MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

„Late-night vs. Post-truth Politics: Satire as a Form of Counter-discourse"

verfasst von / submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (MA)

Wien, 2018 / Vienna, 2018

DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I confirm to have conceived and written this MA Thesis in English all by myself. Quotations from other authors are all clearly marked and acknowledged in the bibliographical references, either in the footnotes or within the text. Any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of other authors have been truthfully acknowledged and identified in the footnotes.

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HINWEIS

Diese MA Thesis hat nachgewiesen, dass die betreffende Kandidatin befähigt ist, wissenschaftliche Themen selbstständig sowie inhaltlich und methodisch vertretbar zu bearbeiten. Da die Korrekturen des Beurteilenden nicht eingetragen sind und das Gutachten nicht beiliegt, ist daher nicht erkenntlich mit welcher Note diese Arbeit abgeschlossen wurde. Das Spektrum reicht von sehr gut bis genügend. Die Habilitierten des Instituts für Anglistik und Amerikanistik bitten diesen Hinweis bei der Lektüre zu beachten

Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction

> I have a gut, and my gut tells me more sometimes than anybody else's brain can ever tell me. […] One of the problems that a lot of people like myself [sic], we have very high levels of intelligence but we're not necessarily such believers. […] As to whether or not it [climate change]'s man-made and whether or not the effects that you're talking about are there, I don't see it.
>
> Donald Trump, Interview with *The Washington Post* (Rucker et al.)

Climate change denial questions the scientific consensus on anthropogenic global warming. It claims that deniers' opinion is as valid as the factual argument that humans are causing the world temperature to rise. In the United States, climate change denial has hindered the efforts to prevent or reduce the harmful effects of global warming (Mann and Toles 131). Denying climate change is one of the most noticeable (and alarming) examples of what is called post-truth discourse. The post-truth discourse enables its subjects to produce and consume knowledge based on their emotions or beliefs – often in dismissal of, or in opposition to factual evidence.

The post-truth discourse is the common thread that links some of the recent political phenomena around the world: Brexit, Donald Trump's election as the President of the US and the increase in the power of the Freedom Party in Austria. One of the main economic slogans of Brexit campaign in 2016 claimed Brexit would result in the acquisition of £350 million that can be dedicated to the British National Health Service has since proven to be statistically misleading (Full Fact). Donald Trump has withdrawn the US from the Paris Agreement on climate change and has left the Iran nuclear deal, both, against the advice of experts who considered them necessary for protecting the environment and the world piece (Poushter). In Austria, the Freedom Party continues to claim that asylum seekers are more criminally inclined, although statistics do not fully support their claim (Schreiber et al.). Therefore, it is evident that the use

of post-truth discourse in some countries, most notably the US, has fundamentally changed the political landscape. Arguably, it is possible that the adverse consequences of these course-changing events are going to be felt in the years to come.

The severity of such socio-political regressions and their harmful effects on democratic practices require a comprehensive examination of the reasons that led to the rise of post-truth politics. Additionally, it is important to identify the reactions to and the endeavors against the prevalence of adapting such an anti-intellectual approach to public discourse. Satire, traditionally, has been committed to opposing irrational social and moral discursive practices. The roman satirists such as Juvenal targeted the corruption and depravity in Rome. The English satirist of the 18th century such as Jonathan Swift advocated rationalism of the Age of Enlightenment. In the 20th century, George Orwell opposed the authoritarian regimes' attempts to distort historical facts. In his essay, "Looking Back on the Spanish War," discussing General Franco's deceitful historiography, he warned that "the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world" (Orwell).

Contemporary American satirists follow this two-thousand-year-old tradition in opposing current post-truth political practices. Late-night TV satirists such as Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert and John Oliver, among others, identify the irrationalities of practicing post-truth politics and offer humorous counter-discourses to challenge the inconsistencies of such deeds. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the rhetorical capacities of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (*LWT*) as an example of American late-night satiric TV in its opposition to discursive practices of the subjects of post-truth politics. The subject positions of post-truth politics include the politicians, the media and the citizens. I argue that Oliver's satire primarily targets post-truth politicians and media in order to *reintroduce* the principle of honesty based on factual and objective truth to public discourse as a means of defending democratic rights of the citizens.

Scholars usually categorize satiric late-night shows such as Oliver's *LWT*, Stewart's *The Daily Show* and Colbert's *The Colbert Report* as infotainment or soft news – hybrid programs that combine entertainment with informative content. Recent studies in the field of political science highlight the positive aspects of watching satirical TV shows; for instance, Baum's *Soft News Goes to War* (2003) concludes that soft news awakens the interest of viewers who usually do not follow foreign policy. Baumgartner and Morris (2006) examine *The Daily Show* and arrive at the conclusion that it might have detrimental effect on support for political institutions and leaders; however, they agree with Baum that soft news programs capture the attention of inattentive citizens. Parkin (2010) finds out that political interviews in late-night shows engage disinterested viewers and assist them in processing and recalling significant political information.

Scholars in the field of communication and media studies are more interested in the implications of political satire on late-night TV for journalism and the challenges that it poses for traditional role of the press. Baym (2005) argues that the news parody format of *The Daily Show* has had fundamental impact on the traditional monologic TV journalism and has reinvented political journalism in the 21st century. Alonso (2018) examines the role of satiric TV in Northern and Southern America and introduces the term 'critical metatainment' to refer to political satire's subversive role in the media spectacle era.

As this brief review shows the main focus of these studies is the impact of late-night shows on the democratic participation and political knowledge of the citizens; namely, their relation to news programs, political journalism or their infotainment aspect. I contend that additionally the satirical content of these shows plays a significant role in their democratic functionality and integrity. In fact, the satirical aspect of these shows, rather than their new approaches to political debate or journalism, is the determining element in posing counter-discourses to the problematic aspects of contemporary politics.

Therefore, in order to prepare the grounds for examining the satirical late-shows counter-discursive content against post-truth politics, in chapter two, I will focus on defining the terms and establishing the scope of the study. I will present my definition of post-truth politics as a discourse within which knowledge is produced and consumed by post-truth subjects. Additionally, the difficulty of limiting satire to a certain field of study or genre is discussed and consequently satire is identified as a discursive practice. In this vein, satiric late-shows such as *LWT* are recognized as hybrid postmodern infotainment programs that make them uniquely equipped to deal with post-truth politics as a result of their transgressive discursive construction.

In chapter three, Oliver's work in satirizing Donald Trump, as a prominent post-truth politician, during his candidacy and presidency is studied. I demonstrate that prior to Trump's election, Oliver uses satiric devices to deconstruct Trump's celebrity status in the American society in order to encourage his audience to refrain from voting for Trump. Additionally, I analyze his attempts to identify rhetorical techniques used by Trump and his administration after his election. It will be shown that parody, name-calling and ironic similes are used by *LWT* to introduce competing concepts about Trump to the audience.

In chapter four, *LWT*'s satiric challenge to the post-truth media is discussed. By identifying media consolidation as harmful for democratic knowledge and participation, Oliver warns his audience of the propagandic capacities of oligopoly in media markets. He identifies Sinclair Broadcast Group as a media conglomerate that uses extreme right-wing point of view as a means of commercial and political gain. Similarly, the American Rifle Association's TV channel, NRA TV and a conspiracy theory show, *InfoWars,* are investigated by Oliver to show how they manipulate their audience with their imbalanced version of patriotism. In this regard, bathos and grotesque satire accompany parody for proposing alternative discourses about the aforementioned post-truth media.

In the conclusion, Oliver and the citizens, I will provide a brief review of my theoretical approach and discuss the satirical efforts of *LWT* in revealing the post-truth agenda of his targets. I shall argue that Oliver, as a late-night TV show host, occupies different roles within the postmodern infotainment format, although, arguably, he is primarily a satirist who utilizes different satirical devices, especially parody, as a means of forming subversive counter-discourses to post-truth politics. His aim is to *reintroduce* the principle of honesty to public discourse to facilitate democratic participation of citizens.

2. Theoretical Approach

The multifaceted nature of investigating satirical TV programs' responses to post-truth politics requires an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that incorporates political science, communication and media studies, philosophy and literary studies. Therefore, in order to organize the necessary theoretical framework for the study, two separate, but interlinked, paths are taken. First, a theory of post-truth politics as a discourse is developed. Beginning with the current definitions of the word *post-truth* and similar concepts, and briefly examining its history and its philosophical, socio-political and technological origins, a point of departure is provided to examine the emergence and the rise of post-truth politics. Consequently, some suggested counter-strategies are discussed, and a definition of post-truth discourse is presented. Furthermore, the three subject positions of the post-truth politics as a discourse are identified.

The second theoretical path takes into account the difficulty of defining satire and responds to this challenge by employing the discursive theory of satire by Paul Simpson. By considering

satire as a discursive practice, the potential of the contemporary late-shows as satirical work is explored. Additionally, by discussing Bogel's concept of satiric doubleness and Baym's theory of postmodern discursive integration, it is proposed that contemporary satirical late-shows have the distinctive ability to provide counter-discursive responses to post-truth politics.

2.1. Post-truth Politics

The discussion about truth and its relationship to facts caught public attention in the mid-2000s. One of the first public figures who emphasized the severity of the crisis of truth was the satirist Stephen Colbert. Colbert introduced the word *truthiness* in the first episode of *The Colbert Report* in October 17, 2005 and defined it as "the belief in what you feel to be true rather than what the facts will support" (*TLSWSC*, "Post-truth") and promised his audience not to "read the new to [them]" but "to feel the news at [them]":

> Now I'm sure some of the word police – the *wordanistas* over at Webster's are gonna say, hey that's not a word. Well, anybody who knows me knows I'm no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They're *elitist*. Constantly telling us *what is or isn't true* or *what did or didn't happen.* Who's Britannica to tell me Panama Canal was finished in 1914? If I want to say it happened in 1941, that's my right. I don't trust books. *They're all facts and no heart* and that's exactly what's pulling our country apart today. And let's face it America, we are a divided nation… divided between those *who think with their heads and those who know with their hearts*. ("The Word - Truthiness", emphasis added)

Colbert's truthiness was the truth that comes from the *gut*, not from the *head*.[1] Colbert was inspired by the weapons of the mass destruction (WMD) scandal during the Bush era as well as the presentation style of the political pundits that he parodied on his show. W. Lance Bennett states that truthiness refers to "the many political statements that officials introduce into the news that are not entirely consistent with the available evidence. […] evidence that journalists

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[1] In 28 November 2018, in reaction to Trump's assertions in his interview with the Washington Post (quoted in the beginning of the first chapter), Colbert stated: "Trump stole my bit […] that's clear copyright infringement, he's stealing my anti-intellectual property" (*TLSWSC*, "Donald Trump" 01:23-02:05).

have trouble introducing independently unless other officials contest the spurious claims" (*News*, 18-19). Thus, according to Bennett, the news usually *feels* true but it might not be compatible with reality or evidence. The appearance of truth without having evidence is "the essence of truthiness" (ibid. 19). In this way, the word *truthiness* is conceptually similar to the term *post-truth*.

The term *post-truth* has been defined by various scholars in different ways; however, what all these definitions have in common is that post-truth statements are public utterances that perceive factual truth as subjective. Ralph Keyes attributes the increase of post-truth statements in the US to moral decline. In his opinion, the term *post-truth* is a euphemism for lying. He believes that after the Watergate scandal, Lewinsky affair and WMD controversy, Americans have reached moral numbness (11). Against such a backdrop, post-truth, as a euphemism for lying has lost its negative connotations to the extent that one no longer expects honesty to be the default position, particularly in the case of politicians (Higgins 9). In this manner, post-truth threatens the objectivity of truth, especially when political actors dismiss facts as matters of faith, taste or opinion.

The term post-truth politics is defined as "relating or denoting to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" ("Post-truth," *Oxford Dictionaries*). Post-truth politics is a type of discursive operation in which the interlocutors – including the politicians, the media and the citizens – use the internal logic of post-truth discourse (i.e. the equivalency between opinion and fact) to make their political decisions. In the following sections, I will discuss post-truth's terminological, philosophical, socio-political and technological origins and conclude by presenting my definition of post-truth politics as a discourse.

2.1.1. Origins of Post-truth Politics

The word *post-truth* was coined by Steve Tesich in 1992. Tesich, writing for *The Nation* (a progressive dissident magazine), discussed the aftermath of the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals. He stated that due to such scandals and the Vietnam War, American people have decided to equate truth with bad news and accept that the government must protect them from truth. He maintained that "[i]n a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world" (Kreitner). Consequently, the term was used to discuss the Bush era politics. Keyes published his book on post-truth as a crisis of honesty and reconfiguration of moral standards in 2004. However, it was in 2010 that David Roberts, a blogger for *Grist* (an eco-conscious independent news outlet) coined the term *post-truth politics*, to discuss the Republican Party's opposition to Democratic Party's policies during the Obama presidency. He argued that the partisan voters have a biased approach to choosing facts that support their arguments (Roberts). Tesich and Roberts both focus on the citizens or voters in the United States, however, post-truth is a global phenomenon. As the focus of this study is the United States politics, it can only be mentioned that the most prominent instance of post-truth politics in Europe is Brexit; although some other political events, such as the recent elections in Italy and Austria have been permeated with post-truth political rhetoric.

In the US, the earliest instances of post-truth politics can be traced back to the Nixon era. Since then, the use of post-truth politics has gradually increased. In the 1990s, Bill Clinton's efforts to hide his affairs were restrained instances of using post-truth statements to sway the public opinion. In the early 2000s, the claim by the Bush administration that weapons of mass destruction existed in Iraq was the basis for the invasion of that country in 2003. This claim, which was later debunked (Bennett, *When the Press Fails*, 23-24), is a more elaborate instance of post-truth politics. Most recently, Donald Trump's actions before and after his election are among the most deliberate uses of post-truth politics. The fact-checking website, *Politifact*,

estimates that almost 70 percent of what Trump says is false ("Donald Trump's File"). Trump uses his Twitter account as his platform to express his unsubstantiated opinions. Such assertions, either considered as outright lying or merely as stating his opinion seem to be consumed – mostly by his supporters – as reliable information. Considering the amount of power that a US president has, it is important to identify the reasons that such post-truth assertions have been normalized.

There are various philosophical, socio-political and technological reasons that have contributed to the rise of post-truth politics in the world, in general and in the US in particular. Philosophical challenges to the notion of objective truth from relativists, the substantial increase in the number of populists elected in different countries as well as the fundamental changes in the media world are among the main reasons that they had an impact on our understanding of truth in the contemporary era.

From a philosophical perspective, post-truth politics has been in the making for a long time. The challenge to the notion of the objective truth can be considered as the defining moment in the emergence of philosophy as a discipline in Ancient Greece. The sophists or skeptics in the ancient Greece were rhetorical arts teachers, some of whom denied the possibility of objectivity with the aim of winning arguments – as being an effective speaker paved the way to power at the time (Guthrie 44). Sophists were individualists; therefore one cannot call them a school, however, they all shared "a common scepticism about the possibility of certain knowledge, on the grounds both of the inadequacy and fallibility of our faculties and of the absence of a stable reality to be known" (ibid. 47). Centuries later, philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment foregrounded the notions of objectivity and rationality; concepts that were partly challenged by philosophers like Nietzsche in the 19th century.

The ancient skeptics, Simon Blackburn argues, have close affinity with modern relativists, whose motto can be summarized in this Nietzschean sentence that "there are no facts, only interpretations" (qtd in Blackburn xv). However, Blackburn states that contemporary relativists, - unlike their ancient counterparts whose skepticism amounted to *epoche* or lack of opinion, and culminated in *ataraxia* or tranquility of mind -, "persuad[e] themselves that all opinions enjoy the same standing in the light of reason, take it as a green light to believe what they like with as much conviction and force as they like" (xiv). He argues that relativism assumes "no asymmetries of reason and knowledge, objectivity and truth" exist (xviii). In this manner, something unreasonable or based on one's taste can be counted truthful, and a scientific fact can be considered just an opinion – an opinion that can be true or false[2].

Some postmodern scholars have tried to provide explanations for Nietzsche's claim. For instance, Paul de Mann believes that Nietzsche has shown that all rational thought has limits, because all thought stems from "power, rhetoric and metaphor" (ibid. 79). Michel Foucault's influential ideas on the relation between power and truth also contribute to the relativist notions of some postmodernists. He argued that knowledge is always a form of power and the application and effectiveness of power/knowledge is more important than the question of 'truth' (Hall 49). As Stuart Hall clarifies, for Foucault, "Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true" (ibid.). Therefore, there is a direct correlation between power and knowledge. Foucault also claimed that there is no subject

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[2] According to Searle, the idea that opinions and facts can equally be valid is logically self-refuting. Because when a statement is considered true relative to a certain point of view, the opposite of that statement can be considered true relative to another point of view (interpretation). Therefore, for instance, "snow is white," is true based on my point of view, and not true based on another point of view. However, "*to say* something" means that we believe what we say is true; thus, when one says, "snow *is* white," it means that she believes that *it is true* that snow is white (Searle 4, emphasis added). Therefore, saying that there *are* no facts, paradoxically indicates that the speaker believes that what she says *is true* that *there are no facts*. As a result, such a statement is self-refuting because it assumes that at least one statement is true (Blackburn 77). In other words, everything is relative, *except* the preposition that 'everything is relative' and the existence of one absolute prepositions refutes the relativist's claim.

outside discourse and subjects are constructed by discourses (ibid. 52). Denying the possibility of production of knowledge outside one's discursive boundaries (for instance, one's culture) can lead to equalizing all positions concerning truth, regardless of their origins in facts or otherwise.

Another twentieth century thinker that influenced the understanding of truth, especially scientific truth, is Thomas Kuhn. He presented serious challenge to the correspondence theory of truth[3]. In his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn discussed the term paradigm; namely, any scientific achievement or model that is acknowledged by the scientific community and can be taught in an academic capacity (Preston 21). Kuhn believed that science is based on a past scientific achievement that "the scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice" (Kuhn 10, qtd. in Preston 21). In Kuhn's opinion, paradigms can be big or small, for instance, Maxwell's electromagnetics is a relatively smaller paradigm than Newton's laws of motion. Thus, Kuhn doubted the objectivity of science and popularized the idea that there is "*no* theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like 'really true'" because "the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its 'real' counterpart in nature now seems […] illusive in principle" (Kuhn 206, qtd. in Blackburn 56). Kuhn's idea targets the correspondence theory of truth or "the idea that truth can be understood and explained in terms of correspondence with the facts" outside of theories or paradigms (ibid). This is the concept of truth associated with the modernist point of view.

Postmodernist anti-foundational theories challenge the claim that there is an ultimate truth or that there are certain criteria to determine what can be considered the ultimate truth (Sim 3). Baudrillard has introduced the concept of hyperreality, "where social and cultural forms not

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[3] The view that "truth is correspondence to, or with a fact … [it refers] to any view explicitly embracing the idea that truth consists in a relation to reality" (David).

only simulate the 'real,' the real itself is a simulation" (Haywood and Mac An Ghaill 56). Overall, in postmodernism, the grand narratives or metanarratives that proposed an absolute truth are no longer considered valid (Watson 67). Lyotard described the grand narratives or metanarratives as "theories which claim to provide universal explanations" such as Marxism and most religions; however, he believed that grand narratives are authoritarian in nature and accordingly, we have to construct our own little narratives to stand up against authoritarianism (Sim 259). Thus, a more democratic and tolerant society can stem from a more relaxed approach to absolute truth.[4]

On the other hand, there are some scholars, who believe the pluralist nature of postmodernism can be used to defend grand narratives. For instance, Danaher proposes a postmodern correspondence theory of truth that can be used to justify Christianity. He believes that since postmodern truth is related to one's conceptualization of reality, therefore, Christianity (or at least some concepts within it) are God's conceptualization of reality and can be held true regardless of any objections (61). However, rendering truth to be personal – either human or divine - cannot provide any ground for a firm belief in the veracity of a matter. This perspective can only mean that Christianity is one faith among many; as any other faith can claim that they consider the conceptualization of their deity to be the absolute truth. In other words, such a correspondence theory of truth is, in fact, a relativist theory of truth.

As a result of all these philosophical upheavals, some have concluded that personal beliefs are no longer required to conform to reasoning and factual analyses; they have become a matter of taste. This principle, when applied to public affairs, translates into post-truth politics. One of the inherent dangers of post-truth politics is that any public policy debate (or

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[4] However, such a relaxed approach might also be harmful in some aspects. For instance, if one accepts that traditions are culturally-specific and cannot be judged from the perspective of other cultures, totalitarian governments of some states can argue that they have the right to execute their populations based on their religious or cultural 'traditions.'

any debate for that matter) that is not grounded in reality or does not have a factual basis, can turn into an unsolvable controversial issue. For instance, the climate change denial (discussed in the introduction) has turned into one of the most controversial issues in the US.

One of the main socio-political reasons for the rise of post-truth politics is the populist turn of the 21th century. The rise of populism in the US and Europe is evidenced by the Brexit vote and Donald Trump's election as the US president. Post-truth discourse is a contributing element to such populist movements, especially by influencing the voter behavior. Drinkwater and Jennings explain that voters cast their ballots based on instrumental motivations or expressive motivations (181). Instrumental voters consider their choice as a kind of investment to yield indirect benefits, while the expressive voters see their actions as a kind of consumption that can lead to direct benefits, similar to booing or cheering in sport events (ibid.). Jane Suiter, based on the work of psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, argues that emotions such as anger and irritation motivate "expressive voters" to cast their ballots "without regard for evidence or long-term thinking" (26-27). In her opinion, emotional appeals utilized by the media and the politicians attract audiences/constituents' attention. The way that the media present a "false balance" between two opposing sides of an arguments, leads to truth becoming and remaining "simply a matter of assertion" (27). Such a false balance is the same as adopting a relativist approach to truth. Politicians, therefore, can gain support in elections by adjusting their assertions to what influences their audience the most. In this way, by claiming to be responding to people's demands, the populist leaders present themselves as having compatible concerns with their constituents.

Populism encompasses both right wing and left-wing politics, however, as the sociologist Roger Brubaker notes, all populist movements claim, "to speak in the name of "the people" and against various "elites"" (359). He proposes that we must treat "populism as a discursive and stylistic repertoire" (360) that can be used (or not be used) by political actors. Brubaker enumerates five

elements for populism: antagonistic re-politicization, majoritarianism, (selective) anti-institutionalism, protectionism and having a "low" rather than a "high" style (from language and food to rhetorical and self-representational styles) that values raw and crude over refined and cultivated (364-366). Not all these elements must be used simultaneously by political actors to make them populists. Among these elements, some are more subtle like re-politicization of areas of modern life that has been long de-politicized; for instance people making direct decisions about joining or leaving international entities such as the European Union. There are instances that are more obvious such as the protectionist rhetoric of villainizing immigrants, especially from certain ethnic and cultural backgrounds (e.g. islamophobia in Europe or propaganda against Mexicans in the US).

There has been different underlying reasons for the rise of populism for the last two decades. One of the reasons that populism has been on the rise is the mediatization of the politics; namely, direct contact between the politicians and 'the people' (Brubaker 370). Thus, many populists have tried and succeeded in conveying their message directly to 'the people' through social media. Economic factors such as the 2008 financial crisis and recession also play an important role in boosting populism (ibid. 374).

Another important contributor to populism has been the demographic and cultural transformation, especially in the form of immigration. Therefore, populism has found the opportunity to claim that 'the people' must be protected against the *others* (ibid. 373). The most recognizable example is the global reaction to the so-called 2015 'refugee crises.' For instance, in Austria, the conservative and the right-wing party were able to win the election in 2017 based on their firm stance against refugees. The new chancellor, Sebastian Kurz advocates that the European countries must decide for themselves how many refugees they allow into their countries ("Kurz fordert Kursänderung").

In the case of 2015 'refugee crisis,' the mediatization of politics and the demographic and cultural changes converged to construct a media spectacle,[5] which is another contributing factor to the rise of populism. Murray Edelman suggests that such political spectacles are constructed based on the perception of the citizens, politicians and journalists. He argues that politics is not based on factual observations but on the participants' perceptions or interpretations that are linked to a certain ideology (10). In this vein, problems and crises might not be factual but mere constructions. In Edelman's view, since the 1960s, American politics, in general, has not only been merely *constructed* by political actors: it has lost its connection to the *actual* events. He states that if political developments were based on "factual observations," then in time, false meanings "would be discredited […] and a consensus upon valid ones would emerge;" however, this does not happen and "controversy over their meanings is not resolved" (3). Therefore, "[a]ccounts of political issues, problems, crises, threats, and leaders" substitute "factual statements" to construct contrasting "assumptions and beliefs about the social and political world" (10). Consequently, facts are disregarded and every aspect of politics is an interpretation serving an ideology. As a result, a spectacle is created that in turn generates points of views, perceptions and strategies. Edelman's conclusion attributes the rise of political spectacle to dissembling reality rather than manipulating it. Brubaker partly affirms Edelman's notion by stating that "[w]ith the complicity of mainstream, alternative, and social media, political actors construct, perform, intensify, dramatize, and in these ways contribute to producing the very crises to which they claim to respond" (374).

In short, Brubaker argues that the convergence of several social and cultural changes in the recent decades has laid the groundwork for the populism to gain such momentum. Therefore, according to Brubaker, the omission of the journalists that used to work as a mediator between

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[5] Douglas Kellner describes media spectacles as "technologically mediated events, in which media forms like broadcasting, print media and the Internet process events in a spectacular form" (708). Such media spectacles are dramatic, out of the ordinary and dominate journalism for long periods of times (ibid. 707).

the politicians and the citizens (the mediatization of the politics), accompanied by an increase in immigration to the European countries and the United States; as well as the rise of the terrorists attacks and the "crisis of public knowledge […] suggested by the talk of fake news, alternative facts, and a post-truth era" has made it possible for the populists to contribute to the construction and representation of the existing problems as severe crises. Brubaker calls this "the perfect storm" that has facilitated the prevalence of populist rhetoric (378). Thus, Brubaker considers post-truth discourse or as he puts it "crisis of public knowledge" as one of the contributing elements to populism that serves the populist agenda. However, the reverse might also be true. A society permeated with post-truth discourse can facilitate the rise of populists.

Another contributing element to the rise of post-truth politics is the changing media landscape. It was discussed that the social media has allowed the populists to directly connect to people. Meanwhile, media spectacles have severed the link between reality and politics and have turned politics into a mere construct of political actors. Another significant technological or media-related change that contributes to the rise of post-truth is the development of infotainment. Infotainment, a portmanteau coined in the 1980s, refers to "television programs that present information (such as news) in a manner intended to be entertaining" ("Infotainment"). Daya Kishan Thussu considers infotainment a global trend originated in the US and is synonymous with soft news, which is mostly concerned with dramatic events related to crimes, celebrities, etc. – that presents news as "a form of spectacle, at the expense of news about political, civic and public affairs" (8). Thussu, therefore, finds infotainment a negative phenomenon.

According to Delli Carpini and Williams, traditionally, scholars have distinguished between entertainment media and non-entertainment media (160); however, technological changes in the media landscape especially news, have resulted in the erosion of the socially constructed "news-entertainment distinction" (167). They propose to use the concepts of hyperreality and

multiaxiality "to make sense of [the] world of mediated politics" (170). Hyperreality, as mentioned earlier, indicates that in "a postmodern world we can no longer rely on a stable relationship or clear distinction between a "real" event and its mediated representation. Consequently, we can no longer work with the idea that the "real" is more important, significant or "true" than the representation" (Fiske 2 qtd in Delli Carpini and Williams 170). In other words, the media spectacle, as discussed earlier has replaced reality. Multiaxiality emphasizes that "[public discourse] is language in social use; language accented with its history of domination, subordination and resistance […] it is politicized, power-bearing language employed to extend or defend the interests of its discursive community" (ibid. 172). As a result, infotainment as a new fluid format, opposed to the traditional rigid categories of entertainment and non-entertainment, can respond to the hyperreality and multiaxiality of contemporary media structure and use it to its benefit.

According to Geoffrey Baym, in the postmodern world such fluidity is not exclusive to infotainment, but it is more pervasive and includes all discursive formations. His theory of discursive integration is based on Habermas's project of modernity. According to Habermas, who is influenced by Max Weber, there are three discursive formations or spheres in the project of modernity: cognitive-instrumental (science), moral-practical (politics) and aesthetic-expressive (arts) (Habermas 9). Baym argues that for the last few decades, the rather clear-cut lines of discursive formations of project modernity have been gradually changing in different domains ("Serious Comedy" 24). Infotainment is the result of the discursive integration between news and entertainment, which respectively belonged to the modern cognitive-instrumental and aesthetic-expressive spheres. The objectivity desired in news is aversely influenced by the rise of media corporations and their need to attract readers and viewers who want excitement and drama (ibid. 27). In such an atmosphere, the priority of the media is increasing the viewers' numbers and commercial gain.

Additionally, discursive integration not only influences the news media but also the political scene. In politics, the political actors must now have the capacity to be entertaining. When the presidential candidate, Bill Clinton appeared in *Arsenio Hall Show* to play saxophone, he ushered the politicians into a new era of campaigning in which the wining of elections partly depends on how good an entertainer a candidate is (Spiegel). Barack Obama was a frequent guest on late-night shows and even sang about his achievements on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* in 2008. The line between political journalism and punditry has also been blurred as the distinction between the political satirist and newscaster; to the extent that Baym declares Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert are the true heirs of Walter Cronkite[6] (Pollock 514).

Overall, infotainment in media and politics, with its transgressive capacity, has contributed to the post-truth discourse by replacing the 'real' with the 'spectacle.' To have politicians who are entertainers and entertainers who are political commentators or journalists can have both positive and negative effects. The negative effect is the loss of the distinction between opinion and fact, which is the central tenet of the post-truth discursive practice. On the other hand, infotainment provides the opportunity for new forms of discursive expression to enter the realm of public discourse such as satire – discursive practices that can adapt themselves better to the needs of the contemporary political world.

After considering the underlying reasons for the rise of the post-truth politics, first, it must be noted that the rise of post-truth politics cannot be attributed to a single phenomenon. A series of philosophical, socio-political and technological changes in recent decades have foregrounded its emergence. Next, the examination of these reasons makes it clear that post-truth politics,

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[6] Walter Leland Cronkite Jr. (1916-2009) was the anchorman CBS Evening News for 19 years. He was often called "the most trusted man in America" after a poll in 1972. This epithet was later used for Jon Stewart.

especially when used by some populist leaders and with its capacity to turn any public discussion into a controversial issue has adverse effects on a functional democracy.

2.1.2. Proposed Strategies against Post-truth Politics

As it has been discussed, post-truth politics has a tangible presence in the contemporary world. It is most commonly utilized by the populists to manipulate public opinion. Given that preserving the truth and holding the politicians accountable is of outmost importance for a democratic society, one has to look for strategies and solutions to deter the further development of such practices as well as trying to repair the existing damage resulted from them. There are some suggestions in this regard, including developing personal civic responsibility to analyze the information that one receives from different outlets, media taking action to spot and debunk fake news, teaching the values of veracity and objectivity to children and adults and making fun of false statements (d'Ancona 113-138). These strategies all require active participation of the individuals and institutions.

On the other hand, Brubaker suggests that populism – as the political format in which post-truth discourse can best be best utilized - can be self-limiting, because the non-populists can selectively use populist tools to defeat the populists: as the populists thrive on crisis, their opponents can be considered agents of non-crisis and rational optimism (380). Besides, as populism works based on having faith that 'the people' are being represented, it simultaneously needs an element of lack of faith in the "workings of the representational politics [and] *disinvestment* from politics as usual" (ibid. emphasis in original); therefore, when the populists gain power, their claim to being exceptional or anti-establishment can easily be discredited. In this manner, post-truth politics' reliance on faith can be self-defeating.

Another strategy to challenge post-truth politics is the use of satire. Post-truth politics' reliance on relativist ideas and its utilization of infotainment can both be challenged by satiric responses as exemplified by late-night shows in the US. Jones and Baym argue that although satiric late-night shows have a postmodern form, they follow "a modernist agenda, a critique of news and an interrogation of political power that rests on a firm belief in fact, accountability and reason in public discourse" (281). In other words, although satiric late-night shows are infotainment programs, they *reintroduce* an objective take on truth. In this manner, they are not simply ridiculing a post-truth statement; they are also introducing criteria for evaluation of such statements. This transgressive form of satire has the potential to show the self-refuting aspects of post-truth statements. Thus, satiric late-night shows can be among the main counter-discursive strategies against post-truth politics. I will further discuss this counter-discursive capacity in the end of this chapter.

2.1.3. Post-truth Politics as a Discourse

Until now, it has been discussed that term post-truth has been introduced in the last few decades. It has also been established that as a concept, post-truth can be traced back to the Ancient Greece. As a practice, post-truth can be found within a wide range of political movements, although it can be seen most prominently among the right-wing populist movements. As I have mentioned earlier, post-truth politics is a type of political discourse. To define post-truth as a discourse, I use the Foucauldian ideas about discourse. According to Foucault, a discourse is, "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment […] Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But […] since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive

aspect" (Hall 44). Therefore, discourses are bodies of knowledge or ways of talking about the world.

In Foucault, a discourse is composed of four elements: objects, operations, concepts and theoretical options. These elements, are not permanent and can be formed, transformed and establish correlations with other discourses (McHoul and Grace, 44). Discourses 'rule in' what can be said about a certain topic and how one should conduct oneself; they also 'rule out' and limit other ways of talking about that topic and behaving in relation to it (Hall 44). A discourse, therefore, sets the boundaries of producing and consuming knowledge. As mentioned earlier, the subjects of a discourse can produce their texts within these boundaries; texts that, in turn, are consumed by other subjects of that discourse or other discourses.

Therefore, I define post-truth politics as a political discourse that enables its subjects to produce and consume certain forms of public knowledge based on their aesthetic judgement without regard to factual evidence or logic. In this discourse, the subjects occupy three main positions, the politicians, the media or the press and the citizens or the voters. These subjects produce and consume post-truth knowledge based on their aesthetic judgements, namely their emotions or feelings and their beliefs. Although, not all politicians, media or citizens use the post-truth discourse, but when the post-truth discourse becomes dominant in a society everyone is affected by its operations. These discursive operations encompass news, policies, opinions and voting decisions. Post-truth political discourse, then, can be practiced by populist politicians or news media or citizens; while the statements made in its framework would be considered valid by its subjects.

As I mentioned in the previous section, satire has the discursive potential to act in counter-discursive capacity. In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss satire from different perspectives and in the end will present a more comprehensive account of satire in the context

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of American late-shows as a counter-discourse to post-truth politics. In the following chapters, I will examine the satiric counter-discourse of *LWT* in relation to the three subject positions (politicians, media and citizens) of the post-truth politics discourse.

2.2. Satire

In this part, I would start by describing some of the attempts made to define satire and the devices that can be used by satirists. Next, I will present Paul Simpson's account of satire as a discursive practice as well as Fredric Bogel's concept of satiric doubleness. In the end, I would try to delineate the characteristics of satire in late-night shows as a point of departure for discussing satire as a counter-discourse.

2.2.1. Satire as a Discursive Practice

Defining satire has proven to be a difficult task. George Test in his preface to *Satire: Spirit and Art* (1991) writes that satire is "an aesthetic manifestation of a universal urge so varied as to elude definition" (ix). As a result, Test among others, has considered satire, a spirit or a mode that can be found in literary and non-literary works. Condren suggests to categorize satirical works "in terms of family resemblance" which will be more helpful in understanding satire (375). Nonetheless, it is significant to review some of the most significant endeavors in defining satire in literary studies and beyond.

Abrams defines satire as "the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation. […] it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself" (275).

Abrams's definition is similar to the classical notions of satire. In 1692, Dryden published his "Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire." He offered two rules for satire. First, satire must treat only one subject or have one particular theme and second, the satirist must recommend some virtue and condemn some form of vice (Griffin 19). Although not even English satirists of the Augustan age, the Golden Age of satire, followed these rules, Dryden's ideas – which were influenced by his admiration for the great Roman poets like Horace and Juvenal – dominated the literary study of satire for centuries to come. In this vein, satire was supposed to enjoy moral significance and corrective powers. The assumption that satire can have rehabilitative influence on its targets was considered similar to the function of magic in ancient societies by Robert Elliott. He states that satiric spirit, "whether mockery, raillery, ridicule, or formalized invective" has appeared in "the literature or folklore of all peoples" (Elliott).

According to Griffin, in the 20th century, the New Critics considered satire a rhetorical art, in which a persona that should not be confused with the historical figure of the writer, participated in the eternal fight between good and evil (35-36). Critics such as Northrop Frye, Alvin B. Kernan and Maynard Mack separated satire from its historical context – a feature that was an important aspect of the classical definition of satire and expressed that satire must have moral impact on the lives of its readers (ibid.). After 1960s, the scholars have opposed this abstract notion of satire. Bogel formulates three phases for the historical development of the criticism on satire: pre-formalist investigation, during which, attempts were made to unearth historical targets of satirical texts; formalist reading, which considered satire as a work of art or as an abstraction of the work from historical circumstances and considered satire universal or ahistorical; and lastly, the phase of studying satire against formalism; in which the study of satire requires a movement from text to context, and a combination of historical and textual analyses is possible.

Dustin Griffin and George Test – writing in the third phase of critical study of satire – believe in a kind of spirit of satire that permeates many literary and non-literary texts. Griffin declares that satire invades any literary form, from epic to travel writing, in a way that subverts its potential toward alien ends, making a hybrid form (3). He proposes to consider satire as a mode or procedure rather than a literary genre. In his view, satire is historically and morally ambivalent and subsequently open-ended; it poses questions rather than answering them (ibid. 4-5). Test, similarly, maintains that satire is "beyond any medium in which it occurs" and it is carried out in the context of "ritual and folk behavior that continues to the present. Celebrity roasts, mock festivals, and the performances of comics in nightclubs and concerts bear witness to the ritual contexts in which satire still occur" (9). However, Test does include the moral agency as an element of satiric spirit; in his opinion, satire is always a kind of pressure toward order with its "preoccupation with "truth" and "reality"" (17).[7] He states, "satire cannot succeed by ambiguity or ambivalence […] If literature is a text without reference to the circumstances or events that shape it, then satire can scarcely be said to exist, since satire is above all else a reaction. The satirist needs a world of values and events to respond to judge" (258-9). Condren also confirms that moral seriousness and censoriousness are indeed found in almost all satiric works (378, 391). Overall, all these scholars agree that satire is beyond a certain academic discipline and that satire is a reactionary spirit or mode.

Based on this diverse spectrum of definitions presented for satire, it seems that what counts as satire is a text that has a target, which it finds unfavorable based on a set of standards[8]. It is also

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[7] This idea is originally discussed by Alvin B. Kernan in his book, *The Plot of Satire*, first published in 1965. According to Kernan, satirical plot moves from chaos to order.

[8] Traditionally, especially up to the middle of the 20th century, the (literary) critics maintained that satirists enjoy a sense of moral certainty. In fact, it was assumed that the satirists are obliged to "insist on the sharp difference between vice and virtue, between good and bad, between what is and what *ought to be*" (Griffin 36, emphasis in original). However, this traditional view is challenged based on four grounds: 1) not all satire sets good vs evil, 2) the thematic center of satire is not always a moral standard, 3) there are no definite socially sanctioned virtues, and 4) the satirist is not always trying to persuade his/her audience to be better (ibid. 37).

evident that the genric boundaries of satire, which were more or less clear until the 19th century, have become blurred and nowadays satiric mood or spirit can be found in many literary and non-literary works. Therefore, the need to find new ways to distinguish a satiric text or cultural practice from a non-satiric one has resulted in considering satire a discursive practice that is "higher than what literary-critics traditionally mean by the term "genre of literature"" (Simpson 8). As a discourse, satire has three subject positions: the *satirist*, the *satiree* (reader, viewer or listener) and the *satirized*. The satirized can be an individual person, an event resulting from human agency, a tradition without clear human agency or another discursive practice (ibid.). To construct a satirical text a combination of two elements is required: a *prime* or the context that echoes "some sort of "other" discourse event, whether that be another text, genre, dialect, register, or even another discursive practice" and a *dialectic*, or an antithesis which usually temporally follows the prime, but can also be isochronous (ibid. 89). Simpson situates satire within the larger framework of comic discourse and considers irony as the pragmatic and linguistic device that "plays a central role in the creation and uptake of satirical discourse" (ibid. 90). Considering satire a mode or spirit or a discursive practice allows for a more inclusive analysis of satirical texts. However, it must be noted that most detailed and comprehensive studies of satirical texts are done within literary criticism. Therefore, I will refer to many literary configurations of satirical elements and devices as the basis of analysis in my study of *LWT* as a satirical work. To this end, in the following section, I will first give an account of elements of satire (based on Test (1991) and Caufield (2005)), then discuss the notion of satiric doubleness as a preamble for discussing late-night satiric shows as counter-discourse.

2.2.2. Elements of Satire and Satiric Doubleness

George Test gives a clear account of four elements or ingredients for a work to be considered satirical. The first and least controversial element is aggression – an attack to inflict pain. In satire, aggression can be direct or indirect, but it only takes symbolic form (16). Direct forms of satire include name-calling or epithet-slinging and indirect forms range from beast fables to different kinds of allegory. Either form is a conduit to express emotions that are not usually socially acceptable, like "anger, indignation, frustration, righteousness, hatred, and malice" (17). The second element, play, can take many forms. Traditionally, the element of play has been used to "refer to irony of life itself" (21). "[T]he juxtaposition of satire and play" can be found in the trickster figure, in ancient festivals like saturnalia or medieval feast of fools or the contemporary celebrity roasts (23).

Next element of satire is what Horace considered "telling the truth with a smile" (23). Laughter can be "an agent of change for the better" which can "shame the fool into changing his ways" (24). Test believes it is naïve to believe in the reformative power of laughter, first, because laughter has two levels, social and personal. Some things are socially acceptable as targets of laughter, however, there is chance that one might not refrain from laughing at something that is not acceptable or find the socially acceptable target humorous (25). Second, laughter produced by satire is not simple; many satirists are prosecuted for laughing at people in power without having any effect on their rehabilitation. The playful side of satire might manifest itself in a wide range of genres from farce and comedy to tragedy and pathos (27).

In Test's opinion, judgement is the last element that activates the other three elements. Without judgement, aggression would not have any target, laughter no stimulant and play would be waiting for a game. The butt of satire is usually a person who is considered to be morally lacking and his shortcomings are evaluated by the satirists against certain 'truth' criteria. The satirist's

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truth can be ethical, political, aesthetic, common sense or even shared prejudices (28). Test indicates that these four elements are social; namely can work within a social context, and in most cases, a work enjoying these elements needs an audience to be regarded as satire. However, he neither considers it a formal element of satire in his theory, nor mentions that the audience must have some knowledge about the context of the satiric text. However, in the contemporary context, Caufield states, satire demands knowledge from its audience: an informed audience can participate in the play of satire and arrive on their own judgment. In this vein, the ultimate target might be the satire's own audience (Caufield 12). In such a case, the satirist is not only mocking the *satirized*, but also the *satiree*. Bogel's theory of satiric doubleness expands this idea by asserting that *satirists* are targets of their own satire.

Bogel states that the target of satire, the *satirized*, is ultimately the same as the *satirists*, as they attempt to distance themselves from being identified with having the same characteristics that they are satirizing. In his book, *The Difference Satire Makes* (2001), he proposes that there is a "normative interconnectedness" between the satirist and the object of satire (19). In other words, the satirist is not simply passing judgment onto a stable, fixed and certain entity separate from oneself, but he or she is producing "differences in the face of anxiety about replication, identity, sameness and undifferentiation" (Bogel 21). Bogel focuses on such an attempt on the part of the satirist and explains that *making* rather than *registering* difference leads to

> [T]he exploration of the continuities, identifications, and interdependencies of what satire elsewhere projects as different: satirist and satiric object, high literature and low, original and imitation, the vital and the mechanical, prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary political orders, and so on. In consequence, […] a good deal of […] satire is […] neither revolutionary nor […] conservative but as troubled – and troubling – exploration of structures of identity and difference that make political, social, and artistic change intelligible at all. (ibid. 21)

Therefore, he indicates that satirists possess a version of the traits they are attacking. In other words, the internal mode of satire includes an energetic repulsion that implies identification and

requires intimate knowledge of the object to be successful – "you cannot call a kettle black if you are an apple" (ibid. 32). Bogel draws on the ideas of the French thinker René Girard and British anthropologist, Mary Douglas to show that satire, similar to the ancient forms of purification and sacrifice, is a cultural practice for boundary-policing and boundary-establishment (46). Therefore, it is a "rhetorical means to the production of difference in the face of a potentially compromising similarity, not the articulation of differences already securely in place" (ibid. 42). Satire works against disruptive elements that threaten "to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" (ibid. 43). Thus, satire presents the readers with the opportunity to examine the nuances of different moral positions (ibid. 62).

This problematic aspect of satire, namely the satirists' attempt to establish difference between themselves and their objects that is also an act of identification with their object, is what Bogel calls the 'satiric doubleness.' For instance, in the case of parody, there is an initial identificatory process or mimicry that results in the production of hostile parody and subsequently positive criticism (ibid. 74). Bogel suggests that satire utilizes the principle of "anti-mimetic aversion" to show one's hatred and disgust directed toward someone who has been practicing or embracing that despised notion (52). The ones who have been practicing or accepting the satirized notion can be the satirists themselves or the audience. Thus, the satirists confront their audience with their fears and anxieties, and symbolically break down the boundaries between themselves and their audience. In this manner, Bogel shows that the doubleness of satiric structure is intertwined with the problem of judgement; it is problematic because genuine judgment requires that we not only explore our differences from the object that we disapprove of, but also explore our connection to it (78). Such doubleness might refer to specific individual characteristic of the satirists (e.g. one's own moral shortcomings) or it might indicate a genric or structural problem (e.g. the setting or format that satirists work in).

This quality of satiric doubleness is evident in satiric TV in the US. Alonso argues that the TV satire in the US is primarily self-referential. Within such a tradition exemplified by programs such as *The Simpsons*, the satirists "realize that in a televised nation, social satire must often be both on and about television" (Grey et al. 24, qtd in Alonso 26). In this vein, prominent late-night shows such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Colbert Report* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* function within this self-referential tradition, parodying different TV genres and occasionally satiric television itself. Next section will provide a more detailed account of satiric late-night shows in the US and the counter-discursive capacity of their satire.

2.2.3. Late-night Show as Satiric Counter-discourse

In the United States, the term late-night show usually refers to late-night talk shows that broadcast between 11:30 and 12:30. In broadcast media, the practice of dayparting[9] leads to broadcasting different kinds of content during different times of the 24 hour cycle of TV programing as a means of appealing to certain demographics (Beyers 67). The late-night shows are a mixture of variety shows, chat shows and sketch shows (Diffin and Lane) and are very popular in the US in spite of their broadcast time[10].

The origins of late-night show format can be traced to the variety show, itself a descendent of vaudeville shows. For instance, *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948-1971), the most successful variety show in American history, included an emcee, live audience, celebrity guests and musical

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[9] Dayparting refers to broadcasting "a certain program (or a series of related program)" in "a consecutive block of time" characterized by "a demographic homogeneity and similar features" (Sherman, qtd in Beyers 67).
[10] For instance, in the week of May 7-11, 2018, which was a rather low week for late-night shows, on average 3.86 million Americans watched *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 2.69 million watched *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and 2.27 million watched *Jimmy Kimmel Live* every night (Welch). In 2008, Pew Research Center reported that around 8 percent of Americans learned something about the presidential election from the comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and the late-night shows such as *The Late Show* or *The Tonight Show*. The numbers rise to about 35 percent in the age group 18-29 and around 30 percent in the age group 30 to 49 (Kohut).

performances (Allen and Thompson) many of which still exist in late shows. The satiric element entered the late show format gradually in the 1970s with the introduction of the "Weekend Update" segment on *Saturday Night Live*. In the 1990s, political and social satire was an integral part of many late shows such as *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* (1993-2002), *Late Show with David Letterman* (1993-2015) and most prominently *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (1999-2015) during the Bush era (Alonso 26).

As an offspring of variety shows, late-night shows integrate different elements. In addition to other genric specificities of being talk shows, the elements of comedy and satire usually overlap in late shows. As stated earlier, laughter is one of the elements of satire along with aggression, judgement, play and an informed audience. Based on these characteristics, whenever the late shows include all five elements they can be considered satiric. Although, late-night shows are not exclusively satirical works, they are among the most effective contemporary satirical practices. Griffin believed that novel has been most hospitable to satire (4); however, it seems that in the current audio-visual culture, satiric TV might be as hospitable. During the last two decades, the shows have integrated social and political criticism and many hosts are celebrated satirists such as Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert.[11] In fact, a Google search of the word *satirist* lists Stephen Colbert after Jonathan Swift among the most prominent practitioners of satire.

Satiric elements usually appear during the hosts' monologues, but they are not limited to these segments. Late shows target perceived social and political problems, and the comments on these issues can be expressed in opening segments, comedy sketches and sometimes during interviews. Although, it should be noted that not all late-night shows include interviews or comedy sketches. For instance, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* rarely has guests, and the

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[11] It should be noted that many late shows have a writing board responsible for preparing the script for the host. The hosts often work as head writers and their creative input is the deciding factor for the final material.

interviews done on *The Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* usually encompass the whole episode of the show.

In the 21st century, under the influence of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, the late-night shows have moved further away from being pure entertainment. By combining elements of comedy and satire (primarily in the form of news parody), the late-night shows works within the new infotainment format. These programs are not primary sources of news, they are commentaries on news; therefore, they are not only commenting on the content of the news, they also criticize and comment on the way that the news is delivered. This genric ambiguity has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the late-night shows can be dismissed as comedy shows with the sole purpose of making their audience laugh, or as having therapeutic or cathartic effects. On the other hand, integrating news means that late-night shows are political commentary outlets that can compete with programs on news networks. Consequently, the comic element gives the late-night programs the chance to have a broader look at the events, unlike the news programs that are bound by the demands of 24 hours news cycles. For instance, one of the discerning aspects of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* was juxtaposing the statements made by public figures over the course of their career to show the contradictions or inconsistencies in their opinions. For instance, Stewart presents a montage of political figures' comments on Iraq war to show how they have changed their opinion over time (Comedy Central).

The hosts sometimes display a persona that might be similar to the literary eiron – a character seemingly naïve and curious but argumentative and in search of truth (Test 102) – for instance, Jon Stewart from *The Daily Show*. Sometimes the persona itself is a parody, for instance Steven Colbert's persona in *The Colbert Report* is a fictionalized version of conservative pundits. However, in most cases, the late-night host is a combination of Horatian satirist (urban and sophisticated) and the iconoclast figure (self-identified outsiders) and his or her attitude is

marked by irony, skepticism and cynicism (Abrams 276; Test 231-3). Such an iconoclast persona has its roots in the practice of roman satirists, who, well versed in rhetoric, devised different personas "to cultivate the dramatic potential of satire and to establish the perspectives of speaking characters" (Keane 43).

In addition to personas, Late-night show hosts as satirists use a wide range of literary and non-literary satirical devices. Among the most popular techniques used is mimicry or parody. The hosts usually imitate the mannerisms, patterns of speech of public figures and describe their behavior in a comical tone. Such mimicry is presented in the form of live-action sketches, animations and sarcastic imitations of letters, tweets or official statements. Furthermore, the structure of the show is sometime an imitation of another genre; *The Daily Show*, for instance, is news parody. The hosts are usually very direct and their verbal attacks consists of such devices that are not unknown to ordinary speech such as invective, abuse and billingsgate as well as subtler forms of aphorisms and epigrams. These verbal attacks are usually ironic and include anticlimax and bathos, catalogue, charactonym, imitation, literalization, pun, under- and overstatement, oxymoron, sarcasm and paradox.[12] The non-verbal satirical devices used in late shows include visualizations and pictorial satire,[13] in form of digitally altered photos, caricatures and mime. Many of these devices and techniques will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters throughout the analysis of the *LWT*'s take on post-truth politicians and media.

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[12] For a comprehensive discussion of the verbal devices see Test, pp. 100-125.

[13] According to Ronald Paulson, pictorial or graphic satire is an artist's attempt to translate the strategies of verbal satire into image. Pictorial satire can be an adaptation of verbal satire such as depicting the scenes from Gulliver's Travels; or an original visual narrative such as William Hogarth's "The Harlot's Progress." It can also be a parody of another visual style, such a painting school, as caricature was a consequence of Rococo paintings' parody of classical pompous portraiture. The grotesque as exemplified by Honoré Daumier and Francisco de Goya's works takes pictorial satire to another level (Paulson 293-324).

So far, I have established that some aspects of the late shows are satiric. To bring the theoretical discussion to an end, it is necessary to give an account of the reasons that satiric late-shows can be considered an effective counter-discourse against post-truth politics. There are some issues that should be considered beforehand. First, if we consider satire as a discursive practice that indispensably requires a target, to some extent, all satire is reactionary and therefore, a satiric text against a discursive practice can be seen as *countering* another *discourse*. Therefore, it is necessary to elucidate what counter-discourse within the context of this thesis means. For the purposes of this study, counter-discourses are defined as "an alternative, liberating *newness* against the established discourse" that try to permeate all other discourses or infect them and challenge the dominant discourses[14] by claiming "difference against reinfection by the constituted sameness, the apparent stability and inertia, of the dominant" with the aim of subverting the dominant discourse (Terdiman 13-14, emphasis in original). According to this account by Terdiman, counter-discourses are not only reactionary practices, but are inventive attempts in subverting the established discourse in order to construct a more dynamic discourse.

Next, in the case of the relation between the post-truth politics and late-night TV satirist, the "constituted sameness" between the dominant discourse and the counter-discourse as Terdiman formulates, or "normative interconnectedness" between the satirized and the satirist according to Bogel, is a kind of formal ambiguity that has resulted from the postmodern discursive integration (as explained by Baym). I argue that post-truth politics and satiric practices of late-night shows are both discursively integrated; therefore, the late-show satirist works within the current ambiguity of discursive spheres. Such discursive ambiguity allows post-truth political actors and satiric late-shows to transgress the boundaries of at least two discursive formations of project modernity, namely, moral-practical (the shows comment on politics and public

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[14] Based on the subsequent chapter, which identifies Donald Trump as a post-truth political actor, it can be argued that post-truth politics is currently established as the dominant political discourse in the United States.

events) and aesthetic-expressive (they are entertaining) in the case of the satiric late-shows; meanwhile, in post-truth politics, the discursive subjects make policy decisions (located in moral-practical sphere) based on their beliefs (aesthetic-expressive sphere). [15] Consequently, post-truth politics and late-night shows are practices that transgress their traditionally allocated discursive boundaries. A contemporary TV satirist and a contemporary post-truth political actor (politicians or the media) are both entertainers; they are both appealing to the aesthetic judgment of their audience. Under such circumstances, the satirists try to distinguish their position from the political actor.

Moreover, a counter-discourse needs to act as a "liberating, alternative *newness*;" its subversion must be constructive. Therefore, my second argument is that contemporary satirists faced with the post-truth discourse's proposition to consider fact and opinion equal, *reintroduce* the moral standard of honesty to the public discourse. As I mentioned earlier, satiric late-night shows are postmodern infotainment programs, however, they have a modernist take on truth with their emphasis on objective criteria[16]. In this vein, the *prime* of satiric counter-discourses is post-truth politics' reliance on aesthetic judgement and the *dialectic* that they introduce is a *new* model of public discourse based on facts and rational argument that corresponds to reality. Therefore, the satirists insist that the moral standard of honesty must be followed in policymaking and in the politicians and the media's interactions with the citizens. Honesty requires a criterion, based on which one can assess statements and actions. Thus, the satirists *reintroduce* the modernist notion of 'objectivity of truth' into the political conversation and consequently subvert the discursive integration of postmodern spectacle politics/infotainment media that proposes equivalency between facts and opinions.

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[15] The post-truth politics disregard for facts in favor of opinion adds to the complication. It can be argued that post-truth politics is also combines cognitive sphere with the aesthetic sphere.
[16] Refer to 2.1.2. For comprehensive discussion see Jones and Baym, "A Dialogue on Satire: News and the Crisis of Truth in Postmodern Political Television."

In the subsequent chapters, I will analyze *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* as the leading example of counter-discursive satire against post-truth politics by distinguishing between three subject categories of politicians, media and citizens. *Last Week Tonight* is chosen because of its format, rather long, in-depth analyses of different issues (every episode tackles one topic in twenty to thirsty minutes); its topic selection (paying attention to significant social, political and cultural problems) and its satiric richness (which will be documented in the analysis of the six selected episodes). Finally, it must be noted that this study focuses on the rhetorical capacity of satire and is not concerned with the real-life impact of *LWT*.[17]

3. Oliver and the Post-truth Politicians: The Case of Donald Trump

Post-truth politicians produce and consume 'knowledge' based on personal beliefs or aesthetic judgements, which might not correspond to facts. In this chapter, I will focus on post-truth politicians in the US. In several episodes of *LWT*,[18] a prominent post-truth politician is discussed: Donald Trump, who won the 2016 United States presidential election, used various

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[17] It is worth mentioning that Oliver sometimes moves his audience, primarily, and general public, secondarily, to action; to the extent that the term "The John Oliver Effect" is used to discuss his influence. For instance, his episode on "Bail" (7 January 2015) led the New York mayor to announce the city's relaxing bail requirements for nonviolent crimes; his first "Net Neutrality" episode (1 June 2014) resulted in the Federal Communication Commission's website to crash as his fans voiced their opposition to proposed changes in the Net Neutrality law; and his episode on Civil Forfeiture Laws (5 October 2014) was influential in legislative reforms (Luckerson "How the 'John Oliver Effect'").

[18] I use *LWT* and Oliver interchangeably in this thesis. Oliver is the main writer and the show reflects his creative decisions.

populist[19] strategies to win the election. He has continued to use the post-truth rhetoric to shape the US policy since his inauguration in January 2017. Oliver scrutinizes Trump's cult of personality, celebrity status, his rhetorical techniques and policies as well as his relationship with media and the citizens to bring to light a series of problems associated with practicing post-truth politics. Oliver benefits from various satirical devices to propose counter-discursive strategies. Additionally, he directly advises his audience to pay more attention to certain issues or to adopt certain behaviors to cope with, and oppose dishonesty in contemporary social and political domains.

Before discussing *LWT*'s take on Trump, a brief discussion of satirical devices used by Oliver is required. Oliver utilizes similes, exaggeration, and parody as well as pictorial satire. Similes are among the unacknowledged devices of satire and the ones used by satirists usually contain irony as well. In *LWT*, Oliver occasionally comes close to a kind of elaborate simile similar to Petrarchan conceit ("an exaggerated comparison or striking oxymoron" Baldick 190) and sometime uses such unlikely pairings that are similar to metaphysical wit ("verbal expression which is brief, deft, and intentionally contrived to produce a shock of comic surprise [such as an] epigram" Abrams 330). Using simile is one of Oliver's customary techniques, which is usually accompanied by pictorial depictions. Pictorial supplements are diverse; sometimes, the pictures are real pictures of objects, people or animals. In some other instances, Oliver uses

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[19] The Nobel Prize winning economist, Paul Krugman, believes that based on Trump's policies - elitist and against the working class -, one should refrain from calling him a populist (Krugman). However, as Wodak and KhosraviNik (2013) point out, right wing populism can be distinguished with the expression of an implicit or explicit dichotomy between two identities of 'Us' and 'Them' based on national, regional, religious and ethnic differences (xx). The emphasis on these dichotomies is apparent in Trump, for instance, posing the American against non-American (immigrants), United States First policy, the Muslim ban and the vilification of Hispanic and Middle-eastern minorities in the United States.

digitally altered photos or designed graphics.[20] In the course of the analysis, I will elaborate more on these satirical devices whenever necessary.

3.1. Trump as a Candidate: Demythification of the *Trump* Brand

In February 2016, when it was imminent that Trump would become the Republican Party nominee, Oliver addressed the Trump candidacy as a serious issue for the first time. Since Trump had announced his candidacy in June 2015, *LWT* had barely paid any attention to his campaign. In fact, in 2013, Oliver (as guest host of *The Daily Show with John Stewart*) had found the idea so absurd that he had jokingly urged Trump to run, because he thought that it would be highly entertaining TV spectacle ("Can't You at Least Wait," 03:14-03:37). However, in 2015, Trump's rising popularity, made it significant for *LWT* to acknowledge the Trump candidacy. Oliver states that Trump is now "America's back mole. It may have seemed harmless a year ago, but now it has gotten frighteningly bigger, it is no longer wise to ignore it" (*LWT*, "Donald Trump" 00:38-00:46) (Fig. 1).

Prior to becoming a candidate, in addition to being a real estate developer, Donald Trump was known as the host of *The Apprentice* and *The Celebrity Apprentice* – reality game shows in which participants competed to win money, for their own business or for a charity, respectively. Donald Trump, as a famous person "whose existence and activities are known to an audience that is unknown to him or her personally" is a celebrity (Gamson, "Celebrity," 275). Joshua Gamson reports that some scholars believe the socio-cultural visibility celebrities enjoy can turn into social, economic and political capital. In contemporary western societies, celebrities'

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[20] This study is primarily focused on the verbal satire in *LWT*, mainly because the illustrations that project on the screen are usually graphic renderings of what Oliver is expressing. Although I believe that the illustrations have artistic value and merit academic discussion on their own.

fame or notoriety is "manufactured by mass media without regard for character or achievement" (ibid. 275). Daniel J. Boorstin mentions an important quality in contemporary celebrities, i.e. "[t]he celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness" (57). In this vein, although some celebrities are artists or recognized in a professional capacity, having a body of work is not necessarily a part of celebrityhood[21], although many celebrities (such as Oliver) arguably have an outstanding body of work.

Production of celebrities usually includes a popular storyline, for instance "little guy makes good, outrageous behavior, a great rivalry, the big break" (Gamson, *Claim*, 68). These storylines can be real, although most of the time they are constructed. One of these storylines is that of the self-made individual who is the embodiment of the American dream; a person that through his/her efforts, intelligence and astuteness has been able to gain success and wealth. Donald Trump's self-constructed image is to a great extent compatible with the aforementioned storyline of self-made individual. This image of individual success based on ingenuity or the American dream is one of the founding cultural myths of American society that has been perpetuated by the media[22].

In 1961, Boorstin concluded that the concept of "celebrity in the distinct modern sense could not have existed in any earlier age, or in America before the Graphic Revolution[23]" (57). At the moment, social media has made the dispersion of any type of information "accessible to all" in an "intelligible" way (Boorstin 119). This accessibility and intelligibility can greatly improve the staging of storylines or "pseudo-events," non-spontaneous, pre-planned incidents with an ambiguous relation to the reality and intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy (ibid. 9, 11-12).

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[21] Merriam Webster Dictionary defines celebrityhood as referring to "state of being a celebrity" ("celebrityhood").
[22] For instance, the many adaptations of "The Wizard of Oz," the TV shows about making it in America, the semi-canonization of successful businessmen such as John D. Rockefeller and most recently Steve Jobs.
[23] Boorstin located the beginning of the Graphic Revolution in the United States in the middle of the 19th century. The revolutionary process has continued throughout the 20th century (119).

Thus, the advance of social media has facilitated the possibility of one establishing oneself as a celebrity (Gamson "Celebrity," 276). In the same way, already established figures such as Trump could use the social media to further add constructed qualities to their image and expand their fame and reach to more fans.

The process of production or construction of celebrities is similar to the branding process. Branding is "[t]he process involved in creating a unique name and image for a product in the consumers' mind, mainly through advertising campaigns with a consistent theme" ("Branding"). For instance, Coca Cola has retained its success consistently for more than a century by keeping the original image and taste of the product. Coca cola has become an integral part of the American life, an American icon, to the extent that when in 1985 the company decided to change its formula, it faced an enormous consumer backlash (Fog et al. 73-74). Coca Cola is a brand with extremely loyal customers which is the ultimate goal of branding ("Branding"). Accordingly, celebrities brand themselves (or get branded by their publicists) to project a unique image into their audience or fans' mind. In this manner, the celebrity is the product sold. For instance, Beyoncé Knowles has used two personal brands effectively, in her early career as a sex symbol and recently has transformed herself into a new feminist role model (Nijskens). In this vein, Trump has been constructed to reflect the brand of American success over the years.

Considering Trump a celebrity also implies that he has a public persona that might differ from his private persona. It is a common practice among popular magazines to go behind the scenes and reveal the supposed 'real' characteristics of celebrities. In other words, they want to show that the 'authentic' characters of the celebrities are not what they present to the world. These inside stories of the lives that celebrities lead in private, ultimately feed into the narrative of celebrity's authenticity and competence (Gamson, *Claim*, 147). This strategy of showing an

authentic account of the celebrity is similar to the account offered on the February 28, 2016 episode of *LWT*. However, what Oliver does is to show that the characteristics that Trump has as a celebrity (e.g. the image of ingenious businessman) and the glamor and success he represents - which, if true, might be considered favorable in a celebrity or reality TV star - are not the characteristics needed in a presidential candidate, who is going to lead the US executive branch for four years. Oliver's satire, thus, aims to disqualify Trump as a candidate, while criticizing the practices of media in idolizing celebrities with the aim of subverting such portrayals.

This kind of subversion is the basis of the postmodern degenerative satire. Weisenburger (1995) argues that there are two types of satire. The modern, generative satire based on the mostly verse British neo-classic and Greco-Roman satiric works, that seeks transhistorical validity by the "ridicule of human follies and vices with an eye on their reform" (10-11). In contrast, the American postmodern novels such as *Gravity Rainbow* (1973) by Thomas Pynchon are examples of degenerative satire; intertextual or dialogic works that exemplify "counterpositionings not only of different voices in the narrative itself but also of interior texts and the codified elements of language or culture in general" (11). This type of subversive postmodern text undermines hierarchies (Weisenburger 3). This approach to satire in the contemporary context is in line with seeing satire as a discursive practice that can target another discourse.

In this manner, Oliver is targeting two dominant discourses here, first, he is attacking Trump as the potential President of the United States, who will soon have significant official and socio-cultural power. Arguably, his goal is not to reform Trump personally, therefore, his satiric practice is closer to the postmodern American satire with its subversive purpose. Furthermore, by deconstructing the processes of celebrity production and the media practices surrounding

celebrityhood, Oliver, as a member of the media and a celebrity himself, is subverting the media practices of promoting celebrity image through constructed narratives. Therefore, Oliver is making his audience cognizant of the media spectacle that is leading to Trump's election as the President of the United States.

Several merits attributed to Donald Trump make him an appealing choice as the Republican candidate. Oliver identifies these characteristics; analyzes them, and by tracing their origin, shows how they have come into existence and how they correspond to reality. In the end, he proposes to substitute the concepts associated with the celebrity persona of Trump by using another signifier, 'Drumpf,' instead of the signifier 'Trump,' which has been branded to be recognized as a symbol of wealth and success.

The first favorable quality espoused by Trump supporters is that he speaks his mind and does not hesitate to tell the truth. Oliver enumerates documented instances of Trump's lies (e.g. self-funding his campaign, his entrepreneurial competence) and concludes by an exaggerated statement that truth is as important to Trump as a supreme court vacancy is to a lemur (*LWT*, "Donald Trump" 03:56-04:05). In response to Trump's statement, "I am self-funding my campaign, I tell the truth" (ibid. 04:11-04:18) Oliver points out that the argument that "I am rich, therefore, I tell the truth" has the same internal logic of saying all vegan people know karate (ibid. 04:15-04:29). In this case, Oliver is using a metaphysical conceit. As it was pointed out beforehand, using similes including wit and conceit are not among the most discussed devices used in satire[24]. This might be the reason that after using an elaborate simile like this,

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[24] For instance, George Test (1991) never mentions wit or conceit in his discussion of satiric devices. Neither does Dustin Griffin (1994). In fact, most of the discussion on the use of tropes or figures of thought in satire, especially by Formalists, is focused on verbal irony, to the extent that Northrop Fry (1957) considered satire synonymous with "militant irony" (223).

Oliver explains the reasoning behind the conceit: "… there is no cause and effect between those two and the correlation usually goes the other way" (ibid. 04:29-04:35).

Another claim made is that Trump is that he is tough. Oliver documents the case that Trump has not been able to take criticism with good grace in case of his encounter with the editors of the satirical magazine Spy (ibid. 06:07- 06:17) (see e.g. Folkenflik). Oliver goes on to declare a character analysis of Trump based on his use of a gold sharpie pen: "[it] is so quintessentially Donald Trump, something that gives the passing appearance of wealth but is actually a cheap tool" (ibid. 6:36-6:41). This sentence implements two literary devices; there is a metaphor for Trump as well as a pun on the word 'tool.' The statement is also accompanied by a picture of the said 'tool,' namely a gold sharpie pen. Additionally, the metaphor foreshadows Oliver's subsequent attempt to distinguish between the appearance of wealth (celebrity/brand of Trump) and the actuality (Trump's verifiable business failures).

Trump supporters also claim that he is a successful and wealthy entrepreneur. Oliver dedicates few minutes to debunk this claim. To achieve this goal, Oliver presents the evidence to the viewer through a montage of documented quotes from Ivanka and Donald Trump. What he uses here, as Baym has extensively discussed, is a technique favored by Jon Stewart in *The Daily Show* (Baym, "The Daily Show" 266). Juxtaposing different voices that contradict each other, interjected by Oliver's own comments, is a means to contextualize the veracity of different claims. As Baym explains, such juxtapositions are common in political satire. By revealing contradictory statements made by politicians over a period of time, political satirists show the problematic nature of their pretensions measured by commonsense reasoning. Thus, Baym expresses that such satire "is dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense, the playing of multiple voices against each other in the discursive exchange that forces the original into revealing contexts"

(266). This kind of dialogic discursive exchange is a discourse of inquiry to "clarify the underlying morality of the situation" (ibid. 266-67).

With such a dialogic technique, Oliver judges Trump's claim to wealth. He quotes from a document published by Trump lawyer, Corey R. Lewandowski, on July 15, 2015: "Mr. Trump's net worth is in excess of TEN BILLION DOLLARS" ("Donald J. Trump Files" emphasis in original) and sarcastically adds "it is in all caps, so it must be true" (*LWT*, "Donald Trump" 9:15-9:18). In this manner, Oliver, similar to Jon Stewart, takes "a one-sided, singular-voiced presentation" and incorporates it into a dialogue, to "force [it] into critical exchange" (Baym 267). In this case, the claim made by the lawyer, lacks factual basis. There are no governmental or official documents - for instance, tax returns - to indicate the actual personal wealth of Trump. Therefore, Oliver's comment about capitalized font on the document reveals the rhetorical nature of the method used by Trump's lawyer.

After enumerating business ventures associated with Trump and showing evidence of his failures (*LWT*, "Donald Trump" 10:23-11:24), Oliver concludes that among the most powerful tools in Trump's arsenal are his name and image: "He has spent decades turning his name into a brand synonymous with success and quality, and he's made himself the mascot for that brand" (ibid. 15:08-15:16). Based on interviews with Trump supporters (ibid. 18:12-18:23), it is evident that for many Americans the name *Trump* is associated with being rich. The word *Trump*, Oliver reminds us, onomatopoeically sounds rich: "[it] is the sound produced when a mouthy servant is slapped across the face with a wad of thousand dollar bills" or "the sound of a cork popping on a couple's champagne-anniversary, the day renovations in the wine cellar were finally completed" (ibid. 18:27-18:41). Consequently, Oliver states, "the very name Trump is the cornerstone of his brand" (ibid.18:42-18:45). This description refers to the name

Trump as a signifier for wealth and success. In other words, Oliver shows that the name *Trump* has become a modern myth.

According to Roland Barthes, myth is the sign in a second-order semiological system in which a linguistic sign is used as second-level signifier (which Barthes calls *form*) for a secondary signified (Rose 90). Hence, here the word *Trump* no longer refers to the person of Trump. *Trump* as a celebrity persona or brand is a second-level signifier referring to a second-level signified – success and wealth. As discussed earlier, celebrities are known for their well-knownness. Such fame is "a salable and sold commodity," and in the celebrity industry "what is developed and sold is the capacity to command attention" (Gamson *Claim*, 58). In Trump's case, he (and his campaign) is selling the myth of self-made successful entrepreneur as the solution to America's problems.[25]

The fact that the name *Trump* has become the equivalent of a modern myth brings the issue to a semiotic level, where regardless of having origins in quantifiable facts; one would arbitrarily associate a signifier with certain concepts. In Barthes' terms, "denotive sign, […] becomes a signifier at the second, or mythological, level of meaning. At this second level of meaning, this signifier is then accompanied by its own signified. These second-level signifieds and signifiers then form second-level signs" (Rose 90). When we say that something is a myth, the "contingency and the history of the meaning become remote, and instead a myth inserts itself

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[25] The problems to which Trump is offering a solution (economic difficulties, cultural identity, etc.) might be conditions that are brought into discourse simply to be used as "a rationale in vesting authority in people who claim some kind of competence" (Edelman 12, 20). It is also possible that some problems are simply constructed to justify certain courses of action (ibid. 21-22). Therefore, although, it is undeniable that American economy has problems, the claim, for instance, that the immigrants play a significant role in reducing job opportunities for Americans is disseminated by the Trump campaign to be named as an area that Trump's presidency can present the ultimate solution by no longer letting immigrants enter the US. This claim has been refuted by the US Labor Department reports (Gomez), but has not change the Trumpean anti-immigration rhetoric. As discussed by Oliver, Trump's entrepreneurship and business acumen is considered by his supporters as a panacea for American economy and society. This example shows how Trump's brand and celebrity image function as a marketing tools for his competence to become the President of the Unites States.

as a non-historical truth. Myth makes us forget that things were and are made; instead it naturalizes the way things are" (ibid. 91). Therefore, it seems that the myth of the persona/brand *Trump*, surpasses the reality of Trump as a person.

Oliver contemplates whether one can dissociate Trump's name from the concept of success: "If only there were a way to uncouple that magical word from the man he really is" (*LWT*, "Donald Trump" 18:42-18:51). In technical terms, Oliver wants to deconstruct the second-order signification and replace it with a first-order semiological system that links Trump as a person to his actual business history rather than the constructed *form* or his celebrity persona. From a satirical perspective, Oliver's attempt is simply name-calling or assigning an epithet, a form of verbal attack or invective.

A myth possesses the two components of signifier and signified and one possible demythification process entails replacing the signified. For instance, the main difference that the "Black is Beautiful" movement in the 1960s made, was replacing the signified "black features are ugly or less beautiful than white feature" with the notion that "black features are as beautiful and attractive as white features." Anderson and Cromwell state that illustrations of people with different skin colors "within settings which […] debunk any system of discriminative values attached to skin color" will lead to "positive black identification" (88). In this case, Oliver suggests replacing the signifier, the name Trump with the name *Drumpf*.[26] The word *Drumpf* initially might have no association in the minds of the audience. Oliver proposes that the word *Drumpf* sounds less magical; it is the sound produced when "a morbidly obese pigeon flies into the window of a foreclosed Old Navy" and "the sound of a bottle of store-brand root beer falling off the shelf in a gas station mini-mart" (*LWT*, "Donald Trump" 19:14-19:23).

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[26] *Drumpf* is the previous last name of the Trump family which they changed upon migrating to the US.

Next, Oliver replaces the orderly picture of Donald Trump with a picture of disheveled *Drumpf* (Fig. 2). He goes further by asking America to "Make Donald *Drumpf* Again" (ibid. 20:05-20:06) and announcing a twitter hashtag. He also introduces the browser extension "Drumpfinator" that replaces all *Trumps* with *Drumpfs* in any given web page. His efforts to demythify the name Trump also includes selling "Make Donald Drumpf Again" hats. Finally, he plays a song with the lyrics that repeat the word *Drumpf* and the word appears in golden neon lights behind him. All these attempts are similar to the advertising campaigns that brands usually undertake.[27]

In conclusion, before the election, Oliver's counter-discursive attempts to dissuade people from voting for Trump included two major strategies: using ironical similes (including conceits and metaphors), which leads to introducing funny competing concepts to the viewers' minds; and demythification by replacing the signifier of the *Trump* myth with *Drumpf*.

3.2. Trump's Presidency: Iconoclastic Defense of Rational Public Discourse

Donald Trump won the presidential election in 2016 and assumed office on January 20, 2017. One of the most important issues since the beginning of the Trump Presidency is the dissemination of post-truth statements by him and his administration. In the *LWT* episode aired on February 12, 2017, Oliver addresses an important issue of the post-truth era; namely, "the concept of reality, itself" (*LWT*, "Trump vs. Truth," 00:28-00:29). Oliver points out well-known instances of Trump's lies including the one about his inauguration crowd size and the claim that it was not raining during his inauguration speech. He explains that it is true that politicians

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[27] According to the *Time Magazine*, *LWT* sold 35,000 hats and almost half a million people downloaded the extension from Google Chrome Web Store by March 2016 (Luckerson, "John Oliver's Donald 'Drumpf' Hats"). As of June 2018, there are still almost 200,000 Drumpfinator users.

lie. However, while, a quarter of the former President, Barack Obama's statements were false ("Barack Obama's File"), the number is over two-thirds in President Trump's case[28]. In chapter 2, I discussed the significance of truth in public debate and argued that supporting the relativist notion that facts and opinions have the same rational standing can result in unsolvable public controversies.

Denying the existence of "a shared sense of reality" (*LWT*, "Trump vs. Truth" 03:07-03:10) is the distinguishing feature of the post-truth era. Oliver demonstrates that Trump shows a great deal of inconsistency in his statements which have claims to be based on his perception of reality. Therefore, *LWT* concentrates on four main questions regarding the Trump Presidency and its relation truth: why Trump won the election despite his lies, what the sources of his inconsistent statements are, why many people believe him and what the best reactions to untruths stated by the president and his administration are. Additionally, Oliver identifies three main techniques of Trumpean rhetoric and gives some advice to his audience to recognize and oppose them.

First, Oliver addresses the reasons why Trump was elected president of the United States. To answer this question, he refers to the fact that people have gotten used to Trump's behavior and his speech patterns in addition to his status as a successful businessman. Similar to his attempts in "Donald Trump" episode, Oliver lists some of Trump's statements about his career and properties that have proven to be wrong. For instance, Trump has exaggerated the ratings of his show, pretended to be his own publicist and added to the number of floors on the Trump Tower (ibid. 04:00-04:17). In this way, many have accepted his boastful behavior as part of his eccentricities and his falsehoods are dismissed as "Donald being Donald" (ibid. 05:40-05:41).

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[28] According to fact-checking website, *Politifact*, as of November 2018, 69% of Donald Trump's statements are 'false' or 'mostly false.' Besides 15% of his statements are 'half-true.' Only 17% of what he says is 'true' or 'mostly true.' ("Donald Trump's File")

This familiarity with his personality or public persona stems from the fact that he has been a TV star for more than a decade before becoming elected as the president. There is no expectation that an entertainer to be habitually truthful or provide evidence for his statements. Therefore, when an entertainer enters the political arena, he or she is *not* measured by the same standards as career politicians. Moreover, by having celebrity politicians the standards of being a politician shift.

As Nayar (2009) clarifies, celebrities have the power to capture the attention of the audience because they can offer the opportunity to them to copy their lifestyle, fashion or appearance (Nayar 152-153). The audience can imagine having similar attributes and the fact that many celebrities on the social scene might have been involved in scandals might only help the audience experience more excitement vicariously; therefore, they might not care much about the scandals (ibid.).[29] In the case of Donald Trump, his wealth and success in addition to his TV star status gives him the celebrity power.

In the 21st century celebrities can interact directly with their fans through social media, an ability which Trump uses to his best advantage. This mediated connection between Trump and citizens leads to the effect that citizens (even if one is not his fan) are always his audience, he is "both intimate and distant" (ibid 154) and the audience have a parasocial relationship with him generated by the mass media. Parasocial interaction is a concept introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) which refers to the one-way relationships of fans with their favorite celebrities (Cashmore 80). Desiring such a parasocial relationship with a celebrity is partially because the contemporary standards for 'greatness' has changed dramatically compared to, for instance, two hundred years ago, when people looked "for God's purpose" to consider a person great,

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[29] However, seeking such vicarious pleasures does not mean that people are passive consumers. For instance, Cases in which popular movie stars' films flop in box office show that people decide when and how to respond to certain celebrities.

nowadays, *fame* and *greatness* has become more or less synonymous (Boorstin 45-46). Therefore, celebrities like Trump who have the ability to advertise themselves as successful or "to manufacture their fame" have been able to become the kind of heroic figures that people aspired to become in the past (ibid. 47). As a result, Trump has been able to set his or her own standards of acceptable conduct as a 'great' person. Subsequently, having been able to set his own standards, the politician Trump is able to perform like an entertainer; to have a quasi-cult following of dedicated fans; and not to commit to following the standards demanded from career politicians.[30] Trump has the ability to make "real policies based on fake facts" (07:17-07:20), because he does not have to follow the rational rules of policymaking.

To answer the second question, Oliver focuses on the sources of Trump's (mis)information. Oliver mentions that reportedly Trump gets his information from TV, specifically cable news networks (Haberman et al.). The first source discussed is Fox News. According to a survey by the fact-checking website Politifact, 60% of claims made by Fox News were false or to some extent false in 2015 ("Fox's File"). On the other hand, the Fox News audiences are reported to be less informed than the viewers of other cable news channels in the US. Media critics have shown "that watching Fox News negatively correlates to political knowledge" (Mindich 101).

Additionally using TV programs as a source of information implies that the individual is exposed to a considerable amount of commercials. Berger reports that it is estimated that by the time Americans reach adulthood, they are exposed to 360,000 to half a million commercials (61). Although many people change channels or engage in other activities during commercial breaks (i.e. zap), almost 50 percent of viewers still pay some attention to TV during commercial

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[30] However, it should be noted that many of Trump's policies are consistent with the GOP's ideology and thus, enjoy the Republican Party's full support. Noam Chomsky "the Republican Party is the most dangerous organization in human history" because of its efforts to undermine environmental protection policies and its military practices (Goodman). Although, it is necessary to study the post-truth practices of GOP as a political institutions, it is beyond the scope of this study.

breaks (Speck and Elliott 62). Such a considerable exposure to commercials as social and cultural narratives, not only has the power to affect the audience's mind, for instance change their buying habits, but also their bodies, for instance, by increasing their food and medication intake (Berger 61-62). Therefore, a satirist like Oliver can use such an influential TV genre to convey his criticism of a president whose source of information in TV.

To this end, Oliver uses an advertisement on the morning news programs on Fox News for catheters in which, a professional cowboy (who did not like to have pain while urinating) talked about the benefits of using the device for older people (Ultra). Oliver parodies this ad as a counter-discursive measure to inform his audience of the importance of facts and using credible sources of information in policymaking.

As mentioned before, commercials can have a considerable impact on audience's life and decision-making process. Satirizing TV commercials through parody has traditionally been part of classic sketch comedies on programs such as *Saturday Night Live*. Simon Dentith defines parody as "any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (9). According to Bakhtin, parody aims to "depict a real world of objects not by using the represented language as a productive point of view, but rather by using it as an exposé to destroy the represented language" (Bakhtin, Dialogic, 364). In other words, parody tries to distort the original discourse by undermining it. Dentith argues that parody has a newfound importance in the postmodern age because not only Bakhtinian ideas have gained prominence in the second half of the twentieth century, but also the element of pastiche has made parody the central idea of many new genres (ix). Indeed, to some extent *Last Week Tonight* is itself a parody of political commentary programs such as *The Rachel Maddow Show*, *Countdown with Keith Olbermann* and *Hannity*. *LWT* subverts the commentary programs opinion-based argumentative style with fact-based argumentation style.

Oliver's parody targets both the form and content of the "catheter cowboy" commercial. *LWT* mocks the commercial format, the content of such commercials and misuses the form of TV commercial in its entirety as a vessel for mocking the President's negligence of important issues. By using "the irony of violated content[31]," Oliver is showing how ludicrous some TV commercials are. He discusses the original commercial's lack of coherence by commenting on the cowboy's statement "I [have] been cowboying for 25 years" (*LWT*, "Trump vs Truth" 09:50-09:53) by asking the rhetorical question: "what did you do before you were cowboying?" Oliver also criticizes the location of the commercial "why are you in a library? And one that doesn't want to overdo it with books?" (ibid. 10:07-10:20), illustrating the incoherence of shooting a catheter commercial in a library.

However, the main focus of *LWT* is violating the conventions of the content of this form (commercial TV genre) by using the rather light style of advertisement to convey serious content and simultaneously criticizing the president for choosing TV as his main source of information. Using the irony of misused form[32], Oliver claims that by means of his mock 'catheter cowboy' commercial series, he is trying to "sneak some useful facts to his [Trump's] media diet" (ibid. 21:21-21:24).

The first catheter commercial parody introduces the 'catheter cowboy' who is "a professional cowboy and use[s] catheters, [has] been cowboying for 25 years and there is two things that [he] know[s]" (ibid. 21:40- 21:47). These two things consists of "[he] doesn't like pain when [he] cathe[s]" (ibid. 21:47-21:50) and an additional piece of information (that changes in different commercials) of which the president must be aware, but apparently he is

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[31] In irony of violated content, "the techniques of exaggeration, displacement, and naturalizing [are used] as ways of disparaging style," for instance in "Metzengerstein," Edgar Allan Poe mocks the genre of Gothic tale (Test 163-4).

[32] In "irony of misused form, … forms and styles [are] not the targets of the satire but features and forms are used mainly as carriers and ploys exploited for generating irony" (Test 169).

not. For instance, in one of the sample commercials that are featured on the February 12, 2017 episode, the 'catheter cowboy' recounts the components of the US nuclear triad. The cowboy ends the commercial by staring into the camera, tilting his head up and down and saying "… that's the nuclear triad. In case, you are the kind of the person who might really need to know that" (ibid. 22:04-22:08).

Oliver announces that the ads are going to be broadcasted on commercial breaks of morning news programs of major TV networks, including MSNBC, Fox News and CNN in the Washington D.C. area, where the White House in located. These commercials, which actually ran intermittently for about a year, were supposed to "educate Donald Trump one by one on topics [*LWT is*] pretty sure he doesn't know about" (ibid. 22:21-22:25). These topics, in addition to the nuclear triad, include serious issues such as war crimes, residence of black people in the inner cities, global warming, location of African countries and unemployment rates and comic reliefs such types of forks, identity of Tiffany Trump, and the location of clitoris. The montage of catheter cowboy commercials ends with the cowboy directly addressing Trump, "…just remember Donald! If you don't know, it's ok to ask" (ibid. 23:33-23:36).

The catheter cowboy commercials are symbolically addressed to Trump, – although there is an actual chance that he could have watched them – nonetheless, their real intended audience is the viewers of *LWT*, in particular and the US citizens, in general. The commercials draw attention to two issues. First, elected officials are required to have a minimum amount of information about certain issues. Second, using TV, specially the channels or programs that resonate with one's ideology as one's source of information is not only neglectful, but also hinders the process of making sound policies.

The next source of information used by Trump that Oliver examines is Breitbart News. Breitbart is a conservative news and commentary website founded in 2007.[33] Oliver quotes different instances of *Breitbart* reports to show that it is not a trustworthy source of news. After establishing that *Breitbart* cannot be trusted, Trump is shown using Breitbart to support his statements in an interview on *Fox News*. In discussing the claim that thousands of Muslims celebrated the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, Trump and Bill O'Reilly discuss the credibility of the claim:

> Trump: "… I don't know that I'm wrong, Bill. You know this just came out from Breitbart. I mean literally, it just came out: [holding up a printed copy of a Breitbart article and reading the headline] Trump vindicated. 100% Vindicated."
>
> O'Reilly: "[if] there were thousands, it would have been reported. But what I am trying to get at, is this…"
>
> Trump [interrupting O'Reilly]: "But this article says they were swarming all over the place. So, I don't know what that means, but that means a lot of people." (ibid. 11:19-11:40)

Oliver, incredulously, holds up his hand and says "wait, holding up a Breitbart article does not make you seem more credible… You might as well, have gone oh, [putting a banana to his ear like a phone] hold on a second, Bill Hello! Thanks, sources are saying I am right Bill… [holding the banana toward the camera as if trying to hand it to someone] talk to them, talk to my sources, William." In this case, Oliver is using exaggeration to show the absurdity of the situation. He is taking a more direct approach compared to use of parody. This instance of verbal aggression against Donald Trump directly portrays him as a fool and likens him to a clown.

A close examination of the media sources used by Trump to support his claims, leads to a conclusion by Oliver that captures one of the core problems of the post-truth discourse as used by politicians and the media: "… there is a pattern here. Trump sees something that jibes with

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[33] Media Bias Fact Check website rated Breitbart "Questionable based on extreme right wing bias and publication of numerous false claims" in 2018 ("Breitbart").

his worldview, doesn't check it, half remembers it, and then passes it on, at which point it takes on a life of its own, and appears to validate itself" (ibid. 14:15-14:68). His conclusion refers to two stages of the cycle of constructing post-truth statements; seeking sources of information that confirm one's beliefs and producing knowledge based on those unsubstantiated news and reports.

Westerwick et al. show that selective exposure to information – which is facilitated by the access to networks with different political attitudes – results in one mostly getting information that is consistent with one's own view (445). For instance, in the case of voter fraud, Oliver points out, a claim by a Twitter user was turned into headlines published by many news agencies. Therefore, when one uses the same media outlets that the President uses, after observing that the President is repeating such a claim "he doesn't look like a crank, he looks like the first president ever to tell you the real truth" (*LWT*, "Trump vs Truth" 15:28-15:35). Thus, the viewer or the audience perceive the initial opinion as factual. This explanation answers Oliver's third question regarding why many people believe Trump.

It is worth emphasizing that the issue of selective exposure to media as a component of the spread of post-truth politics is important. First, because when citizens choose to only read, listen or watch the news that conforms to their own beliefs (or as Oliver puts it when news "jibes with their word view" 14:18-14:20); then, it means that ignorance of some other issues would be prevalent. Kaitatzi-Whitlock argues that when in a capitalist society, like the United States, media abandon their political role "as providers of social knowledge" and disseminate information that enhances their own profit; they limit the ability of the citizens to identify and appreciate the power relations (460). For instance, Mindich reports that in 2003 and 2004, two-third of US citizens still believed that there was a connection between the 9/11 attacks and Iraq, although the Bush administration had already rescinded its claim to such a connection (98).

In addition, selective exposure also leads to confirmation bias, which might also result in an inability to alter or reject one's previous beliefs. Confirmation bias can prevent from neutral information processing. Westerwick et al. report that several studies show online users usually "trust in political messages based on prominence and presentation [of the sources] without cross-checking validity" (433). They found out that people who attach higher importance to political issues are more likely to read or watch news material consistent with their attitude, from sources with lower credibility, so that they can get the information that is least likely to oppose their already held beliefs (447). Nyhan and Reifler show that "controversial factual questions" (305) in politics are tied with political preferences. Therefore, when presented with factual truth, only when the citizen is presented with the corrective fact as the *only* truth, corrections can occur. Nevertheless, the way that corrections are usually presented through 'objective' media is useless. Because the citizen might even strengthen their biased opinion; or as Nyhan and Reifler call it, "the backfire effect" is set in motion (303). In other words, humans are "goal-directed information processors" who evaluate information in order to strengthen their view, namely they use confirmation bias to make decisions (ibid. 307). Consequently, it is a significant that Oliver identifies this problem of the vicious circle of consuming the news that conforms to one's views.[34]

At this point, to address the severity of the problem, to answer his fourth question regarding possible ways of dealing with Trumpean rhetoric. Oliver uses the persona of iconoclast[35] and

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[34] In 2016, 62 percent of US adults got the news from web sources. Many people who read fake news stories believe them and such stories are shared more on Facebook compared to mainstream news stories (Allcott and Gentzkow 212). Although only 14% of American adults find social media credible sources of news, however, Allcott and Gentzkow's study shows that 156 fake news stories (115 in favor of Trump and 41 in favor of Hillary Clinton) were shared almost 38 million times on Facebook, which roughly translates into more than seven hundred million clicks. Moreover, they report that partisan news attract more partisan viewers (212-213).

[35] According to Test, iconoclasts are among the three usual satiric personae; the Ingénu (child-like characters such as Voltaire's Candid), the Eiron (two-faced type, or the wise fool, appears innocent or ignorant but it is not certain if such foolish behavior is real or pretend such as Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*) and the Iconoclast (outsiders who see and say things about their society which are unwelcome; individualists who are against established social hierarchies such as Oscar Wilde, or H. L. Mencken) (Test 205-26).

directly addresses the audience. He does recoil from criticizing American institutions and politicians or the citizens including his own audience. In this case, he expresses that the veracity of a concept is independent from the number of people who might find it true. This notion is one of the central principle of the correspondence theory of truth. Oliver uses a simile to make his clear: "just because they believe you and you believe them doesn't make it true, this isn't like Peter Pan, where believing in fairies will keep Tinker Bell alive" (*LWT*, "Trump vs Truth" 16:34-16:43).

Additionally, Oliver demonstrates that when Trump is confronted with the lack of evidence for his beliefs he does not retreat from his opinion. To prove this claim, a montage is played of Sean Spicer, then White House Press Secretary, stating the president has hold certain beliefs for a long time (ibid. 17:24-17:45). Oliver, in a dialogic manner, announces with certainty, "this isn't about belief, it can't be" (ibid. 17:51-17:55). Oliver points out that an incident like voter fraud is "a verifiable fact" and the issue at hand is not about beliefs. He clarifies that confusing faith and facts is important because "real people get hurt when you make policy based on false information" (ibid. 18:01-18:10). The difference between beliefs and facts is a matter that has been confused in the post-truth era. Oliver puts it in simple terms "we all need to commit to defending the reality of facts" (ibid. 20:29-20:32). In other words, Oliver is inviting the audience to take a stand against harmful effects of relativism and commit to the theory of absolutism of truth. According to Searle, absolutism states that there are number of propositions that their truth is not dependent on the feelings or beliefs of the people who support that proposition or claim that it is true (2-5).

In addition to the call for defending the reality of facts, Oliver proposes another counter-discursive strategy to "drag the administration back to reality" (*LWT*, "Trump vs Truth" 20:38-20:42) by using civil protests. He proceeds to suggest that individual responsibility is

significant, for instance, social media users must make an effort to verify what they consume, especially if the information they encounter on the web is consistent with pre-existing biases that they hold. Avoiding confirmation bias, as stated earlier, is a difficult but necessary task that leads to making informed political decisions.

After analyzing the reasons that Trump won the election and proposing some strategies to deal with Trump administration's elusive relation with truth in the episode "Trump vs Truth," Oliver offers further help by identifying the main techniques used by Donald Trump "to insulate himself from criticism and consequence" in the episode aired 12 November 2017 (*LWT*, "The Trump Presidency" 05:13-05:15). According to Oliver, "norms that [the Trump] presidency has violated" are the norms required for a sound engagement between the leaders and the citizens (ibid. 02:17-02:19). Oliver identifies three norm violations and enumerates them as rhetorical techniques used by Trump and his supporters. These techniques, as discussed below operate within the post-truth discourse.

The first technique "delegitimizing the media" refers to Trump's constant claims that the opposition press media are "fake new" (ibid. 05:25-06:10). The second technique is "whataboutism," namely "the practice of changing the subject to someone else's perceived wrongdoing [… which is] an old soviet propaganda tool" (ibid. 06:24-07:22). In discussing this technique, Oliver, again defends objectivity of factual truth and rebukes relativism. He elucidates the fundamental danger of whataboutism in that "it implies that all actions regardless of context share a moral equivalency […] all criticism is hypocritical and everybody should do whatever they want" (ibid. 07:23-07:35). Oliver states that the errors that other officials have made (for instance Hillary Clinton's emails) do not absolve Trump administrations' sins. He uses sarcasm and exaggeration to arrive at this bathetic[36] conclusion about whataboutism: "[A]

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[36] Bathos refers to anti-climactic effect of taking an argument to a trivial or ridiculous conclusion (Abrams 20).

defense attorney could not stand up in court and say, "maybe my client did murder those people, but I ask you this: What about Jeffrey Dahmer, what about Al Capone, what about the guy from *Silence of the Lambs*? [Pretending to be indignant] I rest my case here, people! I rest my case!"" (ibid. 08:24-08:33).

The third technique is "trolling," which, as Oliver explains, is used by Trump in order to hurt his perceived enemies. Trolling encompasses giving derogatory nicknames to democrats or tweeting hurtful messages about TV personalities (ibid. 09:44-09:50). The problem with trolling is that it is a purposeful attempt to offend and usually originates from an emotional state of resentment and feeling of indignation. As a result, oftentimes the 'troll' needs not to present any evidence to support his/her claims. For instance, in response to a question about his claim that Obama had surveilled the Trump Tower, Trump answers "I don't stand by anything, you can take it the way you want" and repeats the relativist notion that everyone can have their opinions (ibid. 12:52-13:00; 13:54-13:58). Oliver calls this "one of the frighteningly nihilistic sentences a president can say" (ibid. 13:15-13:18).

To deal with these techniques Oliver proposes that "we train ourselves to identify these techniques, because their natural endpoint is the erosion of our ability to decide what's important; have an honest debate; and hold one another accountable" (ibid. 16:58-17:11). In this manner, *LWT* shows that abandonment of moral standards of honesty and accountability and the inability in distinguishing the significant from the insignificant are the results of using Trumpean rhetoric. He states that such "erosion can be so gradual that it's difficult to spot. It's like being murdered by a sloth. It happens very slowly and you might not notice until it's too late" (ibid. 17:12-17:23). Once more, this bathetic simile highlights the danger in taking post-truth discourse to its limits.

To conclude, *LWT*, in discussing Trump's tenure as the President primarily uses parody to show his incompetence for leading the US. Additionally, sarcasm and bathos are used to show the absurdity of using Trumpean techniques. Finally, Oliver advices his audience, in a serious manner, to responsibly educate themselves so that they can refrain from being persuaded by such rhetoric.

3.3. Conclusion: Beware of "Some Idiot's Blog or the White House"

LWT presents two main counter-discursive strategies to deal with post-truth politicians. The first strategy consists of revealing the inconsistencies and disqualification of the politician, in this case Trump, through name-calling, derisive demythification and a series of commercial parodies in addition to exaggeration, bathos and vituperative comments. All these satirical attacks to show Trump's unfitness for office pave the way for a second strategy which consists of direct appeal to the audience to contemplate on the information they receive and use rational criteria to determine the accuracy and veracity of different claims. Often the serious advice is expressed with humorous terms, for instance, Oliver asks his audience not to trust the sources that repeatedly make false claims, "whether that outlet is some idiot's blog or the White House" (*LWT*, "Trump vs Truth" 21:05-21:10).

This request is consistent with satire as a rational discourse expressed by an iconoclast. In this manner, Oliver espouses policy-making based on information consistent with reality and recommends his audience fulfill their civic duty of being informed and socially-conscious. In the next chapter, I will follow the argument started in this chapter about the sources that support post-truth politicians' claims by examining Oliver's take on corporate media and programs that use post-truth discourse as part of their marketing techniques.

4. Oliver and the Post-truth Media: Sinclair, *InfoWars* and NRA TV

In this chapter, I will focus on *LWT*'s take on the post-truth media. By post-truth media, I refer to the press, media corporations, TV channels or stations, or any audio-visual programs that produce knowledge within the post-truth political discourse. In other words, these media interact with public by producing content that aims to affect them emotionally, either by evoking fear, for instance by exaggerating possible threats; or by producing confusion, for instance by disseminating false information. Consequently, the emotional responses that have been channeled into policymaking aim to benefit the media themselves, in particular, or the state/corporate power, in general.

The first part discusses consolidation or mergers of the media companies in the US and Oliver's work in regards to Sinclair Broadcast Group's propagandist content in service of corporate/state power. In the second part, *LWT*'s take on NRA TV as a medium of sales for the American weapon industry and Alex Jones's *InfoWars*, which uses conspiracy theories to sell its own branded products are examined. Both NRA TV and *InfoWars* use patriotism as a marketing ploy.

4.1. Sinclair Broadcast Group: Media Consolidation and Propaganda

Before starting the discussion of *LWT* episode dedicated to analyzing media conglomerate Sinclair, it is necessary to situate media companies in the US and understand the relationship between the media and citizens especially the media's relation to democracy.

The 21st century life is permeated with media consumption. According to Nielsen's data analytics of 2018, in the United States, "adults spend over 11 hours per day listening to,

watching, reading or generally interacting with media" ("Time Flies"). In the first quarter of 2018, American adults watched on average four hours and 46 minutes of TV per day (ibid.).[37]

Such a considerable amount of media and specially TV consumption is higher than most western countries[38] and signifies the importance of discussing media in the American context. One of the most debated issues in this regard is the freedom of speech or the press – a right protected by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. Free press or media are among the foundations of democracy in the US. However, many scholars challenge the idea that free media exist in the United States or that the media are fulfilling their democratic function.

Media and news media professionals often refer to themselves as gatekeepers of democracy and use the 'watchdog' metaphor to describe normative behavior of journalists in western democracies (Kampf and Daskal 177). This claim has been contested by scholars like Stephen Coleman and Karen Ross, who argue that "the media, and news media, in particular, routinely decide what's in the best interest of the public, usually based on nothing more than musings at editorial team meetings and inklings about what typical members of the public are like and would expect from the mass media" (45). Other scholars argue that in the United States, media and especially mainstream media, not only do not help enhance citizens' democratic participation, but also obstruct their rights by disseminating propaganda. Propaganda "involves

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[37] Additionally, radio had a weekly reach of 92% and live and time-shifted TV reached 88% of adults on a weekly basis. Consumers' use of digital mediums also increased in this time span and reached 3 hours and 48 minutes per day (ibid.). The news media consumption is also significant in the United States. In 2017, over a million people watched cable TV (CNN, Fox News, MSNBC) evening news every day; over 4 million people watched the local TV (ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC affiliates) evening news daily and over five millions watched network (ABC, CBS, NBC) evening news every day ("Cable News Fact Sheet," "Local TV News Fact Sheet," "Network News Fact Sheet").

[38] For instance, in Austria, the average TV viewing time was three hours and 8 minutes in 2017 ("Fernsehnutzung in Österreich"). In Germany, children and adults spend over 10 hours every day interacting with media, and on average watched 3 hours and 41 minutes of TV every day ("Mediennutzung in Deutschland 2017").

systematic and deliberate attempts to sway mass public opinion in favor of the objectives of the institutions (usually state or corporate) sending the propaganda message (Snow 66; qtd in Soules 3). Chomsky and Herman's "Propaganda Model," proposes that "the media serve the interests of state and corporate power, which are closely interlinked, framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege and limiting debate and discussion accordingly" (Chomsky 21). In Chomsky's opinion, the media are protecting and supporting the corporate power and the already privileged "from the threat of public understanding and participation," because in the United States "there is no infringement on democracy if a few corporations control the information system" (ibid. 26, 29). According to the US laws and regulations, the freedom to persuade citizen-consumers or "to manufacture consent" can be held by only a handful of individuals or companies and such a practice does not undermine the democratic society (ibid. 30).

Against such a backdrop, it seems, the media do not work as the gatekeepers or the watchdogs of democracy, but (paradoxically) thwart it. The corporate nature of the US media and consequently, the undemocratic practices of journalism in them is one of the main issues that the satirists of the 21st century have addressed in the United States. One of the most famous examples is Stephen Colbert's performance in the 2006 White House Correspondence Dinner in which he harshly criticized the press media for their unquestioning acceptance of the Bush administration's policies, especially the Iraq War:

> But listen, let's review the rules. Here's how it works. The President makes decisions. He's the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put 'em through a spell check and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration? You know, fiction! (Political Comedy 10:21-10:54)

In his analysis of satiric takes on journalism in the US, Alonso, first distinguishes the tripartite functions of journalism. He maintains that journalism in the United States has three functions and practices, "information, opinion/analysis, and investigation." He considers Jon Stewart's work in *The Daily Show* as "deconstructing the daily news agenda" which dealt with the first function of journalism, disseminating information. Jon Stewart's pioneering work in regards to the news media was to the extent that Baym proposes viewing *The Daily Show* as "an important experiment in journalism" in which "the silly is in interwoven with serious, resulting in an innovative and potentially powerful form of public information" ("The Daily Show" 273). Thus, the satiric approach to informative aspect of journalism has been seen as challenging the traditional approach to news.

Steven Colbert of *The Colbert Report*, in Alonso's opinion, "tackled the inconsistencies and absurdities of pundits," which refers to the opinion/analysis aspect (43). In fact, his impersonation of Bill O'Reilly of Fox News on *The Colbert Report* was a harsh critique of "the self-proclaimed "objectivity" of Bill O'Reilly's "No Spin Zone,"" to show his informed viewers that O'Reilly is not objective and "does not refute with facts but with emotional, anecdotal language that appears to appeal to common sense" (Colletta 862). Colbert's concept of *truthiness*, as discussed in chapter 2, also contributed to his fight for defending the distinction between opinion and facts.

Alonso asserts that Oliver "focuses on investigative journalism with thorough reporting and longer in-depth pieces." (43) In this vein, *LWT*'s format as a media product is a criticism of the journalistic practices of the mainstream media as it undermines the constantly changing 24/7 format by doing comprehensive analyses of problems and issues in weekly episodes. Alonso refers to Stewart, Colbert and Oliver's work as a satiric audio-visual trend, which he calls "critical metatainment, a postmodern carnivalesque result of and a transgressive reaction to the process of tabloidization and the cult of celebrity in the media spectacle era" (151). Therefore,

one of the main aspects of satirists' work is their confrontation with the problematic aspects of the media is to subvert the media spectacles at meta-level.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Oliver deconstructed the celebrity status of Donald Trump and proposed counter-discourses to his cult of personality by appealing to his audience's rational judgement. Additionally, I referred to *LWT*'s analysis of the sources of Trump's information and the cycle in which the media subsequently reported his unsubstantiated claims as factual; which ultimately resulted in their acceptance as legitimate information by post-truth citizens (who consume the knowledge within the post-truth discourse or are exposed to such knowledge).

In addition to considering Trump and citizens' use of media, Oliver furthermore considers the US media and specifically their covering of politics and their interactions with citizens directly. His satire targets the media at two levels. At the macro level, he addresses the problem of consolidation of news media and the consequences of market oligopoly and the implications that corporate media's propaganda has for the citizens and democracy. At this level, the media is primarily selling the media products to consumers and trying to change the policies on a national level for instance by influencing decisions in elections. At the micro level, he focuses on programs and TV channels that use disinformation, alarmism and conspiracy theories in their platforms, manipulatively, to market their products while proclaiming to promote patriotic causes. I will start the analysis of *LWT*'s episode on Sinclair Broadcast Group with a short prelude about media consolidation in the US and then move on discuss Oliver's counter-discursive approach to Sinclair propagandic model in its domination of US local TV market.

The enormity of the United States media market and the consumers' willingness to spend money on media products means that media consolidation results in fewer corporations to have

larger "share of the annual harvest of the billions of the consumer dollars" (Bagdikian 30). [39]

On the other hand, the resulting oligopoly allows them to have better chances with negotiating with the suppliers as well as charging higher prices for the consumers (16). Such a concentrated market has made the scholars apprehensive for decades. Robert McChesney warns that media concentration is dangerous for democracy, stating that media system in the US has "devastating implications for self-government" because there is "an inherent tension between capitalism and democracy" (xxxvii). McChesney, influenced by Chomsky, Herman and Bagdikian, maintains that neutral professional journalism is not possible in a corporate media system under commercial pressure (ibid. xxxviii). In spite of constant warnings, since the 1970s, the laws and regulations that prevented from consolidation and market concentration have become "relaxed or eliminated" in the US and the new merger culture has become the norm (ibid. 21). According to McChesney, this concentration of media ownership has extremely negative effects, because, the "wealthy managers and billionaires with clear stakes in the outcome of the most fundamental political issues" do not have similar interests to "the vast majority of humanity" (29-30).

The media conglomerates (and most other conglomerates) usually support conservative political ideas. The reason is that the conservative probusiness, neoliberal[40] ideology of free

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[39] In 1983, Ben H. Bagdikian, astonishingly, reported that only fifty men and women controlled most of the media in the United States. In 2003, his updated report showed that only five men controlled those companies that were once run by fifty different people. These five CEOs and owners of five conglomerates (Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, News Corps and Bertelsmann) were the main decision makers for what most citizens consume (Bagdikian 27-28). In 2012, only six corporations controlled 90% of media in America (General Electrics, News Corp, Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, CBS) which means that these companies controlled 70% of the cable channels, and the media diet of 277 million Americans (Lutz). In 2018, after winning a lawsuit against the US department of Justice on antitrust laws (Kang and de la Merced, "Justice Department"), AT&T bought Time Warner Inc. to become the biggest media company in the United States ("AT&T Completes Acquisition of Time Warner Inc." att.com).AT&T became the parent company of HBO, which produces LWT. However, this did not deter Oliver from his continued criticism of AT&T. For instance, in the episode on Corporate Consolidation, he mocked AT&T's abysmal customer service on Sep. 24 2017.

[40] "[N]eoliberalism is grounded in the assumption that governments cannot create economic growth or provide social welfare; rather, by trying to help, governments make the world worse for everyone, including the poor" (Bockman 14). At the moment, many Republican politicians who espouse smaller government in the United States adhere to this neoliberal idea. The most notable heads of states who implemented neoliberal policies are Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK.

market is more beneficial for the owners. For instance, Rupert Murdock of the News Corps (now 21st Century Fox, Inc.) is "an outspoken proponent of the view that the main problems with the world are the prevalence of taxation on business and the wealthy, the regulation of business, government bureaucrats, and labor unions" (62). This might be the reason that media owners such as Murdock continue to own news media, arguably not the most lucrative part of media business, because they want "the political leverage [that they] can get out of being a major network" (ibid). This explanation clarifies the right-wing slant of some American media corporations including Sinclair, which will be discussed shortly. Such a right wing slant, sometimes called Foxification[41] is parallel to the post-truth discourse. In other words, having certain political orientation results in seeing the world through the lens of a certain ideology and thus beliefs replace facts in the process of information dissemination. In this vein, the choice of news stories and the interpretation of the stories as well as the content created for the entertainment programs follow certain predetermined frameworks. This is the basis for Oliver's satire in examining Sinclair Broadcast Group's practices in the US local news media market.

In May 2017, it was announced that the Sinclair Broadcast Group – already the largest owner of local TV stations in the US – has proposed to acquire Tribune Media; a merger that in case of success would have brought more than 250 local TV stations under Sinclair's control (Littleton)[42]. *LWT* addressed this issue on July 2, 2017 episode.

After establishing the importance of local news,[43] Oliver introduces Sinclair with a clip from one of Sinclair's political commentators (and former executives) Mark Hyman. In the clip,

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[41] "When a media product or outlet becomes more opinionated and shouty such as Fox News" (Harcup).
[42] As of August 11, 2018, the merger has not taken place. Tribune Media rejected Sinclair's offer based on FCC's recommendation (Reardon).
[43] Oliver elucidates the significance and impact of local news by quoting a Pew Research Center survey reporting that people trust local news more than national news organizations ("Sinclair" 01:43-01:50). He states that Sinclair Broadcast Group is the biggest owner of the TV stations in the US. Sinclair's official website states that the Group owns 191 television stations and 601 channels in 89 US markets. As Oliver indicates such a market share is overwhelming; because in some US markets 2.2 million households watch Sinclair channels, which is "more than

Hyman addresses college students in his political commentary show, *Behind the Headline* in a segment called "Snowflake Advice": "Listen up closely, snowflake! Yes, I'm talking to you, you the social justice warrior, who whines for trigger warnings and safe spaces, not grown up enough to deal with facts, then hunker down in your room and snapchat the day away with other social justice warriors, college is not a babysitting service. It's time to grow up, snowflake!" (*LWT,* "Sinclair" 2:01-2:30). The introductory clip makes it clear that Sinclair has a partisan orientation, in which being a "social justice warrior," a concept associated with the political left, is frowned upon. Oliver, using the satiric technique of catalogue[44], imitates Hyman's rhetoric: "That man is Mark Hyman, one in what I presume is a series, featuring titles like, 'Wake Up Libtard,' 'Cucked Much, Ya Little Beta Baby' and 'Knock Knock Sheeple, It's Me Truth with Mark Hyman'" (ibid. 2:26-2:40). The Hyman clip and Oliver's comments sets the tone for the rest of the episode, in which, Oliver satirizes Sinclair on the two grounds: the content Sinclair provides the TV stations it owns or is affiliated with; and sinclair's practice of requiring the stations to broadcast the content as 'must-runs.'

The fact that Sinclair forces its stations to air the content they provide as must-runs, Oliver tells his audience, is highly unusual: "as best as we can tell no other major owner of TV stations distribute[s] its own commentary segments to run during local news" (ibid. 04:18-04:26). These must-run segments include individual stories and recurrent features such as "Behind the Headlines with Mark Hyman," "Bottom Line with Boris," and "Terrorism Alert Desk." Oliver declares that these segments "hew hard right" (ibid. 04:26-04:27). For instance, a montage of Hyman's comments includes these statements by him: "We are threatened by a nasty cancer epidemic, it's danger to our nation, it's political correctness and multiculturalism," "Words that

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any current prime time show on Fox News" ("Sinclair" 3:49-3:55). This comparison is meaningful, because Fox News has the highest ratings among cable news networks in the United States (Katz).

[44] Catalogue is a list made up of "objects, persons, or attributes" used as "way of exemplifying the chaos of reality or at least its incongruity" (Test 154).

were once acceptable in polite conversation are no longer, handicapped and retarded are now off-limits," and "There's one step proven to dramatically reduce domestic violence: marriage" (ibid. 4:26-4:53). Such statements are not only extremely problematic, but some can be refuted[45]. Oliver does not further comment on Hyman's statements and let the audience judge Hyman's statements on their own.

Another must-run segment is "Bottom Line with Boris." In this case, Oliver first discusses Epshteyn's credibility as the newly hired chief political analyst at Sinclair. Oliver explains that Epshteyn used to be a Trump advisor and clearly has partisan affiliation. Epshteyn's support of Trump is to the extent that he was among the few political commentators who supported Trump's comments in the aftermath of the white supremacist rallies in Charlottesville in 2017 ("Bottom Line with Boris").

Oliver shows a clip of Epshteyn discussing a retracted story by CNN claiming, "CNN along with other cable news networks is struggling to stick to the facts and to be impartial" (*LWT,* "Sinclair" 06:28-06:33). In response, Oliver states, "that could not be more pot calling the kettle black if he [Epshteyn] said the bottom line is: CNN is a rejected extra from *The Sopranos* in a JC Penny's tie whose voice sounds like Sylvester Stallone with a mouth full of bees" (ibid. 06:38-06:50). In this vein, Oliver is not only satirizing Epshteyn's remarks but also his personal style and to some extent, his physical appearance by referring to him as "a rejected extra from *The Sopranos*" in a cheap tie. Later *LWT* will present a more elaborate invective of Epshteyn as a representative of Sinclair (and biased right-wing pundits) to convey its message against Sinclair and its practices. I will discuss this counter-discursive parody in the end of this part.

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[45] For instance, Machado, Martins and Caridade examine different international studies and report that there are "high levels of violence within both types of relationships" (1).

The third must-run segment that Oliver discusses is "Terrorism Alert Desk." He incredulously states that the TV channels associated with Sinclair must run the segment "every single day, whether there is something major to report on or not" (ibid. 14:03-14:07). He proceeds to introduce the cases in which the reports by "Terrorism Alert Desk" included stories only nominally related to terrorism. For example, the "Terrorism Alert Desk" reported an ISIS flag has been hanging for a few hours in a New Hampshire neighborhood in New England. Oliver mocks the insignificance of these reports by exaggeration and follows the excerpt with these words (in a rough voice) "… in other alerts, my grandma heard a loud noise, a man with a beard asked me when the next bus is coming and Iran still exists, from Terrorism Alert Desk in Washington, I am just about done with this shit" (ibid. 14:36-14:42).

The problem here is that "Terrorism Alert Desk" is the program's confusion of the terms 'terrorist' and 'Muslim.' In other words, the program shows a cultural-racial bias in attributing terrorism to features of Muslim life that has nothing to do with terrorism, and excluding terrorist acts that are not committed by the Muslims. For instance, the "Terrorism Alert Desk" follows a report on ISIS, by discussing the Burkini (modesty swimsuit that covers the whole body) ban in France. Oliver is astonished and with a sarcastic tone states, "that is not about terrorism, it's just about Muslims. By that definition, terrorism is anything that a Muslim does" (ibid. 16:09-16:21). In Fact, by definition terrorism has nothing to do with a certain nationality or religion.

The US Department of State defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience" (Sinai 9). Based on this definition, any group with any ideology can be considered terrorist. However, after the 9/11 attacks, the US media and consequently international media have sometimes reported being a terrorist and being a Muslim

equivalent[46]. Oliver correctly specifies that such an equivalency is false. He lists some successful Muslim-born Americans to dissociate being a Muslim from being a terrorist. Oliver presents a parody of the "Terrorism Alert Desk" reports: "Mahershala Ali [is] on the cover of GQ [magazine], Kareem Abdul-Jabbar sneezed in an airport and happy birthday Fareed Zakaria. [Speaking with a rough voice] This has been your Terrorism Alert Desk" (*LWT,* "Sinclair" 16:23-16:32). The use of celebrities as examples of non-terrorist Muslims is humorous and bespeaks of the American preoccupation with celebrities. In this way, the viewer can see that some celebrities that she parasocially knows and aspires to imitate are from other ethnic backgrounds.[47]

In the remainder of the episode, *LWT* discusses the content provided by Sinclair. Oliver clarifies that the content is either a news story or the "scripts that local anchors can use to introduce the [news] pieces" (ibid. 8:40-8:47). As previous discussion of the must-runs demonstrates, the Sinclair's rhetoric targets some of the controversial issues with an extreme biased slant. This might not be a problem if it is the interpretation expressed by one single news anchor or one single news channel, however, when such a statement is repeated by several anchors and TV channels it can be considered a form of propaganda. For instance, Oliver shows a soundbite from numerous Sinclair TV stations across the United States who repeat the same sentence when introducing a news story about the FBI investigation of Michael Flynn[48]: "Did the FBI have a personal vendetta in pursuing the Russia investigation of President Trump's former national security adviser, Michael Flynn?" (ibid. 08:55-09:26) This exact same sentence repeated by 8 different news anchors on different TV channels ends with an anchor commenting, "it could very well may be true" (ibid. 9:24-9:26). Oliver uses anti-climactic

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[46] This statement does not mean that Muslims have not and do not commit terrorist acts. Only that not all Muslims or Middle Eastern people are terrorists.

[47] For more on the para-social relationship with celebrities see the discussion on Trump in ch. 3.

[48] Michael Flynn was Trump's first National Security Advisor who was forced to resign after admitting to having lied to the Vice President Mike Pence about his contact with Russia (Kelly).

similes to show how such a rhetorical question can be used for any kind of absurd statement: "Are all peanut M&Ms just snake eggs painted different colors? Do Foxes walk on their hind legs when no one is looking?" (ibid. 9:30-9:36).

Oliver had previously discussed the importance of the local news. Anew, he emphasizes that there is a real problem with "your trusted local newscasters using FBI and personal vendetta in the same sentence" (ibid. 10:10-10:17). Oliver's criticism is alluding to the persuasive power of recurring exposure to such content on media. The question is why such a practice might be problematic. It could be that the rhetoric used by these must-runs borders on propaganda. Propaganda is a persuasive message that only benefits its sender. As mentioned earlier, according to Nancy Snow propaganda tries to influence public opinion for the benefit of certain institution, especially state and corporate, in a systematic and deliberate way (Snow 66; qtd in Soules 3). As I discussed in the beginning of this chapter, corporations have clear interest in conservative neoliberal pro-business policies. Since Donald Trump's election, his administration has fiercely perused such policies; the tax reform is among the most notable attempts. The Nobel winning economist Joseph Stiglitz considers this tax reform as a big gift to "corporations and ultra-rich" which will lead the US to more debt that will take decades to undo (Stiglitz). In this vein, Sinclair's pro-Trump agenda is an instance of propaganda. Sinclair is promoting Trump's intent (as head of the state) by undermining the FBI investigation against him. In a more revealing example of Sinclair's pro-Trump bias, a viral video published by Timothy Burke of *deadspin.com*, features tens of Sinclair TV stations' anchors contributing to Trump's anti-media agenda (Burke). Burke, inspired by Oliver's piece on Sinclair, complied the footage from various TV stations in which the anchors all unanimously relate this message:

> … we're concerned about the troubling trend of irresponsible, one sided news stories plaguing our country. The sharing of biased and false news has become all too common on social media. More alarming, some media outlets publish these same fake stories… stories that just aren't true, without checking facts first. Unfortunately, some members

of the media use their platforms to push their own personal bias and agenda to control 'exactly what people think'… This is extremely dangerous to a democracy. (ibid.)

The Orwellian video highlights the anchors all repeating the script in unison (Fig. 3). In reaction to this video, some US senators asked FCC to investigate Sinclair on the ground that it is abusing its power to advance partisan political agenda; nonetheless, their request was denied by the head of FCC claiming that investigating Sinclair would be against the freedom of press (Coldewey). After this controversy, Donald Trump voiced his support for Sinclair in a Twitter message (Breuninger). Such an affirmation on Trump's part shows Sinclair and Trump's concordance.

Establishing that such a practice is propaganda merits a discussion of the reason the propaganda in media is indeed effective. One explanation is Lakoff's theory of 'neural recruitment' that claims the "repetition – of talking points, phrases, metaphors and other figures of speech – comes to dominate thinking" (Soules 98). For instance, constantly hearing phrases like war on terror, liberal media, lowering taxes and other concepts might trigger empathy in the audience and change their mental state (ibid. 98). It is worth noting that when such phrases are uttered by "people we know and like and who are similar to us," such as local newscasters, the possibility of being persuaded increases (ibid. 105).

Another theory is Kahneman's theory of 'fast' and 'slow thinking.' 'Fast thinking,' or 'system 1 thinking' or 'rules of thumb' are cognitive shortcuts or biases that "determine how people vote, who they associate with" and "what issues they support" (ibid. 111). The 'slow thinking' or 'System 2 thinking' should include "reason, reflection and calculation" which is more difficult and as a result, most people prefer 'fast thinking.' For instance, when experts express uncertainty, the audience might use their 'System 2 thinking' and decide against their statements. In contrast, a confident testimony can persuade the audience (ibid.). This might be the case when people do not believe scientists who express concerns for the climate change

(who always use the scientific language of probability) and prefer the testimony of TV experts who deny the possibility of human contribution to climate change with certainty.[49]

Oliver's report on Sinclair ends with a "little video" produced by *LWT* for the Tribune Media TV stations "to alert [their] viewers" that the station might soon be controlled by Sinclair ("Sinclair" 17:42-17:45). The concluding clip features a *The Sopranos* actor, Steve Schirripa, and a piglet called Pork Chop. Discussing "Bottom Line with Boris," Oliver had commented that Epshteyn looks like "a rejected extra from *The Sopranos* in a JC Penney's tie whose voice sounds like Sylvester Stallone with a mouth full of bees" ("Sinclair" 6:43-6:52). In the clip, Schirripa parodies Epshteyn, as a host, and the genric features of "Bottom Line with Boris." Schirripa voices *LWT*'s concern about Sinclair getting bigger and draws attention to the TV format within which the Sinclair's agenda is presented to the viewers. First, Schirripa deconstructs the TV genre of political commentary programs or punditry exemplified by "Bottom Line with Boris." Schirripa enumerates the components of such TV shows including a white middle-aged man in a suit and tie, and the use of a green screen to portray patriotic images such as the White House or the American Flag in the background (ibid. 17:52-18:01). Following the comment on the low production values of political commentary programs, Schirripa, continues to explain the role local news must play in communities:

> … local news should never be about cheap scaremongering or advancing a political agenda. It should only be about weather, sports, […], and human-interest stories featuring cute animals like this pot-bellied pig [picks up a piglet and holds it while the piglet's name appears on the screen (Fig. 4)] look at this little guy, He's called Pork Chop. Anyway, I am Steve Schirripa telling you if this becomes a Sinclair station good luck with that shit. (18:18-18:46)

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[49] Kahneman and Tversky also developed the prospect theory, which challenges the classical notion of expected utility. This theory states, "most people do not simply consider the expected utility (usefulness) of their decisions, but are often motivated by other factors such as a baseline reference point (where they are already); diminishing sensitivity to additional gains after a certain threshold is reached; and loss aversion, where 'losses loom larger than corresponding gains'" (Kahneman 297; qtd in Soules 113).

This monologue uses the satirical device of literalization to highlight the type of content local TV stations must provide. According to Test, literalization is an effective source of irony in which a concept or metaphor is turned on its head; for instance, in the last scene of *Animal Farm*, when animals become like men and men become like animals, literalization is used rather than a metaphor (155). In this case, the metaphor of news about cute animals (i.e. comforting stories) in literalized by introduction of the piglet, Pork Chop. In this way, *LWT* criticizes the local TV stations, in particular and news media, in general, of ignoring significant social and political issues and producing a vacuum that can be misused by corporations such as Sinclair to deliver their propaganda. The last sentence uttered by Schirripa, "good luck with that shit" is an instance of direct verbal aggression with a resort to profanity, which is used to shock and warn the audience. Overall, *LWT*'s attempt at a counter-discursive strategy in this case is a rather direct invective of the media oligopoly and functions as an informative piece of investigative journalism. Like a journalist, Oliver informs his audience of the dangerous practices of a relatively unknown (at the time) corporation with vast amounts of power. This might be the reason that Oliver takes the more direct approach of verbal aggression in this episode compared to his previously subtler attempts.

This episode fits among the anti-corporate agenda that *LWT* has followed through the years. In a number of episodes, Oliver has discussed consolidation and corporate mergers in the United States either directly such as in the episode "Corporate Consolidation" (September 24, 2017) or indirectly in episodes on "Sugar" (October 26, 2014), "Marketing to Doctors" (February 8, 2015), "Tobacco" (February 15, 2015), "Journalism" (August 7, 2016), "Opioids" (October 23, 2016), "Dialysis" (May 14, 2017) and "Economic Development" (November 5, 2017).

Overall, Oliver's attempt in his opposition to Sinclair is to show Sinclair's hypocrisy and its use of propagandic methods to serve the state and corporate power. In the next part, I will proceed to analyze *LWT*'s approach to the micro-level attempts to utilize media as a means of

gaining commercial profit. At the micro level, the media use their power to sell a secondary non-media product, e.g. supplements or weapons. In order to expose such practices, Oliver targets Alex Jones's *InfoWars* and the National Rifle Association's TV channel, NRA TV.

4.2. *InfoWars* and NRA TV: Patriotism for Sale

The previous section on media consolidation discussed how media conglomerates use their power to disseminate their ideas and influence policies at a macro level. Sometimes, having certain political ideas is to increase commercial gains of certain individuals or a certain industry, respectively. Alex Jones's *InfoWars* is an example of the former, which uses conspiracy theories and xenophobic patriotism as a means of marketing products that directly benefit the host (and the manufacturers of his products). The NRA TV is an example of the latter, used as a marketing tool for the American weapon industry. NRA TV primarily uses alarmist patriotism as a marketing ploy by exaggerating security threats and presenting armed defense as patriotic duty of American citizens.

In the episode aired 30 July 2017, Oliver discusses Alex Jones and his program *InfoWars*. Previously, in February 12, 2017 episode, Oliver had mentioned that Jones lacks credibility and his emphasis on spreading conspiracy theories was target of Oliver's ridicule; Oliver had directly called Jones "stupid" (*LWT*, "Trump vs. Truth" 13:15-13:17). In response to Oliver's comments, Jones had stated that Oliver "ma[d]e fun of him out of context" in addition to claiming that "people want legitimacy, they want real, they want to hear somebody that could speak to them and touch them inside" (*LWT*, "Alex Jones" 03:09-03:25). In reaction to Jones's response, Oliver states that *LWT* will try to present him in context. Oliver reports that Jones spends one fourth of his 4 hour-long daily show to promote products that he sells on his online store. These products include items such as survival gear for the upcoming civil war, Bill

Clinton rape whistle and "9-11 Was an Inside Job" bumper sticker. Oliver mentions that Jones also sells a line of vitamins and nutriceuticals under his patented brand, "Info Wars Life."

Oliver first makes it clear why one should take Alex Jones serious, as "an estimated 5.9 million people listen to his radio show or watch it online every week" and the president of the United States is among them (ibid. 02:00-02:10). He introduces Alex Jones by showing a clip of him in which Jones is in an enraged rant, with a red face and entirely shaking while hitting the desk with a stack of papers saying that the government is turning "frigging frogs gay" by adding chemicals in the water (ibid. 00:34-00:36). This statement among others including Jones's repeated claim that Sandy Hook massacre was orchestrated by the government (Raffalli) or the claim that Boston Marathon bombings was a false flag (Horsey) can be recognized as instances of conspiracy theories. Jones has also founded 9/11 Truth Movement which claims the US government has staged the attacks on the World Trade Center buildings in 2001 (Johnson).

Conspiracy theory has been defined by Keeley (1999) as "a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons - the conspirators - acting in secret" (qtd in Allcott and Genrzkow 214). Conspiracy theories try to explain a disputed event either to express the conspiracy theorists' anger and suspicion toward dominant social groups such as the state or "to express frustration with perceived powerlessness within society;" although in some cases the people in power have used conspiracy theories to "justify persecution of targeted groups" (Issit 7). In this vein, conspiracy theories work within the post-truth discourse, by proposing a person or a group of people's opinion as the *real* cause of an event. According to *LWT*, Jones's conspiracy theories with their flavor of xenophobic patriotism provide such post-truth explanation to be utilizes as a marketing tool for the products that Jones sells in his online shop.

Oliver catalogues the products that Jones sells. Among them are different supplements and 'Wake Up America Patriot Blend Coffee.' (*LWT*, "Alex Jones" 8:52-8:55). This list, accompanied by the products previously mentioned, shows how Jones is using emotional triggers to invoke patriotism to as a marketing strategy. Additionally, it highlights the commercial nature of Jones's enterprise. It is logical to expect a news and commentary program to sell books or magazines, however, selling bumper stickers and food signify an unadulterated business orientation.

To promote the products, Jones is sometimes accompanied by a medical expert, whose credentials Oliver investigates and proves to be inflated by Jones. In a clip shown on *LWT*, the medical expert, Dr Groupe, advertises a supplement called "Living Defense":

> … if you're suffering from abdominal pain, allergies even like headaches, anemia, weakened immune system, gut problems, depression, hair loss, excess gas, muscle pain, nervousness, I mean all these things, if you look at some of these conditions and then *us opening up our borders* and *all the other countries opening up our their borders*, you're just dealing with *a mass amount of parasites or harmful organisms*. You can type in *refugees spreading disease*. I mean the CDC [Center for Disease Control] is going crazy right now. (ibid. 10:05-10:32, emphasis added)

In response, Oliver comments: "I'm pretty sure if you type "refugees spreading disease" into google and press enter, it just takes you right to the Wikipedia page of xenophobia" (ibid. 10:39-10:46). In this case, he is relying on his informed audience to understand the implications of using racist rhetoric as a marketing strategy. Although xenophobia[50] and racism[51] are not the same phenomenon, they are similar in some aspects. For instance, both use exclusionary practices or stereotypes (Baker et al. 366). The use of the racial 'other' as a source of impurity has long been employed as a marketing ploy, especially for cleaning products[52]. Naming

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[50] "[F]ear of the unknown and of a generalized outgroup which exists outside society" (Baker et al. 365).
[51] An ideology in which identification of certain biological or somatic characteristics leads to assigning a "natural, unchanging origin and status" to a group of people, and consequently attributing a series of secondary negative characteristics that results in their being considered inferior and a threat to the dominant group (Miles and Brown 104).
[52] For instance, Massing discusses the practice of soap advertisers in the 19th century in which "black people dramatically los[e] their skin pigmentation as a result of cleaning process" (180).

immigrants as a source of contagion is clearly a similar strategy that uses the already existing racist and xenophobic repertoire of the sales and marketing in the US.

It can be argued that Jones has found a customer niche by using an "innovative cultural expression" to gain widespread support among people who ideologically agree with him. Innovative cultural expression is the reason that some brands have become extremely successful. For instance, Nike has used "combative solo willpower" as a cultural expression in the 1970s to boost its sales among non-professional runners and to become one of the leading athletic wear brands in the world (Holt and Cameron 26-27). Alex Jones's cultural expression (Americans must protect themselves against the world) is indeed not innovative, but uses the same branding techniques of innovative cultural expression to present *InfoWars* as a brand that patriots support as opposed to other brands that benefit the globalist corporations. In fact, Jones usually urges his audience to buy his products so he can "attack the enemy" and "fight against Tyranny;" enemies and tyrants including liberal media, globalist corporations and the deep state (ibid. 15:52-15:58; 16:08-16:18). In this manner, the people who believe that immigrants are invading America and buy survival gear on his website clearly put their biases and beliefs before the evidence that they can gather based on reality.

LWT explores this aspect of the *InfoWars* and concludes that the patriotic outbursts of the host are merely a façade for his lucrative business. Oliver states that when *InfoWars* is put into context, Alex Jones is "like a skilled salesman spending hours a day frightening you about problems like refugees spreading disease and then selling you an answer" (*LWT*, "Alex Jones" 18:07-18:16). To support this conclusion, Oliver shows that after the comment Jones made about chemicals in water that feminize society and lower birth rate (turning frogs gay), he has directly referred to his line of water purifiers that prevent from homosexualization (ibid. 18:21-18:31).

The satiric counter-discursive approach that Oliver takes against Jones is a mild humorous and grotesque parody of *InfoWars's* marketing panel. In this imitations of Jones's marketing endeavors, Oliver presents 'John Oliver Tactical Assault Wipes,' which are an imitation of 'Combat One Tactical Bath' wipes that were sold on the *InfoWars* store which "can be used anywhere needed including the perineal area [between genitals and anus][53]" (ibid. 5:48-5:59). In contrast, Oliver announces 'John Oliver Tactical Assault Wipes' are exclusively for the perineal area. To draw more attention to this specific feature, the actor lampooning the medical expert on *InfoWars*, holds up a picture of the male perineal area and illustrates the way the wipes must be used by his hand gestures. This parody draws from the use of grotesque imagery in the satiric repertoire.

Grotesque imagery has a well-established standing in satire. From the Bakhtinian perspective, grotesque satire, satire that has to do with body and bodily functions, is ambivalent (Bakhtin 307). Although grotesque is not always satiric, but it encompasses "a negation of the entire order of life" that can lead to pathos. Thus, grotesque humor "fuse[s] the body and the world" (ibid. 311) and transforms the described phenomenon in the world into a bodily organ. Wurth notes that grotesque is tied to the human body and concentrates on the bodily orifices such as mouth, ear, vagina and buttocks, where the body meets the world (200). Grotesque "distorts or turns upside down a familiar social and moral order" and subverts accepted norms of society (ibid). *LWT*'s spoof product distorts the euphemistic practice of the hygiene product advertisement. At the same time, the grotesque imagery defaces commercial aspirations of Alex Jones. By juxtaposing Jones's business with products used for the material body, Oliver is belittling *InfoWars*'s claims of being a legitimate and real patriotic institute, and shows that what *InfoWars* actually stands for.

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[53] See the product here: www.infowarsstore.com/combat-one-tactical-bath-all-purpose-skin-cleanser.html

The imitation presented in this episode is humorous, grotesque and its tone is relatively lighter than *LWT*'s usual parodies. One reason might be the nature of I*nfoWars*, which as a conspiracy theory program does not need much satirizing to be shown as ridiculous and irrational to *LWT*'s informed audience. On the other hand, as Dentith has discussed although parody has the ability to eternalize the text that it is mocking, however, there will remain "no unsullied point of origin in which the hypotext existed without the contaminating presence of parody or the parodic forms" (189). Thus, the imitation of the very dangerous practice of Alex Jones of using alarmist statements and conspiracy theories might be grave, but Oliver's parody is able to subversively change the conversation about *InfoWars* to its marketing practices and thus, emphasizing the business-centered nature of its seemingly patriotic rhetoric.[54]

In dealing with post-truth media, Oliver is attempting to reveal their hypocrisy in his pieces on Sinclair and Alex Jones. Oliver illustrates how Sinclair manipulates its viewers to consider its content as locally produced. He clarifies how Jones hides his commercial goals under the guise of patriotism by contextualizing his seemingly passionate warnings about the inherent dangers of the globalists and the liberals who endorse immigration. *LWT* continues this line of argument in its work on NRA TV.

In the episode aired on March 4, 2018, Oliver demonstrates how the National Rifle Association uses a wide range of TV programs as a way to sell weapons to American citizens under the slogan "Our greatest weapon is truth." In fact the homepage of NRA TV invites its audience to

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[54] *LWT*'s was among the first programs that took Alex Jones seriously. After Jones's continuous insistence that Sandy Hook shooting was a hoax, some of the victims' families sued him for defamation ("Sandy Hook"). Consequently, in August 2018, many social media platforms, including Apple, Youtube and Spotify removed *InfoWars* content from their websites. The companies maintain that Jones has "violated hate speech policies on their respective platforms" (Browne). Although hate speech is still protected as free speech under the United States Constitution, these online platforms cite user complaints and the violation of their internal policies as the reason to remove content created by Alex Jones. Jones has called this a first amendment breach and after Twitter banned *InfoWars* from posting for a 7 day period on August 16, 2018, he has been portraying himself as a victim of censorship and claiming that the "mega-corporations working in tangent to stifle competition" ("Founder of GAB").

"stand with America's most patriotic team on a mission to take back the truth" (see homepage of *nratv.com*). NRA TV's claim on truth is a rhetoric device to delegitimize the evidence that limited access to firearms makes the American society safer. In fact, a meta-analysis of 130 studies in 10 countries in 2015 has shown that indeed gun control laws are effective in reducing violent crimes (Santaella-Tenorio et al. 140). Therefore, NRA TV, similar to the Tobacco industry in the second half of the 20th century, which spread ignorance about the risks of smoking, tries to spread ignorance about the link between easy access to firearms and violence by their narrative that guns prevent from violence[55]. Consequently, the NRA and its TV channel try to present using firearms part of the American identity and emphasize two positive aspects of gun use: the pleasure or entertainment aspect (as a tool in hunting or for entertainment) and the practical aspect of guns (as a protective tool). Oliver identifies these two aspects in his piece of NRA TV. To this end, the TV channel's shows either try to depict using guns as a fun activity and carrying guns as fashionable; or illustrate the American society at imminent risk; therefore, present the possession of firearms a requirement. Both of these trends are utilized to encourage the audience to purchase firearms.

By depicting using guns as a fun activity, NRA TV focuses on a spectrum of gun users, from hobby shooters to professional hunters. For instance, a show called "Love at First Shot," targets female audience and tries to introduce using semi-automatic rifles, AR-15[56] as a very enjoyable activity. The host of the TV show calls shooting with the rifle, "a little puff of happiness," to which Oliver replies, "It's a little weird to describe a semi-automatic rifle the way Bob Ross describes a fucking cloud" (*LWT*, "NRA TV" 9:57-10:13). The show's depiction of shooting

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[55] For the use of ignorance as a marketing tool, see Proctor, Robert N. and Londa Schiebinger, *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, Stanford University Press, 2008.

[56] AR-15s are a series of semi-automatic rifles manufactured by Colt that can be privately bought in the United States for about one thousand dollars. See the product here: https://www.colt.com/series/AR15_SERIES. AR-15 is among the most controversial firearms in the United States with many gun control supporters requesting the government to ban selling the weapon.

as a fun activity is a prelude to its attempt to market firearms and firearm accessories, such as gun cases and handbags for concealed carry. Oliver concludes by saying "*Love at First Shot* functions as a kind of QVC for firearms" (ibid. 10:26-10:31). By this comparison to QVC (an international home shopping channel), Oliver highlights the commercial aspect of the TV program, however, he emphasizes that the main tone used by the NRA TV is "darker."

Discussing one of the hunting shows on NRA TV, a clip is shown in which wide-shots of natural phenomena are accompanied by dramatic music and forbidding voice-over: "Somewhere over this horizon sit a million little dictators, eager to purge humanity of its hunting instincts. The anti-hunters have imposed a false order on their lives, based on a misconceived perception of the world. Death is evil, they believe and so the purveyor of death must also be evil. Death is an undeniable fuel of life" (ibid. 13:00-13:27). Oliver's mock-shocked response is to sarcastically call the monologue "deranged letter from serial-killer" and to comment "although, to be honest, I would respect the NRA a lot more, if its slogan were 'The NRA: Because Death Is an Undeniable Fuel of Life'" (ibid. 13:35-13:43). He explains he would not like this latter slogan, "but at least we'd be clear where they're coming from" (ibid. 13:46-13:49). This comment again emphasizes the principle of honesty and criticizes the manipulative way NAR TV markets firearms.

Moving to the second trend in the NRA TV's programs, Oliver identifies one of the main characteristics of the NRA TV as "painting a bleak vision of America, with threats around every single corner and one solution" (ibid. 14:44-14:50). A clip is shown in which different NRA TV 'experts' express their concerns about security problems in the US, for instance, the NRA spokesperson, Dana Loesch, is shown saying: "Today's America is plagued by urban riots and domestic ISIS sympathizers … drug cartels and human traffickers have invaded our borders and embedded in every single American city" (ibid. 15:00-15:04). The clip concludes by a gun expert announcing: "this threat is real, our leaders are either incapable of or unwilling to protect

you and AR-15 is one of the most effective tools available to protect yourself and your family" (ibid. 15:15-15:30).

This clip, and other similar content on NRA TV, Oliver argues, seem like infomercials "because many of [them] are sponsored by gun brands like Smith & Wesson and behind the scenes of the NRA TV is an ad agency [called] Ackerman McQueen" (ibid. 16:03-16:16). Oliver says that the statements made on the NRA TV follow the logic of infomercials. Infomercials usually present a problem and then offer the solution in the form of a product. In this vein, Oliver presents an infomercial parody: "Is human trafficking getting you down? Do you have ISIS sympathizers in those hard-to-reach places? Are you tired of getting nine elevened? There's got to be a better way. Try the AR-15. Available at way too many stores near you" (ibid. 15:23-15:48). This mock infomercial in its parodic capacity employs a bathetic technique to highlight the commercial nature of the NRA TV. By juxtaposing grave problems such as human trafficking, ISIS sympathizers and the 9/11 terrorist attacks with language associated with prescription drug ads and hygiene product commercials such as getting you down, hard-to-reach places as well using 9/11 as a verb, Oliver follows an anti-climactic descend from serious to absurd and ridiculous. Consequently, this parodic discourse opposes the pompous rhetoric of NRA TV's alarmist patriotic discourse. Additionally, it equalizes selling guns to selling medication and hygiene product and highlights the fact that NRA TV is "just a vessel to sell America guns" (ibid. 17:29-17:32). In the end, he recommends not to take the NRA TV seriously, as the NRA's other practices such as political lobbying might be more dangerous.

4.3. Conclusion: Look at "Where They're Coming from"

In conclusion, it is evident that Oliver's satiric take on the post-truth media encompasses two stages. The first stage is identifying the problem. For instance, he draws attention to Sinclair

and illustrates its propagandic content and format as harmful to democracy. He argues that Sinclair is manipulating its audience by disguising their dictated content as genuine pieces produced by local newscasters and journalists. Similarly, Oliver informs about the issue of Alex Jones's business model, which is based on a distorted and xenophobic view of what being an American entails or reveals NRA TV's alarmist brand of patriotism as a marketing tool. The second stage, presents his judgement of the situations that usually take the form of parodic sketches. These parodic counter-discourses use grotesque imagery, bathos and sarcastic similes to challenge the post-truth media's claim of having genuine concern for American citizens' democratic rights.

The foremost goal of Oliver's work on media conglomerates, TV channels and programs is to contextualize their ideological protests by identifying "where they're coming from" (*LWT*, "NRA TV" 13:46-13:49). He raises awareness about the insincerity of ideological marketing and implies that honesty is the principle lacking in the post-truth media productions. In this capacity, he is doing what a journalist must do. However, the act of judging the fundamental dishonesty of the post-truth media practices is compatible with his role as an iconoclastic satirist.

5. Oliver and the (Post-truth) Citizens: Concluding Remarks

A study of the satiric TV shows' discursive reaction to post-truth politics requires an interdisciplinary approach. To this end, I have employed theories and concepts from different academic branches to provide a theoretical framework. First, I have argued that post-truth era has emerged as a consequence of the prevalence of some philosophical ideas (truth is relative and power determines what can be considered true), a series of political upheavals (rise of populism and the transformation of politics into spectacle), and technological advances (infotainment and social media facilitating discursive integration). Next, it was established that the post-truth politics is a discourse, in which its subjects (politicians, media and citizens) use their aesthetic judgment, i.e. their beliefs and opinions, to produce and consume knowledge – specifically in policymaking and public decisions. Lastly, satire was identified as a discursive practice that can target another discourse and propose a *dialectic* or antithesis. The *normative interconnectedness* or *constituted sameness* of satiric aspect of the late-shows and post-truth politics is their discursively integrated postmodern format. This format enables shows like *LWT* to challenge the established post-truth discourse used by some politicians and media that considers opinion and fact to be on a par and offer citizens an alternative discourse based on the objectivity of factual truth. *LWT*'s satire against the post-truth discourse in politics, consequently, primarily targets the two subject positions of politicians and the media in an attempt to *reintroduce* the principle of honesty to public discourse as a way of promoting democratic rights of citizens.

To oppose post-truth politicians such as Trump who use their celebrity status as a means of distorting truth, Oliver deconstructs Trump's image as a modern myth of self-made wealth and success (fulfillment of American dream) by replacing his name with a humorous substitute 'Drumpf' to dissociate his name from the aforementioned positive concepts. Additionally, Oliver emphasizes on the importance of knowledgeability and competence as opposed to

presenting a deceitful construct of intelligence and aptitude. In this vein, *LWT* critically analyzes Trump's sources of information (TV) and reveals his incompetence and unreliability. In order to highlight his unfitness for office, Oliver uses a series of commercial parodies featuring a "catheter cowboy" discussing the nuclear triad and war crimes. The commercial parodies target Trump personally as a post-truth politician whose falsehoods might have catastrophic consequences as well as the media sources that aid the post-truth politicians. Additionally, Oliver identifies three main techniques that is used in Trumpean rhetoric and by awareness raising tries to guide his audience to take a stance against such rhetoric.

LWT targets the post-truth media at macro and micro levels. At the macro level, Oliver attacks media consolidation. Giant media companies, who follow their own agenda to increase their profit, use propaganda to influence elections and the direction of public discourse. In order to reveal the manipulative nature of media corporations' approach to truth, Oliver offers a rebuke of Sinclair Broadcast Group as the biggest owner of local TV Stations in the United States. He criticizes Sinclair's practice of requiring its stations to broadcast their extremely right-wing content that fanatically supports Trump administration's anti-(opposition)media and pro-business policies. By offering a parody of the Sinclair pundits, accompanied by direct verbal attacks, Oliver informs his audience of the inherent harms of media oligopoly for democracy. At the micro level, LWT focuses on Alex Jones's conspiracy theory program, *InfoWars*, and the National Rifle Association's TV channel, NRA TV. *InfoWars* and NRA TV's producers offer a specific brand of racist/xenophobic patriotism in which America is under threat as a marketing tool for their products, lifestyle products and guns, respectively. The main counter-discursive strategy offered by Oliver is to contextualize the commercial nature of this programs by lampooning the experts and offering bathetic parodies of *InfoWars* and NRA TV.

Oliver's main goal in opposing post-truth politics is to reveal the inconsistencies of the politicians and the manipulative practices of the media. In this vein, *LWT* fulfils the traditional

satiric aim of identifying vice and folly and disparaging them. Moreover, *LWT*'s attempts for awareness raising are similar to practices of watchdog journalism. This could be the reason that some journalists consider his work investigative journalism (see Poniewozik, Steinberg and Brown) and some scholars propose to identify the type of the work that Oliver does as a new kind of political journalism (see Baym and Jones) or activism (see Alonso). In my opinion, *LWT* has a hybrid status that can transgress different discursive practices, however, it is primarily a satiric discourse. Satire, as a discursive practice has the capacity to function as a social, cultural and political force in opposing hegemony. It is able to subvert the dominant discourse, humorously introduce new perspectives and simultaneously defend the traditional notions of the objectivity of truth and the necessity of moral accountability on the part of politicians and the media. Arguably, *LWT*'s emphasis on the principle honesty can be criticized based on the fact it is itself part of the corporate media (HBO is a subsidiary of Warner Media, recently purchased by AT&T). Nonetheless, so far, such corporate affiliation has not deterred Oliver form attacking corporate and state power.

In short, the satiric late-show in the 21st century is a multifaceted text that contains discursive characteristics of entertainment, political commentary, journalism, and activism in reaction to social realities of the post-truth age. In this manner, *LWT* serves its audience, in particular and the citizens, in general, by first drawing their attention to what is important and significant in a democracy. Next, it analyzes the selected issue or problem, similar to political commentators or journalists while infusing the analysis with satiric humor especially parody. At this level, *LWT* invokes a certain sense of moral standard against which the discussed problem is assessed. What distinguishes *LWT* from other satiric late-shows is Oliver's frequent calls to his audience to act. These appeals oftentimes take the form of verbal requests to pay more attention to their responsibilities as citizens and sometimes directly addresses the politicians and media. These

appeals sometime result in "The John Oliver Effect" with real-life consequences for the socio-political institutions.

In conclusion, *LWT,* similar to its predecessors, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report,* is a dissident voice against the dominant post-truth discourse of the 21st century United States. Post-truth discourse threatens to eradicate any distinction between fact and opinion and disintegrate the possibility of public accountability due to obliteration of any objective criterion. *LWT*, as a result, by its *reintroduction* of the currently marginalized principle of honesty is supporting and promoting the democratic rights of citizens. Therefore, a satirist like Oliver is able to respond to people like Trump who deny climate change by saying: "Who gives a shit? That doesn't matter! You don't need people's opinions on a fact. You might as well have a poll asking: which number is bigger, 15 or 5? Or do owls exist? Or are there hats? The debate on climate change should not be whether or not it exists, it's what we should do about it" (*LWT*, "Climate Change Debate" 01:05-01:31).

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7. Appendixes

7.1. Figures

Fig. 1. Donald Trump, America's back mole (*LWT*, "Donald Trump")

Fig. 2. Disheveled 'Drumpf' (*LWT*, "Donald Trump")

Fig. 3. Sinclair Local TV anchors read prepared script by Sinclair in unison (Burke)

Fig. 4. Local news should be about cute animals (*LWT*, "Sinclair")

7.2. Abstract

The rise of post-truth politics threatens to eradicate the possibility of rational public discourse. In post-truth politics, the subjects including the politicians, the media and the citizens, can make public decisions based on their aesthetic judgement, i.e. their opinions, beliefs or emotions. Considering fact and opinion on a par hinders democratic participation as it erases the necessary basis of a shared sense of reality that acts as the departure point for any rational discourse. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to examine the satiric aspects of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* as a contemporary American late-show that challenges post-truth politics. I argue that the late-shows and post-truth politics are both discursively integrated and such hybridity allows late-shows to propose counter-discourses. Counter-discourses create new and alternative possibilities by subverting the dominant discourses. To investigate *LWT*'s counter-discursive strategies against post-truth politics, I have analyzed six episodes of *LWT*, in which a post-truth politician (Donald Trump) and post-truth media (Sinclair, InfoWars, NRA TV) were discussed. Oliver uses parody as the primary satiric device to subvert the targeted discursive practice and to deconstruct political personas and media formats to illustrate their deceptive implications. Additionally, in the role of an iconoclastic satirist, Oliver directly addresses the problematic aspects of post-truth politics and subsequently asks his audience to action. I found out that *LWT*'s satire works within the traditional satiric discourse by *reintroducing* the principle of honesty as a standard or judgement criterion for rational public discourse.

Keywords: post-truth politics, late-night show, satire, counter-discourse, John Oliver

7.3. Zussamenfassung

Der Aufstieg der Post-Truth-Politik droht die Möglichkeit eines vernünftigen öffentlichen Diskurses auszurotten. In der Post-Truth-Politik können die Untertanen, einschließlich der Politiker, der Medien und der Bürger, öffentliche Entscheidungen auf der Grundlage ihrer ästhetischen Beurteilung treffen, d. H. Ihrer Meinungen, Überzeugungen oder Emotionen. Die Berücksichtigung von Tatsachen und Meinungen über Parallelen behindert die demokratische Partizipation, da sie die notwendige Grundlage eines gemeinsamen Realitätssinns, der als Ausgangspunkt für einen rationalen Diskurs dient, auslöscht. Der Zweck dieser Studie ist es daher, die satirischen Aspekte von *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* als zeitgenössische amerikanische Late-Show zu untersuchen, die die Post-Truth-Politik herausfordert. Ich behaupte, dass die Late-Shows und die Post-Truth-Politik sowohl diskursiv integriert sind, als auch die Hybridität es erlaubt, Late-Shows Gegendiskurse vorzuschlagen. Gegendiskurse schaffen neue und alternative Möglichkeiten, indem sie die vorherrschenden Diskurse unterwandern. Um die gegendiskusiven Strategien von *LWT* gegen Post-Truth-Politik zu untersuchen, habe ich sechs Episoden der *LWT* analysiert, in denen ein Post-Truth-Politiker (Donald Trump) und Post-Truth-Medien (Sinclair, InfoWars, NRA TV) diskutiert wurden. Oliver verwendet Parodie als primäres satirisches Instrument, um die angestrebte diskursive Praxis zu untergraben und politische Personas und Medienformate zu dekonstruieren, um ihre täuschenden Implikationen zu veranschaulichen. In seiner Rolle als ikonoklastischer Satiriker befasst sich Oliver direkt mit den problematischen Aspekten der Post-Truth-Politik und fordert sein Publikum anschließend zum Handeln auf. Ich fand heraus, dass die Satire von *LWT* im traditionellen satirischen Diskurs funktioniert, indem das Prinzip der Ehrlichkeit als Standard oder Beurteilungskriterium für einen vernünftigen öffentlichen Diskurs *wiedereingeführt* wird.

Schlagwörter: Post-Truth-Politik, Late-Night Show, Satire, Gegendiskurs, John Oliver