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Oliver Morrison

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## Where is all the conservative comedy?

By Oliver Morrison

The success of John Oliver's show "Last Week Tonight" has undermined conservative arguments that the liberal slant of political TV satire is [mere happenstance](#). The show entered a crowded field of popular liberal news satires—with Jon Stewart already sarcastically pounding Republicans with his raised eyebrows, Stephen Colbert undermining Fox pundits with his deadpan smirk and Bill Maher provoking everyone with his blunt punch lines.

So why is there no conservative contender? It could have been coincidence that these quality political satires came of age under the watch of [an unpopular Republican president](#) when disenchanted liberals needed cathartic release. Even if a conservative TV satirist didn't appear right after President Bush left office, it could have been because Obama was a different kind of president: he was the first African-American President, which meant comedians had to [tip-toe around anything with racial connotations](#), and his [restrained personality](#) made him [difficult to parody](#).

But six years in, Obama's party has been thoroughly trounced in the midterms and publicly excoriated by right wing politicians. And yet no conservative comedians have delivered. The niche-targeted structure of cable media today incentivizes the kind of political comedy that liberals are making. It would have been difficult for Stewart or Colbert to find an audience during the era when three broadcast stations competed for the entire country and could not afford to alienate half of their audience. But cable TV news programs need only find a niche audience that is easily divided along partisan lines. Why then, hasn't a conservative Daily Show found its own place on Fox?

Two years ago Alison Dagnes, a professor of political science at Shippensburg University, literally [wrote the book](#) on the liberal bias in political comedy. Dagnes spoke to dozens of working liberal comedians and as many conservative comedians as she could find. What she discovered was that, while conservatives tend to defend institutions and the status quo, satire has always been more aimed at taking down the powerful than the powerless, from the Revolutionary War through Vietnam and 9/11. "Conservatism supports institutions and satire aims to knock these institutions down a peg," she wrote. Liberals, on the other hand, tend to champion the weak and underrepresented, groups that are harder to pillory without coming across as mean-spirited.

The problem with this argument is that liberal comedians haven't had any trouble making light of their own institutions and sacred cows along with mocking Republicans "Portlandia" is about to enter its fifth season mocking the kinds of [liberal protesters](#) who don't understand that silly costumes and giant political puppets are probably more artistically pleasing than politically effective. Jon Stewart has even had success [poking fun at Obama's policies](#). And liberals and conservatives alike had no trouble [making fun of Bill Clinton](#) when he was president.

When Dagnes analyzed late night TV she found that the liberal Clinton was the butt of more jokes on late night TV than either Bush II or Obama.

So if liberals can be funny targets, why are so few conservative comedians doing the lambasting? There are, by all accounts, fewer conservative comedians. Just as liberals dominate academia, journalism and other writing professions, there are nearly three times as many liberals as conservatives in the creative arts, [according to a recent study](#). Dagnes argues that the same personality traits that lead us to pick a profession also shape our political preferences. This tendency just gets more extreme in the case of comedy, which usually requires years of irregular income, late hours and travel. Conservatives who champion the importance of a stable nuclear family are probably not the people who are going into comedy. The number of liberals in comedy clubs is higher than in ballet companies and orchestras, but it's lower than in jam bands and hip-hop groups. So even if it's possible to make conservative satire, there are fewer conservative comics to do it.

Dennis Miller, probably the most well-known and frequently cited conservative comedian, has lost his audience, not because he became conservative, [many say](#), but because he became strident and preachy. Miller greets Bill O'Reilly during his weekly segment on The O'Reilly Factor with a twirl of his hand in deference to O'Reilly as if he were a court jester and O'Reilly the king who wants to hear his opinions spun back to him.

On a recent show O'Reilly brought up the Democrats' election losses, and Miller, eager to please, took the bait. "I think liberalism is like a nude beach," Miller said. "It's better off in your mind than actually going there: a lot of fat people, a lot of scars, a lot of cellulite." His jokes are sometimes amusing, but they're grounded in vague ideological punch lines, not in the attentive criticism to the news of the day that has given liberal satires entertainment five days a week.

Some conservative have said Hollywood bias in the cause. Frank Rich recently [argued in New York magazine](#) that, although there are a few mildly popular conservative satirists—Jeff Dunham, Greg Gutfeld and Miller—its their lack of talent, not Hollywood, holding them back. Rich quotes South Park creator Matt Stone, who said producers in Hollywood, "they just want to make money, you know? And there's something kind of beautiful about that."

Because of the lack of Hollywood support, conservatives argue that no show has been given a proper chance. "The Flipside," the latest attempt at conservative satire, was started this year by Kfir Alfia, who got the political bug a decade ago [when he joined the Protest Warriors](#), a conservative group that counter-demonstrated at anti-war protests. But Alfia is either not rich or not committed enough, because the show is hampered by its small budget, according to The Flipside's producer, Rodney Lee Conover, who said he has to work 10 times as hard, because his show has 10 times fewer resources than the liberal shows supported by cable networks. "The Flipside" started airing this fall in more than 200 stations across the country, but in

New York State, for instance, you can only see it at 5 a.m. on Mondays if you happen to live in Elvira.

Conover was a writer along with Miller on “The 1/2 Hour News Hour,” the first major attempt to create a conservative counterpart to the Daily Show in 2007. It was cancelled after just 13 episodes and has [remained the worst rated show of all time](#) on Metacritic. It has been widely panned by critics who complained that it was trying to be political first, so the jokes were unsurprising and flat.

The host of “The Flipside”, Michael Loftus, says he’s doing the same thing as Jon Stewart, just with some conservative window-dressing. Wearing jeans, Loftus stands and delivers his jokes on a set that looks like the set of “Tool Time,” a kitschy version of the kind of garage Conover must imagine the target audience works in for this show. In [a recent episode](#), after Republicans won the Senate, Loftus sang lyrics to a country song, “Looks like we made it...,” at once making a jab at the Republican primary victory over the Democrats in the most recent election while also pandering to his country music-loving audience.

But the show is uneven. Rather than talking about the news, as Colbert and Stewart do, or deconstructing a big political issue, as Oliver does, Loftus makes dated references to Jeremiah Wright, Bill Ayers and Benghazi without offering new context to freshen them up. He relies on the kind of guilt-by-association that would only resonate with the most ardent Fox News viewers.

Loftus obviously can’t yet attract the level of celebrity guest or politician that his network competitors can. But instead of poking fun at or playing games with the guests he can get—a la Stewart, Colbert or Maher—he asks softball questions that allow his conservative guests to spout off. The guests are not uninteresting people, but they’re also not prodded for entertainment value.

Loftus, like [Greg Gutfeld on Fox’s “Red Eye”](#), can be funny. He’ll drop in a well-timed joke about how Kim Jong Un’s haircut looks really good, i.e. much like his own. But he and Gutfeld are both a little smarmy. They laugh a little too hard and seem just a little too eager to please. It’s as if they’re trying really hard to hold together a dinner party with people they don’t know well.

So it could be the nature of the jokes, the relatively few conservative comedians working or their lack of power in Hollywood. Or it could be that conservative shows such as “The Flipside” are failing at least, in part, because they’re just not that funny. But what is it about comedy that conservatives are failing at? What makes something funny?

\* \* \* \* \*

There has been a long history of trying to explain humor theoretically, starting as far

back as Plato, who said humor got its power from the pleasure people get from feeling superior over others by laughing at their foibles, flaws, and fumbling. Freud saw it as a cathartic release from society's repressions: i.e. all our sex and fart jokes. And Hegel and some of his acolytes saw it as reconciling the incongruity between two normally separate spheres of meaning, i.e. a football player in a cheerleading outfit or cats wearing human clothes.

| Earlier this year the journalist Joel Warner published [The Humor Code](#) about his expedition to test the "benign-violation theory" of humor, one of the most recent attempts to explain comedy heralded by the academic, Peter McGraw, a professor at the University of Colorado.

McGraw believes that humor results from violating social norms, (as Freud believed), or by violating a particular person or group, (as Plato believed). But it only becomes funny in a second context, (as Hegel argues), that clearly signals the violation is harmless or benign—i.e. if a person falls down the stairs, it will only be really funny if the person doesn't get hurt.

So Warner and McGraw visited improv artists in New York and stand-up comics in L.A. They talked to the world's foremost humor scientists and explored the vast joke collections of humor anthropologists. They even traveled to Japan to see if this theory held up in a culture renowned for its weird sense of humor. In each case, they made a decent argument that their theory could explain the various kinds of humor they encountered. But when they tried to put the theory into practice, by having McGraw perform standup—first at a bar in Denver and then at the Just for Laughs Festival in Toronto—the theory lost most of its utility. McGraw did manage to get some laughs eventually, but only after months of immersion and practice.

This attempt to provide an over-arching theory of humor suggests that, while academic theoreticians may generalize and describe humor's many forms, it isn't much help to the professionals who are trying to be funny. Humor is a creative art that responds to a specific culture at a particular moment in its history and is located in a particular room with a particular audience or is broadcast on a particular media.

Comedy is not only an art, it's an art that takes many forms: it includes TV sit-coms, internet parody, late-night variety shows, cartoons, stand-up, sketch, improv, and whatever it is that Howard Stern does. Does a cartoonist who sketches alone in his room share any skills with an improv artist who ad-libs characterization in a group? Although they have a similar goal, these are distinct art forms, many of which are relatively new. Newspapers didn't have a tradition of including satirical cartoons until the late 19th Century. Stand-up was born in the second-half of the twentieth century. The explosion of sketch and now improv are even more recent still. The Onion adapted political satire to the Internet fifteen years ago and it's still trying to find success with comedy's latest incarnation: the viral video. Political satire on TV, like all these other forms, was born at a very particular moment when cable TV

created more opportunities for niche programming.

The most successful performers in this new comedic form came from one show: the Daily Show. Stephen Colbert and John Oliver both learned on the Daily Show how to do [the very difficult task](#) of sorting through all the news quickly and turning it around into biting, relevant satire that works for television—before they could do it on their own. The dominance of liberal satire might more accurately be described as the rise of the Daily Show as a singular training center in this very specific comedic form. But the show was not an immediate success and took years to develop into a popular form with its own singular voice. No conservative political show has been given the same time and resources.

The lack of conservative comedic depth also impedes its success in the fast-paced world of TV comedy, which, despite featuring star performers, is more of a team sport than standup or satirical writing. So even while some conservatives, such as PJ O'Rourke or Jeff Dunham, have found success on their own, it is a different challenge to put together a team of top humorists that can keep up with the demands of daily and weekly news.

The rise of liberal satire also came during a fortuitous historical moment, when liberals were fuming over George W. Bush's presidency but didn't have talk-radio to turn to. So when Jon Stewart joined the Daily Show, it not only made liberals laugh, but fulfilled a liberal need that conservatives had satisfied through radio through the likes of Rush Limbaugh.

Conservatives have dominated the political entertainment form of talk radio, where liberals have failed, most prominently with the Air America network. Even MSNBC, the avowedly liberal answer to Fox News, has never been able to attract as large an audience. So it could be that satire is biased toward liberals in the same way that talk-radio and punditry is biased toward conservative blowhards such as Limbaugh.

The difficulty of finding and training conservative comedians could be heightened by the fact that there is little demand for it from conservative audiences, which would also explain Hollywood's failure to produce it. Could it be that the absence of TV satire can be explained by a fundamental difference in the way conservative voters like to digest their politics?

Dannagal Young, a professor of communications at the University of Delaware, was thinking about the lack of conservative comedians when she noticed some studies that found that liberals and conservatives [seem to have different aesthetic tastes](#). Conservatives seem to like stories with a clear ending. Liberals, on the other hand, have more tolerance for a story that ends with some uncertainty and ambiguity. So Young began to wonder whether this might explain why liberals were flocking to satirical TV shows, which often employ irony. An ironic joke requires people to hold two or more disparate ideas in their heads, something liberals find satisfying and conservatives tend to find less so.

Stephen Colbert, for example, may say that he's looking forward to the sunny weather that global warming will bring, and the audience knows this isn't what he really means. But they have to wonder: is he making fun of the kind of conservative who would say something so egregious? Or is he making fun of arrogant liberals who think that conservatives hold such extreme views? Or maybe he's just teasing the kind of cheery person who would look at global disaster and celebrate its minor benefits? Or maybe he's gleefully riling up predictable liberal outrage? His joke contains a whiff of all these different interpretations, which leaves it to the audience to sort out what he really meant. This is the kind of aesthetic experience that liberals love, Young noticed, and which can leave many conservatives frustrated by its lack of clarity. ([Or not even aware that he's joking.](#))

The different ways that conservatives and liberals respond to some kinds of jokes could explain a number of high profile comic misunderstandings, according to Young. Dave Chapelle recently [started talking to the media](#) after years of seclusion and silence. At the height of his career, he had what some people thought was a psychological breakdown, when he gave up a \$50 million paycheck. He felt deeply uncomfortable with the fact that [some people in his audience weren't getting his jokes](#) and believed he'd lost control of his material. He made ironic jokes about, for instance, a blind black man who joined the KKK and celebrated white power. Chapelle became uncomfortable with a portion of his audience that might have been laughing for the wrong reasons

Rush Limbaugh uses humor as a tool rather than the end goal of his entertainment, but it's a tool that liberals misunderstand. Many conservatives recognized a joke on his radio show this year about Sandra Fluke. He exaggerated her promiscuity to make an argument against the requirement to make birth control widely available. But the liberal blogosphere erupted with derision for his having called her a slut. Limbaugh responded with more jokes, which the blogosphere [continues to take umbrage](#) at. The success of conservative talk radio suggests that conservatives may not need a specially delineated comic art space to make the kinds of jokes conservatives find funny.

These examples formed the kernel of Young's hypothesis that liberals and conservatives look for and see different kinds of humor. Young gathered together jokes from YouTube, some of which were ironic and required a level of interpretation, and others which were exaggerated, using a style of humor that underlines its point rather than implies it. But after promising early results, her colleagues wondered whether liberals liked the ironic jokes because they were talking favorably about gays and marijuana, dependably liberal issues, as opposed to their ironic structure.

She needed to separate the structure of the jokes from the political content. To do this she would need to create her own jokes without any overt political content. So her graduate assistants scoured the papers for local news stories, such as the one

about the lost parrot who returned to its owner speaking Spanish. Or the hikers who were taking selfies with bears. Or stories about technology or celebrities, which didn't have an obvious political slant. And then she hired her friend Don Montrey, who heads the long-running Philadelphia Comedy Sports show, to turn these apolitical stories into jokes.

Montrey struggled at first. Although the jokes he made were really funny, they weren't exaggerated or ironic. "It's a real challenge and frustrating at times because you're working against your instincts to just look for the funny," Montrey said. "What's funny in the story isn't always ironic or exaggerated, it's a turn of phrase, an extrapolation, a connection between the punch line and the setup."

Young thinks it's wrong to make arguments that certain races or genders are smarter, better at science, or funnier. But her hypothesis is not about intelligence; it's about a preferred structure of jokes, she said. There's nothing inherently better about liking ironic jokes over exaggerated ones.

But Conover, the producer of "The Flipside," is skeptical of Young's arguments that conservatives prefer simpler, more exaggerated humor and liberals subtler, implicit humor. "That's another way of saying that liberals are smarter," Conover said. "And clearly that's not the case. Liberals are some of the dumbest people to walk the earth."

So Young is preparing for more angry responses when her study is finally complete in 2015. "The attacks are going to be fierce," Young said. And then sounding as if she was trying to convince herself: "I'm ready."

But one of the biggest challenges to her theory actually may be John Oliver. His jokes are almost all exaggerated, rather than ironic. He uses tone of voice and metaphor to emphasize his comedic arguments. This could mean that Oliver's show will attract more conservative viewers than Colbert, Stewart or Maher have been able to. But the content veers strongly liberal. A recent show about the power of local government, gave "stricter abortion laws" as an example of bad laws and "minimum wage increases" and "gay marriage" as examples of good laws. It is hard to imagine that many Fox News viewers will be able to look past this obvious liberal slant, even if the style of jokes are more to their taste.

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It would be nice if there were a single, simple explanation for why conservatives have failed at political TV satire. But the truth is there are many factors that have all contributed: the tendency of satire to skewer the establishment; the lack of conservatives drawn to comedy; the unique liberal anger when the medium came of age; the first-in training advantage of the Daily Show; the subtle biases of Hollywood executives making the decisions; as well as the different sensibilities of conservative and liberal viewers.



Normally it's conservatives who dismiss liberal arguments about the structural impediments that the underprivileged face. Ironically, in comedy it's the liberals who dismiss the structural impediments conservatives face. Instead they focus on the harshness of the conservative worldview as being antithetical to successful comedy or their intrinsic lack of talent. But essentially they're making the same kind of argument Reagan once used to dismiss liberal "welfare queens" values as antithetical to the capitalist values of economic success. It's always easiest to say that the group in the inferior position deserved it due to their own shortcomings. The easy answer is for liberals to celebrate the cleverness of Colbert and Oliver while deriding the crassness of conservative talk radio. But aren't these two types of political entertainment fulfilling the same purpose?

A long line of what appeared to be almost entirely white, NPR-loving liberals wrapped around the block several times on a recent cold winter afternoon to get the chance to see Jon Stewart. The night before, Stewart had been seemingly caught off guard by a grand jury decision not to indict the police officer who choked Eric Garner to death. Most media tiptoed around the issue, giving voice to criticisms of the protesters as well as to those critical of the police. But on this night, Stewart's criticism was savage and unsparing, mocking the people who worried more about their Christmas shopping than the death of black men, and comparing America's justice system to apartheid.

The people who are most knowledgeable about politics—and therefore, the ones who will understand the most political jokes—also [tend to be the most ideologically extreme](#). So it makes sense that political satire shows, like conservative talk-radio, are ideologically skewed: those are the kinds of people who know enough to understand the jokes, let alone care enough to watch. The Daily Show and Colbert Report don't just skew liberal, they draw [some of the most liberal viewers on TV](#).

Before the seventh-to-last Colbert Report, a warm-up comic asked audience what they did for a living, drawing predictable responses: artist, comic, lawyer and teacher. Then the comic came to a gay Broadway financier and his boyfriend who, it turned out, worked on a non-profit trying to elect Hilary Clinton president in 2016. The man lifted up his shirt and pulled down his pants to reveal a tattoo of Clinton's signature near his nether-regions. These people were clearly not just liberals, but their apotheosis.

Before the start of the show, Colbert took several questions from his liberal tribe, finally calling on me for the last question.

"Who is your favorite conservative comedian?" I asked from the furthest away seat in the back. Would he be able to name anyone?

He paused, and for a second of silence it seemed as if he might not have an answer. Then, just before galloping back to his desk to start the show, with an impish smile

and a twinkle in his eye, responded, "Bill O'Reilly," and the crowd roared and jeered with laughter.