If John Oliver Wants To Be Funny About Science Non-Profits, I Can Help Write Better Material

By Hank Campbell — August 13, 2018

I like comedy news host John Oliver. He was among the top nine funniest guys in the first season of "Community" and he even won an Emmy when Jon Stewart made the jokes of Oliver's colleagues sound hilarious. So I was excited on Saturday when I got to send an email to our Board of Trustees and the staff at the American Council on Science and Health giddy that Oliver, host of HBO’s "Last Week Tonight" [1], was going to do a hit piece on us.

Maybe it’s not a hit piece, maybe he is pro-vaccine, one replied, and is going to applaud our work on that. Or cheer our dismantling Dr. Oz and his supplement empire (along with half his audience) in 2015. Or note how we helped cause smoking in the US to collapse or exposed Natural Resources Defense Council fraud on "60 Minutes" or any number of wins for the American public in our 40 year history.

No chance, I told them, he makes his money creating what he hopes will be viral clips on YouTube by pretending to be sincere and angry [2] while playing an invisible accordion. If he is going to mention us, I wrote, it is going to be that 'science is a corporate conspiracy' stuff that anti-GMO and anti-vaccine groups promote. And then I started writing this article, nearly 36 hours before the episode even aired, sight unseen. Because I already knew what Oliver would say before even corresponding with the producer.

It's that predictable.

I just hoped it would have been funnier. But he wasn't, as you can see below. Not even a chuckle from the audience when he was talking about "astroturf" groups (those that pretend to be
grassroots) put up splashy graphics and our logo and splattered corporate stuff all over it.

*If you pause at his graphic for us, you will look closely and then wonder why John Oliver is against window cleaners, washing dishes and is for cigarette smoking.*

Instead, if anyone rushes to their computer to investigate us, they will find out the awkward truth about "Last Week Tonight" fact-checking and it will cast into doubt his whole segment. Just 4% of our funding comes from corporations or trade groups. And I am grateful for them. But they are not controlling what 300 scientists and doctors say and couldn't even if they gave us 100%. Our budget is too small to buy anyone off, much less hundreds of volunteer advisors. Watching the segment, I had never even heard of any of the other groups he mentioned, so I wondered why a science education non-profit in existence for 40 years was being lumped in with restaurant owners who don't want to pay minimum wage and some group who thinks the humane society is not humane.

There seemed to be no rational justification for our inclusion so it was perhaps just chance. Or maybe one of the producers has a friend at NRDC or another group who feels fundraising pain when we debunk them and pitched, 'ACSH writes 1,500 science and health articles per year, they are published in the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and many more and they undermine a lot of our efforts to scare people, even with 1/1000th of our revenue, so please go after them' and the producer did.

But here is the irony - Oliver is British and Brits love irony - the "evidence" their producer sent me the afternoon before it aired *was from an actual astroturf organization* - U.S. Right To Know [3], one of the puppet arms created by Organic Consumers Association to attack and harass the science community using any means at their disposal. And they have means. Very deep pockets. And *some sources allege* [4] their cozy links to *Russia Today*, the propaganda arm of the Kremlin, are also a sign of something more malevolent.

They are literally paid to smear the science community. That's not great company to be keeping, Mr. Oliver.

As I noted, he is British, and the U.K. came up with both the anti-vaccine and anti-GMO
movements, both of which U.S. Right To Know help, but I do not think he is anti-vaccine. He just attacked them a few weeks ago. Yet they are getting the last laugh. Because he just helped them.

John Oliver and his invisible accordion.

And so what about corporations? We have been around 40 years, of course during that time we have gotten donations from corporations. We’re important, corporations have people internally who want to do positive things with their money. The American Heart Association, Salvation Army, PBS, they all get corporate money too - a lot more than 4%. Oliver is 100% corporate-funded. Are secret sponsors telling his writing room who to attack?

Of course not.

Conspiracy theories fall apart pretty quickly under the gaze of truth. I recognize exaggeration is a vital aspect of comedy, I just wish they had written some - comedy that is. Instead of being funny or accurate, he laboriously implies we are working for Big Soda because in our 40-year history we have gotten $50,000 from Coca-Cola, completely transparent [5]. It made no difference in our work, we have said for decades that sodas are a treat, enjoy them in moderation like you do Starbucks mochas or pizza. Sodas don't "cause" diabetes despite how Mr. Oliver attempted to overturn all of
biology claiming they do. Too many calories leading to obesity are the predominant cause of Type 2 diabetes, regardless of where they come from.

And maybe that is why no one laughed - even though the audience got tickets 2 months in advance, so they really wanted to laugh. There were probably diabetics in the audience, including the Type 1 kind who are tired of being the butt of lazy soda jokes, there were probably people who used e-cigarettes to get off smoking. There may have been chemists, biologists, and toxicologists, all who cheer our work standing up for science against activists saying the science community is fraudulent. There may be people who know America reached emissions reductions targets 8 years ahead of what President Obama called for in his Clean Power Plan [6], because of natural gas - the Big Fracking industry he suggests controls us (yet give us no money.) If lower CO2 emissions are a bad thing to John Oliver, I am happy to be on his Black List. But he needs to take a class in physics. (1)

Maybe there was someone in the audience who got botulism because they believe, apparently like John Oliver, that BPA must be harmful because it's a chemical, and they instead bought spoiled food from some anti-science hippie.

It's impossible to know, John Oliver obviously does not read science sites, so he won't clarify.

**Be part of the solution, John**

Mr. Oliver can be part of the solution if he is worried that anti-science groups are under existential threat because they have 1000X our revenue and still get beat up by us when it comes to actual science and medicine. Since he believes funding is how the science community decides what evidence to accept, with a flick of his pen he could take a tiny fraction of his wealth and simply donate to us here [7].

Then, armed with his seemingly keen knowledge of how I am solely motivated by money despite knowing nothing about me, he can call me up and demand I change what science topics we will cover.

I will sure enjoy that discussion. I truly will. I will be a lot funnier than his segment on us was. And it won't be the first time he phoned one in.

**How You Can Help**

If you have Twitter, you can write him and tell him you don't like that he is using anti-science trade groups [8] to undermine trust in science nonprofits. On Facebook, you can comment here [9]. Or you can contact the producer, Charles Wilson, charles.wilson@lastweektonight.com [10] or at (212) 975-8186, and let him you don't like American science being used as his political football.

**NOTE:**

(1) I put the details in a footnote because this kind of stuff kills articles the way dream sequences in movies do.
Here is what Mr. Charles Wilson, the producer, sent me after spending 5 seconds on Google and finding US Right To Know, and I will address the specific claims he noted one-by-one. In the segment John just says "chemicals" and maybe to him the very word is bad. To science, it is not.

You'll have to click the image to see it full size.

Fracking. Who outside environmental lawyers still thinks fracking is bad? It is now established as the safest, most cost-effective way to get more cleaner-burning natural gas, the only realistic bridge to truly clean energy, be it solar or fusion or whatever wins the fight for the future. Once fracking became viable, natural gas replaced coal, which America relied more heavily upon after the Clinton administration ended nuclear energy development in the U.S., and switching to natural gas in the 2000s caused our energy CO2 emissions to plummet. Like we all said we wanted.

Banning sugary sodas. We wanted to ban hypocrisy and junk science back then and still do. Note we have never endorsed sodas the way his casual swipe alleges we do. We were against a ban on them. Banning sodas will not prevent Type 2 diabetes, soda does not "cause" it any more than salads will, too many calories does, and it was hypocritical that Starbucks drinks with more calories were exempt from the ban, as were lots of other high-calorie sugar-filled products. This was a Manhattan-driven ban on stuff wealthy white elites did not consume anyway. You know, people like John Oliver. As with energy, we defend poor people from regressive taxes and bans when it comes to the War On Fun. Next John Oliver might claim coffee and french fries cause cancer. He will be wrong on that as well, and we will be right. Again.

We want people to make smart choices, not to be social authoritarian and ban everything. Maybe in Mr. Oliver's political circle, freedom to choose, including stupid choices, is a bad thing.

BPA. You remember BPA, a plasticizer often used to line cans to prevent foodborne illness. This is a weird thing to say is bad to defend. BPA is harmless, just as we showed. It binds 1/20,000th as well to estrogen as actual estrogen so if John thinks BPA is bad, he'd better start preaching abstinence only sex education because he should really hate birth control. BPA has continued to be shown harmless, the gigantic CLARITY study found it so yet again [12]. We were on the side of the science angels then and we still are now. That John Oliver is instead educated by activist press releases about scary "chemicals" doesn't change biological reality, like that botulism is a bad thing.
They are 0 for 3 so far. Seriously, Mr. Oliver, we can send you literature to help you separate facts from fundraising-driven nonsense that political allies of your producers send. We have written hundreds of books and white papers. They'll all free. It's what we do.

Atrazine. Most of you will never have heard of this, it is an herbicide but not made by Monsanto so it really only gets attention from organic trade groups and trial lawyers who need something new to go after. In 2002, a biologist at Berkeley claimed it caused boy frogs to act more like girl frogs, so the George W. Bush-era EPA convened a special panel to assess it. The researcher behind the claim refused to show his data. To EPA. How odd, right? An activist in Berkeley may have made stuff up? EPA ordered a special analysis designed anyway, and the company behind atrazine, named Syngenta (headquartered in Switzerland) was even forced to pay for the studies activists hoped would ruin them. But again the product was found to be fine. Then the Obama administration ordered the EPA to evaluate it yet again. Same result. Atrazine is still on the market so ACSH was right. Again.