



## CHAPTER 13

# The John Oliver Effect

Using Political Satire to Encourage Critical-Thinking Skills in Information Literacy Instruction

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## Introduction

We live in technologically advanced times, with a fast-paced 24/7 news cycle and information flows that are increasingly tailored to our personal preferences. We do not know to what extent our reading choices are determined, edited, and customized by web cookies and search algorithms. In addition, we no longer see the same internet as this customization creates “echo chambers,” that is, enclosed systems where the news stories we clicked on, liked, or shared echo back the kind of content that confirms our pre-existing attitudes and beliefs.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the press and majority of TV news programs remain focused on sensationalist reporting, in which they favor presenting opposing opinions without analyzing or investigating the evidence behind those opinions. All of this combined compromises our capacity for critical thinking, narrows down our political horizons, and makes us less likely to relate to people with other beliefs. Incoming first-year college students are often not fully aware of how incomplete and biased the information they get on TV or search for and access online is.<sup>2</sup> They are building up a filter bubble and risk carrying it into their university work. How do we address this?

In Britain, there is a saying that *many a true word is spoken in jest*. In today's information environment, in which students are increasingly exposed to misinformation and lies, the "truth" is indeed often found in comedy. British comedian John Oliver, who hosts the HBO weekly show *Last Week Tonight*, has arguably the most significant impact—well beyond late-night entertainment and social media.<sup>3</sup> Under certain conditions, discussed in the course of this chapter, political satire can be an effective source for learning—especially by engaging students in critical thinking, reflection, and dialogue about the social and political dimensions of information literacy.

The pedagogical rationale for using satire is based on a review of literature on using popular culture in library instruction as well as the author's experience of delivering a series of workshops on digital literacy at the University of Roehampton in London. After three semesters of teaching, it has been observed that attendees positively respond to the use of humor in library sessions, especially to videos from John Oliver's show. The selection of excerpts used for in-class discussion is informed by the instructional humor processing theory (IHPT), which states that choosing humor related to instructional content will positively correlate with student learning.<sup>4</sup> The chapter explores how students benefit from the reflexive aspects of humor and presents ideas of how they could apply the satirical form themselves, for example, in appraising information sources and making more informed choices when engaging with digital platforms and services.

## Popular Culture and Information Literacy

In their book *Humor and Information Literacy: Practical Techniques for Library Instruction*, Vossler and Sheidlower provided a cross-disciplinary review of the literature regarding the use of humor in higher education, including library contexts. They aptly noted, "Students cannot learn what they ignore."<sup>5</sup> Poor attendance or engagement (or both) in library workshops lead information professionals around the world to explore new instruction ideas and pedagogical tools to make information literacy more relevant and appealing to students. Vossler and Sheidlower encouraged educators to take the risk to use humor. Political satire is one important source of humor that has not been considered in depth in scholarly literature to date.

An enduring criticism of political satire centered on the premise that it damages the trust in political institutions, the support for leaders, and consequently political participation.<sup>6</sup> However, studies that looked at the impact of satirical shows on attitudes, political knowledge, and participation reveal that exposure to political satire leads to more critical evaluations of politicians running for office, especially among young Americans.<sup>7</sup> This does not necessarily weaken institutional trust. There is a difference between cynicism and skepticism. A skeptic

doubts and proactively checks whether the source of information is reliable or not. A cynic dismisses the information outright and goes into counteroffensive. A satirist or comedian is more of a skeptic. Baym argued that satire fosters a desirable dose of skepticism among audiences. He looked at how satire “revives” a journalism of critical inquiry and helps the audience to examine and evaluate news media coverage of current affairs,<sup>8</sup> whereas Young found that “viewers of late-night comedy are just as, if not *more* informed about politics, participatory, talkative about their political world, and attentive to the campaign than non-viewers of late-night comedy or than viewers of more ‘traditional’ news programs.”<sup>9</sup>

The use of popular culture examples in information literacy classes is contextual and requires some creativity and risk taking on the part of the instructor. Tewell conducted a study to evaluate the impact of applying excerpts from television comedies that illustrate ACRL’s *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* to library instruction sessions for first-year students.<sup>10</sup> The extracts came from satire and TV comedy series—*The Colbert Report* (the popular segment on “Wikiality”), *Parks and Recreation*, and *30 Rock*. He found the comedy form suitable for demonstrating information literacy concepts in an accessible and dialogue-provoking way, even in one-shot instruction sessions.

Detmering found that film could help facilitate critical thinking about information beyond the library and the classroom and lead students to a deeper understanding of the fundamental need for information literacy as a lifelong skill.<sup>11</sup> His approach consisted of contextualizing information literacy competencies by engaging learners in watching and discussing three popular (and to an extent also satirical) films—Jason Reitman’s *Thank You for Smoking* (2006), Joel and Ethan Coen’s *Burn after Reading* (2008), and Oliver Stone’s *W.* (2008).<sup>12</sup>

Brabazon argued that popular culture could help manage classroom diversity by allowing students to feel comfortable in their textual environment. She said that the first step when integrating popular culture into the curriculum (and library resources) is to *transform consuming pop into thinking pop*.<sup>13</sup> It is the role of librarians to frame and contextualize *pop* examples in information literacy and challenge students to develop higher order thinking skills, for example, critical interpretation of texts and contexts.

Smith shared her experience of facilitating discussions of sensitive issues on a college campus. She used hip hop and Jordan Peele’s award-winning film *Get Out* to teach critical information literacy and social justice education.<sup>14</sup> Using hip hop to channel one’s feelings was found to be helpful for students in discussing the struggles in their communities and engaging in constructive ways to protest in a politically polarizing time. Smith organized panel presentations, film screenings, discussions, and brainstorming sessions where students discussed ways to be activists.

Springer and Yelinek have tried to tap into the emotions of students and facilitate deeper learning by using MTV’s reality show *Jersey Shore*.<sup>15</sup> They found this example to resonate well with their students and wrote about it in *College and*

*Research Libraries News* to encourage other library professionals to try popular culture in information literacy instruction. Springer and Yelinek were aware that *Jersey Shore* may not be as appealing and relevant an example to use with future student cohorts, but they stressed that new popular culture references will always be available. They also noted that picking the right example does not always happen the first time, and each teacher needs to find material that their students will identify with and relate to.

In the post-truth information environment, which requires prompt responses to highlight and debunk falsehoods and inconsistencies in the news cycle, librarians can look to political satire for additional examples to include in information literacy instruction. The relevance and influence of satire has been on the increase since 2009, when Jon Stewart, then-host of *The Daily Show (TDS)* was named the most trusted newscaster in the US by the *Time* magazine.<sup>16</sup> Stewart and fellow comedian Stephen Colbert have become subjects of scholarly inquiry. Publications like *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?* and *Colbert's America: Satire and Democracy* aim to explain why and how satire has become a source of information as well as how Colbert and Stewart made the important link between entertainment and critical thought.<sup>17</sup>

When certain news stories break, we may secretly wish they were fake, and some news is so absurd that we cannot help but laugh. However, traditional journalism does not always know when (or how) to laugh at absurd statements or conspiracy theories (e.g., chemtrails or QAnon).<sup>18</sup> Political satire, on the other hand, can expose the different ways politicians twist facts. Short videos from political comedy shows can help build meaningful classroom discussions around the social and political dimensions of information literacy. The comedian who has the greatest impact today is John Oliver, who starred on Jon Stewart's program before receiving the chance to host his own show on HBO.

Since its premiere in April 2014, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* has been taking a satirical look at current events on a weekly basis. Currently in its fifth season, *Last Week Tonight* covered a wide range of issues in a long-form "investigative comedy" style that has often been praised for the depth of its research and for "holding America's attention."<sup>19</sup> Among more than 140 episodes to date are US-specific topics such as the opioid crisis, Obamacare, gerrymandering, bail requirements, televangelism, voter ID laws, net neutrality, and the National Rifle Association (NRA). However, Oliver also covers a wide range of international issues, including Brexit, the recent general election in Italy, and domestic crises in Venezuela and Argentina. The show also frequently focuses on universal themes that librarians can use in subject-specific instruction sessions, for instance, student debt, online harassment, LGBTQ rights, mental health, pharmaceutical marketing, and the Paris Agreement (climate change).<sup>20</sup>

Has there been any wider impact? Can we speak of a "John Oliver effect"? The first "net neutrality" segment from 2014 was thought to have played a major

role in saving the regulations that required internet service providers to treat internet traffic and data equally, for example, without different charges for specific users, platforms, methods of communication, or types of content. Oliver's fans wrote over 45,000 comments to the Federal Communication Commission (FCC), causing its servers to crash.<sup>21</sup> In June 2015, the show aired an episode on bail requirements in the US judicial system, in which Oliver criticized the system that essentially detained people based on their wealth and not the risk they posed. In less than a month, New York City altered its bail policy—giving judges discretionary power to release low-risk offenders while they await trial.<sup>22</sup> These two examples show how satirical investigations of important social and political issues can have a real impact beyond the world of television and entertainment. Satire is increasingly mentioned and referenced in mainstream sources of news. For example, the website of the British daily *The Guardian* has a weekly late-night TV roundup section.<sup>23</sup> John Oliver has made finding relevant or course-related humor much easier. The next step is for instructors to test the “John Oliver effect” in the classroom by aligning with specific educational objectives.

## Using Satire in Information Literacy Workshops at Roehampton

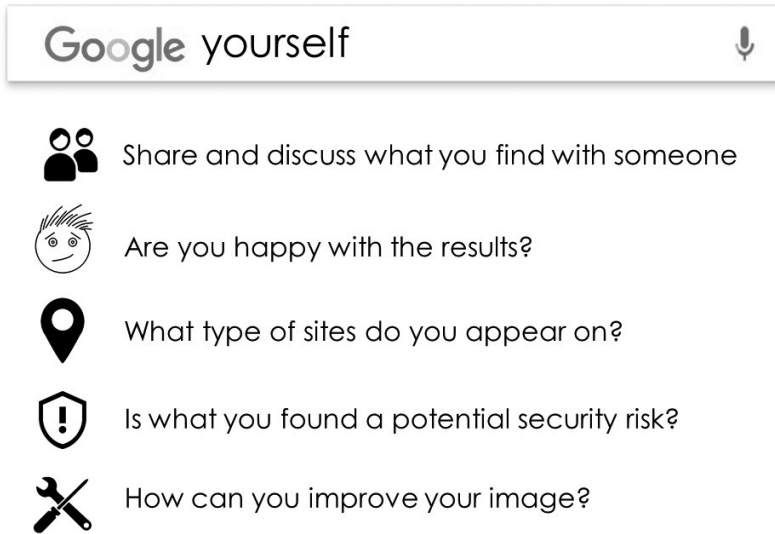
I work as an academic achievement librarian responsible for the design and delivery of information literacy instruction to students at all levels and across the entire curriculum at the University of Roehampton in London. With traditions going back to 1841, Roehampton is a public university formed of four constituent colleges that were all established as teachers' training colleges in the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Having gradually introduced humorous examples and activities that relate to popular culture in my previous roles, I learned the format makes the instruction more accessible to students. Most of the teaching that I deliver is one-shot instruction and open to students of all disciplines to sign up for. Popular culture (and by extension humor and satire) has become not only my preferred pedagogical tool to further critique and analysis of information, but also an effective strategy to ensure an inclusive learning environment for all students. When all goes well, the use of humor attracts students' attention and produces a more relaxed and productive learning environment.<sup>25</sup> By fostering a shared sense of enjoyment, humor can also make it easier for a librarian to build a longer-lasting rapport with students.<sup>26</sup>

It takes time to learn how not to sacrifice workshop content for humor; for example, when using videos from popular culture or political satire, it helps

to pause or cut videos because a longer clip can stir too far from instructional content. It is also important for teaching librarians to ensure their instruction (including activities and any humor used) is “constructively aligned” to the wider college curriculum, that is, using a constructivist approach to align the intended learning outcomes (for the library session) with the teaching environment, modes of assessment, and—in the long run—graduate attributes.<sup>27</sup> This correlates with IHPT—“students may very well resolve the incongruity and understand the humor, but unless the humor generates positive affect and enhances [our] ability to process, learning would not be enhanced.”<sup>28</sup> The aim is to ensure that the learning experience relates directly to the knowledge, attribute, or skill that we expect the students to achieve and that in-class activities or assessment tests this accordingly. This ensures the humorous message is more likely to be cognitively processed by students (i.e., recognized and resolved).

My most successful application of satirical humor to instructional content was in the *Managing Your Digital Identity* sessions. These workshops invite students to critically reflect on the patterns of their engagement with digital services and platforms—especially their use of social media, which is increasingly monitored by employers. The first session was delivered at a time when the university hosted a series of events focused on careers and employability. The learning outcomes expect students to be able to explain what a digital footprint is, reflect on their online presence, and plan how they could create or improve their *professional* identity online. The workshops have evolved over time, based on student feedback and wider interest they attracted among academic staff. Sessions in the 2018 spring term were more focused on data protection, privacy, and well-being in the digital environment. This was due to the Facebook data breach scandal featured in the news cycle as well as important changes in the data protection regulations in the European Union. These sessions were also attended by academic and professional services staff, including College Life Development Officers, who would later promote it to faculty and students. A colleague from the e-learning team organizing the annual learning and teaching event on campus invited me to talk about the workshop to faculty.<sup>29</sup> The use of satire in these sessions was met with a positive response among academic staff, reassuring me that the approach is overall suitable for the Roehampton community.

The format of the workshop is a presentation with a wide range of visual examples of the types of digital footprint that is desirable as well as examples of posts and comments that may become reasons for not hiring a candidate. There is considerable discussion in between slides before the workshop proceeds to a Google Yourself activity, in which students reflect on their digital footprint and consider whether they are “what Google says they are” and analyze potential wider implications (see figure 13.1).



**Figure 13.1**

Slide from Managing Your Digital Identity workshop with the Google Yourself activity.

Humor is used throughout the presentation, including a stock photo example of an embarrassing situation in which a student holding a bottle of alcohol pushes a shopping trolley with another student inside. Prior to the start of teaching, students at UK universities attend orientation known as Freshers' Week. They typically attend a number of parties before teaching starts, but do not immediately realize how certain photographs they take and share on social media (tagging themselves and friends) may have a negative impact on their employability at the end of their degree. After students discuss what they found in the Google Yourself activity, an animated image from the comedy series *Parks and Recreation* is shown, in which the main character, Ron Swanson, throws away his computer after realizing how much information about him is available online. In workshop evaluation forms collected from participants, some students admit this is exactly how they felt about some of the search results about themselves.

In terms of political satire, the workshops feature the following short excerpts (about three minutes long, between the two clips):

- *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, "Mark Zuckerberg Is Silent amid Facebook's Privacy Scandal," YouTube video, 5:52, posted to YouTube March 20, 2018, <https://youtu.be/qyKivZT2wig>, played from 0:20 to 1:40.

Students frequently stir the in-class discussion to issues of data protection and privacy. The Facebook data breach scandal revealed in March 2018 propelled Facebook users around the world to re-evaluate their engage-

ment with the platform. Stephen Colbert's comments in the video were then discussed in class in relation to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).<sup>30</sup> Students found the video funny, but also recognized the implications for data protection and their digital footprint (including the less obvious fact of how their friends and their actions contribute to that footprint). Students found the GDPR measures timely and needed—especially for strengthening their control over their data.

- *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, “Right to Be Forgotten,” YouTube video, 6:59, posted to YouTube May 19, 2014, <https://youtu.be/r-ERajk-MXw0>, played from 3:19 (alternatively, from 4:04 to 5:23).

After this video, students consider how the GDPR allows them to request their data to be removed from internet search results by quoting the “right to be forgotten.” Both videos invite students to discuss the implications of their digital footprint (reflecting on their own actions online) and data protection measures (i.e., the GDPR legislation with its pros and cons). While relaxing the learning environment, satire links to the wider information literacy dimensions here and helps to raise awareness how our social activity online (connections among us and friends) is controlled and determined by for-profit corporations. Students realize how social media platforms operate according to a transaction. The “free” service for communicating and connecting with other users comes at a cost—it is our privacy, information about us and our friends (or people we follow and are connected to) on a given platform.

How have the students responded to the use of satire in workshops? Students were surprised to find that the library covered such themes in workshops in the first place. There was considerable interest in finding out how to delete or remove certain content from one's online results as well as questions about building a LinkedIn profile (as a way of creating a professional online identity). A key observation, based on two full semesters of teaching with political satire videos, is that humor proves to be a good attention-gaining technique, making difficult and complex topics more interesting and approachable (e.g., the GDPR). John Oliver was known to most students and resonated well with the audiences at large. There is a likely identification with the teller of the jokes on the part of students due to him being British. In terms of class interaction, I anticipated that some students would be confused or even distracted by the use of satirical videos. Some international students may be used to a highly formal education style and culture, in which there is little room for humor. However, the vast majority of students respond with laughter. A few are somewhat or mildly amused, but there can also be a few students wondering why others are laughing. My hope is that they leave the workshop thinking, “What is it that I am not getting?” All these different reactions give the class a moment on which to *reflect on* their differences. An additional lesson learned from this experience is that for the instructors to be



taken seriously, we do not have to teach seriously. More observations will be made in the upcoming academic year when the workshop will be delivered to a more politically savvy audience, for example, journalism and news media students on the Reporting Britain module. Future sessions of the workshop that have already been planned and timetabled also include Digital Identity and Networking Skills: How Your Online Presence Affects Your Career (collaboration with the careers department), Managing Your Digital Identity to Forge a Career in Psychology and Personal Branding: Understanding How Digital Identity Affects your Career.

Given Roehampton students' positive response to the use of satirical content in the Digital Identity workshops, the next step in my own practice would be to extend the approach to other topics. I also intend to shift the focus of instruction more toward the students. A significant part of each workshop entails students discussing the examples, but there is scope for more active learning scenarios that would *involve students in creating humorous content* themselves, for example, by applying the satirical form (using parody to critique or exaggerate something). Activities and tools that can be applied in a one-shot library instruction session include the following:

- **X-Ray Goggles bookmarklet** (<https://goggles.mozilla.org/>). Originally used to teach how to see and edit the code behind any webpage, X-Ray Goggles can also be used to teach critical thinking and prompt class discussion. The bookmarklet is a software application that allows users to interact with webpages. For example, a CNN headline can be changed into something funny, outrageous, or misleading (for learning purposes), and the instructor can then ask students to discuss it (or ask directly whether they think it is real or not). This activity would also show how easy it is to change web content and spread misleading information (e.g., via taking screenshots and social media shares).
- **The Breaking News Generator** (<https://breakyourownnews.com/>). One of many online tools to generate fake headlines and tickers that would also illustrate how easy it is to create fake news and sensationalist reports.
- **HSP** (<https://h5p.org/>). A free resource to create rich, interactive content such as videos with embedded quizzes, audio narration, or comments.<sup>31</sup> Librarians or instructors will find it easy to use and could annotate video excerpts from political comedy shows—providing additional context and guidance to students.

These resources can engage students in reflecting on the current information landscape. An anthropology student came back to me once saying how easy it was to trick her children, family, and friends with fake headlines and paragraphs she created with X-Ray Goggles. This reassures me of the need to raise awareness of fake news and misinformation in library instruction. This is because fake news played a significant role in shaping the public opinion and voting behavior

in two important political events of 2016—the EU membership referendum in the UK (i.e., the “Brexit” vote) and the US presidential election. Examples of misleading news stories include the £350 million for the UK National Health Service (NHS),<sup>32</sup> Pizzagate, the Bowling Green “massacre,” massive voter fraud, or the argument about the sizes of the crowds at Barack Obama’s and Donald Trump’s inaugurations. Rather than a series of isolated falsehoods, we are confronted with a growing ecosystem of misinformation, involving alternative epistemologies that defy conventional standards of evidence.<sup>33</sup> Librarians and information professionals in the UK, who already teach students and patrons about information literacy and how to evaluate sources, are in a good position to lead initiatives to respond to and help combat misinformation and fake news. For instance, London South Bank University hosted an event, *This is Not a Fake Conference!*, in June 2018, while the Open University (OU) became a partner in the EU-funded project *Co-Inform*, the aim of which is to develop tools to engage citizens, journalists, and policymakers in fighting misinformation on social media.<sup>34</sup> Satirists are not journalists, which is what both Jon Stewart and John Oliver frequently stressed in their shows. However, they can be our allies in combating fake news and misinformation as much as journalists, if not more. In the current information landscape, late-night comedy shows are often the only places where we can learn to *repeatedly interrogate* evidence and information. Political pundits and some journalists on partisan networks frequently let their guests “off the hook”—satirists hook them back on.

## The Pedagogical Rationale for Teaching with Satire

Political satire frames complex issues in ways that are more narratively compelling, making it a sound pedagogical tool that librarians can refer to in information literacy instruction.<sup>35</sup> Satire is defined as “an artistic means of pointing out and holding up for scrutiny and criticism that ridiculousness by, ironically enough, being somewhat ridiculous.”<sup>36</sup> Satirical programs like *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, and *Late Night with Seth Meyers* perform three important functions:

- analyzing (or exposing the lack of) the analysis in “regular” news
- providing a historical context to a given story using archival footage
- editing news footage from several sources to create something new

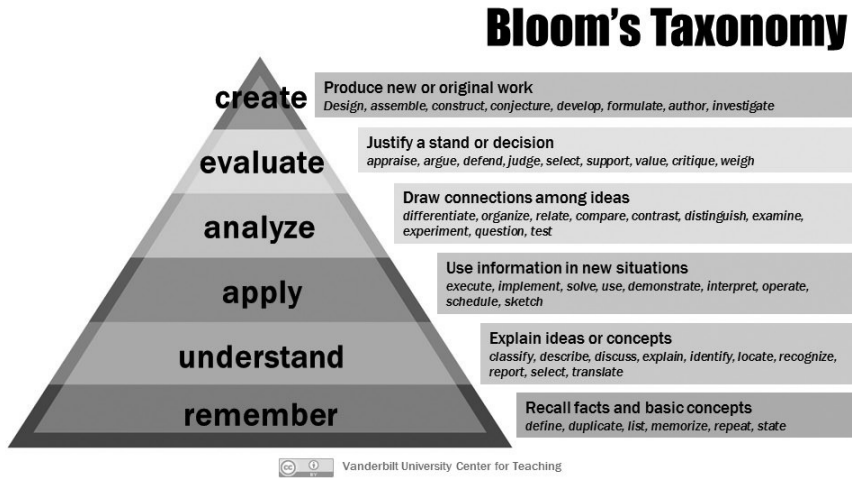
When Jon Stewart was the host of *The Daily Show*, he often criticized news media for failing to deliver analysis. At the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear in 2010, Stewart said that the media have a magnifying glass that they can use to bring specific problems into focus, but instead they choose to use the magnifying glass to “light ants on fire and host a week of shows on the sudden, unexpected

dangerous flaming ant epidemic.”<sup>37</sup> The comedy format developed by Stewart and the long-form variety mastered by Oliver are effective tools in teaching media literacy—especially when contrasted with “breaking news” headlines from the more established media outlets.

The second important function of satire is the use of archival footage to counter politicians’ attempts to rewrite history. By explaining how a story developed over time and revealing how politicians tend to hold every position on a given subject, satire “gives the news a memory.”<sup>38</sup> Quoting (and playing back) what was previously stated prevents the audience from forgetting or overlooking important information that is relevant to the story of the day but gets obscured in mainstream news reports. In contrast to political comedians, news anchors and pundits on mainstream TV networks no longer question or investigate deep and far (and long) enough the “facts” that politicians cherry-pick (and often invent) to make their claims. In an episode from *Last Week Tonight* that aired on October 18, 2015, Oliver looked into how politicians frequently misremember past events and misquote historical figures. Dr. Ben Carson quoted Thomas Jefferson in a Fox News interview using the term “gun control,” which was not in use until some 130 years after Jefferson’s death.<sup>39</sup> I have been using this video in library workshops on referencing and plagiarism—as an example that including citations to nonexistent or inaccurate information about sources is not an acceptable academic practice.

Students can also learn from the way satire uses important intertextual figures: quotation and parody. The satirist invites the audience to follow how different parts of a news story stream can be connected, quoting past statements and opinions and employing parody to show how one’s argument can lead to absurd conclusions if taken far enough.<sup>40</sup> By placing an emphasis on synthesis—that is, combining existing material into something new and unique—satire provides a good model for writing better assignments at university.<sup>41</sup> Synthesis entails the ability to identify gaps or shortcomings and adding original work in. It is a key stage in Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives (figure 13.2), a widely used model for developing learning outcomes and aligning them with assessment criteria. The taxonomy can also be applied in library instruction. The first level of the pyramid starts with factual knowledge, which is about remembering or recalling previously learned material. This can be basic terminology to use in searching for information and evaluating it. For example, when news stories use acronyms we are not familiar with, we need basic knowledge of the subject area to ensure our search for the meaning of the abbreviation is accurate. The knowledge stage is a crucial element in developing critical-thinking tools. The satirical shows of John Oliver, Stephen Colbert, and Seth Meyers are well-researched and can provide adequate levels of factual knowledge on important issues. *However, where these shows are most effective is in providing a model for analysis and synthesis—arguably the most important skill for university students to master, especially in times of polarization.* Satire offers a good example of how the meaning of one source is shaped

by another. It teaches us the importance of asking “what if,” combining, modifying, linking knowledge from multiple sources, recognizing relationships among parts, imagining different solutions or interpretations, and proposing or actively creating something new.



**Figure 13.2**  
The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (adapted from Bloom)

In an environment filled with misinformation and manipulated news stories, the importance of critical-thinking skills is more apparent than ever. Satire teaches us not to skip steps in the pyramid. If we jump to *evaluation* before acquiring certain *knowledge* and performing *analysis*—we can make a mistake. If we do not *know* the facts, then we will lack the crucial tools to think critically *with*.<sup>42</sup> Checklists and tests such as CRAAP or PROMPT are often used in source evaluation exercises at university.<sup>43</sup> Students may refer to these resources and genuinely feel they are critically evaluating a source. For example, when evaluating websites, students are told to look at the “about” page, which makes them focus on a website’s most easily manipulated features. However, the internet today is characterized by polished web design, and organizations vying to appear trustworthy will make sure they meet the criteria on any checklist or test. Sites are inclined to paint the most favorable picture of their expertise and credibility.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, information literacy guidelines limited to ready-made checklists create a false sense of security (making students more vulnerable to fraud and scams).<sup>45</sup> Students should be building up factual knowledge and linking it together, going through each stage of Bloom’s taxonomy. This will enable them to write their own processes for evaluating information while actually uncovering the same criteria used on the CRAAP or PROMPT worksheets.

There is a more efficient route to learning more about a source: finding out what the rest have to say. The approach that Wineburg and McGrew recommended is “lateral reading”—getting your bearings by looking at what other sites or resources say about the one you are evaluating. The irony is that this is about spending less time on a website but learning *more* by actually leaving it. When reading laterally, one leaves a website and opens new tabs along a horizontal axis in order to use the resources of the internet to learn more about a site and its claims.<sup>46</sup> It would be good for students to develop a habit of hitting Ctrl + Tab on their keyboards to leave the source in the quest of evaluating it effectively. One of the tabs could be to check if a news story has been covered in a late-night political comedy show to see if someone is lying or twisting facts, to check what is being exposed or ridiculed and why. Lateral reading brings students closer to the *analysis* level in Bloom’s taxonomy. By opening new tabs on their browsers, students can engage with other points of view and *draw connections* between them. However, lateral reading requires knowledge of sources, some understanding of how the internet and searches are structured, and knowledge of strategies to make searching and navigating effective (e.g., to decipher specific discipline-related acronyms and know where to search). By using satire, instruction librarians can engage students more in a process where all these higher order skills are at work.

## Is John Oliver “Transferable”?

Satire plays an important discursive function and has the power and the appeal to cross national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries.<sup>47</sup> The satirical puppet show was a particularly “transferable” format, with popular productions around Europe including *Spitting Image* (UK), *Les Guignols* (France), and *Polskie Zoo* (Poland). At present, the look of most shows mimics the formats developed by Jon Stewart and, more recently, John Oliver. In the Netherlands, there is *Zondag met Lubach*, which can provide one particularly useful example for an information literacy workshop. In January 2017, Arjen Lubach (the show’s host) created a video addressed to the new US president, Donald Trump. Lubach acknowledged that it would be “America First” from then onward, but hoped the Netherlands could be *second*. The video went viral, reaching 73 million views in less than two weeks. This inspired Jan Bohmermann, host of the German show *Neo Magazin Royale*, to launch a Europe-wide contest *Every Second Counts*. Eventually, forty-one countries participated in the contest, reaching millions of people. All submissions used parody and self-disparaging humor, offering a critique of populism, nationalist rhetoric, and economic protectionism while reflectively looking at how their own countries act on the international political scene. President Trump’s policy and campaign rhetoric also inspired comedians in Poland. Jakobe Mansztajn and Rafał Żabiński run a fifteen-minute web series in the investigative comedy style of John Oliver. Their show is called *Make Poland Great Again* and covers important topics such as

pollution, regulation of the advertising industry, the hunters' lobby, or proposed legislative changes to the Polish judicial system.

John Oliver would not be able to host his *Last Week Tonight* in the same format back in his country of birth. In the United Kingdom, structural factors prevent political satire from being as effective a part of the political conversation as its US counterparts. This is because in 1989, the UK Parliament placed a ban on using video footage in light entertainment and satirical programs.<sup>48</sup> It is an irony that in a country that produced such sophisticated and absurd types of humor as *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *The Spitting Image*, and *Have I Got News for You*, political satire is actually being constrained in the post-truth era. Rory Bremner, a Scottish comedian, links the lack of satire to the causes of Brexit, saying there was not enough analysis and not enough engagement as a result of the “due impartiality” rules in the media sector.<sup>49</sup> This shows that satirists must always work within the political legal and regulatory context that both enables and constrains what they can do.<sup>50</sup>

## Limitations (and Opportunities)

Incorporating new instruction ideas, especially those based on humor, into teaching and selecting the right examples can be tricky. Political satire might not resonate well with all students. Within the genre, there is currently no conservative counterbalance for the shows that exhibit a clear liberal and progressive bias.<sup>51</sup> Further analysis of the absence of a conservative John Oliver is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, librarians can mitigate this type of bias and select examples for information literacy instruction that are more representative of the student body at their institution. In addition, we can do more to incorporate the student voice—for example, involving students to mimic the work of a satirist—exaggerating claims in a humorous way to bring attention to issues of their choice.

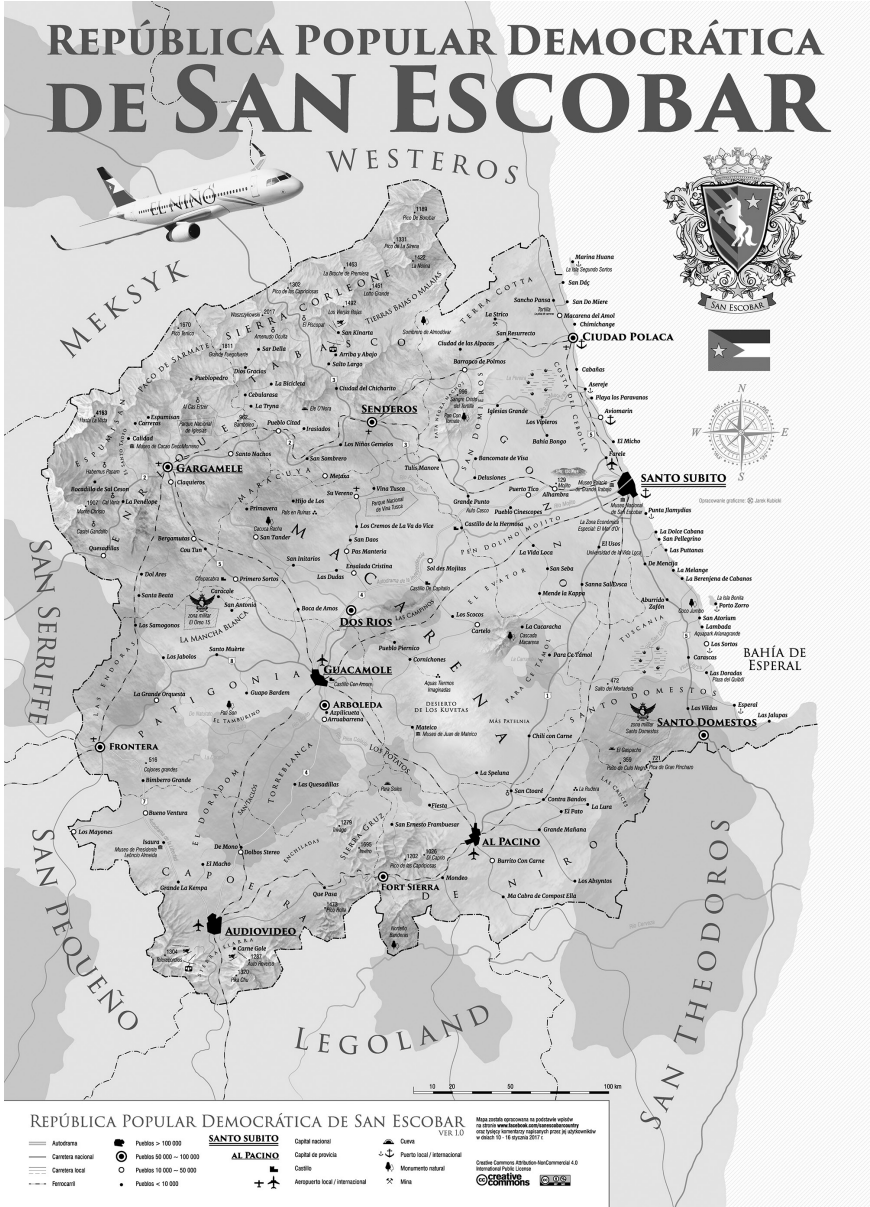
Students may feel distracted by humor or prefer to learn in a more formal way. They may not relate to the specific kind of humor used by instructors or struggle to recognize the irony in the humorous message. *Critical thinking is therefore as much a precondition for as an outcome of using humor.* For humor to be effective, the target audience must recognize the irony that is at the heart of the message. In other words, the audience must have some prior knowledge base (which takes us to Bloom's taxonomy again) and make the connection between the humorous aspects of the message or information and its referent.

On April 1, 1977, the British broadsheet *The Guardian* ran a seven-page travel supplement on the tiny tropical island of San Serriffe. Everything connected with San Serriffe was named after printing and typesetting terms; for example, the country's main islands, called Upper Caise and Lower Caise, formed the shape of a semicolon, and the capital was in Bodoni. Many readers were fooled into believing this was all real, quite possibly due to the fact that four out of seven pages

of the supplement were taken up by advertising tailored to the story, which made it look more credible. For example, Kodak ran a competition asking for amateur photographers' pictures of San Seriffe, with the line "If you've got a photograph of San Serriffe, Kodak would like to see it." Advertisers being complicit in the joke accounted for a greater success. The article on San Serriffe is now available for download as a "resource of the month" from the Guardian News Media education portal.<sup>52</sup> It can be used in information literacy instruction because ironically, in the post-truth age, we are increasingly likely to come across similar stories, and a great number of readers remain unable to identify branded content. According to the 2016 Media Use Report published by Ofcom (the regulator for the communications services), 51 percent of UK searchers cannot spot a paid ad, while only half identify sponsored links on Google as advertising.<sup>53</sup>

Fast-forward nearly forty years from the San Serriffe story to January 2017, and we have a similar "imaginary country" in a news story of the post-truth era. Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Witold Waszczykowski told reporters that for the first time in the history of Polish diplomacy, he established new ties with countries in the Caribbean such as Belize and "San Escobar" [*sic*]. Waszczykowski claimed his comment was a slip of the tongue for "San Cristóbal y Nieves," which is Spanish for Saint Kitts and Nevis. The name *Escobar* of course refers to Pablo Escobar, the Colombian drug lord (popularized around the world through the Netflix series *Narcos*). This time, it was "citizen" satirists who quickly produced various "facts," as well as a flag, map, and even currency (the "pablos") of the non-existent country. San Escobar is a good example of how satire is "less real, perhaps; but more true,"<sup>54</sup> in the sense that Poland's current government has many fewer friends and allies on the international scene (some would joke that it has so few that the minister felt he had to make one up).

The map of San Escobar (see figure 13.3) is a masterpiece, especially in terms of linguistic creativity and political knowledge of its many contributing authors.<sup>55</sup> The wide range of names are cultural references that will be known to people from different countries and cultural backgrounds, for example, "Santo Subito," "La Isla Bonita," "Monte Christo," "Terra Cotta," and "Al Pacino." However, the San Escobar map project succeeds the most when alluding to Poland's political scene and its many divides and scandals. "Parque Nacional de Vina Tuska" sounds as if it could indeed be a national park in a Spanish-speaking country. If written as "Wina Tuska" in Polish, however, this becomes one of the most commonly cited accusations directed at former Prime Minister (and current President of the European Council) Donald Tusk and his alleged responsibility or blame ("wina") for everything that the current ruling party criticizes. The original use of "Wina Tuska" is so abstract and controversial that it might as well be an imaginary mountain range on the map of San Escobar. Taken *this far* by way of satire, a polarized political issue is recontextualized and ridiculed, allowing even Mr. Tusk's staunchest opponents to recognize that not everything could be blamed on him.



**Figure 13.3**  
 The map of San Escobar—a collaborative effort based on social media posts following the news story about the imaginary country. San Escobar illustrates how anyone (not just comedians or instructors) can effectively use the satirical form to engage in discussion on social and political issues.



# Reflexive Aspects of Humor: Seth Meyers, *Saturday Night Live*, and Trevor Noah

Satire has a crucial self-reflexive aspect. Those who engage in it are simultaneously *readers* (of the story they are deconstructing and retelling) and *authors* (of the satirical interpretation).<sup>56</sup> Therefore, “any ‘truth’ structured by a satirist comes with the knowledge that he or she is de-centering someone else’s ‘truth.’”<sup>57</sup> In the context of news reports, satire provides a new version of a news story but does not intend to propose itself as the definitive one, since by its own example it belies the concept of a definitive or authoritative work altogether.<sup>58</sup> In other words—*satire, as a form, is the epitome of critical analysis*. A satirist does not expect the audience to agree with him or her. Seth Meyers, the host of the *Late Night* on NBC, talks over any “clap-ter” (i.e., audience cheering and clapping in agreement) as he wants the audience to laugh and *reflect*, not agree with him.<sup>59</sup>

From a more general perspective, humor positively correlates with creativity; for example, brainstorming activities typically start out with humor exercises. As we relax in response to humorous situations and activities, our negative emotions also dissolve, which suggests humor allows us to maintain our self-control and propel us to act more responsibly. In making us more rational, humor fosters intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness.<sup>60</sup> Research in educational philosophy and instructional humor reveals that humor can illuminate complicities and invite “more robust interactions with difference, creating pleasurable encounters to work through difficult social divisions.”<sup>61</sup> This useful reflexive function of humor manifests itself when the incongruity we laugh at involves our own shortcomings. Humor can help us recognize our unconscious bias. Mayo argued, “While we might hope, for instance, that we are not biased or prejudiced, we still understand jokes that ridicule and understand as well that that understanding implicates us in that bias and in the ways we might undo it.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, when humor puts us in a positive mood, we see ourselves more objectively than we do in the presence of negative emotions.

The recurring “Jokes Seth Can’t Tell” segment on *Late Night with Seth Meyers* exemplifies how humor can make us reflect critically back on ourselves and the social groups we are part of, and not merely on the target of jokes. In “Jokes Seth Can’t Tell,” Meyers uses humor to bring attention to difference and diversity. When introducing the segment, Meyers says, “Every night I deliver a monologue comprised of jokes written by a diverse team of writers. As a result, a lot of jokes come across my desk that due to my being a straight, white male would be difficult for me to deliver. But we don’t think that should stop you from enjoying them.”<sup>63</sup>

He then invites writers Amber Ruffin and Jenny Hagel on for the segment to deliver the punchlines to his setups. Ruffin is black, and Hagel is lesbian; they are

both women, which places them in a better position to deliver jokes about being black or gay or a woman. Meyers includes writers' voices because they are best positioned to represent their unique cultural identities and tell jokes from their own perspectives. By highlighting a diversity of viewpoints, Meyers is able to reach a wider audience. If delivered by the show's host, a straight white male, certain jokes would be too controversial. This is how, ironically, a comedian (i.e., someone who typically pushes boundaries of what can be said) is teaching us where to draw a line. The incongruity the audience is presented to process here is meant to encourage self-reflection, for example, consider how *differently* messages are communicated and received depending on who is talking (or who is the "messenger"). Another good example to illustrate this point is a video from the HBO show *Real Time with Bill Maher* entitled "New Rule: What If Obama Said It?"<sup>64</sup> Maher invited Obama impersonator Reggie Brown to find out how Republicans would react if Barack said some of the things Donald Trump was able to say and face almost no consequences.

Satirical humor can break into a filter bubble to influence our perception of particular issues and public figures, weakening attitudinal bias. A case in point is Tina Fey's *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) impersonation of Sarah Palin, the former governor of Alaska and Republican nominee for vice president in the 2008 US election. Political impersonations often blur the line between the original and the impression, causing the former to "take action." Tina Fey's portrayal of Palin as an uninformed and incompetent political novice spanned six *SNL* skits and gained unprecedented popularity. Sarah Palin eventually appeared on *SNL* as herself, performing some damage control for her reputation. Blurring the lines by bringing the real (Palin) into the mimetic (Tina Fey as Palin on *SNL*) helped viewers see a more comprehensive and accurate picture of the real Sarah Palin as a candidate and determine her suitability for office.

Day argued that in the *SNL* sketches on Palin, the juxtaposition of the mimetic and the real was instrumental in informing citizens because "the mimetic frame allows the stolen fragments of the real to be satirically scrutinized, deconstructed, and even subsequently mobilized as a form of evidence in public debate, pointing up the flaws of contemporary political discourse."<sup>65</sup>

Exposure to Tina Fey's impersonation of Sarah Palin's performance in the 2008 vice presidential debate on *SNL* was associated with changes in attitudes toward her selection as VP candidate and presidential vote intentions.<sup>66</sup> Kate McKinnon's Hillary Clinton impersonation on *SNL* in the most recent election has also been applauded. It may have made its way into the echo chambers on the liberal side of the political spectrum and affected the support for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential race.

Perhaps the strongest evidence for how polar opposites can engage in a basic, yet important reflexive dialogue comes from *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. On November 30, 2016, Trevor Noah hosted Tomi Lahren, a conservative vlog-

ger and political commentator known for her controversial opinions (e.g., calling the Black Lives Matter movement “the new KKK”). In the interview with Lahren, Noah abandoned jokes in favor of a frank conversation—engaging his guest in a heated, but respectful discourse on complicated and polarizing issues, for example, Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protest during the playing of the US national anthem, meant to bring attention to what he believes to be racial injustices against black Americans. Noah’s interview with Lahren supports studies that report that satirical programs are actually the least politically polarizing and do not promote distrust.<sup>67</sup> Trevor Noah maintained a conciliatory tone after the interview by tweeting “Thank you for being my guest Tomi. Our goal should be to destroy these ‘bubbles’ not each other. You’re always welcome on my show” (@Trevornoh, December 1, 2016). The full interview with Tomi Lahren can be used in the classroom to prompt discussions on social justice. It is a worthy effort to engage supporters on opposing sides of the political scene in a civilized debate.

## Conclusion

The examples discussed in this chapter aimed to show that humor works as an effective attention-gaining method, relaxes the environment we teach in, and helps us form relationships with students. This is an advantage for librarians involved in one-shot instruction facing an unknown and mixed cohort of students. The key pedagogical benefit of using humor is that it improves recall and recognition—we tend to remember humorous messages more than we do nonhumorous ones.<sup>68</sup> This is because our brains perform differently depending on our emotional state. When our response to the use of humor puts us in a positive mood, we will exhibit a “greater creativity and flexibility in problem solving as well as more efficiency and thoroughness in decision-making.”<sup>69</sup> Political satire, when carefully selected and aligned to instructional content, elicits the positive kind of emotional response while simultaneously providing a sound model for synthesis and source evaluation.

Incorporating political satire into library instruction helps students navigate the increasingly polarized information environment. By incessantly holding people and issues up for scrutiny and questioning, satire makes us pay closer attention to what is actually being said. We may eventually re-evaluate our affinity to and withdraw our support for those who fail this scrutiny test. We all have what psychologists call an “affective tipping point” at which our existing bias gives way to a newly understood reality.<sup>70</sup> Humorous messages in general are more likely to win our attention, while satirical messages in particular, pointing out the absurd (and increasingly the unjust), help us see the flaws and limitations of “our” sources of information. Satire can thus reduce attitudinal bias and broaden our filter bubble by helping us notice and accept new, more reliable (and more diverse) information into it. If we want to build stronger literacies for navigating the current informa-

tion environment, we need to think creatively about our instructional practice. The most future-proof solution to the various challenges our students face is their capacity for critical thinking and ability to enter into dialogue with people who hold different beliefs. We can work on this by bringing John Oliver to class.

## Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to my wife, Ela, for her support, constructive feedback, honesty, and patience in improving the early drafts of this work. I would also like to thank my amazing colleagues in the Academic Achievement team at the University of Roehampton—for prompting me to talk about my ideas and helping me fit it all together. To all the readers—feel free to reach out to me if you have questions or need clarification on any of the ideas presented here.

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