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# **Investigative Comedy: Redefining News and How We Get It**

An honors thesis presented to the  
Department of Communication,  
University at Albany, State University of New York  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in Journalism  
and  
graduation from The Honors College

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## Abstract

The investigative comedy genre rose to prominence over the last two decades and now dominates the late night industry. “The Daily Show” brought political satire to mainstream American television at a time when sensationalized 24/7 cable news coverage and partisanship in the national government dominated political discourse. Jon Stewart, then a little-known comedian from New Jersey, brought younger and more informed audiences to his show through his style of comedy—one that spoke truth to power and called out hypocrisy when he saw it. The show entertained and taught viewers about the mainstream media, politics, and lesser-known issues that journalists failed to cover. Stewart also became part of the political conversation for much of his tenure: many election candidates stopped by to make their pitches and debate with him on the issues.

The origins of investigative comedy grew out of two parallel developments in television: broadcast news and late night, both of which have been airing since the 1950s. The inspiration for a political satire show came from Britain’s experimentation with the genre in the 1960s and 1990s, but U.S. audiences would not see a serious attempt at this kind of comedy until Chevy Chase’s “Weekend Update” in early seasons of Saturday Night Live.

Variations of his comedic style now dominate late night, as many “Daily Show” alumni including Stephen Colbert, Trevor Noah, Samantha Bee, Hasan Minhaj, and John Oliver each host their own shows. As popular as investigative comedy has become, can these shows fundamentally change institutions of power for the better? Using five overarching principles of Stewart’s style in investigative comedy—Target the powerful, determine the larger narrative of the piece, highlight the process of what happens behind the scenes, call out the hypocrisy as host, and treat the subjects like idiots when out in the field—I analyze four significant moments in investigative comedy: Jon Stewart’s appearance on *Crossfire* (2005), John Oliver’s Net Neutrality pieces and the Federal Communications Commission’s website crashes (2014, 2017), Hasan Minhaj’s Student Loan piece and the subsequent testimony (2019), and Jon Stewart and the 9/11 first responders’ legislative fight with Congress for the Victim Compensation Fund (2010, 2015, 2019). The first three cases find that the shows did enough to start a conversation about the issues raised in each episode, but they did not create change in policies that would remedy those issues because the shows are not in the position of power and accountability to do so. The fourth case is unique because the bill was passed, but only after most of the comedy was dropped for pure activism.

While investigative comedy is not a perfect genre, there are a few new routes that it can take: grassroots activism, more investigative “reporting,” more diverse topics, and a post-Trump comedy era all done by a more diverse group of late night hosts. Ultimately, the journalist still has the duty to keep institutions of power accountable, so the mainstream media needs to reform, first.

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## Foreword

I was not a news junkie until I was halfway through high school.

When I was growing up, my parents and I used to watch “Fox 5 News” together every weeknight. Rarely have I understood the gravity of what then-anchors Ernie Arnastos and Rosanna Scotto said, but watching the news was our way of spending family time. In fact, we used to jokingly taunt and call each other to the room with the show’s slogan: “It’s 10 p.m., do you know where your children are?” After a few host changes, we switched to “PIX 11 News.” By then, I wasn’t in my parents’ room every night, but I saw them flipping between news channels more often.

In my family, news was and still is a sacred treasure. My grandma and grandpa turn on last night’s Hong Kong news every morning at 11:30 a.m. Then, they would read the “Sing Tao Daily” during their afternoon teatime at 3:15 p.m. My dad used to come home from work and watch “Nightly Business Report” and “PBS Newshour” back to back before dinner. While my mom has only picked up “PBS Newshour” recently, she is the only one that still sticks to the 10 p.m. news these days. After the TV news, she winds down with the same “Sing Tao Daily” newspaper that my grandparents started with.

I, on the other hand, rarely kept up with the news but remember watching a few things from the past. I would absorb random bits of CNN at the airport like any bored traveler would. I remember watching all three Presidential debates of 2012 because I suddenly had an interest in American history in 8th grade. I found Bob Schieffer’s moderating in the third debate particularly interesting and the conversations between then-Governor Mitt Romney and President Obama thought-provoking. I also remember Mitt Romney’s criticism of Obama’s terrorism response and President Obama’s relatively poor performance in the first debate. While I could not vote yet, those

debates helped me frame what American politics looks like through the news. Otherwise, I did not have a routine like the rest of my family.

That changed in Summer 2015. I chose my high school major, Law & Society, after finishing sophomore year at Brooklyn Technical High School. I initially wanted to do Social Science Research, the only other non-STEM major of 17. However, my parents said because I liked to weigh arguments before making decisions, Law & Society might be a better choice for me. So, I switched majors the night before the submission was due.

2015 was an interesting year, to say the least. The 2016 election cycle was just beginning. President Obama was hyping up the country for the next election. Political polarization really came to the forefront, as if the last six years were not obvious enough. Republicans and Democrats alike piled up candidates and began campaigning. Cable news was having a field day with the chaos.

As much as I was still learning about the world of politics and news, I *did* know that 2016 was going to be a pivotal year. I felt that the end of the Obama presidency was a mirror that the country did not want to face. With government institutions constantly in gridlock and the mainstream media harping about the latest mass shooting or press conference, it seemed like something in American society would fundamentally change. I did not know what it was nor how bad it would be, but I knew something had to happen with so much political tension.

2016 was also personally pivotal because I was three months shy from being able to vote. I knew I didn't want to miss an election once I turned 18 (but I have now missed two elections because of absentee clerical errors). Becoming an adult without having a say in such a consequential presidential election made me feel more helpless than most, even before I knew where the country was actually going.

When I heard about the shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, I was particularly frustrated about the country's gridlock and how

people treat each other. This shooting tugged my emotions almost as hard as the Sandy Hook's shooting did. Maybe it was because this shooting was so racially charged and blatantly a hate crime. Maybe it was because despite the generosity of the parishioners, the shooter decided to kill them anyway.

While I was on Facebook, I came across Jon Stewart's monologue. I clicked on the video thinking it was a news clip. The show started with light laughter from the audience, but as Stewart got more serious about his words, the laughter stopped. Watching him confess that he "hadn't done his job" of writing jokes brought some odd relief for me (Stewart, 2015 0:23). The mildly sarcastic yet very authentic tone was a refreshing twist. I did not know he was a comedian and I didn't care then. I have learned to appreciate good writing and persuasion, so I knew when I saw it. I was hooked.

I kept watching what would eventually become the end of Stewart's run on "The Daily Show," including his final interview with President Obama. Eventually, I realized I was entering the late-night genre at the time of a massive shift: most of the cable and network late-night hosts were retiring or moving up time slots to take over for former hosts. Stephen Colbert was going to begin his run on "The Late Show" in early September and Trevor Noah was going to begin his run on "The Daily Show" three weeks later. I filled up the rest of my summer by watching some of Jon Stewart's famous clips. I binged "The Rally to Restore Sanity," most of the very limited YouTube clips that the Comedy Central channel had up at the time, Stewart's 9/11 monologue, his 2012 debate with Bill O'Reilly, the "Crossfire" appearance, some of The Writers' Strike episodes, most of his appearances on other shows, and the Glenn Beck monologue. I also skimmed a few "Colbert Report" and David Letterman "Late Show" episodes. I researched and read how Stewart got into late night and what his legacy is. While I still have not watched every episode of Stewart's show,



even to this day, I had a pretty good understanding of late night's history from Letterman's "Late Night" forward by the end of the summer.

Why was Jon Stewart so appealing to me? I appreciated evidence-based burns and sarcasm before I understood the gravity of many topics he talked about. Stewart was a teacher and a storyteller who showed America how its own country worked using impressions, clips, and a handful of photoshop. Everything in the show seemed to have a story arc that resolved (or seemed to resolve) nicely. The clips were short enough to watch and spread quickly. Ultimately, it was a fresh breath of air in "news" that I did not know I needed. Learning while laughing was a dream-come-true for a teenager still figuring out how to be an active citizen, especially in what was becoming a darker world.

Stewart's successors became my main source of news about politics for a few years. I didn't turn to hard news sources until I saw the need for other perspectives and other types of stories. Stewart introduced me to a different kind of "journalism," one that is more opinionated, idealistic and took its watchdog role seriously. I chose to study Journalism at the University at Albany, partially because I was inspired by his and his successors' works, even though none of them are journalists. For those who have not heard of investigative comedy or its influence, I hope to introduce the genre here.

## **Introduction**

News has always been a part of human history as long as we have been communicating. Anthropologists, historians, and sociologists say that awareness of what happens beyond one's own experiences ensures security, control, and confidence (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1). News is a fundamental connection between the public and its leaders, from oral recitations to virtual and

augmented realities. How news spreads will continue to evolve as long as there is a desire to know and share what is going on in the world.

With each innovation in the journalism industry, more citizens become consumers of local, national, and world events. They can access more information and make better decisions about their daily lives. They can share these resources with others almost instantly. No matter how news is delivered, those that consume feel secure knowing they can take control of their own lives because they know what happens around them.

While news creates an information channel between the public and its leaders, political satire became a byproduct of that information flow. Satire's purpose, unlike news, was to "use sarcasm and/or humor to point out the foibles, incompetence, or corruption of political leaders and government actions" or "poke fun at society, daily life, or certain classes of people," according to Penn State Erie Political Science Professor Robert Speel (Marquette). It uses humor through a combination of entertainment and statement of beliefs to make its points as early as 2,400 years ago, when "the ancient Greek dramatist Aristophanes, sometimes called the father of comedy, satirized Athenian leaders and their conduct of the Peloponnesian War."

Those in the United States fighting for independence from British rule used satire as social commentary centuries later, such as in Ben Franklin's "Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One" written in 1773. In the 19th century, satire became predominantly visual: political cartoons criticized politics and public officials through caricatures of the subjects. Cartoonist Thomas Nast of "The Harper Magazine" created the symbols of the Republican and Democratic parties in the second half of the 19th century and those have been used ever since (Marquette). Orson Welles's radio broadcast of "War of the Worlds" was said to have freaked out enough citizens to create mass panic, but this story is now being challenged with the assertion that

the newspaper industry created the narrative to recover their failing circulations (Pooley and Socolow).

Like every other medium before it, television broadly had twin parallel developments of news and entertainment programs. Television would enter U.S. homes in the 1950s and most sets only had the “Big Three” channels: ABC, CBS, and NBC. Once CBS jumped from radio to television with “Douglas Edwards With the News” in 1950, ABC and NBC eventually followed with their competing 6:30 p.m. programs.

Entertainment programs, however, ran throughout the rest of the day. They were mostly soap operas and late night talk shows. Late night talk shows began with NBC’s “Tonight starring Steve Allen” in 1954, but the genre did not become popular until his successor’s iteration in “The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson.”

Meanwhile, the United Kingdom experimented with the satire genre and one of the more successful shows was “That Was The Week That Was” from 1962 to 1963. A U.S. version also aired on NBC in 1964 and 1965 with the same host (Ramsey). In 1975, Chevy Chase would be the first in the U.S. to try political satire with “Weekend Update” on “Saturday Night Live” and the segment still runs today (Edgars, Kaplan). HBO would try their own show, “Not Necessarily the News,” from 1983 to 1990 but it ended after 8 seasons. Back in Britain, BBC Radio 4 aired the radio show “On The Hour” from 1991 to 1992 and BBC2 aired the television show “The Day Today.” Both were not unlike the premise of “The Daily Show” across the pond. Other than Chase’s “Weekend Update,” satire would not take hold in the U.S. until the early 2000s.

In 1980, cable and 24/7 cable news channels entered the U.S. media—first with CNN, then MSNBC and Fox News. The news business would go down a familiar path newspapers once went. Like how the established newspapers competed with more tabloid-styled publications for circulation,

the more serious network news channels were competing with the more sensational cable news channels for ratings.

Despite this new competition, cable news was embraced by the citizenry and the government alike because it was much more accessible than the nightly programs. The public could find the news whenever it was most convenient for them, while the government could create the news whenever it was most convenient for them. If the public and its leaders can reach each other with the media, this was thought to be an ideally functioning society, and everyone benefited. The *quality* of news was almost never questioned for over two decades, so the line between news and entertainment gradually blurred.

News has been redefining itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in the last five years. Fake news, alternative facts, truthiness, post-truth, media literacy—these are just some of the words used to describe the current media landscape. Once a world full of scheduled newspaper deliveries, radio, and television broadcasts has now become one full of fragmented mobile attention, social media bubbles, and endless push notifications.

No, we are not crazy. The news is no longer what it used to be. It is changing before our eyes. News cannot seem to cover news. Objectivity does not exist. Today's lunacy smacks you in the face. The audience is so ironic and jaded that no amount of news can get the point across and keep the citizenry informed. How did we get here?

Enter Comedy Central's "The Daily Show" in 1996, which was launched with ESPN commentator Craig Kilborn. He quietly left after two years to host "The Late Late Show" on CBS (Smith xviii). The successor, however, would redefine the public's understanding of the news and bring the show to prominence and relevance. This iteration of political satire became known as investigative comedy, a name used by Robert Thompson, director of Syracuse University's Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture (Associated Press). It is a genre that treads the fine line

between news and entertainment, sometimes providing clarity in an increasingly confusing media landscape and other times just adding to the confusion. While Stewart has often been cited as the pioneer, his successors, like Hasan Minhaj, John Oliver and Samantha Bee, are taking the original form and using their own strengths to create their own spins on the formula.

Much of the current investigative comedy literature, however much there is, tends to deal with perceptions of the show. Critics say that these shows are politically liberal agendas. Some supporters claim these shows are journalism because they do the craft just as well, if not better, than the real reporters. These range of assertions are worth looking into, but what is more important is how these shows affect institutions of power, such as the media and the government. In order to assess this, one needs to examine the history of television journalism, how it paralleled the history of late night, and how this led to the birth of investigative comedy.

“The Daily Show” and many other investigative comedy shows have developed a show formula that consists of calling out media figures and politicians through jokes and impersonations. Because the shows squarely target politicians, late night shows have now become a coveted political campaign spot for them over the last two decades. At times, investigative comedy shows called for minimal grassroots activism, such as trolling the comments sections, donating to Super PACs, and shaming Congress to pass certain laws (Smith 279). Other times, they merely highlighted conversations about underrepresented populations and issues while hosts made bad puns from their sets with artistic photoshop.

Investigative comedy has played and will continue to play a role in U.S. media and political spheres, despite many late night investigative comedians denying their roles in reshaping the landscape. However, the comedians are correct that they are not journalists: the former are not bound by the same laws and ethics the latter are bound to. This allows comedians to experiment with form and actively advocate for issues. However, this also means that investigative comedy

ultimately has very little effect on the events in Washington D. C. and the institutions they make jokes about.

The next section will go over the history of broadcast news and late night that helped create the circumstances for “The Daily Show’s” rise. Then, we will examine some elements of Stewart’s investigative comedy. Next, we will look at a few case studies over the years and analyze them using these investigative comedy principles, seeing whether these helped create change in institutions of power. Finally, we will close with whether investigative comedy truly has an effect on the institutions it targets and criticizes.

### **Background: The Evolutions of Broadcast News and Late Night**

While television has existed since the 1920s, home-owned TVs have not been widely used in the U.S. until the 1950s. Back then, there were only a few channels and very few programs. The direction the satellite pointed still mattered and one little shift could ruin your feed. Like for any medium, news emerged rather quickly with the widespread use of TVs. The three ‘big’ networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS, each scrambled to get a news show on the air. However, CBS was the first to successfully do so, airing from New York’s WCBW twice a day in 1941.

TV news did not truly become a staple to the average American home until Walter Cronkite’s “CBS Evening News” in 1962 (Baym 10). ABC and NBC aired their own competitive broadcasts soon after. This began what many called the “Golden Age of Broadcast News,” when the Big Three brought American families to the TV set every night at 6:30 p.m. to learn what went on in the world (11). Reading the newspapers may still have been part of many people’s routines but watching the broadcast news was quickly rising as America’s favorite source of news. The Big Three had 90 percent of all TV ratings by the end of the 1960s (10). Print and broadcast news were able to

preserve their authoritative nature that citizens have come to trust and depend on. Like how every printed word was seen as “the truth,” every word that came out of anchors’ mouths was also seen as “the truth” (11). The trust was even more apparent with television, however, because viewers could see who was reading the news to them. They could see the emotions (or lack thereof compared to today’s broadcasts) that anchors displayed. They could see the crawl while correspondents stood outdoors live at the scene. The news was no longer intangible pictures and stories on the page. The stories were in front of them on the screen. News became more accessible just as how it intended to be.

Geoffrey Baym called this period “High-Modern Journalism” and highlights the era’s two distinct features. First, news and entertainment were two clearly separated departments that never interacted. News aired from New York City while entertainment aired from Los Angeles. Executives enforced this separation, such as when then-CBS President Richard Salant rejected a request on behalf of Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather to appear on Tom Snyder’s “The Tomorrow Show,” saying that late night TV was not a “suitable framework for the excellent professional journalists of CBS News” (32). Second, the newscasts during this period reported the news for most of the 30-minute program, but left a few minutes at the end for a senior journalist to provide commentary. The commentary had no graphics and it was cited as the individual’s work, as opposed to the rest of the program, which was simply “the news” (32-33). Thus, opinion was still distinguished from the news even within the same program. The executives at the time believed providing “objective” news was their civic responsibility and this perception led to the styling of the “authoritative voice” that audiences associated with Walter Cronkite (10-12, 32-33).

Broadcast news kept that formula for almost three decades. When Cable News Network debuted the first 24-hour news network in 1980, TV news ratings would never be so high and concentrated ever again. The Big Three now had competition from cable for ratings. While many

continued to watch network news, some switched to CNN as their primary news source. The news became even more accessible than before because it was now instantaneous. While it pales in comparison to how news adapts to any media platform today, cable news was revolutionary then because it was the first time news was not delivered at a scheduled time. People no longer had to wait all day for a neatly packaged 30-minute summary of all the events in the world, nor did they have to wait until the next morning for the paper. The news was “there” and ready to be watched whenever people switched to the channel. The world was spinning all around them and the audience could tune in whenever it was most convenient for them to be in front of the TV.

News also became livelier thanks in part to the anchors, whose personalities were much less stoic than those of the previous era. As these news anchors spoke, the screen complemented their narrations by adding B-roll of photos and unedited video footage. These clips were quicker, but they also made abstract concepts in Washington, such as the “House votes” and “The President,” more tangible (35). The subjects’ personalities also became more important to audience perception (34). Each day’s shows were filled with the latest events around the world, sometimes with difficulty. While major world events, like the fall of the Soviet Union, the First Gulf War, and the Clinton impeachment filled shows’ materials for weeks (to the point of repeating the same points over and over again), there were other days where there was “little” news to report because the biggest stories that day would not have attracted eyeballs to the screen (34). Hours after hours of less-than-dire stories drove the need to fill airtime that was appealing enough for viewers to stay, but not controversial enough to make them question their anchors. That need to balance the “glamour” of the news presentation and the “authoritative voice” of the anchors blurred the line between news and opinion in TV, let alone in other news media (Cutbirth 21).

For sixteen years, CNN dominated the cable airwaves as the only major cable news channel. Then MSNBC, a cable extension of NBC, and FOX News both launched in 1996 (Smith 18). As



discussed, the cable channels presented news in a more informal and paradoxically less informative way than its more neatly packaged competitors and predecessors. The original three empires of ABC, NBC, and CBS as well as the print publications, were losing views and decreasing their paper circulations. The news will continue to fracture like this throughout the next two decades at varying speeds.

Before 1996, satire was beginning to take shape, but it mostly occurred on British TV. “That Was The Week That Was,” or TW3, debuted in 1962. This show was one of the first to actively satirize political figures and significant events. Using sketches, monologues, and debates, performers improvised with suggestions from the audience and addressed topics like the BBC, the British monarchy, and social hypocrisy (Ess). Very few notable shows would rise to TW3’s former prominence until “On the Hour” and “The Day Today” in 1991 and 1994, respectively. These shows also ran for no more than two years each, but Britain experimented far more with satire in the 20th century than the U.S. did.

Back in the U.S., NBC debuted its first American talk show, “Tonight starring Steve Allen,” in 1954, four years after “Douglas Edwards With the News” aired on CBS. In 1962, “The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson,” aired on NBC and “CBS Evening News” with Walter Cronkite aired months apart from each other. “The Tonight Show” aired at 10 p.m., long after the news shows were done. Carson’s show first ran for 90 minutes, then it was reduced to 60 minutes. The format was rather simple and very similar to that of Steve Allen’s show: a monologue of jokes (which were usually one-liners), a sketch, a few guests, then a performance by a musical guest or a stand-up comedian. This format is mostly in-tact today with slight variations, from Letterman and Leno to Colbert, Fallon, and Kimmel (G. Kennedy).

After Johnny Carson began his run of “The Tonight Show,” David Letterman began the midnight program “Late Night” two decades later. After NBC did not pick David Letterman as

Carson's successor in 1991, Letterman jumped to CBS in 1993 to create "The Late Show," a direct competitor to "The Tonight Show," which the latter would be hosted by Jay Leno (Carter). The Letterman-Leno late night war would ensue. CBS and NBC would battle in late night ratings for the next 21 years.

Meanwhile on cable, Viacom's Comedy Central decided that they, too, wanted to have their own late night program. Inspired by "The Day Today's" short run of news parodies and fake news in Britain, Lizz Winstead and Madeleine Smithberg created and premiered "The Daily Show" in 1996. ESPN sportscaster Craig Kilborn hosted for the first three years. The original "Daily Show," modeling after its British counterpart and taking a page out of the late night book, was a 30-minute fake news show with headlines (that resembled a monologue with clips), a field piece, and a guest each night (Smith xvii). The set was also designed to look like a real news show.

Craig Kilborn left abruptly in late 1998 when he signed with David Letterman to be the second "Late Late Show" host on CBS, competitor to "Late Night" that was succeeded by Conan O'Brien after Letterman left (xviii). For a few months, Viacom scrambled to find a new host. They took a chance on Jon Stewart, a stand-up comedian from New Jersey that was fresh off a few movie cameos and the cancelled "Jon Stewart Show" on MTV. Stewart began hosting "The Daily Show" in January 1999 and the rest was history.

## **Jon Stewart's Principles**

Jon Stewart's satirical bite was not immediately apparent when he first took the host's chair. With the help of upcoming political events such as the U.S. 2000 presidential election and a tug for power with the holdover Kilborn writers, Stewart began to find the direction he wanted to take with the show (Smith 9-10).

“The Daily Show (The Book): An Oral History” records Stewart’s tenure and the evolution that turned the show into the media watchdog for which it became known. Stewart’s brand of investigative comedy took shape based on the world events and the issues the show wanted to cover. No matter which era, the show’s staff and their work are guided by several principles that are key to understanding how investigative comedy works. Of course, this is not an extensive list nor a one-size-fits-all formula for Stewart’s brand of satire. Nevertheless, these will be key to understanding why pieces were as pointed and hard-hitting as they were.

**The first principle of Stewart’s brand of investigative comedy is to target those who have power and a voice, such as politicians and the media.** Inspired by George Carlin, who “wove social criticism into his jokes and riff[ed] about dirty words, organized religion, and hypocritical politicians,” the show went from “creating funny spoof headlines” to “making fun of the news” in the name of making the show more relevant in understanding reality (Smith 6-7, 23). One way the show made fun of those in power during the early days was to use news media conventions in “slightly exaggerated or subtle ways” (like camera turns) to make the story itself have purpose (7). Thanks to the improvement in video searching technology across Stewart’s tenure—VHS tapes, TiVos, then SnapStream—this process evolved into retrieving clips of people saying opposite things and playing them one after the other to highlight the hypocrisy (Smolkin, Smith 259).

“The Daily Show” staff say “Bush v. Bush” was the first example of this technique, when Texas Governor George W. Bush in 2000 debated President George W. Bush in 2003 about use of military force, Iraq, and diplomacy (Smith 106-108). Although the segment was short, Stewart and his team effectively constructed a narrative of Bush disagreeing with himself. By cutting the clips to sound like a debate, the piece highlighted President Bush’s flip-flop in foreign policy after he became

president. While the segment was mostly done to see if the concept would work (and for laughs), this technique has become standard practice of more and more broadcast newsrooms.

Writers and correspondents across Stewart's tenure struggled with how to write segments sometimes, mainly because what Stewart wanted for a piece went beyond the setup-punchline formula of talk show monologues and the randomly targeted slapstick comedy of Kilborn's "Daily Show" era. Thus, Stewart often suggested to give the segments **a point of view or intent, which is the second principle**. This meant being passionate about what one wrote and talking about the larger narrative beyond the actual event (59, 323). It also meant talking about what *should* be done or what larger hopes one might have about the issues discussed (148-149).

Lauren Sarver Means, a writer and producer, said having that point of view became especially important when issues were confusing or uncomfortable, and she remembered Stewart offering this advice:

"If it makes you uncomfortable, that's not necessarily an impediment to what you're trying to say... [If you are confused about something,] write that confusion into th[e] piece. If you're upset about [this issue], fall into whatever is keeping you from writing this... If you're feeling scared, make fun of what you feel... Part of the challenge that keeps [the show] exciting [is] making yourself uncomfortable" (300, 333).

In traditional journalism, having a point of view or taking sides in a story is often shunned, but having an opinion can be extremely effective when done correctly. Op-Ed sections of newspapers and commentaries of the High-Modern era are prime examples of this in more traditional platforms. However, late night is ultimately an entertainment business, so comedians can write these segments freely without being bound to journalistic conventions and mannerisms (G.

Kennedy, Smith 31, 227). Stewart took the newsroom processes of fact-checking and interviewing, combined it with a point of view, placed it in a larger narrative of telling the truth, and sprinkled the entire piece with jokes that moved the story from one point to the next. Ultimately, this allows the show to tell more effective and pointed stories that highlight a specific point of view.

Amid an increasingly fractured media system and government, Stewart found his niche in investigative comedy early when he focused his work on what *is not* seen. Thus, **the third principle of his style was to highlight what happens behind the scenes: between “meeting and the announcement or policy change,” the “public policy and the strategizing that went into creating it,” or “the space between the press secretary and the politician” (Smith 47-48, 104, 296).** What policymakers planned behind the scenes often did not match up with what the public saw, so the show found many important contradictions here (109). Exposing the space between the theory and the reality of policies was powerful, especially when discussing how policy was implemented (334).

**The fourth principle of Stewart’s style was simple: the host called out the hypocrisy (39).** The host’s role on investigative comedy shows resembles the “authoritative” nature of newscasters during the Golden Age of Broadcast News. Throughout Stewart’s “Daily Show” tenure, his role as the hypocrisy-highlighter has not changed much and this helped create the audience’s perception of Stewart as the new “authoritative voice” in an increasingly sensationalized media landscape. On the other hand, the correspondents’ roles have evolved especially for field pieces. Early in the show, correspondents presented the idiocy of an issue while Stewart called that idiocy out. The host reigns in the crazy statements that correspondents say and contextualizes them in reality. This dynamic between the hosts and the correspondents resembles a journalist fact-checking a source during the interview. Stewart held the correspondents “accountable” for their words the same way a journalist kept the source accountable for their words. The only difference is, “The Daily

Show” *intentionally* highlighted the idiocy to make a point. Co-creator Lizz Winstead explained that relationship this way:

“Instead of Jon playing a character—the news anchor, one of the derelicts in a derelict world of media... the correspondents present[ed] the idiocy, and then Jon is the person who calls out the idiocy with the eloquence that the viewer wishes they had. And he did it in a way that’s not condescending, it’s not smug. It’s funny, it’s emotional, it’s calling out bullshit. So Jon became the voice of the audience” (39).

Later in the show’s development, Stewart decided that correspondents did not need to present the idiocy in a facade and could just be themselves, attacking an issue in a more organic way. This meant explicitly saying that the view was crazy and unreasonable (instead of embodying that crazy and unreasonable mindset to make the same point). Stewart called this “moving from caricature to character” (171).

While in the field, however, the correspondents were told, “**Whoever the subjects were, treat them like crazy idiots. Give subjects their say and let *them* respond to the contrarian view**” (40, 134). This, as David Javerbaum puts it, makes fun of society by highlighting the “unreliable narrators” who treat the subjects poorly (40).

In fact, Stephen Colbert often told future correspondents to “hang their souls at the door,” which meant that they were to “[take] a character of a correspondent who has no interest other than getting what he needs out of the person [they’re] interviewing... in a purely parasitic relationship, no matter what the truth is” (92-94).

Rob Riggle, a correspondent from an earlier era of the show, shared Colbert’s advice with newer correspondent Al Madrigal. The points summarize the correspondent’s role on the show:

- “1) Burn Tape! Tape is cheap, keep talking and keep them talking...
- 2) Break up questions... Don't let them see where you're going.
- 3) Play the silence.
- 4) Match energy with [the] subject.
- 5) Discover things in the moment! Be aware of when those 'discoveries' happen.
- 6) Always be asking yourself... 'What's my point of view on this subject?'
- 7) You have to think it's funny. Find a way to make that happen...
- 8) Get clear on 3-5 things you want your subject to say and don't leave until you get them.
- 9) Understand the real point... what's behind all this?
- 10) Character is key! Understand your P.O.V. on this issue and you will be able to react spontaneously in the moment” (322).

The references to point of view and the larger narrative also show the importance of underlying issues while creating each segment of the show.

While specificity does not explicitly define investigative comedy, Stewart emphasized it when advising many of the correspondents and writers. A joke about something specific makes the premise funnier. It is direct and targets a specific interest. Landing that powerful conversational language was for what Stewart always strived (63).

### **Case Studies: Can investigative comedians influence the media, government, and other institutions of power?**

While many nights of investigative comedy highlighted important issues and made jokes about them, there were times when the shows might be noticed by the media or influence the

outside world. Using the five principles previously discussed, we will analyze each case study and discuss whether and how this was effective for clicks but not effective enough to create change in institutions that wield societal power.

#### Jon Stewart's Crossfire Appearance (2004)

Perhaps one of the most famous cases of Stewart's growing voice in the media landscape was his appearance on CNN's "Crossfire." After saying "Crossfire" was bad on his show, Stewart decided that it was better to confront hosts Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala as a guest (Popkin 5). He clarified that debate shows like theirs were "hurting America" and "doing theater, which is disingenuous" because sensationalizing news in an already confusing media landscape ultimately hurts the voters who are trying to understand politicians and helps politicians' political strategies by creating pointless conflict (Begala et. al 2:58, 5:16, 6:58).

While the show was not a traditionally written segment, Stewart found ways to use his principles in his arguments. He specifically targets debate shows like "Crossfire" for not asking the hard questions, as news shows have that power and duty to hold politicians accountable. Co-host Tucker Carlson took Jon Stewart to task, asking him why he did not ask presidential candidate John Kerry more hard-hitting questions. Stewart replied, "I don't care... I didn't realize that news organizations look to Comedy Central for cues on integrity" (5:06, 5:35). Stewart effectively denies the responsibility of asking politicians the serious questions because as a comedian, asking hard questions is not his job.

Stewart made his larger narrative clear from the beginning: the mainstream media must do better at asking people of power questions that clarify the political landscape and inform the public. His appearance was effective because it highlighted Carlson's hypocrisy over what the journalist's



role should be. For example, Carlson's asking Stewart about the latter's questions backfired as Stewart explained how Spin Alley (even just the name) creates the perception that the mainstream media is helping the politicians, let alone how journalists scramble and chase around the room asking politicians for answers (11:27). Stewart exposed the process of journalism after debates, about which most Americans (especially during that time) might not have known.

This confrontation was significant in Stewart's career because it was the first time he wasn't attacking a show from his desk, with the research and support of his production team. As a guest on "Crossfire," Stewart was more vulnerable to the show's questions and accusations. The event was also significant because Stewart and his team, who were mostly hidden from public view for the first five years, hopped into the political spotlight after this appearance. As "The Daily Show" covered the 2004 presidential election, its coverage contributed to voters' perceptions of the race, even if it did not do so intentionally (Cutbirth 1, 4, 17).

The appearance also influenced CNN executives' decision to cancel the show months after the appearance. CNN President Jonathan Klein cited Stewart's reasoning as a factor for cancelling "Crossfire," which aligned with Klein's desire to change the tone of the network (Begala, Smith 147). The cancellation was temporary, however, because "Crossfire" rebooted in 2013. The show did not make it that far this time because the Malaysian Airlines crash coverages stalled production of the show. Thus, the show was cancelled once again.

While Stewart effectively contributed to cancelling "Crossfire," the principles he advocated for—putting on debate rather than theater, getting politicians to answer the questions, and journalists using their platforms to ask those questions—haven't been put to practice seriously enough yet. Since "Crossfire" in 2004, even more debate shows have appeared on CNN and other cable news channels. Panels have lost control and correspondent Desi Lydic highlighted this in

Trevor Noah's era. However, this observation might reflect the overall media landscape that continues to fracture, including whether CNN can curb endless debates on their shows (Lydic et. al).

What constitutes "effectively changing institutions?" If changing institutions entails tangible actions like cancelling shows, then yes, Stewart was able to cancel *one* cable show of at least 71 cable shows at the time. Was Stewart able to change the culture of cable debate shows? No. Nevertheless, by singling out the media in their neglect to hold politicians' feet to the fire, Stewart began to take the role of media watchdog, however seriously he took it.

"Breaking" the Internet for Net Neutrality (2014, 2017)

John Oliver, Jon Stewart's original pick for successor on "The Daily Show," became famous for his long-form pieces on normally dry topics and over-the-top satirical stunts on "Last Week Tonight." Oliver paid off medical debt (which cost more than Oprah Winfrey's "You Get a Car" surprise), brought ridiculous props to his show (such as cake that encompassed the entire stage area), and performed a musical number in Times Square after HBO won its legal battle. Few pieces, however, created as much press as his original Net Neutrality piece.

In the segment, Oliver walks the viewer through what "Net Neutrality" is and who is advocating for which side of the issue (Oliver, 2014 1:57). He then makes a case for preserving the system so that the Internet companies are not able to treat customers differently based on how much companies are paid. The story is laced with jokes about cable companies being monopolies, Estonia having better internet than the U.S., and companies getting away with anything when they put the conditions in the terms of agreement (8:06, 10:16). Oliver provided a possible solution to the Federal Communications Commission's proposed rule by mentioning the commission was taking

feedback on its website. He appealed to internet trolls at the end of the segment in a locker room-styled speech:

“For once in your life, we need to channel that anger. That badly spelled vile that you normally reserve for unforgivable attacks on actresses you seem to think they’ve put on weight, or politicians you disagree with, or photos of your ex-girlfriend getting on with her life, or non-white actors being cast as fictional characters... We need you to get out there, and for once in your lives, focus your indiscriminate rage in a useful direction. Seize your moment, my lovely trolls. Turn on caps lock, and fly my pretties, fly!” (12:25).

The next day, the FCC site crashed. After a few weeks, the FCC instituted protections for net neutrality and the internet was saved. For now, the segment was a success: Oliver pointed out the issue, mobilized his viewers by getting them to do a relatively simple task, and prevented a change in policy.

Oliver had a unique standing in 2014’s late night scene compared to the rest of his “Daily Show” alumni: his show was on a premium network and played no advertisements. Hasan Minhaj’s “Patriot Act” would enjoy the same benefits starting late 2018, but Oliver was able to innovate the already novel form of investigative comedy with his show. While the rest of his colleagues had their segments broken up into pieces, which doesn’t allow hosts to explain the issues and the people involved as thoroughly, Oliver essentially began many shows’ segments assuming the viewer knows little about the issue he’s going to discuss. This is not to say that Stewart or any other host could not explain the issue as well because of commercials, however. Oliver just had one less obstacle to worry about during production.

Like in many of his segments, net neutrality was a topic that needed to be unpacked. According to Stewart's principles, he successfully questioned the process of creating the proposed rules and targeted the powerful FCC, including a few who were former executives of cable companies charged with regulating their former employers. The larger narrative, which was covered by reporters the next day, was to save net neutrality by encouraging internet trolls to crash the FCC comments section. Oliver repeatedly calls out Internet companies' hypocritical statements about being committed to a "open and free Internet" (9:30). He reinforced his accusation of hypocrisy by agreeing with their subjects' idiocy and taking it further. For example, when the executive says that Comcast and Time Warner do not compete over which cities they serve, Oliver says "You could not be describing a monopoly more clearly" (7:50). By sarcastically propelling the unsound argument, he implied why it did not stand in the first place.

While the virality of the segment did not *change* policy, it at least reinforced and added to existing policy. Net neutrality was reclassified as Title II under the Communications Act of 1934, giving it stronger legal protections (Oliver, 2017 5:15). However, these legal protections were not strong enough. In 2017, Oliver did a follow-up segment because the rules were under threat again by new FCC Chairman Ajit Pai. The FCC made it harder to get to the comments section, so Oliver's team made a custom link ([gofccyourself.com](http://gofccyourself.com)) and encouraged viewers to flood the site again (16:10).

Once again, the site crashed. However, net neutrality rules were repealed months after the media frenzy settled. In other words, while getting trolls to flood the website and crash it worked, the power of repealing net neutrality was still in Chairman Pai's hands. Pai ignored the comments and repealed the rules anyway (Collins). The key here is that there was a temporary effect, enough for the public to have a conversation about net neutrality and learn what it is. However, it was not enough to save it. Like Stewart, Oliver often claims that he is a comedian first, despite critics citing him as someone who does journalism (Brown, Press, Suebsaeng).

## Student Loans and the House Financial Services Committee Testimony (2019)

Hasan Minhaj, Stewart's last correspondent hired on "The Daily Show" and one of the newest late night hosts, found his style rather quickly with his show "Patriot Act" on Netflix. Mimicking the long-form deep dives for which John Oliver became famous, Minhaj tackled more familiar issues that appeal to younger viewers and the immigrant experience, such as Affirmative Action, the videogame industry, hip-hop, and Supreme (Crosley). However, he connected many of these topics with a larger issue. For example, the videogame industry piece dealt with how labor unions were being suppressed. The hip-hop piece talked about how the it was used to express dissent against authoritarian regimes. Minhaj uses conversational language familiar to college students and recent graduates. He also uses many screens, camera angles, and personal stories (especially 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrant experiences) to aid his storytelling as much as he can.

His episode on Saudi Arabia, Jamal Khashoggi, and the connection to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was banned in the country for violating anti-cybercrime laws, which made the incident and the corresponding episode (ironically) go viral on YouTube instead (Crosley, M. Kennedy). When Minhaj talked about the Indian elections, Indian commentators (and even his own family-acquaintance) accused Minhaj of swinging elections, to which he replied, "Comedians can't swing elections! George W. Bush won *twice* when Jon Stewart was on the air" (Minhaj 8:28). Perhaps a less famous but important piece was his show on the student loan crisis.

Minhaj began with the numbers, conducting a non-scientific survey of his audience to provide perspective on the issue. For an issue that affected just about everyone, Minhaj pulled many references for this piece: he interviewed a contestant on "The Price Is Right" who went crazy after being given the chance to play (the contestant used the money he won to pay off some of his

student loans), referenced the NCAA and the political climate, and had fellow “Daily Show” alumnus John Hodgman host a parody game show to illustrate the absurdity of debt collection (Minhaj 23:54).

Minhaj then talked about the effects of not paying loans, how the system changed in 2010, and what the loan servicers are supposed to do under that system change. He then explained how the system became so broken using graphics displayed around the stage and contemporary metaphors to help make dull, bureaucratic terms more familiar to the average viewer. He first focused on the systems that created and exacerbated the crisis, such as Navient and the Department of Education. Then, he shifted his focus towards those who are trying to fight for borrowers and why the story was important:

“Most borrowers want nothing more than to pay back their loans. There are people who would kill just to be flat broke... Six states attorneys general are now suing loans servicers, so if you think you’re being taken advantage of by your loan servicer, contact your state AG. The federal government won’t do anything, but they might. Student loans were supposed to be a way to invest in our citizens, reward public service, and flex on the Russians. But now they’ve become a minefield of misinformation, where debt can follow you for life. So, if we’re gonna have game shows about student loans, they should actually reflect how difficult it can be to repay your loans” (Minhaj 23:14).

Like that of Oliver’s pieces, Minhaj’s pieces involve explaining complex issues from the problems to a solution. More simply, both shows structure their pieces by moving from the who and the what to the why and the how. Oliver’s storytelling style is more chronological, and he interlaces the jokes throughout the show, escalating from slapstick one-liners to absurd minutes-long acts. For

this reason, Oliver often ends on a high note, whether that is a tangible solution or absolute chaos. Most of his guest interviews, stunts, and performances are also saved for the end, like how both FCC segments had him displaying a URL on the screen and the camera elevates as if it were flying (Oliver, 2014 13:11, 2017 19:19).

Minhaj's style, while also linear, oscillates between serious and absurd throughout his segments. For example, he introduced student loans by showing viewers that there is a show dedicated to paying off loans *before* breaking down what the issue is (Minhaj 0:33). This grabs the viewer's attention and peaks his or her interest in a topic that otherwise is hard to sit through. He is also the only host thus-far to break up field pieces and intertwine them with the studio monologues. This allows him to add additional follow-up research and reflect on the interviews through a different moral lens, the latter of which references the "Daily Show" field piece writing process and his days as a correspondent (Smith 92-94).

The influence from Minhaj's hero, Jon Stewart, is clear (Minhaj 1:23). Minhaj starts and ends the segment with the point of view, arguing that student loan debt is an issue that hurts almost everyone after college. He says that the system that was supposed to thank Americans for committing to public service has failed them through misinformation and deceptive practices (Minhaj 0:30, 23:28). Throughout the piece, Minhaj highlights the process of getting a loan from loan servicers and how the system came to be predatory, again, by focusing on the institutions that neglected their duty to protect the people. In both field interviews, Minhaj played the correspondent's mocking role to his advantage by making fun of the former "The Price Is Right" contestant's passion for Penn State's slogan and satirizing a typical college student's attitude. For the latter, Minhaj wore streetwear and smoked an e-cigarette while being told to call his congressperson for help on student loans (4:48, 12:48). He also used the studio pieces to call out hypocrisy of officials and to make fun of his past self during the interview, the latter through his silence (22:52).

The piece was effective enough that Minhaj was called to testify in front of the House Financial Services Committee (WATCH, 31:05). In that testimony, he singled out predatory lenders and added insight about the piece in front of Congress, while making a few jokes throughout the session. However, the segment did not change the Department of Education's policies or Navient's practices. This is another example of investigative comedians highlighting the issues and making jokes about it without doing much more. However, student loan debt is also a very large issue, so it would not be reasonable to expect policy changes so quickly. Like Oliver's piece on Net Neutrality, Minhaj's piece was effective enough to understand what the issue was and start a conversation. The public has theoretically become more informed on the issue. The responsibility is then on the lawmakers, from local to federal, to put that information to good use and create laws.

The Fight for the 9/11 Victim Compensation Fund (2010, 2015, 2019)

In the last three case studies, investigative comedians talked about issues that were of concern to them, with or without a script. Jon Stewart, John Oliver, and Hasan Minhaj set their sights on the powerful media, government, and predatory companies, respectively, by calling out hypocrisy on what these institutions said and what they did. Stewart, Oliver, and Minhaj showed the viewers how the problems came to be using jokes, graphics, and research. However, all three cases show that the issues rarely progress further than creating chaos and sparking conversation on the issues. This next case may be the exception.

In 2010, Stewart and "The Daily Show" found out that the Zadroga Act, proposed legislation that would pay for first responders who developed health problems since the tragedy, was being stalled in the Senate (Smith 275). The show also found out that a group of first responders went to Washington D.C. to convince lawmakers to sign onto the bill, but they were almost thrown



out of Congress (276). Aside from the partisanship surrounding the bill, senators also complained that they wanted to go to recess. Thus, the show went to work by first assembling a list of politicians who voted against the Zadroga Act but praised the 9/11 responders.

During that last show of 2010, Stewart opened up with a monologue asking how the broadcast news failed to talk about the bill for the last few months, how Fox News briefly mentioned the bill but did not give the full story, how Al Jazeera was the network that provided 22 minutes of in-depth coverage, and how Republican senators passed a tax cut bill faster than the Zadroga bill (Popkin 11, Stewart, 2010 1:13, 1:48, 3:54, 4:11, 5:01). In the following segment, Stewart invited four first responders to respond to Senator Mitch McConnell's speech for retiring Senator Judd Gregg. In that panel, the first responders talked about how they suffer from the effects of 9/11, both financially and physically, because their conditions must be validated by the insurance companies before the coverage is approved (Stewart 2010, 2:01, 4:24). When the first responders were asked about congressmen wanting to go to recess, firefighter Kenny Specht replied, "You won't find a single New York City firefighter who considers it a sign of disrespect to work in a New York City firehouse on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day" (7:07). The next day, "Fox News" and "The Daily News" brought the bill to the forefront of their news coverage and pressured Republicans to pass it into law. Almost a week later, the bill passed but it was set to expire in 2015 (Smith 278-279).

These two segments were traditionally Stewart's style: they targeted the powerful Mitch McConnell and the mainstream media. The segments' larger narrative was that McConnell failed to bring the bill to the floor and the media failed to highlight its importance. The show highlighted the process by talking about the tax bill and how first responders were not able to afford their health benefits. Stewart also called out the hypocrisy of Fox News's lack of 9/11 coverage, despite normally talking about 9/11 all the time. Finally, the panel of first responders responded to Senator McConnell's tears with a few jokes but mostly genuine anger. Stewart argued that Zadroga was an

issue best expressed without a façade of comedy and therefore would be more effective (276). As discussed, the Zadroga Act passed, but the funds were set to expire in 2015.

Stewart, who used fewer jokes and more raw emotions for those segments, pressured the media to discuss the Zadroga Act and the government to pass it, proving the pieces' effectiveness on institutions of power. The Zadroga Act issue was unique because Stewart became an advocate of the issue for the first time, which proved to be more effective than disguising the outrage of this issue as comedy (275, 361). One more advantage that comedians have over journalists is that the former can use their platforms to raise issues without being accused of partisanship. However, investigative comedians usually avoided the activist role during that time, despite the large megaphone they carry (275, 361). Now, with more investigative comedy shows on the air, hosts like Stephen Colbert and Samantha Bee have turned to fundraising to support causes such as DonorsChoose and the Committee to Protect Journalists, respectively (Stephen).

Jon Stewart and the 9/11 first responders had to return to Congress at the end of 2015 to advocate for reauthorization of the bill. However, the late night landscape was vastly different from when they last visited the issue. First, Stewart left "The Daily Show" that year and Trevor Noah began hosting two months later. Many other hosts in late night have also passed their torches to newer and younger talent by then: Jay Leno to Jimmy Fallon on "The Tonight Show," Fallon to Seth Meyers on "Late Night," Craig Ferguson to James Corden on "The Late Late Show," and David Letterman to Stephen Colbert on "The Late Show." Noah and Colbert were hosts of their respective shows for just over three months, each. However, Stewart needed a platform on which to talk about the Zadroga Act, so he filed a field piece for "The Daily Show."

Stewart appeared in the second act and did a sketch with Noah before presenting the field piece in Washington D.C. Stewart opens the piece by asking whether shame in Congress would work, once again referencing the list of congressmen who tweeted "Never Forget 9/11" but haven't

signed onto the new bill (Noah and Stewart 4:42). After a montage of Stewart and the first responders being denied meetings with senators about the Zadroga Act, they caught up with Senator Rob Portman. Portman signed the bill after former construction worker John Feal told him that there is no excuse for not supporting the bill because Congress can always find money (7:55).

In the third act, Stewart and Noah discussed how Senator Mitch McConnell passed an eerily similar healthcare bill for energy workers, but somehow would not bring the Zadroga Act up for a vote (despite the fact that the former costed less than the latter) (Noah and Stewart 1:41, 2:16). Stewart then “brought back” the panel that he had in 2010, except only firefighter Kenny Specht was there (3:37). One of the panelists passed away and the other two were not healthy enough to join the show. Thus, Stewart called on viewers to use #worstresponders to get Senator McConnell’s attention. Stewart also crashed Stephen Colbert’s “Late Show” to do an impression of Trump praising the first responders and asked viewers to use the same hashtag (Colbert and Stewart, 2015 5:21). After the tweet went viral, McConnell finally passed the Zadroga Act with the year-end omnibus bill. Once again, the Zadroga Act was temporary and was set to expire in 2020.

The first part of the 2015 coverage on Noah’s show ran like a standard field piece, focusing on the GOP senators and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who failed to sign onto the bill and give the first responders a proper meeting about the Zadroga Act (Noah and Stewart 5:22, Noah and Stewart 6:31). Stewart not only called out McConnell’s hypocrisy for passing a law that gave energy workers in McConnell’s state similar health benefits, but Stewart also highlighted what it is like to try to get a meeting with senators in the Capitol. While Stewart’s field piece and Colbert’s sketch had plenty of jokes (such as when Stewart said he was unemployed and could wait all day for meetings with senators), the panel had a more serious and urgent undertone because of the missing chairs and Stewart’s frustration about the whole situation (Noah and Stewart 6:13, Noah and Stewart 4:01).

The hashtags and the segments were effective enough for the bill to be passed temporarily, but the push for the Zadroga Act hit its peak in 2019. The first responders were asking for a permanent reauthorization of the Zadroga Act after failing to get it last time (Smith 411). Jon Stewart went back to Congress with more 9/11 first responders, including former NYPD Detective Luis Alvarez, to give testimony to the House Judiciary Committee. In an emotional speech, Stewart said that Congress's failure to act costed these first responders "their most valuable commodity: time" (Siegel and Szabo). He also pointed out how first responders filled the hearing room and some congressmen failed to show up. Thus, Stewart likened the scene of the hearing to how the first responders did their job on 9/11 in five seconds, while Congress took 18 years to even consider permanent health benefits for the first responders (Siegel and Szabo).

Once again, Stewart also singled out Senator Mitch McConnell for using the issue to serve his political purposes (Brito, Colbert and Stewart 4:29). McConnell fired back a week later, saying congressmen were busy attending other committee hearings (Colbert and Stewart 3:12). Stewart then sarcastically replied on Stephen Colbert's "Late Show," "I didn't mean to interrupt them with their *jobs!*" (Brito, Colbert and Stewart, 2019 3:45). The bill was put to a full Senate vote the following week and the Zadroga Act passed with a permanent fund, ending the 18-year long issue.

While Stewart used many of his investigative comedy principles (mostly in his response to Senator McConnell), Stewart dropped much of the comedy and opted for blatant sarcasm, anger and disappointment to express that the first responders were tired of praise and have waited too long to get their permanent healthcare fund. Again, Stewart targeted McConnell's inaction on the issue, blaming him for juggling the bill with other issues for the last nine years (Colbert and Stewart, 2019 1:16). Stewart also called out congressmen on the committee for tweeting "Never forget the heroes of 9/11" but failing to address this issue as quickly as the first responders addressed 9/11, adding, "[The first responders] are the first heroes, veterans, and victims of the great trillions-of-dollars War

on Terror” (Colbert and Stewart, 2019 2:49, Brito). Referring to McConnell as a turtle and reminding him not to be surprised if first responders do not help him as quickly as they are supposed to, Stewart flips the scenario on McConnell’s arguments to prove Stewart’s points:

“If you’re busy, I get it. Just understand that next time we have a war, or you’re being robbed, or your house is on fire, and you make that desperate call for help—don’t get bent out of shape if they show up at the last minute with fewer people than you thought were going to pay attention, and don’t actually put it out. Just leave it there smoldering for another five years. Because that’s how it’s done around here, mister. I’m sure they’ll put it out for good when they feel like getting to it. No offense” (Colbert and Stewart, 2019 5:54).

The whole journey through the Zadroga Act issue is very significant for a few reasons. First, Stewart’s role shifted from investigative comedian to outright activist over the last nine years. He dropped most of the comedy by 2019 (only breaking into it on Colbert’s show for a few jokes), as Congress took so long to pass a permanent reauthorization. The issue became extremely personal to Stewart over the years: Detective Luis Alvarez, who testified with Stewart, did not live to see the passing of the bill. Firefighter Ray Pfeifer, who was Stewart’s friend, died in 2017 and hundreds of other first responders also died since Stewart’s show first worked with them in 2010 (Kolinovsky and Turner, Siegel and Szabo).

Second, the healthcare that Stewart and the first responders fought for passed, which has a huge impact, financially and physically, for both the 9/11 first responders and their families. They no longer need to spend extra energy begging politicians for their voices to be heard. Stewart’s case is one of the few times the media and government not only listened to the outrage of an investigative comedian almost immediately, but also echoed his messages and acted on them. He

successfully blended activism with investigative comedy, showing that (in this case) the two are not mutually exclusive. However, Senator McConnell did not give Stewart and the first responders exactly what they wanted until Stewart fully dropped the comedy for raw emotions and fully embraced the activist role. The bill was permanently funded only after Stewart and the first responders begged and stayed on top of the issue for years.

## **Conclusion**

Investigative comedians, for all the chaos their shows can sometimes bring, paradoxically clarify and further the national conversation by targeting the powerful, having a larger narrative they want to tell, highlighting the process of how institutional decisions are made, using the host as an authoritative voice, and using the correspondents' role to point out idiocy. These shows' narratives are almost always a contrarian to the mainstream media and government press briefings, cutting through the misinformation and disinformation to point out what really is happening. At times, investigative comedians say what journalists do not or fail to say by highlighting disenfranchised groups in stories that are not bound to journalistic obligations. Rarely, they also help pass laws and influence institutions of power in ways bigger than the shows' influence. Thus, investigative comedy creates a new avenue of storytelling that is not purely entertainment or purely news. It finds a way to be both funny and informative, which makes the genre attractive to viewers and the people the shows talk about (Smolkin).

However, that is not to say investigative comedy is free of flaws. One issue that is worth examining in the future is how the genre is still largely white and male (but this is changing). In the U.S., Samantha Bee is the only woman in investigative comedy and one of few in late night. Her show "Full Frontal" is best known for its field pieces highlighting women's issues, immigration, the

protest movements, voter suppression, and lesser-known issues that many late night shows have not covered. Her style, in contrast, resembles the second half of Jon Stewart's era: one that is more overtly sarcastic and revels in awkward moments. Like Stewart, Bee has also embraced activism by holding grassroots fundraising campaigns and making games that educate people on important issues (such as "Full Frontal's Totally Unrigged Primary," which was made to teach users about voter suppression and American elections) with her show's team (WNYC Studios).

Trevor Noah, Stewart's successor of "The Daily Show" and one of the few international late night hosts, brings a radically different style of comedy than Stewart:

"I guess my long-term vision of the show is to shift away from it being media criticism, have somewhat more of a global perspective, and move toward a more Juvenalian style of satire. More pointing out the folly on both sides. Jon's style was more Horatian. You see that with Sam Bee as well. Really polarizing, very end-of-the-world pessimistic. And I want to connect the show with a younger audience... I remember when people would say, 'He smiles too much,' or 'He's not angry enough.' That's your style. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X had very different ways of tackling the same thing. You can't say one was right, one was wrong. You can say they were different" (Smith 404).

Noah also increased the show's presence by bringing the show's presence online through "Between the Scenes" segments. The latter are short, less-structured segments in which he elaborates on issues or talks about something completely different (366).

Another issue in investigative comedy worth examining is how investigative comedians help or hurt the current polarizing narratives of American politics post-2016. While Stewart was famous for providing clarity in the investigative comedy landscape, let alone the media landscape, they both

have radically changed since he left the host's desk. Stephen Colbert's legacy, both his real self on "The Late Show" and his character on "The Colbert Report," may provide insight into this shift, as the two shows line up with when Stewart was on "The Daily Show" and when Stewart left. Neither Colbert or "Stephen Colbert" might have changed laws and created policies in the way Stewart did, but the character coined "truthiness," which pre-dated post-truth, ran for President in 2008 as a joke, created a Super PAC to demonstrate how rampant money in politics was, and testified in Congress about an agriculture bill that dealt with immigrant farmers (Smith 162, Young).

Do investigative comedians need to drop comedy for activism in order to push forward on the issues they care about outside their shows? Perhaps so, since even a big issue like the Zadroga Act did not resolve until the laughs were long gone. However, the Zadroga Act is only one of a few prolific cases uncovered with such longevity and stain in modern American politics. There is not enough evidence to suggest that an investigative comedy piece alone could create the impact like what Stewart did for the Zadroga Act, nor is there enough evidence to suggest that without fully embracing activism, investigative comedians can get the issues they care about done. The Zadroga Act was so successful partly because Stewart invested so much personal time into the issue.

For most shows, some of the issues discussed are personal. For example, John Oliver's Legal Immigration segment highlighted some of his experiences through the American immigration system (Oliver, 2019 8:42, 18:24). However, even those pieces have a guise of journalistic "objectivity," that allows comedians to merely point out the issue but not necessarily solve it because, again, that is not their job. Dannagal G. Young argues that satire is only beneficial to the satirist because the genre "remains in a state of play, downplays its own moral certainty and issues judgments through implication rather than proclamation," which makes the genre only "a forum for exploration and rumination, but not for mobilization" (Young). Because satirists are comfortable



with ambiguity and uncertainty, they prefer to explain their arguments in layered, ironic, and complex ways that do not always say what they mean (Young).

The mainstream media may also be part of the blame for the lack of mobilization on important issues. Despite the number of news platforms on multiple devices, bills and laws that are otherwise important to the public are sneaking their way through legislative chambers undetected. Perhaps the writer did not have time to report on the issue and scrapped the draft long before it was due. Maybe the editor did not think that the bill was important enough to fit into the hour-long broadcast. The report may have been published but only appeared online, falling further and further into the algorithm so much that the next polarizing statement trending on social media dominated readers' and viewers' feeds. There are fewer and fewer journalists to sift through more and more information. Thus, the lack of filters that tune out the sensationalism (rather than amplify it) are hurting the public's inherent need to know (Straut-Collard).

Where does investigative comedy go from here? Some possible directions include activism, diversified topics, and more investigative reporting, but perhaps the most interesting in a few years will be how comedians tackle the post-Trump era.

While the jokes investigative comedy shows make might influence policies by overloading and criticizing institutions, no societal change will occur without the people who have the power to ask the questions, create policies, and protect the people doing so. As Stewart said, "controlling the culture does not equate to holding the power" (Merelli). Without that power, the investigative comedian's next best thing to do is to make jokes and hope someone laughs and learns.

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