

Oliver slays

'Last Week Tonight' is a perfect blend of news and humor

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TV Media

When John Oliver accepted correspondent duties at "The Daily Show" as a fresh-faced British youngster in 2006, he could not have dreamed that he would eventually adapt and perfect that show's formula to create a series that would ultimately eclipse its progenitor.

That's exactly what he's done with "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver" — he has inherited the cable comedy news throne that was once occupied by Jon Stewart and "The Daily Show." Oliver's version of the late-night comedy news genre heads into its sixth season on Sunday, Feb. 17, when its milestone 150th episode airs on HBO.

"Last Week Tonight" follows in the footsteps of "The Daily Show," exposing the absurdity of traditional news media, the 24-hour news cycle, and both niche political factions and the political elite, while avoiding cheap-shot accusations through diligent research and a fundamentally journalistic approach.

Oliver got his first serious taste of hosting duties in 2013, when Stewart took a 12-week leave of absence to direct the film "Rosewater" (2014). Audiences were largely impressed with Oliver's fill-in duties, and executives across the TV world raced to see who could land him as a headliner for their own news comedy show. HBO turned out to be the best fit, and a mere three months after his stint as temporary host, it was announced that Oliver would be creating a brand new show for the premium cable network.

In April 2014, "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver" premiered, and in the time since its debut, the show has become a cultural touchstone and a critical darling. It has also won multiple Emmy and Peabody awards for its humorous-yet-informative treatment of serious issues — most recently, the show took home the 2018 Emmy for Outstanding Variety Talk Series.



John Oliver as seen in "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver"

"Last Week Tonight" is especially notable for taking extra deep dives into serious issues. If "The Daily Show" was a satirical version of the archetypical nightly news broadcast, then "Last Week Tonight" is more like an off-kilter newsmagazine. It's not uncommon for a segment on Oliver's show to run between 15 and 20 minutes, which is a vast chunk of time for a half-hour show to dedicate to a single topic. Segments on a serious newsmagazine heavyweight such as "60 Minutes" tend to run between 11 and 13 minutes, and the fact that Oliver and his writers can outdo that is impressive.

From the very beginning, Oliver intended to set his show

apart from similar series in a few specific ways. Rather than rushing through a number of diverse topics, he chose to produce longer, more in-depth segments about issues he and his writers felt strongly about. The fact that "Last Week Tonight" is a weekly show also influenced its tone and content. Oliver and his colleagues realized that by the time they got their Sunday night shot at the week's news, it would have already gone through countless iterations in the traditional news media, and "Last Week Tonight" might be hard-pressed to come up with something unique.

Rather than being discouraged by that prospect, Oliver and his staff felt freed by it. It

allowed them to scour the news landscape for underreported stories and identify niche subject matter that had been overlooked by traditional outlets. It also meant that when they did cover big news, they were able to offer a more comprehensive and considered take after several days of development, differing significantly from the reactionary coverage necessitated by the 24/7 late-breaking stories format peddled by other newsmongers.

Oliver's influence has become so pervasive that people have coined the phrase "the John Oliver effect," which refers to real-world policy decisions that are influenced by the show's dedicated and very loud fan-

base. There are a number of incredible examples of this occurring: after Oliver ran a segment on net neutrality legislation and encouraged his viewers to send their disagreements to the Federal Communications Commission, the FCC's servers received such a deluge of comments that they were overloaded. Similarly, after Oliver railed against the unfair and unjust bail system in New York, the state relaxed its bail requirements for people charged with nonviolent crimes. And after a widely watched segment skewered the corrupt leadership of FIFA, its long-standing president resigned in disgrace shortly thereafter.

Even when Oliver's segments don't result in specific changes,

"Last Week Tonight" has an uncanny knack for becoming part of the cultural discourse. One of the show's most recent bits — the "we got him" segment, which pointed out that President Trump never seems to pay a lasting political price, no matter how many fibs he's caught in — became a ubiquitous internet meme in 2018. That segment, as well as other popular offerings, are almost sure to return when Season 6 of "Last Week Tonight" starts rolling.

Make sure to catch Oliver's unique brand of satirical news-flavored comedy (or comedy-flavored news?) when "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver" returns for a sixth season on Sunday, Feb. 17, on HBO.