

Harvard Lampoon president Alexis Wilkinson on how writers' rooms should deal with gender

The 138-year-old magazine was already an institution, but Wilkinson has managed to usher it into a new age

by PRACHI GUPTA for *Salon*



Alixes Wilkinson (Credit MSNBC)

Last week, Harvard's 138-year-old comedy mag, The Harvard Lampoon, launched its first Internet parody site, the Huffington Psst. It's a mirror-image of Arianna Huffington's traffic monster, with content taken down a notch or ten.

The project came to fruition under the leadership of Lampoon president Alexis Wilkinson, a woman who made headlines earlier this year for becoming the first black woman to lead the organization. Wilkinson, who has seemingly brought the venerated comedy institution into the 21st century with a new interest in Internet parodies and a heightened awareness of race and gender issues, recently opened up to Salon about her year as president, her observations about diversity in the comedy-writing world, and where the Lampoon may be headed next.

It's really hard to say the name: the Huffington Psst.

(Laughs). I know, we actually kind of love it. We had a big debate about the name of it and we went back and forth between Huffington Poon and thought, oh, that implies Arianna's vagina... we de-

ecided that was a little too sexual, and "Psst" is a bit of a conversation stopper because it's so hard to say, and we thought that was funny.

How did the project originate?

Lampoon is 138 years old and we've done magazine and print parodies for quite some time. One of our more famous ones being "Bored of the Rings" back in the '70s. Last summer we did "The Wobbit," before that we did "Hunger Pains"...so it became a tradition fairly recently that we kind of re-took up the print book tradition. Over the summer we would do some sort of parody project, usually some sort of young-adult fiction book.

This time — it had been an idea I'd had since I got on staff when a freshman — I had the idea that, well people at the Lampoon have the Internet (chuckles), so we should do something that is for the Internet. It took a long time for us to get not only the staff will — there is a very traditional part of the staff that thinks that the most important thing is the magazine, and anything we do on the Internet or things that'll take away from the importance of producing the magazine are bad. Even the Twitter account. We just recently got a Twitter account for the last couple years. Updating the website, all those kinds of initiatives. They're all happening very slowly in Lampoonland.

When I was a freshman, there were a bunch of other people on staff who thought, "We're going to do a digital parody. We're going to do a digital parody." The first step was deciding roughly what we wanted to do. Now in a post-Onion, post-Clickhole world, our options were — not limited — but we always knew we were in a market of close parodies. So whatever we did, we wanted it to be something that had a distinctive style. Whatever we were going to produce we wanted it to look exactly like the real thing. You'd

have to do a double take to know it was different, which I think is different from Clickhole and The Onion, which look like their own thing.

Immediately, Eleanor Parker and I, being women leaders, we thought — Arianna Huffington, Huffington Post. It's got a leader who has a distinctive personality. She's been on TV a couple times. She has a good sense of humor. She's very good friends with some of the older Lampoon alums who worked on "SNL," like Al Franken. We can definitely make fun of her without feeling weird about it. And the site, which has crazy videos, the HuffPost Live stream, which is so weird to all of us, all these sort of format things. Big headlines in all caps. There are so many format things to play with that we thought this would be a really good idea.

We first got a donation from an anonymous donor. Gave us a pretty large donation to start it off, and then we got a sponsorship from Hello Products, which is an oral and mouthcare brand. They make toothpaste and mouthwash that's indie, vegan and cruelty-free. We did banner ads for them. We also made a video ad for them, which Lampoon has never done before.

How has the writers' room changed with the addition of this huge site?

We don't see this — at least right now — as a permanent fixture for Lampoon. And that's for a couple reasons: One being that we feel very strongly that each executive board — so myself, the head writer, all the other people in charge of making these decisions — every executive board should have the decision to make whatever parody they want. They shouldn't be tied to the Huffington Psst because we decided one summer we wanted to do the Huffington Psst. It might be another site. Maybe they want to do a game. There's so much out there in the digital world. We feel strongly that they should have all the freedom in the world to pursue something else if they want.

Right now the plan is only to keep it up for the month, or potentially into October. Then after that, depending on what we decide, it might cease to exist entirely, which was the original plan. Or we just won't be updating it with original content. But from now until then, we've been having weekly writers meetings specifically for this. So it is has kind of changed the way we do things on staff because now we have to come up with topical things and it's kind of a restructuring. But it's been an adventure.

What are some of the subjects that you'd love to see someone else take on in a future iteration of the Lampoon?

I don't know, as far as websites go. I would really love to see a game or an app or something specifically made for mobile devices. I think now that we have proven we can do the website thing. I'm really excited about the idea, and it's something we kind of toyed with before we decided on this, of doing something that's still very digital but completely different.

You've spoken a lot about the lack of diversity in comedy writing. After leading a comedy publication, do you have any thoughts on how TV shows or other writers' rooms can deal with this, or insight into how to address these concerns?

I hate to talk in broad terms because I have such a very specific experience that like 99 percent of people who are going into comedy or comedy writing would not relate to — not only Lampoon but Harvard and being a black girl from the Midwest. I think as far as just my experience being on staff, I know that when I was applying to get on staff, just seeing women and people of color in the room. People don't realize how much that affects your perception of the place as far as just organizations in general. And I know even when I'm looking at something, or I see a story I really like and I go and I look at the writers' room and it's all white guys — there are a lot of predominantly black shows and predominantly women shows that have no black writers and no women writers and it's really disheartening. If women and people of color can't write TV shows, well shit! Why is this happening?

I realize, especially now that I'm in a place that has a sort of network, that I don't think it's at all malicious and it's at all purposeful. I know that the opportunities that I get, a lot of them have come through Lampoon and through the people I know.

When I'm the only black person on Lampoon, you get into a vicious circle. I think staff has changed so much, it's not just a bunch of white guys from prep schools knowing a bunch of other white guys from prep schools and discussing all these things.

But it's hard when you have an opportunity — "OK, am I gonna help my friend who I know, or some random person I don't know." And if all your friends happen to be the people you went to school with, the people you work with, the people you went to the same prep school with, they're all going to look the same. So I think you just have to be purposeful about realizing those biases and, again, that they're not explicit. It doesn't mean these people are racist

and necessarily don't understand the importance — some people don't understand the importance of diversity, but that's another issue. I think a lot of people get it, they just don't know how to fix it. I think it's a really tough thing to fix and you just have to try to get into communities and expand your own network of people you associate with and give them a shot.

If it doesn't work it doesn't work. But you have to realize that just because they know you doesn't mean they're necessarily better than other people you don't know, which I think is a lot of the problem — in Hollywood as well, it's not just comedy. It's a lot of professions. It's how all professions are; people just don't want to talk about it. You've got to make a purposeful effort to expand outside of that.

What advice would you have for aspiring writers who aren't already plugged into those communities?

I think forcing your way into that community, if at all possible, is really valuable. I'd say that as far as — you gotta realize that this is how it works. And if you get jobs at The Onion by being friends with people at The Onion, find out where people at The Onion hang out and go hang out there. Find out where the bar, where the happy hour is, find a friend of a friend whose mom works for them. I think, for me, even before I got on Lampoon and even after I got on Lampoon I've been so encouraged — I cold-emailed people whose work I really respected and admired and especially as someone who doesn't come from an industry family. I can't go to my mom and ask "What's an agent?, what's a manager?, I don't know what I'm doing, help." She doesn't know what I'm talking about 99 percent of the time. She does not read my stuff. Just benign neglect with my comedy. But just sort of reaching out to people and saying "Hey, I really admire what you do and I think it's something I might want to do. Can I talk to you about it? I promise I won't waste your time and I have very specific questions."

But the flip side of that is you have to have something to show for it. You have to be doing it on your own, especially with the Internet. Make a blog. Make a Twitter. There's no reason, if you want to write, that your writing shouldn't be out there in some capacity. Before I got on Lampoon I had a terrible blog that everyone calls my Slut Blog. It wasn't that slutty; it wasn't just about sex and things.

I realize now, especially that I'm getting more into tweeting and putting more of my writing out there, that that's how you get noticed. Even if you don't know anybody, you never know who's going to

stumble across your thing and like what you're saying and say "Oh you want to do this." And so much of that happens. People get writing jobs off Twitter all the time. So there's no reason, when you're going to these people to ask for help, you can't just say, "I want to write" and then they say, "What do you write," and then you say, "Nothing." "Oh, where can I read your writing?" "You can't." You've gotta be able to point to things to say you're trying to do it on your own.

What are your major lessons or major takeaways from your time as president of the Lampoon?

That's a good question. I can't even remember that I'm on my way out. Just an old hag looking at the sunset. I think my biggest challenge has been as a leader, in general. I don't think — not that I'm not constantly trying to improve as a writer and things like that — but I didn't realize the challenges that would come with trying to lead a group of people, because I was never really student council president. I didn't have to make executive decisions.

I guess one thing I've learned is that I've stopped taking things so personally. Which, especially with all the sort of media stuff that happened to me after the election, was very difficult for me because I wasn't used to people who didn't know me — or maybe did, or didn't know me very well, or maybe knew me too well — having very strong positive or negative opinions about me, personally, and then also Lampoon. At the end of the day, we are a student organization. So when you express these vitriolic opinions — we're 20 years old! Calm down! I think it's very hard for me to separate, sometimes — I'm trying to think of an example. I remember when I was on "Melissa Harris-Perry," I talked to one of the producers. It was after the show... he told me that he met with the rest of the producers and they go over what stories they're going to put up for the week — and one of the producers had said, "Oh I'm gonna have the president of the Lampoon on" and before the producer had finished the sentence someone was like "I bet he's a dick."

Oh, great.

Exactly. And he was like, "Well SHE is not a dick." And they went back and forth for a little bit before someone was like "Alright. Time out." It's funny now but at first those sorts of things are really hurtful to me. When this is something that I love, I want everyone to love it as much as I do. It's just been very difficult for people to realize that this a

138-year thing. And people are going to feel about it however they're going to feel. It doesn't matter if they like you or if they hate you. You're just a blip on the radar in this larger history of a thing.

Prachi Gupta is an Assistant News Editor for Salon, focusing on pop culture. Follow her on Twitter at @prachigu or email her at pgupta@salon.com.