Go Fix It: Comedy as an Agent of Political Activation

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Objective. One of the recent late-night political comedy successes is John Oliver’s Last Week Tonight, which includes frequent calls to action at the end of a segment, encouraging viewers to do something about the problem they have just learned about. Methods. Using an experimental design, this study investigates the effects of these calls to action on the likelihood of engaging with the issue of net neutrality. Results. Findings suggest that exposure to political comedy activates viewers to engage in small but meaningful behaviors, but does not spill over to encourage more difficult political behaviors, nor does it boost political efficacy. Conclusion. The call to action, encouraging viewer participation in remedying a problem addressed in a political comedy show, seems effective at encouraging viewers to participate. However, it may not make them feel more equipped to do so.

While political satire has been a feature of U.S. political life since the days of the American Revolution, the effects of exposure to satirical content has been a consistent focus of research for the past 20 years (Becker and Waisanen, 2013). This research suggests that political satire shapes a wealth of outcomes, including media habits and choices, attitudes toward politicians, interest in the political process, knowledge about politics, and the desire to participate and engage both civically and politically (Baek and Wojcieszak, 2009; Baum, 2003; Baumgartner and Lockerbie, 2018; Baumgartner and Morris, 2006; Becker and Bode, 2018; Cao, 2010; Feldman and Young, 2008; Hoffman and Young, 2011), although effects vary for different populations (Boukes et al., 2015; Innocenti and Miller, 2016). On balance, research has also shown that political comedy is seen as both a source of news and entertainment, often offers as much factual and contextual information as traditional network news programming, and can present a space for a more deliberative conversation about politics and public affairs than is currently offered on cable television news networks (Baym, 2013; Becker, 2013; Fox, Koloen, and Sahin, 2007; LaMarre et al., 2014; Purcell, Heitmeier, and Van Wyhe, 2017; Young, 2013). Importantly, political satire has experienced significant growth since 2014, with new offerings across a range of network and cable television outlets (e.g., Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver). In many ways, we are now experiencing a boom period for political comedy.

One new show, described in greater depth below, is John Oliver’s Last Week Tonight (LWT). Because this show’s format differs significantly from those that came before it, it is important to study its effects, separate from the broader realm of political satire. In this

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study, we utilize an experiment to investigate whether those exposed to a call to action on LWT are more likely to engage in issue-specific political participation as compared to those exposed to LWT without a call to action. Our findings suggest political satire can have a mobilizing effect, but only for small, low-cost political behaviors.

**LWT: What Makes John Oliver’s Show Different**

We highlight John Oliver’s LWT given that its format differs significantly from programs that came before it.

Research is just beginning to consider how John Oliver and LWT fit into the larger genre of political satire and whether Oliver’s extended segments across a wide variety of “hard” political issues, his interviews with high-profile individuals like Edward Snowden, and his penchant for investigative journalism are together producing a “John Oliver effect” on contemporary political discourse and public policy (Brewer et al., 2018; Luckerson, 2015). Research also shows that exposure to LWT is effective from an informational perspective, with knowledge gains comparable to those exposed to news on the same subject (Becker and Bode, 2018). While many see Oliver’s new venture as yet another successful spin-off from a TDS alum (like The Colbert Report and Full Frontal with Samantha Bee), there are actually a few aspects of the program that make it unique.

First, Oliver’s program airs on HBO, which affects not only the potential size of the show’s weekly audience, but also the format of the show. While only airing once a week, because it is uninterrupted by commercials, LWT runs for a full thirty minutes, rather than the 22 minutes that is standard for network and basic cable half-hour programs. This extended length effectively turns LWT into a mock-up of a newsmagazine program as opposed to a satirical take on a network evening news broadcast (Kenny, 2014). As a result, Oliver’s segments may tackle issues at greater length and in richer detail than other political satire offerings—often a single segment will last a full 20 minutes, which would be virtually impossible in nonsubscription-based political comedy programming. The sheer amount of information included therefore exceeds that of traditional political satire programs.

Second, while Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert made periodic forays into the larger arena of political action like with Colbert’s formation of the Colbert SuperPAC (Hardy et al., 2014), the hosts always viewed themselves as comedians first; serving as journalists or public political figures was always a secondary byproduct of their programs’ popularity (Helmore, 2014). While Oliver expresses a similar sentiment, his segments are styled more like traditional journalism, a perception that is reinforced by his hiring of former New York Times Magazine and ProPublica journalists as part of his writers’ room, and his wide-ranging investigative reports on diverse topics including the Miss America Pageant, foreign elections, and the FIFA scandal.

Third, many of these stories end with explicit calls to action, wherein Oliver asks his viewers to, for example, use a new hashtag on social media, boycott a particular company or buy a particular product, or engage in some other sort of advocacy. This is not true for all segments, but represents a new sort of audience engagement that goes beyond simple entertainment, encouraging action rather than passive watching.

It is this third change—the call to action—upon which we focus. In order to isolate this potential call to action effect, we field an experiment in which we manipulate the LWT clip to either include or exclude a call to action.
Making an Impact: Political Comedy’s Effects on Participation and Efficacy

While viewers report that they turn to political comedy first and foremost to be entertained, political satire programs are also informative, providing important contextual news information (Young, 2013). Research has consistently shown that exposure to political comedy can have a meaningful, if somewhat limited effect on key democratic outcomes including political knowledge, participation, and efficacy (Becker and Waisanen, 2013).

Studies suggest that exposure to political comedy programming, and satire in particular, has a positive impact on young people’s levels of civic and political participation (Baumgartner and Lockerbie, 2018; Cao and Brewer, 2008; Hoffman and Thomson, 2009; Hoffman and Young, 2011). For example, research by Becker (2013) found that exposure to a political comedy interview resulted in a greater likelihood of engaging in a protest or signing a petition than exposure to comparable cable news content. This may occur through communication mediation, where satire viewing spurs talk about politics, which then leads to political participation (Lee, 2012), or through the generation of mobilizing negative emotions (Lee and Kwak, 2014).

Central to the relationship between political comedy exposure and greater political and civic participation is the role of political efficacy. Research has consistently shown that exposure to a range of different political comedy forms encourages individuals to feel more confident about their own ability to influence and engage with politics (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006; Becker, 2011, 2014; Hoffman and Thomson, 2009). In short, research often finds that exposure to political comedy has substantial effects on important democratic outcomes.

Political Participation

More generally, frequency of political participation is often inversely related to its difficulty. People are easily persuaded into engaging in small acts of political participation, like signing a petition or talking about politics (Bode, 2017; Vaccari et al., 2015), whereas only the most engaged tend to do harder things like volunteering or running for office. Easy political behaviors are not without importance, as they can sometimes lead to more difficult and consequential political behaviors including contacting politicians, campaigning for parties and candidates, and attending political events (Vaccari et al., 2015).

The vast majority of variance in political participation is determined by only a handful of factors. In order to engage in political participation, people require three things: capacity, motivation, and mobilization (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995; though as Fiorina (2002) points out, these conditions are necessary but not always sufficient to engender participation).

Motivation is just as it sounds—the extent to which someone is incentivized to participate. This could take the form of having an issue that is particularly important (Kim, 2009; Krosnick, 1990; Price et al., 2006), having a personal stake in an issue, either financial (Lewis-Beck, 1985) or emotional (Swers, 1998), or being engendered with a sense of civic duty (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). In general, motivation is relatively difficult to

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1One exception to this rule is Baumgartner and Morris (2008), who found that exposure to Colbert’s satire, in which he imitates conservatives, results in decreased internal political efficacy. It is worth noting, however, that they use a single measure of internal political efficacy rather than the standard index. The authors also speculate that Colbert’s complex, character-based satire may have confused participants, leading them to feel less confident about their ability to understand politics.
move—people tend to be interested in politics or not, and this remains relatively stable over their entire lives (Prior, 2010). For this reason, we do not expect the experimental stimulus to affect motivation.

Mobilization is the simple act of being asked to participate. This is particularly important for higher-level forms of participation like running for office (Lawless and Fox, 2005), but also plays a role in more everyday political behaviors. Voter turnout, for instance, is strongly affected by door-to-door canvassing—essentially volunteers for campaigns showing up at someone’s door to personally ask them to get involved (Gerber and Green, 2000).

Capacity is the ability, or set of skills, required in order to participate. This includes things like understanding how to register to vote, having the ability to write a letter to a Member of Congress, or feeling like participatory actions matter. This last element—feeling like participating makes a difference, is known as political efficacy (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei, 1991), and matters substantially for predicting political participation (Vecchione and Caprara, 2009).

The question, then, is which of these three elements, if any, an LW T call to action should affect. We argue that the call to action should work in two ways. First, the call to action should function as an agent of mobilization. John Oliver is directly asking his audience to participate politically—a classic example of mobilization. If this is true, we should see an increase in intention to engage in political behavior for those exposed to the call to action compared to those exposed to the clip without the call (H1). It is worth noting, however, that it is unclear whether this sort of call to action will function in the same manner as traditional appeals to political participation, like direct asks and door-to-door canvassing (Gerber and Green, 2000; Lawless and Fox, 2005). We do not know if people will take the call to action seriously when it comes from a comedian, or whether they will actually be moved to participate as requested.

Second, the call to action should also work as a form of capacity-building. John Oliver takes the guesswork out of what to do to make a difference. Instead, he gives simple, specific, and detailed directions for action for the audience to take. This should increase their feelings of ability to do something—increasing internal political efficacy. If this is true, we should see an increase in internal political efficacy among those exposed to the call to action compared to those exposed to the clip without the call (H2).

Methods

Case

The stimulus we use comes from a June 1, 2014 broadcast of LW T, in which John Oliver chose to take on the issue of net neutrality, explaining the Internet regulation policy proposal with a 13-minute presentation. In the segment, Oliver stresses the importance of net neutrality for the average Internet user and the competing interests of Internet service providers, streaming services, and major technology companies. Throughout, Oliver entertains the viewer with satirical critique, references to popular culture, and off-color jokes. At the end of the clip, Oliver encourages viewers and Internet trolls in particular to go online to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) site and comment on the net neutrality proposal before the close of the June 2014 public comment period.

People listened. By Monday, June 2, the FCC site had crashed in response to the rapid spike of activity. In less than 24 hours, the website had registered more than 45,000 new comments on net neutrality that were seen as a direct response to Oliver’s call to action.
In response to the high comment volume, the FCC Twitter account sent out a pair of messages on June 2 about the site being shut down due to technical difficulties (Aamoth, 2014). Obviously, the segment itself was effective in getting people to act. But it remains to be seen whether it was the information in the clip or the call to action that effectively mobilized people. This study allows us to disentangle these two elements.

To date, the *LWT* net neutrality clip has received just over 14 million views on YouTube as well as a public media reference from FCC Chairman Wheeler (Brody, 2015). News reports note that Oliver’s segment sparked an internal email conversation among FCC employees and that the dedicated email inbox for net neutrality comments received upwards of 300,000 messages; a normal FCC special inbox receives about 2,000 messages from interested citizens (Brody, 2015).

**Experimental Design**

A two-condition online experiment was created using the Qualtrics Survey Software platform. The subjects (*N* = 196) were recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk Human Intelligence Tasks (HITs) platform (mTurk) and were offered $0.75 in exchange for their participation in the 20-minute study (this is a fairly standard rate of pay for such studies; see Goodman, Cryder, and Cheema, 2013). All respondents had at least 95 percent approval ratings and greater than 500 HITs completed, as recommended by best practices (Peer, Vosgerau, and Acquisti, 2014). All data were collected on January 21, 2016. The survey included five attention check measures; any subjects who answered one or more of these questions incorrectly were removed from the final subject pool (*n* = 7).

After a pretest questionnaire measuring general political interest, media consumption, political trust, and social media engagement, subjects were randomly assigned to watch one of two video clips. Subjects in the first condition (*n* = 97) viewed an approximately six-minute clip of John Oliver’s *LWT* June 1, 2014, broadcast on net neutrality. The last two minutes of the clip featured a request for viewers to go to the FCC website to comment on net neutrality. During this time, the web address for the FCC comments site ([fcc.gov/comments](http://fcc.gov/comments)) appeared periodically on the bottom of the screen. For the final 45 seconds of the clip, Oliver got up from his anchor desk and passionately tried to incite “Internet trolls” toward action. Subjects in the second condition (*n* = 99) viewed an approximately four-minute clip of the June 1, 2014 *LWT* broadcast that excluded the call to action material; subjects still received all the same information about the issue and its potential political impact including explanation of U.S. Internet speeds, the role of the FCC, and the competing interests of service providers like Comcast and streaming services like Netflix.

Videos were captured via YouTube and edited to remove all background commentary, the scroll bar, ads, and suggestions for related videos. The edited videos were then uploaded
to a secure website and inserted into the survey experiment; a validation mechanism was set so that each subject could not click forward or backward within the survey or scroll forward through sections of the video. A set of recall questions was also included after each video along with a series of manipulation checks to confirm that viewers had paid attention to the content and interpreted the message and tone of each video correctly. A posttest questionnaire followed in all conditions, tapping key items including political efficacy, the likelihood of engaging with the net neutrality issue, issue knowledge, issue efficacy, and demographics.

The Amazon mTurk sample (final \( N = 290 \)) was evenly gender balanced (51.1 percent male; 48.9 percent female) with an average age of 37.77 years (\( SD = 11.08 \), range = 20–77 years). A total of 22.1 percent of the sample indicated that they had completed some college, with 36.4 percent completing a bachelors’ degree. A total of 47.8 percent of the sample identified as Democrats, 15.5 percent as Republicans, and 31.6 percent as Independents. The sample was 7.1 percent African American, 5.9 percent Asian, 4.1 percent Hispanic, and 80.4 percent Caucasian. The median household income fell between the categories of $25,000 to $49,999 and $50,000 to $74,999. Notably, the sample shows the most skew in terms of education, partisanship, and race (as is typical for mTurk samples; see Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012). While this is worth noting in terms of generalizability, given that we are primarily concerned with experimental effects, any skew is of less concern, as random assignment should mitigate any resulting bias.

**Key Measures**

Because randomization was effective, we do not control for any demographic or political variables. Key measures described here are therefore all outcome variables of interest.

Internal political efficacy—our measure of capacity—was measured by averaging five different measures (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”), featured in prior versions of the American National Election Study (see ⟨http://electionstudies.org/⟩): (1) “I consider myself to be well-qualified to participate in politics,” (2) “I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of important political issues facing our country,” (3) “I feel I could do as good a job in public office as most other people,” (4) “I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people,” and (5) “Sometimes, politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on” (final item reverse coded; \( \alpha = 0.84, M = 4.25, SD = 1.33 \)).

The other variables of interest are a variety of measures capturing intent to engage in political participation related to the issue of net neutrality. Specifically, we asked how likely subjects were (1 = “not at all likely” to 10 = “very likely”) to: (1) comment on the FCC’s website about net neutrality (\( M = 4.35, SD = 3.04 \)), (2) seek additional information about net neutrality (\( M = 6.43, SD = 2.92 \)), (3) talk to a friend or family member about net neutrality (\( M = 6.02, SD = 2.97 \)), (4) sign a petition about net neutrality (\( M = 6.02, SD = 3.20 \)), or (5) contact your member of Congress about net neutrality (\( M = 4.14, SD = 2.91 \)). These prospective behaviors, not surprisingly, are all correlated, with significant correlations ranging from 0.53 (between seeking information and contacting one’s Member of Congress) to 0.75 (between commenting and contacting). Still, we analyze them separately in order to isolate effects on specific low-cost behaviors.
In order to test our two hypotheses, we estimate a series of bivariate regression models to determine the effect of the condition to which people were exposed on outcomes including political efficacy, and the five political participation behaviors outlined above: (1) commenting on the FCC website, (2) signing a petition, (3) looking for additional information, (4) talking with others about the topic, and (5) contacting a politician about the issue. We present the results of these models in Table 1.

In general, we find support for H1, which predicted that exposure to a call to action would increase intentions to engage politically, but only for what we call “easy” political behaviors. These are behaviors that are either directly recommended by the show (commenting on the FCC website) or closely related to that recommendation (signing a petition), and those that are relatively low-cost—they can be done online in just a few minutes (Bode, 2017). For these two behaviors, means are significantly higher for those exposed to the call to action compared to those exposed to the shorter version of the LWT clip without the call to action (see Figure 1). These effects are fairly large, with those exposed to the call to action almost a point more likely to sign a petition (6.73 compared to 5.77), and similarly more likely to comment on the FCC’s website (5.18 compared to 4.29). For each measure, this represents a change of about one third of a standard deviation. Intention to engage in harder political behaviors (e.g., looking for additional information, talking with others about the topic, and contacting politicians about the issue), which take greater investment, is not affected by exposure to the call to action. This suggests that a political comedy show’s call to action is effective at mobilization in some circumstances.

However, we find no evidence that a call to action has any impact on capacity—or more specifically, on respondents’ internal political efficacy, and therefore no support for H2. There is no difference between the call to action and no call in terms of political efficacy. This suggests that the mechanism encouraging participation is mobilization, rather than increased capacity. We discuss the implications of these findings and their larger meaning for the future of political comedy effects research in the section that follows.

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We also estimated more complicated regression models, which included a range of demographic items, to look for differential treatment effects. However, other variables were not significantly predictive of our outcome measures, so we present the more parsimonious models for simplicity. Full regression models available upon request.
Discussion and Conclusions

In general, we are able to conclude that it matters when political comedy hosts ask their audiences to engage in an activity. A call to action promotes specific engagement in that activity, but not necessarily broader engagement on the issue or a sense of efficacy as a result.

Notably there is a sharp difference between people’s intent to engage in easy political behaviors (commenting on the FCC website or signing a petition) rather than hard behaviors (contacting a politician, talking to others about the issue, or seeking more information on the topic). This is in keeping with other research, which shows that exposure to political comedy content has a significant impact on the likelihood of engaging in easy political behaviors rather than activities that are hard or difficult, requiring more effort, skills, and a lengthier time commitment (Becker, 2013). It is worth noting, though, that first political behaviors can often help citizens to form habits of participation (Gerber, Green, and Shachar, 2003; Plutzer, 2002), and easy political behaviors can act as gateway behaviors, encouraging more difficult actions down the line (Bode, 2017; Bode et al., 2014; Vaccari et al., 2015). Future research might therefore consider the long-term implications of consistent exposure to calls to action.

In the same way that intent to engage in the suggested behavior does not spill over into broader intent to engage in complicated behaviors related to the issue, willingness and belief in one’s ability to engage in the suggested behavior does not instill a broader feeling of ability to act politically, or internal political efficacy. While previous research on political satire has found effects on political efficacy (Hoffman and Thomson, 2009), John Oliver’s style of satire may be more about information and activism than about pure comedy, which might be enough to dampen these effects. There is also some research that suggests that political efficacy is often an outcome of political participation (Finkel, 1985), in addition to a predictor of it, which might suggest that we could see political efficacy result down the line if people actually did engage in the participation that they intend to. Future research could follow up on these possibilities, paying greater attention to the role of political efficacy and examining under what conditions a call to action might increase it.
It is also possible that the call to action does not provide sufficient specificity in order to give people confidence in their ability to engage in politics. If greater detail were offered in terms of how to go about the behavior (how to navigate the FCC website), encouragement of the average citizen’s ability to engage in that behavior, or suggestions of other ways to get involved, we might see a boost in capacity in addition to the increase in mobilization that we do observe.

The study is limited by its sample, obtained through mTurk. Although a wealth of research now shows that such samples are comparable to others, especially for experimental research (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012; Clifford and Jerit, 2014; Levay, Freese, and Druckman, 2016; Necka et al., 2016), the sample is not representative, particularly on education, partisanship, and race, and there is some evidence that MTurk workers are more attentive (Hauser and Schwarz, 2016) and more aware of experiments (Chandler, Mueller, and Paolacci, 2014) than other experimental participants, and therefore we cannot be confident that other samples would respond similarly to our stimuli. It is further limited in that we consider only a single (edited) episode of *LWT*, so we cannot be sure that these effects generalize to calls to action more generally, or to other political comedy programs. It is also worth noting that in a study such as this, multiple goals related to comparability of conditions and external validity are in direct conflict. One goal is to maximize external validity—it is for this reason that we chose to use actual *LWT* clips, rather than something that could be more scripted and controlled, but with an unfamiliar actor rather than the known entity of John Oliver (for an example of how this can make a difference in effects, see Vraga et al., 2014). A second goal is to make everything except the experimental variation constant, in order to be able to isolate the causal mechanism for any effects seen. Here, the ideal would be two clips that are identical in length and content, but vary only in whether or not they include a call to action. However, there is no way to make clips of equal length and equal content and varying in terms of inclusion of call to action, particularly when dealing with existing footage in order to maximize external validity. For that reason, we chose to prioritize external validity, and the tradeoff is that the two clips are comparable in content but not in length. Finally, because we employ an experimental design, we cannot know to what extent the effects we see are generated by those who might not tune into this type of programming in the first place (Xenos, 2015). Finally, it is worth noting that our measures of participation reflect intent to participate, rather than any actual behavioral measures. Given that these are two separate steps toward participation (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987), we may only be seeing effects on preparticipation elements, which may or may not translate to actual participation. Future research should follow participants over time to see if they actually engage in the behaviors they intend to participate in, as well as to see the duration of any mobilizing effects.

The implications of this line of research are increasingly important as the number of shows like *LWT* increases, and as the audience for these types of programs continues to grow dramatically. *LWT* alone averaged 4.1 million weekly viewers in its first season (O’Connell, 2014), due mainly to “multiplatform views” (i.e., people may see it online or shared on social media) and “timeshifting” (recording for viewing later, or “DVRing”). In fact, *LWT* makes a point of sharing the lead story from each week’s episode on YouTube to counteract being broadcast originally on HBO, a premium subscription-based cable channel. In reality, the multiplatform emphasis of the show allows for the potential for much larger audiences, depending on how much it gets shared. That makes the effects we find—that John Oliver (and presumably other political comedy hosts) can have substantial effects on their audience’s willingness to take part in political activities—inherently scalable.
as well. These calls to action may have a particularly important impact on newly suffraged citizens (Plutzer, 2002), or those who have not engaged in politics before who are the heart of the late-night comedy audience (Young and Tisinger, 2006), as it may serve as a gateway behavior to additional information consumption (Feldman and Young, 2008), or to political participation (Bode et al., 2014).

In sum, our research suggests that *LWT* is having a direct, if limited effect on political participation and engagement via the mechanism of mobilization. Future research is needed to further tease out the effects of these calls to action and ultimately assess whether, over the longer term, we may begin to see incremental increases in viewers’ political capacity as well. For the time being, we can expect that calls to action featured on *LWT* and other political satire programs will at minimum encourage citizens to engage in easy political behaviors in an effort to directly influence key issue debates (Freelon et al., 2016).

**REFERENCES**


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