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## Peeling the Onion

*With its often hilarious, pitch-perfect parody of news-writing conventions, the Onion has attracted a dedicated audience for its print and online incarnations. Kathryn S. Wenner takes a behind-the-scenes look at how it all comes together.*

By **Kathryn S. Wenner**

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Todd Hanson's voice resonates from under the conference table as he and his editor, in the weekly budget meeting, debate the wording of a headline. At the moment it's "31 Record Store Clerks Feared Dead In Mogwai Concert Disaster." But Editor in Chief Rob Siegel thinks Mogwai might be too obscure. He suggests Yo La Tengo, a New Jersey-based band that's been around for years, long enough to be familiar to readers but with enough cult appeal to nail the joke about hipper-than-thou music store geeks.

Senior writer Hanson, feet on chair, back on floor, head of shoulder-length brown hair on purple velvet throw pillow, eventually agrees. Siegel also wants to just say "dead" without the "feared." Staff writer Joe Garden objects. "I think, journalistically, 'feared' is better," he says.

"'Dead,'" Siegel says. "It's pretend."

"Wait," sounds the voice from under the table. "I'm confused. Is this pretend?"

Welcome to the Onion factory, where a bunch of friends who last year left Madison, Wisconsin, for Manhattan dream up jokes and turn them into a very successful satirical weekly newspaper. In some ways, what these 10 editorial staffers do isn't that different from working at a real newspaper. But in most ways, it's like an alternate universe, where the environment seems like reality as you know it until you pay attention to what's being said. Which, in fact, is how the Onion itself works. It looks like a real newspaper, until you read the headlines: "God Re-Floods Middle East," "Orgy A Logistical Nightmare," "80 Percent Of Small-Town Newspaper Written By Jerry Schoepke."

Headlines like those, and the accompanying stories that riff on them, draw more than a million unique visitors to the online edition each month, according to comScore Media Metrix. Publisher Peter Haise estimates print readership at 500,000, though circulation is only 262,000. Onion readers tend to be around 30 years old for the paper edition, Haise says, and a little younger on the Internet. Sixty percent of them are male.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a chunk of them are also journalists. The New Yorker, the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times and USA Today have published flattering features on the Onion and its team of comedy news writers. Siegel, the editor in chief, says he frequently gets e-mails from reporters. "Often the letter will say, 'Everybody here in the newsroom reads you guys,'" he says. "I think a lot of journalists get frustrated, just as a lot of writers do. I think we're this revenge fantasy for journalists. We're making fun of the things they would make fun of." Such as awkward newspaper-speak like "area man," which the Onion uses often as a hook for observations about American life, as in "Area Man Constantly

Mentioning He Doesn't Own A Television." Or colorful graphic boxes that list hot trends, which the Onion regularly parodies with topics such as "Top Rumors About Tom Cruise" or "What Pornography Are We Avoiding?"

The carefully structured copy includes pitch-perfect supporting quotes and punctuation tics like a bracketed word substituted for what was really said. The Onion isn't necessarily commenting on the way newspapers are written, says copy editor Stephen Thompson. It just uses the style to advance a joke. Thompson's all-time favorite example of using brackets is in the story "Area Homosexual Saves Four From Fire: Heroic Neighbor Praised, Gay," which ends with this quote from the hero: "I've always believed that one [homosexual] really can make a difference."

The journalistic form, Siegel says, is "the vessel.... It has to look like real journalism to create the comedic tension between what is being said and how it is presented."

All Onion stories start with the headline, the big joke that spawns lots of smaller jokes in the accompanying copy. Not all headlines warrant full-length stories, which run about 800 words. Some become 100-word briefs; others run as front-page refers with no inside copy and are sometimes accompanied by a photo, like "Stack Of Unread New Yorkers Celebrates One-Year Anniversary."

Every Monday, each of the publication's seven writers submits 25 possible headlines, or 75 if he or she had only written one story the week before. Together they select 50 or 60 they like best. On Tuesday, the writers pick 18 for the next week's paper. During the writing and editing process, everyone reads and comments on each piece.

"Everything is really workshopped to death," says Hanson, a strong believer in collaboration, even though "it's very time-intensive."

Early on this Tuesday afternoon in March, several hours before Hanson gets his pillow and lies down on the floor, seven members of the editorial staff sit in plastic chairs around a long wooden conference table. Cluttered with bits of lunch, the table nearly fills the room, which has a bare brick wall and exposed pipes--part of a spacious suite in a renovated warehouse in Chelsea. The five staff writers, one woman and four men, flank either side and at opposite ends sit Hanson and Managing Editor Carol Kolb--who broke up last fall after dating for years. The staff has worked together since the mid-'90s, with the exception of newcomers Chris Karwowski, 29, who started three years ago, and Tim Harrod, 34, who joined in 1997. Attire tends toward flannel shirts over T-shirts and jeans.

None of the writers has any journalism experience beyond some time spent at college papers, in most cases as cartoonists or graphic artists. Siegel, 30, wrote for the student paper at the University of Michigan.

To some extent, people try to make each other laugh as they hammer out the headlines, Hanson says, but a common belief that the meetings are one big laugh riot isn't true. "It's not like you're sitting with your friends and cracking each other up. It's like if you said, 'Let's analyze everything we just said in the last 20 minutes. Let's just pick everything apart.' Your friends would just say, 'God, you're no fun to be around.' "

But maybe Hanson feels that way because he's never been an outsider observing this group of self-described outsiders.

The writers take turns reading headlines they've come up with. Harrod, less vocal than some of the others, suggests "Village Voice Columnist Feels Like He's Supposed to Apologize for Liking Shrek" and "Chinese Confectioners May Have Atomic Fireballs."

"That's funny," Hanson says without laughing. No one laughs out loud about a headline they like. They're too busy analyzing it.

Harrod's last suggestion is "Opium-Filled Ad Writer Conceives Epic Tums Jingle." Several issues later, this one, edited slightly, becomes a brief. "Opium-Inspired Ad Executive Composes Epic Tums Jingle" includes the following verse: "When Vulcan's fires spout and rage / within a roiling acid sea / let work the soothing tablet Tums / The Hell-sear'd forge within becomes / sweet alkaloid esprit. "

"I poured my heart out to make it Coleridgean," Harrod says. He adds that he was especially happy that Siegel, an aggressive editor whose decisions frequently rankle his writers even though most consider him brilliant, didn't change a word of the jingle.

Harrod, like Hanson, has done comedy improv. He's also done stand-up. When he first saw the Onion in 1995, Harrod was living with his parents in southern Michigan, and his brother had given him a subscription. "It didn't take me many issues to decide that this was possibly the best thing coming out of American comedy," he recalls. Harrod began submitting headline ideas, which led to writing stories. Two years later he moved to Madison and joined the staff full time.

The others on the editorial staff--including the two graphics editors--were drawn to the Onion through their connection to a loose network of creative, comedy-leaning slackers in Madison in the early 1990s. Most of the staff are from Wisconsin.

"We're just a bunch of friends that came together to do this," says Siegel, by way of explaining the group's chemistry and why it's impossible for an outsider to get hired, or even, these days, to become a contributor the way Harrod did. His standard response to the question, "How do you get a job with the Onion?" is "You don't, any more than you get a job with your favorite band." If he needed to hire a new writer, Siegel says, he'd go to the roster of seven or so contributors "who have been with us for years. You're never going to see an ad asking for résumés and cover letters. We just don't know what to do with them."

A general sense of frustration begins to reveal itself after Siegel joins the meeting in midafternoon. His job is to give each headline a thumbs-up, thumbs-down or a good tweak. The others have already spent several hours picking over ideas and fussing over wording. It is at this point that Hanson leaves the room to retrieve the purple pillow that he uses to reposition himself under the table.

Aside from the record-store clerks concert disaster, the editor in chief isn't finding much of anything particularly funny.

"Those Tuesday meetings are the most unpleasant thing for me to be thrown in," Siegel says later. "It's an important thing, having a 'no' man. I think it's a vital thing if you want to produce good work." On the other hand, he says, he recognizes the importance of a "passionate, great, free-flowing vibe" in the early stages. "You don't want that 'no' to be poisoning the first part of the process, when everyone's feeling good."

Kolb says Siegel is in some ways resented for being the "no" man. "Sometimes, he gets kind of a bad rap among the Onion staff for not being willing to listen. But I think that's because it's such an emotional thing for some people," she says.

"People who do comedy are particularly insecure and in need of approval," Hanson says. "Rob doesn't give too much feedback one way or another. He just takes [the copy] and changes it. On the other hand, everyone agrees that the material that we put out is something we're proud of, so he must know what he's doing."

Siegel admits he edits heavily. This creates occasional minor rebellions. Maria Schneider, 34, relates a story about the time writer John Krewson, 34, tired of having all his fictitious character names changed, named every person in a story "Rob Siegel." But much of Siegel's job is not so different from that of any newspaper editor. At one point he interrupts the meeting to tell Schneider that her story about a teenage time traveler needs some scientific-sounding explanation near the top.

Despite the fictional nature of the stories, a fair amount of reporting goes into them. "If we're doing a story about the Green Hornet or opera or stamp collecting or the ozone layer, whatever it is, we have to assume that experts in that field are going to

be reading it," Siegel says.

Thompson says that in copyediting, he catches "a lot of 'how a bill becomes law' stuff.... We'll have the House introduce a bill that the president has signed in the same story." Beyond factual errors, Thompson corrects wording that isn't journalistically authentic--ensuring the Onion reads like a real paper.

Thompson, 30, who lives in Madison and edits the Onion A.V. Club--a real arts and entertainment section that is published both in the print and online editions--has a journalism degree from the University of Wisconsin and magazine editing experience. Siegel and Thompson are the verisimilitude police. With a couple of exceptions--using U.S. Postal Service abbreviations for states and capping every word in headlines--they assiduously adhere to AP style.

The effect, of course, would be incomplete without art. Graphics Editor Mike Loew and Assistant Graphics Editor Chad Nackers fake the photos and create the color boxes. For subjects, they use a lot of friends and family, Loew says, but sometimes in a pinch they recruit people on the street. Since the least flattering photo is the one most likely to get published, "I tell them it's theater," Loew says. "We're not making fun of you; you're playing a role."

Loew and Nackers also use Photoshop on photos from news services. "The ideas are dreamed up in the writing room," Loew says. "We have to go out and make them happen."

Pretend news can be profitable. Started in Madison in 1988, the Onion added color and launched a Milwaukee edition in 1994; a Denver edition opened the next year. In 1996 it went national with theonion.com, a site that has won Webbys each year since 1999. The Chicago edition launched in 1998. But it was the April Fools' Day 1999 release of "Our Dumb Century: 100 Years of Headlines from America's Finest News Source" that brought fame and, at least comparatively, fortune to the little company whose 50 or so employees, in the words of Publisher Haise, "worked for peanuts for a long time." The book won the 1999 Thurber Prize for American Humor.

Honchoed by former Editor in Chief Scott Dikkers, "Our Dumb Century" is a 164-page collection of made-up front pages that begins with Monday, January 1, 1900 ("McKinley Ushers In Bold New 'Coal Age,' " "Man With Limbs Employed by Rail-Road") and concludes with Saturday, January 1, 2000 ("Christian Right Ascends To Heaven," "All Corporations Merge Into OmniCorp"). Producing it was by all accounts a miserable two-year ordeal. "It was obsessively researched," Siegel says, from actual history to the evolution of newspaper spellings, usage, typefaces and layouts.

Two more best-sellers followed, "The Onion's Finest News Reporting, Volume One," published in 2000, and "Dispatches From The Tenth Circle," released in 2001.

Haise says that the Onion's profitability, which includes merchandise, the books and a DreamWorks movie option, helped make possible the big move to New York in January 2001. Why New York? Well, Siegel missed his family. Other staff members wanted a change from Madison, and everyone wanted to raise the Onion's profile. It meant, of course, big increases in expenses, including paying people not just enough to live in New York, Haise says, but enough so that they'd stay with the Onion once they got there.

Haise, 35, won't divulge profit numbers, but he says that about 70 percent of revenue comes from advertising sales, two-thirds of that from the print edition. Subscriptions provide another 10 percent, and the rest comes from the books, movie options (they also have a development deal with Miramax), merchandise and so forth. The Onion Radio News, 60-second fake reports that air daily on more than 80 stations nationwide, doesn't make much money but gets the name out there.

Two more compilation books are scheduled to come out this year. And the next big thing is a screenplay for a sketch comedy film to be produced by David Zucker (the "Naked Gun" movies) and Gil Netter ("Dude, Where's My Car?"). Siegel likens it to

1977's "Kentucky Fried Movie," in which Zucker starred. "It'll probably be a little more satirical" and less spoofy than that, he says. "A little more in the Onion style, still fairly crude and cheap-looking."

They pick their projects carefully. "We're doing what we want to do," Haise says. "We're successful in that nobody's forcing us to do anything that we don't want to do."

Humor is a personal thing, and even those who consider themselves Onion fans can end up offended or just left flat from time to time. "I think it's often very clever," says Mitchell Stephens, professor and journalism historian at New York University. "Occasionally, as with a lot of humor writing, the third and fourth joke, the ones down in paragraphs five through seven or eight, are not as funny as the first and second jokes were."

Siegel is the first to admit the jokes don't always go over. "Of anyone on staff I have the lowest opinion of our hit-and-miss ratio," he says. "There's a healthy chunk of the stuff we do that I think is pretty mediocre myself." But he also notes that "you're 10 times more likely to find a joke funny if it's about your things," your likes, dislikes, familiar experiences. By the same token, when people get offended, it's frequently because the joke hits a little too close to home.

Sometimes people don't even know they are reading jokes. Kolb says the Onion gets "just stacks" of e-mails from the overly credulous. But the gullibility prize goes to China's Beijing Evening News, which essentially reprinted the story headlined "Congress Threatens To Leave D.C. Unless New Capitol Is Built."

However, it's not just about entertainment. "We want to have jokes of substance," Schneider says. "We try to say 'Nothing's sacred,' " though "there's definitely some topics we haven't talked much about, like AIDS in Africa," she says. "There's a message in a lot of the stories."

Sometimes that message is aimed squarely at the news business, as in "CNN Still Releasing News Piled Up During Elián González Saga." And Dan Fost, media columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle, thinks a large part of the Onion's approach is a critique of newspapers. "Anybody who's worked for a smaller newspaper knows that there's this formula you can write your stories in," he says. "They take that formula to these absurd extremes." Such as in "Lackluster Marriage Enlivened By Cancer Scare," a twisted take on the kind of story meant to connect with readers. "When you're writing about real people there's a whole different sensitivity that you can't have when you're doing satire," Fost says. "But I think it also should just remind you to take a step back when you're writing these stories."

Although no one on staff admits to consciously criticizing the media, one of Siegel's pet peeves--and one he loves to satirize--is what he sees as the media's tendency to ascribe heroism to everyone who has some tragedy befall them. "I think it kind of strips away a person's humanity," he says, "if you present people as these robots of bravery who automatically rise to the occasion, when you Christopher Reeve-ize everybody.... It just oversimplifies the full range of emotions you work through when you're confronting death and disease." The Onion's answer: "Loved Ones Recall Local Man's Cowardly Battle With Cancer."

Siegel lists a few other hackneyed story lines that bug him. "The Y2K thing. And you already know exactly what journalism is going to look like in September 2002. Shit, I could write those stories right now. After Columbine, 'The healing has begun.' That trope is a fairly standard one."

He continues: "There's really nothing more simplistic than the way the media deals with death. There doesn't seem to be any room in journalism for people shrieking and crying. It's always rendered very lofty and dignified. Death is rarely dignified."

Last September, Siegel and his staff found out how difficult it can be to write about death. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon occurred eight months after they'd moved to New York--and shortly before they'd planned to launch

the New York edition. "We stopped the presses. We had our emergency meeting to discuss what we should do," Siegel says. They decided to devote the entire next issue to the attacks (see "Maybe Not," May).

Collectively titled "Holy Fucking Shit: Attack On America," the package drew extreme responses: People either loved it or hated it. Its headlines, including "Hijackers Surprised To Find Selves In Hell" and "Not Knowing What Else To Do, Woman Bakes American-Flag Cake," got lots of press mentions.

The New York Times' John Schwartz lavishly praised the edition, describing the "Hijackers" story as "searingly brutal" and "cathartic for many readers." "[O]ther articles in the carefully balanced package show a sense of compassion and even grace," he wrote.

Still, some were offended; others just disappointed. Online Journalism Review published a commentary by contributor Steven Zeitchik on October 19 that criticized the issue as preachy, obvious and lacking punch. Zeitchik preceded his complaints with "Normally, I'm one of the many who finds the Onion riotously funny. But when it came to the attacks, something seemed off." The hijackers-in-hell headline, he wrote, is "one of the lazier forms of humor: moral grandstanding. Do we really need to be told what naughty little boys those terrorists were?"

But overall, the response "was pretty overwhelming," says writer Garden. "It was really kind of moving to see how much of an impact it had.... People wrote in and said that this was the first thing they had laughed at. It was really touching to be part of the healing process in a way that I never thought I would be capable of."

Siegel thought the package strong enough to be a Pulitzer Prize contender, so he submitted it under the "commentary" category. Though it didn't make the cut as a finalist, one member of the jury says he wished it could have been recognized. "I thought it was brilliant," says Philadelphia Daily News Editor Zack Stalberg. "The unfortunate thing is it was up against traditional, as in kind of serious, entries from other columnists in that category, all about September 11. So while I think it really impressed people, they had a hard time deciding it should be a finalist."

Stalberg says he particularly liked Siegel's nomination letter, which ended with a George Bernard Shaw quote that Stalberg wrote down and saved: "Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh."

That, says Hanson, is what the Onion is all about. "Some people see comedy as a venue to provide light distraction, put a smile on other people's faces," he says. "And yet if you really understand what comedy really is, I believe, it's not about lightheartedness at all. It's about very harsh and terrible things that were really horrific. It's sort of a way of processing horror and misery. That's where comedy comes from."

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