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“It’s funny ‘cause it’s true”

A critical discourse analysis on new political satire on television
in the United States

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ABSTRACT

A new genre of political satire, namely new political satire, is becoming more popular on television in the United States. With most previous studies focusing on audience effects and quantitative analysis, this study aims to provide a closer look at the distinctive features of the discourses used in these shows. By conducting a thematic and critical discourse analysis on the sample, which was carefully selected from three current new political satire shows in the US, the study shows that apart from the heavier use of information and facts, the new genre has many distinctive discursive features: information and comedy are tightly intertwined, especially when complex information must be explained; hosts are no longer merely satirists, as they are educating their viewers in different ways; and from their satirical material, we can learn how their approach to current events have reflected societal changes.

This study also visited the question on whether political satire shows are practicing journalistic duties. While satire has become more informative and could potentially stimulate civic engagement, the fact that contents from these programs rely on existing works of journalists have limited the potential of the genre. Despite this, new political satire has displayed its competency in mobilising its viewers and making changes in real life, especially for now when scepticism towards journalists is at an all-time high.

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the website of the Federal Communication Committee was brought down after a talk show host urged his viewers to defend net neutrality¹. At that time net neutrality is still a relatively unknown topic in the US, and media coverage has been limited. Surprisingly, the TV personality who spent 15-minutes explaining the concept was neither a journalist nor a professional in the subject matter, but a comedian who hosts a political satire show on cable network. A year later, another talk show host has been blamed either jokingly or seriously for Donald Trump’s decision to run for president in 2016, thanks to the host’s relentless attack on the property tycoon back in the 2011 White House Correspondence Dinner (WHCD)². Meanwhile, a comedienne who didn’t have the chance to host the WHCD hosted her own version of the annual dinner in 2017, which raised over 20,000 USD for an NGO that fights for the safety of journalists.³ Satirists might be funny, but they are seemingly taking up more serious roles in our society.

With *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* establishing the recent popularity for political satire TV programs, the genre have continued to dominate late night television in the US. While a variety of studies had been done to investigate the impact of political satire shows on its audiences, the study on the text itself has been limited. In addition, the introduction of a more information-heavy style of political satire has reignited the discussion on whether political

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/john-oliver-net-neutrality-last-week-tonight_n_5431215

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/02/26/did-the-2011-white-house-correspondents-dinner-spur-trump-to-run-for-president/?utm_term=.dab08985ebc7

³ <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2017/04/29/samantha-bee-not-the-white-house-correspondents-dinner-full-frontal-recap/101077264/>

satire can be a supplement to or even a news source itself. “New political satire” (Becker and Bode, 2017) have given comedians the power to educate and lecture its audience, which is built on their original duties – to satirise current events and point out the absurdities in our lives. This bring back arguments from scholars like Baym (2005) and Faina (2012), who argued that political satire is to a certain extent practising journalism. So what makes “new political satire” different in terms of their discourses? And does the new genre strengthen or weaken the argument on political satire as journalism?

Focusing on three political satire programs in the US, this study aims to investigate their discourses and identify the characteristics of this new genre, and how does it differ from conventional political satire programs. Through a critical discourse analysis, this study will discuss how their discourse styles reflect changes in society, as well as how satire is integrated with information, giving satire a new role in educating the people.

This study will start by reviewing previous studies and discussions on political satire, followed by a two-step analysis of the texts and a discussion on the findings.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Before researching on the new genre of political satire, it is essential to lay out the key ideas and conceptual frameworks that guide the study. In this section, I will review the key concepts that are influential to this study, as well as an overview of previous studies in the field of political satire and television.

2.1 Political Satire

Rooted in the Latin word *lanx satura*, Satire is defined as a genre of “mixed dish” where features of different literature style are combined by the satirist to deliver an attack (Knight, 2004; Holbert, Tchernev, Walther, Esralew and Benski, 2013). By playing the role of a “sceptical and bemused observer”, the satirist attacks the subject with “a blend of amusement and

contempt” (Knight, 2004). Simpson (2003) suggested that satire has four types of attack: episodic, personal, experiential and textual. Episodic and personal attacks aim at current events and personalities that making the news respectively, while experiential attacks deal with social norms and textual attacks mocks the language. But like Knight (2004) has argued, satire would only be “effective” or funny only when a “mutual understanding” is established between the satirist and the audience; that is, the target of the satire should be worthy of being satirized, and the satirical message should be “justified by the values articulated or implied in the satire” (p.41). Regardless of the topic or target of the satirist, satirical literatures are usually “pre-generic” as they are built on pre-existing genres (Knight, 2004; Holbert et al., 2013), or like Feinberg (1967) describes it, “a playfully critical distortion of the familiar”. As a form of discourse, satire can be comprised of two elements: attack and judgment (Grey, Jones and Thompson, 2009). By producing verbal attack that passes judgment on certain objects, satire can expose a perceived violation of social norms by the elites, while simultaneously acting as a form of social commentary (Gray *et al.*, 2009). Satirists should play the role of distinguishing the right from wrong in the society, and should be willing to “attack the wrong without reservation.” (Hight, 2016). Grey et al. (2009) argue that satire is an important form of political discourse because of its composition and demand on the audiences. To understand satire, the audience need to have a heightened state of awareness on current events and mental participation, not to mention prerequisite knowledge on the issue mocked by the satirist. Rather than just speaking to individuals, satire can help audiences connect to current events and the community. By providing critiques that allow deliberation, and democratic discourse (Grey *et al.*, 2009), satire can help people to understand the obscured reality, thus interrogate and engage with politics and those who are in power.

While formats of satire can vary, they can be separated into two categories: Juvenalian and Horatian (Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather, and Morey, 2011). Named after Roman poet and satirist Quintus Horatius Flaccus (aka Horace), Horatian satire uses everyday activities as its ground for arguments provides critique on the ruling power and elites (Knight, 2004). The

primary goal of such kind of satire is to please audience and produce a “wry smile” among audiences (Sander, 1971), hence the contents are usually described as “light and witty” (Holbert *et al.*, 2008). Meanwhile, named after another satirist Decimus Junius Juvenalias, who’s known for his satirical critique on the Roman Empire, Juvenalian satire is more critical and harsh in nature, as it intends to laugh at the hypocrisies and incongruities of life (Sander, 1971). Described as a “savage and merciless” style (Holbert *et al.*, 2011), Juvenalian satire also provides social commentary like Horatian satire, but rather than just giving its audience a good laugh, it uses a more acidic tone and aims to inflict harm through its discourse (Holbert *et al.*, 2011). One example from this category is Stephen Colbert’s performance during the White House Correspondent Dinner in 2006, where Colbert gave a “simultaneously funny and fierce” speech that attacked both the President and the journalists in the event (Baym, 2008).

While critiquing the use of satire, some scholars have argued that satire has been underused by the media, despite its strong potential to critique reality. Grey, Jones and Thompson (2009) suggested that not only can satire provide meaningful political critiques, it can also encourage audiences to scrutinize and question politics instead of simply consuming it from authoritative sources. Russian literary critic and scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (2017) also suggested that comically playing with political issues can enhance one’s sense of ownership over it, thus feeling more empowered to be engaged with it. Making use of both kinds of satire, political satire can be understood as the form of critique that combines humour and commentary to ridicule the absurdities in politics. By presenting political events in a more entertaining way, political satire has become a popular genre on television in the past decades, and the United States has been the most prominent example of that until today.

2.2 Political satire in the United States

2.2.1 Impact and audience effects

The effects of political satire TV programs started to capture attention of the academia in early 2000s. A research done by Pew Research Centre (2000) found that while young people are getting less information on political campaigns from tradition news source, they and people with low political efficacy are learning much more about campaigns from late-night television programs than other groups. As a result, it has been commonly assumed that younger audiences have given up news and use late-night TV programs as their news source (Young and Tisinger, 2006). Seven years later another research done by Pew (2007) found that 16% of Americans are regular viewers of *The Daily Show* or *Colbert Report*, proving the popularity of such genre. But like Jon Stewart have said,

*[most kids] are not [getting their news from us] because you can't...If [kids] came to our show without knowledge, it wouldn't make any sense to them.*⁴

Understanding political satire requires previous knowledge on the issue. If the assumption is true, then young viewers would not have enough information to make an informed decision on politics (Young and Tisinger, 2006). In fact, the research by Pew (2007) found that most viewers of Stewart’s or Colbert’s show are already highly informed in current affairs, thus suggesting that the two shows are not the sole news source for its regular viewers. Instead of seeing it as a mutually exclusive relation, scholars like Baum (2003) suggest that soft news program can foster audiences’ interest in political issues, thus driving them to consume more

⁴ C-Span Newhouse School Forum with Ken Auletta from the *New Yorker*, Oct. 14, 2004.

traditional news programs. However, not much is known about the influence on political efficacy from both satire and traditional news programs. (Holbert, 2013).

The effects of political satire programs in the US have been studied by different scholars from the past decade, but the findings have been mixed. On one hand, some studies claimed that consuming political satire on television can improve audiences’ political efficacy and persuade them to be engaged in political issues. For example, by analysing the coverage of *The Daily Show*, Brewer and Marquardt (2007) suggested that the show has the potential to educate its viewers and encourage them to think critically about world events; Xenos and Beckers (2009) found that consuming political satire could create a “gateway effect”, in which audience are more likely to consume traditional news after watching such shows. Similarly, Becker and Bode (2017) found that long-form political satire could be beneficial to issue-specific knowledge gain, but they have noted that exposure to traditional news still plays an important role in such effect.

On the other hand, empirical evidences have shown that political satire have minimal or even adverse effects on political efficacy. Like Young and Tisinger (2006) have found, audiences of political satire shows are likely to be well-informed on political issues before watching them as they consume the news regularly, hence it would be difficult to learn something new out of them. Similarly, Baek and Wojcieszak (2009) found that while viewing late night television might enhance one’s political knowledge, the effect is limited to easier items and is only significant on those who are not politically attentive. Baumgartner and Morris (2008) studied the effect of *Colbert Report’s* satirical mockery of conservative talk shows, and they found that young viewers might not be able to fully understand the humour in the show. Instead of having more negative perception towards Republican politicians and the government, younger audiences have higher affinity towards them after watching the show. In addition, they suggested that consuming political satire programs might lead to a sense of political alienation among the audiences, thus dampening their participation. Other studies have found

that political ideology can significantly influence audience’s perception on the jokes on *Colbert Report*, where ambiguous messages might not be well-received (LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam, 2009). Meanwhile, scholars like Hart and Hartelius (2007) are more critical towards political satire. They argued that programs like *The Daily Show* are promoting cynicism towards the government and those with power, and Stewart is adopting cynicism as a rhetoric not only to “serve a dramatic purpose” (p.269), but also to attract younger audiences who find such rhetoric admirable. In summary, there is no single conclusion on the effects of political satire programs on its audiences, and the debate is likely to continue as the genre remains a staple of American late-night television.

2.3 Political satire and public journalism

Another major discussion over the role of political satire programs is whether they constitute as a form of journalism, especially at times where journalistic power and integrity have been questioned. Media critic and scholar David Rosen (1999) argues that the traditional notion of subjectivity and detachment in journalism have been largely ineffective in public engagement; Instead, the detachment can forbid participation of the public (Merritt, 1998). By introducing the concept of public journalism, Rosen (1999) aims to recover the press as a credible political institution, instead of an organization “outside the sphere of politics”. He believes that public journalists should be more explicit in “recognizing that others might hold competing core values, and might process the ideas through a different set of experiences and beliefs” (p.96). Rosen argues that it is pointless to keep journalism value-free, as audiences are capable of building their own ideologies and values, with or without journalists. Another principle of public journalism is that journalists should focus on the real problem of any issue, rather than the political gamesmanship behind it (Rosen, 1999; Faina, 2012). This could help the public to better understand and engage with current events. Similarly, Merritt (1998) suggests that journalists can engage with the public by focusing on an event’s impact on the community, rather than its political implications.

Scholars like Baym (2005) and Faina (2012) have argued that political satire shows are participating in new forms of public journalism. On one hand, Baym’s (2005) analysis on *the Daily Show* suggested that by interweaving two levels of discourse (news reporting and entertainment talk), the hybrid form of the program reinvents the idea of journalism as the show can simultaneously offer entertainment and serious political critique. He discourages labelling the show as “fake news” program, as it fails to acknowledge the show’s emerging role in delivering serious political communication. Through using satire to “interrogate power, parody to critique contemporary news, and dialogue to enact a model of deliberative democracy” (p.261), Baym believes that *the Daily Show* is practicing alternative journalism by integrating news and satire into a new form of discourse. On the other hand, Faina (2012) discussed that through using humour, *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* are practitioners of public journalism. Through their satire and parody, the two shows are improving the public by engaging people in current events at a deeper level. Both shows engage with the public by helping them realize their own perceived interests, as well engaging the audiences in political discussions with each other. Here humour functions as a journalistic device that produces a more concerned public. Through his analysis on Stewart’s interview on his show, Faina (2012) suggested that his discuss and deliberation can rehabilitate public discourse by asking questions from a citizen’s perspective. Meanwhile, Colbert’s parody of an ultra-conservative pundit provides not only a strong critique on framing in journalism, it also helps explain controversial issues to the public. Faina also argues that not only are the two shows offering political critiques and improving public engagement, they are also playing the greater role of media critics.

Apart from serving as public journalists, scholars like Dahlgren (2003) argued that new media has the power of rebuilding a civic culture that encourages political participation. The idea of civic culture treats citizens as social agents and questions how various cultural factors can influence their action and communication, thus impinging their roles and identity (p.152). Dahlgren further suggested that civic culture is necessary for democracy, and it is embedded

in everyday life practices and symbolic milieu which is heavily influenced by the media. Particularly, Dahlgren commented that there has been a generally low political knowledge among citizens, and one of the causes could be the media they consume. While remaining open on the media effects on civic culture, Dahlgren believed that the media can still play an influential role in shaping the society, by providing citizens the basic referential knowledge they need to stay engaged. While he did not directly address the genre or medium that can serve the roles he suggested, Dahlgren’s views had resonated with studies on the impact of political satire, which in turn implies the civic duties political satire can perform.

In recent years a new form of political satire program has appeared in the US and received much attention from the public. Comparing to *The Daily Show* and now-defunct *Colbert Report*, this new format, which Becker and Bode (2017) identified as “new political satire”, is more information-rich and in longer format. One of the target of this study, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* devotes a majority of its 30-minutes program to discuss one single issue on its weekly show; NBC’s late-night talk show *Late Night with Seth Meyers*’ signature segment “*A Closer Look*” spends 8 to 13 minutes per episode to discuss a current political issue in the US, and is aired almost every weeknight. The transition to long form political satire shows that instead of providing a brief discussion and a few punch lines, political satire shows are introducing in-depth investigations into their programs, thus further blurring the line between them and journalism.

Summarising all the above, historically satire has been a way to entertain the people while keeping them aware of the injustice around them. Meanwhile, political satire has taken the role up a notch by informing the public, which some studies have shown to have improved the viewer’s knowledge on current events. The new political satire format showed how comedy could be informative and assist in social learning (Becker and Bode, 2017), which reinvigorated the discussion on political satire as a form of journalism. The new genre followed by studies that largely focused on audience effects have left a blank on the research

of political satire TV programs, as the contents (texts) of these new programs have been hardly studied

3 RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

This study on new political satire aims to fulfil two goals: To offer a new perspective on studying political satire on television, and to revisit the arguments on political satire as a form of journalism. As I have pointed out earlier, studies on political satire shows in the US have been largely focusing on its effects on their audience, using empirical data to discuss their impact. This study will take an alternative angle by looking at the show themselves, in order to find out how their discourses were constructed to have any impact on their viewers. Meanwhile, the new political satire genre provides the opportunity to revisit the discussion on whether political satire shows are functioning as public journalists by informing and educating its audience. The aims of the study can be summarised into the following questions:

RQ 1. What are the characteristics of the discourse of new political satire shows?

RQ 2. Are new political satire shows performing the roles of public journalists?

RQ 2A. If so, what roles are they performing?

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To learn whether long-form political satire programs are fulfilling journalistic duties, this study will analyse the discourses of three political satire programs in the United States: *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers* and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*. This section will outline the methodology of this study and explain how the research sample is chosen.

4.1 Sample

To ensure the scope of this study is manageable yet representative, three of the current late night political satire programs from the US are chosen to be scrutinized for this study. They are chosen due to both their similarities and differences in terms of content and format, as well as convenience in sample collection.

4.1.1 Last Week Tonight with John Oliver

Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (hereafter, LWT) is aired on Sunday evenings on HBO, a subscription-based cable channel. Hosted by former *The Daily Show* correspondence John Oliver, the show differs significantly from the established format for political satire programs. As acknowledged by Oliver, airing on the weekend means that events occurred during the weekdays have already been covered by shows airing before them; hence *LWT* covers topics that are “off the grid” or more international than their weekday counterparts.⁵ For example, in the current season *LWT* has covered the Mexican and Italian elections extensively. In addition, the lack of commercial breaks on HBO means that *LWT* will have the full half hour to themselves, which allows the program to have longer and deeper discussion in their segments⁶. Primarily the show can be divided into three parts: An opening monologue, a transition comedic piece that replaces the commercials, and an in-depth investigative segment. Since the first two components are common in talk shows, this study will focus only on the final part. Ranging from 10 to nearly 30 minutes, the main part of the show covers different topic every week, from American politics to international events. Topics in the segment are not necessarily current events, and they could have little to no media attention in the country

⁵<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-johnoliver/for-daily-show-alum-oliver-last-week-is-fresh-turf-to-ruin-idUSBREA3F0SP20140422>

⁶ <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/04/22/5-things-to-know-about-last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver>

at all.⁷ Using satire and occasionally original findings, Oliver attempts to scrutinize the subject and explain its effects. Towards the end of the segment, Oliver often asks his audiences to take action through campaigns he launches, in which most of the time are directly mocking its real-life counterparts. For example, to demonstrate how easy it is for Televangelists to set up tax-exempted entities, Oliver created his own Church, Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption, to prove his point while donating proceeds to charity⁸. Airing the show on a subscription-based cable channel has limited *LWT*'s TV viewership, but by uploading the show's main segment to their official YouTube channel hours after its broadcast, the program has an immense presence on the internet and have captured worldwide audience. As of March 2018, the YouTube channel has gather over 1.4 billion views worldwide in four years⁹, and the shows most viewed segment has gathered over 33 million views. The channel also facilitates sample collection for this study, as the main segments are uploaded without any alterations and is viewable worldwide.

4.1.2 Full frontal with Samantha Bee

Another alumnus of *The Daily Show*, Samantha Bee created her own weekly political satire show in 2016. *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* (hereafter, *FF*) introduced the only female late-night talk show host into the arena, and the show has been described by critics as “the most mercilessly feminist show”¹⁰. While *FF* has a similar three-piece format like *The Daily Show*, the writing style and focus of the program is quite different. The writing of *FF* shows an orientation towards female viewers, where jokes are often linked to events that can better resonate with them. And as co-creator of the show Jo Miller described, while the show also

⁷ <https://www.vox.com/2016/2/14/10989154/john-oliver-last-week-tonight-season-3>

⁸ <https://www.mediaite.com/tv/john-oliver-one-ups-colbert-super-pac-by-creating-his-own-tax-exempt-church/>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/user/LastWeekTonight/about>

¹⁰ <https://www.wired.com/2017/03/full-frontal-assault/>

discusses politics, *FF* focuses on its injustice rather hypocrisy, which can be justified by the show’s segment such as an investigation on the insufficient medical services for female veterans.¹¹ After the show is broadcasted every week, segments are uploaded to its official YouTube channel, which as of May 2018 has over 800,000 subscribers and over 290 million total views¹².

4.1.3 Late Night with Seth Meyers

Meanwhile, *Late Night with Seth Meyers* (hereafter, *LNSM*) is a traditional weekday late-night show aired on NBC. Started in February 2014 (just two months before *LWT*), the show did not have a strong focus on politics until mid-2015, when Jon Stewart retired from *The Daily Show* and the 2016 US election cycle commenced¹³. As the previous anchor and head writer of *Weekend Update*, the mock-the-news segment of *Saturday Night Live*, Meyers introduced a heavier presence of political material onto his show. The most prominent example of this is the introduction of *A Closer Look*, a segment that has eventually become the signature of *LNSM*. Unlike the main segment *LWT*, *A Closer Look* focuses mostly on American politics, particularly the Trump presidency. But the two segments are similar in terms of format: Using existing news clips, the host satirises politicians by pointing out the absurdity of the actions and explain how certain policies could have negative effects on the public. In terms of online presence, *LNSM* regularly uploads the show in segments to their YouTube channel hours after its broadcast. With over 800 million total views, the most watched *A Closer Look* segment has over 4 million views, but is nowhere near the most view videos in the channel.¹⁴

¹¹ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/television/john-doyle-samantha-bee-shifts-late-night-comedic-style-to-full-frontal/article28111884/>

¹² https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC18vz5hUUqxbGvym9ghtX_w/about

¹³ <http://www.vulture.com/2015/06/seth-meyers-political-kingmaker.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/user/LateNightSeth/about>

4.2 Sampling method

Given the number of episodes of the shows, analysing them in full would be impossible. Hence only a sample of the shows are picked to study their discourses and functions.

Before picking the sample, the timeframe is first defined. Since the three shows have commenced at a different time, the starting point of the sampling period is defined by the show with the latest date of debut. In this case the starting point should be February 2016, when *FF* broadcasted its first show. All of the three shows have gone through significant changes in their first month of broadcast, hence episodes from this period will not be considered and the sampling episode will start in March 2016. Finally, as *LWT* airs only between February until November, the sampling period will end on November 2017, which ensure that all three shows have a similar number of episodes in the sample. After defining the sampling period, episodes are gathered from their respective official YouTube channels and their themes or topic are noted down before they are screened for the final sample. Meanwhile, episodes outside of the sampling period which are found to be useful for the discussion have also been remarked.

While the shows’ official YouTube channels have made data gathering easier, it does not guarantee a complete set of data. For *LWT*, as the episode list has been documented online, it is easy to compare with the show’s channel to see if any episodes are missing or incomplete. In fact, not all shows, especially the early episodes in season 1 and the last few episodes of season 2 have been uploaded to the channel,. For *LNSM*, data completeness verification is hardly possible, as there are no records on the episodes where *A Closer Look* was featured. Hence we can only assume that the official YouTube channel has provided the complete set of data; but the time gaps between episodes have invalidated the assumption.

As discussed above, *LWT* has a distinctly different format and style from the two other shows, hence a sample that can help us to compare the differences and similarities between *LWT* and the two shows is built. After gathering the sample data, the sample of *LNSM* and *FF* is reduced

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by only keeping segments that share similar themes with a *LWT* episode, which the samples are paired up for the analysis. Five pairs of samples are thus generated, which consists of segments from five *LWT*, three *LNSM* and two *FF* episodes. This sample consists of episodes with five topics: Texas abortion law reform, repealing of Obamacare, National Budget, Trump’s Russia scandal and North Korea missile crisis in 2017. By including local, national and international issues, this sample can help us better understand how different events are portrayed and satirised by the three hosts. The sample can be summarized into the following table:

Pair	Episode of LNSM/ FF	Aired date	Episode of LWT	Aired date
1	<u>Texas abortion case (LNSM)</u>	4/3/16	<u>Abortion</u>	21/2/16
2	<u>Trump and healthcare plans (FF)</u>	15/3/17	<u>American Health Care Act</u>	13/3/17
3	<u>Trump’s budget plan (FF)</u>	22/3/17	<u>Federal budget</u>	19/3/17
4	<u>Trump’s interference on Flynn’s indictment (LNSM)</u>	16/5/17	<u>“Stupid Watergate” (Alleged Russian interference)</u>	21/5/17
5	<u>Trump’s twitter attack on North Korea (LNSM)</u>	9/8/17	<u>2017 North Korea crisis</u>	13/8/17

Table 1: Paired samples for analysis

4.3 Research methods

To analyse the texts, a two-step analysis is used to understand them and study how satire is used to discuss social matters.

4.3.1 Thematic analysis

After screening through the transcripts, a thematic analysis will first be employed to provide a simple categorisation of contents. The texts are categorised based on their functions: To satirise elites or social phenomenon, to provide facts or background information, to state the host’s opinion or to suggest possible action to the audience. This will lead to the second step of the study, where a critical discourse analysis will be conducted to further investigate the functions of the texts and discuss their implications.

4.3.2 Discourse analysis

Unlike most research methods with specific procedures, discourse analysis is more versatile, and it often requires interdisciplinary approaches, drawing theories from different areas to provide a better understanding of discourses. Van Dijk (2001) argued that due to the complexity of social activities studied by the method, it is necessary to use multiple theories to address the intricate relations between language, power, society and culture. While the field of discourse analysis offers the researcher a greater extent of freedom to design the study, it could be time-consuming for the researcher and confusing for the reader to create a tailor-made approach to the discourses in this study. Hence critical discourse analysis is chosen as the framework for the analysis.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a method designed for understanding complex social phenomenon through the study of discourses in texts (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). As Habermas (1989) described, language is not only a means to exercise power but also a site of competing representations. Discourse is thus a way to represent reality through languages, which in turn shapes how people interpret the world around them. Like Chouliaraki (2008) explained, the

media plays a crucial role in delivering discourses by creating a representation of the world and “orient us towards other in this world” (p.694). Hence in order to understand how languages shape the behaviour and our society, it is crucial to study how media discourses function, and CDA is an adequate method to fulfil the aims of this study. Viewing discourses as a form of social practice, CDA is conditioned to study representations of the world through analysing how power relations are represented in languages (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Through analysing media texts, CDA aims to enlighten people by revealing the dominating powers and their struggles in society (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). Fairclough (1993) created a three-dimensional framework for CDA, which can better scrutinize the function of different language techniques in delivering political satire. Fairclough (1993) explained that a *discursive event* is formed by three dimensions: the *text* itself, the *discourse practices* that are used when producing or interpreting the texts, and how the text reflects *social practices*. The analysis of *text* includes their linguistic features, such as vocabulary and grammar; the analysis of *discourses practices* focuses on “the sociocognitive aspects of text production and interpretation” (Fairclough, 1993; 136), which involves studying how participants of the discursive events interpret and respond to the texts. Finally, the analysis of *social practices* focuses on the wider societal context the text represents and reflects. Following this framework, the analysis will study how satire and political commentary functions in the selected texts.

4.4 Limitations and reflexivity

While CDA can serve as a tool to analysis the construction of power and social relations in discourses, it has its limitations, particularly the subjectivity of the findings. As Morgan (2010) argued, meanings in texts are often subjective and open for interpretation, hence interpretation bias is likely to happen, and it is difficult to come up with findings of strong external validity. Scholars like Ang (1989) and Breeze (2011) also suggested that CDA ignores focusing on audience reception, which could be problematic as the subjectivity on text interpretation could

lead to a completely different reading between the researcher and the audience. Despite this, it should be emphasised that the study is focusing on how discourses were articulated in texts, rather than an investigation on how the audience receives it. However, this also creates an opportunity on further studies, which shall be discussed when I conclude the study.

Following the argument on CDA and its lack of subjectivity, the researcher’s choice of sample could significantly influence the findings as well. As Rose (2001) had described, researchers might subjectively select data that are most likely to support the hypothesis or research questions. Indeed, when designing the study, the choice of data and the level of convenience during data collection have been put into consideration, but the rigorous sample screening and pairing have ensured the study to produce a comparable result through a carefully picked sample. The final sample included three prominent new political satire programs, covering national and international topics through their own style of discourses; such representative sample can serve as the basis of a comprehensive study on the genre.

5 ANALYSIS

5.1 Thematic analysis

Before conducting the critical discourse analysis, a thematic analysis was first carried out to help categorise the text, understand its structure and identify similarities or any points of interests in the sample. Six aspects of each sample is highlighted, which includes (1) Satirizing fallacies of elites/politicians/ organizations, (2) Satirizing media practices, (3) Satirizing social behaviours, (4) Explaining facts/ history (e.g. policies), (5) Opinion of satirist and (6) Call for action.

5.1.1 Satire

First, as the main component in the genre, satirical content of each show and their style of discourse were identified. For Seth Meyers, his “A Closer Look” segment focused mostly on

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issues related to the current administration, especially the President. In the earlier days the segment focused mostly on general social issues that are slightly less politicized than what has been covered today. As shown in the samples, latter segments (Sample pair 4 and 5) are mostly targeting events in Washington, particularly President Trump and his aides. The segment integrated the traditional comedy style (context of events followed by punchline) with facts to satirise political events.

Turning to Samantha Bee’s show, her jokes were more politically balanced than Meyers’ and were aiming towards feminine audiences. While Meyers’ jokes are targeted towards members of the GOP, Bee makes fun of people from both sides in the same issue. For example, while she mocked Trump’s response to the failure of Obamacare repeal, she also made fun of Nancy Pelosi’s somewhat absurd celebration of the failure. As the only female late-night talk show host, some of Bee’s remarks are clearly orienting towards female audiences. From comparing Trump to a man trying to hook up with women in bars to (Sample Pair 2) saying Republican’s support to Trump is like a poorly designed bra (Pair 3), some of the jokes can resonate better with female watchers, who might be seeking a more feminine voice in the masculine arena of late-night talk shows.

Oliver’s style of satire was more diverse than the two other hosts, particularly in the way he concludes his show. At the end of each shows, Oliver either concludes with (1) a call for action, (2) a more “symbolic” conclusion and (3) revealing the show’s response to the topic discussed. In the episode about the presidential budget (pair 2), Oliver concluded by showing how Trump contradicted with his own words from the book *The Art of the Deal*, thus suggesting that his supporters would turn on him when they realized they could be harmed by the budget; this conclusion falls in the first category. In the episode on abortion (pair 1), Trump asked those who are strongly pro-life to avoid watching the main segment but returning for the ending, in which he brought out a sloth dressed in pajamas. Using the popularity of sloths on the internet, Oliver used this conclusion to suggest that even people’s view on abortion

could be different, there must be some common ground to open up discussions; this ending falls into the second category. Finally, many of the conclusions that have went viral on the internet fall in the last category. In our sample, it includes the catheter cowboy ad that airs on Fox News to explain healthcare for Trump (pair 3) and the accordion song about North Korea by “Weird” Al Yancovic (pair 5). Conclusions in this category often have created real life impact, from media attention on the topic discussed that week to actual change in policies.

5.1.2 Show format

Moving on to the shows’ format, Meyers’ *A Closer Look* satirises political issues in the country and explains topics that might be somewhat complex to the views. Ranging from four to over ten minutes, Meyers provides his take on current events through satire and social commentary. Meanwhile, comparing to her male counterparts in the sample, Bee’s show doesn’t offer in-depth discussion on impacts and implications of political events. As shown in both samples, Bee summarized and satirized events happened in the past week by adding her observations and jokes.

For John Oliver, his show differed significantly from others in terms of format, style and aims. Rather than focusing on a series of events, Oliver’s show usually starts with a broader topic (The 4th sample, “Stupid Watergate”, is still a rare find on the show, as it is the only program so far that scrutinized events from the past week). In terms of format, *LNSM* and *FF* follows a conventional structure established by *The Daily Show*, while *LWT* established its own format of presentation. The main segment of *LWT* is often divided into three parts, which as Oliver has described, “...What the fuck is going on, how big a deal is this and where do we go from here” (Pair 4). For a segment that often runs over 20 minutes, a clearer format is needed as it is essential to fulfil the aim of the show: To help people understand the matter at hand. If the show follows the conventional comedy format like Bee and Meyers do, it would be hard not only for the audience to comprehend, but also produce difficulties of writing as it is virtually impossible to frequently include punchlines when summarizing facts and regulations. While

the show only airs once a week, it goes beyond summarizing what happened last week by providing lecture-like comedy that both entertains and educates its audience. Assuming the audience to be interested but ill-informed in the topic of the episode, the first part (What the fuck is going on) provides the necessary knowledge for one to understand the episode, and jokes appear relatively more frequently in order to capture the people’s interest. After that, Oliver goes in-depth in explaining the impact of the topic and will it relate to the audience. For example, in the 2nd pair of sample, Oliver explained how American Health Care Act will work if it is passed, and how people under different scenarios could be harmed by the repeal of Obamacare. By drawing in real situations that people can relate to, not only can this help them understand the issue at hand, it also stimulates them to react to it.

5.1.3 Comedic style

When formulating their jokes, all three shows had used pop culture references significantly, which serves to resonate with different groups of audience and punchlines. All three hosts have used references from different eras to connect with a variety of demographics: For Samantha Bee, her Thelma and Louise and less explicit President Ford references (Pair 2) clearly aims at the female and older audience groups respectively; while Seth Meyers’ Olive Garden (Pair 1) and Starbucks (Pair 5) reference aims at a broader American audience. These references can help attract certain groups of audience as they feel relevant towards the topic of the shows. However, those who are less media savvy or have not lived in the US before might be confused by the references due to cultural differences, hence it’s possible that they’re unable to get some of the jokes. In addition, allusions have been used extensively and will be discussed in the CDA.

5.2 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

Through Fairclough’s (1993) three-dimensional framework for CDA, this section will analyse the sample from three perspectives. First through the *text* itself, which will point out and

compare the choice of linguistic devices between the three shows. Then the *discourse practices* in the sample will be identified, as I discuss the characteristics of new political satire and the interaction between hosts and viewers. Finally, I will discuss how each show’s discourses resonate with the change and trend in *social practices*, as well as whether political satire is taking up more serious roles in the media.

5.2.1 Text

For this set of sample, the analysis of the text focuses on how jokes and satirical devices were constructed in discourses, in order to entertain the viewers. Through the thematic analysis, it can be observed that two literary devices had been used commonly in the discourses of all three hosts: Allusions and pop culture references.

As a comedy and commentary technique, allusions and similes have been used extensively by the three comedians. The primary functions of these literary techniques are to implicitly or explicitly compare two objects that are in some ways similar to each other, which gives the audience a better understanding to ideas they’re not familiar with. allusions and similes mainly serve two functions in *the texts*: to illustrate or to entertain. The events used to compare with the target of the text does not have to be realistic in either case, as long as they can resonate with the audience.

For the former function, allusions in the sample can be used to problems with policy designs or wrongdoings of the elites. When Meyers explained why the current requirement for abortions in Texas is unreasonable, he compared it with the need to travel long-distance to see a doctor to get an approval for masturbation (pair 1). While the comparison sounds hilarious to the audience, it illustrated the barriers a Texas woman can face to complete a simple non-surgical treatment. It is also worth noting that without the allusion, female audiences would have already understood the frustration of the law; and as shown by the quotes Meyers’ have used, those who have voiced their concern on the law reform have been overwhelmingly

feminine. But with Meyers’ comparison that clearly targeted male audiences, it could ensure that both sides can have a similar level of understanding towards the issue and can get a good laugh out of it.

On the same issue, John Oliver took a different discursive strategy to illustrate the absurdity of the law reform. When observing how officials have been continuously claiming the law reform is for the women’s benefits, he alluded with having a “DEFINITELY NOT PORN” folder on a computer’s desktop (pair 1). Through the comparison, Oliver pointed out that the insistence had made their motives even more suspicious, and they had merely addressed people’s concern over the law reform. Oliver’s allusion is more relatable as it could be a real-life situation, as it compared the hypocrisy of politicians with a terrible attempt of hiding actions that are deemed socially unacceptable and too socially awkward to discuss. From the reaction of the live audiences, both allusions have been well received, but it could be worth investigating how hypothetical and more realistic allusions could be received differently or have different level of influence on the audiences’ understanding of a complex issue.

Meanwhile, allusions can also come in the form of references, which compare real life events to cultural artefacts. As Samantha Bee demonstrated, she compared the results of Obamacare repeal with the widely-known final scene of *Thelma and Louise*, where the protagonists drove off Grand Canyon and fell to their death to dodge police pursuit (pair 2). Bee alluded to way Democrats won as if the way police have won the chase: while their goals are reached, their effort have almost nothing to do with the result. Bee also compared Thelma and Louise to Trump and Paul Ryan, who are the key players in the repeal. Through the segment Bee did not explicitly explain what she’s alluding to, hence it has been assumed that the audiences were either familiar or have a basic idea what she’s referring to. Either way the reference served as an alternative portrayal of the Obamacare repeal, and an explanation on the results for those who are not familiar with the news. It should be noted that Bee’s interpretation of the scene in her allusion is almost the opposite of its common interpretation. Despite their

subsequent deaths, the protagonists are usually seen as the “winners” as they have liberated themselves; while the cops, who failed to arrest the duo are the “losers” and antagonists throughout the movie. In Bee’s allusion, the roles of the antagonists and protagonists had been reversed: To portray Trump and Ryan, Bee alluded them to Thelma and Louise’s reckless and suicidal acts, while the Democrats were the police enforcing the law. As the comparison went against how most people interpret the movie, it could be debateable whether Bee had chosen the right object to allude to. Still, in the late-night television dominated by men, referencing a landmark film representing feminism can resonate with Bee’s target feminine audience by comparing a matter to something that recognizes their values. The complexity of politics and time limitations have created a barrier for political satire programs to provide a full explanation on the events they will discuss for the segment, hence these allusions can come in handy as they can in some ways inform the audience while keeping the content entertaining.

As seen in different forms of comedy, the common function of allusions is to make people laugh. By making hypothetical or exaggerated allusions, these allusions have greater comedic than educational value than allusions for explaining matters. In his program John Oliver have used these kind of allusions or similes extensively, and they often span beyond one punchline. Notable examples include his self-deprecating comparison of the chances of dying from abortion to the chances of his very specific and embarrassing death (sample pair 1), to comparing Tucker Carlson’s remarks on Trump’s Russian scandal with a toddler walking in to his parents “69-ing” (pair 4). All these allusions do not provide the audience with new knowledge, as they self the sole function to make them laugh. One worth noting point is that when the comedians in the sample make a comedic allusion, pictures resembling the alluded situation are shown simultaneously on screen. The visualization in some sense saved the audience’s time to imagine the scenario, and it can strengthen the comedic impact of the joke.

5.2.2 Discourse practices

The most notable feature of the discourse of new political satire is the use of information to support jokes and arguments. Combining with the different discourse style of the three hosts, the sample showed how political satire programs are not merely mocking politics, but also influencing or even educating the audience.

One of the features of new political satire programs is the heavier presence of facts, information and expert opinion. In the samples the three shows have taken different ways to present them and combine them with comedy materials. For Seth Meyers, soundbites of politicians or reporters from television news were used extensively during his segments. Before or after showing them, Meyers normally summarised the shown media content. Besides from providing information to the ill-informed audience, these news reports were also used as build-ups to jokes or Meyers’ satirical comments. For example, Meyers often quote Trump’s words not only to let his audiences understand the situation, but also mocking either his comments or posture in the soundbite. In Bee’s program, facts and information were mostly for explaining context of the situation rather than for laughs. John Oliver took a similar approach like Meyers in using news clips, which they are used for both comedic and information purposes. A common theme shared by Oliver and Meyers is their use of quotes from experts of the subject matter. For instance, in the first pair of sample both shows quoted comments from numerous experts that are stakeholders in the Texas abortion law reform debate. For Meyers, he placed his focus on the legislation, and he quoted opinion such as current Supreme Court Justices and Senators to support his argument on why the law is placing women in jeopardy. On the other hand, in a much longer segment Oliver analysed both the politicians’ responses to the law and the possible impact the law could have on the state’s abortion services, and the focus is placed on the latter topic. By quoting abortion clinic owners and staffs, Oliver illustrated the absurdity of the law reform and how it could affect women in the state who needs to undergo abortions. The quotes made by the two hosts play two main functions: to support their arguments and to provide vivid illustrations of the

absurdity. As talk show hosts Oliver and Meyers might have a broad audience like the news do, their lack of journalistic background and well-recognised role as comedians could create barriers when it comes to persuading the audience. Using soundbites or quotes in their segments can help the talk show hosts to display that they are well-informed in the issue that they are commenting on, which can enhance the persuasiveness of their arguments and show that they could be as credible as network news pundits do.

In the studied segments of all three shows, they are delivered through the host’s monologue and commentary. While the format is similar, the way they addressed the audience and assumed their roles are quite different. For Meyers and Bee, they rarely directly address the audience and mostly speak as a commentator in third-person. Though it’s not difficult to spot their opinion on the matters they discussed in the segments, both hosts only provide their observation and opinion in their monologues, as if they’re sharing their views with the audiences. However, as the audiences are addressed as “we”, the two hosts assume themselves to be part of the audience, in the sense that they have similar views on the topic and have followed the news like they did. Even the hosts have made their opinion explicit, they never urged or request their viewers to completely agree with what they think. For example, even Meyers have targeted Trump extensively in his jokes, he never explicitly asked his viewers to despise him (even they’re quite likely to do so without watching Meyers’ segment). On the contrary, John Oliver often directly addresses his audiences and makes his opinion on matters explicit. Directly addressing the audiences as “you”, Oliver possesses himself to be more knowledgeable than his average viewers as he explains various complex issues to them. From the episode on abortion (pair 1), we can observe how Oliver was aware of his target audience, to the point that he asks those who are the minority and don’t share the same views to watch something else. What’s more, he further criticized those who are strongly opposed to abortions by asking them “what the fuck is wrong with you?”, which showed how Oliver actively recognizes his target audiences by alienating those who are not. A major difference of Oliver’s show from the other two is its engagement with the audiences. While all

three programs satirize current events, Oliver’s show goes a step further by telling its audience why they should think about the matter and what action they should take. From the Stupid Watergate episode (pair 4), Oliver concluded the show by reminding his viewers not to feel numb about the scandal and to stay hopeful that politics in Washington can return to normal soon; meanwhile, when covering the same issue, Meyers’ conclusion is less reflective and more general, as he suggested GOP members to take actions. This brief comparison shows the directness of Oliver, who to certain extent instruct his audiences to reflect and respond to the issue. This can be linked to a broader discussion on the roles of the three different hosts, which will be discussed in the next section.

5.2.3 Social practice

While all the three shows in the sample covers political events through comedy and satire, their differences in the style of discourses reflects different issues in the society and how each of these shows utilized them. Particularly, their discourses revealed how each show aims for different groups of audiences.

For John Oliver, the long-form satire from the main segment of his show has arguably shown elements of investigative journalism. Putting the jokes aside, the LWT episodes chosen for the sample covered complex issue inside or outside of the US, which usually started with an explanation of the background. Evidently this part is for those who are ill-informed or uninitiated in the issues, which helps generating their interest in the show or provide the essential pre-requisite knowledge to understand it. As discussed earlier in the literature review, while satirists have the power to inform the audience, audience should already possess interest or knowledge in the satirised matter in order to understand the material. What Oliver had done was seemingly different from what his former boss Jon Stewart had suggested, as he was trying to talk to the ill-informed audience as well. From the explanatory allusions to satirical remarks, Oliver’s show had been attempting to educate those who do not consume the news regularly. In other words, the relationship between Oliver and his viewers is

somewhat like a lecturer- student one: Oliver performs his monologue and educate the viewers what he believes is important, while the audience receive his information and learn what can be done to change the situation. While the jokes and obscene remarks have made it impossible to qualify this show as a journalistic program, the way satire, information and opinion intertwined in *LWT* and its reception has led to the question on whether the show and the genre can shape social relations and public opinion like the news do.

On the contrary, Seth Meyers’ more conventional style of satire was aiming towards more general group of viewers. Given the time and format constraint, Meyers’ segment was unable to go in-depth on a certain topic and explain complicated issues to its viewers. Instead, what we can observe from *A Closer Look* is a stronger emphasis on providing commentary than information. From the extensive use of media materials and expert opinion, there’s no doubt that information still had a significant presence in this satirical segment. However, what makes it stand out is Meyers’ critical comments interlaced with jokes and satirical remarks. From the sample we learned that *A Closer Look* mostly targets the Trump administration, with Meyers relentless attacking the President and his aides. Comparing Meyers’ style of discourse with Oliver’s, the latter has a “stronger” message in which the audience are being told explicitly what’s wrong with an issue and why they should be aware of it. For Meyers, he identified and satirised the problems of the administration, but for most of the time the audience are left to draw their own conclusion. Meyers’ role is more of a conventional satirist, in which he pointed out made fun of absurdities in politics. But rather than telling his viewers to take certain action, they are left to come up with their own reflection on the issue. While Meyers and his show have displayed a clear political orientation, different groups of target audience could have slightly different opinion on the same issue. In a highly fragmented society, it is strategically wiser to avoid further diversifying the audience by providing a specific solution, especially considering that *LNSM* can be watched freely in the whole country. In short, *A Closer Look* discussed and satirised political issues from a perspective of a Democrat, but viewers were given the freedom to draw their own conclusion from Meyer’s viewpoint and materials.

Samantha Bee’s discourse is a combination of her two male counterparts in the sample, and her show bears the significant role of bringing in a feminine perspective into the late-night arena. From the choice of jokes and style of presentation, we can see how Bee’s show was simultaneously aiming at a broad and specific group of audience. Like *LNSM*, *FF* also targets a more general group of audience who either has known or has interest in the satirised current events, which is shown by the show’s focus on satire rather than informing the watchers. Such style coincides with traditional satire programs such as *The Daily Show* and Weekend Update of *Saturday Night Live*. As discussed earlier, the choice of jokes of *FF* revealed its target on younger and female audience. Using satire materials that can better resonate with female viewers, Bee’s discourse represents a more feministic side of late night television. While gender-specific figures were not available, in its first two seasons the show’s viewership had increased by 175%¹⁵, which proved the popular demand and reception of Bee’s style of discourse. Using one-liners or jokes that compare absurdities in the political world to the daily lives and struggles of women, Bee talked to the female audience who have felt under-represented on late night television. While Meyers also used jokes that target a specific gender, its function is different from Bee’s jokes. Seth’s jokes in the segment on abortion law generates the empathy needed for men to understand the struggle of women, which in turn ensuring both gender can have a similar level of understanding towards the issue. For Bee, her female-oriented jokes created a sense of group identity that has hardly existed in shows on the same time slot. Late night programs have been dominated by male hosts since its creation, and these shows tend to aim towards male audiences. Through establishing the rapport and throwing jokes that are more relatable to the female viewers, Bee’s program has recognised the large group of audience that has been left unsatisfied with the conventional late-night line up. For decades female late-night talk show hosts have hardly succeeded in the US, and Bee’s success

¹⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/careypurcell/2017/11/09/how-feminist-rage-moved-samantha-bee-to-the-top-of-late-night-tv/#6f69e9095a43>

have hinted a change not only in the time slot’s demographics, but also the market for a feminine voice in political satire.

6 DISCUSSION

The analysis of the three comedians’ performances have given us a better sense of how their work simultaneously entertains and informs its audience in different ways. In this section, I will discuss the roles and impacts of these political satire programs, as well as attempting to answer the research questions stated earlier.

6.1 Roles of the host

While it’s evident that the three performers in the sample have entertained the public with their monologues or commentaries, the roles they fulfilled is beyond simply a comedian.

To start with, by reflecting on and mocking current events, the comedians have taken up the role as satirists. As discussed in the literature review earlier, the function of satire is to serve as social commentary while point out and attack the violation of social norms by the powerful and elites (Grey et al., 2009); in the samples we see how the three comedians discussed political events and explicitly those who are in power. From Seth Meyers’ constant attack on Donald Trump’s competency and absurd manner to Samantha Bee’s commentary on the GOP’s failure to repeal Obamacare, they have pointed out the absurdities in what’s happening in the country by making fun of it. But what draws comedians and satirists apart is the latter’s role in making social commentaries.

Aside from entertaining the audience, hosts of new political satire shows have been trying to educate them as well, with John Oliver being the most evident one. Contrary to the findings of empirical studies, through Oliver’s discourses we can see that the audience is sometimes expected to know nothing about the satirised topic. Although the show explicitly appeals to audiences with certain political views (e.g. the abortion episode), the lecture-like structure of

the show kept the audience engaged by inserting comedic or explanatory allusions, which can help them better understand the problem at hand and get some laughs out of it. The one-way relationship between Oliver and his viewers, in which the former almost instructs the latter on what they should believe or do, had shown how the show is trying to educate the uninitiated.

While the discourses of Bee’s and Meyers’ shows are closer to social commentary, they do not merely comment on or criticise current events. Both shows have devoted a significant portion on explaining “why it matters”, which is a key feature of new political satire shows. Aside from the use of information and facts, the jokes in the materials are often assisting in explaining ideas. From the discourse analysis we can see how allusions served as both comic relief and a tool for elaboration. Rather than adopting a stronger tone like Oliver, Bee and Meyers attempted to persuade their viewers by first explaining the situation, followed by a satirical commentary on the issue, before stating their views towards the end of the segment. Regardless of the style of their discourses, we can see how new political satire shows placed the emphasis on explaining things, rather than simply political comedy.

6.2 New political satire and public journalism

With a heavier presence of information and the satirists taking up additional roles, is the new format of political satire getting closer to journalistic reports?

The introduction of new political satire shows and the changing perceptions on journalism have brought the discussion back with new arguments. On one hand, journalists and news anchors in the US have been gradually losing their respect and prestige. When Pew (2010) compared its findings on the most admired news figure in the country the past 25 years, fewer people were able to name their favourite journalists; by 2010, over half of the respondents were able to answer the question. Meanwhile, political satire has maintained its audience and impact, as another Pew research done in 2014 showed that *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* had earned an overall higher level of trust than traditional media like *The New Yorker* and

Bloomberg, as well as conservatives’ favourite personalities like Sean Hannity. As Jones (2009) suggested, media framing on the Iraq war and the financial market crisis in 2009 contributed to the decreasing trust towards journalists and fragmentation of media choices, but the change seems to be expedited after 2016. During and after his presidential election campaign, Donald Trump’s constant claim of “fake news” and his aides’ choice of “alternative facts” have resulted in scepticism towards traditional media. While left-leaning media such as CNN and New York Times have become regular targets of the president, his active endorsement of right-wing media and personalities have not improved their credibility either. But still, this has created a polarised view towards the media. By 2017 the divided perception on journalists’ watchdog roles had become evident: A Pew research showed that nearly 90 percent of Democrats believed the journalists are performing their duties as the fourth state, while only 42 percent of Republicans agreed. This marked the greatest margin of difference since the study commenced in 1985, and the margin was a mere 4 percent when the study was conducted the previous year. As Haugerud (2013) explained, people rely on news media to help understand and imagine their nation. When the audience perceived the media as unable to perform their duties, they turned to other power that can hold the elites accountable and point out social injustice. And this is where new political satirists came in to take over.

Through the critical discourse analysis, we can see how new political satire shows are getting closer towards journalistic reports. Aside from the evident presence of facts and information, the satirists in the sample have spent a significant portion of their show explaining complex matter through satire. From Bee’s explaining how removing financial support for the Energy Star program could lead to potential blackouts to Meyers’ summarising the Trump campaign’s collusion with Russia, new political satirists are attempting to clarify matters that are either too intricate or things that news media do not have the time and space to explain. Rather than simply cracking jokes on the expense of current events, these satirists took a step further and explain what’s wrong with it and why the viewers should care. By mocking the current administration and explaining how injustice can be created through law reform and new

legislations, the satirists are lecturing the audience in their own ways. From Meyers and Bee’s commentary to Oliver’s clearly structured and informative satire, late night political satire shows are appealing to those who wish to seek an alternative voice to present them the news, or even to enlighten them on complex issues or news that are left out by the mainstream media.

Meanwhile, despite being creative and entertaining, the area that could be covered by new political satire programs and the impact it could have on the audience remains in question. To start with, previous studies on the effects of political satire had shown mixed results, and the trend is likely to continue to the new genre. Like Young and Tisinger (2006) had pointed out, political satire shows mostly attract those who are interested in current events or share similar views with the host or the show itself. In other words, it would be difficult to broaden the show’s audience as it has a pre-requisite for its viewers. This issue has echoed with the “mutual understanding” between the satirist and the audience that Knight (2004) had described, which is essential in order for satire to work. Those who are media-savvy or share the same political views are more likely to watch and agree with the show, while those who are uninterested will remain the same.

Besides, the information, facts or expert opinion in these shows are usually not original work. Many of the facts that either serve as a background for a joke or evidence to support arguments rely on existing media reports. For example, had it not been the existing reports on North Korea, Oliver would not be able to elaborate on the current humanitarian crisis in the country. In addition, the ability to provide facts and figures to support their views are critical to building the satirist’s knowledgeable and reliable image. This again show how the inclusion of information makes new political satire different from the original genre: Without any soundbites or quotes to back their jokes or views, satirists are just making fun of the news. One might argue that new political satire shows can have their own team of journalists and producers to provide the material, but in terms of production cost that would be almost impossible. As such, for new political satire to thrive, they still have to rely on existing

journalistic works; even when political satirists can come up with new perspectives, professional reports will always be the foundation for their materials.

6.3 Political Satire and Public Sphere

Through their semi-pedagogic roles and informative content, satirists have the potential to educate the people by equipping them to participate in public spheres. In Dahlgren’s (2003) idea of civic culture, knowledge plays an integral part as it helps people to understand and be interested in what’s happening around them. Due to the differences between educational levels or critical thinking ability, different forms of knowledge are needed for people from various background. With its unique style of discourse, new political satire shows have the potential to impart knowledge to some groups of viewers, particularly those who are less educated or find conventional news boring. The discourse analysis revealed how the satirists attempted to unpack political issues and legislations with satire and comedy, which created a more entertaining take on the news and provided a summarised version of what’s happening.

As I have discussed in the introduction, new political satire shows have been making changes in real life, as they have mobilised their viewers to take actions. For example, John Oliver managed to raise attention on net neutrality, a topic that captured little to no general interest before his show discussed the topic. While more evidence are needed before discussing to what extent did *LWT* contributed to the amount and intensity of campaigns against the FCC’s actions, it nevertheless showed how the genre could open new public spheres and stimulate social movements. To identify the magnitude of impact new political satire has on public discussions, further empirical studies are needed to study to what extent the genre have stimulated discussions on the topic in public spaces, including social media.

7 CONCLUSION

By satirising current events and explaining complex ideas to their audiences, political satirists have used their discourse to entertain and educate the public at the same time. In this study I have discussed how new political satire separates itself from its older format. From its heavier feature of information to its growing pedagogic role, it showed the versatility and impact this format could create on its viewers. Satirists are no longer merely entertainers, as they comment on current events, educating the audience on different matters and reminding them why they should care about it. Through the critical discourse analysis, we can see how the three satirists kept the public informed using their own language and style, as they deliver a humorous yet realistic version of reality to their viewers. The line between comedy and journalism might have become more opaque, but the change in comedic discourses and audience taste is pretty evident.

Satirists might have a greater freedom in formulating their discourses when discussing current events, but that could come with consequences as well. For John Oliver, his episode on the coal industry in the US had led to a defamation case launched by coal tycoon Bob Murray, who Oliver mocked extensively in the episode. The case was soon dismissed by the West Virginia Circuit Court, in which the judge argued that Oliver’s program was based on facts and satire, thus making the case “beyond meritless”¹⁶. Meanwhile, Samantha Bee was forced to apologise after calling Ivanka Trump a “feckless cunt” when discussing the immigration issues in the US on her program¹⁷. Bee’s comments was heavily condemned by White House officials¹⁸, while comedian and Bee’s previous boss Jon Stewart argued that she should not

¹⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2018/02/26/a-coal-exec-sued-john-oliver-for-calling-him-a-geriatric-dr-evil-a-judge-tossed-the-case/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d0d2a76db083

¹⁷ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/samantha-bee-calls-out-ivanka-trump_us_5b0f8d95e4b0fcd6a833715d

¹⁸ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/31/politics/samantha-bee-ivanka-trump/index.html>

have backed down¹⁹. On one hand this shows how political satirists could face criticisms and legal consequences for what they said; on the other hand, the identity of a satirist has given them the tool to blur the line between jokes and serious reporting, which is also reflected in their discourses.

Seeing the popularity of new political satire in the US, it is worth wondering what makes people turn away from conventional news source to current events told by a comedian. However, this will require further empirical studies on the effects of this new genre, comparing it to the old ones and further studies to help create a new dialogue and a clearer picture.

In a time where journalists’ works are downplayed and challenged by the authority and elites, satirists seem to be in a better position to tell stories and inform the people. While satirists are indeed fulfilling some journalistic duties, it will be a long shot to identify them as journalists. Still, with their informative and “educational” content, these satirists are trying to bring changes to the world by reminding their viewers what’s going on. They might not be the professionals, but by sitting behind desks and dressing like one, they have the tools, or at least the look to be the rational voices in irrational times.

¹⁹<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/jon-stewart-samantha-bee-ivanka-trump-comments-latest-a8382186.html>

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