

“The Planet’s on Fucking Fire!”: Climate Coverage in Jester Journalism

Meredith J. Alling

Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University

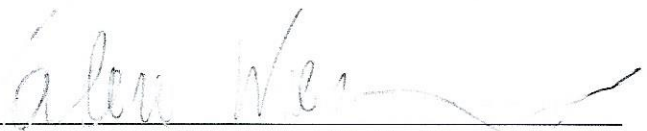
Department of Communication

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science

December 2020

Approved by:



Valerie Wieskamp, Ph.D., Thesis Director



Laura England, M.S., Second Reader



Jennifer Gray, Ph.D., Departmental Honors Director

Abstract

This paper examines climate change communication in *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight*'s coverage of the Green New Deal. Jester journalism, a term used to describe *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight*, is defined here as a satirical news parody that performs rhetorical criticism. Findings from a rhetorical analysis of two clips from *The Daily Show* and one episode of *Last Week Tonight* are described, and recommendations for future climate communication in jester journalism are outlined.

Comedians Covering Climate on Cable

Comedy shows like *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight* present a unique opportunity for climate change communication. Television news in general discusses climate change infrequently, and what little climate coverage exists is somewhat warped by overuse of the conflict frame and journalists' efforts to maintain objectivity. Satirical news parodies that perform rhetorical critiques, or jester journalism, are made for the purpose of comedy, not reporting the news. Striving for comedy and not journalistic excellence can allow jester journalists to craft messages without the restraint of objectivity or a dependence on the conflict frame, making them important sites for climate change communication.

Cable TV's Climate Communication Crisis

Climate change is an urgent and ongoing problem, yet television news does not provide adequate climate coverage. Cable news programs rarely discuss climate change, perhaps because producers assume that it is too depressing or too abstract for audiences to engage with. More subtly, the journalistic norms television news tries to adhere to—like objectivity and the conflict frame—can actually impede accurate depictions of climate reality and scientific discourse. Here, objectivity refers to journalists' efforts to give equal weight to opposing perspectives on an issue in order to appear impartial, and the conflict frame refers specifically to television news' tendency to discuss climate change in terms of scientific debate instead of health or social justice contexts. While these flaws are discouraging, cable news shows are not the only avenues for climate reporting. News parodies like *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight* cover topics that TV news does, but without the baggage of journalistic standards. Although *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight* are not news programs, they present unique opportunities to cover climate issues with greater efficacy than some cable news shows can.

Science in general, and climate change in general, are under-discussed on television news programs. Science news, including climate news, is largely absent from TV news programs (Feldman, 2017). A lack of science- and climate-related news may be due in part to producers' assumptions that the general public is uninterested in the information; climate stories may be perceived as dismal and irrelevant in contrast to the immediacy and swift pace of breaking news (Smith, 2005, 2017). To make matters worse, even though mainstream media is the general public's primary source of science knowledge (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004), science communicators in mainstream media¹ may not share their peers' training or expertise. Smith found that the level of science understanding British media professionals who covered science displayed was drastically insufficient when compared to the economic knowledge economic media professionals possessed or the political knowledge political media professionals possessed (2005). Not only is climate news under-reported, some journalists may lack the expertise necessary to cover it properly.

In addition to a lack of coverage, TV news' depiction of climate change is hampered by the journalistic convention of objectivity. Journalists strive to appear impartial in order to maintain their audiences' trust. However, in attempts to maintain impartiality, cable news has grossly misrepresented the scientific conversation about climate change. The process of forming a scientific consensus is quite different from the process of forming a political consensus and does not translate to television as well. Difficulty portraying scientific debate, combined with a need to appear impartial, resulted in televised debates where news programs pitted one scientist against another. These debates failed to communicate both the processes by which scientists

¹ In this paper, I focus on climate communication on cable news. However, Smith and other scholars whose work features in this paper do not refer to cable news specifically, but "mainstream media," a vague and somewhat outdated term.

evaluate claims and just how few scientists disputed the growing consensus that anthropogenic climate change is a reality² (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Smith, 2005). Furthermore, journalists' adherence to impartiality may prevent them from questioning the trustworthiness or appropriateness of the experts they cite (Borden & Tew, 2007). For example, journalists may present the findings of a study funded by oil companies about the impacts of climate change without noting the obvious conflict of interest. Impartiality is essential to quality journalism but can distort climate communication when combined with a lack of scientific understanding.

Cable news' reliance on drama and the conflict frame also undermines its climate reporting. The frames that journalists use guide audiences in thinking through an issue and emphasize certain aspects of complex issues. American journalism's overreliance on the conflict frame comes from structural biases that favor drama and novelty (Feldman, 2013). While conflict is certainly present in humans' struggle against climate change, it can sometimes be difficult to find in such an insidious, drawn-out crisis. Part of the reason TV journalists latched on to the climate science debates was to highlight the conflict between different stakeholders in the debate (Feldman, 2013). Using a disaster frame has been somewhat more productive; natural disasters provide a convenient vehicle to discuss the consequences of climate change. However, explaining the impacts of climate change solely in terms of natural disasters can overwhelm audiences. Further, relegating climate change to disaster coverage fails to reveal the ways in which climate change relates to audiences' personal actions or needs (Smith, 2005). Part of the reason television news' climate coverage is lacking is an over-reliance on the conflict frame.

Cable news struggles to discuss climate change productively. It assumes a lack of interest on the part of its audience, in spite of climate change's current effects on human life. Although

² An infamous study published in 2013 found that ninety seven percent of scientific articles about climate change supported the existence of anthropogenic, or human-caused climate change (Cook et al.)

climate change's accelerating impacts are garnering it more attention than before, it has historically lacked the sustained attention given to topics like gun violence or economic upheaval. A lack of expertise, a strict interpretation of impartiality, and a reliance on the conflict frame further hamper climate coverage. However, TV news programs are not the only places people get their climate news. Comedy shows like *The Daily Show (TDS)* and *Last Week Tonight (LWT)* cover science and climate and present exciting opportunities to circumvent these shortcomings.

Not “Fake News,” But Real Rhetorical Critique

Although it may seem appropriate to include *TDS* and *LWT* under the umbrella of TV news, these shows are not TV news, or even journalism at all. Rather, *TDS* and *LWT* are comedy shows that function as rhetorical critiques of journalism. The similarities between the way *TDS* and *LWT* present themselves and shows like Anderson Cooper 360 present themselves are part of *TDS* and *LWT*'s comedy. This comedy not only makes fun of cable news, it asks important questions about cable news and makes space for humor in cable news' construction of reality. To avoid confusion, *TDS* and *LWT* need a term to distinguish them from the programs they emulate. While “fake news” was the label for some time, modern usage ties that phrase to faulty journalism, which *TDS* and *LWT* are not. *TDS* and *LWT* therefore must adopt a new title that more accurately reflects their relationship to journalism.

TDS and *LWT* cannot be journalism because journalism is their performance, not their intent. Part of *TDS*' comedy comes from the way it uses stereotypical elements of television news to tell jokes and make fun. The host wears a suit and sits at a podium, but curses freely. The graphics are high quality, but include a photoshopped image of a senator in a diaper. If viewers cannot tell that *TDS* is not meant to be taken seriously, they miss the show's central joke

(Druick, 2009). While journalistic activities may be the premise of these shows' comedy, as long as their end goal is comedy, they are not performing journalism (McKain, 2005). Jon Stewart, the show's first host, insisted he was a comic and not a journalist (Borden & Tew, 2007). Trevor Noah, the show's current host, acknowledges that "comedy" is an incomplete description of what the show does, but describes *TDS* as a platform for his beliefs rather than a journalistic endeavor (Ordoña, 2020). *TDS* lacks journalistic intent and therefore cannot be classified as journalism.

TDS is not journalism but a rhetorical critique of journalism, politics, and news media writ large. *TDS* both calls attention to prominent issues in the public sphere and plays with the messages broadcast about those issues in such a way that prompts deeper thought in its viewers (Waisanen, 2009). In re-editing footage and cracking jokes, *TDS* dissolves the infallibility of dominant media narratives and brings them under scrutiny, all for the greater purpose of a hearty laugh (McKain, 2005). Though Stewart may not have intentionally deconstructed headlines to educate the public, the material he chose to play with and the way in which he played ultimately resulted in rhetorical critique.

LWT is also a rhetorical critique, but with a few key differences. John Oliver filled in for Jon Stewart during an extended absence on *TDS*, and audiences loved Oliver enough for him to start his own show when his time on *TDS* ended. Thus, *LWT* was born. *LWT* borrows some themes from *TDS*: commenting on popular news stories, lambasting weak reporting, and cracking jokes. However, rather than flit from story to story, *LWT* covers one topic extensively. Oliver's coverage is generally more nuanced, and he tends to target powerful people or institutions rather than news outlets (Wild, 2019). Further, Oliver frequently uses the show's budget to fight the injustices he covers. When the U.S. Postal Service was under fire, *LWT* released stamps whose profits helped the Postal Service. When Oliver's piece on coal baron Bob

Murray resulted in a lawsuit, Oliver celebrated the lawsuit's conclusion with an elaborate song-and-dance number in which he hurled insults at Murray. Though minor and sometimes impractical, *LWT* takes legal and financial action on the issues it covers (Wild, 2019), something *TDS* does not. Though ostensibly a spinoff of *TDS*, *LWT* more closely resembles journalism in its extensive coverage of a selected topic and explanatory tone.

Even though *TDS* and *LWT* aren't journalism they invite humor into American journalism's construction of reality. Parodies like *TDS*, according to Druick, "[address] a sophisticated reader or viewer expected to decode multiple texts in dialogic relation" (2009, p. 301). As previously mentioned, *TDS* is most entertaining to viewers who know and understand the news enough to fully appreciate the show's goofs. In fact, one study found that 40% of viewers who preferred clips of *TDS* and *The Colbert Report* over other television genres did so because such shows "made the news fun," implying that these viewers got their news from alternate sources (Young, 2013). *TDS* isn't journalism, and it isn't just any old type of comedy; it is satire, and it is one that caters to a knowledgeable audience.

Although *TDS*, *LWT*, and other news parodies have traditionally called themselves "fake news," this is no longer an appropriate description. *TDS* has long referred to itself as fake news, as do those who study it (Borden & Tew, 2007; McKain, 2005). This is a useful term because it references the journalistic practices and tropes *TDS* appropriates without implying a journalistic intention. However, since the show's inception, "fake news" has evolved to mean something else in the world of media and politics. Today, describing *TDS* or *LWT* as "fake news" suggests they are players in the contentious debate over which news sources are trustworthy, and implies that they seek to be taken as truth. Instead, *TDS* and *LWT* inspire their viewers to think critically both about traditional journalism and about the content they release, something a fake news outlet

would not want (Borden & Tew, 2007). However useful the term may have been in the past, continuing to describe *TDS* and *LWT* as “fake news” is more confusing than helpful.

Rather than “fake news,” I propose we instead call *TDS*, *LWT*, and other satirical news parodies that perform rhetorical criticism, jester journalism. This new term conveys the same idea that “fake news” once did: this type of show takes on elements of news reporting but is distinct from what it imitates or mocks. Further, the word “fake” carries the connotation that the events and ideas Stewart and Noah discuss or the work they do are somehow unreal. “Jester journalism,” while still separating *TDS* and *LWT* from accredited sources, instead emphasizes the humor these shows provide as they unpack the news. Moreover, jester journalism’s differences from traditional journalism are part of what enables it to communicate effectively about climate change.

Clowning Around with Climate

Jester journalism’s comedic role is precisely what enables it to talk about climate in a more productive way than traditional TV news can. By adopting the appearance of journalism without intending to do journalism, jester journalism is free to explore climate change without the obligation to appear impartial or objective, as traditional journalism must. Jester journalism also has the freedom to abandon the conflict frame when it so desires; audiences are already engaged with the comedy, so jester journalism doesn’t need to rely on the conflict frame to capture audiences’ attention like traditional TV news does. Indeed, jester journalism’s climate coverage aligns with prevailing scientific understandings, increasing viewers’ certainty about the reality of climate change. These advantages beg the question: how does jester journalism fit into the ongoing struggle for better climate communication?

Because comedy is jester journalism's purpose, it doesn't strive for impartiality like traditional journalism does. This is a major advantage for climate communication. Past TV news coverage of climate change has pitted climate scientists against each other or climate skeptics, sending the message that the science was not settled and that credible experts doubted the existence of climate change (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). *TDS* and *LWT* aren't required to appear impartial or balanced and can thus more accurately capture scientific perspectives on climate change. In fact, jester journalism has actively fought back against poor representations of science on television news (*LWT*'s John Oliver famously did so in a segment called "A Statistically Representative Climate Change Debate"). Jester journalism frequently recycles clips from cable news, ridiculing poor choices of expert interviewees and denouncing inaccuracies. *TDS* in particular has been known to release unedited footage of interviews that includes awkward silences and pauses, undermining the credibility of so-called experts (McKain, 2005). Ironically, in being unbound by impartiality, jester journalism can better strive for accuracy.

Jester journalism's comedy also allows it to provide alternatives to the conflict frame. Since these types of shows entertain by telling jokes, coverage need not rely on dramatizing scientific debate to hook audiences. *TDS* regularly frames climate change in terms of public accountability, and has used environmental, economic, public health, and moral frames to discuss climate change (Feldman 2013; 2017). In so doing, *TDS* helps its audience understand the threats climate change poses beyond natural disasters and makes more direct connections between climate change and its audiences' personal interests. For example, in *TDS*' coverage of the Green New Deal, Noah argued that audiences should support clean energy transportation alternatives to flight because airplane bathrooms are extremely unpleasant. Jester journalism also has the advantage of dedicating more time to individual topics, which allows hosts to more fully

characterize the nature of climate research and climate debate (Feldman, 2017). Even when the conflict frame is appropriate or unavoidable, jester journalism's sustained attention to a topic can provide nuance lacking in traditional TV coverage of climate issues.

Despite their sole purpose being entertainment, jester journalism's climate coverage is robust. A 2008 study found that *TDS* covered science in general and climate change in particular twice as much as the mainstream press did, and *TDS*' regular viewers report paying more attention to climate change than its infrequent viewers (Brewer & McKnight, 2015; Feldman, 2013). *TDS*' coverage of climate change also tends to be consistent with the prevailing scientific understanding of global warming (Feldman, 2013). This is significant. By expressing agreement with the scientific consensus or referring to climate change as an accepted reality, the hosts of *TDS* and other jester journalism programs can increase viewers' certainty about the scientific consensus and existence of anthropogenic climate change (Brewer & McKnight, 2015, 2017).

Innovative as jester journalism is, the way it recycles footage may be problematic. Both *TDS* and *LWT* recycle news content, using cable television both as a source of ridicule and a source of information. The same news channels that Oliver and Noah mock supply evidence for their arguments. Some scholars argue that the inclusion of these clips comes with their journalistic baggage: blind trust in certain authoritative organizations, inclusion of unqualified experts, and, of course, conflict frames (Borden & Tew, 2007; Feldman 2013, 2017). Even though both shows hold such clips up to scrutiny, building a show around the faults of other shows necessarily builds those faults into the structure of the criticism (McKain, 2005). However, it could be argued that the fresh perspective and additional context *TDS* and *LWT* add to the clips they use negates the problems inherent in recycling them (Borden & Tew, 2007). In

fact, *TDS* frequently criticizes political polarization and partisanship (Feldman, 2013), a critique not necessarily of the conflict frame omnipresent in journalism, but on rampant conflict itself.

Jester journalism's unique format presents exciting possibilities for climate communicators. Although *TDS*, *LWT*, and other shows of their kind cannot be counted as legitimate journalism, they still provide opportunities for viewers to engage with news stories, albeit in a more humorous context. The problems that plague traditional journalism—presumed lack of interest in climate stories, giving equal time to scientists and science skeptics, and a hyper focus on conflict and drama—do not necessarily have to plague jester journalism. As long as they can get a good joke about it, Noah and Oliver are free to cover topics that are as depressing as climate change can be. Do these advantages mean jester journalism is an ideal medium for climate change communication? How does jester journalism factor into the effort to foster more productive conversation about climate change in the United States?

Research Methods

To answer these questions, I performed textual analysis on content from *TDS* and *LWT*. Although both have hours of environment- and climate-related content, I focus on their approaches to a recent topic both covered: the Green New Deal. The Green New Deal was a policy proposal that aimed to address the climate crisis through the creation of clean energy jobs and infrastructure changes. The proposal also contained provisions aimed at meeting the needs of vulnerable communities most impacted or likely to be impacted by climate change. Comparing the ways *TDS* and *LWT* discussed the same climate-focused bill allowed me to identify pertinent differences in their discussions. Although this approach cannot speak to differences in how these two shows select topics to cover or long-term patterns in the environmental issues they draw attention to, it nonetheless provides insight into how jester journalism explains environmental

issues, characterizes attempts to implement environmental policy, and conveys the urgency of climate action. This approach also permits an understanding of the diversity within jester journalism. Although *TDS* and *LWT* fall under the same umbrella, they are distinct entities with different rhetorical styles. These rhetorical differences imply that not all jester journalism is equally suited to climate communication, an idea I explore later.

I performed a rhetorical analysis on three YouTube clips: *LWT*'s feature on the Green New Deal, *TDS*' coverage of the proposal, and a parody trailer mocking conservative's reactions that *TDS* produced. As I watched, I paid close attention to how the shows presented the Green New Deal, how, if at all, they presented climate change, and what they chose to make fun of. Although *LWT* and *TDS* scarcely mentioned climate change itself, Noah openly supported measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and Oliver stressed the need for climate action. The shows presented the proposal in somewhat different ways; while Noah examined reactions to the Green New Deal and Oliver unpacked the proposal itself, both agreed the Green New Deal was flawed. Oliver identified its rollout as the primary problem while Noah appeared to denounce the proposal altogether. The shows also used humor differently. Noah tended to directly make fun of cable news hosts and politicians. Oliver, on the other hand, made less fun of specific people and more frequently referenced outside topics, like Elon Musk and *Game of Thrones*. *TDS* and *LWT* approached the Green New Deal differently, and their approaches mirrored the type of comedy they used.

Climate Communication in Jester Journalism's Green New Deal Coverage

TDS and *LWT* both covered the Green New Deal, but the shows' particular approaches to comedy had a significant impact on their climate policy messaging. Both shows presented climate change as a legitimate issue worth solving and supported measures to reduce greenhouse

gas emissions. *LWT*'s focus on unpacking the proposal itself likely made it the more effective of the two, but *TDS* and *LWT* told jokes that targeted conservatives. Jokes targeting a particular political group, while a staple of jester journalism, are risky in the climate communication context. Overall, both shows did the bare minimum: they backed climate change, gave the Green New Deal some exposure, and told jokes along the way. Neither was a perfect exemplar of climate communication, but *LWT*'s approach to comedy made it the stronger of the two.

Overview

TDS' coverage of the Green New Deal centered more on reactions to the proposal than proposal itself. Noah began not by mentioning the Green New Deal, but one of its backers, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez before introducing the proposal with a montage of cable news clips listing its goals. He expressed shock at the Green New Deal's lofty aims, saying, "Wow. That's a lot of major issues for a climate change plan to solve" (The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, 2019, February 16). Noah then likened the proposal to old-fashioned cure-all elixirs, a comparison meant to convey his skepticism that the bill can effectively accomplish such a wide variety of goals. He then transitioned to partisan reactions, which occupied the majority of the clip's time. Conservatives were portrayed as reactionary dunces, unnecessarily stoking fear. Noah chastised them thus: "There are enough real questions about the Green New Deal for conservatives to take issue with, but I guess it's more fun to just scare America into thinking it's about to become a vegan North Korea" (The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, 2019, February 16). Democrats, on the other hand, were made out to be a mixed bag. Noah zeroed in on Nancy Pelosi calling the Green New Deal "the Green Dream or whatever," pronouncing her reaction "shady" (The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, 2019, February 16). Democratic presidential candidates' support for the proposal was mentioned, but Pelosi's misquote received

the most emphasis. *TDS*' coverage of the Green New Deal was more based in reactions to the proposal than details about the proposal itself. Though the show mocked those who opposed the bill, Noah himself did not endorse the Green New Deal.

In addition to airing a segment on the Green New Deal, *TDS* created a parody movie trailer on its YouTube channel mocking conservative reactions to the proposal. Clips of Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, and other conservative pundits declaring "government forced veganism is in order" and calling the Green New Deal "Marxism" were set to a cliché horror trailer soundtrack (The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, 2019, February 13). These strong statements were paired with melodramatic images: a burger falling to the ground in slow motion, a plane plummeting from the sky, solar panels tracking the sun's path through the sky. The trailer concluded with Hannity claiming the Green New Deal will "destroy America" (The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, 2019, February 13), his voice distorted, followed by footage of an atomic bomb exploding. After the explosion, a creepy music box played while the camera zoomed in on a still of Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez's face, her eyes edited bright green. Viewers of Hannity and Ingraham's programs might take the trailer at face value, but commenters clearly understood it was meant to be a joke. Some sarcastically agreed with the trailer and others openly denounced Fox News and Republicans. *TDS* not only made fun of conservatives' responses to the Green New Deal in a televised segment, it made a separate piece devoted entirely to that premise.

While *TDS* covered the discussion surrounding the Green New Deal, *LWT* focused on explaining the Green New Deal. After a brief primer on climate change and quick overview of public figures' reactions, Oliver declared his intention to "see what [the Green New Deal] is, what it isn't, and most importantly, where we should maybe go from here" (LastWeekTonight, 2019, May 12). Rather than rattle off the Green New Deal's numerous goals, Oliver highlighted

its primary interests: reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing renewable energy, and creating quality jobs. Oliver did not tout the proposal as an airtight path forward but called it a “conversation starter.” (LastWeekTonight, 2019, May 12). Oliver argued the proposal’s most significant flaw was not its construction, but its rollout because “it gave an opening for these idiots [in reference to conservative newscasters] to pretend the Green New Deal was all about hamburger stealing, when it is not!” (LastWeekTonight, 2019, May 12). From there, Oliver pivoted to explaining carbon pricing, a policy he suggested will be part of ongoing conversation about the Green New Deal. Oliver’s explanation of carbon pricing touched on its implementation in Canada, opponents’ pushbacks, and the failure of a similar measure in the U.S. Senate. Throughout the latter half of the show, Oliver eagerly called on Bill Nye the Science Guy to explain relevant scientific concepts. Nye played an irritable scientist so fed up with climate inaction he lit a globe aflame, shouting, “The planet’s on fucking fire!”. While nowhere near as educational as a documentary, *LWT*’s coverage of the Green New Deal concentrated on describing and contextualizing the proposal, not just reacting to it.

The Bare Minimum: Real, Serious, and Relevant

Though *TDS* and *LWT* barely referenced climate change itself in their coverage, they nonetheless engaged in constructive climate communication practices. Both shows indicated that climate change was a problem worth solving, and neither mentioned scientific conflict. Each host endorsed some form of policy or industry change to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Although *TDS* and *LWT* told jokes about the Green New Deal and people associated with it, climate change itself was not a target of humor, sidestepping the danger of trivializing climate change itself. Finally, simply covering the Green New Deal was helpful. By continuing to expose audiences to the proposal and perpetuate the conversation about addressing climate change, *TDS*

and *LWT* implicitly produced valuable climate communication. Although climate change didn't receive much attention in the shows' coverage, they nonetheless performed beneficial climate communication.

If nothing else, both *TDS* and *LWT* successfully conveyed that climate change is bad. Although *TDS* did not contextualize its coverage of the Green New Deal by listing climate impacts like *LWT* did, neither show questioned the necessity of climate solutions. In fact, both hosts expressed support for changes within the United States to reduce or mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Noah argued wherever sensible, low-energy transportation options should be available. Oliver insisted that a diverse array of climate solutions, including lab-grown meats and building better nuclear plants, are necessary to effectively combat climate change. By openly endorsing changes to U.S. systems in order to combat climate change, these comedians may have bolstered their audiences' beliefs that global warming is a genuine threat. Brewer and McKnight found, in a 2015 study, that jester journalists "beliefs about global warming were also associated with certainty that global warming is happening" (p. 647). Although neither Oliver nor Noah said "climate change is happening" outright during their segments, their interest in climate solutions implied an understanding that global warming is occurring, an understanding they may have encouraged or reinforced in their audiences.

Both shows also avoided telling jokes about climate itself, a good choice for climate communication. Issue-related humor, or humor that makes fun of a particular problem, may reduce how serious audiences think the problem is. Telling jokes about climate change, then, may make it seem less threatening. However, telling jokes about how climate change is covered in the media may not produce the same effect because it is the media being mocked, and not climate change (Feldman, 2017). The interesting thing about *LWT* and *TDS*' coverage of the

Green New Deal, though, is that neither told jokes about the media's perception of global warming. Oliver roasted the ridiculous Earth Day crafts promoted by a morning talk show but did not tell any jokes about melting glaciers or reporters talking about melting glaciers. Instead, each comedians' material either made fun of public figures associated with the Green New Deal or told jokes about completely unrelated ideas. Oliver, for instance, veered off topic to argue that pie is the best desert, a funny rant that had absolutely nothing to do with the matter at hand. Because neither show dabbled in climate-related humor, audiences may have been more likely to think of climate change as a threat.

TDS and *LWT* also engaged in positive climate communication practices simply by covering topics relevant to climate change. Jester journalism can reach audiences who may not be interested in environmental issues but are still interested in current events or those who just find the shows entertaining (Brewer & McKnight, 2017; Chattoo, n. d.). In fact, a 2017 study of Oliver's "Statistically Representative Climate Debate" found that the debate's effects were strongest on those with lower interest in the environment. The authors suggested that *LWT* and shows like it could contribute to climate communication by closing the gap between viewers who are already invested in environmental issues and viewers who are not (Brewer & McKnight, 2017). Audiences may come to jester journalism wanting nothing more than a laugh and may leave with a greater investment in relevant issues.

Broad and Focused Approaches to Climate in Jester Journalism

Jester journalism may be a niche genre, but there are still variations within. All jester journalism is united by the premise of comedy, but each comedian has a unique style and approach to writing jokes. When *TDS* and *LWT*'s approaches to humor differ, there will inevitably be differences in the way shows frame climate change. *LWT* is more focused, making

its coverage more nuanced, while *TDS* is broader, making its coverage shallower. Not only does jester journalism provide exposure, it can also provide a framework to help audiences make sense of information in the future (Chattoo, n. d.). This can be helpful when jester journalism uses its rhetorical criticism to expose weaknesses in common arguments about climate issues. However, if *TDS* or *LWT* are a viewer's first exposure to climate issues, any mistakes the shows make may color the viewer's future understanding of the problem. Recognizing the style of a jester journalism show is vital to assessing its climate communication skills and has implications for the role it can play in the climate conversation.

The most significant difference between *TDS* and *LWT* in my sample was the way they connected comedy to the problems they discussed. *LWT* did its journalism by explaining a relevant topic and did its jester performance to engage the audience and keep them listening to the explanation. *TDS*, meanwhile, told jokes about the news instead of telling jokes to help its audience sit through the news. *LWT* was like a dog pill coated in peanut butter and *TDS* was just a peanut butter flavored dog treat. On *TDS*, the news itself was funny, which made it that much easier to trivialize the Green New Deal. Interestingly, Noah is quite comfortable with approaching an issue seriously and is not above abandoning humor to drive home a strongly-held belief. Why was the Green New Deal, a potential solution to an enormous threat, not worth the serious approach in this case? It could be that, since *TDS* plays to a more informed audience than other late-night shows, Noah assumed his viewers already understood the seriousness of climate change. All the same, given the nature of Noah's critique, it may be that *TDS*' approach may not work as well in a climate context.

TDS' coverage was far harsher than *LWT*'s. Noah's first real comment about the bill was that it was a "cure-all," an observation that made the Green New Deal sound unrealistic and

ineffective. Noah did acknowledge a need for policy that encourages greenhouse gas reduction and connected the proposal's infrastructure goals to this need, but still did not explicitly endorse the bill. This is not necessarily a problem. The Green New Deal is just one of many proposals that have been put forth over the years to address climate change, and, as Oliver explained, a variety of political and non-political options exist to confront the problem. What raises concern is *TDS*' history of covering climate policy. A study conducted while Stewart was the host found that more than a third of *TDS* segments covering climate change "made explicit statements that trivialized global warming, touted its benefits, or otherwise undermined its severity" (Feldman, 2013, p. 445). Policy efforts in particular were targeted during these segments (Feldman, 2013). While Noah does not have an obligation to support any and all policy aimed at tackling climate change, the show's history puts his appraisal of the deal as a "cure-all" and his vague support in a negative light. It is easy to assume that Noah either does not understand the bill, or does not understand its significance, neither of which makes for constructive coverage.

Oliver's coverage of the Green New Deal was far more robust and factually informative than Noah's. *LWT* stressed the urgency of climate action, supported a variety of climate solutions, and distinguished "bad faith" arguments against the Green New Deal from genuine problems with its rollout. While *LWT* lacked the time to fully detail the science behind climate change, it focused on correcting false impressions about the bill's structure and provisions, simultaneously dissecting conservatives' backlash. *LWT*'s coverage suggested that climate change is a serious issue that, despite reactionaries' claims, has viable solutions. Oliver's clarifications—that the Green New Deal does not contain any set initiatives to achieve its goals and that the bill itself doesn't even mention airplanes or farting cows—have the added bonus of arming audiences with information that could help them successfully navigate future discussions

about the Green New Deal or carbon pricing. Although neither *LWT* nor *TDS*' approach to comedy is inherently superior, *LWT*'s may be more constructive in a climate context.

The Partisan Problem

Despite their different approaches, *TDS* and *LWT* share a stumbling block: partisanship. Noah and Oliver each identified “conservatives” as the group most opposed to the Green New Deal and spent a portion of their coverage ridiculing what they deemed the conservative response. It would be flat-out wrong to claim partisanship is not an important dimension of climate discourse in America; the Republican party and conservatives in general are more likely to dismiss the threat climate change poses or denounce moves toward climate neutrality. However, assuming conservatives will never care about climate impacts or neglecting persuadable Republicans when crafting environmental messages would be a huge mistake. Research has also found that conservatives and liberals have comparable levels of scientific understanding, making both groups vulnerable to misinformation (Kovaka, 2019). Climate communicators across disciplines are struggling with the question of how to bring conservatives into efforts to mitigate and reverse climate change. Jester journalism is not exempt from this challenge and could benefit from rethinking the ways it links partisan politics and climate change.

Both *LWT* and *TDS* made fun of conservatives' reactions to the Green New Deal, but *TDS* took the joke farther than *LWT* did. *TDS* and *LWT* each featured a montage of clips from Fox News where anchors insisted that the Green New Deal was “radical environmental socialism” (The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, 2019, February 16) and an open threat to the American way of life. Noah characterized their reactions as blindly partisan and clearly ridiculous. Oliver didn't mince words either, calling the speakers in the montage “idiots”. Yet

it's worth noting that *TDS* spent proportionally more time engaging in partisan humor than *LWT* did, especially when considering the mock movie trailer *TDS* produced. The trailer, released to an online audience, was wholly devoted to mocking conservatives' reactions to the Green New Deal. Though Oliver made fun of Mitch McConnell and suggested conservative pundits had Joseph Stalin confused with the Hamburgler, these jokes were not a focal point of the program in the same way Noah's were. What's more, Oliver devoted time to correcting false notions put forward in the reaction montage, while Noah just dismissed them altogether. *TDS* and *LWT* both told partisan jokes, but *TDS* leaned on partisanship more heavily.

It's not surprising that *TDS* and *LWT* told partisan jokes. Political satire has an existing tradition of open partisanship and is, by its nature, more divisive than unifying (Borden & Tew, 2007). The problem with partisanship in this context is that even though climate change is a very partisan issue, voters in the Democratic party have different appraisals of climate change's significance. By telling jokes that alienate or put down another political group, these shows treat liberals who are deeply concerned with climate action the same as liberals who are less invested in climate action. Furthermore, depicting climate change as a partisan issue reinforces the idea that political parties are at odds over climate change and therefore cannot be trusted to find common ground. Failure to emphasize the stake that all parties have in mitigating and reversing climate change not only obscures the differences in understanding among those who agree climate change is a problem, it also belittles a potential ally. It would be neither feasible nor appropriate to remove partisanship from jester journalism, but it is important to note the effect partisan humor can have on climate discourse.

All in all, it's difficult to predict exactly how jester journalism's humor interacts with its audiences' beliefs. Some scholars have proposed that viewers seek out jester journalism to help

them think through the news (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011; Young 2013). It could be that audiences have enough exposure to other news sources to critically assess *TDS* and *LWT*'s approaches to the Green New Deal. It could be that, since audiences are aware of the partisanship present in political satire, it doesn't play into jester journalism's climate rhetoric in a significant way. However, given the concerns plaguing television news coverage of climate change and worsening partisanship in American political discourse, it would be naive to assume the best. Further research is needed to flesh out the way partisanship affects climate messaging on jester journalism, but it is worthwhile to consider the audience jester journalism tends to attract.

Jester journalism has the capacity to fill gaps left by cable journalism and challenge dominant rhetoric about climate change. Shows like *LWT* that cover issues extensively and use humor as an incentive to learn rather than an excuse to ridicule may be better suited to climate communication. Although jester journalism already shows promise, it is still important to ask how jester journalism can best participate in the climate conversation going forward, especially given concerns about partisanship.

The Future of Jester Journalism's Climate Clowning

Jester journalism, particularly in *LWT*'s focused style, should be used for climate communication going forward. Oliver's coverage of the Green New Deal fulfilled its obligation to be funny while stressing the urgency of climate change, exploring potential policy solutions, finding reasons for hope, and arming its audience with tools to meaningfully participate in future discussion about climate policy. While a good deal of these achievements were enabled by Oliver's approach to jester journalism—using comedy to explain an issue rather than using an issue as fuel for comedy—this does not necessarily imply that *TDS* or other shows with a broad approach cannot be effective climate communicators. There is certainly humor to be found in the

absurdity of political climate inaction. The keys are to ensure that activists and climate policy are not the butt of the joke and to pair jokes with context so audiences are in touch with why climate policy matters. *LWT* should be a role model for talking about climate issues in jester journalism, but other styles of jester journalism can still contribute meaningfully to climate discourse.

One of jester journalism's biggest challenges moving forward will be to find a more intentional approach to the partisanship surrounding climate change. Everyone in the United States is threatened by climate change. Jester journalists' ability to openly express their personal ideologies should not interfere with their ability to encourage cooperation. Once again, *LWT*'s perspective may be useful in surmounting this obstacle; combatting powerful institutions whose actions are environmentally irresponsible may be a better strategy than denouncing an entire political party. Oliver's Green New Deal episode did not take kindly to conservative public figures and said Republicans were "foaming at the mouth" (*LastWeekTonight*, 2019, May 12) over the proposal. Perhaps more episodes that tackle exploitative people like Bob Murray will be more likely to pique conservatives' interests. However it handles climate change in the future, jester journalism cannot afford to forget the importance of stressing common interest over division. It is vitally important to have all hands on deck, and conservatives are no exception.

Ultimately, jester journalism ought to continue reporting on climate change. Jester journalism alone is not the way into more productive climate action, but its humor and freedom from some journalistic restraints make it an important contributor to the climate conversation. Ideally, cable news will continue to improve its climate coverage and jester journalism will follow along for the ride, making fun of cable news' missteps and politicians' errors as they go. The more climate becomes a mainstream issue, the more important rhetorical critics like Noah and Oliver become. We need them to keep pushing our newscasters and our elected officials to

be better. At the same time, the longer climate change continues, the more important comedians like Noah and Oliver become. We need them to help us laugh in the face of a complicated and deep-seated crisis. Jester journalism can be a helpful vehicle for climate communication, so it should keep following the climate crisis. We need all the help we can get. After all, in the words of one Bill Nye, “the planet’s on fucking fire!”

References

- Brewer, P. R., & McKnight, J. (2015). Climate as comedy: The effects of satirical television news on climate change. *Science Communication, 37*(5), 635-657. doi: 10.1177/1075547015597911
- Brewer, P. R., & McKnight, J. (2017). "A statistically representative climate change debate": Satirical television news, scientific consensus, and public perceptions of global warming. *Atlantic Journal of Communication, 25*(3), 166-180. doi: 10.1080/15456870.2017.1324453
- Borden, S. L., & Tew, C. (2007). The role of journalist and the performance of journalism: Ethical lessons from "fake" news (Seriously). *Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 22*(4), 300-314. doi: 10.1080/08900520701583586
- Boykoff, M. T., & Boykoff, J. M. (2004). Balance as bias: Global warming and the US prestige press. *Global Environmental Change, 14*, 125-136. doi: 10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2003.10.001
- Chattoo, C. B. (n. d.). *How comedy works to change the world*. Retrieved from Center for Media & Social Impact website: <https://cmsimpact.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/08/HowComedyWorks.pdf>
- Cook, J., Nuccitelli, D., Green, S. A., Richardson, M., Winkler, B., Painting, R., Way, R., Jacobs, P., & Skuce, A. (2013). Quantifying the consensus on anthropogenic global warming in the scientific literature. *Environmental Research Letters, 8*(2), 1-7. doi: 10.1088/1748-9326/8/2/024024
- Druick, Z. (2009). Dialogic absurdity: TV news parody as a critique of genre. *Television & New Media, 10*(3), 294-308. doi: 10.1177/1527476409332057
- Feldman, L. (2013). Cloudy with a chance of heat balls: The portrayal of global warming on *The*

- Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 430-451.
- Feldman, L. (2017). Assumptions about science in satirical news and late-night comedy. In Jamieson, J. H., Kahan, D. M., & Scheufele D. A. (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of the Science of Science Communication*. doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190497620.013.35
- Hmielowski, J. D., Holbert, R. L., & Lee, J. (2011). Predicting the consumption of political TV satire: Affinity for political humor, *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report*. *Communication Monographs*, 78(1), 96-114. doi: 10.1080/03637751.2010.542579
- Kovaka, K. (2019). Climate change denial and beliefs about science. *Synthese*. doi: doi.org/10.1007/s11229-019-02210-z
- LastWeekTonight. (2019, May 12). *Green New Deal: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDcro7dPqpA>
- McKain, A. (2005). Not necessarily not the news: Gatekeeping, remediation, and *The Daily Show*. *The Journal of American Culture*, 28(4), 415-430. doi: 10.1111/j.1542-734X.2005.00244.x
- Ordoña, M. (2020, September 20). The ‘unnatural evolution’ of Trevor Noah and *The Daily Show*. *The Day*. Retrieved from <https://www.theday.com>
- Smith, J. (2005). Dangerous news: Media decision making about climate change risk. *Risk Analysis*, 25(6), 1471-1482. doi: 10.1111/j.1539-6924.2005.00693.x
- Smith, J. (2017). Demanding stories: Television coverage of sustainability, climate change, and material demand. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A*, 375(2095). doi: 10.1098/rsta.2016.0375
- The Daily Show with Trevor Noah (2019, February 13). *The Green New Deal | The Daily Show*

- [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zomqoshu3tg>
- The Daily Show with Trevor Noah (2019, February 16). *Conservatives Slam Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal | The Daily Show* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kjaBcUwkOc
- Waisanen, D. J. (2009). A citizen's guides to democracy inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's comic rhetorical criticism. *Southern Communication Journal*, 74(2), 119-140. doi: 10.1080/10417940802428212
- Wild, N. M. (2019). "The mittens of disapproval are on": John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* as neoliberal critique. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 12. 340-358. doi: 10.1093/ccc/tcz021
- Young, D. G. (2008). The privileged role of the late-night joke: Exploring humor's role in disrupting argument scrutiny. *Media Psychology*, 11(1), 119-142. doi: 10.1080/15213260701837073