



## Behind The Scenes at The Onion: ‘Trump Is the Emperor Who Admits He’s Naked’

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On the night of the 2016 election, writers at the Onion gathered to watch the unexpected results. One had made an ice-cream cake. “Nobody touched it the entire night,” says Mike Gillis, the Onion’s head writer. The melting treat was decorated with a face that gradually became “more distorted and horrific” as the night went on.

“That was a good symbol of everybody’s feelings. And I think that was a moment where we all had to pause and reflect on how we were covering politics.” Coverage became more critical, Gillis says, but finding the jokes could be a challenge.

“Part of it was finding ways to pin a joke on somebody who’s already a self-parody,” Gillis said. “Trump was very good at creating a parody of himself and anticipating that people would see that it was ridiculous that he was this corrupt businessman who was actively talking about how he could get away with anything.” Trump gleefully admits to the hypocrisy satire would typically target, Gillis says.

“The textbook example of satire is something like the emperor’s new clothes. And this was an example of the emperor openly saying, ‘Hey, everyone, I’m naked. What do you make of that?’”

Over the past three and a half decades, the Onion has developed a reputation as the go-to place for fake news long before fake news was a thing. Headlines like “Supreme court rules supreme court rules,” “Fun toy banned because of three stupid dead kids” and “Drugs win drug war” have endured; other stories, such as “No way to prevent this, says only nation where this regularly happens” – published after every prominent mass shooting – have offered more biting social commentary.

But in recent years, “That sounds like an Onion headline!” has become a familiar remark – whether about the US trying to buy Greenland or a billionaire planning to colonize Mars. The phrase proves

how deeply the satirical newspaper-turned-website has penetrated our culture: everyone knows their Onion.

Yet when the day's real-life headlines are regularly compared with the Onion's, how do its writers tackle the news? How do you parody the world when reality has jumped the shark?

When it comes to Trump specifically, one method is targeting those close to him who take a much more traditional approach – the Jareds and Ivankas, “who have this image that they really desperately want to project on to the world. Puncturing that is something that satire is very good at,” Gillis says.

But the Trump era also tested satirists in its insistence on “alternative facts”. “If you can't have an established truth, it's really hard to play off of things,” says Chad Nackers, the Onion's editor-in-chief since 2017 and a staff member since 1997. “It divides your audience. Half the country is like: ‘Well, I don't believe in that truth. So this joke makes no sense.’”

But the mockery abides. “Satire only goes away when there's no more humans,” he adds. You just “have to be a little more innovative”.

That, he says, is partly why the Onion is launching a revamped opinion section on Tuesday. While the current political era has brought new pitfalls for satirists, it's also brought new targets – including the endless stream of media and social media chatter.

In the past, the site's fictional commentators have included the likes of the overeager Jean Teasdale and the slacker Jim Anchow, who offer readers updates on their personal trials. Both characters, Nackers says, reflect more of a local-news format. Beginning on Tuesday, however, the Onion will offer comment pieces from figures based on America's insufferable political pundits, providing their strongly held views in a round-table format. Expect direct amalgamations of all your least favorite media voices, from earnest broadsheet columnists to desperate would-be influencers.

### **Under the skin**

A typical day at the Onion's headquarters, now in Chicago, begins with writers and editors perusing the day's real-life headlines for inspiration. Then the staff gathers in the writer's room – the heart of the operation, where bright-green office chairs surround a large table beneath a whiteboard. Various odds and ends around the room serve as inspiration: a newspaper box from the Onion's print era, which ended in 2013 (last headline: “Onion print revenues up 5,000%”); a model owl sitting on the vents, one of several around the office (“I have no idea why they're there,” says Gillis); an expired container of ham and chicken paste as a centerpiece on the table (the staff may use it as baby Jesus in a nativity scene this year).

Chad Nackers, the Onion's editor in chief, at a 2016 event. Photograph: Brad Barket/Getty Images

Before the meeting, each writer sends a list of potential headlines to Nackers, which he reads out loud. After a two-round voting process, staff work together brainstorming “and sometimes

massaging the headlines if they're not fully where we want them to be", says senior editor Lauren Moser. Finally, the headlines are sent to individual writers to create the accompanying articles.

This collaborative approach has served the publication well over the years, seeing it through a series of dramatic shifts in the cultural and comic landscape.

Founded in 1756, and long published by the bespectacled news baron T Herman Zweibel, the newspaper today boasts 4.3 trillion daily readers and maintains news bureaus and labor camps worldwide, not to mention its business interests in global transoceanic shipping lanes and animal-testing operations. Or so it claims.

In reality, the newspaper first appeared in 1988 as the work of two students at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Tim Keck and Chris Johnson, who sold it the following year to their cartoonist Scott Dikker, and Peter Haise, the publisher. That pair gradually expanded the newspaper's distribution to other US cities, and its website launched in 1996. It cemented its place in American pop culture when, in 1999, it released *Our Dumb Century*, a collection of imaginary editions of the Onion spanning the 20th century, including such memorable headlines as "Kennedy Slain By CIA, Mafia, Castro, LBJ, Teamsters, Freemasons" and "Holy shit, man walks on fucking moon." The book was a No 1 New York Times bestseller.

A year later came the 2000 US election debacle, which left Americans unsure for weeks about who the next president would be. The Onion's initial take – "Bush or Gore: 'A new era dawns'" – proved more apt than expected. When staff wrote the headline, they expected the answer to become clear before the piece was published – the joke hinged on the idea that the writers had been stymied by publication deadlines. Instead it accurately, and amusingly, reflected an electoral crisis.

Confronting that election was among the most memorable moments of Nackers' Onion career. In the 1990s, the jokes had tended toward pure silliness, "wacky and crazy stuff" that's "written in a news voice", he says (for instance: "Perky 'Canada' has own government, laws", from 1996, or "Jurisprudence fetishist gets off on a technicality," two years later). But "from that moment on, America gets kind of crazy," Nackers says. "I do think that the Onion entered a new era of satire."

The 9/11 attacks came mere months after the Bush-Gore election – and shortly after the Onion had moved its headquarters from Madison to New York, making the attack feel personal. Nackers recalls attempting to head to work in the aftermath of the attacks, seeing signs for missing people and empty ambulances in air that "reeked of electrical fires". "That's where it kind of hits home," he says.

In the ensuing years came the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and "satire went to a darker place", Nackers says. The Onion, he noted, was one of the few publications not to beat the drum for an Iraq invasion, with pieces including a point-counterpoint – "This war will destabilize the entire Mideast region and set off a global shockwave of anti-Americanism vs No it won't" – and headlines such as "New bomb capable of creating 1,500 new terrorists in a single blast" and "Dead Iraqi would have loved democracy".

“I think the Onion’s always been kind of counter-culture. But that’s where we kind of took this stand and the real truth-to-power started happening,” Nackers says.

That strain of commentary continued through the election of Barack Obama – whose use of drones the Onion hammered to the end, with a 20 January 2017 headline reading, “Departing Obama tearfully shoos away loyal drone following him out of White House.” Then, of course, came Donald Trump and the melting ice cream cake.

But even Trump’s best efforts can’t stand in the way when humorists take action outside the sphere of satire. Last month, the Onion submitted a very real amicus brief – a legal document from an outside party weighing in on a case – to the supreme court.

The case in question hit at the heart of what the Onion does every day. An Ohio man, Anthony Novak, sued after local police arrested him over a Facebook page parodying the police’s own website. The case wound its way to the highest court in the country, and a friend of the Onion staff brought it to their attention.

“We all thought it was a big fat first amendment parody law case that we all were excited about getting behind,” Gillis says. He wrote much of the 23-page document immediately after their first conversation.

Unlike your typical court filing, it’s highly readable – and very funny, using humor to make its point about the importance of legal protections for parody. The website is weighing in “to protect its continued ability to create fiction that may ultimately merge into reality”, the filing asserts. “The Onion’s writers also have a self-serving interest in preventing political authorities from imprisoning humorists.”

The thing that we lucked out with was that everybody involved with the case on Anthony Novak’s side is a huge fan of the Onion. So they were very much behind the idea of making this kind of totally weird and out of the ordinary,” Gillis says.

The Onion submitted the brief in early October. Since then, “everybody from the director of the Cato Institute to Webster’s dictionary has issued a statement about it”, Gillis says. “We’ve gotten emails from people at Harvard Law and Universidad Federal in Brazil – a professor there is going to translate it into Portuguese so they can teach it to their students.”

But if dramatic political shifts have forced Onion writers to find new ways to confront a troubled nation, at its core, the process remains the same, say Moser and the site’s managing editor, Jordan LaFlure.

“The news cycle has gotten crazier, and this job has gotten crazier, but we as writers absorb the news and react to it,” says Moser, who began at the Onion in 2014. “My writing process hasn’t changed.”

LaFlure agrees. “While the world has gotten crazier, the tools of comedy are immutable,” he says. “I think one outcome of the world having gotten crazier is that jokes are willfully misunderstood

because they don't fit with the person's ideology. But we're just going to stubbornly press forward."

"Satire is a powerful tool," Moser adds. "It reflects the world back in on itself to the readers, and no matter what the world is, it will hopefully shine a light on the craziness underneath it all."