a Thing”, a short satirical piece usually on a controversial topic that, according to the show, should not have the importance it still holds in contemporary society —for example, one of the themes discussed in this segment was the Commonwealth Games. *LWT* always starts with an opening introduction where cropped pictures are shown against a light grey background (annex 1). They are usually accompanied by two captions: one above, in latin, and one below, showing the number of the image and its description in one word, in English. These

---

<sup>102</sup> Lockett, Den. “Last Week Tonight Renewed for Two More Seasons of Epic Rants”. *Vulture*. 17 February 2015. Web. 18 February 2015. <http://www.vulture.com/2015/02/last-week-tonight-renewed-for-two-more-seasons.html>

<sup>103</sup> Ibidem.

images are not always the same and are often connected with current events widely discussed in the media during the previous week. When Oliver's picture appears, it gets a third caption that reinforces his English background while stating that, for now, he is living in New York City. The introduction is accompanied by an upbeat music score and ends with the display of the show's title. What follows is an overview of *LWT*'s set, with the camera gliding over Oliver's desk until it stops in front of the host.

The set of the show is composed of Oliver's desk, a stage where interviews and performances usually take place and a big screen used to show clips, pictures and graphics. The main attraction of the set, however, lies behind Oliver's desk (annex 2). At first sight, the background scenery looks like the skyline of New York, but once you look closer you are able to see a mixture of famous landmarks of other cities —real and fictional— like the London Eye, the Egyptian pyramids and the Dragonstone castle<sup>104</sup>, from HBO's *Game of Thrones* series. This setting contributes with creating a unique atmosphere for the show and it helps to distance itself as a New York-based television programme, since the composed background allows for *LWT* to be presented as a 'worldwide player' discussing the most important events of the week.

### **'Death Penalty': transcending ethical standards**

The first segment we are going to close-read in this chapter was a part of the show's second episode, broadcasted on 4 May 2014 and it dealt with the death penalty<sup>105</sup>. It was the third segment shown on that week's episode — apart from this one, other five segments were included in the show: first, Oliver did a quick round-up of the week, commenting on the crisis in Ukraine and Russia, and the White House Correspondents' Dinner; then there was a "And Now This" about Star Wars Day ("And now... Newscasters enjoy a pun about today's date a little too much", said the

---

<sup>104</sup> McGlynn, Katia. "John Oliver's 'Last Week Tonight' Set Has A Hidden 'Game Of Thrones' Easter Egg". *The Huffington Post*. 5 May 2014. Web. 6 March 2015. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/05/john-oliver-set-game-of-thrones-castle-easter-egg\\_n\\_5267628.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/05/john-oliver-set-game-of-thrones-castle-easter-egg_n_5267628.html)

<sup>105</sup> Oliver, John. "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Death Penalty (HBO)". *HBO*. 4 May 2014. Web. 8 March 2015. <http://youtu.be/Kye2oX-b39E>

show's announcer); after the death penalty segment, Oliver summarised the sexual scandal involving the French president, François Holland; discussed the Sharia law in Brunei; and closed with a clip showing "people falling asleep behind politicians". The segment on death penalty was the main one of the show, taking a little over 12 minutes —these long-form pieces would become one of the reasons for the programme's success throughout its first season.

Since *LWT* was still in its early stages, Oliver starts the segment explaining the show's premise: "As you know our show is dedicated to covering the biggest news of the week whatever that news may be. We have a long, proud, one week history of doing that" (0'00"-0'15"). In this first sentence it is already possible to notice his English irony shaping the segment that is about to start. He then asks the audience what the biggest news of the week was and the image cuts to several newscasts discussing an execution that went wrong in the American state of Oklahoma. When Oliver appears before the camera again he is visibly uncomfortable, with eyes wide open and an expression that seems to translate as he really does not know where to begin. He stays silent, relying only on his facial expression to draw laughs from his live studio audience. He finally says: "OK, OK, I know what you are thinking. You are thinking: 'Wait! You are not going to really do a comic take on the death penalty, right? It is your second episode, I have not even decided if I like this show yet'" (0'34"-0'50").

After suggesting that "no one is forcing us" (0'53"-0'55") to discuss the topic, the image cuts to a speech given by the president of the United States, Barack Obama, commenting on the botched execution. The American leader says that the country, "as a society", needs to ask some "difficult and profound" questions about the death penalty. The camera goes back to Oliver and he still looks uncertain on the urgency of the topic and shows another clip of Obama in which the president struggles to find words when discussing the capital punishment —"That is the sound of a man drowning on dry land" (1'35"-1'39"), Oliver says in a comment that could never be made by an anchor of a traditional newscast because it is clearly a

judgement of value and clashes directly with the ethical norms of journalism.

Finally, the English comedian seems convinced that the topic is worth delving into. By his right, a photomontage is shown, containing a picture of the US Supreme court, a gurney used for lethal injection executions, and what seems to be a prison fence. The words “DEATH PENALTY” are written in capital letters over the images. Oliver concedes that the topic might be hard to digest, but then bargains with the audience that if they can ‘hang on’ until the end of the segment he will show a “magical” (2’10”) video of tiny hamsters eating tiny burritos —a negotiation that is unthinkable in the serious media (if traditional newscasts could use videos of kittens and puppies to boost ratings when reporting on complicated issues, perhaps, broadcast journalism would not be going through a crisis<sup>106</sup>).

Oliver then asks for a simple way of explaining the intricate particularities attached to the death penalty debate. His question is answered by a CNN clip in which former US attorney general Alberto Gonzales comments on the issue, closing up his argument by stating that he is in favour of the capital punishment “only in respect of those guilty of committing a crime”. Oliver’s English tradition of irony comes in handy again when he praises Gonzales’s statement: “Bold idea! We should not execute innocent people” (2’49”-2’54”), exclaimed Oliver. The irony here is present not only in the tone of his voice, but also in the way he is performing before the camera. As Nash argues, “jokes are made or marred in the telling”:

The language of humour is powerless without the *speech* of humour. Jokes are *told*; somewhere beyond the text is a voice, telling, delivering, timing. Just as we can never love or understand poetry if it is not heard —heard in the imagination at least, given its phantom performance— so we can never know the bliss of humour until we can recognize its voices (Nash 170).

---

<sup>106</sup> Baym, Geoffrey. “The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism”. *Political Communication*, 22:3 (2005): 259.

Before continuing the segment and proposing the debate on whether the state should execute criminals, Oliver pauses and concedes that he is not American and, therefore, is discussing the topic as an “outsider”: “Let me acknowledge right upfront that I have come to this as a bit of an outsider. Britain does not have capital punishment. So, in a way, I really do not know what I am talking about” (3’09”-3’19”), he says to the laughing audience. He continues: “But in another way I really do know what I am talking about because before 1965 we did not just have capital punishment; we literally went medieval on people’s asses” (3’19”-3’31”). A BBC Four clip telling the history of capital punishment in Britain is shown, focusing mainly on how it was applied —people found guilty could be boiled alive, burned, hanged, quartered, and so on. The image cuts back to Oliver, who is now accompanied on his right by a medieval drawing of a man being boiled alive. He comments: “Yes, we did that. We boiled people! And in the grand tradition of British cuisine, if anything we over boiled them” (3’46”-3’56”). Here is another example of Oliver’s use of one of the core elements of English humour in his act: “laughing at yourself”<sup>107</sup> —he takes a stereotype about British food (that it is always “either boiled or overcooked”<sup>108</sup>) and deconstructs it in order to make a joke. The English comedian goes on about the British love of “killing people” (4’03”) and uses as an example the many tools invented for such purpose, while making fun of the typically English names given to them. Here, Oliver is using his English identity as a ‘green light’ to poke fun at the British while satirising their history. The comedian does not stop there; he complements his take on the comparison of American and British approaches to the death penalty by presenting a survey carried out by YouGov that shows that 51% of the British population is in favour of reinstating capital punishment in the UK.

The comparison between America and Britain comes to an end and Oliver goes on presenting data that consolidates the argument against the death penalty. He goes on to summarise the main concerns of ‘the common

---

<sup>107</sup> Mikes, George. *English Humour for Beginners*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1980: 44.

<sup>108</sup> Hechinger, Paul. “Five Myths About British Food”. *BBC America*. 20 March 2012. Web. 8 March 2015. <http://www.bbcamerica.com/anglophenia/2012/03/five-myths-about-british-food/>

man' when it comes to the capital punishment —“But John, I hear you saying that most Western countries no longer have executions, but if someone committed a heinous crime, I would still very much like to kill them” (6'37"-6'47")— and breaks down each one of the arguments contained in them, showing how the death penalty, sometimes, is applied on innocent people. He presents two CNN clips to back his argument but, at the same time, criticises the tone and words adopted by the traditional broadcast channel. Oliver builds up on his irony when using the statistics of the death penalty in Texas to illustrate how the state's governor Rick Perry does not take into consideration that some people could be wrongly executed. The segment goes on with a CNN clip of an interview with Audrey Gaughran, director of Global Issues at Amnesty International, saying that the death penalty does nothing to deter violent crime; and ends with the high costs that are attached with executions —according to the clip shown, statistics provided by the *Los Angeles Times* point out that, since 1978, US\$ 4 billion were spent on capital punishment expenses only in the state of California.

Oliver sums up the segment, breaking down the death penalty debate into three simple bullet points: it is expensive; it kills innocent people; and it does nothing to stop crime. He finishes up posing a question to the audience: “If we are going to answer ‘difficult and profound’ questions as the president told us to, the toughest one is probably if someone is guilty of committing a horrible crime and the family of the victim want the perpetrator executed, do we want to live in a kind of country that gives that to them?” (11'04"-11'23"). While broadcast journalists would leave that question for the audience to come to its own conclusions, Oliver does the opposite: he promptly replies that no, he does not want to live in a country that offers that possibility. By clearly stating his position, that is backed by the information contained throughout the entire segment, Oliver distances himself from the traditional ‘opinion-free’ model of broadcast journalism. His ironic comments —at the heart of his English humour— made during

his presentation are used as a tool to transcend journalistic standards of objectivity and impartiality<sup>109</sup>.

Olives ends the segment fulfilling the promise he made at the beginning and shows the video of a tiny hamster eating tiny burritos: “And this is how you end a comprehensive segment on the death penalty” (12’14”-12’20”), says the comedian to a cheering live studio audience.

### **‘Immigration reform’: transcending impartiality**

The second segment we are going to analyse in this dissertation is the one about the immigration reform in the United States, broadcasted on 15 June 2014<sup>110</sup>. It runs a little over 13 minutes and it was the main of the five segments presented on *LWT*’s seventh episode of its first season —the show started following up on the discussion that a segment on net neutrality broadcasted weeks earlier caused on a meeting of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC); other segments included the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Iraq; a historic visit made by president Barack Obama to a Native American reservation and the controversy around the football team Washington Redskins; and an interview with English theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking for a segment called “Great Minds: People Who Think Good”.

The segment on immigration reform was the forth to be presented in this episode and started with a straight-up joke from Oliver: “I would like to talk about immigration tonight. Now, clearly, I have a vested interest in this subject” (9’50”-9’57”), said Oliver while loud laughter erupted from the live studio audience. “Eight years ago, I journeyed to America from across the sea like a human Fievel” (9’57”-10’02”), said Oliver, while a picture showing his face superimposed over Fievel’s face on the commercial poster for the 1980s movie *An American Tail* was displayed; the film tells the story of Fievel, a Russian mouse that emigrates to the United States in search of

---

<sup>109</sup> Baym, Geoffrey. “The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism”. *Political Communication*, 22:3 (2005): 267.

<sup>110</sup> Unfortunately, this particular segment was not made available on the show’s YouTube channel. However, it is possible to watch it at HBO GO, if you are a subscriber, clicking on the following link: [http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver#/HBO\\_GO/GOROSTGP43418](http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver#/HBO_GO/GOROSTGP43418)

freedom. While Oliver goes on about the part played by immigrants in American history, a photomontage is shown by his right side, containing a picture of illegal immigrants being arrested; what appears to be the border between the United States and Mexico; a black and white photo of immigrants arriving in America in the beginning of the 20th century; and a picture of a demonstration on Capitol Hill superimposed over the Pledge of Allegiance. The word “IMMIGRATION” is written in red capital letters.

The English comedian explains why this subject is being considered as a topic for one of the segments of his show; according to Pollard, the “first task” of the satirist is “to convince his audience of the worth—even more, of the necessity— of what he is doing” (Pollard 73). In order to meet this requirement, Oliver presents a clip about the Republican primaries in Virginia, in which Tea Party candidate Dave Brat defeated Eric Cantor on a platform anti-immigration. After this, the comedian shows a compilation of newscasters saying that the defeat of Cantor meant that the immigration reform was dead. The host goes on to explain the reasons why the United States urgently needs a reform in its immigration policies; to support this, he shows a picture of dozens of immigrant children being held in temporary facilities in Arizona and discuss the problem of ‘coyotes’—people who charge immigrants to get into America illegally.

To prove that the issue is not controversial only in the United States, Oliver shows clips of how the French and the Dutch are reacting to immigrants in their territories. This paves the way for another comparison between England and the United States: “Immigration is the universal crazy maker and, believe me, I know, I come from England. Hating immigrants is one of our national past-times. It is like cricket or winning Academy Awards; we are almost weirdly good at it and we have been doing it for years” (13’21”-13’40”), says Oliver—again, using ironically his national identity to make a point and get some laughs. The image cuts to a clip that appears to have been recorded during the Thatcher years and shows people being interviewed in England. One lady’s quote comes to attention; she says that the English “should have at least the dignity of being allowed to live with our own kind”. The camera switches back to an overly excited Oliver

that has to deal with an apprehensive reaction of his live studio audience: “That lady missed some key lessons from those world wars” (14’06”-14’12”), he says. Oliver then starts an impersonation of the woman, with an over-the-top English accent: “The nazis must be defeated so we can create a England pure of race and genetically superior” (14’12”-14’19”), says the comedian, while a classic red “Keep Calm” poster is shown by his right —instead of having “and carry on” stamped below, however, the poster reads “Keep calm and purify the bloodline”. Oliver goes on, justifying that England has “an excuse for being that stupid” (14’24”-14’28”) —according to him, because it is such an old country it could get away with having such conservative standards on the issue. The same, he argues, is not possible in the United States, a country so young that is possible to “dress up” (14’36”) like its earliest ancestors —a picture of two people wearing pilgrim costumes appears by his right side. To back up his argument, Oliver says: “If you ask an English person to do that, they would show up looking confused wearing a cloak and dear antlers, waving a wand around” (14’38”-14’45”). This statement could clearly represent the confusion of what it means to be English; by satirising his own homeland, Oliver exposes the complicated task of defining what “Englishness” constitutes of. The comedian goes on, listing examples of how immigrants have been good to America —he even includes Superman (“a Kryptonian”, 15’04”) as one of the immigrants that have contributed to making the United States a ‘great’ country. Oliver then questions why some people want to stop immigration if it has been good for America and vice-versa. A clip of Brat, the Republican candidate who started the debate around the topic, is shown; in it, he says he is against immigration because he does not favour “importing 7 billion people” to the US. Oliver comments on Brat’s quote, saying that he is ill-informed and shows a Gallup survey pointing out that immigration reform proposals have “broad support” throughout the country. He then argues how unfounded arguments are ‘drowning’ the wishes of those who want to see a reform —he calls it “undocumented opinions” (16’46”), in a clear analogy of the undocumented immigrants. Oliver breaks down the prejudice against immigrants —that

they will ‘steal’ American jobs and that they are prone to crime— and presents a clip of Republican Michelle Bachman saying that if “amnesty” is given to illegal immigrants the United States will never have another Republican president. Ironically, Oliver suggests, to a loud sound of applause: “What if, and this is going to sound crazy, you just try treating them better?” (19’43”-19’47”).

The segment ends with a satirical piece of *An American Tail*, altered to meet the needs of the “modern immigrant” (20’52”); entitled *An Actual American Tail*, the animation promises to the audience that they “have never seen America until you have seen it through Fievel’s eyes”. The satire even includes a sequel within the satire, called *An Actual American Tail: Fievel goes I.N.S.*, in which the immigrant mouse tries to legally enter the United States; it enlists all the troubles immigrants face when going to America. Oliver’s satire serves the purpose of a “counternarrative”<sup>111</sup> aimed to “shatter complacency”<sup>112</sup> and to “challenge the status quo”<sup>113</sup>:

Satire has been described as taking the form of paradox, carrying within it “the notion of a challenge to ‘receive opinion’ as paradox challenges orthodox” [...]. The challenge, although destructive, is not merely so, for “a paradox serves to rouse and awaken the Reason of Men asleep, into Thinking and Philosophical Temper” [...]. As such, satire can be understood as the means by which an unorthodox opinion is advanced, a vulgar error exposed, or thought stimulated via rhetorical ingenuity [...]. More simply, satire is a type of counternarrative (Hill 329).

In his satire, Oliver manages to call attention to “powerful but unspeakable truths”<sup>114</sup>, that could have its origins both on disdain or praise for a particular subject<sup>115</sup> —“The satirical temperament is a fusion of the

---

<sup>111</sup> Hill, Megan R. “Developing a Normative Approach to Political Satire: A Critical Perspective”. *International journal of communication*, 7 (2013): 329.

<sup>112</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>113</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>114</sup> Hart, Roderick P. “The rhetoric of political comedy: a tragedy?”. *International journal of communication*, 7 (2013): 339.

<sup>115</sup> Furlong, Norman. “Introduction”. *English Satire - An Anthology*. Ed. Norman Furlong. London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1946: 12.

critical and the humorous. When humour overwhelms the critical faculty, the artist passes beyond mockery to acceptance of the inadequacies of men” (Furlong 12).

### **‘Scottish independence referendum’: transcending objectivity**

The segment on the Scottish independence referendum<sup>116</sup> is, possibly, the one segment that most assembles British references throughout the entire first season of *LWT*. Broadcasted on 14 September 2014 as a part of the show’s seventeenth episode, it lasted around 15 minutes and it was the fourth of six segments that were presented that night —other topics discussed were the sexual assault allegations within the National Football League (NFL) in the United States; the American attacks against ISIS in Iraq; a satirical commercial about Olive Garden and its new promotion for all-you-can-eat pasta; a “And Now This” showing “newscasters misidentifying photographs as selfies”; and the use of hashtags in Twitter to raise awareness to social causes.

The segment starts with the camera plan focusing on Oliver; by his right there is a Scottish flag. Oliver says that Americans do not know much about Scotland except what was learnt from popular culture —that the country is “the birthplace of Shrek” (0’08”), for example. He moves on, saying that the country is facing “a major decision” (0’16”) on the upcoming week and the image is cut to show clips of different newscasts discussing the Scottish independence referendum. When Oliver is back in front of the camera he, again, points out the American ignorance towards Scotland, saying that when Americans think about Scottish freedom the image that usually comes to mind is the one portrayed by actor Mel Gibson in the movie *Brave Heart*. Oliver moves on to explain to his audience what the United Kingdom is —“a complicated political and economic union” (1’15”-1’18”)— and says that in order to understand why Scotland might want to break free from it, it is crucial to understand the history of its relationship with England. A clip showing a reenactment of a battle between the two countries is played while

---

<sup>116</sup> Oliver, John. “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Scottish Independence”. *HBO*. 19 September 2014. Web. 9 March 2015. [http://youtu.be/-YkLPxQp\\_y0](http://youtu.be/-YkLPxQp_y0)

its narrator explains how the country became a part of the UK —“For centuries England and Scotland remained separate and frequently at war. But in 1707 they formed a single country, Great Britain; a decision that has been controversial in Scotland ever since.” Oliver comments on the clip, saying that both countries have been in a “300 year arranged marriage” (1’56”) and recognises that England has been “a little bit of a dick” (2’02”) ever since the honeymoon. To back his arguments, he shows an excerpt from a book that states England banned the kilt in 1746 —“just because we knew they liked it” (2’08”)—, followed by the music sheet for *God Save The King*, the UK national anthem, that used to contain the verse “Rebellious Scots to crush”.

The segment continues with a BBC clip explaining both campaigns in the independence referendum —the one for independence, “Yes Scotland”; and the one against it, “Better Together”. Oliver interrupts the clip to criticise the name given to the campaign against independence, using again the analogy of a failed marriage —“It sounds like what people say to convince themselves to stay in a dead marriage” (2’48”-2’52”). Oliver then calls out the attention to the campaign’s slogan: “No thanks” that, according to him, is “a violently British way to refuse something” (3’18”-3’21”). Like a traditional broadcast television show would do in order to present a balanced piece, *LWT* gives almost the same amount of time for each side to expose its points of view; the case in favour for the Scottish independence is presented first.

Oliver shows a clip of a debate in which Alex Salmond, the leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), argues that the country would be better off if it was run by its people. The video cuts back to Oliver who promptly agrees with Salmond: “And to be fair, he might be right about that. Scots know how to run a country because when they got to choose their national animal they selected —and I swear this is true— a unicorn” (4’44”-4’54”). The comedian continues listing things that prove how Scotland is a nation that knows how to run itself and presents the thistle, the country’s national flower that is “made out of tiny knives and a throwing star” (5’25”-5’28”). An image of a man dressed in Scottish traditional clothes holding a thistle is

shown by Oliver's right side and, in a thick and exaggerated Scottish accent, Oliver says: "The only flower I like is a flower that could pierce an Englishman's throat!" (5'28"-5'33").

The political aspect of the segment is heightened following this, when Oliver states that one of the "legitimate reasons" (5'37") for Scotland wanting to leave the UK is the fact that it is a liberal nation that has "frequently" (5'44") been run by a Conservative British government. The comedian gets serious and his audience who, seconds before was laughing and applauding Oliver, responds to the shift in his tone and respectfully becomes quiet to listen to what he is about to say. Oliver then says that the Conservative factor has never been more of an issue than now, when the UK's prime-minister is Conservative David Cameron, whose name is pronounced with a clear disdain by Oliver. From now on, all conventions of objectivity in this report are forgotten when Oliver gives his very personal and passionate point of view on the British prime-minister. A clip is shown with a newscast report saying that "Cameron is seen in Scotland as the personification of everything that is wrong in the UK". Oliver quickly agrees with the clip, adding: "He [Cameron] embodies all the things I hate most about England and I am English" (6'07"-6'11"). To prove his point, Oliver shows a black and white picture of Cameron when he was a student at Oxford University, in which he is dressed in a very posh style. Ironically, Oliver says that Cameron himself has admitted to be embarrassed by the photo and that is why "it pains" (6'23") him so much to show it to his audience, before asking for a close-up on Cameron's face —"That is the face of a man who fast-forwards through the servant parts of *Downtown Abbey*" (6'27"-6'33"). Oliver's rant on Cameron does not stop there and he continues his crusade to prove "what an asshole" (6'44") the prime-minister is, showing a clip of a discussion in Parliament about who should control oil revenues from Scotland; in it, Cameron smugly answers a question posed by a Scottish representative on the issue —"If you ask a stupid question, you get a stupid answer", says the prime-minister. When Oliver chooses to call Cameron "an asshole" he is, again, transcending ethical norms of journalism; a serious anchor on a traditional newscast could never use such

word in reference to a political leader without being considered partial and risking it to lose his 'trustworthiness'. The choice of words and tone used by Oliver show not only his complete disregard to norms of objectivity and impartiality, but also demonstrate an evident contempt towards the importance of the use of language standards when broadcasting the news.

The attention is now shifted to the anti-independence campaign and Oliver shows a controversial television commercial targeted at women. The comedian satirises the piece for portraying women as fragile and not comfortable to make decisions on their own. Following his performance of a brainless woman with no self-assurance, Oliver lists the negative outcomes that leaving the United Kingdom could have to Scotland, such as the loss of the pound as their currency —“They could lose the pound and that is not nothing because if they do they would either have to join the currently unstable euro or revert to Scotland’s old currency which I believe was sheep and threats” (8’57”-9’08”), says Oliver before doing, once again, an impersonation of an angry Scotsman, followed by the self-reflecting comment “why do they hate us?” (9’16”).

After presenting both sides of the argument on the Scottish independence, Oliver says that if Scotland left the UK, it would have serious consequences to “everybody” (10’31”); as he finishes this sentence, a CNN clip is played in which the narrator says that the UK could lose its ‘beloved’ Union Jack flag in case Scotland left the union. When the camera plan returns to Oliver he shows an ironical annoyance at this, saying that if such ‘tragedy’ was to happen he would have to get rid of all the merchandise he has with the patterns of the Union Jack. Oliver also argues that if Scotland becomes independent it will want to get rid of the nuclear weapons that are currently based in the country; he shows an excerpt of the country’s government website in which the weapons are called “an affront to basic decency”. He then uses this quote as a counterpoint to ironically reinforce how these weapons are a source of concern for the Scottish society —how can the same society that invented the haggis, “a boiled sheep stomach stuffed with organ meat” (11’46”-11’50”), consider these weapons as “an affront to basic decency”? Oliver continues to underline how the issue is

important and how the UK government was now panicking over the outcome of the vote. As a sign of the effort the British government was making in order to maintain Scotland in the United Kingdom, Oliver shows a clip of two men trying to raise the Scottish flag over 10 Downing Street; they face some complications and the flag falls to the ground —“Not even English flag poles can suddenly start treating Scotland with the respect it deserves” (12’22”-12’27”), jokes Oliver, before showing a clip of Cameron’s plea for the unity of the United Kingdom —a speech that is criticised by Oliver, who calls out the lack of ‘passion’ by the prime-minister when discussing the topic.

The segment ends with Oliver satirising British romantic comedies —“If I learned anything from the last four minutes of British romantic comedies is that if you are trying to win someone over, you need a big romantic gesture” (13’03”-13’11”), says the comedian before showing pictures of famous British films, like *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Love Actually*. He starts a speech: “I am just a boy standing in front of a nation asking it to continue tolerating me” (13’36”-13’42”) —a satire of the famous quote from Julia Robert’s character in another famous British romantic comedy, *Nothing Hill*: “I am just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her.” Oliver then brings to the top of his desk a plate full of haggis, eats it, and washes it off with some Scottish whisky. The surreal atmosphere increases when Oliver, backed by the English “national love of nonsense”<sup>117</sup>, welcomes to the stage a two-person costume of a unicorn and eight bagpipe musicians, while the Scottish flag unfolds behind them. In another satire of a British film he imitates the card scene from *Love Actually* with phrases that manifest his wish for Scotland to stay in the UK.

Continuously throughout this segment, Oliver strongly criticised the English using satire and irony. His satiric approach resembles the one used by Byron, as argued by Elices Agudo, who was able to vigorously satirise English society while living outside of the country:

---

<sup>117</sup> Nicolson, Harold. *The English Sense of Humour and Other Essays*. London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1956: 46.

The success of Byron's satiric view of England, Sutherland argues, lies basically on his detached and lawless philosophy of life. His constant travels and his condition of expatriate placed him in a privilege position to analyse England from the distance, a key factor to heighten the value of satiric writing (Elices Agudo 27).

This 'detachment', continues Elices Agudo, is crucial for the success of satire, that is only obtained once the satirist is able to "abandon partiality"<sup>118</sup> so that he can concentrate "exclusively on the object of his satiric attack"<sup>119</sup>. This could easily be applied to Oliver too, since the English comedian has been living in the United States for almost a decade now. Oliver's detachment from England, however, is not only assured by geography; his use of irony also assists him in achieving satire excellence — "Through irony we can discern the meaning or sense of a context without participation in, or being committed to, that context" (Colebrook 3). Another example of the use of his condition of expatriate was presented in the segment<sup>120</sup> about the anti-gay laws in Uganda, discussed previously in Chapter One. When discussing the historical background of Uganda and its treatment of the gay community, the English comedian asked "out of interest" (3'55") where did the country get the ideas for such "hateful" (4'00") legislation. A clip was shown on the sequence with the answer: such laws were first introduced during the British colonial days. When the picture cuts back to Oliver, we can see he is clearly uncomfortable, reaching out for his tie knot, trying to loosen it, while a Union Jack flag is displayed on the background. He blasts out a "Oopsie daisy" (4'13") just before using his British identity as a source of comic relief — "I have got to be honest. Being British is sometimes a little like being an alcoholic. When someone says you did something awful, you find yourself going: 'Honestly, I do not even remember doing that, but, yeah, probably. Probably. I am a dick, I am a dick. What do you want me to say?'" (4'15"-4'29").

---

<sup>118</sup> Elices Agudo, Juan Francisco. *Historical and Theoretical Approaches to English Satire*. Munich: LINCOM, 2004: 37.

<sup>119</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>120</sup> Oliver, John. "Last Week Tonight: Uganda and Pepe Julian Onziema Pt. 1 (HBO)". *HBO*. 29 June 2014. Web. 23 February 2015. <http://youtu.be/G2W41pvvZs0>

The expatriate characteristic of Oliver also brings the following question into mind: would *LWT* be as successful as it is if it was broadcasted only in a British context? As discussed in Chapter One, although satirical television programmes emerged both in America and Britain, it is undeniable that the format explored by Oliver is more successful in the United States<sup>121</sup>. It is also relevant to notice that it was only after relocating to the US that Oliver finally got recognition for his talent<sup>122</sup>. However, it would be unfair to say that Oliver's humour has become 'Americanised' and could not be appreciated by the British people. Despite being more famous in the United States than in the United Kingdom, the core of Oliver's humour is still based on his "Englishness" and, as argued by Nash, people who share the same background tend to find the same things funny:

Humour is not for babes, Martians, or congenital idiots. We share our humour with those who have shared our history and who understand our way of interpreting experience. There is a fund of common knowledge and recollection, upon which all jokes draw with instantaneous effect (Nash 9).

It is through the use of his English identity and the values that are associated with English humour that Oliver succeeds in transcending journalistic norms and is able to create a unique product that trumps the one currently being offered by traditional broadcast journalism shows.

---

<sup>121</sup> Burrell, Ian. "John Oliver: British comedian written off at home has last laugh in US". *The Independent*. 27 April 2014. Web. 10 March 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/john-oliver-british-comedian-written-off-at-home-has-last-laugh-in-us-9292540.html>

<sup>122</sup> Ibidem.

## CONCLUSION

The combination of comedy and journalism in John Oliver's *LWT* had its most glorifying moment in a segment about the Miss America pageant<sup>123</sup>, during the show's eighteenth episode of the first season, broadcasted on 21 September 2014. In a little over 15 minutes, Oliver made use of his English humour in order to transcend journalistic norms such as objectivity and impartiality. The result was a 'solid piece' that gave a deep understanding of the pageant's background history, showing a remarkable work of research that should be expected from the traditional broadcast journalism shows. The segment began with the basic information the audience had to have in order to understand the topic —i.e. the rules for participating in the competition, what the prizes were, the controversy and prejudice behind beauty pageants, etc. The real focus of the segment, however, was presented after this, when Oliver highlighted the claim made by the competition's organisers that the Miss America pageant was "the largest scholarship provider for women in the world", awarding around US\$ 45 million every year for the purpose of education. What followed that was an exceptional example of journalism practice. Like a good reporter would be expected to do, Oliver questioned this claim and went into a deep investigation, trying to verify if this amount of money corresponded to the truth. He guided the audience through the process of research him and his staff went through, pulling all the tax forms from every competition in the USA; while doing this he even stressed out the pressure of the deadline suffered by them in order to present a complete segment during that night's episode —a pressure that is faced daily by 'real' journalists: "At this point we just had to stop because it was 35 minutes ago and we had to tape this show" (11'16"-11'22"), said Oliver. After this, he presented the conclusion of the research, stating that, with the information he and his staff were able to convey, it was true to say that the Miss America pageant awards in

---

<sup>123</sup> Oliver, John. "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Miss America Pageant (HBO)". *HBO*. 21 September 2014. Web. 12 March 2015. <http://youtu.be/oDPCmmZifE8>

scholarships a substantially lower amount than the US\$ 45 million it says it does—in 2012, for example, the organisation spent less than half a million in scholarships (US\$ 482,000). Oliver not only excelled in presenting an impressive piece of journalistic work, exposing the truth behind the pageant's allegations, but also called out for the important fact that “whatever the number is one thing does still seem to be troubling true” (11'32”-12'00”): the Miss America pageant was still the largest scholarship provider for women in the world. To support this statement, Oliver then presented the fact that the amount of money made available by the pageant to scholarships is still higher than any other women-only scholarship that he and his staff were able to find. He cited some examples of such organisations, while displaying their webpage addresses at the bottom of the screen; he even called out the audience to donate money to these scholarship providers if they wanted to “change the fact that currently the biggest scholarship programme exclusively for women in America requires you to be unmarried, with a mint condition uterus and also rewards working knowledge of buttock adhesive technology” (12'00”-12'18”). The segment ended with a satire of beauty competitions in general: “The Miss Last Week Tonight Pageant”. The actors participating as contestants employed irony in their performance in order to expose the way women are subjected to a demeaning process during these contests. Once the segment was over, the audience was left with a feeling that not only it was entertained, but that it also got a comprehensive and informative piece on the business of beauty pageants in the USA. It could be argued that a similar result is very difficult to be achieved by the traditional newscasts on air nowadays. First, the atmosphere surrounding television news is not appropriate to stage a satire piece in order to entertain its audience —“The ambience of television news, then, is one of formality, sincerity and neutrality, bolstering the ideological claim that television news is essentially truthful” (Casey et al. 147). Second, the comprehensiveness of *LWT*'s piece and its 15 minutes of duration is unthinkable in a conventional newscast, where segments rarely have over one minute. Third, we cannot forget that *LWT* has the advantage of time, since it is a weekly show, which gives its

staff the opportunity to delve into topics on a greater depth—a luxury that journalists working daily in a newsroom seldom have<sup>124</sup>. One factor that should also be taken into consideration is that Oliver enjoys full independence from advertisers, since the HBO business model<sup>125</sup> does not allow advertising from outside the network—the commercials shown are only about the cable channel’s own products.

From a journalistic point of view, however, it is still complex to think of a ‘solid piece’ that contains irony and satire as central elements, since “the satirist can hardly achieve impartiality” (Furlong 20). Although irony and satire go against some of the ‘sacred values’ of journalism—i.e. impartiality and objectivity—it is interesting to notice, as Mikes argues, that both journalist and satirist have a similar motivation when executing their work: “The satirist is often a journalist or pamphleteer whose only weapon is his pen with which he fights kings, tyrants and obnoxious political regimes” (Mikes 61). Baym takes this understanding of satire even further when he argues that the use of such mechanism invites the audience to “reconsider journalistic conventions”<sup>126</sup>:

Conventional news is *monologic*, pretending to “possess a ready-made truth” [...]. Satire instead represents a searching for truth through the process of dialogical interaction. Unlike traditional news, which claims an epistemological certainty, satire is a discourse of *inquiry*, a rhetoric of challenge that seeks through the asking of unanswered questions to clarify the underlying morality of a situation (Baym, *The Daily Show* 267).

When analysing the first season of *LWT* it is intriguing to observe how Oliver appears to have found a way to combine the use of characteristics commonly associated with the English sense of humour—i.e. irony, satire, nonsense and self-deprecation—with one of the most important

---

<sup>124</sup> Elliott, Deni and David Ozar. “An Explanation and a Method for the Ethics of Journalism”. *Journalism Ethics: A Philosophical Approach*. Christopher Meyers. United States: Oxford University Press - Special, 2010: 4.

<sup>125</sup> Wohlsen, Marcus. “HBO makes more money than Netflix—for now”. *Wired*. 2 May 2014. Web. 19 March 2015. <http://www.wired.com/2014/02/netflix-makes-less-money-hbo-long/>

<sup>126</sup> Baym, Geoffrey. “The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism”. *Political Communication*, 22:3 (2005): 263.

commitments that journalists have: to “seek truth and report it”<sup>127</sup>. This is also true when Oliver succeeds in balancing humour with some of the ethical values of journalism; for example, when his segments are constructed in a way that it is fair to both sides of the same story —by doing this, Oliver proves wrong scholars who argue that fairness does not make a good joke<sup>128</sup>. It is even more interesting to notice that, while doing this, he was also able to transcend journalistic norms of impartiality and objectivity, and yet, as a result, presented his audience with a unique kind of journalism: one that is contemporary in the way it discusses current events —using social media and encouraging participatory democracy—, and one that manages to make “what is important interesting”<sup>129</sup>, breaking the argument posed by Postman that “television news shows entertains but does not inform”<sup>130</sup>. Could the format introduced by *LWT* —this ‘fusion’ of comedy and real journalistic work— be the future of the news? If, as Gordon has argued, comedy in the 19th century was “aimed at making us think”<sup>131</sup> and in the 20th century was targeted “at making us laugh”<sup>132</sup>, what is the purpose of comedy in the 21st century? After analysing the first season of *LWT* it could be argued that, today, Oliver’s comedy serves as a combination of both, adding to the equation the ‘newsworthy’ factor; the audience is laughing and thinking at the same time, while it is also being informed on current events and invited to take action in some of the topics discussed.

In a way, the work Oliver is doing in the journalistic field could be compared to what the New Journalism movement did for the development of the profession a few decades ago, since both the English comedian and this school of thought from the 1960s and 1970s introduced new norms and

---

<sup>127</sup> “Code of Ethics.” Society of Professional Journalists. 1996. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

<sup>128</sup> Mikes, George. *English Humour for Beginners*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1980: 30.

<sup>129</sup> DeWolf Swenson, Molly. “The future of news”. *TEDx Talks - Berlin*. 30 September 2014. Web. 6 February 2015. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKoR\\_kFv7Dg#t=577](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKoR_kFv7Dg#t=577)

<sup>130</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death - Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. London: Penguin Books, 2005: 107.

<sup>131</sup> Gordon, Edward J. “What’s Happened to Humor?”. *The English Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (1958): 128.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibidem*.

modes to the practice of journalism. Just as the New Journalists, Oliver is also ‘expanding’<sup>133</sup> the definition of journalism to something else; a new kind of journalism that does not have to be objective to be considered trustworthy; one that does not need to be serious to be reliable; one that can subvert impartiality and still be dependable. Like the New Journalists, Oliver is also contributing with the progress of the profession —“It seems safe to say that those who call themselves New Journalists will, in the main, have aided the trust toward a freer and better American journalism” (Murphy 38):

Today, the term “New Journalism” is most often associated with the writers of the 1960s and 1970s who stretched the boundaries of legitimate journalism by challenging the ideal of objectivity and advocating the use by journalists of narrative techniques used by fiction writers. Their ideas of “good journalism” continue to be explored and refined by new generations of reporters and editors who believe that it is possible to write creative, literary nonfiction that is factually true (Fazakis 950).

More important than this, Oliver’s combination of journalism and English humour creates a final product that is authentic and could be the ‘secret formula’ broadcast journalists have been searching for in order to make their stories more appealing to audiences everywhere. It is important to highlight that there is more than enough evidence to suggest that Oliver’s new modes for journalism practices provide some solutions to the problems contemporary journalism is facing. However, if a creation of a new genre of journalism will emerge from Oliver’s work is yet to be seen.

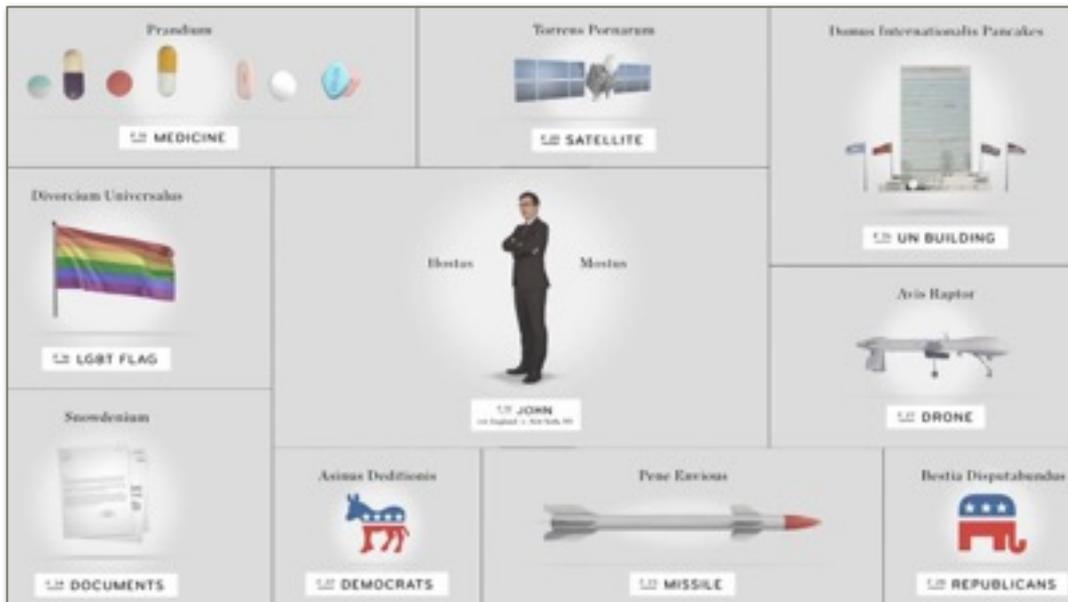
---

<sup>133</sup> Fazakis, Liz. “New Journalism”. *Encyclopedia of Journalism*. Ed. Christopher Sterling. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2009: 947.

## ANNEXES

The images shown below were captured on 5 March 2015 via print screen from *LWT*'s first season. They exhibit part of the show's opening credits and the set where it is recorded.

### Annex 1



*'Last Week Tonight' opening credits*

### Annex 2



*'Last Week Tonight' set*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adelian, Josef. "Long Live Oliver: HBO's 'Last Week Tonight' Debuts to Solid Ratings". *Vulture* . 28 April 2014. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://www.vulture.com/2014/04/ratings-last-week-tonight-has-a-solid-opening.html>

Bach, Les and Michael Keith, Azra Khan, Kalbir Shukra and John Solomos. "New Labour's white heart: politics, multiculturalism and the return of assimilation". *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 73 (4) (2002): 445-454.

Bauder, David. "Oliver adds journalism to his comedy". *Associated Press*. 25 September 2014. Web. 3 February 2015. <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ea1d53d73d0e4a199b65d19181660e9e/oliver-adds-journalism-his-comedy>

Baym, Geoffrey. "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism". *Political Communication*, 22:3 (2005): 259-276.

Baym, Geoffrey. *From Cronkite to Colbert - The Evolution of Broadcast News*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Boyd, Andrew and Peter Stewart, Ray Alexander. *Broadcast Journalism - Techniques of Radio & Television News*. Burlington: Focal Press, 2008.

Burrell, Ian. "John Oliver: British comedian written off at home has last laugh in US". *The Independent*. 27 April 2014. Web. 10 March 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/john-oliver-british-comedian-written-off-at-home-has-last-laugh-in-us-9292540.html>

"Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe". *Pew Research Center For The People & The Press*. Washington: 11 January 2004.

Casey, Bernadette and Neil Casey, Ben Calvert, Liam French, Justin Lewis. *Television Studies - The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Chapman, Jane. "Broadcast journalism - Yesterday, today and the future". *Broadcast Journalism - A critical introduction*. Eds. Jane Chapman and Marie Kinsey. New York: Routledge (2009): 7-16.

"Code of Conduct". National Union of Journalists, 2013. Web. 11 February 2015. <https://www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-code/>

"Code of Ethics." Society of Professional Journalists, 1996. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

Colebrook, Claire. *Irony - The New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Crouch, Ian. "John Oliver, Charming Scold". *The New Yorker*. 7 May 2014. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/john-oliver-charming-scold>

DeWolf Swenson, Molly. "The future of news". *TEDx Talks - Berlin*. 30 September 2014. Web. 6 February 2015. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKoR\\_kFv7Dg#t=577](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKoR_kFv7Dg#t=577)

Dobson, Roger. "Joking aside, British really do have unique sense of humour". *The Independent*. 9 March 2008. Web. 26 February 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/joking-aside-british-really-do-have-unique-sense-of-humour-793491.html>

Easthope, Antony. "The English sense of humour?". *International Journal of Humor Research*, vol. 13 (2000): 59-75.

Elices Agudo, Juan Francisco. *Historical and Theoretical Approaches to English Satire*. Munich: LINCOM, 2004.

Elliott, Deni and David Ozar. "An Explanation and a Method for the Ethics of Journalism". *Journalism Ethics: A Philosophical Approach*. Christopher Meyers. United States: Oxford University Press - Special, 2010.

Fazakis, Liz. "New Journalism". *Encyclopedia of Journalism*. Ed. Christopher Sterling. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2009: 947-951.

Featherstone, Simon. *Englishness - Twentieth-Century Popular Culture and the Forming of English Identity*. Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2009.

Feldman, Lauren. "The news about comedy - Young audiences, The Daily Show, and evolving notions of journalism". *Journalism*, Vol. 8 (4) (2007): 406-427.

Friedman, Sam. "The cultural currency of a 'good' sense of humour: British comedy and new forms of distinction". *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 62, Issue 2 (2011): 347-370.

Fuller, Jack. *News values: ideas for an information age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Furlong, Norman. "Introduction". *English Satire - An Anthology*. Ed. Norman Furlong. London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1946: 11-23.

Gervais, Rick. "The Difference Between American and British Humour". *Time*. 9 November 2011. Web. 26 February 2015. <http://time.com/3720218/difference-between-american-british-humour/>

Giles, Judy and Tim Middleton (Eds.). *Writing Englishness 1900-1950: An introductory sourcebook on national identity*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Gordon, Edward J. "What's Happened to Humor?". *The English Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (1958): 127-133.

Hall, Julian. *The Rough Guide to British Cult Comedy*. London: Rough Guides, 2006.

Harcup, Tony. "Fair enough? Ethics and regulation in broadcast journalism". *Broadcast Journalism - A critical introduction*. Eds. Jane Chapman and Marie Kinsey. New York: Routledge (2009): 247-256.

Harrison, Jackie. "Constructing News Values (Gatekeeper Studies)". *The Television Genre Book*. Ed. Glen Creeber. London: Palgrave MacMillan (2008): 111-113.

Harrison, Jackie. "Objectivity and Television News (The BBC and Impartiality)". *The Television Genre Book*. Ed. Glen Creeber. London: Palgrave MacMillan (2008): 111-113.

Harrison, Jackie. "Exploring news values - The ideal and the real". *Broadcast Journalism - A critical introduction*. Eds. Jane Chapman and Marie Kinsey. New York: Routledge (2009): 59-68.

Hart, Roderick P. "The rhetoric of political comedy: a tragedy?". *International journal of communication*, 7 (2013): 338-370.

Hechinger, Paul. "Five Myths About British Food". *BBC America*. 20 March 2012. Web. 8 March 2015. <http://www.bbcamerica.com/anglophenia/2012/03/five-myths-about-british-food/>

Hill, Megan R. "Developing a Normative Approach to Political Satire: A Critical Perspective". *International journal of communication*, 7 (2013): 324-337.

Holcomb, Jesse. "Social Network Websites". *Encyclopedia of Journalism*. Ed. Christopher Sterling. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2009: 1298-1300.

Holland, Patricia. "Conflicting pressures - News and representation". *Broadcast Journalism - A critical introduction*. Eds. Jane Chapman and Marie Kinsey. New York: Routledge (2009): 215-229.

Holpuch, Amanda. "John Oliver's cheeky net neutrality plea crashes FCC website". *The Guardian*. 3 June 2014. Web. 21 February 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/03/john-oliver-fcc-website-net-neutrality>

"John Oliver's Biography". *I am John Oliver*. Web. 3 February 2015. [http://www.iamjohnoliver.com/?page\\_id=6](http://www.iamjohnoliver.com/?page_id=6)

"John Oliver's 'Last Week Tonight' Ratings: 796,000 Viewers In Finale's First Run". *Deadline*. 11

November 2014. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://deadline.com/2014/11/john-olivers-last-week-tonight-ratings-796000-viewers-in-first-season-finale-premiere-1201280776/>

Jones, Jeffrey P. *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010.

Lance Holbert, R. "Developing a Normative Approach to Political Satire: An Empirical Perspective". *International journal of communication*, 7 (2013): 305-323.

Landau, Elizabeth and Zain Verjee and Antonia Mortesen. "Uganda president: Homosexuals are 'disgusting'". *CNN*. 25 February 2014. Web. 23 February 2015. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/24/world/africa/uganda-homosexuality-interview/index.html?eref=edition>

Langford, Paul. *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character 1650-1850*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Lefevre-Gonzalez, Christina. "Restoring Historical Understandings of the 'Public Interest' Standard of American Broadcasting: An Exploration of the Fairness Doctrine". *International journal of communication*, 7 (2013): 89-109.

Lewis, Justin. "Analysing Television News". *The Television Genre Book*. Ed. Glen Creeber. London: Palgrave MacMillan (2008): 108-111.

Lockett, Den. "Last Week Tonight Renewed for Two More Seasons of Epic Rants". *Vulture*. 17 February 2015. Web. 18 February 2015. <http://www.vulture.com/2015/02/last-week-tonight-renewed-for-two-more-seasons.html>

Luce, Edward. "The jesters shaping american Politics". *The Financial Times*. 8 February 2015. Web. 11 February 2015. [http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/b4e08c58-ae0a-11e4-919e-00144feab7de.html?ftcamp=traffic/email/guestpass/gp\\_email/guestpass/auddev&utm\\_source=gp\\_email&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=guestpass&utm\\_campaign=guestpass#axzz3RBRVGAIK](http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/b4e08c58-ae0a-11e4-919e-00144feab7de.html?ftcamp=traffic/email/guestpass/gp_email/guestpass/auddev&utm_source=gp_email&utm_medium=email&utm_term=guestpass&utm_campaign=guestpass#axzz3RBRVGAIK)

“Mark Thomas Summary”. *Mark Thomas Info*. Web. 19 February 2015. [http://www.markthomasinfo.co.uk/section\\_info/](http://www.markthomasinfo.co.uk/section_info/)

McGlynn, Katia. “John Oliver's ‘Last Week Tonight’ Set Has A Hidden ‘Game Of Thrones’ Easter Egg”. *The Huffington Post*. 5 May 2014. Web. 6 March 2015. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/05/john-oliver-set-game-of-thrones-castle-easter-egg\\_n\\_5267628.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/05/john-oliver-set-game-of-thrones-castle-easter-egg_n_5267628.html)

Mikes, George. *English Humour for Beginners*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1980.

Modood, Tariq. “Is multiculturalism dead?”. *Public Policy Research*, Volume 15, Issue 2 (2008): 84–88.

Murphy, James E. *The New Journalism: A Critical Perspective*. Association for Education in Journalism, 1974.

Nash, Walter. *The Language of Humour - Style and technique in comic discourse*. New York: Longman, 1985.

Nicolson, Harold. *The English Sense of Humour and Other Essays*. London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1956.

Oleksiak, Timothy. “How John Oliver won the Internet”. *Salon*. 9 October 2014. Web. 2 February 2015. [http://www.salon.com/2014/10/09/how\\_john\\_oliver\\_won\\_the\\_internet\\_partner/](http://www.salon.com/2014/10/09/how_john_oliver_won_the_internet_partner/)

Oliver, John. “Last Week Tonight - Episode 1”. *HBO*. 27 April 2014. Web. 28 January 2015. [http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver#/HBO\\_GO/GOROSTGP43418](http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver#/HBO_GO/GOROSTGP43418)

Oliver, John. “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Death Penalty (HBO)”. *HBO*. 4 May 2014. Web. 8 March 2015. <http://youtu.be/Kye2oX-b39E>

Oliver, John. “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Net Neutrality (HBO)”. *HBO*. 1 June 2014. Web. 23 March 2015. <http://youtu.be/fpbOEoRrHyU>

Oliver, John. "Last Week Tonight - Episode 7". *HBO*. 15 June 2014. Web. 8 March 2015. [http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver#/HBO\\_GO/GOROSTGP43418](http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver#/HBO_GO/GOROSTGP43418)

Oliver, John. "Last Week Tonight: Uganda and Pepe Julian Onziema Pt. 1 (HBO)". *HBO*. 29 June 2014. Web. 23 February 2015. <http://youtu.be/G2W41pvvZs0>

Oliver, John. "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: #GoGetThoseGeckos (HBO)". *HBO*. 27 July 2014. Web. 23 March 2015. [http://youtu.be/b436uUuf\\_VI](http://youtu.be/b436uUuf_VI)

Oliver, John. "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Scottish Independence". *HBO*. 19 September 2014. Web. 9 March 2015. [http://youtu.be/-YkLPxQp\\_y0](http://youtu.be/-YkLPxQp_y0)

Oliver, John. "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Miss America Pageant (HBO)". *HBO*. 21 September 2014. Web. 12 March 2015. <http://youtu.be/oDPCmmZifE8>

Oliver, John. "Last Week Tonight - Episode 20". *HBO*. 5 October 2014. Web. 8 March 2015. [http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver#/HBO\\_GO/GOROSTGP43418](http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver#/HBO_GO/GOROSTGP43418)

Oliver, John. "Last Week Tonight - Episode 21". *HBO*. 12 October 2014. Web. 8 March 2015. <http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver#/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver/episodes/1/21-october-12-2014/index.html>

Pollard, Arthur. *Satire - The Critical Idiom*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1970.

Poniewozik, James. "Unfortunately, John Oliver, You Are a Journalist". *Time*. 17 November 2014. Web. 3 February 2015. <http://time.com/3589285/unfortunately-john-oliver-you-are-a-journalist/>

Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death - Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.

Power Dudden, Arthur. "The record of political humor". *American Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (1985): 50-70.

Shannon Miller, Liz. "Why 'Last Week Tonight With John Oliver' is The Next Generation of Late Night". *Indiewire*. 29 July 2014. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://www.indiewire.com/article/why-last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver-is-the-next-generation-of-late-night-20140729>

Simpson, Paul. *On the Discourse of Satire: towards a stylistic model of satirical humour*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003.

Steinberg, Brian. "How John Oliver and HBO Shattered TV's Comedy-News Format". *Variety*. 2 July 2014. Web. 3 February 2015. <http://variety.com/2014/tv/news/how-john-oliver-and-hbo-shattered-tvs-comedy-news-format-1201257084/>

Stewart, Jon. "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart". *Comedy Central*. 11 February 2015. Web. 19 February 2015. <http://on.cc.com/1vmN9Fy>

Stuever, Hank. "John Oliver's 'Last Week Tonight' on HBO sticks to a familiar formula". *The Washington Post*. 28 April 2014. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/style/wp/2014/04/28/john-olivers-last-week-tonight-on-hbo-sticks-to-a-familiar-formula/>

Suebsaeng, Asawin. "'Last Week Tonight' Does Real Journalism, No Matter What John Oliver Says". *The Daily Beast*. 29 September 2014. Web. 3 February 2015. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/09/29/last-week-tonight-does-real-journalism-no-matter-what-john-oliver-says.html>

"The Bugle". *The Bugle*. Web. 6 March 2015. <http://thebuglepodcast.com/photos/>

Thomas, Mark. "The Mark Thomas Comedy Product - Series 2, Episode 5: Lottery". *Channel 4*. 21 February 2011 (originally broadcasted in 1998). Web. 19 February 2015. <http://youtu.be/rk88-vOkonI>

"Today's Journalists Less Prominent". *Pew Research Center For The People & The Press*. Washington: 8 March 2007.

"Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni signs anti-gay bill". *BBC*. 24 February 2014. Web. 23 February 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26320102>

Ward, Paul. *Britishness Since 1870*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Wohlsen, Marcus. "HBO makes more money than Netflix —for now". *Wired*. 2 May 2014. Web. 19 March 2015. <http://www.wired.com/2014/02/netflix-makes-less-money-hbo-long/>

Zoller Seitz, Matt. "John Oliver is Outdoing 'The Daily Show' and 'Colbert'". *Vulture*. 11 November 2014. Web. 2 February 2015. <http://www.vulture.com/2014/11/john-oliver-is-outdoing-the-daily-show.html>

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This Masters Thesis had the supervision of Johanna Zinecker, whom I thank for the advice and guidance. I also thank my parents, Teresinha Mauro and Renato Miranda, for constantly inspiring me and supporting me in everything I did since I left São Paulo to do this Masters in Berlin; I would not be here without you. To all my friends who were always there when I needed them, but especially to Leda Letra, Mariana Mandelli and Livia Vilela for all the encouragement, love, laughs and patience. I love you all and will be grateful forever.

## STATUTORY DECLARATION

I hereby declare the following:

- (1) that this work has never been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree, examination, or thesis;
- (2) that it is my own work;
- (3) that all the sources, including online sources, cited, reproduced, or referred to herein — especially the sources of quotations, images and tables— have been acknowledged as such.

With my signature, I acknowledge that any violation of these declarations will lead to an investigation for cheating or attempted cheating.

This thesis contains 20.378 words.

Renata Miranda

Berlin, 31 March 2015.