

# John Oliver's high moral view of journalism is part of the problem

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2016/08/08/jon-olivers-high-moral-view-of-journalism-is-part-of-the-problem/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2016/08/08/jon-olivers-high-moral-view-of-journalism-is-part-of-the-problem/)

2016-8-8

I know this won't be a popular position, but I think that the high moral view of journalist/comedian John Oliver about journalism is part of the problem.

I enjoy his work and have always thought it's a part of the multifarious contemporary journalism ecology, just as Jon Stewart was before him.

But in [his latest critique of the woes of the news media](#), his (mildly funny) take on local US journalism [which is hugely well funded compared to 'local' journalism anywhere else] is rather conservative. He blames the public for failing to pay for the kind of investigative journalism celebrated in [the award-winning movie Spotlight](#). He is guilt-tripping us.



The trouble with that approach is that trying to get people to fund good journalism out of guilt or civic duty turns journalism into a charity. Good luck with that. It won't work.

In practice it usually means you end up in the hands of philanthropists. Many are well-intentioned, or liberal proprietors, but [as Andy Carvin's Reportedly has just found out](#), they are not always entirely reliable funders of 'good' journalism. It is odd how the liberal UK *Guardian* rails against rich men funding journalism when they are right-wing, yet is happy to take capitalist's cash to fund its own work. (Guardian Australia is supported by a tycoon, Guardian Development is funded by Bill Gates).

Or you hand over responsibility to tax-funded journalism like the BBC. They produce a large amount of very good and vital coverage, but it will never be as critical, creative and outspoken as independent news media.

The real lesson of John Oliver is that he makes his journalism entertaining and attitudinal. A bit like Fox News. That works.

A good example of this (without the John Oliver jokes) is the extraordinary success of ITN's Channel 4 News' online

video which has focused relentlessly on the social justice/emotional intensity of its content while staying within that 'alternative' remit that characterises its excellent journalism. Its videos are carefully tailored to fit into people's mobile habits and are now soaring up the digital viewing charts.

If journalism is to survive and thrive it must be more relevant, useful, and engaged with people's lives. The evidence in the UK from the Times, FT and Economist, to name just three, is that people will pay subscriptions to make that happen. Those organisations are working their socks off to provide a service for those consumers – including some outstanding investigative work – instead of relying on an appeal to the public's noble instincts.

That is my problem with the Guardian's membership strategy which feels more like a National Trust charity appeal (for US readers, think National Parks). And you don't even get to visit the crumbling ruins.

Journalism – as the industry it has been for the last few decades – has no right to exist. It must fight for attention in a world of digital distraction. If that means becoming a spectacle (like John Oliver) then that's fine. It's what keeps us honest.

Oliver's comic sermon suggests the choice is between kittens and investigative journalism when in fact journalism has always been a mix of both. It has always been a combination of circus and pulpit. Create real value for people out of that and they will pay.

*This article by Polis director, Professor Charlie Beckett @CharlieBeckett, Department of Media and Communications, LSE*

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science