1. Introduction

When in early 2019 corporate giant Gillette asked provocatively, "Is this the best a man can get?" to accompany an advertisement for shaving products that challenges stereotypical male behaviour, reactions ranged from calls for consumer boycott to praise for the company's courage (Topping, Lyons, and Weaver 2019). By playing on its own well-established tagline of "The best a man can get," the 1:48-minute Gillette video clip takes up traits of male behaviour habitually associated with toxic masculinity to promote a more positive version of contemporary manhood. In the process, it also explicitly aligns itself with the #MeToo movement, indicating how fundamentally public discourse has been affected by it. Since the #MeToo movement had gained momentum in late 2017, laying bare an epidemic of sexualised violence against women, public debate had turned to the question of appropriate – and inappropriate – enactments of masculinity (Kantor and Twohey 2019, 4). With Gillette's well-positioned and calculated marketing stunt this was taken to a new dimension, though.

By extracting the discussion about toxic masculinity from the sites of social commentary and placing it in an advertisement for a mass consumer product, the issue became firmly established, in highly commodified form, in the middle of popular cultural production.

Late-night comedy shows, which largely explore current affairs by means of satire, have proved less conspicuous in their engagement with toxic masculinity. Despite tapping into huge audiences themselves, they assume a hybrid position between popular entertainment and social and political commentary. Amber Day is convinced that "satiric media texts have become a part of (and preoccupation of) mainstream political coverage, thereby making satirists legitimate players in serious political dialogue" (2011, 1). These shows, a hugely popular genre particularly in US-American television, traditionally focus on current affairs, and thus not only partake in but produce a discourse that inevitably shapes public perceptions across a broad spectrum of topics. Thus, it was less a question of whether but rather how these shows would tackle the issue of toxic masculinity in the wake of the #MeToo movement. One incident in the autumn of 2018 lends itself particularly to an investigation into this 'how:' the highly controversial nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court. Not only did it dominate media reporting in the US (and Europe) for a considerable time, it also vividly lays bare the mechanisms of power and performances of toxic masculinity.

In that satire is generally the choice of attack used in late-night comedy shows to hold powerful people and institutions to account, the intersection created by discussing toxic masculinity in this context seems particularly pertinent. On the one hand, late-night hosts are able to offer a challenging perspective on the topic by negotiating the
question of what constitutes socially acceptable and unacceptable performances of masculinity through a genre that has long been feared for its acid sting in the sides of the powerful. As Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson argue, "while satire enables broader social commentary, it is its ability to attack power and pass judgement on the powerful while doing so in playful and entertaining ways that makes satire a particularly potent form of political communication" (2009, 12). On the other hand, the genre itself is highly gendered and the presenters' own position as (mostly) male comedians is thus thrown into sharp relief. The question will have to be, therefore, which strategies late-night comedians employ to subvert performances of toxic masculinity while navigating their own roles as privileged, powerful men and the gender issues raised by the format of comedy itself. This will be the point of departure for the analysis of three of the most popular late-night comedy shows in the US, The Late Show with Stephen Colbert on CBS (2016-), Trevor Noah's The Daily Show on Comedy Central (2015-), and Last Week Tonight with John Oliver on HBO (2014-), and their handling of the Kavanaugh case.

2. Toxic Masculinity and Comic Intervention

The influence of late-night talk shows on social and political developments is perceived throughout the media as well as political campaigns and is well documented. The Economist, for example, contends that late-night shows "play an outsized role in American politics," with the same number of (young) viewers turning to comedy formats such as The Daily Show for their coverage of current affairs as to CNN or network news programmes ("Can the Late-Night Chat-Show Format" 2019). In a similar vein, Patricia Moy argues that television comedy has a major impact even on elections, redefining "the way citizens decide the candidate for whom they will vote" (qtd. in Niven et al. 2003, 119). As a consequence, political campaigns react to and probably reinforce this leverage by making sure their candidates receive sufficient coverage in the respective shows (ibid.), while media outlets in turn acknowledge the decisive role of the shows for current affairs. The 2020 Democratic race for presidential candidate, for instance, was dubbed the "Stephen Colbert Primary" by CNN, with a nod to the presenter of The Late Show with Stephen Colbert on CBS (Stelter 2019). But late-night comedy shows have also become a permanent fixture in Western media outside their immediate environment. The British Guardian, for example, reports regularly on the late-show comedians' takes on recent political, cultural and social events.

A topic that has permeated current affairs since late 2017 is the variety of gender performances that can be subsumed under the term of toxic masculinity. Clearly, the concept of toxic masculinity was not born then, despite its amplified use now. It has been part of academic and popular discourse for some time, although its origin seems somewhat hazy (Ging 2017, 3). In his study of male prisoners, Terry A. Kupers defines toxic masculinity as "the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence" (2005, 714). This evaluation, rather than description, of specific performances of masculinity indicates that such performances have been classified as poisonous and thus detrimental.
to functioning social structures – at least by parts of society. As such, the concept of toxic masculinity is related to hegemonic masculinity, which R.W. Connell mapped in the late 1980s to explore the connections between gender and power.

Establishing hegemonic masculinity as integral to patriarchal order, Connell describes it as a “social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organisation of private life and cultural processes,” largely by relying on its perpetuation through "religious doctrine and practice, mass media content, wage structures, the design of housing, welfare/taxation policies and so forth" (1987, 184). It relies on the domination of women and subordinated masculinities, particularly homosexual masculinities (ibid., 186). This domination can take the shape of practices that could be described as toxic, while there are other aspects of hegemonic masculinity that uphold a gender-based power imbalance without necessarily falling into the category of toxic. In revisiting the concept, Connell and Messerschmidt observe that while hegemonic masculinity cannot be considered "normal in a statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it," its impact is "certainly normative" (2005, 832). One element of this normativity that hegemonic masculinity produces is the way gendered violence was integrated into performances of masculinity that remained largely unquestioned – that is, until October 2017.

In the autumn of 2017, the concept of toxic masculinity rose to dubious prominence in its incarnation of sexual assault and harassment, when staggering numbers of stories of abuse at the hands of powerful men surfaced, mostly triggered by the allegations against film heavyweight Harvey Weinstein. There seemed to be rather little surprise about the nature of the accusations, but their sheer number and scope sent ripples of shockwaves through society, through all types of media, impacting all walks of life. In reviewing the genesis of the scandal and the momentous impact it had, Adrian Horton writes of "an avalanche of women's accounts of sexual harassment and assault," of "pent-up frustration and calls for accountability," which "have exposed and stalled the careers of prominent men" all across the power spectrum (2019). Indeed, the seismic shift in public discourse triggered by the #MeToo movement added a new dimension to what could, and should, publicly be said about men in power, about those who enact hegemonic masculinity, or who are complicit in it. In its wake, the concept of toxic masculinity, manifested in the sheer endless reports of sexual harassment and assault, and its far-reaching implications seemed to take shape in social as well as traditional media, laying open a well-known, albeit suddenly highly topical imbalance in gender relations.

Since comments on current events belong to the standard repertoire of late-night comedy shows, it seemed inevitable that the fallout from practices of toxic masculinity would become the target of these shows. The question was, however, which format the shows would choose to enter the discussion. Obviously, one characteristic means of late-night shows is to employ satire to comment on, to criticise or to condemn current events or persons of public interest. In doing so, they make use of the subversive, disruptive nature of humour, which often consists of placing the target of their jokes in an inferior position. This is linked to the superiority theory of humour, already formulated by Plato and Aristotle and later taken up by Thomas Hobbes, which focuses on the superiority that the person making the joke assumes over the one who is ridiculed. It might be worth noting that originally this theory did not encourage a
critique of power relations but was rather a warning to those in power about the subversive force of humour and ridicule (Weaver, Mora, and Morgan 2016, 228). This momentary superiority, however, is regularly employed by late-show hosts to hold those to account who exercise their influence and authority in spheres outside the respective show.

By laughing at figures of public interest, and inviting their audiences to join in, late-night comedians habitually tap into a powerful disciplinary device: ridicule, the "act of making fun of some aspect of another [that] involves a combination of humor and degradation and encompasses a range of activities like teasing, sarcasm and ritualized insults" (Wooten 2006, 188-189). Janes and Olson describe ridicule as "one type of disparagement humor – that which is directed at an individual concerning some aspect of his or her behavior or appearance" (2000, 474). Michael Billig contends that being afraid of ridicule functions as a powerful control mechanism that keeps people within given societal norms (2005, 201-202). This even works via proxy according to a Canadian study which documents the effects of seeing someone else being ridiculed; it appears "to make observers aware of their own vulnerability to ridicule and rejection" (Janes and Olson 2000, 484), thus limiting their subsequent behaviour. Given this social leverage, it is hardly surprising that ridicule should form an essential part of satire. Because satire's "calling card is the ability to produce social scorn or damning indictments through playful means" and that it has the power to "transform the aggressive act of ridicule into the more socially acceptable act of rendering something ridiculous" (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009, 12-13; original emphasis), late-night comedy shows should have powerful tools at their disposal to tackle the display of toxic masculinity.

Ridicule as a disciplinary device, though, has to be positioned in the wider context of gender and humour. Obviously, they intersect in various ways, two of which are particularly relevant in our context. On the one hand, humour was considered a male prerogative for a very long time, as Regina Barreca writes in her collection of women's humour: "The creation and enjoyment of humor have traditionally been considered masculine privileges, sort of like writing in the snow or running for public office' (1996, 1). As such, producing humour has been perceived as expressing and contributing to the affirmation of male dominance in hierarchical social structures. Helga Kotthoff observes that "[h]umorous aggression, a component of many types of teasing, mocking, parodying, and ridiculing, is gender-relevant. One can tease at the expense of other people and put pressure on them by publicly exposing supposed deficiencies" (2006, 13). This aggression, Kotthoff argues, has been considered incompatible with female behaviour in our hierarchic system of gender relations and has thus become part of a "traditional performance of masculinity" (ibid., 14). Considering the fact that to this day the majority of late-night hosts are male, they can be seen to structurally perpetuate this status. Whether or not they choose to use this position to question gender hierarchies is part of the original question.

Male dominance in the production of humour is part and parcel of the second dimension of gender and humour in the given context, which is how social norms are upheld and gender roles perpetuated through particular humorous strategies. In his article on ridicule and gender hegemony, Mostafa Abedinifard illustrates how specific
forms of mainstream humour are employed in western societies to maintain hierarchic
modes of femininity and masculinity, ridiculing anyone who would find themselves
outside normative gender performances (2016, 235). Abedinifard argues that in these
instances ridicule

serves to (threaten to) punish any violations of established gender norms. In mainstream
gender humour with targets – women, effeminate men, homosexuals, etc. – the
disciplinary effect can occur through derision of certain gender-transgressions. [...] In
such gender humour, while certain hegemonic gender norms or normative acts are
presumed or implied, violations of them are stated or are clearly derisive. (ibid., 241)

By analysing popular cultural texts such as selected sitcoms¹ and jokes, Abedinifard
identifies various mechanisms that are used to police gender norms through ridicule.
These strategies push the targets, "women, effeminate men, homosexuals, etc." (ibid.),
even further to the fringes, thus helping to consolidate hegemonic masculinity. However, if these forms of ridicule prove so powerful in maintaining hegemonic masculinity, could they also be inverted and fruitfully employed by late-night comedians to challenge existing power structures?

In that the role of the male comedian as well as the targets of ridicule in some forms
of popular humour are so inherent to enactments of hegemonic masculinity, a number
of strategies open up for the male host of a late-night comedy show who wants to tackle
toxic behaviour. These include: ridiculing those who perform within the dominant,
 hierarchical gender discourse rather than those on the margins; questioning male
dominance in the production of humour; or simply exempting themselves as presenters
from any association with behaviour considered typical within hegemonic masculinity.

3. "A Toddler Being Dragged out of the Gymboree:” The Brett Kavanaugh Senate
Hearing

The following discussion focuses on three of the most popular US-American late-night
shows. The first production to be analysed is The Late Show with Stephen Colbert on
CBS, whose "anti-Trump bend" has "helped the late-night host win more and more
viewers" (Stelter 2019). In fact, Colbert is currently the highest-rated host in late-night
comedy (ibid.). Secondly, there is The Daily Show on Comedy Central, presented by
Trevor Noah, whom The Guardian has just named one of the best comedians of the 21st
century. "Noah is such an outsider," Stuart Heritage writes, "not only a foreigner, but a
South African born to interracial parents at the heights of apartheid – that his point of
view can't help but stand out against those of the white male Jimmys that make up the
rest of late-night TV" (Davies et al. 2019). The third show discussed here is John
Oliver's Last Week Tonight on HBO, whose impact on US current affairs has been
branded the "John Oliver Effect." As Victor Luckerson writes in Time magazine:

Comedians mock our cultural and political institutions on TV all the time. But it's not
every day that a comic's jokes crash a government website or directly inspire legislators

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¹ This should not distract from the fact that there are also a considerable number of sitcoms
that operate with different conceptualisations of gender norms and themselves challenge
hegemonic discourses.
to push for new laws. John Oliver, host of HBO comedy news program Last Week Tonight, is quickly building up that level of cultural cachet. (Luckerson 2015)

All three shows have tackled toxic masculinity in a variety of ways, naturally depending on the instances that sparked public interest in the first place. One of the top stories in US-American news in late 2018, and then again in October 2019, were the accusations against the Republican nominee for the Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh. Kavanaugh was accused of sexual assault, first by a former high school classmate, then by an increasing number of female co-students from university. The parallels to the Clarence Thomas Senate hearing in 1991 were palpable, when Anita Hill had come forward with accounts of Thomas "asking her out on dates and making pornographic comments at work" (Kantor and Twohey 2019, 43). The mishandling of Anita Hill's testimony and the fallout from it added an acuteness to the Kavanaugh case. Reactions to the accusations against Kavanaugh were divided mostly along partisan lines, revealing first, once more, how important it is for each party to gain the upper hand in the Supreme Court by means of nominating justices from their own political background to the lifelong appointment. What is more, the public hearings for Brett Kavanaugh as well as the attempts at damage control on the part of the Republican Party brought to light displays of hegemonic masculinity that habitually normalise toxic behaviour. Eventually, it was also this normalisation that helped install Kavanaugh in office (Gambino and Weaver 2018; "Brett Kavanaugh to Be Denied Inaugural Walk" 2018).

The testimonies of Brett Kavanaugh and Christine Blasey Ford, his former high-school classmate, before the Senate Judiciary Committee were widely reviewed by various media outlets and scrutinised accordingly by all three late-night comedy shows. The hearings revealed a curious disparity between an angry and very emotional Kavanaugh and Blasey Ford's composed, accommodating statements, which was readily picked up by Colbert, Noah and Oliver alike. All three of them took up the opportunity to ridicule Kavanaugh's behaviour during the testimony, also by denigrating the candidate by highlighting the seeming abnormality of his performance. They refrained from ridiculing the toxic behaviour Kavanaugh was accused of in the first place, and thus from casting doubt on the experiences recounted by Blasey Ford and others. By ridiculing Kavanaugh's behaviour during the testimony, they not only raised serious doubts on the integrity of his character but also on his ability to serve on the Supreme Court.

In his opening monologue on 1 October 2018, Stephen Colbert comments on a still of Kavanaugh from the testimony, showing him with an angrily contorted face: "Our great nation, it is still being emotionally keelhauled by the Senate confirmation of Supreme Court nominee and 'toddler being dragged out of the Gymboree,' Brett Kavanaugh." Colbert compares him – in a rather simple joke – to a toddler throwing a tantrum, he ridicules Kavanaugh while assuming a position of superiority – a powerful disciplinary device, as has been discussed. At the same time, however, the comedian

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2 Each late-night show/segment of a show discussed here is identified by date within the text. Detailed references to the respective clips are given at the end of this article.
does not make light of the situation: the joke references the highly influential institution of the Supreme Court as well as the emotional upheaval this has brought to the nation. Colbert at once criticises the – seemingly immature – character of the nominee, while maintaining the seriousness of the matter as such.

The second example also zooms in on the ridiculous, laughing at the seemingly hyper-emotional Kavanaugh, who cries about mundane things during his testimony, which is presented in stark contrast to the calm and poised testimony of his accuser. In Last Week Tonight from 30 September 2018, John Oliver shows footage of Kavanaugh recounting tearfully how he spent his free time in high school, for example working out with friends. Oliver expresses his disbelief at Kavanaugh's performance: "He is crying at the memory of lifting weights at his friend Tobin's house. I hate to say it, but I'm starting to think that men might be too emotional for the Supreme Court. Also, he'd be really pretty, if he smiled more." Clearly, Oliver's comic approach draws on ridiculing the target, at least initially. However, by employing a form of strategic belittling normally levelled at women, namely that they are too emotional to fill positions of power, he achieves two things at once: first, he questions the misogyny inherent in this denigration, also by tacitly evoking female Supreme Court justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg or Sonia Sotomayor, who could hardly be described as too emotional for the job. Simultaneously, he also lays bare the normative function of certain types of humour – slurs such as this are still regularly employed to prevent women from assuming positions of power and thus to maintain hegemonic masculinity. The comic intervention allows Oliver to challenge this normative function and its links to hegemonic masculinity.

The third example, taken from Trevor Noah's show, also uses ridicule as a disciplinary device by painting the candidate for the Supreme Court as a bumbling fool who is unable to conform to social norms and expectations. In his segment about the more recent developments concerning Judge Kavanaugh from 16 September 2019, Noah wonders about the fact that Kavanaugh supposedly repeatedly exposed his genitals to women:

Why the hell was Kavanaugh constantly whipping his dick out at parties, can we ask that question? [...] He is doing it at high school parties, he is accused of doing it at college parties. I'm starting to wonder if Kavanaugh even understands what parties are.

Noah takes this idea further by imagining Kavanaugh behaving thus at his grandmother's birthday party, which is accompanied by a photomontage of a formally dressed Kavanaugh, albeit with no trousers on. He is seen standing in front of a bunch of balloons next to an elderly lady in a comfortable chair, to which Noah has the imaginary grandmother react by shouting: "No, Brett, no! We said, bring your famous dip!" This not only ridicules the person; but by painting Kavanaugh as a character acting outside appropriate social norms, his alleged toxic behaviour towards women in the past is also rendered abnormal.

The second group of examples could be characterised as ridiculing male behaviour within the social groups Kavanaugh belongs to by exposing the toxic masculinity inherent in them. This is related to the nominee's emotional reminiscing about his high-school friends and the alleged sugar-coating of the group's alcohol excesses. Stephen
Colbert picks up on this in his monologue of 1 October 2018. Colbert cites the statement delivered by one of Kavanaugh's former classmates from Yale University, Chad Ludington, that contradicts Kavanaugh's claims that he did not consume alcohol excessively during his years at university, and he goes on to lament: "Oh, when you've lost Chad, it can't be long until you lose Brad and Ted and Troy and Tanner and Tripp and Bryson and Tucker." Colbert imagines Kavanaugh's group of friends as, on the one hand, a stereotypical boys' club with all kinds of hyperbolically generic names, who, on the other hand, are instrumental in the affirmation of toxic masculinity on a structural level. It is through group pressure but also through closing the ranks in case of trouble that toxic behaviour is not only tolerated but becomes an integral part of these adolescents' self-image and perpetuates hegemonic masculinity. This relates to what Michael Kimmel has termed the "Guy Code," which is defined by a "collection of attitudes, values, and traits that together compose what it means to be a man" (2008, 45). Kimmel argues that this code is being monitored by a self-appointed gender police, ensuring that everyone constantly complies with the Guy Code – even if they don't want to. They know that if you do go along, you’ll have friends for life, you’ll get laid, you’ll feel like you belong. And if you don't, you won't. If you're lucky, you'll just be ignored. (ibid., 98)

Colbert ridicules the ritualised processes constitutive of these social groups and thus voices a critique not only of Kavanaugh himself but of the societal structures that enable toxic behaviour in men: "No, Chad broke the bro code! Brett, you better hope that Pierce, Jason and Devlin don't find out about this!"

John Oliver follows a similar strategy in his show on 30 September 2018 by ridiculing Kavanaugh's insistence on how important his group of high school friends were for him. Oliver thus highlights how conducive this particular group culture is to the exertion of power by means of toxic behaviour. This ties in with Connell's observation that "peer group interaction is a particularly salient site for the definition of masculinities in adolescence" (2008, 133). In scrutinising Brett Kavanaugh's refusal to allow any external examination of the accusations, Oliver muses:

If I were Kavanaugh, I would be desperately trying to prove my innocence in every possible way. FBI investigations, polygraph test, sworn affidavits not only from Mark Judge but from all my other boys from G-town prep. I'm talking about Tobin, Timmy, Squee, PJ, Cumrocks, Tooks, Murk, CDubs, Dirty P, Fat Andy, Spliff Dog, The Horn Dog, Bonowiec, Bonowic's older brother JMoney and Shitdig. You know, character witnesses.

Beginning with Mark Judge, whom Christine Blasey Ford named as having watched and cheered Kavanaugh on as he assaulted her in high school, Oliver provides a list of increasingly ridiculous boy's names that should be called upon as character witnesses for the Supreme Court nominee. He thus puts his finger on the complicity within masculine circles at school, in this case a highly prestigious prep-school, which also adds a class dimension to the criticism. At the same time, however, as the names Oliver cites morph more and more from middle class names into mobster-style aliases, the fraternity is likened to organised crime in which Kavanaugh is consequently implied.
The display of toxic masculinity by privileged men like Brett Kavanaugh, and the support he expects from his male high-school friends, is thus aligned with gang culture. This equation of mob culture and the social elites, of which Kavanaugh is a prime example, is exploited for comic effect while pointing to systemic parallels between the two social strata. Oliver employs these parallels not only to criticise Kavanaugh's character but also the system within which he operates and which enables toxic behaviour.

What the example also shows is how important it can be for the host to establish his own position with regard to the man accused of toxic behaviour: John Oliver very explicitly tells his viewers how he would behave if he was in Kavanaugh's position and really not guilty; thus, Kavanaugh's own refusal to behave accordingly consolidates the lack of trust his testimony has produced and openly casts doubt on his character. Simultaneously, it allows the host of Last Week Tonight to exempt himself from any association with performances of toxic masculinity. This is relevant not only for the trust his viewers have in him but also for how successfully he can ridicule and thus criticise the character of a toxic man, as becomes clear when considering the mechanisms of comic interventions. After all, by ridiculing the person that behaves in a toxic way and/or the system that enables this behaviour, the late-night host makes use of what Billig has described as its "power to enforce the demands of social order" (2001, 38). In each of the cases discussed here, the late-night comedian naturally assumes a position of superiority. This position, however, is forever a precarious one in that the hosts' own gender and powerful position in society do not allow for permanent immunity against hegemonic or toxic masculinity. So asserting one's distance to the scrutinised behaviour is essential to allow for the comedy to work but also to demonstrate that the normativity of toxic behaviour does not necessarily render it normal.

This is made very explicit in the last example to be discussed here, which is taken from The Daily Show from 24 September 2018. Here, Trevor Noah discusses a short segment taken from a CNN programme in which a number of Republican women are asked to comment on the accusations against Brett Kavanaugh. Noah introduces the clip by explaining how he can understand why Republicans are so eager to get Kavanaugh's nomination through: "Getting five conservative justices onto the Supreme Court is something they've been dreaming of for forty years, so they'll do anything to get it done. Even if it means normalising sexual assault." In the material that follows we see, among other things, one woman asking: "We are talking about a fifteen-year-old girl, which I respect. You know, I'm a woman, I respect. But we are talking about a seventeen-year-old boy in high school, with testosterone running high. Tell me, what boy hasn't done that in high school?" In the next shot we see Noah again with a puzzled expression on his face, slowly raising a hand to indicate he did not behave like this in high school – to laughter and cheers from the studio audience. He states: "I don't want to brag, but that's not normal. I mean, I have heard of lenient parents, but this is some next-level shit." Noah employs a twofold strategy here: first, he explicitly identifies the process of normalising toxic behaviour that is so constitutive of its perpetuation. The comic effect, however, is only created in the moment he distances himself from being implied in toxic masculinity. When he communicates his irritation at the words of the Republican woman through facial expressions and by tentatively raising his hand to
indicate that he did not sexually harass girls in high school, he automatically assumes a position of superiority – not on a structural but on an ethical level. By using the woman's comments in such a highly publicised form he, of course, also achieves this structural superiority on a different level. The closing of ranks to justify toxic behaviour, in this case not only within high-school fraternities but within a wider demographic, makes palpable how systemically entrenched these performances of masculinity are – which the comedian hints at by pretending to be almost afraid to reveal that he did not behave accordingly. In ridiculing this attempt at sugar-coating Kavanaugh's alleged behaviour, calling it some "next-level shit," Noah challenges the normative effects of hegemonic masculinity.

4. Conclusion

In his analysis of ridicule and gender hegemony, Mostafa Abedinifard writes:

In discussions of social control, ridicule is often deemed an informal tool, in contrast to such formal tools as law enforcement and police activities. This informal aspect, as well as ridicule's association with humour, has often rendered ridicule as an underestimated or downgraded form. (2016, 244)

That this informality does not thwart the effectiveness of ridicule as a means of maintaining or challenging social norms and structures is substantiated by the material reviewed here. All three late-night comedy shows employ ridicule as a means to denigrate either the character of the man accused of toxic behaviour, Brett Kavanaugh, or the societal structures that encourage and prop up such behaviour as part of hierarchic gender relations. The hosts assume a position of superiority from which they exert their satirical power, tapping into a strategy already described by Aristotle, Plato and Hobbes. In order to maintain this superiority, the comedians also take care not to be implicated in any forms of toxic masculinity, or hegemonic masculinity themselves. Acutely aware of their own position as powerful men, the hosts locate themselves at a safe distance from any such behaviour, which proves essential for the satire to work and for the criticism to unfold. What is more, they invite their audiences to share this position of superiority through their laughter, which clearly is a 'laughing at' the ridiculed person, institution or system rather than a 'laughing with,' thus fixing the target in their subordinate position. Separating the person and the social support system from the actual toxic behaviour in this process allows the comedians to retain a respectful stance towards the women affected by toxic behaviour, while attacking the behaviour of men who act within the normative frame of hegemonic masculinity. Comedy is not a benevolent force in these satirical interventions but a disciplinary device concerning the ridiculed person; its acid humour blisteringly criticises social practices that enable toxic masculinity and thus subverts hegemonic structures. At least temporarily, the audience's laughter about and consequential exclusion of the target can thus serve as a social corrective that is all too often missing elsewhere.
Works Cited


