

John Oliver's interview with Edward Snowden: Pseudo-satire in defense of NSA surveillance

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Comedy host John Oliver conducted an interview with National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden in Moscow recently that was broadcast Sunday on his HBO show "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver." In the process, Oliver exposed his solidarity with the American state and its vast, illegal spying operations. He took the opportunity of the conversation to come out harshly against Snowden's decision to leak large quantities of NSA documents.

Pushing for a confession that his actions were potentially "harmful," the British-born Oliver demanded to know whether Snowden had personally read every single document contained in the files that the former NSA employee transferred to journalists beginning in the summer of 2013.

"I have evaluated all of the documents that are in the archive. I do understand what I turned over," Snowden replied.

"There's a difference between understanding what's in the documents and reading what's in the documents. Because when you're handing over thousands of NSA documents, the last thing you'd want to do is read them," Oliver retorted sarcastically. He went on, "You have to own that. You're giving documents with information that could be harmful."

Oliver repeated the favored arguments of the Obama administration and intelligence establishment to the effect that the preservation of "national security" required the elimination of civil liberties, such as Fourth Amendment protections against arbitrary searches and seizures.

"We all want perfect privacy and perfect safety, but those two things cannot coexist," Oliver said, comparing the NSA spy programs to a "Badass pet

falcon," which he asserted could not live together with "an adorable pet vole named Herbert."

Oliver's attack on Snowden reached extraordinary and insulting heights. At one point, he interrupted the internationally respected whistleblower for sounding too much like "the IT guy from work... Please don't teach me anything. I don't want to learn. You smell like canned soup," Oliver said to the courageous defender of democratic rights, who has now endured nearly two years of persecution and exile.

Oliver's hostility towards Snowden and Julian Assange of WikiLeaks is an expression of his staunch support, almost universally shared among well-to-do strata in American society, for the continuation of the US government's surveillance programs.

In a couple of brief asides, Oliver half-heartedly suggested that minor reforms to the system of authoritarian shadow courts and antidemocratic laws erected to legitimize the spying might be necessary. But the development and permanent maintenance of mass surveillance programs by the US government went unquestioned.

If nothing else, the Snowden interview should help clear matters up for those who still had illusions about Oliver, Jon Stewart and their ilk. Behind their sophomoric antics, designed to dupe more naïve elements looking for something genuinely antiestablishment, lies a run-of-the-mill, conformist outlook, in keeping with the lavish material rewards they receive. (Oliver made an estimated \$2,000,000 in 2013.)

In one of a few moments when he adopted a serious tone, Oliver cited the failure of the *New York Times* to fully redact one of the NSA slides, an oversight he

claimed was a “f***-up” that exposed a US intelligence operation against al Qaeda in Mosul, Iraq.

In another, he warned viewers that WikiLeaks’ Assange was “even less careful than Snowden” about the material he was leaking. He mocked Assange, who remains trapped inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London as a result of his efforts to expose US war crimes, comparing him to “a sandwich bag full of biscuit dough wearing a Stevie Nicks wig.”

Pointing to video clips of street interviewees who showed increased concern over surveillance after Oliver referred to reports that NSA agents view nude pictures sent by targets via email and text message, the comedy host contended that Americans’ interest in the matter does not extend beyond such matters.

From here, Oliver arrived at the notion that the failure of even minimal reform of the surveillance operations to gain traction results from the fact that ordinary Americans can only be convinced to think about politics through appeals of the most backward kind. “Domestic surveillance, Americans give some of a sh** about. Foreign surveillance, American don’t give any sh** about,” Oliver said.

When Snowden noted that such abuses are “seen as no big deal in the culture of the NSA,” and that agency employees “see naked pictures all the time,” Oliver issued another absurd slander against the US population. “This is the most visible line in the sand for people. ‘Can they see my dick?’” Oliver said.

If wide sections of the population lack accurate knowledge about recent developments in government spying, it is the outcome of the systematic and deliberate efforts to conceal the truth by the corporate media to which Oliver belongs.

Snowden made patient efforts to work around Oliver’s willful ignorance and class arrogance, seeking to explain that along with the “dick pictures” obsessed over by Oliver, the NSA is collecting every other form of data on the planet, from US and non-US individuals alike, in open violation of the US Bill of Rights and international law.

“If you have your email somewhere like Gmail, hosted on a server overseas or transferred overseas or [if it] at anytime crosses outside the borders of the United States, your junk ends up in the database,” Snowden commented. “Google moves data internationally and NSA catches copies during this

process, through PRISM, with Google’s involvement. All the major companies, Yahoo, Facebook, the US government deputizes them to be its surveillance sheriffs,” he added.

Oliver is not engaging in political satire, of which there is a long and proud tradition, in any meaningful sense of the word. Genuine satire attacks the powerful, exposing their lies and hypocrisy. Oliver, on the other hand, instinctively aligns himself with the US ruling elite and its historically unprecedented surveillance apparatus, one of the foundations of a police-state dictatorship. Sunday’s installment of Last Week was an exercise in pro-NSA propaganda and cultural degradation.



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