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# Evoking truthiness

## Using satirical news comedies to teach information literacy

Instruction librarians looking for new ways to spice up their library instruction can use video clips from “The Most Important News Show . . . Ever” (*The Daily Show*) and other satirical news comedies to capture the attention of students during their next instructional session. These videos can serve as an entertaining mechanism to help students understand information literacy (IL) concepts.

At California State University-East Bay, we engage students by integrating satirical news videos in our teaching. In this article, we will share our insights, including some of the pitfalls we have experienced along the way. We have organized satirical news videos by the frames in ACRL’s Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education<sup>1</sup> and linked to the videos in a LibGuide,<sup>2</sup> in order to share them with other instruction librarians who may want to use the videos in their classrooms.

### What do we mean by satirical news videos?

In recent years, the quantity of satirical news programs, such as *The Daily Show* (with Jon Stewart as well as Trevor Noah), *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, has expanded, indicating a popular culture appetite for such entertainment. These programs use the formula of traditional television news and pundit shows to satirize current events with parody. During these shows, the host or

show correspondent covers various topics in 5-to-20-minute segments, sometimes as a monologue with visual aids or illustrative video clips. Other times they interview or interact with people relevant to the topic. In all cases, humor is employed to poke fun at the day’s events.

Instructors can find these videos available for free on a variety of Internet platforms. Clips from shows aired on Comedy Central (*The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*) can be found on the network’s website. Clips from the programs on basic cable (*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*), premium cable (*Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*), and Netflix (*Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj*) can be found on YouTube. These publicly accessible clips can be played legally during in-person educational classes or embedded or linked within online classes thanks to the fair use doctrine and the TEACH Act.<sup>3</sup>

### “Fake news” and critical thinking skills

*The Daily Show* has described itself as a fake news program. However, it often reports real news in a mocking manner simi-

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lar to the other satirical news shows named above. This use of the term “fake news” should not be confused with other uses of the term. For example, politicians and pundits have been known to call current news reports that they disagree with fake news, even when those news reports are factual. “Fake news” has also been applied to completely false stories that resemble real news, such as “Pizzagate,” during the 2016 election cycle.<sup>4</sup> Encouraging students to distinguish between these different meanings of fake news through viewing video clips from satirical news shows provides an opportunity for students to develop critical thinking skills. Instructors can lead class discussions asking students to reflect on questions such as, What do we mean by “fake”? Who is the creator of a specific piece of news? What biases might they have, and How can we tell? and How might we verify the facts that are reported?

### **Why use these videos?**

Humor can be an effective instructional tool to engage students with course content, and the use of video clips can help keep students’ attention focused on the material at hand.<sup>5</sup> Research has shown that students enjoy having satirical humor incorporated into instruction and indicates that humor can support their engagement with the course material.<sup>6</sup> When used to support the understanding of IL concepts, satirical news videos can help make the content accessible and interesting to students.<sup>7</sup>

When surveyed at the end of select terms, students in our classes at California State University-East Bay shared that they found the videos to be funny and interesting. They also felt that watching the videos provided a good break from other class activities, which helped them stay engaged. Observationally, as instructors, we found that the videos spurred lively discussions as compared to other activities in face-to-face classes. In online classes, student responses to quiz questions showed that the students understood and engaged with the IL concepts addressed in the videos.

On the flipside, the use of humor, specifically satirical humor, presents its own unique set of challenges that instructors need to consider. Often satirical news comedies are perceived to be politically left-leaning, which could alienate politically conservative students.

As these programs often air on networks that are targeted to adult audiences, coarse language and suggestive scenarios may be included with the coverage of IL topics. When using satire or sarcasm in the classroom, an instructor runs the risk that students may take the satirical humor literally, causing students to miss the point of the satirical news comedies entirely.

### **Best practices for using satirical news video clips in the classroom**

#### *Engage in pre- and post-video discussion*

To mitigate the risk of students interpreting the satirical content literally, instructors can introduce the video, explain its satirical nature, and engage the class in discussion of the content after viewing the video to reduce the risk of students misinterpreting the content.

#### *Avoid potentially triggering topics*

Satirical news programs often air on cable networks that allow for the inclusion of topics and content that may be triggering for some students. Instructors can consider choosing when to start and stop videos in order to refrain from showing portions of videos that may contain potentially objectionable content, rather than showing the entire segment as posted.

For example, a video from *The Daily Show* (“Weathering Fights—Science: What’s it up to?”) posted on Comedy Central’s website includes an interesting segment on the peer review process, but the segment ends with a joke that may be triggering for some viewers. By stopping the posted video before the end of the segment, the instructor could exclude the potentially offensive joke.

Consider the cultural context of the humor. Often, the humor in satirical news programs assumes that viewers are aware of the popular cultural references the programs make. *The Daily Show's* "Art of the Steal" video includes a parody of the 2016 Kanye West and Taylor Swift recorded phone call where they discussed Kanye West's song "Famous."<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* video, "Melania Trump Did Not Plagiarize Her RNC Speech," which parodies Melania Trump's 2016 Republican National Convention speech, references the works of Dr. Seuss, the television program *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, Mel Gibson's speech in the movie *Braveheart*, and more.

For students who may not be familiar with these references to American popular culture, these parodies may not make sense to them, thus blunting their understanding and enjoyment of the videos. Instructors should weigh the videos' reliance upon, and the universality of, these cultural references when considering whether to show the videos in class.

## How we have used these videos

### *Credit courses*

In credit-bearing IL courses, instructors have the luxury of a whole term to engage students with IL concepts. This can allow for creative and inventive approaches to pedagogy. At our university, we have credit-bearing IL courses, which are taught either in-person or online. Showing a 5-to-10 minute satirical news clip gives a good shot of entertainment in what otherwise could be a slog of information.

Depending on which IL concept we are addressing, we either give homework or conduct an in-class activity related to an IL concept prior to showing the video. After showing the video, we give students 5 minutes to write a guided response. Then, we facilitate a discussion about the video and IL concept we are addressing.

In an asynchronous online course, providing context can be more difficult.

Thus, choosing videos that are more straightforward, accessible, and require less explanation is important. We still introduce the IL concept through a variety of means, such as a slide presentation, video lecture, reading assignment, or explanatory text. Then, students watch the video clip and respond to questions about it. The students' responses can either be homework that only the instructor sees, or as a discussion board prompt to foster dialogue among the students.

### *One shots*

In one-shot instructional sessions, very brief video clips of the satirical news videos can be used to provide an engaging example of an IL concept. These clips (less than two minutes) need to be clearly understandable by the audience without a significant amount of introduction or post-viewing explanation.

## Sample videos by ACRL Framework for Information Literacy

We have created a LibGuide<sup>9</sup> that includes brief descriptions and links to satirical news video clips, which can be used to introduce students to IL concepts. The guide is organized by the frames in the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy. We intend to add to the guide as we find additional videos, and we welcome suggestions. Below is a short description of three video segments we have used and the frame and IL concept they relate to.

### *Authority is Constructed and Contextual*

In the *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* episode entitled, "Dr. Oz and Nutritional Supplements," Oliver juxtaposes clips from Dr. Oz's television show where Dr. Oz discusses "magic" pills to help with weight loss, with clips of Dr. Oz testifying before Congress that, of course, he does not believe in "magic" pills. This segment provides a jumping off point to discuss authority and bias.

### *Information Creation as a Process*

In the *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* episode “Content Moderation and Free Speech,” Minhaj looks at the rules governing social media platform content and how social media platforms hide behind the concept of freedom of expression. Minhaj discusses how the lack of governmental regulation of the Internet has allowed extreme speech to proliferate online and lead to violence or threats of violence in the real world. This episode provides examples of how social media has made it easier than ever to create and share information, but how this ease leads to a greater need to critically evaluate information, as well as consider what role the government has in regulating this vital resource.

### *Information has value*

Melania Trump’s controversial speech at the 2016 RNC is covered in a segment from *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* entitled “The Art of the Steal.” Noah volleyballs back and forth between clips of Melania Trump’s speech at the RNC with elements that sound similar from Michelle Obama’s speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention. We have found that the clip engages students to think about and discuss issues around credibility and plagiarism.

### **Conclusion**

While some care needs to be exercised regarding how satirical news comedies are incorporated into IL instruction, our experience has shown that students find these videos humorous and entertaining. This engagement can serve as the spark needed to get students thinking deeply about core IL concepts (like authority, the value of information, and peer-review). The potential for getting students interested in IL concepts makes it worth the effort to incorporate the satirical news comedies into our IL instruction, whether part of a credit course or a one-shot session.

### **Notes**

1. “Framework for Information Literacy

in Higher Education,” Association of College & Research Libraries, accessed July 31, 2019, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

2. See <https://library.csueastbay.edu/satiricalnews>.

3. “Copyright for Libraries: TEACH Act,” American Library Association, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://libguides.ala.org/copyright/teachact>.

4. Cecilia Kang, “Fake News Onslaught Targets Pizzeria as Nest of Child-Trafficking,” *New York Times* (2016, November 21), accessed September 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/technology/fact-check-this-pizzeria-is-not-a-child-trafficking-site.html>.

5. Ronald A. Berk, “Multimedia teaching with video clips: TV, movies, YouTube, and mtvU in the college classroom,” *International Journal of Technology in Teaching & Learning* 5, 1 (2009): 1–21.

6. Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, “Jon Stewart Comes to Class: The Learning Effects of America (The Book) in Introduction to American Government Courses,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 4, 2 (2008): 169–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512160801998015>; Staci L. Beavers, “Getting Political Science in on the Joke: Using The Daily Show and Other Comedy to Teach Politics,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, 2 (2011): 415–19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511000266>.

7. Stephanie Alexander and Lana Mariko Wood, “No News is Good News? Satirical News Videos in the Information Literacy Classroom,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 19, no. 2 (2019): 253–78, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2019.0015>.

8. Nicole Sands, “Kanye West’s Phone Call to Taylor Swift: Read the Transcript of the Call That Started It All,” *People* (July 2016), accessed July 31, 2019, <https://people.com/celebrity/kanye-west-and-taylor-swift-famous-phone-call-transcript/>.

9. See <https://library.csueastbay.edu/satiricalnews>. *zc*