

Vassar College

## Digital Window @ Vassar

---

Senior Capstone Projects

---

2020

### Broadcasting addiction: the establishment of authority in the dissemination of medical information in television media

Elizabeth Rotolo  
*Vassar College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior\\_capstone](https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Rotolo, Elizabeth, "Broadcasting addiction: the establishment of authority in the dissemination of medical information in television media" (2020). *Senior Capstone Projects*. 1051.  
[https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior\\_capstone/1051](https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone/1051)

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Window @ Vassar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Window @ Vassar. For more information, please contact [library\\_thesis@vassar.edu](mailto:library_thesis@vassar.edu).

**Broadcasting Addiction: The Establishment of Authority in the Dissemination  
of Medical Information in Television Media**

Elizabeth Rotolo

May 15, 2020

Media Studies Senior Project

First Reader: Alexander Kupfer

Second Reader: Dara Greenwood

## Table of Contents

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	3
<b>Introduction</b>	4
<b>Chapter One:</b> Why Do We Trust What John Oliver is Telling Us?	12
<b>Chapter Two:</b> Do I know These People? How Documentaries Give Us Insight into the Lives of Opioid Addicts	25
<b>Chapter Three:</b> It's Not <i>Just</i> a Funny TV Show: <i>Scrubs</i> and How Addiction is Framed for Laughs	39
<b>Conclusion</b>	50
<b>Bibliography</b>	53

## Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my family, especially my parents, for supporting me throughout my time at Vassar. It is because of their care and encouragement that I was able to accomplish my goals. My Dad first pushed me to go to Vassar. My mom told me to look into Media Studies when I had no idea what I wanted to study. My sister calls me “media studies queen” whenever I make analytical comments about what we watch. My brother has given me such wise advice, including “just get it done,” which I remembered on many long nights writing this whole thing.

I would also like to thank the Media Studies Department and Giovanna Borradori (and her unforgettable energy circles). I can wholeheartedly say that this has been the perfect, most fulfilling major for me. I have had the flexibility to take all kinds of classes that have each taught me different lessons and skills. This interdisciplinary major has prepared me to be a well-rounded and critical thinker. I am so appreciative of the amazing resources and consultation I have had that allowed me to write this thesis, which I am very proud of.

I will always cherish my semester abroad in London through the Media Studies program. I made the most wonderful friends who I had previously not known at Vassar. They are all incredible and I have gained so much because of their individual passions, including intellectually stimulating conversations that spurred rumination about my eventual topic.

Thank you to the Media Studies Department, the Steering Committee, and my second reader, Dara Greenwood. I have taken a couple of classes with Professor Greenwood, both of which are some of my favorites and taught me the most about the power of media. It has been an honor to learn from such an intelligent and engaged professor.

Most of all, I would like to thank my advisor, Alex Kupfer. I took my first and last class at Vassar (and others too) with Professor Kupfer. His passion and commitment to teaching students who are eager to learn is unmatched. He has given me more feedback and reassurance throughout this process than I could have ever hoped for (not that I am surprised, but also, I seriously cannot tell you how many times he read over my chapters). He has been consistently present and available, even with the unpredicted coronavirus pandemic, which is why my thesis was not impacted by distanced learning.

## Introduction

The relationship between media and medicine has become increasingly important. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the French Ministry of Health generated a misconception that ibuprofen makes symptoms much worse by tweeting a warning citing “serious adverse events” from an inconclusive study that was never proven.<sup>1</sup> Even those with good intentions can proliferate misinformation in the media that impacts the lives in unpredictable numbers and ways. The media landscape is overcrowded with conflicting information about health and medicine, which are already convoluted topics that are difficult to learn about. There are always new suggestions in the media about what medications to take, what to do to live a longer life, and how to avoid disease, all which are offered by people with various credentials and motives. By analyzing messages about medicine in the mass media and one can begin to understand how the public relies on the mediation of this information through trusted sources for their comprehension. To recognize how the media impacts the public’s health and their understanding of medicine, it is critical to investigate how consumers determine what sources are authoritative and trustworthy in disseminating such information.

Health communication and medical information is propagated and has proliferated in recent years through various media channels, including television, print, radio, and Internet.<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, I will focus on analyzing content found on television, as it has proved to be a particularly effective tool in shaping public thought and societal attitudes towards prevalent issues. Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch position television as a cultural forum that reflects,

---

<sup>1</sup> Maryn Mckenna, “The Ibuprofen Debate Reveals the Danger of Covid-19 Rumors,” *Wired*, Conde Nast, March 26, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-ibuprofen-debate-reveals-the-danger-of-covid-19-rumors/>.

<sup>2</sup> Maria De Jesus, “The Impact of Mass Media Health Communication on Health Decision-Making and Medical Advice-Seeking Behavior of U.S. Hispanic Population,” *Health Communication* 28, no. 5 (2013).

maintains, and transforms the public's traditional stances.<sup>3</sup> Television programming is very revealing of cultural norms and also has the ability to shape those norms. Additionally, in Michael Pfau et al.'s study on the influence of television on public perceptions of physicians, they found that that television is most influential when presenting situations where viewers have minimal direct experience, which inhibits their ability to confirm or deny the accuracy of those depictions.<sup>4</sup> Television provides viewers with information about issues that they are not knowledgeable about in which they learn from and form opinions. In my thesis, I want to examine how different approaches, genres, and forms explore the same topic to clarify the intended impact on how viewers regard the issue.

I have chosen to analyze case studies that pertain to the contemporary issue of the opioid crisis. This is a topic that is framed and discussed in various ways, and the coverage has increased over the years due to the growing severity of the issue. The increase in opioid addiction began in the late 1990's when pharmaceutical companies instructed healthcare providers that they could prescribe opioid pain relievers at greater rates through the assurance that patients would not become addicted. The increase of prescriptions resulted in the wide-scale abuse of both prescription and non-prescription opioids. Opioid addiction grew exponentially in America and in 2017, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services declared the opioid epidemic to be a public health emergency.<sup>5</sup> In 2018, over ten million people misused prescription opioids and an average of 130 people died every day from an opioid overdose.<sup>6</sup> This is a complicated issue and there has been a lot of attention paid to and increasing blame placed on

---

<sup>3</sup> Horace Newcombe and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum," in *Television: The Critical View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Pfau, Lawrence J. Mullen, and Kirsten Garow, "The influence of television viewing on public perceptions of physicians," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 39 (1995).

<sup>5</sup> "About the Opioid Epidemic," *hhs.gov/opioids*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, September 4, 2019, <https://www.hhs.gov/opioids/about-the-epidemic/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

certain parties, furthermore changing perceptions on how to regard addicts. The media perpetuates discourse and rhetoric that consumers incorporate in their own considerations about the crisis and addiction.

The Surgeon General stated that “treatment is critical” in cases of addiction, which presents similar characteristics found in other chronic diseases.<sup>7</sup> Although addiction is a disease that requires treatment, it can often be framed as a criminal justice issue in the media, rather than a public health issue. There are many television programs, whether they are nonfiction genres, like news or documentaries, or fiction series, that reinforce negative stereotypes and paint addicts to be immoral and unworthy of care. These notions are accepted by various demographics as they are prevalent in different genres and frameworks. Jason Mittell uses the concept of genre mixing to explain how genre determines the show’s target audience and how it influences viewers.<sup>8</sup> By combining two genres, such as satire and news, serious topics engage many viewer types who want to be informed and entertained. Genre mixing also allows for serious topics to be approached seemingly superficially, through humor, so that the content appears non-didactic but will nevertheless impact viewers. It is important to consider the effect that genre mixing has on viewers. How are viewers socially impacted when they learn about the opioid crisis in the name of comedy? How does this differ from when viewers learn about the opioid crisis by watching affective stories of grieving families in combination with hearing significant facts about addiction? A range of television genres and forms can influence viewers’ ideas about the opioid crisis, whether they positively or negatively contribute further to prevailing discourses.

---

<sup>7</sup>“Surgeon General’s Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health,” *SurgeonGeneral.gov*, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, May, 13, 2020, <https://addiction.surgeongeneral.gov/executive-summary/report>.

<sup>8</sup> Jason Mittell, “Cartoon Realism: Genre Mixing and the Cultural Life of *The Simpsons*,” in *Television: The Critical View*, 7th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Satire relies on the viewer having a degree of cultural awareness in order to connect to the jokes. This is important for its ability to “produce social scorn or damning indictments through *playful* means and, in the process, transform the aggressive act of ridicule into the more socially acceptable act of rendering something ridiculous.”<sup>9</sup> It can prompt viewers to reflect and critically think about the most current news and issues at the forefront of public discourse, such as political opinions and societal operations. Jonathan Grey, Jeffrey Jones and Ethan Thompson argue, “Satire not only offers meaningful political critiques but also encourages viewers to play with politics, to examine it, test it, and question it rather than simply consume it as information or ‘truth’ from authoritative sources.”<sup>10</sup> By comedically addressing important topics that are most often approached seriously, shows can help viewers connect more easily with the information and feel less intimidated and more empowered to engage it. The nature of these shows presents the material about the opioid crisis and addiction in a way that is not overwhelming, whether it is by breaking down information in comprehensible synthesis or incorporating it into a funny narrative. Humor also increases the comprehensibility of and accessibility to the information, because it is presented in a simple manner so that both the jokes and content can be easily understood. It allows for the correspondents or characters to say more provocative things than perhaps cannot be said on serious news programs. Through satire, news correspondents are able to scrutinize pharmaceutical companies and other institutional entities in the medical field for their role in the opioid crisis and fictional characters are able make fun addicts in humorous, not somber, ways.

---

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Grey, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson, “The State of Satire, The Satire of State,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post Network Era*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

In addition to sources that address addiction by scolding those responsible for the crisis or addicts themselves, other types of programs focus on exploring the personal suffering caused by addiction. In showing the impact of addiction on victims and their families, viewers are able to emphasize and recognize that addiction is a very difficult disease and addicts require treatment, not incarceration. The variation in framings of addiction across television content, that can prompt different debates, viewpoints, and actions, demonstrates how overwhelming the media landscape is and why it may be difficult for viewers to decide what to trust.

In this thesis, I will explore how medical information, specifically about the opioid epidemic, is dispersed to the public through forms of television. Although broadcast news is most commonly regarded as the authoritative source on such issues, I choose to examine satirical talk shows, documentaries, and narrative television – three other forms of media that are not always acknowledged for their ability to educate viewers. I will look at *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, the satirical HBO program, *Warning: This Drug May Kill You* and *Understanding the Opioid Epidemic*, the HBO and PBS documentaries, and *Scrubs*, the medical sitcom as my case studies. These case studies show how these genres differ in their examination of the same issue. Through my analysis, I reveal how these forms gain the authority and the trust of their viewers.

In my first chapter, I use *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* to illustrate how satirical news shows have become trustworthy sources for consumers by synthesizing information and presenting it in an accessible way that is simultaneously entertaining. This show reviews significant issues and constructs arguments that are supported by media drawn from more traditional news sources, such as interviews, news reports, and articles. These segments are also amusing because they are filled with interjections of culturally relevant jokes. John Oliver has

become an authoritative figure himself through his exceptional ability to engage and activate his viewers. *Time* created the phrase, “John Oliver Effect” to call attention the measurable impact Oliver has had because of his ability to create viral content that incites change through calls-to-action.<sup>11</sup> This skill is often demonstrated in his segments about the opioid crisis, where Oliver blames pharmaceutical companies for the growth of opioid addictions and overdoses. Oliver revisited the opioid crisis three times, which indicates the growth and perpetuation of this national problem. *Last Week Tonight* identifies some of the people and companies that are responsible for crisis as they disregarded potential and ensuing harm of increasing opioid sales. Oliver pushes his viewers to learn more about all the people in the medical industry, including specific pharmaceutical executives, that can financially gain from the inflation of prescriptions. Satirical news shows educate viewers who watch to access compelling media evidence and to hear innovative jokes, so that they learn about topics in humorous ways.

In my second chapter, I discuss how documentaries employ emotionally evocative footage of the experiences of addicts and their families so that viewers emphasize with those affected. This is complemented with more objective factual evidence so that viewers recognize the gravity of the crisis. I examine *Warning: This Drug May Kill You* (Perri Peltz, HBO, 2017), an observational film that cultivates the sense that viewers are seeing the unmediated, direct experience of addicts. I also discuss *Understanding the Opioid Epidemic* (John Grant, PBS, 2018), an expository documentary that is dependent on statistics and expert opinions to present a credible investigation, but also includes affective footage of a grieving family. Documentaries contribute to the awareness that addiction is prevalent among different geographic regions, socioeconomic statuses, and ages by profiling different types of addicts. By focusing on the

---

<sup>11</sup> Victor Luckerson, “The John Oliver Effect: The HBO Host's Real-World Impact,” *Time*, Time USA, LLC., July 10, 2015, <https://time.com/3674807/john-oliver-net-neutrality-civil-forfeiture-miss-america/>.

experiences of addicts and their families, these films notably convey addiction as a disease that is a continuous, unpredictable struggle that victims grapple with for rest of their lives, helping to position them as victims instead of criminals. HBO's inclusion of extensive footage demonstrates the filmmakers' deep engagement with their subjects and PBS' thorough investigation into the topic allows for documentaries to potentially prompt positive change, such as caution with addictive medications, ability to identify of the signs of addiction, more compassion for addicts, or greater awareness of the scope of the opioid crisis

In my third chapter, I analyze the sitcom *Scrubs*, which aired on NBC and ABC from 2001 to 2010, to examine how addiction is framed in medical series, and how these narratives can expose and shape public perceptions of doctors and addicts. *Scrubs* has been acclaimed for its accurate portrayal of ordinary hospital circumstances and experiences. It combines episodic and serialistic modes of storytelling that allows for complex narratives to develop over episodes and seasons. Addiction in *Scrubs* is depicted through Sam, a recurring character who is condemned and ridiculed by the doctors who do not feel responsible for helping him. Over the stand-alone episodes, Sam is presented as a manipulative con-artist who is criminally punished, rather than treated and cared for by the doctors and hospital staff. Narrative television is capable of revealing and reinforcing societal notions, such as that addicts are morally degenerate and undeserving of treatment, which is indicated by the inclusion and management of Sam and his addiction in *Scrubs*.

The analyses throughout this thesis show how satire news programs, documentaries, and narrative television have the capacity to contribute and perpetuate societal norms and cultural connotations in the general public. The variation in genre presents an arrange of approaches to the opioid crisis, including scrutiny of pharmaceutical companies, empathy for addicts, and

mockery of addicts. The exploration of medical information in these media forms advances larger discussions about how trust is instilled in media more broadly. It is essential to determine how viewers decide to trust media sources in order to discern what motivates their actions and informs their beliefs about fundamental issues in contemporary American life.

## Chapter One: Why Do We Trust What John Oliver is Telling Us?

We are making jokes about the news and sometimes we need to research things deeply to understand them, but it's always in service of a joke. If you make jokes about animals, that does not make you a zoologist. We certainly hold ourselves to a high standard and fact-check everything, but the correct term for what we do is “comedy.”<sup>12</sup>

- John Oliver

### Introduction

Satirical news shows, like *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, have become a popular source for political and societal commentary in America by highlighting complex topics through candid discussion styles. The popular weekly HBO satirical news program has won the Emmy for Outstanding Variety Talk Series & Writing for a Variety Series four years in a row.<sup>13</sup> Blurring the lines between comedy, journalism, and politics, the show’s brand is based upon Oliver’s keen ability to thoroughly delve into topics while often ignored or misunderstood, demand attention through analyses. Audiences see him as an authoritative figure who they can rely on to learn about such topics. Each episode features a main segment, which are usually around twenty minutes in length, where he discusses critical issues by examining media highlights from interviews, news pieces, and article snippets, with the routine interjection of culturally relevant jokes that engage and entertain viewers. Oliver has covered an array of complex topics, such as prison labor and food waste in an accessible manner. He has repeatedly examined the opioid crisis, calling attention to processes pharmaceutical companies employ in marketing to doctors and the effects on people and communities nationwide. In this chapter, I

---

<sup>12</sup> David Carr, "Dry Topics Give Oliver Comedy and Clout: Business/Financial Desk]," *New York Times*, November 17, 2014, <http://libproxy.vassar.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.vassar.edu/docview/1625282902?accountid=14824>.

<sup>13</sup> “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver,” *HBO*, Home Box Office, Inc, Accessed December 14, 2019, <https://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver>.

will examine three different *Last Week Tonight* episode on the opioid crisis that illustrate the variety of tactics Oliver uses in cultivating himself as a well-informed and authoritative source for underexplored topics, even though satirical media is not typically regarded as a source for information. By using *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* as a case study, we can see how satirical news shows position themselves as a trustworthy form of mass media for consumers through the genre's ability to synthesize information and present accessible information in an entertaining form.

### **Background: *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver***

Horace Newcombe and Paul Hirsch argue that television producers are “Cultural *bricoleurs*, seeking and creating new meaning in the combination of cultural elements with embedded significance. They respond to real events, changes in social structure and organization, and to shifts in attitude and value.”<sup>14</sup> Satirical news correspondents both reflect and shape public opinions within the issues that they explore. Like other satirical news shows, *Last Week Tonight* compiles significant and neglected stories from various sources into a digestible, humorous synthesis of a complex topic that simultaneously informs and engages the viewer. This positions Oliver as an authoritative figure as he is able to recognize and comment on prevalent issues in accessible ways for viewers to increase their knowledge about certain issues.

John Oliver categorizes his show as a comedy and does not consider it to be a news program, yet younger audiences rely on satirical news shows as a source for important news and information. A 2004 study found that 21% of Americans aged 18-29 regularly learned about the

---

<sup>14</sup> Horace Newcombe and Paul M. Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” in *Television: The Critical View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 563.

presidential campaign from shows like *The Daily Show*.<sup>15</sup> Another national survey found that *The Daily Show* viewers were better educated and more and knowledgeable about the presidential campaign than those who did not watch late-night television.<sup>16</sup> Before hosting his own show, John Oliver worked as a correspondent from 2006 to 2013 on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, considered to be the trailblazer for satirical news television and clearly influenced Oliver's own show, beginning in 2014. *The Daily Show* legitimated satirical news programs as hubs for cultural commentary about current events cemented this genre as a reliable source for viewers to gain insight to educated opinions. Oliver respectfully admits, “[Jon] invented this particular style of TV comedy about the news. There is not going to be a Stephen Colbert without Jon, and there's definitely not going to be me.”<sup>17</sup> Stewart became well-known for analyzing current events by deconstructing footage from other news programs, especially the conservative *Fox News*, and discussing it through an opinionated and comedic angle. Like Oliver, Stewart identifies as comedian and describes his job as “throwing spitballs” from the back of the room and points out that *The Daily Show*'s purpose is to entertain, not inform.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the extensive and informative content that they consistently present and comment on prompts viewers to regard them as political and societal forerunners.

News media is often regarded as trustworthy by TV audiences and the most authoritative source for information. Jason Peifer explains, “scholars, politicians, and citizens alike commonly treat the news media as a concrete—albeit vaguely defined—institutional entity.”<sup>19</sup> Viewers trust

---

<sup>15</sup> Amber Day, “And Now... The News? Mimesis and the Real in *The Daily Show*,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post Network Era*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 99.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>17</sup> David Marchese, “In Conversation: John Oliver.” *Vulture*, Vox Media Inc., February 16, 2016, <https://www.vulture.com/2016/02/john-oliver-last-week-tonight-c-v-r.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Michiko Kakutani, “Is Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in America?,” *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, August 15, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/17/arts/television/17kaku.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Jason T. Peifer, “Imitation as Flattery: How TV News Parody's Media Criticism Can Influence Perceived News Media Importance and Media Trust,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 95, no. 3 (2018).

the news because the media organizations take on the responsibility of reporting on the most important issues to inform the public. Peifer adds that the believability of the news centers more on expectations of whether reporters will present true and verifiable information, which demonstrates the imperative role that anchors take on.<sup>20</sup> Satirical news correspondents, such as Stewart and Oliver, are able to gain a similar reputation of trust to that of news anchors by critically examining the information provided by legitimate news outlets and exposing the motives that drive that information. Viewers look to satirical news correspondents to say what traditional anchors cannot, which gains the trust of viewers.

*Last Week Tonight* is able to obtain an authoritative reputation though the nature of its content but also gains further viewership by uploading its main segments to YouTube for people without an HBO subscription. In Henry Jenkins' chapter in *Satire TV*, he examines how new relationships between new and old media forms, such as YouTube and television, are reshaping public discourse and civic engagement. Jenkins previously coined the term "convergence culture," which he describes as a concept, "shaped by increased contact and collaboration between established and emerging media institutions, expansion of the number of players producing and circulating media, and the flow of content across multiple platforms and networks."<sup>21</sup> The distribution of *Last Week Tonight* content onto YouTube allows viewers to share and connect over clips, which in turn not only exposes Oliver's messages to more people online but also invites more viewers to tune into his show on HBO. This is also why Oliver's content is made freely available online, as it can go viral, benefiting HBO's business and

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Henry Jenkins, "Why Mitt Romney Won't Debate a Snowman," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post Network Era*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 189; Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

branding. This process works cyclically, establishing Oliver as a popular public figure in the media and his show as a respectable source for information.

*Last Week Tonight* is more welcoming for viewers who want to engage with information about current events but may be deterred from legitimate news sources as their content is more serious and more disheartening. The presence of the Oliver's segments on YouTube highlights satire's viral abilities and facilitation of connection, in addition to the technological advances that grant satire the capacity to transgress the boundaries of television almost instantaneously.

The ability of Oliver to go viral demonstrates his direct engagement with consumers who are eager to share and discuss his segments. Like *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight* has also enlightened and informed their viewers to be engaged and active. *Time* coined the phrase the "John Oliver Effect" to call attention to the tangible effects resulting Oliver's ability to create viral content and incite change, something that has distinguished his show as an important text apart from *The Daily Show*.<sup>22</sup> For example, in one of his most popular segments from 2014, Oliver urged his audience to write to the Federal Communication Commission about their opposition for potential changes to Net Neutrality. The FCC received so many comments that its servers crashed. Similarly, in a segment from 2014 where he criticized the Miss America Organization but acknowledged it as the largest provider of scholarships for women in the world, Oliver implored viewers to donate to other groups. In the following two days, the Society of Women Engineers received \$25,000 in donations in, or about 15% of its typical annual individual donations. The "John Oliver Effect" even inspired government action. The *Time* article also discussed how a Washington State legislator proposed a new bill that would let

---

<sup>22</sup> Victor Luckerson, "The John Oliver Effect: The HBO Host's Real-World Impact," *Time*, Time USA, LLC., July 10, 2015, <https://time.com/3674807/john-oliver-net-neutrality-civil-forfeiture-miss-america/>.

citizens comment on new legislation using videos submitted online, which was inspired by Oliver's ability to turn "boring" topics into viral sensations through online video.

It is valuable to examine *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* specifically in the context of trustworthy forms of mass media forms because he often has had a measurable impact on topics that he has discussed. One of the reasons that contemporary satire programs have had a cultural impact is because those comedians, "often say what the press is too timid to say, proving itself a more critical interrogator of politicians at times and a more effective mouthpiece of the people's displeasure with those in power, including the press itself."<sup>23</sup> Due to their comedic nature, satirical news shows are able to push the boundaries of what can be said about serious topics. The opioid crisis is a multifaceted issue that can be explored in many ways and satirical news shows discuss it by earning the trust and laughs of viewers. There is certainly value in the ability for satirical news programs to engage viewers in ways that legitimate news sources cannot.

### **Television as a Cultural Forum and *Last Week Tonight's* Genre Hybridity**

*Last Week Tonight* prompts viewers to be critical of established norms or institutions, such as the pharmaceutical industry. Oliver's commentary often includes a scathing take on an issue or public figure, but the comedic tone allows viewers to approach disappointing or negative news openly through the genre's promise of entertainment. For example, Oliver discussed how the top prescribing doctors of a certain drug are often paid by that company, highlighting how patients are typically unaware of doctors' profit-seeking motives. He framed this information by comedically contrasting to Rihanna's endorsement of coconut water in which viewers know that

---

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Grey, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson, "The State of Satire, The Satire of State," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post Network Era*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 4.

she is getting paid, joking “I’m glad you’re getting paid Riri, but I’m actually not going to drink that because you and I both know that coconut water tastes like cereal milk mixed with bull semen.”<sup>24</sup> This joke illustrates Oliver’s argument about how doctors’ ethics can be skewed when pharmaceutical companies offer them the opportunity to make more money.

Although there are frequently frivolous jokes throughout the show, viewers nevertheless rely on shows like *Last Week Tonight* to inform them and to help them gauge public perceptions in contemporary society. Newcombe and Hirsch distinguish television as a cultural forum and claim that television “focuses on our most prevalent concerns, our deepest dilemmas. Our most traditional views, those that are repressive and reactionary, as well as those that are subversive and emancipatory, are upheld, examined, maintained, and transformed.”<sup>25</sup> When *Last Week Tonight* focuses on the opioid crisis, it explores it in a way that differs from the limited perspectives that are presented elsewhere, such as the perspective that addicts are criminals that are unworthy of treatment. When Oliver discusses topics, he often criticizes the corruption of powerful people and institutions, while imploring his viewers to make a difference by visiting websites, making donations, voting, and writing to government officials, for examples. By analyzing the discourse around an issue in combination with prompting positive change, Oliver is simultaneously disempowering dominant forces that can often escape public scrutiny and empowering his viewers to take action. Oliver’s ability to synthesize information about complex issues into an accessible format through humor further engages viewers and attracts them to his program. By educating them about issues and also prompting further action, his viewers believe that by watching they can learn how to make a difference.

---

<sup>24</sup> “Marketing to Doctors: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO),” *YouTube*, LastWeekTonight, February 8, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQZ2UeOTO3L>.

<sup>25</sup> Horace Newcombe and Paul M. Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” 564.

The genre hybridity of satirical news programming is relevant helps explain why shows like *Last Week Tonight* have the ability to attract younger audiences, who may want to be informed, but also want to be entertained. Jason Mittell argues that a “show's genre mixing is crucial to understanding the program and that genre has had deeper and more significant ramifications than one might presume.”<sup>26</sup> By integrating humor in the presentation of contemporary news topics, *Last Week Tonight* appeals to consumers who are simultaneously entertained and educated about issues, that have to do with topics such as health. Through this, viewers absorb Oliver’s accounts of issues, which influences their viewpoints and can contribute to further discussions in public discourse. Although Oliver insists that he works in comedy and not news, fans regard *Last Week Tonight* as a trustworthy source of information to viewers who appreciate the topics that he dissects and the humor that he employs. One viewer on YouTube commented, “John Oliver did a better job of explaining this issue in a comedy interview than every news outlet combined.”<sup>27</sup> By using media such as clips from traditional television news and supplemental information from print sources with statistics as sources to develop a clear thesis, viewers learn more and trust the show to provide more important information and discuss it in more accessible ways than other news providers. In a crowded media landscape with many different accounts and insights, it can be difficult to find sources that are reliable, engaging, and stimulating for viewers. The genre hybridity of *Last Week Tonight* situates the program as a source for thought-provoking, opinionated discussions about pertinent topics that Oliver approaches in an educated way that is comprehensible, captivating, funny, and informative.

---

<sup>26</sup> Jason Mittell, “Cartoon Realism: Genre Mixing and the Cultural Life of *The Simpsons*,” In *Television: The Critical View*, 7th edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Tryitout, *YouTube*, 7 months ago, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEVlyP4\\_11M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEVlyP4_11M).

### ***Last Week Tonight's Address of Medical Issues and Dissection of Information***

As the number of opioid overdoses surged, countless people were personally affected who had questions that needed to be answered. In his segments discussing the opioid epidemic, John Oliver largely blamed large pharmaceutical companies. He blamed these companies for the rise of addiction and overdoses. Through the hybridity of satire and news, Oliver uses humor to cultivate clear thesis in his arguments that are easy to follow. Although there is a team of people who educate Oliver on the topics that he addresses, the cultivation of his discussions suggests that he is an intellectual, literate man who is trustworthy and knowledgeable about the sea of problems plaguing our nation.

John Oliver's segment "Marketing to Doctors," which aired in February of 2015, has currently over eleven million views on YouTube and demonstrates his ability to engage viewers.<sup>28</sup> Oliver exposes how drug representatives, who are responsible for selling their drug to doctors, have access to what prescriptions doctors are writing. They push the doctors to "go off label" and prescribe their drug for non-FDA approved uses. In a particularly alarming part, Oliver discusses how the doctors who write the most prescriptions of drugs can be paid by that company. He acknowledges that although this is a disheartening revelation, viewers do not have to be complacent. He informs his audience that they can use the website, [OpenPaymentsData.CMS.gov](https://openpaymentsdata.cms.gov), a federal website that allows people to see all of the perks given to doctors by pharmaceutical companies. This is very typical of Oliver's segments and is another example of how Oliver directly engages with his viewers, which is different from other media coverage of the opioid crisis. He exposes wrongdoings coupled with the interjection of jokes before prompting viewers that they can take action. This segment returns to more conventional

---

<sup>28</sup> "Marketing to Doctors: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQZ2UeOTO3L>.

satire, concluding with a fake advertisement that parodies the formulaic, identifiable aesthetic that most pharmaceutical companies employ. This fake advertisement is for “pharmaceutical money” and satirically demonstrates the process of a doctor accepting compensation and benefits from pharmaceutical companies and how he frequently prescribes the medication. One of the reasons that satire news is so popular is because it plays with the stereotypes and conventions of other media forms through a humorous, yet critical lens in order to present these topics in ways that distinguish it from other media forms.

*Last Week Tonight’s “Opioids,”* which aired in 2016, has currently over twelve million views on YouTube and illustrates Oliver’s reputation as an authoritative figure through his ability to synthesize important pieces of evidence from multiple sources.<sup>29</sup> Oliver uses clips of Perdue advertisements filled with supposedly inspirational stories of people who used Oxycontin to turn their life around, such as a woman who talked about how it helps her play with her grandchildren. This adds to *Last Week Tonight’s* reputation as a trustworthy source because it is able to gather and highlight important information from a range of sources in order to bolster his thesis. Oliver then announced that two out of the seven people in Perdue’s video subsequently died from active opioid use and showed a news interview with the grandmother about how she almost lost everything. *Last Week Tonight* is doing the follow-up work that is normally associated with news platforms. Oliver ends the segment by blaming on large pharmaceutical companies and calling for action for prevention and to help the millions of addicts that already exist by investing more in treatment programs and increasing availability of drugs that stop overdoses.

---

<sup>29</sup> “Opioids: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO),” YouTube, LastWeekTonight, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pdPrQFjo2o>.

The final *Last Week Tonight* segment that is relevant to the discussion is called “Opioids II,” which was aired two and half years later in April of 2019 and has over six million views on YouTube.<sup>30</sup> In this segment, John Oliver explained that he was doing another segment dedicated on this topic because the epidemic is very much still ongoing and 47,000 overdosed on opioids the prior year. Much like a traditional news outlet, *Last Week Tonight* returns to important topics, highlighting how the problem perpetuates. He again dives into how the opioid epidemic began and blames large pharmaceutical companies that acted wildly irresponsibly, skirted any major consequences, and, for the most part, avoided public scrutiny. This also reveals how *Last Week Tonight* uses HBO’s industry position to support the show’s argument in a humorous manner, here by utilizing Hollywood stars to enable John Oliver to the link illegal drug trade to tactics employed by pharmaceutical companies. This demonstrative of the importance of satire news’ genre hybridity in highlighting key issues in a humorous manner.

Oliver focuses Richard Sackler, whose family owns Perdue (the company that marketed Oxycontin to doctors), making it easier for viewers to identify an actual corrupted and powerful person who has knowingly taken part in causing massive devastation. Sackler’s family is worth thirteen billion dollars, yet hides from the public eye, making it difficult to find any pictures, interviews or media discussion of them. Sackler’s presence is so scarce in the media, he has evaded any recognition as a key player in the opioid crisis. To draw even more attention to Richard Sackler’s central role in the opioid crisis, Oliver had four famous actors read lines from the released testimony of Sacker in a settled case, of which the video was sealed.

---

<sup>30</sup> “Opioids II: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO),” *YouTube*, LastWeekTonight, April 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qCKR6wy94U>.



*Last Week Tonight* uses star power to bring awareness to Sackler’s evils by using actors from shows that revolve around drugs, such as *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*, to show the link between prescription and illegal drugs. Oliver even directly states, “This is HBO and if we want someone to read this shit out of another email that Richard Sackler wrote, this one characterizing his devotion to oxycontin, we have access to the cast of another iconic drug drama so brace yourselves.” Oliver acknowledges here the authority that HBO has earned in its access to what it needs to create iconic moments, and also includes identifiable cultural allusions that further engage and entertain the audience. To end the segment, Oliver promises that until Richard Sackler releases the video evidence of his testimony, *Last Week Tonight* would upload all of the videos of the four Richard Sackler stand-ins reading extracts from his emails and deposition, and various state lawsuits he is involved in to [sacklergallery.com](http://sacklergallery.com). Oliver emphasizes that, “The point here is Richard Sackler’s deposition should not be something that Perdue gets to bury like its buried so many other things over the years. So please, go to the website and watch and use the clips as you see fit.” The end of this segment perfectly encapsulates the reasons why *Last Week Tonight* is a cultural phenomenon for its ability to inform viewers with important information, entertain viewers with cultural references, and evoke change by prompting further action – all of which is made possible by the effectiveness of its genre hybridity and the power of HBO.

## **Conclusion**

Through these episodes of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* that the opioid crisis, it is clear how satirical news shows have become trustworthy forms of mass media that further the understanding and education of consumers about topics that require more attention. *Last Week Tonight* accomplishes this through its ability to synthesize information, through the nature of its entertaining form, and through the virality of the segments.

## Chapter Two: Do I know These People? How Documentaries Give Us Insight into the Lives of Opioid Addicts

Documentaries offer the sensuous experience of sounds and images organized to move us: they activate feelings and emotions and they tap into values and beliefs; in doing so, they possess an expressive power that equals or exceeds the printed word.<sup>31</sup>

- Bill Nichols

### Introduction

If you think of any topic, whether it is common or obscure, there is most likely a documentary that addresses it, or several. For a topic like the opioid epidemic, there are a growing number of documentaries that address this as it affected millions of people.

Documentaries can be incredibly moving and powerful inherently because of their form, which claims to be more truthful or objective in their representations of a topic such as addiction. This topic has a strong affective component since it allows viewers to feel for addicts and their families, while also is at the center of politically charged debates, which is why people want to learn more about it. Some observational documentaries, such as *Warning: This Drug May Kill You* (Perri Peltz, HBO, 2017), emphasize dramatic experiences of individuals and families in an effort to evoke strong emotions and produce empathy. In observational documentaries, the presence of the filmmaker is absent and unacknowledged to create the impression of an unmediated account that allows viewers to feel as though they are witnesses to the events on screen.<sup>32</sup> Other expository documentaries, such as *Understanding the Opioid Epidemic* (John Grant, PBS, 2018), rely heavily on factual evidence and testimonies of experts in order to

---

<sup>31</sup> Bill Nichols, "What Makes Documentaries Engaging and Persuasive?" in *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 73.

<sup>32</sup> Bill Nichols, "Documentary Modes of Representation," in *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 42.

educate and in attempt to present a credible examination. In expository documentaries, filmmakers directly address the audience with elements to advance their argument, while also seeming objective.<sup>33</sup> Documentary filmmakers invite viewers by exploring a subject through a focused lens, which presents a perspective that is unlike those publicized in mainstream media. Bill Nichols defines social actors as people who “continue to conduct their lives more or less as they would have done without the presence of a camera. Their value resides... in the ways in which their everyday behavior and personality serves the needs of the filmmaker.”<sup>34</sup> Documentary filmmakers focus on learning about their subjects in order to piece together narratives that position their subjects as social actors who can draw in viewers and prompt further reflection about the opioid crisis and how society understands addicts.

Although documentaries have angles and are created with certain perspectives, viewers consider these films to be factual and accurate, and use them to educate themselves on issues at both the macro and individual levels. Unlike other forms of media, documentaries allow viewers to connect with the social actors and the crafted narrative can shift their personal ideas about addiction. Filmmakers, influenced by their own opinions, experiences, and reasoning, selectively choose what to include in order to impart their desired effect on viewers. They purposefully arrange information, opinions, insights, and accounts that coalesce into a persuasive narrative that is intended to engage and move viewers. Whether it is more observational or expository, documentaries can provide a more comprehensive look into the opioid crisis by showing emotionally evocative footage of experiences of individual addiction or overdose victims and presenting astonishing information. By highlighting experiences of struggling individuals,

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 33-4.

<sup>34</sup> Bill Nichols, “Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?,” in *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 45.

viewers find ways to relate to their stories that move them in ways that conventional news sources cannot. The specific elements in documentaries are used order to persuade viewers to emphasize, to recognize the powerful dangers of opioids, and to encourage them to place blame on the profiting pharmaceutical companies rather than on the addicts themselves.

### **The Effectiveness of Documentaries in Relation to the Opioid Epidemic**

Documentaries can be particularly persuasive and influential when they explore issues that are complex and multifaceted. Bill Nichols comments that, “If an issue has not yet been definitively decided, or if agreement cannot be definitively achieved by science or logic, documentary film plays a crucial role in disposing us to experience that issue from a particular perspective.”<sup>35</sup> Documentaries allow viewers to be exposed to experiences that may not be present in their own lives. This can be especially affective because it allows viewers to empathize and to see how people (who can be similar or dissimilar to them) are affected. Additionally, because documentaries are perceived to be real and factual, they influence viewers who find these films to be authoritative. Unlike satire television or fictional representations, documentaries are associated with truthful, more in-depth narratives that allow viewers to further contemplate a topic thorough a belief that they understand the lives of those directly affected. Documentaries are able to build upon issues in greater details than the coverage of the opioid crisis other media forms, such as the news.

The issues of opioids and addiction are especially convoluted. The opioid crisis in America has reached the epidemic scale; from 1999–2018, around 450,000 people died from an opioid overdose, and this statistic does not reflect the people who lives were ruined by their

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 76-7.

addiction or the families affected.<sup>36</sup> As it continues to cause devastation, it is often a topic of discussion in the media and viewers look for answers of who or what is to blame, how to combat the problem, and how to treat addicts. Traditionally, drug addicts are portrayed as immoral and as solely responsible for their lifestyles that harm the people around them. For example, in 2017, *NBC Nightly News* broadcast a story about a young girl who lived with her opioid-addicted mom for ten years without any real care, and she described, “I consider myself as a parent and my mom as the kid.”<sup>37</sup> Although the news report included that her mother is now sober, it does not diminish from the terrifying experiences that the young girl had to endure, including helping to deal drugs. This news segment, which is less than four minutes, approaches addiction by highlighting the abuse of a child at the hands of an addict. This is a compelling story that can move viewers to empathize with the child in this limited time frame more easily than attempting to evoke empathy for the adult addict. Although the media contributes to certain problematic stereotypes that are typically associated with drug addicts, documentaries have helped highlight how addiction is prevalent among different areas, socioeconomic statuses, and ages.

Documentaries addressing this issue identify addicts and position them as victims rather than criminals in order to persuade viewers to empathize with them rather than to condemn them.

The ways in which documentaries present their subjects defines the narrative of the film and influences the impact of the film in terms of how well the viewers can relate to and empathize with those on screen. Documentary producer Lisa Leeman explains, “As much as documentary filmmakers worry about being true to our subjects, we also fret about betraying ‘the reality’ of what we're filming. And yet, the dictum to not interfere with ‘reality’ often directly

---

<sup>36</sup> “Understanding the Epidemic,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html>.

<sup>37</sup> “One Nation Overdosed: How Children Cope With A Parent's Addiction,” YouTube, NBC News, October 9, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YslhIY7ZyFM&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YslhIY7ZyFM&feature=emb_title).

contradicts our most human impulses.”<sup>38</sup> Filmmakers want to show footage that that will resonate with viewers, but also need to consider the ethics of how it could impact the social actors or other people affected by the issue. The way filmmakers choose to represent people and issues will impact the way that viewers understand them. The inclusion of this footage in documentaries can potentially prompt positive change, whether it be caution with prescription drugs, greater awareness of signs of addiction, more compassion for addicts, or deeper understanding of the severity of the current opioid crisis. Viewers experience the documentary as “a template of life as it is lived,” placing the viewer in the shoes of social actors.<sup>39</sup>

The documentaries analyzed in this chapter show the lives of people effected by the opioid epidemic, whether it is addicts themselves or families grieving in the aftermath. Although these stories are distressing, they are particularly compelling because the subjects seem like “average” people who viewers can relate to because of the way their addiction started. They are people who happened to need health care because of their kidney stones or their Crohn's disease, and became addicted to their prescribed medications. This allows viewers to understand the danger of this crisis and how anyone can be impacted by relating and emphasizing with the people they see on screen. They see “average” people in chronic pain, not only from their previous conditions, but also from withdrawal in the absence of their medications and their ensuing dependence on them. These documentaries are important in their ability to convey the prevalence of addiction as a disease and an ongoing struggle filled with progress and relapses, with no predictable timeline. This representation contrasts with fictional depictions of addicts in

---

<sup>38</sup> Lisa Leeman, “How Close Is Too Close? A Consideration of the Filmmaker-Subject Relationship,” *International Documentary Association*, International Documentary Association, June 3, 2003, <https://www.documentary.org/feature/how-close-too-close-consideration-filmmaker-subject-relationship>.

<sup>39</sup> Nichols, “Documentary Modes of Representation,” 43.

medical setting who are condemned by their doctors as criminals and go untreated, which I will discuss in my next chapter.

When viewers watch these documentaries, they not only learn more about the opioid epidemic but also the structural reasons as to why it has happened – due to the lack of oversight within the healthcare system and the intrusion of profit-motivated stakeholders. They see statistics that place blame on large pharmaceutical companies that prioritize profit above patient welfare. Viewers also learn about how doctors provide prescription opioids in inappropriate and harmful means whether it is because it is easier in terms of providing care or because of the influence of pharmaceutical companies. These documentaries may prompt viewers to think twice about taking analgesic prescription drugs as they see the various people who have become addicted by following their doctors' initial orders. These films aim to increase awareness about the institutional processes occurring that impact social actors and affect their health, such as in pharmaceutical companies, doctor's offices and hospitals, and with insurance providers.

### ***Warning: This Drug May Kill You***

*Warning: This Drug May Kill You* is an hour-long HBO documentary that aired in May of 2017 and focuses on four families with loved ones that are or were addicted to opioids. To contextualize the lives of these families, the film opens with various cellphone footage of addicts collapsing in public before asserting that this is the worst drug epidemic in American history and was “fueled by an aggressive 1990s marketing campaign led by Perdue that promoted the widespread use of opioids to treat pain and minimized the risk addiction.” Similar to *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, from the beginning of this documentary, the blame is placed solely on the pharmaceutical companies because they minimized risks of addiction to sell their drugs. The

disturbing opening images sets an unsettling tone that indicates that viewers should prepare themselves for the severity of the content. The style used in documentary is crucial to the film's affectivity and allows for viewers to empathize with addicts and their families.

The filmmaker takes an observational approach, emphasizing showing over telling and providing viewers with the impression that they are collaborating with the social actors so that viewers can witness "lived time."<sup>40</sup> These documentaries do not rely on intervention or narration by the filmmakers, who instead spends a great deal of time with their subjects to create a sense that they are working with them to create a candid narrative. The rest of the film is split into distinct stories, so viewers are afforded the opportunity to observe the lived experiences of others. The chapters are separated in order to distinguish the story of each social actor and convey that while they are all unique, they are bound together by their battles with addiction. Between each chapter, startling facts fill a black screen informing viewers with facts like, "91 people die every day from opioid overdoses," for example. Bill Nichols explains, "allowing points to be made succinctly and emphatically, partly by eliminating reference to the process by which the knowledge is produced, organized, and regulated so that it, too, is subject to the historical and ideological processes of which the film speaks."<sup>41</sup> The interspersed facts serve to ground the stories with concrete evidence and let viewers know the severe scope of the opioid crisis that goes beyond individuals to become a societal issue,

Throughout the entire film, there is no voiceover narration. The facts are presented through intertitles and all dialogue is "overheard rather than heard" as it is composed of conversations between social actors who do not directly address the camera.<sup>42</sup> Nichols explains

---

<sup>40</sup> Kate Nash, "Documentary-for-the-Other: Relationships, Ethics and (Observational) Documentary," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 26, no.3 (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Bill Nichols, "Documentary Modes of Representation," 34.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 39.

that the absence of commentary encourages emphasis on the activities of the individuals.<sup>43</sup> This allows viewers to consume the stories and facts with less of a sense of intrusion by the filmmaker over the narrative, which may incite viewers to personally reflect on what they observe. As viewers are unable to recognize the direct influence of the filmmaker in the observational mode, they believe that they are witnessing lived events. This is achieved in a sense through the use of scenes of people suffering in what is most often a private setting, simplistic intertitles, and absence of narration to give the viewer the perception that they are watching this unmediated or with the ability to form their own conclusions. This film is not made for viewers to only watch for an hour. It is made for viewers to watch and think about it for time to come, spurring discussion and influencing public discourse. Other aspects of the film reflect the filmmaker's attempt to incite contemplation. Newcombe and Hirsch explain, "Bringing values and attitudes, a universe of personal experiences and concerns, to the text, the viewer selects, examines, and acknowledges, and makes texts of his or her own."<sup>44</sup> Viewers watch the film with the influence of their personal experiences and viewpoints, which makes their interpretation of the film unique to them. However, their access to the events on screen can add to and shift their viewpoints so that their beliefs about the issue advance and grow.

Documentaries often claim to give viewers a direct perspective to the people's experiences. By identifying people who are actually affected by this, people who viewers are allowed to share experiences with, viewers are able to see how addiction and grief affect real families. The stories themselves are compelling because they are both emotional and real. Although the presence of the filmmaker is absent, the stories are edited in a linear fashion so that

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>44</sup> Horace Newcombe and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum," in *Television: The Critical View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 570.

viewers can understand how addiction begins and how their lives progress to have tragic conclusions. Slater states, “Narrative allows the complexity of the social world, and the range of beliefs and values of audiences members, to be plausibly reflected and addressed in the message.”<sup>45</sup> Dissimilarly from satire television, documentaries can present a more thorough look into the life of an individual for the viewer to connect to and emphasize with, which can be extremely effective in moving viewers.

*Warning: This Drug May Kill You* contains four stories, but only one is woven throughout the film. The film begins and ends with the story of Stephany Gay, the only person in the film who is living with addiction, while the other stories show grieving families. Stephany started using pain medication when she was diagnosed with kidney stones at sixteen, but eventually moved to heroin, which many prescription pill addicts begin using because it is a cheaper opioid. At the beginning of the film she is sober but as the film progresses, Stephany has relapses and those around her try to intervene. Nichols claims, “Recurring images or situations tend to strengthen a ‘reality effect,’ anchoring the film to the historical facticity of time and place and certifying to the continuing centrality of specific locations.”<sup>46</sup> The reoccurrence of Stephany’s story woven between the other overdose stories shows how addiction is a process and how recovery is not a consistent improvement, but an unpredictable struggle, something that is often overlooked. Unlike with the other stories, Stephany is alive so her individual experiences are shown, which allow for viewers to the reality of her addiction.

This film does not present possible solutions for those directly impacted or in terms of more broadly combatting the opioid crisis at large and is limited in its scope as it does not

---

<sup>45</sup> Michael D. Slater, “Entertainment Education and the Persuasive Impact of Narratives,” in *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Functions*, (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2002), 170.

<sup>46</sup> Nichols, “Documentary Modes of Representation,” 41.

address other pressing problems of the opioid epidemic. Presenting possible solutions or increasing awareness about other important, more specific problems within the epidemic does not fit within the overall purpose of the film. The filmmaker wants to provoke further contemplation even after the film is over. Leeman explains, “Ultimately, we documentarians hope that our films can have a positive impact—that our subjects' sacrifices and generosity in opening up their lives to the world can do some good, break down stereotypes, foster understanding among divergent people and affect public policy positively.”<sup>47</sup> Reflection is encouraged because of the emotional qualities, the supposed “realities” of the families, as well as less apparent interference of the filmmaker. These combine to prompt viewers to reconsider their opinions of addicts and they are able to empathize with those struggling.

### *Understanding the Opioid Epidemic*

*Understanding the Opioid Epidemic* is an hour-long PBS documentary that aired in January of 2018 and includes both stories of people affected by this epidemic along with interviews with experts who are at the frontlines of combatting the crisis. The film outlines the history the situation as it escalated into an epidemic, as well as provides possible solutions for dealing with the crisis.<sup>48</sup> This documentary fits into Nichols’ expository mode, as viewers are directly addressed with titles or voices that advance an argument, while also emphasizing “the impression of objectivity and well-substantiated judgement.”<sup>49</sup> This documentary employs many features in order to seem factual, honest and fair, trustworthy, and authoritative in order to educate and increase awareness of the scope of the epidemic. Unlike observational

---

<sup>47</sup> Leeman, “How Close Is Too Close? A Consideration of the Filmmaker-Subject Relationship.”

<sup>48</sup> “Watch *Understanding the Opioid Epidemic*,” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, Accessed February 20, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wned/opioid-epidemic/watch/>.

<sup>49</sup> Nichols, “Documentary Modes of Representation,” 33-34.

documentaries, the expository mode uses voice-overs and illustrations to construct a historical investigation rather than intimate footage, creating a different viewing experience.<sup>50</sup> Timothy Corrigan explains the primary goal of expository documentaries is “not only to activate a thinking subject before the empty screen but also to propel that thinking as an intellectual and concrete action within the historical unfolding of events.”<sup>51</sup> Expository films present viewers with emotionally evocative information so they recognize the severity of the issue, which increases the viewers’ awareness and acknowledgement of their ability to shift their own views and/or take future action towards the issue.

The voiceover narration in this film is utilized to state facts, explain processes and figures, and establish a sense of seriousness. This known as “voice of god” narration, in which the speaker is unknown to the viewer. Charles Wolfe explains that, “Disembodied, this voice is construed as fundamentally unrepresentable in human form, connoting a position of absolute mastery and knowledge outside the spatial and temporal boundaries of the social world the film depicts.”<sup>52</sup> This documentary uses narration for clarity and to instill a sense of authority and expertise through the serious, deep male tone of voice and straight-forward rhetoric employed. The ability to describe and interpret a world already established contributes to the authority the film attempts to produce.

The use of grieving families is important for the film’s ability to evoke empathy in viewers who can recognize that addiction affects more than just the addicts and that effects include, lifetimes of grief. Although this film is more informative and educational than

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>51</sup> Timothy Corrigan, "Of the Currency of Events: The Essay Film as Editorial" in *The Essay Film : From Montaigne, after Marker*, (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2011), 164.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Wolfe, “Historicizing the “Voice of God,” in *Documentary Film Reader*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 264.

*Warning: This Drug May Kill You*, it begins with something designed to spur empathy and affect, the story of Michael Israel, a young man who took his life in battle with addiction to prescription opioids, which he used as a result of his Crohn's disease. Throughout the film, viewers see an interview with his parents as they are working to spread awareness about the disease of addiction. The Israels' story is very short in context of the rest of the film but indicates how filmmakers understand the effectiveness in identifying real individuals because it prompts viewers to connect and empathize with addicts or their loved ones. Nichols explains that the voices of others "retain little responsibility for the argument, but are used to support it or provide evidence or substantiation for what the commentary addresses."<sup>53</sup> The inclusion of the specific suffering of Michael and his family authenticate the expansive issues that the film addresses.

This documentary includes interviews with a wide variety of people, including addicts, loved ones, law enforcement agents, senators, professors, researchers, rehabilitators, pharmaceutical representatives, reporters, and insurance providers to show the depth of the types of people involved with matter of addiction, as well as to include clear expertise to instill authority. The film explicitly places the blame on pharmaceutical companies several times, yet it gives a more comprehensive view of many of the problems concerning the epidemic, as well as current and proposed solutions. Through many of the techniques utilized, the director, John Grant, wants viewers to feel as though they are getting an informative overview of the crisis that is unbiased and honest for the purpose of education.

The power of opioids and the addictiveness of prescription pills is certainly emphasized in the film. At one point, Dr. Andrew Kolodny, a director of opioid policy research at Brandeis University and Founder of Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing, calls opioid

---

<sup>53</sup> Nichols, "Documentary Modes of Representation," 37.

medications “heroin pills” as the effects of prescription opioids and heroin are indistinguishable. The film shows that the opioid crisis is a fifty-state epidemic among rural, city and suburban communities and touches every socioeconomic group. The differences in people interviewed and the similarities in their messages really drive this point home. Nichols affirms, “Documentaries lend up the ability to see timely issues in need of attention... These views put before us social issues and current events, recurring problems and possible solutions.”<sup>54</sup> This documentary not only informs viewers of the problems, but also of potential solutions, such as prevention methods and alternative pain management. The solutions presented are consistent with the conventions of the expository mode and are an example of the rhetoric in the argument that this is a massive problem that demands attention and requires immense collective work in order to recover and progress. The film ends with the point that a wide-scale education campaign is needed – there needs to be more of an effort to better educate children, doctors, parents, public health officials, and politicians. While that is the opinion of many of the people who were consulted in this documentary, it is the overall purpose of the film. *Understanding the Opioid Epidemic*, in itself, is contributing to its message that there needs to be more education in order to create more solutions and progress.

### **Conclusion**

Documentary films in both the observational or expository modes focus on the opioid crisis identify addiction or overdose victims so viewers can connect to them, which will persuade them to recognize the powerful dangers of opioids and to encourage them to place blame on the profiting pharmaceutical companies rather than on the addicts themselves. By including

---

<sup>54</sup> Nichols, “Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?,” 45.

individual stories of people's lives and informative material about the issues at hand, documentaries are able to focus on and engage with a topic to present a more comprehensive narrative than those found in satire television, news segments, and fictional television.

## Chapter 3: It's Not *Just* a Funny TV Show: *Scrubs* and How Addiction is Framed for Laughs

The concern is for “dominant” messages embedded in the pleasant disguise of fictional entertainment... The critique that emerges, then, is consciously or unconsciously a critique of the society that is transmitting and maintaining the dominant ideology with the assistance, again conscious or unconscious, of those who control communications technologies and businesses.<sup>55</sup>

- Horace Newcome and Paul M. Hirsch

### Introduction

Television is a powerful tool that both reflects and impacts public thought and concern for society's most prevalent issues. Horace Newcome and Paul Hirsch establish the cultural importance of television and explain that it reflects and transforms the traditional viewpoints of consumers.<sup>56</sup> Whether consciously or unconsciously, viewers rely on television to inform them of news and television also shapes public perceptions in contemporary society. When a topic is as prevalent as the opioid crisis, its media presence grows as consumers are trying to learn and make sense of it. Television presents differences in opinion on how to combat this crisis, what/who is to blame, and how addiction should be treated. Addiction is a disease that requires treatment, yet due to negative stereotypes that are perpetuated on television, addicts can often be blamed and subsequently punished in the criminal justice system rather than treated.

Narrative shows can be very revealing of cultural connotations around addiction as the writing is fictional and not necessarily responsible for factual portrayals or ethical representations of social actors, allowing producers to reflect what ideas are most entertaining for viewers. In this chapter, I will analyze appearances of the addicted character, Sam, in the

---

<sup>55</sup> Horace Newcombe and Paul M. Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” in *Television: The Critical View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 562.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 564.

medical narrative show, *Scrubs*, a popular sitcom that aired for nine seasons from 2001 to 2010 on NBC and ABC. It has been highly praised for striking a balance between medical accuracy and comedic entertainment. Even real doctors have appreciated *Scrubs* for its authentic portrayal of how doctors deal with ordinary cases, not necessarily the rare cases that are dramatized in other medical shows.<sup>57</sup> The framing of addiction in medical narratives can reveal and impact public perceptions of both physicians and addicts, while also demonstrating how medical shows balance genre conventions with medical accuracy. Addiction in *Scrubs* is portrayed as the subject of mockery by some of the doctors, which can perpetuate mockery of addicts by viewers.

### **The Conventions and Influence of *Scrubs***

*Scrubs*' reputation for medical accuracy is reflected by Jeffrey Spike's argument that professors should play *Scrubs* in their bioethics and clinical ethics courses instead of giving lectures or presentations.<sup>58</sup> He believes that such courses give insufficient attention to the issues of professionalism and organization in the medical workplace that *Scrubs* is able to effectively addresses. In his discussion, he includes how *Scrubs* addresses the issue of a patient known to be a recovering addict who is suspected of drug-seeking behavior. Spike's argument demonstrates that even experts believe that viewers, even medical students, can learn from this show and its messages. This relates to Newcombe and Hirsch's idea of how narrative television creates new meaning "in the combination of cultural elements with embedded significance... [responding] to real events, changes in social structure and organization, and to shifts in attitude and value."<sup>59</sup> If

---

<sup>57</sup> Joanna Weiss, "Scrubs," *Slate*, The Slate Group, May 6, 2009, <https://slate.com/culture/2009/05/the-most-accurate-television-show-about-the-medical-profession-scrubs.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Jeffrey Spike, "Television Viewing and Ethical Reasoning: Why Watching *Scrubs* Does a Better Job than Most Bioethics Classes," *The American Journal of Bioethics* 8, no. 12 (2008): 11.

<sup>59</sup> Horace Newcombe and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum," in *Television: The Critical View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 563.

experts and medical students can learn from *Scrubs*, then so can viewers with very limited knowledge surrounding medicine and healthcare. Thus, *Scrubs* has the ability to shape public perceptions about pressing issues in the medical field and industry, such as addiction.

*Scrubs* uses a narrative approach that explores medical settings and experiences through a comedic style in episodic and serialistic modes of storytelling. Mike Hale writes that *Scrubs* employs a sense of humor that is “intellectual and lightly surreal but veined with sentimentality,” filled with “the progression of one-liners, puns, elaborate jokes and bug-eyed tirades substituting for any kind of conventional narrative.”<sup>60</sup> Each individual episode can be enjoyed on its own, but there are also stories and continue throughout multiple episodes and seasons. Additionally, *Scrubs* creates an infusion of comedy and medical narratives contribute to a what Jason Mittell calls a “paradox of realism.” Viewers may not think critically about *Scrubs* due to its entertaining form, yet it still has the power to inform and influence their perceptions, especially when it concerns aspects of medicine that they are ignorant of.

### **How Addiction in Scrubs is Indicative of Issues with Modern Medical Institutions**

An example of a recurring medical issue on *Scrubs* is represented by Sam (Alexander Chaplin), a character who is addicted to pain killers. Sam appears in three episodes in seasons three, five, and six. In his appearances, he humanizes and teaches doctors lessons of cynicism in the medical setting. Yet, Sam’s addiction is never treated but rather exploited for the doctors’ own humor that is rooted in judgmental biases. During his first appearance, (episode 3.17, “My Moment of Untruth”), after Sam is admitted for pancreatitis Dr. Cox (by John C. McGinley) informs Elliot (Sarah Chalke) that Sam is a drug addict that came in eight years prior with the

---

<sup>60</sup> Mike Hale, “Yesterday’s Shaky Residents Are Today’s Put-Upon Professors,” *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, November 30, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/01/arts/television/01scrubs.html>.

same pain and “bolted” as soon as he obtained medication. Elliot wants to believe Sam, who claims he left before because he was frustrated with his last doctor who “threw” pain medication at him. This issue is indicative to how many doctors simply fill prescriptions for addicts rather than genuinely engaging with them and treating them in the ways that benefit them, which requires more time and effort from the doctors.

Towards the end of this episode, Sam finally admits that he has no pain but has done everything he can to con Elliot. Dr. Cox tells Elliot that being a doctor is all about having experience and said earlier that Sam is one of “millions” of drug addicts who create problems to get their fixes. Sam teaches Elliot a lesson in that the patient is not always right and that you have to be extremely critical as a doctor. The conclusion of this episode focuses on Elliot’s education as a doctor rather than the treatment of Sam’s addiction. Addicts are portrayed here as masters of manipulation and criminals who have no place in the hospital. This notion further contributes to the general perception in society that addicts are responsible for their choice to abuse drugs and their behavior should be addressed by means of legal punishment. *Scrubs* fails to address that there are larger societal mechanisms in place that contribute to addiction, which is an issue that requires attention and treatment.

Elliot’s new understanding of necessary cynicism illustrates Leigh E. Rich et al.’s analysis of American medicine in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in conversation with Michel Foucault’s *The Birth of a Clinic*. The authors use Foucault, who examines shifts in medical discourse in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, to interpret such shifts in contemporary discourse using another medical show, *House*. Rich et al. discuss Foucault’s conception of *le regard*, or “the gaze”: a medical approach where doctors view patients objectively, communicating “directly with the disease

rather than the patient.”<sup>61</sup> In theory, this approach allows doctors to distinguish the legitimate signs of disease while silencing distractions, such as concerns, worries, and desires of patients and their loved ones. Le regard detaches the doctor from the patient emotionally and morally, resulting in the doctor regarding the patient not as a human, but as an “object of rational, scientific inspection.”<sup>62</sup> When Elliot initially wanted to believe Sam, she confronted Dr. Cox insisting, “You don’t want to do the right thing. You just want to be right.” Although Sam was ultimately revealed as deceptive and had ulterior motives, he does have a disease that can be treated in order for him to live a healthier life, even if he does not have an illness that Elliot or Dr. Cox can fix with surgery or medication. Yet, rather than sympathizing with Sam and encouraging him to seek professional help, they disregard him, viewing him as a criminal and “junkie.”

When Sam returns for a second time (episode 5.2, “My Rite of Passage”), he convinces a hospital administrator, Jordan (Christa Miller), into giving him \$500 by telling her that he needed the money to visit his daughter. Although the doctors recognize Sam as the “junkie” who “conned near damn everyone in this hospital,” they do not tell Jordan because Dr. Cox decides that she should experience what it is like to work in a hospital. The most concerning part of Sam’s plotline is when Jordan is in the midst of being conned by Sam at his bedside and various other doctors are captivated as they literally watch through the window. Dr. Cox, appearing quite smug and satisfied, labels it “quality crack addict theater.” Objectively, this is a particularly inhumane comment. Dr. Cox may be a fictional character, however, he is nevertheless representing a profession that is held to an ethical standard.

---

<sup>61</sup> Leigh E. Rich, Jack Simmons, David Adams, Scott Thorp, and Michael Mink, “The Afterbirth of the Clinic: a Foucauldian perspective on ‘House M.D.’ and American medicine in the 21st century,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 51, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 222.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 225.

The necessity of these doctors to “learn” about the strategies of addicts and how to regard them is indicative that there is a significant prevalence of addicts in hospital settings and illustrative of the coverage condemning opioid addicts in the media. The doctors’ irresponsible distance from the situation of the junkie, in which they feel no guilt or professional obligation, is problematic because such framing can influence perceptions of both addiction and the role of physicians. In Michael Pfau et al.’s study on the influence of television on public perceptions of physicians, they found that the increasing emphasis on physician’s personal behaviors and shortcomings in medical shows may negatively affects viewer’s perceptions of doctors.<sup>63</sup> People want to know that their doctor has a patient’s best interests in mind and respect their patients. The use of Sam for humor by the doctors in *Scrubs* may influence viewers to be guarded around their doctors under suspicion that they too may be cynical of and uncaring to their patients.

Doctors on *Scrubs* are able to evade consequences for this sense of humor because even though hospitals are traditionally serious settings, the genre hybridity of the show allows writers to challenge norms or expectations. Jason Mittell discusses genre mixing in relation to culture and emphasizes, “The issues of target audience and genre are explicitly and inextricably linked--genres are often defined (especially industrially) by whom their audiences are surmised to be.”<sup>64</sup> Given the comedic nature and entertaining medical plotlines that are easy to understand, *Scrubs* has situated itself as a program that is accessible for viewers of various demographics who can watch sparingly or regularly. *Scrubs*’ sometimes problematic sense of humor and superficial portrayal of issues is accepted because of its genre hybridity.

---

<sup>63</sup> Michael Pfau, Lawrence J. Mullen, and Kirsten Garrow, “The influence of television viewing on public perceptions of physicians,” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 39 (1995).

<sup>64</sup> Jason Mittell, “Cartoon Realism: Genre Mixing and the Cultural Life of *The Simpsons*,” in *Television: The Critical View*, 7th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20.

Pfau et. al believe that television is most influential when showing circumstances where viewers have limited direct experience, which prevents them from confirming or denying the accuracy of the depictions.<sup>65</sup> This point applies to how coverage of opioid addiction is important when not only thinking about how doctors manage this issue, but also how it should be regarded more generally. The doctors lack of sympathy for and disgust with Sam only perpetuates negative stereotypes about addiction. This portrayal contributes to an extensive body of stories that negates necessary empathy and fails to take into account the diverse set of hardships that can lead to addiction.

In this episode, all of the doctors bond by sharing their stories of how Sam has conned each of them individually and the episode's title, "My Rite of Passage," is represented in the narrative. Although Sam does not gain any sort of help from the doctors and hospital employees, they have all used their interactions with him as a learning experience to be able to discern patients who create problems for ulterior reasons, like obtaining pain medication. The personal growth of these doctors and their storylines continue throughout the seasons, yet Sam is featured very sparingly only to serve the purpose of teaching doctors a lesson. The issue of addiction is never actually addressed or contemplated by the doctors; it is only a point of frustration or humor for them. This is indicative of how *Scrubs* tends to tackle serious issues. In *Playing Doctor*, Joseph Turow discusses that while *Scrubs* is refreshing in raising serious issues of race, sex, and class that occur in a hospital environment, most of the time such considerations are brought up sarcastically or cynically and then subsequently dropped.<sup>66</sup> This approach to dealing with these types of issues is supported by the conventions of the sitcom genre and the expectations it sets

---

<sup>65</sup> Michael Pfau, Lawrence J. Mullen, and Kirsten Garrow, "The influence of television viewing on public perceptions of physicians,."

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Turow, *Playing Doctor: Television, Storytelling, and Medical Power*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 361.

for the viewers, which raise issues comedically without delving into the serious and upsetting outcomes. These conventions are also why characters such as Sam are included only sporadically. Although real doctors may praise *Scrubs* for its accurate depictions of medical issues, it nonetheless perpetuates degrading attitudes toward addiction in the episodes discussed. Through characters like Sam, *Scrubs* had a platform to address contemporary issues faced in the medical field, and it could have both raised and considered these issues still maintaining its conventionally comical and entertaining manner, while also dismantling harmful or ignorant viewpoints.

*Scrubs*' representation of addiction is consistent with other discussions of addiction in the media. Satirical television shows, like *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (discussed in chapter 1), and documentaries about the opioid crisis (explored in chapter 2) can inform and persuade people that addiction is a disease that can be caused by societal ills and addicts deserve treatment. Media places blame on the pharmaceutical companies and suggests ways to reduce addiction and harm. Yet, fictional shows, such as *Scrubs*, can be more reflective of cultural norms, which places blame on addicts and suggests that addiction is a criminal justice issue, not a public health issue. Newcombe and Hirsch state, "The conflicts we see in television drama, embedded in familiar and nonthreatening frames, are conflicts ongoing in American social experience and cultural history."<sup>67</sup> A viewer watching *Scrubs* may not think critically about the larger issue of addiction and how it is handled. Yet, these viewers are still absorbing media that discusses prevalent issues can perpetuate negative stereotypes that are rooted in the American social experience and cultural history.

---

<sup>67</sup> Horace Newcombe and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum," in *Television: The Critical View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 566.

At the conclusion of this episode, Sam is handcuffed and taken away by a police officer. In a study conducted by McGinty et al., they found that from 1998 to 2012, the news media were more likely to frame opioid abuse as a criminal justice issue rather than as a treatable health condition.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, they found that news media focused on law enforcement solutions as opposed to approaches designed to prevent abuse, such as substantial addiction treatment. Though a sitcom, this is how addiction is framed in *Scrubs* and is especially important because McGinty et al. also emphasized that depictions of successful treatment of opioid abuse can improve public attitudes toward and reduce the willingness to discriminate against addicts.<sup>69</sup> Clearly there is prevalent discourse on television surrounding addiction in the United States that reinforces social stigmas, demonizes users, and influences policies that punish (not rehabilitate) users.

In Sam's final appearance (6.13, "My Scrubs"), he returns to work as a drug counselor in the hospital. He insists that he is sober and will make a great counselor because he has already been through addiction himself. Eventually it is revealed that Sam has perpetuated another elaborate scheme in which he manipulated his mentees into giving him their drugs, so they were not "tempted." The conclusion of Sam's story is consistent with his entire role in the show. He is a criminal who should not be trusted, who cannot be redeemed, and who is not worthy of a doctor's care.

The conclusion of this episode is different from the endings of the other episodes with Sam in terms of how the doctors use Sam. Elliot again wants to believe Sam and Dr. Cox is set on proving her wrong. When Dr. Cox discovers Sam's lies, he does not tell Elliot because he

---

<sup>68</sup> Emma E. McGinty, Alene Kennedy-Hendricks, Julia Baller, Jeff Niederdeppe, Sarah Gollust, and Colleen Barry, "Criminal Activity or Treatable Health Condition? News Media Framing of Opioid Analgesic Abuse in the United States, 1998–2012," *Psychiatric Services*, 67 no.4 (2015): 409.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

does not want her to become as cynical as him. His decision differs from the rest of the narrative arc involving Sam. Sam's character has been used to educate doctors at the hospital to be more objective and critical of their patients. Yet this blatant disregard for patient wellness actually goes beyond criticism, but rather cynicism and cruelty under the guise of medical professionalism. Dr. Cox's decision to keep Sam's lies to himself again allows him to appear in a more positive and caring light at the end of this plotline. Although this one instance may temporarily benefit Sam who leaves without legal troubles, it does not substantially change anything in the future and things do not end positively for him since he never gets the help he needs. Dr. Cox has been Sam's greatest adversary throughout the three episodes and seems to revel in his ability to see through Sam's manipulations while his protégés constantly fall for the con games of the addict. When Dr. Cox drops this last opportunity to seize upon Sam's latest regression and to prove himself right, it creates a moment of humility for him as a physician. He does this because he cares about his coworkers and he wants them to believe in the importance of their roles as physicians and the value of the field of medicine. This instance may contribute to a more positive public perception of physicians. It is also a failure of Cox as a doctor in a Foucauldian sense because he is not being objective (and prioritizes Elliot's feelings over Sam's recovery). Nonetheless, there is never once a moment of empathy for Sam. The entire portrayal of Sam's character on *Scrubs* only negatively contributed to the public perceptions of addiction.

### **Conclusion**

Through an analysis of the portrayal of addiction in *Scrubs*, it is clear that the framing of addiction in medical narratives impacts the public's potential understanding of both physicians and addicts, but also may reflect consistent beliefs that are perpetuated in the media. Further

research should analyze the portrayal of addiction in other narrative examples and other forms of media to determine whether addiction is more prevalently framed as a criminal issue or a public health issue. When considering such framework, it is important to acknowledge the role that genre, in this case the medical sitcom, plays in its construction, and the ensuing impact of its messages. Given the capacity of television programming in shaping public perception, the opioid epidemic can be combatted by shaping opioid abuse as a public health issue and including more instances of treatment methods and stories treating of overcoming addiction.

## Conclusion

While in the final stages of completing this thesis, my senior year was cut short and diminished to remote learning due to the coronavirus pandemic. As the severity of this unprecedented crisis became more apparent, consumers were overwhelmed by the number of sources and opinions on how to stay safe and minimize individual risks, potential cures and vaccinations, how and when this will eventually end, and whether life will ever return to normal. Determining what sources were authoritative in this uncertain time posed a particular challenge for the public because it seemed that no source had all the answers that everyone was looking for. On May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Dr. Judy Mikovits uploaded her video “Plandemic” across social media sites to argue that the global leaders at the forefront of combatting the coronavirus are actually misleading the public for profit and promotion of political power.<sup>70</sup> It was soon revealed that Mikovits was a discredited scientist and her misinformation was dangerous, including the groundless idea that wearing a mask “activates the virus.”<sup>71</sup> The video went viral on social platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, quickly becoming popular with anti-vaccinators and activists from the Reopen America movement. It was only uploaded for a couple of days before it was removed by the platforms for the potential harm it could cause. There were many consumers who took Mikovits’ video as fact, believing its conspiracies over scientific evidence from credible figures. Despite these problems, “Plandemic” does share important superficial similarities with the case studies analyzed here. “Plandemic” illustrates the power of content that is able to go viral, like *Last Week Tonight*, and content that borrows elements of documentary, such as pieces of “evidence,” to construct an impression of validity. This clearly demonstrates

---

<sup>70</sup> Davey Alba, “Virus Conspiracists Elevate a New Champion,” *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, May 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/technology/plandemic-judy-mikovitz-coronavirus-disinformation.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

how media genres and forms can establish credibility and trust for consumers, but also the importance of analyzing medical media through an educated and critical perspective.

In times of public health crises, it is most vital to consider the impact of mass media on consumers' beliefs and public knowledge. Although there is the common conception that most media consumers look towards traditional news outlets as their authoritative source for information, that is not always the case with the crowded media landscape and social media. Through analyzing my case studies, I convey how there are multiple genres on television alone that cultivate a trustworthy reputation through their specific formal and narrative elements that inform and entertain viewers. Satirical news shows, like *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, review important topics by including highlights from traditional news sources, complemented by Oliver's relevant jokes. Oliver directly engages with and activates viewers to prompt change so that parties responsible for increasing opioid addiction can be publicly held responsible, for instance. Viewers learn about serious issues through humor so that they are simultaneously informed and entertained. Documentaries, such as *Warning: This Drug May Kill You* and *Understanding the Opioid Epidemic*, rely on emotionally evocative footage to prompt viewers' empathy for addicts and their families. These individual stories are supported with factual evidence so that viewers can comprehend the scope of the opioid crisis on both the individual and societal levels. By seeing extensive footage of the social actors and watching a thorough investigation that presents a credible overview of the crisis, viewers learn additional details that influence how they understand addiction and regard addicts. Fictional medical series like *Scrubs* demonstrate how narratives can expose and support societal norms and cultural connotations around drug abuse. This lends media the ability to perpetuate notions such as that addicts are immoral criminals who are unworthy of treatment and deserving of their doctors' mockery.

These case studies indicate how distinct media genres and forms differentiate in their portrayal of the same topic, but nonetheless are powerful in shaping how consumers make sense of important issues, like addiction.

This topic reveals the ongoing need for further research devoted to exploring how consumers use different media genres and forms to educate themselves about medical and health-related topics. In recent years, potential adverse effects of conflicting health information in mass media on public understanding of issues and health-related behaviors has received increasing attention from scholars. However, the studies are typically limited to topics such as nutrition and cancer prevention.<sup>72</sup> There is a great need for further contributions that study the impact mass media in consumers' understanding of other important medical topics. For example, there is little research that has examined the potential adverse effects of mass media on the healthcare-related beliefs and behaviors of patients with illnesses undergoing medical treatments, such as prescription medication regimens.<sup>73</sup> Additional studies will allow for a better understanding of how consumers decide a media text is authoritative, what media they use to base their medical beliefs, and how something like television can encourage their health-related behaviors.

---

<sup>72</sup> Heewon Im, "Does Health Information in Mass Media Help or Hurt Patients? Investigation of Potential Negative Influence of Mass Media Health Information on Patients' Beliefs and Medication Regimen Adherence," *Journal of health communication* 22, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

## Bibliography

- “About the Opioid Epidemic.” *hhs.gov/opioids*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, September 4, 2019. <https://www.hhs.gov/opioids/about-the-epidemic/index.html>.
- Alba, Davey. “Virus Conspiracists Elevate a New Champion.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, May 9, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/technology/plandemic-judy-mikovitz-coronavirus-disinformation.html>.
- Carr, David. “Dry Topics Give Oliver Comedy and Clout: Business/Financial Desk].” *New York Times*, November 17, 2014. <http://libproxy.vassar.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.vassar.edu/docview/1625282902?accountid=14824>.
- Corrigan, Timothy. “Of the Currency of Events: The Essay Film as Editorial.” In *The Essay Film : From Montaigne, after Marker*. Cary: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Day, Amber. “And Now... The News? Mimesis and the Real in *The Daily Show*.” In *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post Network Era*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- De Jesus, Maria. “The Impact of Mass Media Health Communication on Health Decision-Making and Medical Advice-Seeking Behavior of U.S. Hispanic Population.” *Health Communication* 28, no. 5 (2013): 525-529.
- Gray, Jonathan, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson. “The State of Satire, The Satire of State.” In *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post Network Era*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Hale, Mike. “Yesterday’s Shaky Residents Are Today’s Put-Upon Professors.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, November 30, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/01/arts/television/01scrubs.html>.
- Im, Heewon. “Does Health Information in Mass Media Help or Hurt Patients? Investigation of Potential Negative Influence of Mass Media Health Information on Patients' Beliefs and Medication Regimen Adherence.” *Journal of health communication* 22, no. 3 (2017): 214-222.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
- Jenkins, Henry. “Why Mitt Romney Won’t Debate a Snowman.” In *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post Network Era*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Kakutani, Michiko. “Is Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in America?” *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, August 15, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/17/arts/television/17kaku.html>.

- “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver.” *HBO*. Home Box Office, Inc. Accessed December 14, 2019. <https://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver>.
- Leeman, Lisa. “How Close Is Too Close? A Consideration of the Filmmaker-Subject Relationship.” *International Documentary Association*. International Documentary Association, June 3, 2003. <https://www.documentary.org/feature/how-close-too-close-consideration-filmmaker-subject-relationship>.
- Luckerson, Victor. “The John Oliver Effect: The HBO Host's Real-World Impact.” *Time*. Time USA, LLC., July 10, 2015. <https://time.com/3674807/john-oliver-net-neutrality-civil-forfeiture-miss-america/>.
- Marchese, David. “In Conversation: John Oliver.” *Vulture*. Vox Media Inc., February 16, 2016. <https://www.vulture.com/2016/02/john-oliver-last-week-tonight-c-v-r.html>.
- “Marketing to Doctors: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO).” *YouTube*. LastWeekTonight, February 8, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQZ2UeOTO3L>.
- McGinty, Emma E., Alene Kennedy-Hendricks, Julia Baller, Jeff Niederdeppe, Sarah Gollust, and Colleen Barry. “Criminal Activity or Treatable Health Condition? News Media Framing of Opioid Analgesic Abuse in the United States, 1998–2012.” *Psychiatric Services*, 67 no.4 (2015): 405-411.
- Mckenna, Maryn. “The Ibuprofen Debate Reveals the Danger of Covid-19 Rumors.” *Wired*. Conde Nast, March 26, 2020. <https://www.wired.com/story/the-ibuprofen-debate-reveals-the-danger-of-covid-19-rumors/>.
- Mittell, Jason. “Cartoon Realism: Genre Mixing and the Cultural Life of *The Simpsons*.” In *Television: The Critical View*, 7th edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Nash, Kate. “Documentary-for-the-Other: Relationships, Ethics and (Observational) Documentary.” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 26, no. 3 (2011): 224–39.
- Newcombe, Horace and Paul M. Hirsch. “Television as a Cultural Forum.” In *Television: The Critical View*, 6th edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Nichols, Bill. “Documentary Modes of Representation.” In *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Nichols, Bill. “What Makes Documentaries Engaging and Persuasive?” In *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010.
- Nichols, Bill. “Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?” In *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010.
- “One Nation Overdosed: How Children Cope With A Parent's Addiction.” *YouTube*. NBC News, October 9, 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YslhIY7ZyFM&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YslhIY7ZyFM&feature=emb_title).

- “Opioids: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO).” *YouTube*. LastWeekTonight, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pdPrQFjo2o>.
- “Opioids II: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO).” *YouTube*. LastWeekTonight, April 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qCKR6wy94U>.
- Peifer, Jason T. “Imitation as Flattery: How TV News Parody's Media Criticism Can Influence Perceived News Media Importance and Media Trust.” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 95, no. 3 (2018): 307-329.
- Pfua, Michael, Lawrence J. Mullen, and Kirsten Garrow. “The influence of television viewing on public perceptions of physicians.” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 39 (1995): 441-458.
- Rich, Leigh E., Jack Simmons, David Adams, Scott Thorp, and Michael Mink. “The Afterbirth of the Clinic: a Foucauldian perspective on ‘House M.D.’ and American medicine in the 21st century.” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 51, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 220-237.
- Turow, Joseph. *Playing Doctor: Television, Storytelling, and Medical Power*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Slater, Michael D. “Entertainment Education and the Persuasive Impact of Narratives.” In *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Functions*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2002.
- Spike, Jeffrey. “Television Viewing and Ethical Reasoning: Why Watching *Scrubs* Does a Better Job than Most Bioethics Classes.” *The American Journal of Bioethics* 8, no. 12 (2008): 11-13.
- “Surgeon General’s Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health.” *SurgeonGeneral.gov*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, May 13, 2020. <https://addiction.surgeongeneral.gov/executive-summary/report>.
- “Understanding the Epidemic.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. March 19, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html>.
- “Watch Understanding the Opioid Epidemic.” *PBS*. Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed February 20, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/wned/opioid-epidemic/watch/>.
- Weiss, Joanna. “Scrubs.” *Slate*. The Slate Group. May 6, 2009. <https://slate.com/culture/2009/05/the-most-accurate-television-show-about-the-medical-profession-scrubs.html>.
- Wolfe, Charles. “Historicizing the ‘Voice of God.’” In *Documentary Film Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.