

# The Evolution and Importance of News Satire

by

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A THESIS

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The goal of this thesis is to examine how news satire has changed in the United States since the country was founded in 1776. This thesis will show that the connection between news and satire is important because satire can help people understand current events, give context to complex issues and influence change.

When I started this thesis I wanted to learn if satire programs are relevant beyond comedy. During the thesis process I researched the history of satirical plays in an ancient context, the history and popularity of the editorial cartoon and satirical television programs. I primarily focused on satirical television programs because the platform has been studied for decades so there is a wealth of data and research on the subject as well as interesting new developments. I looked at important satirical programs in US history and present programs that are shaking up the genre. In my research of satire as it appears on television I compared the presentation of news events by journalists to the presentation of the same events by satirists. I specifically compared the Edward Snowden interview as presented by *Last Week Tonight* host John Oliver to

that of *NBC News*' reporter Brian Williams to see how the programs were similar and how they diverged.

The thesis was based in part on the hypothesis that satire evolved towards advocacy over the years. An example of which being when former *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart advocated for the passage and later the renewal of the Zadroga Act to fund medical expenses for 9/11 first responders. After completing the research only part of that hypothesis was confirmed. American satire didn't evolve towards advocacy because there is a long history of satire advocacy in America. American satire has changed a great deal since Benjamin Franklin's 'Join or Die' cartoon as platforms and technology have expanded. This thesis will illustrate that recent satirical television programs like *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* and *Last Week Tonight* signal a shift towards more researched and informative news satire. The role satire plays in informing audiences cannot be undervalued in an era where the way people, especially young people, get their news is shifting.

### **Definitions and Abbreviations**

**Media:** all publishing platforms including newspapers, TV shows, radio, etc. used to communicate news and current events.

**Satire:** a way of using humor to show that someone or something is weak or bad.

**News:** new information or a report about something that has happened recently.

**News Satire:** humor that dissects or comments on current events, politics or issues.

**Editorial:** a newspaper or magazine article that gives the opinions of the [editors](#) or publishers; *also:* an expression of opinion that resembles such an article.

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Origins of Satire	1
Chapter 2: Editorial Cartoons	3
Chapter 3: Satire TV	10
Chapter 4: The Snowden Case Study	19
Chapter 5: Satire Consumption and Statistics	24
Chapter 6: Satire and Presidential Elections	28
Chapter 7: Satire as Advocacy	30
Chapter 8: Why Satire Matters	32
Chapter 9: Summary	34
List of Accompanying materials	35
List of Figures	48
Bibliography	53

## Chapter 1: The Origins of Satire

Satire is defined as a way of using humor to show that someone or something is weak or bad. Satire itself is not a new tool. Though this thesis focuses primarily on the development of American satire, it is important to note that even the word satire is derived from the Latin word 'satur' and later 'satura.' The Latin poet Juvenal wrote five books of satires in the first and second centuries A.D. Juvenal's satire addressed morality and society. In his first book of satire Juvenal wrote, "It's hard not to write satire. For who's so tolerant of Rome's inequities?" The translated quote articulates the role of satire taking aim at inequities and societal issues.

Greek comedies and tragedies also provide important context for the foundation of modern American satire. In the early comedies like Aristophanes' 411 B.C. play, *Lysistrata*, ancient women ended the Peloponnesian war by withholding sex from men. It's impossible to know exactly what Aristophanes meant to convey, but due to the violence of the Peloponnesian War and the play's negative portrayal of war many scholars believe the play uses humor to show how foolish war can be. Since 411 B.C. Aristophanes' work has been adapted and modernized many times. Not only is Aristophanes' satire still relevant but also the same plot is recycled and readapted to address current issues, most recently by filmmaker Spike Lee to address Chicago's gang violence in the film *Chi-Raq*. In his book, *Political Humor: From Aristophanes to Sam Ervin*, Charles E. Schutz asserts that Horace, the Roman satirist, used pointed humor to deal with complex issues in a simple manner, to bridge the divide between philosophy

and the public. This thesis will show that modern satire still serves to bridge a divide between issues and the public.

Satirical television is a broad medium that comments on current events in a variety of ways. *The Simpsons* and *South Park* provide a satirical animated reaction to current topics but some programs like the *Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight* and *Weekend Update* on *Saturday Night Live* visually look more and more like tradition news programs. Even when *Saturday Night Live* cast members aren't sitting behind the *Weekend Update* desk as mock newscasters the show pokes fun at current events in comedy sketches, which will be highlighted in chapter six of this thesis.

There is a wide range of satire platforms in modern media such as plays, books, cartoons, magazines and television. Different satire platforms and programs address news and topics from different angles. For the purpose of this thesis I will primarily focus on news satire television programs and the editorial cartoon. There are many current and past satire programs that the thesis will not address in order to focus specifically on news satire programs.

## Chapter 2: Editorial Cartoons

One of the earliest recorded forms of US satire is the editorial cartoon. Benjamin Franklin's famous 'Join or Die' cartoon, which appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1754, is one of the first political cartoons in US history and an early example of mixing comedy, politics and news.



Figure 5:  
"Join or Die"  
cartoon by  
Benjamin  
Franklin  
published in the  
*Pennsylvania  
Gazette*.

The cartoon shows a snake in eight segments to represent each of the colonies. The cartoon illustrates the

importance of national unity and advocates that the colonies band together against the British.

Cartoonists today are still doing what Franklin did years ago, taking on the news and political issues with humor.

Editorial cartoons were a big part of political movements like women's suffrage. Nina Allender was a cartoonist for the National Woman's Party who created hundreds of cartoons promoting suffrage from 1914 to 1927. In her book, *Uphill with Banners Flying*, fellow member of the National Woman's Party, Inez Haynes Irwin wrote about Allender's cartoons.

Her [Allender's] work is full of the intimate everyday details of the woman's life from her little girlhood to her old age. And she translates that existence with a woman's vivacity and a woman's sense of humor... It would be impossible for any man to have done Mrs. Allender's work. *A woman speaking to women, about women, in the language of women.*

Allender's cartoons contradicted the editorial cartoons of the time. For example Joseph Veppler published the cartoon, "A Female Suffrage Fancy," in 1880. The cartoon illustrates women dressed in men's clothing, men forced to do domestic childcare duties and generally depicted women as masculine.

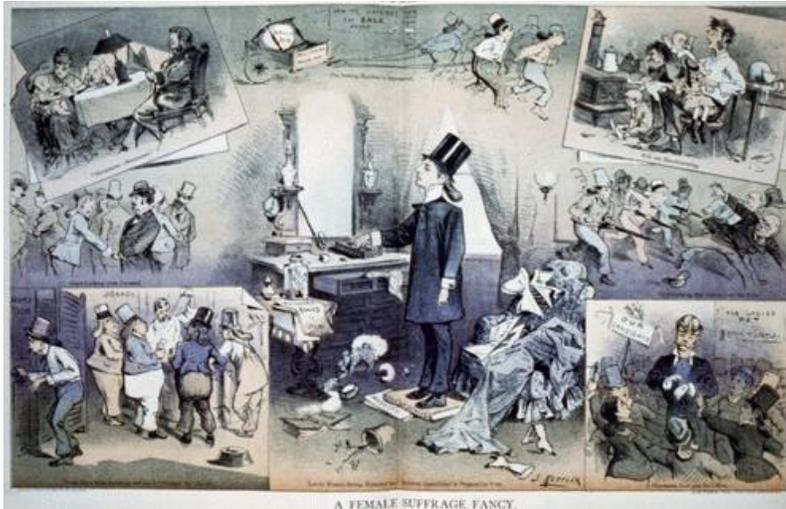


Figure 4:  
"A Female  
Suffrage Fancy"  
cartoon  
published in *the  
Puck*.

Allender used her cartoons to show the National Woman's Party in a positive light by creating the 'Allender Girl'. Elisabeth Crum and Jennifer Krafchick with the Sewall-Belmont Museum, a woman's suffrage museum, described the 'Allender Girl' as young, slender and energetic in a multitude of roles. This depiction of suffragettes is important because other depictions portrayed manly women and weak men. Suffrage cartoons not only addressed social issues but they also contradicted the mainstream narrative.



Figure 6:  
“At Last” cartoon by  
Nina Allender  
published in *the  
Suffragist*.

Similar to Nina Allender, *New Yorker* cartoonist and author, Liza Donnelley is currently using her cartoons to comment on women in today’s society. Donnelley spoke at the TED Women 2010 conference about using her cartoons to change women’s role in society and the many perceived ‘rules’ for women.

What better way than to change them [than] with humor? Humor relies on the traditions of a society. It takes what we know, and it twists it. It takes the codes of behavior and the codes of dress, and it makes it unexpected, and that’s what elicits a laugh. Now what if you put together women and humor? I think you can get change. Because women are on the ground floor, and we know the traditions so well, we can bring a different voice to the table.

Donnelley partnered with cartoonists around the world to draw attention to women’s issues beyond the United States. In 2007 she joined the United Nations initiative ‘Cartooning for Peace,’ focused on global issues. These cartoons provide

entertainment while at the same time illustrating cultural issues. In an interview with the *Michigan Daily* Donnelly explained the impact of journalism vs. cartoons.

I think good journalism and good opinion helps people see what might be going on. But cartoons have a way of — because they're visual, they're not like a long article — they can have an immediate impact, a visceral impact.

Two current satirical magazines that heavily feature editorial cartoons are *MAD Magazine* and the *New Yorker Magazine*. Both magazines have been in publication for decades. *The New Yorker* began in 1925 and *MAD* in 1952, so there is plenty of data on the two publications. Though the two magazines both use humor to dissect current events and trends the two publications appeal to different demographics.

According to *the New Yorker's* most recent report of circulation demographics published by *Conde Nast*, 62 percent of *the New Yorker* audience graduated from at least college, the audiences' median net worth is \$439,835 and the median age of the total audience is 51 years old. According to the Co-Editor of *MAD Magazine*, John Ficarra, the median age of a *MAD* reader is 19. In an interview with the *New York Magazine Review*, Ficarra addressed the magazine's young audience.

The average age of a *MAD* reader is twenty-four. The median age is nineteen. What we found is we sort of have—for lack of a better term—a camel readership. So we get young kids, almost always very bright kids. Twelve years old, they start reading it. They'll read it until they're sixteen or so. Now girls come into the picture—sex, sports, cars—and we lose them. Then, either in college or right after they get out of college, they'll pick it up because they haven't read it in a while. Maybe they're on a trip, first business trip, they're in an airport, their plane just got delayed for six hours. What are you gonna do? You're gonna go to the newsstand; you're looking around for something to read, you go, “Oh, *MAD*? What the hell?” They pick it up and then we get them back. We don't write for any particular audience. We write for ourselves, which has always been the case with *MAD*.

*MAD Magazine* offers less data on audience demographics but the magazine's most recent media kit says *MAD*'s primary readership demographics are 10-14 year olds with a secondary group of 15-18 years olds. *MAD*'s readership is 70% male. Based on the magazine's most recent circulation demographics, the *New Yorker* appeals to an older, wealthier and more educated audience than that of *MAD Magazine*. The distinction between *MAD Magazine* and the *New Yorker* further indicates the wide range of satire audiences today.

The *Charlie Hebdo* shooting in Paris ignited a global discussion of satire and the editorial cartoon. On January 7, 2015 Saïd and Chérif Kouachi killed 11 people and injured 11 others inside the offices of French satirical newspaper, *Charlie Hebdo*. The attacks came after controversial cartoon depictions of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. The BBC reported that witnesses heard the gunman shouting, "We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad" in Arabic. The attacks drew attention to the role of satire around the world and the question, what is the purpose of satire?

British satirist Will Self used the tragedy to write about the purpose of satire for the *BBC* in February of 2015, one month after the shootings at the *Charlie Hebdo* office. Self asserts that the test for whether or not any piece of material is satire comes from the late American editorial writer and humorist Finley Peter Dunne. Dunne wrote a syndicated editorial column from the perspective of Mr. Dooley, a fictional Irish bartender. Dunne used the column to satirize political and social issues of his day. A famous quote widely attributed to Dunne is, "The job of the newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." The quote is cleaned up from colloquial Irish slang. Dunne's original quote is as follows,

Th' newspaper does ivrything f'r us. It runs th' polis force an'th' banks, commands th' milishy, controls th' ligislachure, baptizes th' young, marries th' foolish, comforts th' afflicted, afflict the comfortable, buries th' dead an' roasts thim afterward.

The passage has been applied to satirical and editorial content for years. In the piece *Self* argues that the purpose of satire is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

In *the Heath Anthology of American Literature* Charles Fanning explained that Dunne's column reached popular audiences with his coverage of the Spanish-American war, leading to national syndication of the Mr. Dooley column. The column became so popular that President Theodore Roosevelt read the column at cabinet meetings to judge public opinion. Fanning explained,

Mr. Dooley's perspective was consistently skeptical and critical. The salutary effect of most pieces was the exposure of affectation and hypocrisy through undercutting humor and common sense.

There are different litmus tests for satire such as *Self*'s Dunne-inspired questions of, who does it afflict and who does it comfort? Tim Parks of *the New York Review* wrote a piece after the Charlie Hebdo attacks on the limits of satire and what qualifies as satire versus just an amusing cartoon. Park's piece says satire has to point to positive change.

If it doesn't point toward positive change, or encourage people to think in a more enlightened way, it has failed. That doesn't mean it's not amusing and well-observed, or even, for some, hilarious, in the way, say, witty mockery of a political enemy can be hilarious and gratifying and can intensify our sense of being morally superior. But as satire it has failed. The worst case is when satire reinforces the state of mind it purports to undercut, polarizes prejudices, and provokes the very behavior it condemns.

The common thread among past and present satire criticism and qualification is usefulness. Does it afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted? Is it moving towards positive change? These questions and a larger conversation about satire grew from the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks.

### Chapter 3: Satire TV

Satire grew from plays and cartoons to television programs. In 1975 an early and controversial example of a satirical television program was the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. CBS canceled *the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* after three successful seasons. The show was famous for criticizing the Vietnam War, tongue and cheek bits about freedom of speech and highlighting musicians like Joan Baez and Pete Seeger who criticized the war and the draft. While the show was officially pulled from the air for failing to turn in a script on time, it is widely believed that CBS ended the show for its political content. David Bianculli, who wrote the Smothers Brothers' biography, further explained the Smothers Brothers' conflicts with CBS in an interview with NPR's Terry Gross. Bianculli explained that the Smothers Brothers did a sketch mocking then President Johnson, who called the president of CBS to complain. To entice the show to stop making so many jokes at the expense of Lyndon B Johnson the network allowed Pete Seeger to perform on the show. Seeger had been blacklisted during the McCarthy Era after his hearing in the House Un-American Activities Committee. During his HUAC hearing Seeger refused to answer questions on his communist affiliation. Seeger then performed the song "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy," on the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. The song was an allegory widely believed to be about Lyndon B Johnson escalating the Vietnam War. It likely didn't help that, "the big fool said to push on," is a line in the song. Thomas and Richard Smothers eventually won a lawsuit against the network for the cancellation and won a Freedom of Speech

Award. This instance shows how politically relevant and daring the show was and why CBS found a reason to cancel the show.

The television landscape has changed from a few satire shows like the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* in the 1960s to more than a dozen different satire programs in 2016. In 2010 Bianculli told NPR that the lasting effects of the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* are visible on modern satire. Bianculli said,

I think that it's most visible right now in places like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert and *Saturday Night Live* and Bill Maher. All of them are outside of prime time, but they're all sort of doing elements of what the Smothers did. Stephen Colbert tried very briefly to throw himself into the presidential race, just as Pat Paulsen had. A lot of Jon Stewart's humor is very much what the Smothers was, and he admits that they were a very strong influence. Bill Maher says the Smothers were a very strong influence. And *Saturday Night Live* I sort of see as what the Smothers Brothers almost had the chance to become.

### ***The Daily Show***

One of the most popular satire programs of the last decade has been the *Daily Show*. *The Daily Show* launched 1996 with Craig Kilborn as the program's host. During the two years that Kilborn hosted *the Daily Show* it focused more on pop culture than when Jon Stewart took over as host in early 1999. Stewart hosted the show from 1999 to 2015 and transitioned the focus of the show from mostly pop culture to politics and media. In 2015 Trevor Noah took over as host of *the Daily Show*. In recent years the *Daily Show's* format begins with an opening monologue about current events, followed by correspondent segments where *Daily Show* staffers often stand in front of a green screen pretending to be reporting on location and the show ends with a celebrity interview.

In an interview with Jeffery P. Jones, the *Daily Show's* former host Jon Stewart described his role in comedy as representing the middle.

I represent the distracted center. My comedy is not the comedy of the neurotic. It comes from the center. But it comes from feeling displaced from society because you're in the center. We're the group of fairness, common sense and moderation. We're clearly the disenfranchised center... because we're not in charge.

Stewart's satire resonates with so many people who feel dissatisfied with traditional media or politics. Since Stewart took over *the Daily Show* in 1999 there have been claims that the show influenced national policy, elections and even a visual association between Mitch McConnell and a turtle. In an interview with NPR News' *Talk of the Nation* the co-creator of the *Daily Show* Lizz Winstead talked about comedy's influence on politics. In the broadcast Winstead said that comedy has the power to reinforce what people are thinking and engage people in thinking about politics. Winstead also pointed out that politicians and candidates would not go on the show if they didn't think it influenced the public.

In 2007 a Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism compared a year's worth of *Daily Show* content to that of traditional media outlets. Stewart ranked higher on Pew's list of 2007's most admired journalists than several actual journalists. Pew's analysis found that *the Daily Show* also shared many of the problems as traditional media outlets,

The results reveal a television program that draws on the news events of the day but picks selectively among them—heavily emphasizing national politics and ignoring other news events entirely. In that regard, *the Daily Show* closely resembles the news agenda of a number of cable news programs as well as talk radio.

The *Daily Show* closely resembles cable news programs in its set and format. The host delivers headlines and jokes from behind a desk. In fact, current the *Daily Show* host, Trevor Noah, told NPR's Terry Gross that when he first watched the *Daily Show* in his home country of South Africa he thought Jon Stewart was a news anchor who didn't take his job seriously. Noah said in South Africa he watched the global edition of *the Daily Show* that broadcasts on CNN,

And because it looked like a news show and it had the same colors as CNN and the ticker and - I just worked under the assumption that it was part of the news programming. And so I was just like, this is a really funny show, and that's how I knew it.

In fact a 2004 poll by the Pew Research Center found that 21% of people 18-29 get their news from programs like the *Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live*. Only 23 percent of young people in the same study mentioned broadcast news. The polls show that satire programs are playing a statistically significant role in how young people currently get their news. In an interview with the *American Society of News Editors*, Michelle Ciulla Lipkin, current executive director of the National Association for Media Literacy Education, said,

Everything we watch affects the way we think. With the blurred line of entertainment and news in "real" news, the satirical news shows really play an important role in how we get our information.

### ***Last Week Tonight***

*Last Week Tonight* is only in its third season but has already earned a Peabody award, a Critic's Choice Award, a GLAAD Award and an Emmy Award. In addition to awards the show also garnered glowing reviews from *Variety*, *the Huffington Post*, *the Daily Beast*, *Rolling Stone*, *Salon*, *Time* and more. Some critics have labeled the program as 'investigative journalism' or 'comedy news.' The Director of the Syracuse

University Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture, Robert Thompson, dubbed it “investigative comedy.” *Last Week Tonight* employs researchers from traditional journalism backgrounds. Liz Day spent years at *ProPublica* as the Director of Research before joining *Last Week Tonight* as a Senior News Researcher. Charles Wilson worked for *the New York Times* and *the New Yorker* before taking a position as a Senior News Researcher at *Last Week Tonight*. Before becoming a news researcher Sarah Kneezle worked for *Al Jazeera* and *Time* magazine. Though the show hired journalists the show’s host, John Oliver, denied that the show is in any way journalistic in an interview with the *New York Times*.

We are making jokes about the news and sometimes we need to research things deeply to understand them, but it’s always in a service of a joke. If you make jokes about animals, that doesn’t make you a zoologist. We certainly hold ourselves to a high standard and fact-check everything, but the correct term for what we do is comedy.

*Last Week Tonight* does make reactive jokes, meaning jokes that point to a headline and say something funny or point out a flaw with the headline. But the show also does primary research for more in depth segments. An example of primary research would be *Last Week Tonight*’s piece on the Miss America Pageant. *Last Week Tonight* investigated a claim that the Miss America Pageant gave more scholarships to woman than any other organization, specifically the claim that \$45 million is made available annually. *Last Week Tonight* requested tax records for the pageant and found that in 2012 the Miss America Foundation and the Miss America Organization spent a total of \$482,000 on scholarship. The show received the tax forms for 33 states’ individual Miss America competitions, which didn’t come near the amount advertised. When the staff then called the Miss America organization it revealed that the competition counts the

scholarships offered by schools directly to pageant contestants in their \$45 million number. Oliver further explains that if a state level Miss America contestant is offered scholarships to four different colleges for winning the pageant, the amount of all four potential scholarships are counted even though that contestant could only go to one college. The last part of the segment pointed out that despite the inflation in the scholarship figures the Miss America Pageant was in fact still the largest giver of scholarships for women and encouraged viewers to donate to other female scholarship organizations like the Society of Women Engineers. Days after the broadcast the Society of Women Engineers received \$25,000 in donations, which the organization called the ‘John Oliver bounce.’

The American Press Institute states the purpose of journalism is, “to provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies and their governments.” In recent years reporters and think pieces have tried to give that label to *Last Week Tonight*. In several interviews John Oliver disagreed with assertions that the show practices journalism. Media organizations and journalists from the late *New York Times* columnist David Carr to the *Daily Beast*’s Asawin Suebsaeng have labeled the show journalism and commented on Oliver’s refusal to do the same. In his 2014 article on the show Suebsaeng explained *Last Week Tonight*’s reluctance to be labeled journalism,

After all, the moment you admit you’re committing random acts of journalism, you have to assume the responsibilities and standards of a journalist—something no comedy writer is particularly eager to do.

In 2014 James Poniewozik of Time Magazine explained Oliver’s refusal to be labeled a journalist,

If he accepts the label journalist, he sounds full of himself, and that's the death of comedy.

In an interview with NPR Lizz Winstead, *Daily Show* co-creator, said that the trick for satirists is that they can only be as good as the media gives them information to be.

Today some satirical programs are moving past just commenting on what media gives them. *Last Week Tonight* has added an element of investigation to the show. There are still programs like *Weekend Update* that make jokes directly off the news headlines but programs like *Last Week Tonight* are going deeper than the news cycle to create a more in depth show. In an interview with NPR's Kelly McEvers *Last Week Tonight* host John Oliver said,

You can't build jokes on sand. You can't be wrong about something — otherwise that joke just disintegrates. ... You try to be as rigorous as you can in terms of fact-checking because your responsibility is to make sure that your joke is structurally sound.

The rigorous research and fact checking is what separates new programs like *Last Week Tonight* from satire programs that focus more on reacting to the news cycle.

### ***Full Frontal with Samantha Bee***

In 2016 Samantha Bee got a lot of attention for being the only woman in late night television. In interviews about her new show Bee was asked questions such as “can women be funny?” and “is it a great time for women in comedy?” Interviews and media outlets focused on the host's gender rather than the programming. The first scene of *Full Frontal*, which aired February 8, 2016, addressed the onslaught of questions about Bee's gender and moved on to cover the Republican debates, criticism of a Kansas senator who wrote a dress code for female employees and Jeb Bush's former presidential campaign. The first episode bore many comparisons to Bee's former show,

*the Daily Show*, but has marked differences. For one thing the show has no correspondents yet, no ‘fake news’ and no celebrity interviews. In an interview with the *Hollywood Reporter*, *Full Frontal* Executive Producer Miles Kahn said that show would be different from the Daily Show in terms of depth and by focusing on underreported issues.

I don't know if it's always going to be a full act of comedy. That may be geared more toward what *The Daily Show* does and then maybe we have to pivot to something that's a bit meatier in a different department — try to find a story that you haven't heard. So a little bit of topicality, but then you still want to make sure our focus overall is on stories that are underreported, interesting little news things that you may not have heard of.

*Full Frontal* Executive Producer Jo Miller described the format of the show as half news topics and half deep dives, which are more in depth and investigative pieces.

Miller asserts that the deep dives are possible because the show only air once a week.

One reason that we're able to do the show we do is we're able to craft it a little longer, dig deeper into the stories we're interested in. Last week we had a piece on sexual harassment in the workplace and we didn't have material on women who worked on cruise ships — we didn't have video on it — because, understandably, these women don't want to come forward and identify themselves on TV. So we went and found them and talked to them ourselves, and disguised their voices. We would not have time to do that in a day. So it lets us do what we want to do, and give people the show that they're enjoying so much.

These deep dives are evidence of primary research in satire television. One of Bee's first pieces on *Full Frontal* was a remote segment in Jordan to learn about the Syrian Refugee Crisis. In an interview with Katie Couric, Bee explained why she went to Jordan.

We keep talking about these people, why don't we go meet some of them? Take our tools of comedy and shine a light on something that's rarely seen.

Bee interviewed Syrians and staff from the International Organization for Migration. The piece explained the process of migrating, the reasons many Syrians are seeking resettlement and the demographics of refugees. To address the Fox News claim that terrorists could be using the program to sneak into the United States the show used a video game graphic illustrating the difficult application process. The segment visually explained how difficult the migration process is and how-- as an important counterpoint to the idea that terrorists are trying to sneak into the US as refugees- no refugee has a say in where they are resettled. Bee also used her tools of comedy to teach Syrian migrants American phrases such as, "I can't eat gluten" and "can I have your HBO GO password?" The episode uses comedic tools to make sense of why Syrians are seeking refuge, who is actually able to come to the US and how the process realistically works.

## Chapter 4: The Snowden Case Study

One of the best ways to judge the similarities and differences between TV news and TV satire is a side-by-side comparison. Luckily both NBC journalist Brian Williams and *Last Week Tonight* host John Oliver flew to Russia to interview Edward Snowden. The two interviews can be compared for content and viewership. The full transcripts from the Snowden interviews are available in the Accompanying Materials section 1 and 2.

The interviews vary in length and levity. Williams' report is longer and more serious in tone. Williams' interview covered a wider breadth of topics and the host stayed neutral. Oliver confronted Snowden at multiple points in the interview about the ramifications of his data leak in a more confrontational way than Williams. One similar aspect of both interviews is visual examples used to explain a complex issue. In Williams' interview he asked Snowden what the NSA could find on a disposable cell phone he brought to the Russian Olympics. Here is an excerpt from that transcript,

...

ES: The NSA the Russian intelligence service, the Chinese intelligence service, any intelligence service in the world that has significant funding, and a real technological research team can own that phone the minute it connects to their network. As soon as you turn it on it can be theirs, they can turn into a microphone they can take pictures from it, they can take the data off of it. But it's important to understand that these things are typically done on a targeted basis. Right, it's only done when people go "this phone is suspicious. I think it's being held by a drug dealer I think it's being used by a terrorist."

BW: Can anyone turn it on remotely if it's off? Can they turn on apps? Did anyone know or care that I Googled the final score of the Rangers - Canadians game last night because I was traveling here?

ES: I would say I yes to all those. They can absolutely turn them on with the power turned off to the device. That's pretty scary but the thing about

the Rangers game is also scary. You might say: does anybody really care that I'm looking up the score for the Rangers game? Well, a government or a hacker or some other nefarious individual would say yes, they're very interested in that, because that tells a lot about you. First off, it tells you probably speak English, it says you're probably an American; you're interested in this sport. And they might know what your habits are? Where were you when the world when you checked the score? Did you check it when you travel or did you check it when you're just at home? They'd be able to tell something called your pattern of life: when are you doing these kind activities? When do you wake up, when do you go to sleep? What other phones are around you when you wake up and go to sleep? Are you with someone who's not your wife? Are you doing something? Are you someplace you shouldn't be? According to the government, which is arbitrary. Are are you engaged in any kind of activities that we disapprove of, even if they aren't technically illegal. And all these things can raise your level of scrutiny, even if it seems entirely innocent to you even if you have nothing to hide, even if you doing nothing wrong. These activities can be misconstrued, misinterpreted, and used to harm you as an individual even without the government having any intent to do you wrong. The problem is that the capabilities themselves are unregulated uncontrolled and dangerous.

BW: All because I Googled "Rangers Canadians final score?"

ES: Exactly.

Oliver's example was more graphic and personal to Americans than Williams'. Oliver compares different security programs to the sending and collecting of nude photos, which he calls 'dick pics.' The goal of the 'dick pic' demonstration is to put the information that is difficult to absorb or care about into relatable terms.

JO: But the thing is, everything you did only matters if we have this conversation properly, so let me help you out there. You mentioned in an interview that the NSA was passing around naked photos of people.

ES: Yes this is something where it's not actually seen as a big deal in the culture of NSA because you see naked pictures all the time.

...

JO: This is the most visible line in the sand for people, can they see my dick? With that in mind look inside that folder. That is a picture of my dick. So lets go through each NSA program and explain to me its capabilities in regards to that photograph of my penis.

JO: So, 702 Surveillance. Can they see my dick?

ES: Yes, the FISA Amendment Act of 2008, which 702 falls under, allows the bulk collection of internet communications that are one end foreign.

JO: Bulk collection, now we're talking about my dick...

ES: So if you have your email somewhere like Gmail hosted on a server overseas, or transferred on a server overseas or that anytime crosses outside the border of the US your junk ends up in the database.

JO: So it doesn't have to be sending a pic to a German?

ES: No, even if you submit something within the US your wholly domestic communication between you and your wife can go from New York to London and back and get caught up in the database.

JO: Executive Order 12333, dick or no dick?

ES: YES, EO 12333 is what the NSA uses when the other authorities aren't aggressive enough or they're not catching as much as they'd like, for example-

JO: How are they going to see my dick? I'm only concerned about my penis.

ES: When you send your junk, through Gmail for example, that's stored on Google's servers. Google moves data from data center to data center invisibly to you, without your knowledge. Your data could be moved outside the borders of the United States. Temporarily, when your junk was passed by Gmail the NSA got a copy of that.

JO: Prism?

ES: Prism is how they pull your junk out of Google, with Google's involvement. All of the different Prism partners, people like Yahoo, Facebook, Google, the Government deputizes them to be sort of their little surveillance sheriff.

JO: Upstream?

ES: Upstream is how they snatch your junk as it transits the internet.

JO: Mystic?

ES: If you're describing your junk on the phone.

JO: But do they have the content of that junk call or just the duration of that junk call?

ES: They have the content as well but only for a few countries. If you are on vacation in the Bahamas yes.

...

JO: 215?

ES: No, but they can probably tell who you're sharing your junk pictures with because they're seeing who you're texting with, when you're calling.

JO: If you call a penis enlargement center at three in the morning and that call lasted 90 minutes-

ES: They would have a record of your phone number calling that number which is a penis enlargement center, they would say they don't know it's a penis enlargement center but of course they can look it up.

JO: Edward, if they American people understood this, they would be absolutely horrified.

ES: I guess I never thought about putting it in the context of your junk.

JO: Would a good takeaway from this be until such time as we've sorted all of this don't take pictures of your dick?

ES: No, if we do that-

JO: Wait hold on, you're saying no, you should keep taking pictures of your dick?

ES: You shouldn't change your behavior because a government agency somewhere is doing the wrong thing. If we sacrifice our values because we're afraid we don't care about those values very much.

The examples vary in many ways, for instance Brian William's interview is more serious and in depth. Oliver's interview is important because he clearly shows that what Snowden did in leaking documents only matters if Americans not only comprehend but also are interested enough to have a conversation about a very complex subject.

Oliver's interview with Snowden is a perfect example, not of satire going more in depth than traditional news outlets, but of satire breaking down complex issues and sparking interest in complex topics. *Last Week Tonight* put the entire surveillance interview up on YouTube, which has garnered over 11 million views in addition to those who watched the segment on HBO and streaming services. *Last Week Tonight* uses comedy tools to address ambitious material in a way people can understand and care about.

## Chapter 5: Satire Consumption and Statistics

Data is an important tool used to garner information about the satire audience. In 2012 the Pew Research Center released a report on the changing news landscape and trends in news consumption from 1991 to 2012. The report details a decline in TV news viewership, newspaper readers and radio news listeners. Online and mobile news consumption grew 15 percent from 2004 to 2012, surpassing the figures of those who get news from radio or newspapers. In 2012 TV news viewership still beat those who got their news online, but online news trended upwards while TV news trended downwards.

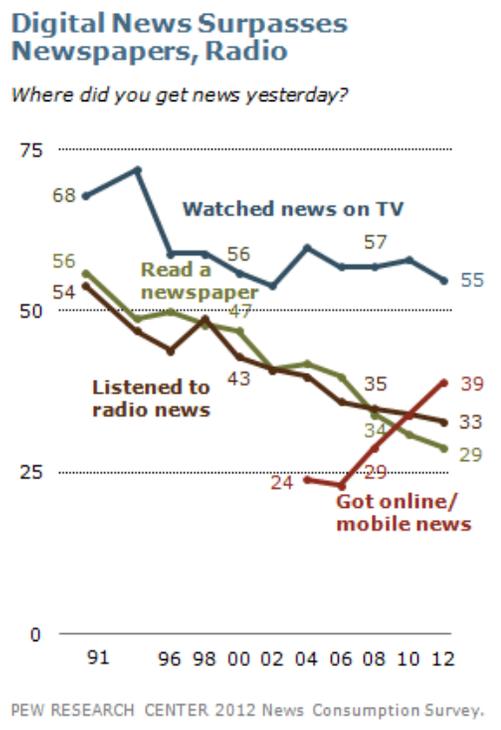


Figure 2:  
“News Consumption Survey” by the Pew Research Center in 2012.

A 2015 study by the Pew Research Center and the John S. and James L Knight Foundation found that 17 percent of US adults use Twitter and 66 percent of US adults use Facebook. Of those adults who use the social media platforms 63 percent now say

each platform serves as a news source. Those numbers are up from 2013 when 52 percent of Twitter and 47 percent of Facebook users said they used the social media platform as a news source. In response to the study, Knight Foundation Director for Strategy and Assessment said,

Exploring how news consumption through social media can shape how people interact with, respond, and react to the news will be critical for news providers and others interested in advancing the real-world impact of journalism.

These results could indicate the importance of sharing not just news, but also satire pieces on social media. The same report shows that more young people use social networking sites than watch news or entertainment TV programming. Satirical television programs such *Last Week Tonight*, the *Daily Show* and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* all use various social media accounts to share clips and segments of their broadcasts. Many of the shows also use their Twitter accounts between episodes to comment on the news or to preview topical segments. An example would be *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee's* Twitter account live tweeting the 2016 GOP presidential debates.

In 2012 the Pew Research Center surveyed Americans with four questions about current events. The questions were, which party controls the House of Representatives? What is the current unemployment rate? What nation does Angela Merkel lead? And which presidential candidate favors taxing higher-income Americans? The number of correct answers were analyzed, along with the audience's news source to gage which outlet had the most informed viewers. *The Rachel Maddow Show* had the highest number of correct answers and daytime talk shows had the lowest number of correct answers. *Daily Show* audiences scored fifth highest in the number of questions

answered correctly and *the Colbert Report* viewers scored ninth. The survey results do not mean that satire makes its audience smarter because correlation does not equal causation, but it is important to be aware of the statistics and implications.

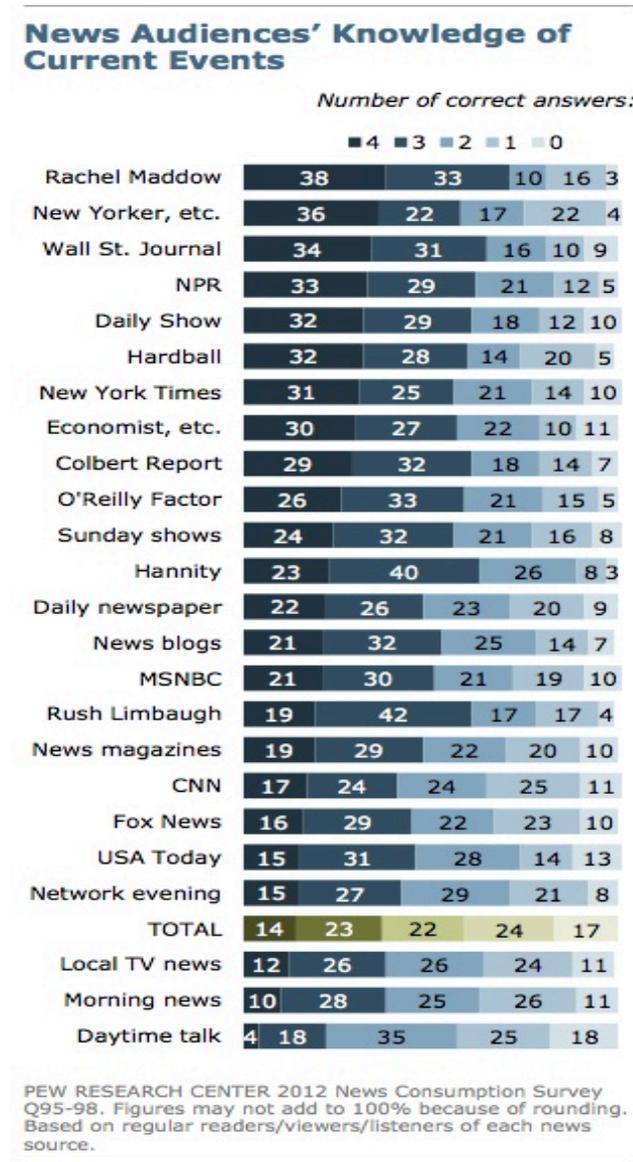
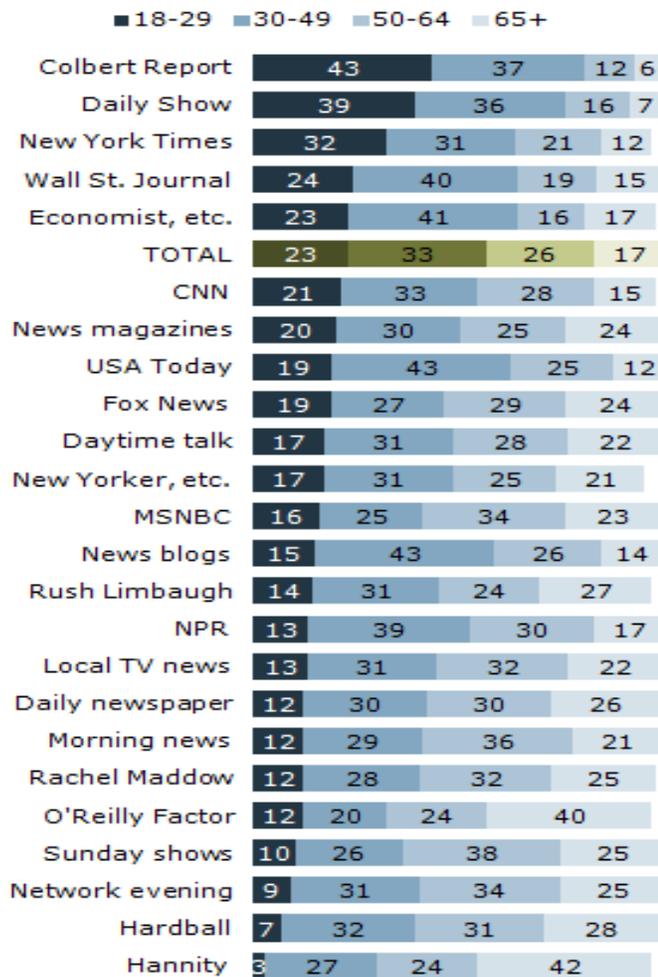


Figure 1: “News Audiences’ Knowledge of Current Events” figure by a Pew Research Center in 2012.

The same survey said that *the Daily Show* and *the Colbert Report* had the youngest audiences surveyed.

## Audience Profiles: Young and Old News Audiences



PEW RESEARCH CENTER 2012 News Consumption Survey. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding. Based on regular readers/viewers/listeners of each news source.

Figure 3:  
“Age of News Audiences Profile” by the Pew Research Center in 2012.

There are too many unknown variables to predict the future of satire programs like the *Daily Show*. However data helps to show the past and present influence and the audience of TV satire.

## Chapter 6: Satire and Presidential Elections

The television program *Saturday Night Live* is known for its presidential impressions. Some media scholars like University of Missouri Professor William Horner speculate that while satirizing the candidates and election coverage the comedy show is influencing voters. Horner specifically cited the 1976 US presidential election. Chevy Chase was consistently clumsy and dimwitted in his impression of President Ford. In one sketch Chase answered a glass of water instead of the phone. In another Chase wandered aimlessly through the White House missing his cues for the presidential fireside chat. President Ford was once filmed falling down the steps of Air Force One and that tumble persisted in Chase's impression.

In an interview with NPR's Mike Pesca both Al Franken, former *SNL* writer and politician, and Ron Nessen spoke about *Saturday Night Live* and President Ford. Nessen, Ford's press secretary, ended up hosting *Saturday Night Live* and poking fun at the president with jokes like, "I've learned a few phrases that make this job easier, phrases like: What the president really said was... Or what the president really meant was... Or what the president really bumped into was..." Pesca explained the importance of *Saturday Night Live* for politicians,

Thus the feedback loop where the president sees how he is portrayed and either changes his behavior or at least tries to get in front of the joke. Franken points to the 2000 election when would-be president Al Gore's handlers actually showed Gore an *SNL* debate skit as a way of saying stop sighing so much.

Another powerful impact of *Saturday Night Live* is called the 'Fey Effect.' In a 2012 issue of *Public Opinions Quarterly*, political scientists Natasha Walth, Jonathan Moris and Jody Baumgardner wrote a piece about the affect of Tina Fey's *SNL* portrayal of

republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin. In the publication the three political scientists wrote that those who watched the *SNL* clip of Fey portraying Palin had a 45.4 percent probability of saying her nomination made them less likely to vote for McCain.

Here is the trio's explanation,

We suggest that any potential "Fey Effect" can be understood within the context of priming and attitude change. This theory highlights the idea that the media draw "attention to some aspects of political life at the expense of others." Citizens, who are overloaded with information, tend to come to judgment by activating familiar concepts — often those that the media have highlighted. In addition to other applications, priming has been used to explain attitude change in evaluations of presidential candidates and to show that negative political ads can adversely affect opinion. Unlike negative political ads, political humor seems to be fairly popular, which could increase receptiveness to the message. And, because political humor is a form of negative priming, it should also be associated with more negative perceptions of its targets, particularly targets that are new to the national political scene.

*Saturday Night Live* continues dissecting presidential elections with humor. In 2016 the last episode of *SNL*'s 41<sup>st</sup> season opened with a sketch of Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton at a bar trading jabs about the democratic nomination. Kate McKinnon as Clinton joked about her assumed victory in the democratic primary where many argue that she doesn't have the popular vote just the delegate vote, "I've done it. I've won the nomination- I mean no I haven't, I keep losing states but mathematically I've done it! To math!" Larry David as Sanders refuses to leave the closing bar, symbolizing his refusal to drop out of the race. The mock Sanders emphasized, "I can stay here as long as I want!" The sketch ends with the two performing the "Waltz of the Flowers" from *the Nutcracker* and Clinton sending Sanders down in an elevator to show Clinton attempting to push Sanders out of the primary and to move on to the general election.

## Chapter 7: Satire as Advocacy

Modern satire shares many traits with its predecessors including the emphasis on advocacy and change. Here are just a few examples of past and present advocacy in satire.

- Nina Allender used editorial cartoons to advocate for women's suffrage and shape public perceptions of women's rights issues.
- Benjamin Franklin used the 'Join or Die' cartoon to illustrate the importance of unification.
- In 2010 Jon Stewart did a segment on the Zadroga act to fund health care for 9/11 first responders. The bill was being filibustered by the US Senate. Stewart used his show to interview four 9/11 first responders suffering from injury and disease due to their service responding to the crisis. Kenny Specht, founder of the New York City Firefighter Brotherhood Foundation told the *New York Times* he attributed the bill passing to Stewart. Former Mayor Michael Bloomberg told the *New York Times*, "Success always has a thousand fathers. But Jon shining such a big, bright spotlight on Washington's potentially tragic failure to put aside differences and get this done for America was, without a doubt, one of the biggest factors that led to the final agreement." Stewart returned to the *Daily Show* in 2015 to call out Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell for holding up the reauthorization of the Zadroga Act. Five years after his first interview with four first responders only one was able to return. Two of the first responders were ill and one had passed away. The segment literally illustrated

why first responders need the Zadroga Act. The reauthorization bill was officially passed 11 days after Stewart's segment.

- June 1, 2014 *Last Week Tonight* aired a segment on net neutrality urging Internet “trolls” to comment on the FCC webpage. The next day there was so much traffic on the FCC website that it crashed. After the segment the FCC received 45,000 emails and months later adopted new net neutrality regulations. Another episode explored gross exaggeration of scholarships awarded by the Miss America pageant and urged viewers to support female scholarship organizations directly like the Society of Women Engineers. After two days the organization received \$25,000 in donations, which the organization called the ‘John Oliver bounce.’

## Chapter 8: Why Satire Matters

Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, said, “the human race has only one really effective weapon and that is laughter.” Michelle Cuilla Lipkin, Executive Director of the National Association for Media Literacy Education, wrote about the influence of satire news programs like the *Daily Show*.

I think what a show like *The Daily Show* does so effectively is model how to ask questions and to put things in larger context. I think humor is a very powerful tool and I greatly appreciate how these satirical shows try to get to the truth through humor.

Robert Mankoff, cartoon editor for the *New Yorker* delves into the importance and influence of political satire in a 2012 article for *Moment Magazine*. In his piece Mankoff collects quotes from politicians and satirists about their views and opinions on satire. Mankoff talked to Trevor Potter, former chairman of the Federal Election Commission. Potter appeared on the *Colbert Report* in 2011 to speak about PACs, Political Action Committees, and Super PACs. In 2011 Stephen Colbert created the Super PAC Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow. The Super PAC and Colbert’s coverage of money in politics exposed loopholes and excessive spending in American political campaigns. Potter later became the Super PAC’s ‘personal lawyer.’ Of his appearance on the show and involvement with Colbert’s Super PAC Potter said,

*The Colbert Report* has shown me how effective satire can be to convey political ideas and messages. What is new about the Colbert method is that he engages his audience in the participatory method of learning. He takes viewers inside a field of knowledge or experience and gives them the feeling of being a participant. The only other person I know who conveyed information that way was George Plimpton, who wrote about unusual experiences by engaging in them. That is what Colbert does very effectively on camera. I know that in Colbert’s view, there is a difference between describing something as an observer and showing it through the lens of participation. I think his Super-PAC has been highly successful at

doing this. I have lots of people come up to me and say, “I didn’t understand Super-PACs before and now I do.” And I continually have people say they’re really interested in what is happening with his Super-PAC—it has created a narrative that people are paying attention to. It seems to me that this is not the kind of reaction we would have if he was just talking about Super-PACs in a monologue on the show.

These sentiments explain what make satire a powerful political tool. News satire, whether it is John Oliver talking about ‘dick pic’ privacy to reveal greater truths about security, or Jon Stewart explaining the importance of renewing the Zadroga Act or Stephen Colbert starting a Super PAC news satire takes on the important issues with humor and context.

## Chapter 9: Summary

There are many iterations of American satire. As for satirical television, early programs like the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* paved the way for the satire shows of today that look less like a variety show and more like a news broadcast. When I first started writing this thesis I thought that satire was evolving towards advocacy. Segments from *Last Week Tonight* that elicited donations to charity and Oliver sending so many people to the FCC's web page that it shut down seemed like proof of measurable advocacy. What I realized after researching satire history is that the US has a long history of using editorial cartoons to advocate for social and political change. In short, satire hasn't evolved towards advocacy because satire in the US began with advocacy. Benjamin Franklin's 'Join or Die' cartoon advocated for the unification of the states. Nina Allender used editorial cartoons to fight for women's suffrage. Using humor to advocate for change isn't new but it has expanded. Now there are more than just the plays from Aristophanes' day, the cartoons of Nina Allender or Mr. Dooley's column. Satirical television programs like *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* and *Last Week Tonight* are going deeper into issues than their predecessors, with more researched and investigative comedy pieces.

Satire is important because it continues to make a difference. Television satire has affected public perception of presidents and presidential candidates. Politicians and strategists use satire to gauge public opinion such as President Roosevelt's use of the Mr. Dooley column. Satire can break down large or boring issues into digestible and entertaining segments. Though modern satire has many different forms it continues to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable with humor.

## List of Accompanying Materials

1. Transcript of Brian Williams's interview with Edward Snowden
2. Transcript of John Oliver's interview with Edward Snowden
3. Video comparison of the two interviews with Edward Snowden. William's interview: <http://bit.ly/1SbdVzi>, Oliver's interview: <http://bit.ly/1HG5FzF> at 25:15.

### 1. Williams' interview transcript

[BW: Brian Williams, ES: Edward Snowden, GG: Glen Greenwald]

BW: A lot of people would say you have badly damaged your country.

ES: I'd say can you show that, is there any demonstration? Because I've been asking, the United States the press has been asking the United States government for a year now. If after year they can show a single individual who's been harmed in any way by this reporting, is it really so grave? Is really so serious and can we really trust those claims without scrutinizing? I'd argue that we can't, but we should be open to it. It's fair, the possibility exists and if this has caused some serious harm, I personally would like to know about it.

BW: Former NSA director Keith Alexander has said "you have done quote significant and irreversible damage to the nation" he said there is "concrete proof the terrorist groups and others are taking action, and making changes and it's going to make our job tougher. And this amounts to telling our enemy our playbook."

ES: So what's interesting is that we see the exact same language, the exact same accusations being leveled against whistleblowers, being labeled against any critic of any government program, throughout history, throughout time.

BW: What are you doing in Russia?

ES: Right, so this is a really fair concern. I personally, am surprised that I ended up here. The reality is I never intended to end up in Russia. I had a flight booked to Cuba, onwards to Latin America, and I was stopped because the United States government decided to revoke my passport and trapped me in the Moscow Airport. So when people ask me: "why are you in Russia?" I say: please ask the State Department.

BW: A formerly high-ranking American official said to me, if Snowden's equivalent – Russian kid was in our hands in the United States we would be working mightily to (a) befriend him and absent that, infiltrate what he has, what he knows. What has your relationship been to the host nation? Have you met Putin? Have you spoken with Putin?

ES: Right, so I have no relationship with Russian government at all. I've never met the Russian President. I'm not supported by the Russian government, I'm not taking money from the Russian government. I'm not a spy, which is the real question. The best way to make sure that, for example, the Russians can't break my fingers and compromise information, or hit me with a bag of money until I give them something, was not to have it all. And the way to do that was by destroying the material that I was holding before I transited through Russia.

BW: People are going to find it hard to believe that president Putin hasn't taken run at you or what you know. You can state declaratively that that hasn't happened.

ES: Yeah. I mean the, the way, the way we need to think about this is, again I already know how to deal with counterintelligence. Beyond that, I took nothing to Russia, so I could give them nothing.

BW: You say you're not carrying around any of these materials, you've handed them off. If I gave you a laptop, could you access the documents?

ES: [laugh] No.

BW: No, no, you couldn't remotely electronically access material, it's –

ES: No.

BW: – it's gone from your control?

ES: Right, I don't have any control. Let's put it this way: if I'm traveling through Russia – and I know I'm traveling through Russia – and I know they've got a very aggressive, very professional service, and I look like Tweety Bird to Sylvester the Cat, if I look like a little walking chicken leg with all these documents, if I got control over them, that's a very dangerous thing for me.

BW: How do you define yourself? Are you – were you trained as a spy? Specifically I'm talking about this – the titles: a systems analyst, contractor. It seems to me spies probably look a lot more like Ed Snowden, and a lot less like James Bond these days.

ES: Well, it's no secret that the US tends to get more and better intelligence out of computers nowadays, than they do out of people. I was trained as a spy in sort of the traditional sense of the word in that I lived and worked undercover, overseas, pretending to work in a job that I'm not, and even being assigned a name that was not mine. Now the government might deny these things, they might frame it in certain ways, and say well, you know he's a he's a low-level analyst. But what they're trying to do, is they're trying to use one position than I've had in a career here or there to distract from the totality my experience, which is that

I've worked for the Central Intelligence Agency undercover, overseas. I've worked for the National Security Agency undercover, overseas and I've worked for the Defense Intelligence Agency as a lecturer at the Joint Counterintelligence Training Academy, where I developed sources and methods for keeping our information and people secure in the most hostile and dangerous environments around the world. So when they say I'm a low-level Systems Administrator, that I don't know what I'm talking about, I'd say it's somewhat misleading.

BW: What did 9/11 mean to you?

ES: I've never told anybody this – no journalist – but I was on Fort Meade on September 11th. I was right outside the NSA. So I remember, I remember the tension on that day. I remember hearing on the radio the planes hit, and I remember thinking my grandfather, who worked for the FBI at the time, was in the Pentagon when the plane hit it. I take the threat of terrorism seriously, and I think we all do, and I think it's really disingenuous for, for the government to invoke, and sort of scandalize our memories, to sort of exploit the national trauma that we all suffered together, and worked so hard to come through, to justify programs that have never been shown to keep us safe, but cost us liberties, and freedoms that we don't need to give up and our Constitution says we should not give up.

BW: Then there is this way of looking at it: our nation had been attacked in this

nonlinear way, we were hurting, post Pearl Harbor hurting, why not cast the widest net possible? Innocent people around the country were – all felt the same way: I've got nothing to hide, we've got to find this enemy we can't see.

ES: The definition of a security state, is any nation that prioritizes security over all other considerations. I don't believe the United States is, or ever should be, a security state. If we want to be free we can't become subject to surveillance, we can't give away our privacy, we can't give away our rights. We have to be an active party, we have to be an active part of our government. And we have to say there are some things worth dying for, and I think the country is one of them.

BW: Like a lot of young men in our country, and especially given the fact that your grandfather was at the FBI, your dad's a vet, like a lot of the young men across America are you wanted to join up, and you did.

ES: in 2004 I joined the US Army under the 18 X-Ray Special Forces recruit program, now I have to give high respect to to everyone in the military, and especially graduates of those programs because they are better men than I. I was injured very early on in the program and washed out. And you know I, readily admit it, I don't hide that. But the fact is that I tried. You know, I saw what was going on in the world. I believed the government's arguments that we were going to do good things in Iraq, that we were going to free the oppressed and I wanted to do my part, to help share the national burden, and create not just a better America but a better world.

ES: The problem was, as as time went on, as I rised – rose, to higher and higher levels and intelligence community, as I gained more and more access, as I saw more and more classified information at the highest levels. I realized that so many of the things that we're told by the government simply aren't true, much like the arguments about aluminum tubes and weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Colin Powell's speech with the vial of anthrax that Saddam was going to, to bring against us. The Iraq War that I signed up for was launched on false premises, the American people were misled. Now whether that was due to bad faith, or simply mistakes of intelligence, I can't say for sure. But I can say it shows the problem of putting too much faith in intelligence systems without debating them in public. We have systems...

BW: I want to ask about this device, this is not my iPhone, this is what drug dealers resort to, this is called a burner, it's a temporary, it's the one I brought to cover the Olympics because our IT people told me that the Russians are so good at infiltration. How good? And how are the Americans? What can the NSA do with this device if they wanted to get into my life?

ES: So first off that's probably the most expensive burner I've ever seen. [laughs] but I guess we're at the upmarket...

BW: I'm using term of art.

ES: ...drug dealer here.

BW: ... This is turned off....

ES: The NSA...

BW: ...it's inert.

ES: Right, the NSA the Russian intelligence service, the Chinese intelligence service, any intelligence service in the world that has significant funding, and a real technological research team can own that phone the minute it connects to their network.

As soon as you turn it on it can be theirs, they can turn into a microphone they can take pictures from it, they can take the data off of it. But it's important to understand that these things are typically done on a targeted basis. Right, it's only done when people go "this phone is suspicious. I think it's being held by a drug dealer I think it's being used by a terrorist."

BW: Can anyone turn it on remotely if it's off? Can they turn on apps? Did anyone know or care that I Googled the final score of the Rangers - Canadians game last night because I was traveling here?

ES: I would say I yes to all those. They can absolutely turn them on with the power turned off to the device. That's pretty scary but the thing about the Rangers game is also scary. You might say: does anybody really care that I'm looking up the score for the Rangers game? Well, a government or a hacker or some other nefarious individual would say yes, they're very interested in that, because that tells a lot about you. First off, it tells you probably speak English, it says you're probably an American; you're interested in this sport. And they might know what your habits are? Where were you when the world when you checked the score? Did you check it when you travel or did you check it when you're just at home? They'd be able to tell something called your pattern of life: when are you doing these kind activities? When do you wake up, when do you go to sleep? What other phones are around you when you wake up and go to sleep? Are you with someone who's not your wife? Are you doing something? Are you someplace you shouldn't be? According to the government, which is arbitrary. Are are you engaged in any kind of activities that we disapprove of, even if they aren't technically illegal. And all these things can raise your level of scrutiny, even if it seems entirely innocent to you even if you have nothing to hide, even if you doing nothing wrong. These activities can be misconstrued, misinterpreted, and used to harm you as an individual even without the government having any intent to do you wrong. The problem is that the capabilities themselves are unregulated uncontrolled and dangerous.

BW: All because I Googled "Rangers Canadians final score?"

ES: Exactly.

ES: ...look at the haystack. When I think about an instance that that really just struck me as "oh my god, we can do this" and that we can do it anyone, was that people at NSA, analysts can actually watch people's internet Communications watch them draft correspondence, and actually watch their thoughts form as they type as you write a message. You know, an analyst at the NSA, or any other service out there that's using this kind of attack against people can actually see you write sentences and backspace over your mistakes, and then change the words and then kind of pause, and then think about what you wanted to say, and then change it. And it's this extraordinary intrusion, not just into your communications, your finished messages, but your actual trafficking process, into the way you think.

BW: You must have been aware spying is sometimes called a dirty business, lives have been taken on unsavory deeds have been committed.

ES: You know, I don't think anybody who, who's been in the intelligence community for almost a decade as I've been, is really shocked by the specific types of general operations, when they're justified. What's more shocking for anybody, is not the dirtiness of the business, it's the dirtiness of the targeting. It's the dirtiness of the way these things

are being used. It's the for lack of respect for the public. Because... and the the lack of respect for the intrusiveness of surveillance.

BW: When the president and others have made the point that you should have gone through channels, become a whistleblower, and not pursued the route you did. What's your response?

ES: I actually did go through channels, and that these documents – the NSA has records they have copies of emails, right now to their Office of General Counsel to their oversight and compliance folks, from me, raising concerns about the NSA's interpretations of its legal authorities. Now I had raised these complaints not just officially, in writing, through email to these officers and and these individuals but to my supervisors, to my colleagues in more than one office I did it in Fort Meade, I did in Hawaii and many, many of these individuals were shocked by these programs they never seen them themselves, and the ones who had went: “you know you're right, these are things that are really concerning, and these aren't things that we should be doing, and maybe we're going too far here, but if you say something about this, they're going to destroy you. Do you know what happens to people who stand up and talk about this?”

BW What did you report, what was the response?

ES: So I reported that there were real problems with the way the NSA was interpreting its legal authorities, and the response, more or less, in bureaucratic language was, you should stop asking questions. And these are, these are, recent records this isn't an ancient history one of my, I would say one of my final official acts in government was continuing one of these, one of these communications with the legal office and, in fact I'm so sure that these communications exist that I've called on Congress to write a letter to the NSA, to verify that they do. Write to the Office of General Counsel and say: “did Mr. Snowden ever communicate any concerns about the NSA's interpretation its legal authorities?”

BW: How long prior to leaving Hawaii did you start to say to yourself: I'm gonna gather this I'm gonna put this away, I'm going to expose this?

ES: I think given the ongoing investigation, that something better not to get into in a news interview but I'd be happy to discuss these things government.

BW: What is the number, what's the closest you've come to estimating the number of documents?

ES: I will say the 1.7 million documents figure that the intelligence community has been bandying about, the director of NSA himself, Keith Alexander said just a week ago and the Australian Financial Times, er, Australian Financial Review, I believe that they have no idea what documents were taken at all their auditing was so poor, so negligent, that any private contractor not even an employee of the government could walk into the NSA building, take whatever they wanted, and walk out with it and they would never know. Now, I think that's a problem and I think that's something that needs to be resolved, and people need to be held to account for. Has it happened before, could it happen again?

BW: What didn't you grab, was there a threshold?

ES: Right, I didn't want to take information that would basically be taken and thrown out in the press, that will cause harm to individuals, that would have caused people to die, that would put lives at risk. So a good gauge of what information was provided to

the journalists is a representation what you see in the press. Now if the NSA and Defense Intelligence Agency, and some of these other organizations have claimed that lives are at risk, that all this military information was out there, that, you know, took all this information about missiles and warheads and tanks. But we don't see any of that in the newspaper, you know, we, we, we haven't seen any stories on that.

BW to GG: What did you make of him [Snowden]?

GG: The initial impression was one of extreme confusion, because I was expecting to meet somebody in his sixties or seventies, someone very senior in the agency, because I knew almost nothing about him prior to our arrival in Hong Kong.

ES: It was a really intimidating moment, you know, it was, it was the most real point of no return, because the minute you start talking to a journalist, as an intelligence officer, on camera, there's really no going back from that. That's, that's where it all comes together.

BW: Also you had this tangible evidence, in effect he was saying to you: if I wasn't legit where else would I have gotten this?

GG: Right, I mean that, that was certainly a good start to establishing his credibility and his authenticity, was the fact that he was able to produce many thousands of documents from the most secretive agency of the world's most powerful government, but at the same time there are questions about the authenticity of those documents, the providence, the motives that led to his taking them, and what it was that he would say when he, when he identified himself to the world as the source.

ES: And that's the reason that the journalists have been required by their agreement with me as the source, although they could obviously break that or do whatever they want. But I demanded that they agree to consult with the government to make sure that no individuals or specific harms could be caused by any of that reporting.

ES: When it comes to specific stories about the specific collection programs, about specific targets, these aren't decided by me, these are decided by newspapers.

BW: You see the part of this and, and for a lay audience looking on, they know that this came from you, the, the bulk release to the journalists came from you. They are guessing that you and decisions to make within what you had access to. So then they hear you saying: I didn't put that out the journalist did.

ES: Right, now that's a fair question, you know any anyone can second guess my judgment and you know, again I'm a human being, I could make mistakes, I could make the wrong call, but the reality is the situation determined that this needed to be told to the public.

BW: To your knowledge there is nothing in what you've handed over to the journalist, materially damaging or threatening to the military or national security?

ES: There's nothing that would be published that would harm the public interest, these are programs that need to be understood, that need to be known, that require deep background and the context for research, they're difficult to report but they're of critical public importance.

BW: On the range between ticker tape parade and life sentence, what do you think ought to happen to you, if and when you return to the United States?

ES: These are things that no individual should empower themselves to really decide. You know, I'm going to give myself a parade, but neither am I going to walk into a jail cell to serve as a bad example for other people in government who see something

happen, some violation of the Constitution and think they need to say something about it.

BW: You hear often in the United States: why doesn't he come home and face the music?

ES: It's a fair question, you know, why doesn't he? Why doesn't he face charges? But it's also uninformed, because what has been laid against me are not normal charges, they're extraordinary charges. We've seen more charges under the Espionage Act in the last administration than we have in all other administrations in American history. The Espionage Act provides anyone accused of it no chance to make a public defense, you are not allowed to argue based on all the evidence in your favor, because that evidence may be classified, even if it's exculpatory. And so when people say: I why don't you go home and face the music, I say you have to understand that the music is not an open court, and a fair trial.

BW: What would you do if you had an audience with the president right now? What would you say?

ES: I would leave I advising the president to his advisers. That a... I wouldn't presume to place myself on the level to be able to suggest what his course of action should be.

BW: Would you ask him if you come home free and clear?

ES: I think that's a decision that he'll weigh and decide based on what he believes would serve the public interest, and I think that's proper appropriate.

BW: In your mind though, are you blameless? Have you done as you look at, as you look at this, just a good thing? Have you performed, as you see it, a public service?

ES: I think it can be both. I think the most important idea is to remember that there have been times throughout American history, where what is right, is not the same as what is legal. Sometimes to do the right thing you have to break a law. And the key there is in terms of civil disobedience, you have to make sure that what you're risking, what you're bringing on to yourself does not serve as a detriment anyone else, it doesn't hurt anybody else, and if you're volunteering yourself to be used as a negative example for volunteering to spend a lifetime in prison, rather than to spend a time in prison, a short period where you'll come out, you'll advocate, you'll emerge stronger and be able to inspire other people to resist these policies. Are you doing good or you doing bad?

BW: Are you looking for clemency or amnesty, would you like to go home?

ES: I don't think there's ever been any question that I'd like to go home. I mean I've from day one said the I'm doing this to serve my country, I'm still working for the government. Now whether amnesty or clemency ever becomes a possibility is not for me to say. That's a debate for public and the government to decide, but if I could go anywhere in the world that place would be home.

BW: This is a big cultural change, you in effect moved to Russia from Hawaii. What is your life like?

ES: You know it's... it is a major cultural gap and it requires adjustment, but even though I didn't choose to be here, even though, you know, circumstances really trapped me here. I can adapt, I can live life as an American, more or less. That's the beauty of the Internet, is that we're no longer tied to our communities merely by, you know, physical connections. Right now I'm watching a show, *The Wire* [laugh] about surveillance, I'm really enjoying it, the second season's not so great, but....

BW: What do you make of the fact that president Putin's standing in the world, let's say,

has changed so dramatically during that time you have been here?

ES: It is... it's really frustrating, for someone who is working so hard, to expand the domain of our rights and our Privacy, to end up stuck in a place where those rights are being challenged in ways that I would consider deeply unfair. The recent bloggers' registration law in Russia, I I can't think I've any basis for a law like that, not just in Russia, but in any country. The government shouldn't be regulating the operations a free press whether it's NBC, or whether it's some blogger in their living room. There's so much that needs to be defended here in Russia but I'm limited by my inability to speak Russian, and so on and so forth... that its it's an isolating and frustrating thing and I really hope that Russia, the United States, and many other countries will work to push back against this constantly increasing surveillance, against this constant erosion and abrasion of public rights.

BW: Correct me if I'm wrong. The arc of your life is you went from signing up for the military after 9/11, in effect, saying you are willing to die for your country, to then telling people you half expected to die via abduction or assassination, after what you've done, in this instance. That's a pretty dramatic arc since 2003-2004.

ES: I think that's actually a... a solid representation of the dramatic arcs that have happened within our government and the same period. Do you think our nation has changed since September 11? Have our policies changed, has the manner of our government changed? Has civil engagement with the government changed? Have our politics changed? Are things and people radically different in terms of partisanship? There have been radical changes within our government.

BW: Do you see yourself as a patriot?

ES: I do. You know, I think patriot is a word that's thrown around so much that it can be devalued nowadays, but being a patriot doesn't mean prioritizing service to government above all else. Being a patriot means knowing when to protect your country, knowing when to protect your constitution knowing when to protect, your countrymen, from the violations of, and encroachments of adversaries. And those adversaries don't have to be foreign countries, they can be bad policies, they can be officials who, you know, need a little bit more accountability. They can be mistakes of government and simple overreach and things that should never have been tried, or that went wrong.

BW: Did you say earlier you were still serving your government?

ES: Yes.

BW: How so?

ES: When you look at the actions that I've taken, when you look at the carefulness of the programs that have been disclosed, when you look at the way this has all been filtered to the most trusted journalistic institutions in America, when you look at the way the government has had a chance to chime in on this and to make their case, and when you look at the changes that it's resulted in. We've had the first open federal court ever to review these programs declare them likely unconstitutional and Orwellian, and now you see Congress agreeing that massive surveillance, bulk collection needs to end. With all these things happening, that the government agrees all the way up to the president, again, make us stronger, how can it be said that I did not serve my government? How can be said that this harmed the country, when all three branches of government have made reforms as a result of it?

BW: What do you miss about home?

ES: I think the only... the only I answer to something like that, for someone who's in my situation is, you know, what don't I miss? What would you miss? You know, what wouldn't you miss? I miss my family, I miss my home, I miss my colleagues, I miss the work. Because caught up in all these issues, people have, you know unfairly demonized the NSA to a point that's too extreme. These are good people trying to do hard work, for good reasons. The problem that we're confronted with, the challenge that we are facing, is not the working level guy is, you know, some... some mustache twirling villain who is out to destroy your life. It's the fact that senior officials are investing themselves with powers that they're not entitled to, and they're doing it without asking the public for any kind of consent.

BW: Is what I just heard you feeling bad for the damage to the NSA as a result of what you've exposed from the NSA?

ES: But what you need to understand in what I was saying.... I guess not what you need to understand but, what I'm saying is not damage to the NSA it's the sort of conspiratorial thinking that can emerge sometimes when we see the Government has committed real and serious abuses, that lead us to think they can do no good, and the government does have legitimate programs and legitimate purposes and they can do great things. The NSA can as well. I think it's important to remember, that people don't set their lives on fire, they don't say goodbye to their families, actually pack up without saying goodbye to their families, they don't walk away from their extraordinary... extraordinarily comfortable lives, I mean I made a lotta money for a guy with a high school diploma, and, and, and, burn down everything they love for no reason.

BW: So you're a kid from North Carolina, and while I, after this interview, am free to fly back to the United States, you can't, does that hurt you?

ES: I think nobody could, no American could, be prohibited from coming home or traveling anywhere else without feeling a sense of loss, but again, I may have lost my ability to travel, but I've gained the ability to go to sleep at night to put my head on the pillow. I feel comfortable that I've done the right thing, even when it was the hard thing, and I'm comfortable with that.

## **2. Oliver's interview transcript**

[JO: John Oliver and ES: Edward Snowden]

JO: How much do you miss America?

ES: My country is something that travels with me. It's not just geography-

JO: That's already a way too complicated answer. The answer is, I miss it a lot it's the greatest country in the world.

ES: I do miss my country, I do miss my home, I do miss my family.

JO: Do you miss Hot Pockets?

ES: Yes, I miss Hot Pockets very much.

JO: The entire state of Florida? ... Lets just let that silence hang in the air.

JO: Truck nuts, do you miss truck nuts?

ES: I don't know what they are.

JO: Lucky for you, Edward, [pulls out American flag 'truck nuts']

ES: You really thought ahead.

JO: At least one of us did, because of the quandary, the Kafkaesque nightmare that you're in.

JO: Why did you do this?

ES: The NSA has the greatest surveillance capabilities that we've ever seen in history. Now, what they will argue is that they don't use this for nefarious purposes against American citizens. In some ways that's true but the real problem is that they're using these capabilities to make us vulnerable to them and then saying 'while I have a gun pointed at your head I'm not going to pull the trigger, trust me.'

JO: What does the NSA you want look like? Because you applied for a job at the NSA so clearly you see an inherent value in that shadowy organization.

ES: I worked with mass surveillance systems against Chinese hackers, I saw that these things do have some purpose.

JO: And you want your spies to be good at spying, to be fair.

ES: Right, what you don't want is you don't want them spying inside their own country. Spies are great when they're on our side but we can never forget that they're incredibly powerful, incredibly dangerous and if they're off the leash they can end up coming after us.

JO: Just to be clear we're talking about two different things here, domestic surveillance and foreign surveillance. Because domestic surveillance Americans give some of a shit about, foreign surveillance they don't give any remote shit about.

ES: Well the second question is when we talk about foreign surveillance are we applying it in ways that are beneficial?

JO: No one cares, they don't give a shit.

ES: We spied on UNICEF, the Children's Fund. Sure. We spied on lawyers negotiating-

JO: What was UNICEF doing? I mean that's the question there isn't it? ES: The question is are these programs valuable? Are we going to be safer when we're spying on UNICEF and lawyers who are talking about the price of shrimp and clove cigarettes?

JO: I think people say that's good, I think they'll say 'I definitely don't care.'  
Americans do not give a shit about foreign surveillance.

ES: I think you're right.

JO: How many of those documents have you actually read?

ES: I've evaluated all the documents that are in the archive.

JO: You've read every single one?

ES: Well, I do understand what I turned over.

JO: There's a difference between understanding the documents and reading the documents. Because when you're handing over thousands of NSA documents the last thing you want to do is read them.

ES: I recognize the concerns.

JO: Right, because when you are handing over thousands of NSA documents, the last thing you want to do is read them.

ES: I think it's fair to be concerned about, Did this person do enough? Were they careful enough? Were they ...

JO: Especially when you are handling material like we know you are handling.

ES: In my defense, I'm not handling anything anymore. That's been passed to the journalists. They are using extraordinary security measures to make sure this is reported in the most responsible way.

JO: But those are journalists with a lower technical skillset than you. ES: That's true, but they do understand just like you and I do just how important this is to get right.

JO: So The New York Times took a slide, didn't redact it properly, and in the end it was possible for people to see that something was being used in Mosul on Al Qaeda.

ES: That is a problem.

JO: That is a f----up.

ES: That is a f----up and these things do happen in reporting. In journalism, we have to accept that some mistakes will be made. This is a fundamental concept of liberty.

JO: Right, but you have to own that then. You are giving documents with information you know could be harmful, which could get out there.

ES: Yes, if people act in bad faith.

JO: No, we're not even talking about bad faith. We're talking about incompetence.

ES: We are, but you will never be completely free from risk if you are free. The only time you can be completely free from risk is when you are in prison.

JO: You said in your letter to Brazil, "I was motivated by a belief that the citizens of the world deserve to understand the system in which they live, my greatest fear was that no one would listen to my warning. Never have I been so glad to have been so wrong." How did that feel?

ES: I was initially terrified that this was going to be a three-day story that everyone was going to forget about it. But when I saw that everybody around the world said, whoa this is a problem, we have to do something about this' it felt like vindication.

JO: Even in America?

ES: Even in America, and I think we're seeing something amazing which is, if you ask the American people to make tough decision, to confront tough issues, to think about hard problems they'll actually surprise you.

JO: Here's the problem. I did ask some Americans and boy did it surprise me.  
[Shows video of on the street interviews in NY where Americans don't know who Edward Snowden is or mistake him for Julian Assange]

JO: I guess on the plus side you might be able to go home because no one knows who the fuck you are.

ES: You can't expect everybody to be uniformly informed.

JO: So did you do this to solve a problem?

ES: I did this to give the American people a chance to decide for themselves what kind of government they want to have. That is a conversation that I think the American people deserve to decide.

JO: There's no doubt it is a critical conversation but is it a conversation we have the capacity to have? Because it's so complicated that we don't fundamentally understand it.

ES: It is a challenging conversation, I mean it's difficult for most people to even conceptualize. The problem is the unit is massively complex and so much of it is visible. Service providers, technicians, engineers, the phone number-

JO: Let me stop you right there Edward because this is the whole problem right here. This is the whole problem, I glaze over because it's like the IT guy comes into your office and you go, 'oh shit.'

ES: In fairness-

JO: 'Oh shit, don't teach me anything, I don't want to learn, you smell like canned soup.'

ES: It's a real challenge to figure out how we communicate things that require sort of years and years of technical understanding and compress that into seconds of speech. I'm sympathetic to the problem.

JO: But the thing is, everything you did only matters if we have this conversation properly, so let me help you out there. You mentioned in an interview that the NSA was passing around naked photos of people.

ES: Yes this is something where it's not actually seen as a big deal in the culture of NSA because you see naked pictures all the time.

JO: That terrifies people, because when we asked people about that, this is the response we get.

[Shows video of on the street interviews in NY where Americans outraged by the idea that the NSA could see their nude photos and not thinking that such a program exists]

ES: Well, the good news is there's no program named the 'dick pic program.' The bad news is they are still collecting everybody's information, including your dick pics.

JO: What's the over or under on that last guy sending a dick pic recently? You don't need to guess, I'll show you.

[Video of a man featured in the last two videos explaining that he recently sent a picture of his penis to a girl]

JO: This is the most visible line in the sand for people, can they see my dick? With that in mind look inside that folder. That is a picture of my dick. So lets go through each NSA program and explain to me its capabilities in regards to that photograph of my penis.

JO: So, 702 Surveillance. Can they see my dick?

ES: Yes, the FISA Amendment Act of 2008, which 702 falls under, allows the bulk collection of internet communications that are one end foreign.

JO: Bulk collection, now we're talking about my dick...

ES: So if you have your email somewhere like Gmail hosted on a server overseas, or transferred on a server overseas or that anytime crosses outside the border of the US your junk ends up in the database.

JO: So it doesn't have to be sending a pic to a German?

ES: No, even if you submit something within the US your wholly domestic communication between you and your wife can go from New York to London and back and get caught up in the database.

JO: Executive Order 12333, dick or no dick?

ES: YES, EO 12333 is what the NSA uses when the other authorities aren't aggressive enough or they're not catching as much as they'd like, for example-

JO: How are they going to see my dick? I'm only concerned about my penis.

ES: When you send your junk, through Gmail for example, that's stored on Google's servers. Google moves data from data center to data center invisibly to you, without your knowledge. Your data could be moved outside the borders of the United States. Temporarily, when your junk was passed by Gmail the NSA got a copy of that.

JO: Prism?

ES: Prism is how they pull your junk out of Google, with Google's involvement. All of the different Prism partners, people like Yahoo, Facebook, Google, the Government deputizes them to be sort of their little surveillance sheriff.

JO: Upstream?

ES: Upstream is how they snatch your junk as it transits the internet.

JO: Mystic?

ES: If you're describing your junk on the phone.

JO: But do they have the content of that junk call or just the duration of that junk call?

ES: They have the content as well but only for a few countries. If you are on vacation in the Bahamas yes.

JO: And finally, you need to remind yourself?

ES: No, I'm just not sure what to do with this [holds up file containing JO's nude photo] It's a lot of responsibility.

JO: Yah it is a lot of responsibility, that's the whole point.

ES: Should I? [Holds up folder]

JO: No you should absolutely not and it's unbelievable that you would do that. Actually it's entirely believable.

JO: 215?

ES: No, but they can probably tell who you're sharing your junk pictures with because they're seeing who you're texting with, when you're calling.

JO: If you call a penis enlargement center at three in the morning and that call lasted 90 minutes-

ES: They would have a record of your phone number calling that number which is a penis enlargement center, they would say they don't know it's a penis enlargement center but of course they can look it up.

JO: Edward, if they American people understood this, they would be absolutely horrified.

ES: I guess I never thought about putting it in the context of your junk.

JO: Would a good takeaway from this be until such time as we've sorted all of this don't take pictures of your dick?

ES: No, if we do that-

JO: Wait hold on, you're saying no, you should keep taking pictures of your dick?

ES: You shouldn't change your behavior because a government agency somewhere is doing the wrong thing. If we sacrifice our values because we're afraid we don't care about those values very much.

JO: That is a pretty inspiring answer to the question, 'hey why did you just send me a picture of your dick?' 'Because I love America, that's why.'

## List of Figures

Figure 1: This is the “News Audiences’ Knowledge of Current Events” figure by a Pew Research Center in 2012.

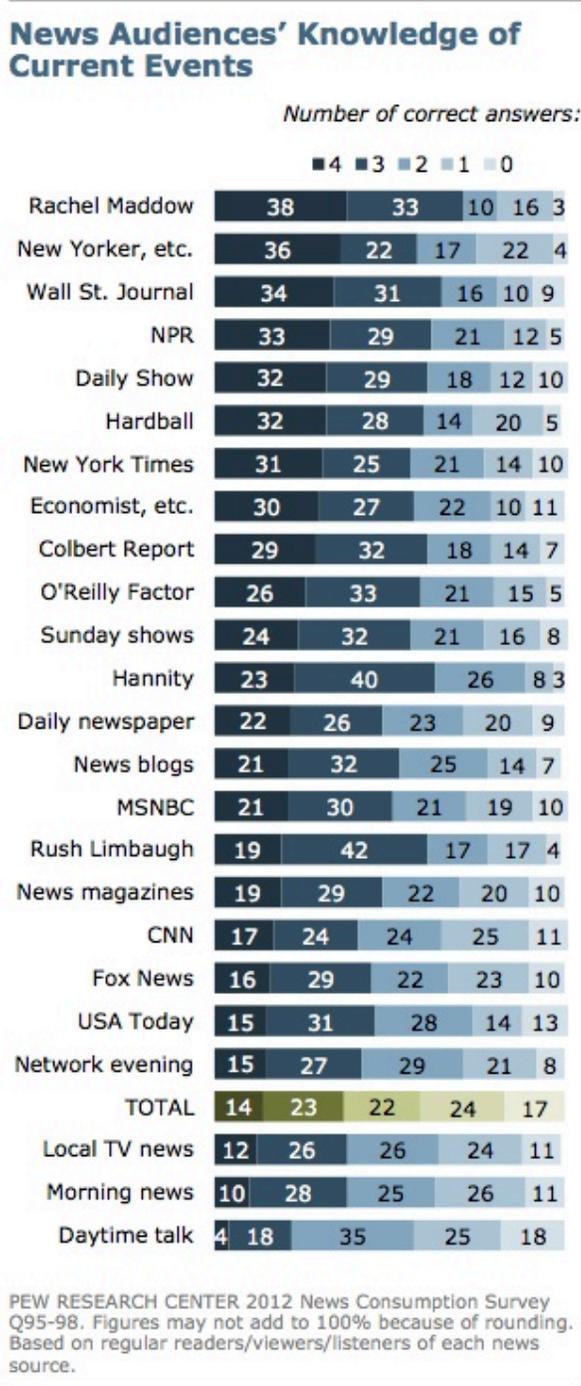


Figure 2: This is the “News Consumption Survey” by the Pew Research Center in 2012.

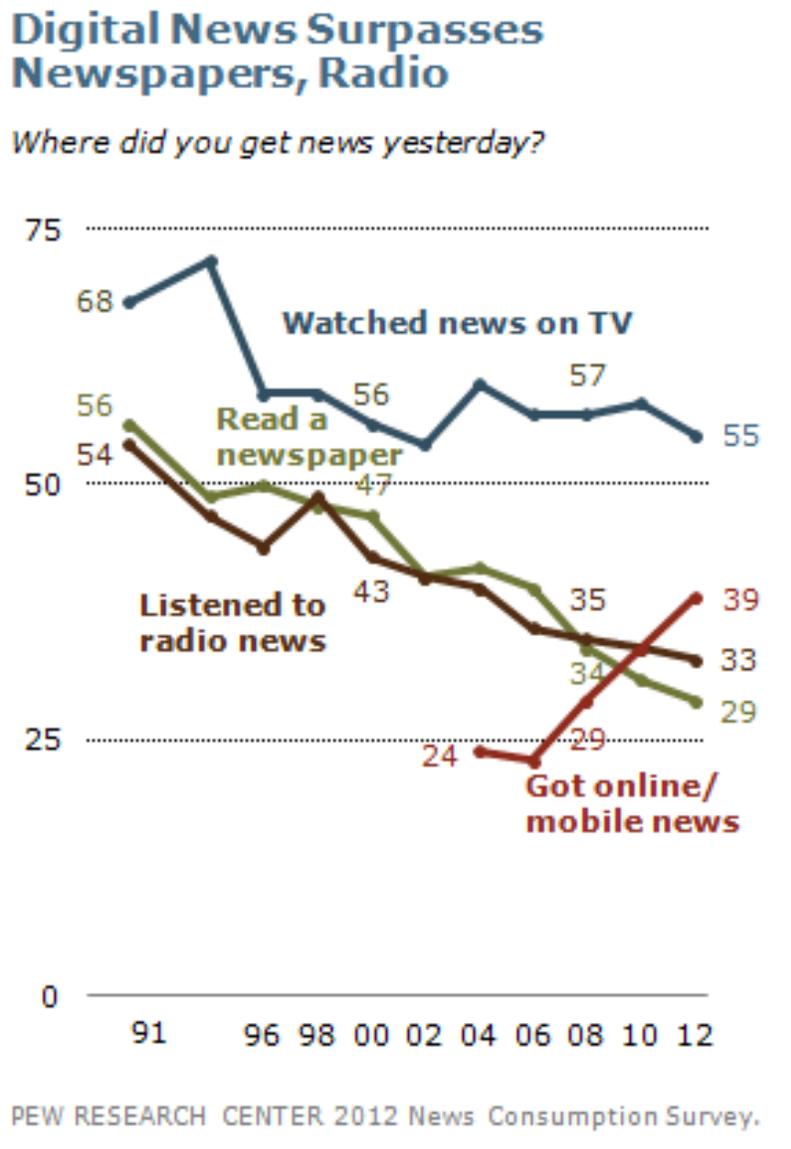
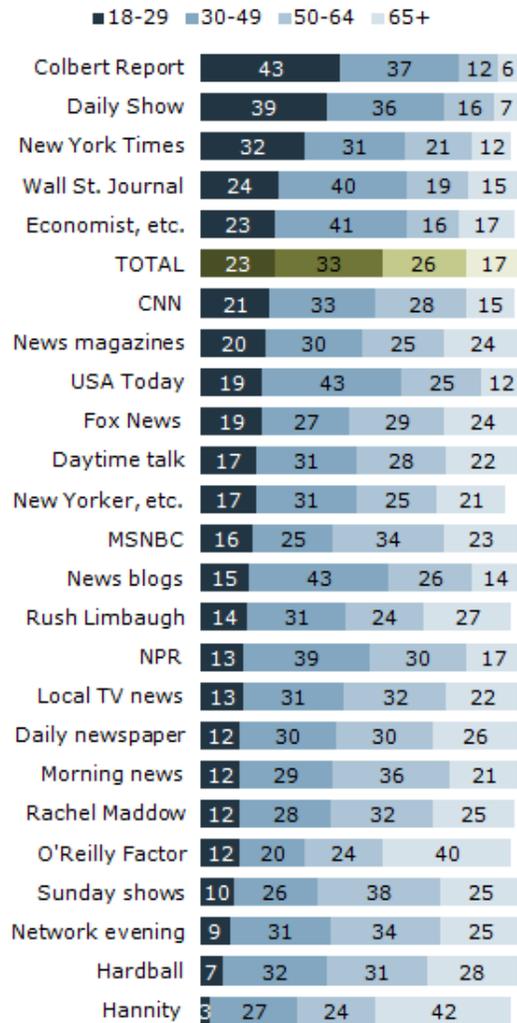


Figure 3: This is the “Age of News Audiences Profile” by the Pew Research Center in 2012.

### Audience Profiles: Young and Old News Audiences



PEW RESEARCH CENTER 2012 News Consumption Survey. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding. Based on regular readers/viewers/listeners of each news source.

Figure 4: This is the “A Female Suffrage Fancy” cartoon published in *the Puck*.

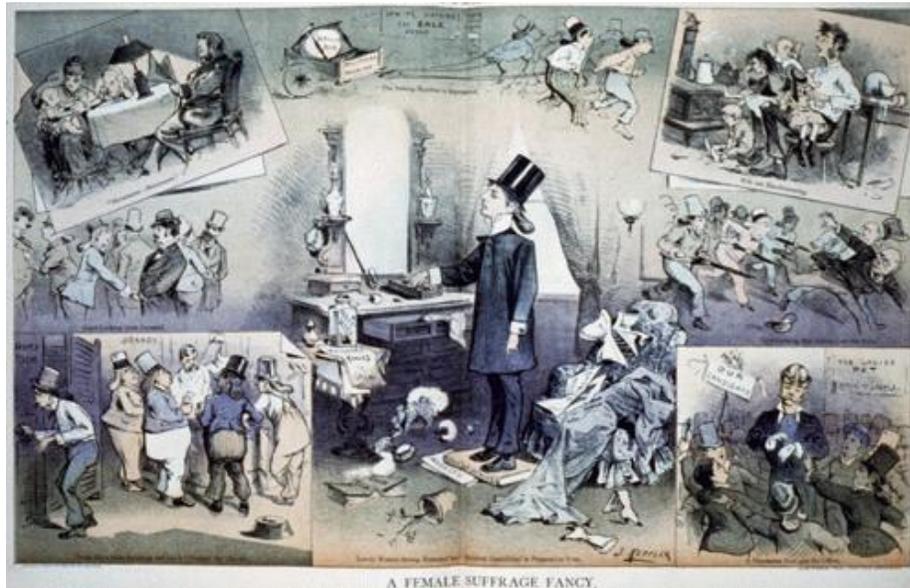


Figure 5: This is the “Join or Die” cartoon by Benjamin Franklin published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*.



Figure 6: This is the “At Last” cartoon by Nina Allender published in *the Suffragist*.



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