



**UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE NATIONAL AGENDA 2020
WE ARE THE PEOPLE**

Scott Dikkers

“Satire or Fake News”

HOSTED BY

University of Delaware –
Center for Political Communication

PARTICIPANTS

Dr. Lindsay Hoffman

Director of National Agenda and Associate Director
of the Center for Political Communication,
University of Delaware

Scott Dikkers

Co-founder and longest-serving editor-in-chief of
The Onion, Scott created the first “fake news”
platform which grew into one of today’s most
recognized comedy brands. His creation of *The
Onion* was based on Scott finding inspiration from
Mad magazine. Dikkers 2018 book, *Outrageous
Marketing* details how *The Onion* broke through the
noise in a media-saturated landscape and
overcame doubters and legal obstacles.

Transcript of Event

Date:

September 16, 2020

Place:

Virtual Event – Zoom Webinar,
Newark, DE



[Musical interlude to 0:05:50.0]

DR. HOFFMAN: Good evening everyone. Welcome to the tenth annual National Agenda Speaker Series. This year's theme calls attention to the power of us, the citizens of the United States. Even this tumultuous, tumultuous, tumultuous ... are we having some audio problems? Okay. I'll continue. Even in this tumultuous time our right to vote in elections remains one of the most important acts we can perform as Americans. And I'm pleased to announce that our voter registration competition, which you can follow at sites.udel.edu/students/vote. So, it started yesterday and broke our single day turbo vote signup by receiving nearly 700 signups. So, make sure you check that out and get registered to vote. This competition continues until September 22nd which is National Voter Registration Day. Tonight, is our first National Agenda without boundaries and throughout the Fall we'll address many tough questions. But we're also here to provide a little levity and entertainment. That's why tonight be prepared to have a laugh or two as we talk about political satire and political humor in a pandemic. Finally, even though we're virtual we'll be still inviting audience participation. To submit a question, type your question into Chat and it may be selected to be asked during our Q and A at the end of this talk. I am Dr. Lindsay Hoffman. Thank you for being here. And I'm excited to announce that tonight when a group of friends dropped out of college and started a fake newspaper they didn't realize it would be one of the most popular humor destinations in the world decades later. *The Onion's* founder and longest serving editor-in-chief is also a best-selling author whose work has won the Thurber Prize for American humor, a Peabody and over 30 Webby awards. Please welcome *The Onion's* Scott Dikkers.



SCOTT DIKKERS: Hi, everybody. It's so nice to be here with all of you.

DR. HOFFMAN: Hi, Scott.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Thank you, Lindsay.

DR. HOFFMAN: Thank you for joining us virtually. And, welcome –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – to the nearly 600 folks on this webinar from Delaware to North Dakota to Costa Rica. All in all, our viewers join us from 19 states and four countries and comprise UD alumni, faculty, staff, retirees and students, as well as many not affiliated with UD. Thank you to all of you for joining us tonight. So, Scott, let's get started. Tell us a little bit about your decades long journey with political satire and *The Onion*.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, so, ah, to make that story very short I'll try to compact 30 years [chuckle] into, um, into a quick answer. But, when I, when *The Onion* started, ah, it seemed like media especially, but kind of the world in general, was going to hell in a hand basket. And now, I mean, everybody seems to agree [chuckle] the world is going to hell in a hand basket. The world is crazier than anything a satirist could invent, and it seems like even when we make things up to try to be as crazy as possible, um, it ends up coming true. Like so many things that we write in, in *The Onion* have, have come true and even crazier than that people believe they're, they're real before they come true. So, it's so crazy that even though everything in *The Onion* is made up that we're in a, in a state now where for a lot of people it's indistinguishable from what's really happening, happening. So, you know, we've all seen those surveys. Young people get they're news primarily from comedy now, um, or fake news. Like, that's, fake news is a term that was invented by *The Daily Show* to define the type of



comedy that they were doing. And, this is a lot of people's primary news source, you know? They, they have to create the context of their comedy, so they tell you what's going on, ah, in the news. And then those same people don't trust the traditional news media because, ah, traditional news media has just become infotainment and, ah, it's not really doing news anymore. So where do you go? Like, where do you go to get information? TV used to be a public service where networks would provide news and information to educate the citizenry [chuckle.] Imagine that? So, now, you know, we have obvious propaganda masquerading as satire that they call fake news. That's what we all heard about during the 2016 election. People just putting out lies to try to sway voters and they called it satire, or they called it fake news. And people confused the two. And, furthermore, they believed that it was true. Um, you know, and online especially, people are not good at distinguishing, distinguishing what's real from what's fake. And so, they get into a rabbit hole of conspiracy theories, they go on Facebook and Facebook and Google are designed to feed people more of what they already want. So, if you, if you like a story about how COVID-19 was invented by Martians to prevent you from getting laid you're going to get more of that and you're just going to go deeper in that echo chamber. And worse, ultimately, is you're going to vote. So, our political leaders get dumber and dumber and it's just a downward spiral. And so, you know, how did this happen? How, how did we get to this place? I guess I should cop to it. It's my fault. Like *The Onion* was the first in a long series of news parody publications and the TV shows that it inspired that do satire. And, you know, a lot of people from *The Onion* went and worked on those shows so it all kinds of, kind of stems from what we did. So, I'm very sorry. I want to apologize –



DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: – um, for the sad state of our national news media. It's my fault.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: Fox News is my fault.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Indiscernible] you're taking all of the blame? [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: All the blame. And MSNBC, my fault; Donald Trump, my fault; the fires in California, my fault; climate change, sorry.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: Um, so, yeah, I didn't know this would happen when these two very enterprising UW Madison students came to me in 1988 and invited me to be a part of this idea they had to start a college humor publication. Um, I just thought it sounded like a fun idea. And it started as just this campus rag 15,000 circulation and students liked it and we were just trying to be funny and we could only afford to print on newsprint so fake news kind of became our format just, ah, form followed function. Um, I'm sorry, function followed form. So, we, um, we did like weekly world news parody stuff at first. And then over the years we kind of figured out the finer points of satire and started lampooning the news media itself just by the nature of the medium that we were working in. Um, and I can tell you more about it but that's basically, um, ah, I think that answers your; that's a long answer. I, I promised I'd do the short answer; I did the long answer.

DR. HOFFMAN: No, no, I just wanted to hear more about kind of how you got here, um, how you got –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – started and, um, what your thoughts are. But apparently



you just think that you're to blame for every, all the ills of the world.

SCOTT DIKKERS: [Chuckle,] yeah, yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: Ah, well, you know, I'm in the comedy business and we take things very seriously.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: We, and we take personal responsibility. But, you know, it –

DR. HOFFMAN: Is that [indiscernible.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: – it started, like I said, with us try, just trying to be funny and so a lot of our humor in the beginning was very sophomoric, um, and we did some political stuff. I remember a story we did that was on the front page, it was, ah, "Governor Proclaims November Masturbation Month".

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: And it was about Governor Thompson, Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin and this is one of the first times we actually got in trouble for what we were printing. It kind of put us on the map in that, in that regard. But, I needed a photo of the governor for this story so I called, um, his office and I spoke to his press secretary who had heard of *The Onion* and he refused to give me a photo because he knew that we would just make fun of the governor. So, I was stumped. I didn't know where to go. I thought, like that, you were supposed to get a free photo of the governor if you were a citizen. They owed you that, you know. A standard politician mugshot or whatever. But they wouldn't give it me and so I went to – and you couldn't just go online to get photos then – this is all like analog –

DR. HOFFMAN: Right, right.



SCOTT DIKKERS: – had, had to find a physical photo. So, I went to the local newspaper in town and they had a huge file of photos of the governor. They had a great picture of him at a podium, you know, going like this which was perfect for the masturbation story. And so, I used that photo. I put it on the frontpage and for kicks I put in really small letters on the side of the photo the name of the press secretary that I had spoken to. It said special thanks to Jon Henkes. That was his name. So, as a little dig.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Indiscernible] that [chuckle] –

SCOTT DIKKERS: And when that issue hit the streets I got a really angry phone call from Jon Henkes who apparently got his head bitten off by the governor who blamed him for giving us the photo and, ah, they tried to sue us. They, they actually prevented us from getting a big advertiser for a long time. They really wanted to crush us because we had been so mean to them. And they demanded a retraction and, you know, in those days it was like we're just doubling down on the, on the funny. So, in the next issue we put a little box that said, ah, last week *The Onion* erroneously reported that the governor had proclaimed November masturbation month. It was an error. Ah, he had in fact proclaimed it sodomy month.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: *The Onion* regrets the error and special thanks to Jon Henkes for pointing out this correction. So, you know, that was sort, sort of the college antics that would happen on occasion [chuckle] at *The Onion* when it was still small and it was just a local thing and when nobody knew about it, those were sort of the adventures that we had.

DR. HOFFMAN: I'm sure none of the college students on this call can relate



to any of that kind of humor [chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: No.

DR. HOFFMAN: All right, so. Let's get started. So, you teach and write books about how to be funny. That's been kind of your, your renaissance. So, define funny for us. What makes something truly funny?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, there's a lot of people who have theories and there's, I keep running into these people and they write books like, um, where they try to, ah, compress it into like a simple formula or whatever. And it's, it's a little more complicated than that. But, for me something is funny when there's subtext that is some opinion or value judgement that the humorist or comedian or comedy writer has that they're trying to communicate to the audience but instead of saying it on the nose, just saying what their opinion is, they filter it through one or more of eleven different, what I call, funny filters. So, these are the essential tools of humor that can make any opinion into a joke. And, ah, let's, let's see if I can remember them all, um, off the top of my head there. So, um, there's irony where you say the opposite of what you think. There's character where you use an invented comedic archetype or character to communicate what you're trying to say. There's reference where you relate, um, an observational or daily experience that most people can relate to, a, a reference to something in the world. Um, there's hyperbole where you exaggerate to an absurd degree, an illogical degree. There's shock where you swear or use sex or violence or some other sort of shocking element that kind of communicates to people that it's a joke, um, but you can't go too far with that because there's kind of diminishing returns. Ah, word play is where you play with words in a way different than their definitions. There is, ah, parody which is what *The Onion* is where you mock the

form of something else – *The Onion* mocks a news organization – but you can parody other things, you can parody movies, TV shows, anything that’s meant for entertainment or information you can parody. You can parody a, parody a, a restaurant menu if you want to. Um, there’s analogy where you compare two disparate things. That’s a kind of a complicated one but everyone has seen it, and everyone gets it. There’s an episode of *Seinfeld* where Jerry gets a new barber and they use analogy to make it seem like he’s having an affair on his old barber.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: And it’s a really great scene because the barber notices a hair on him, and did you get your hair cut by someone else? So, they use all the –

DR. HOFFMAN: I remember that.

SCOTT DIKKERS: – they use all the tropes of having an affair, but they map it onto, um, haircuts. And –

DR. HOFFMAN: That’s very Larry David [chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, Larry David does that a lot and *Seinfeld* does it. *The Onion* does it constantly in stories. It’s a great funny filter. And then there’s madcap where you’re just wacky and silly. It’s like physical humor, pratfall’s, ah, wacky stuff. Ah, misplaced focus is where you intentionally focus on the wrong thing. And then there’s, ah, meta humor which is, ah, making fun of humor itself which is really – that’s what people like Steve Martin used to do where he would make fun of his act while he was doing his act. Um, and I think that was 11 but I might have missed one.

DR. HOFFMAN: That was 11. I just counted.



SCOTT DIKKERS: Oh, it was? Okay great, great. So, um –

DR. HOFFMAN: [Indiscernible.] Well, so, what else; like, so those are the 11
[indiscernible.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: Funny filters is what I call them, yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: Funny filters. What is, like, the go-to win funny maker?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, so, that's where it gets interesting and people who create comedy are like kids with toys and you can mix and match the funny filters and you can, you can create a, a funny filter feedback loop where you have irony upon irony upon irony mixed with hyperbole mixed with character and you throw in a little shock and a little madcap – it's like a recipe. It's like you're cooking. And the right subject matter is going to suggest the right funny filters sometimes. And so, like, for example, if its shocking subject matter sometimes the shock funny filter works really well. Or if it's a really important subtext – like you have something that's really going to raise the ire of your audience, sometimes using misplaced focus is really effective because then you intentionally don't focus on the important thing, you focus on something small and minor and, and maybe made up that just enrages the audience to the point of laughter. It's just like maddening that they're, that you're not talking about the elephant in the room. So, great jokes use, and, and great humor, uses a lot of the funny filters. Like you can find, ah, we were talking about Dave Chapelle earlier and there's a, a sketch that we were talking about, the, the, the black white supremacist, and it uses almost all 11 of the funny filters in that like ten minute sketch.

DR. HOFFMAN: Who is blind and doesn't realize that he is –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Right.

DR. HOFFMAN: – actually black.



SCOTT DIKKERS: Right, so there's irony upon irony right there. There's a lot of shock humor in the sketch because they swear a lot. So, the reason that there are these 11 is because these are the only 11 ways of making something funny that will be perceived as like a professional caliber joke. We all know humor is subjective and people will laugh at anything but there's really no guarantee. If you're a professional humor writer you have to deliver, like, professional quality jokes, these are the tools that professionals use. And the more you get, the better you get as a chef [chuckle], you know, putting together the funny filters the funnier the jokes are going to be.

DR. HOFFMAN: That's a great analogy. So, well let's jump into kind of the, the heart of the conversation here. Fake news is a relatively recent phenomenon. It can be defined in a lot of ways. Ah, but most often its in use, most often it's used to denigrate the press particularly when the content falls on the other side of the ideological divide. It's almost really more an insult than an assessment of truth. So, how do you differentiate between fake news and the kind of satire that *The Onion* does?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, they're, they, they're all kind of, um, bunched together now but in the beginning news parody was a type of parody that you could do. You could parody a movie, or you could parody, um, a newspaper and *The Onion* chose to parody a newspaper. Then *The Daily Show* came about, and *The Daily Show* coined that term Fake News in an ad that they did that ran in *The Onion* [chuckle] that was like, ah, the leader in fake news was what it said. And it was just a funny, it was, looked very serious. You know, they played it straight and they showed Jon Stewart at his, like, anchor desk or whatever and it was just a funny cute way to communicate that this was a comedy news show.

Because of *The Onion* and because of *The Daily Show* and then *The Colbert Report* a whole generation of young people grew up seeing satire only in one format. They only saw it in news parody even though satire can be in any format you want. We know there are Greek plays that are satirical. There are satirical novels. You know, it's an, just an accident of history that during, in the past, you know, 20-25 years it's only come through [chuckle] news parody. So that term fake news started to be confused with the term satire. So, a whole generation of people think satire is jokes that use news headlines to make humor which it is not. Satire is, um, a way to point out human frailty or human foibles or problems in society, bringing down authority figures but doing it humorously in order to communicate that subtextual message about what's wrong with the world. That's what satire is. When those people started doing that fake news on Facebook that was basically propaganda that they were trying, trying to trick people into believing things, they labeled that stuff satire because they were victims of that mistake where they thought fake, fake news equaled satire. They didn't realize they were doing propaganda – maybe they did on some level – but they were kidding themselves, lying to themselves saying oh it's not propaganda, it's fake news. And so, in their mind fake news and satire were similar but they're not. Ah, however –

DR. HOFFMAN: So, [indiscernible] – if I can just jump ahead here. Is it, is it the intention behind the, the news or the information? Is that what makes them different the, sort of the intent –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Absolutely, yeah. So, yeah, I'm, I'm getting in the weeds here. But because that propaganda was, um, purposeful lies and propaganda and it was called fake news and the news parody was also called fake news

those two things got confused. But it's totally different. When you're doing comedy and you're doing a fake news bit, you're a comedian, you're a comedy writer, you're intending to actually educate people about the news especially on *The Daily Show* where they actually tell you what's going on in the news as the context for their jokes, and then the fake news propaganda people are doing the opposite thing where they are trying to give you misinformation and they're not even trying to make you laugh. Now, here's where it really gets confused. When people believe a story in *The Onion* and they think it's true then people are like, well you're just like the propaganda. No, no, no because that's not our fault; that's the reader's fault for being stupid and believing that it's real. We gave them every clue they needed that it was fake because it says there in the, ah, information on the, on the About page or in the Staff box it says this is, *The Onion* is a satirical publication. And also, you should know better not to believe everything you read, and the context of the humor should be such and it should be so crazy and silly that you know it's not real.

DR. HOFFMAN: So, we're in [indiscernible] –

SCOTT DIKKERS: And –

DR. HOFFMAN: – such a contentious time right now –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – and people are, are scared, they're worried, they're angry. You know, do you expect them to look at the About page for every news organization or information organization that they find interesting?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah. I want them all to be like that student of yours who fact checks everything she reads on the internet because that's what we should be doing.



DR. HOFFMAN: Right.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Like at least fact check before you rage respond to something, you know. Like, I, I, I totally understand somebody reads something and it seems real at first, like have that reaction, get punked, enjoy that experience but don't write about it. Don't post something until you've actually taken two seconds to, to see if it's real, you know. That's just –

DR. HOFFMAN: Yeah.

SCOTT DIKKERS: – a, a news or an internet user being a dummy.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, um, I want to transition here to, ah, you know, what if people don't understand the intention? They might see *The Onion*; they might even see that this is a satirical paper, but they don't understand what that means. Um, when I was talking to my cousin earlier this week who should be here – hi Mel – um, about tonight's talk, she said I love *The Onion* except when I think it's real and get mad. [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: [Chuckle.]

DR. HOFFMAN: And, I said I'm sure some of us have the same experience. We know from research that when people are angry or fearful they're critical thinking skills decline. So even if the intention is to be funny what are the consequences when the content is misinterpreted?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, I mean, I, I do think that it is the audience's responsibility to, um, deal with their feelings. Like, it's not my problem [chuckle] your cousin gets angry.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: Now, it is my problem if the humor that I've created is so subtle that it seems real or there's nothing fantastical about it, there's nothing

impossible about it. Like humor should be, should be obviously funny and silly and wacky so you immediately see it and know that it's funny. There should be a, a slight hesitation in *The Onion* because it's presented as real news where it's funny because it's played straight, but yeah, it's my fault if the humor is so subtle that it could be mistaken as real. Like that to me is a failure in the joke. The joke wasn't funny enough if she's getting angry. But if the joke is funny enough and most people are getting the joke pretty quickly then it's her fault for, um, not either knowing the context – like the real news behind the story if it's a play on a news story – or just having enough sense to know that oh well this couldn't possibly be true.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, that's, that's a, a good segue to another set of questions I have. It is, what news sources have been your favorite for adapting real news into satire? Like, who are your go-to sources where –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Where do I go to get real news?

DR. HOFFMAN: To get the real news that you turn into satire. The other question is where –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – do you go to get your real news but there's two, two sides. Where do you go to get –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – the news that's great material and where do you go to get the news that, as one of our, ah, ah, registrants asked when they registered for the event, um, as Steven (sp?) put it, what's your Walter Cronkite source of news? So, what's your, like, *Onion* source of news for good content and –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Right.



DR. HOFFMAN: – Walter Cronkite for good actual real news?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah. I would say if I had to pick one I would say it's the AP for *Opinion* news stories because they're the most conservative; they're not going to be publishing something that they haven't fact checked and they aren't necessarily competing for ratings. Like the last place I would go is TV cable news because they're just competing for ratings; they're just entertainment shows. That's why they show so many fires and riots. Even when there aren't fires and riots going on they'll play the footage because they know that people [chuckle] are going to get riled up from that and it's going to be good for their ratings. So, however, I might also look at Fox News, MSNBC, CNN to see what their, like, 24-hour news cycle story is because that's probably how most people get their news so at least you're speaking the same language and playing off of what people think is the news. But, for the 24-hour news cycle there's usually like one big story that everybody is talking about and it's usually, you know, pretty factual. It's somebody did something and they're, maybe they're on tape doing it or whatever. The real problem is in, sort of the, the broader news. Like, or the broader editorial decisions. What are they choosing to focus on? What topics are they not talking about? And, for those, like, you do need some alternative news sources to know what's happening in other countries, for example. You're never going to hear about that on cable news. Um, what's happening with climate change? Like, unless there's a big fire you're not going to hear about it because it's a boring, you know, not very visual story. Or, ah, erosion of rights, you know? Any sort of like long-term story, and, you know, a show like John Oliver's show, *Last Week Tonight*, they're going to drill in on some of those bigger stories – net neutrality, climate change, you know, Black Lives Matter –



they're, they're going to talk about those things and dissect those things and *The Onion* is going to do stories about those things. So, you just kind of have to do a little of both and have kind of a, ah, a broad, ah, wide palette, um, to get all your various news sources so you can talk about things people may not know about that you can sort of educate them about with subtext obviously. And we never, you know, in comedy you always just want to entertain, you don't want to educate. Um, and you also want those big new stories that everybody's heard about that you can make fun of or whatever. So, but for my own, for my own news, um, I don't watch cable news, I don't have cable. I, I, I don't even like when they come up on YouTube, like they're automatically fed to me because they're, YouTube is favoring the, the mainstream establishment news. It just makes me sick because in my mind it's just corporate propaganda is all that mainstream news is because they're all owned by big corporations and so they, all the news people are hired to perpetuate their corporate agenda and there's really no real news on there. So, for real news I like, um, ah, the *Intercept* I think is great. They do great journalism. Ken Klippenstein does great journalism. Ah, I like, ah, *Democracy Now*, I think that's a great show. And I watch *The Young Turks*. And I like those organizations because they aren't corporate owned. And also, they let, they let you know their bias. Like on *Fox News* they pretend that they are not conservative, and they don't reveal their bias. And that's absurd. Like we all know their bias. But *The Young Turks* are progressive, and they'll tell you that and I appreciate that. And they'll have conservative guests on, you know. So, like it's really important to know what people's agenda is, who's funding them, because that, that has everything to do with, like, what topics they're choosing to report on, you know?



DR. HOFFMAN: Right. That's exactly what I tell my students is I usually use the term diversify your news media portfolio –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Absolutely.

DR. HOFFMAN: – [indiscernible] you're looking at a lot of different sources. And, yeah, if a source is going to tell you if it's biased or not that's a, a bonus. I mean, people, a lot of people don't realize that the history of media in this country, news media in this country is a history of openly biased media, party-backed newspapers, and that the professionalization of news is a relatively recent phenomenon from the early 20th century. So, um –

SCOTT DIKKERS: It was the fairness doctrine that tried to do equal time –

DR. HOFFMAN: Um-hum.

SCOTT DIKKERS: -- and then Reagan got rid of that, so we saw the rise of things like *Fox News* and, um, that nobody had to worry about equal time anymore. But, I think journalism had it instilled in it that well, we should still, like, try to just be referees and not actually communicate what we think the truth is. We should just –

DR. HOFFMAN: Right.

SCOTT DIKKERS: – we should show this crazy person's opinion and we should show this crazy person's opinion and we're out of it. You know –

DR. HOFFMAN: Right.

SCOTT DIKKERS: – you decide like that what, how in, that's not informative at all.

DR. HOFFMAN: Right, no. I, I definitely understand what you're saying. Like, I teach about the objectivity norm in, um, in, in my media classes about how objectivity is really, it's not attainable. Like there's no way to ever be completely

objective. And so, I think –

SCOTT DIKKERS: No.

DR. HOFFMAN: – in some ways we have to acknowledge, like, okay, yeah, I have a subjective point of view but I'm going to talk to people with lots of different points of view. Um, so, let me move on a little bit here. Um, in my other role at outside of running the speaker series, um, as a scholar of political communication I've done some research that concludes that political satire does not necessarily depress the vote or turn citizens into cynics. We talked about this the other day. Um, in fact, such content [indiscernible] political satire can do the opposite. It can, can engage people even more in politics. So, I can explain this with my professorial hat, ah, but I'm wondering what you think of that. Like, why do you think we have found such effects.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, I mean, I was not privy to that. Like, my job has always been to just create that political satire and hope that on some level it was communicating. It; my first hope was it was entertaining people. My second hope was that it was turning them into more critical thinkers so they wouldn't just believe everything they saw or read. That's like my, my mission with *The Onion* if I had to state an actual mission. Funny first; make people critical thinkers second. And, so, I guess it makes me glad that maybe they did enough critical thinking to realize oh, I should, I should vote because maybe it matters.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well and it fits particularly among young people, um –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – around this phenomenon and I'll put my professorial hat on, um, where, where the effects happen is through something called political efficacy where, um, watching programs like that not only, not, doesn't decrease



peoples' feelings that they can have an impact, they can have, make a difference, but it actually makes them feel more so. And I think your example of John Oliver is a really good one because he engages in political satire but also has direct calls to action –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Right.

DR. HOFFMAN: – for people to engage.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, and that, um, I credit him greatly, ah, with that, um, that, um, the way he's advanced satire into activism I think that's amazing. Um, I would never have thought of that or done that because to me it's crossing a line. I always just want to entertain and leave it up to the audience to, like, decide what they do with that. Um, but I admire it. Like, I think it's a, I think it's a, a wonderful way to, ah, evolve what satire can be.

DR. HOFFMAN: It's –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Um –

DR. HOFFMAN: -- it is fascinating to see the kind of trajectory from, you know, *Mad Magazine* to *The Onion* to *The Daily Show* to *The Colbert Report* which is very much –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – about parody.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: Um, and to John Oliver. Um, well let's, let's switch gears a bit. So, um, we all know we're living in a somewhat unusual time. Ah, one of my students from National Agenda who you met earlier, Alvanie (sp?) wants to know what real news headlines have you seen lately that seem to be straight out of *The Onion* but aren't?



SCOTT DIKKERS: Oh, yeah, I saw one the other day, but I remember what [chuckle] it was. Like, I, I should have committed it to memory. Um, I –

DR. HOFFMAN: Or just an example.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, no, like any, any, anything that, um, um, some of the things that Trump does are pretty crazy that we've not seen in our lifetime and I wrote a book called *Trump's America – Buy this book and Mexico Will Pay for It*, where we had a lot of, it, it was a, it was written in 2015 and it was a citizens guide for how, how to be an American when Donald Trump is president. And there was a lot of stuff in there that we made up and we thought was really silly and crazy and stupid that has come to pass. And we even made fake newspaper clippings from the future showing him doing things. Like one of them was, um, it was a parody of *The New York Times* and the [indiscernible] was something like, um, "President Launches Anti-Presidential Discrimination, ah, League" or something like that. And he, he literally has talked about just presidential discrimination. Like who would have ever thought that the president could turn himself into a victim [chuckle] of discrimination. Um, because when we thought of it we thought it was just crazy and silly. Um, but that's an example of a, ah, a comedy article coming true. What I'm saying is when I see headlines about Trump sometimes, when they're just so out there, it does seem to me like something that *The Onion* could have written, like, often.

DR. HOFFMAN: Before the Trump presidency were there ever moments you had like that where you're like yeah, that looks like something we could have written?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Only on the fringe and, you know, Trump is kind of a fringe figure. He rose out of the Tea Party which was a fringe movement of the



Republican Party and yeah, so, people on the, on the fringes whether they were like the hippie dippy communist left or just the, the sort of radical moolah, um, you know, Ted Cruz-type people on the right. Like the extreme religious right. Um, that's where you'd get most of your humor. And it seems like at least as far as the right goes that stuff has, has now been mainstreamed.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, um, reflecting back on the theme of our program this year, which is *We Are the People*, ah, what role does satire play in the democracy with the First Amendment like ours. You talked to our class a little earlier about, um, what satire looks like in other countries. So, I just wanted to ask, how does satire look different in other countries compared to the United States?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, I mean, I don't know too much about it because I'm an American and I, I never leave my house –

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: – but, I know that in a lot of countries you can't make fun of the government and there are people who have tried to develop satirical websites and publications in China and Iran and they, and they get shutdown. So, it's different in that respect in that we have the right to make fun of political figures. And that was another thing about Trump that was new. Well, it was, it was partly new. Before Trump most presidents would, um, laugh politely when they were made fun of on *SNL* or in *The Onion* or whatever. But it didn't start with Trump. It started with George W. Bush. Remember how he stood or sat stone-faced when Stephen Colbert did his correspondence dinner speech making fun of him. That was the first time I'd ever seen that. And a lot of people may not know this but George W. Bush, his, his White House sent *The Onion* and cease and desist

order, ah, to make us stop doing this parody of his weekly radio address that we were doing, ah, in the mid-2000's. And that was also new. You know, every president before them would invite the person who did the impression of them on *SNL* to the White House and, and they, and you know, he, he does me better than me. You know, they'd do that same joke. But, with Bush it started to be a thing where he got mad. And then Trump took it to whole new level where he's so thin-skinned that he just doesn't want to be made fun of in any capacity and he'll find you. And then we did another story about Trump before he was president that Michael Cohen, his attorney, was on us constantly about retracting it or he would sue, and he called –

DR. HOFFMAN: The same Michael Cohen?

SCOTT DIKKERS: The same Michael Cohen. He sent a, a cease and desist letter and he called and followed up repeatedly. I will say, however, that some of those calls I don't think were Michael Cohen. And even the letter may not have been Michael Cohen. Like, I think Donald Trump wrote the letter and signed it Michael Cohen because it had a lot of Donald Trump-ish words in there. It was like this is a disgrace, ah, you know, this is disgraceful. Ah, [chuckle] you know, you just, you look back and you realize – because you remember that story about Trump calling *People Magazine* and pretending to be his publicist and saying that he had all these great, ah, loves, ah, and had sex with all of these women? Um, it occurred to me that why wouldn't he have done that at *the Onion*? Like why pay Michael Cohen when he could do it? Um, so, I think it's possible that Donald Trump himself was calling *The Onion* to get us to stop making fun of him before –

DR. HOFFMAN: [indiscernible.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: – he was president; before he was president. So, yeah,



that's all, that's all very, that's very new and it's very particular to America because of the situation that we're in right now. But then, so we're free to do that with that little exception. In other countries like I was talking about France and Charlie Hebdo where their satire goes so far beyond what you would consider tasteful where in America you, you wouldn't publish that at all because you'd be afraid of alienating your entire audience. But there they revel in like how offensive can we get, and it seems like that type of comedy is embraced, ah, at least in France. Um, and you know, the British have a, a storied history of satire and we got a lot of kudos from satirists in, um the UK when *The Onion* was becoming well known. They were like, oh, we didn't realize you Americans could do satire.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: That felt pretty good. But, um, yeah, I don't, I don't know too much about, ah, satire anywhere else.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, before I move on I will just recommend, um, if, if you haven't seen it or if our audience hasn't seen it, there's a great documentary from 2016 called *Tickling Giants*. Um, it's about, ah, Bassem Youssef who, ah, was a, basically became *The Daily Show* of Egypt. Um, it's an incredible story. It's really fascinating. So, let me move on a little bit. We're in the context of a national crisis, I would say, and I was thinking about 9/11 and I remember after 9/11 comedy was definitely not on people's minds. I remember thinking how are *SNL* and *The Onion* going to cover this. Um, and I know you weren't editor at that time, but I wanted to read a few of those headlines from that time. So, here's one: "Not Knowing What Else to Do Woman Backs American Flag Cake"; "Hijackers Surprised to Find Selves in Hell: "We expected eternal paradise for



this, say suicide bombers.” And then this one: “Hugging Up 76,000 Percent”. So, many Americans had never seen such a tragic event unfold before their eyes and a lot of the comedy that followed, like, in these headlines centered on American patriotism and resilience. I actually lived in Chicago at the time and remember seeing American flags everywhere, cars, buildings, construction sites. The response to COVID and the many other crises facing us today has, let’s just say, not been at all the same. A lot of the humor, and I’m thinking of Randy Rainbow’s videos and various political cartoons, are darker, sometimes insulting, sometimes crude. So, I’m curious, you’ve been through both of these events. What’s different from 9/11/2001 to 9/16/2020? Has comedy changed? Have Americans changed? Why don’t we see a similar pattern of comedians’ sort of rallying around the flag?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, it’s, it’s a really good question and I think I know the answer. I think what it is is that humans are really good at dealing with instant problems. We’re terrible at dealing with long-term problems. Our brains aren’t made for that. We evolved to run away from a, a saber-toothed tiger. We didn’t evolve to solve climate change or combat a virus. And you can see that happening in the culture. Like, the infectious disease experts knew what to do but a lot of the political leaders were like, well, we can’t do that because it wouldn’t look good or whatever. So, it was handled very poorly. Ah, Trump himself wouldn’t wear a mask. A lot of people think the virus is a hoax. And it’s because it’s a long-term problem. Humans are just not built for that. If some random country bombed us and killed 100,000 people you would see all the flags and everything else. I would even say this, if some random county, ah, was known to have sent an agent into New York City with a suitcase with a virus in it



that killed 100,000 people, same thing. You would see American flags, you'd see never forget, etcetera etcetera. It's because it was slow –

DR. HOFFMAN: Um-hum.

SCOTT DIKKERS: – and because we had to do preventative things to stop it that its simply not registering as the same type of event in our minds.

DR. HOFFMAN: So, how does that explain the difference between Americans and the responses of say the Chinese and the Italians?

SCOTT DIKKERS: It's a great question and I think I know the answer [chuckle] to that one too. Or like the South Koreans or like anybody who handled it really well, their governments are working. Our governments are not, our government is not working and the reason their governments are working is because they are science based. They actually listen to scientists and they do what they're supposed to do even though it doesn't seem like the most politically expedient thing to do. Our system here is built on incentivizing politicians to do the most politically expedient thing to get reelected or whatever. And, in some of those other countries they actually, ah – and I, I know I'm saying something very radical, I'm saying America is not number one; I'm saying we're, we're like number 40-something when it comes to [chuckle] dealing with COVID.

DR. HOFFMAN: But –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Maybe even worse than that. But they –

DR. HOFFMAN: If, if I can, if I can –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, go, go ahead.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Indiscernible.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: Go ahead.

DR. HOFFMAN: I teach a course on technology and politics and I taught it in



the spring. Some of my students in National Agenda were in that class. We started the semester by talking about oh my gosh, the Chinese government is requiring people to download this app on their phones that says whether or not they have the potential of being sick with the COVID virus. And I was like, oh my gosh, you guys, can you imagine this happening in the United States? All of a sudden today our university [chuckle] and our state released an app that does exactly that. So, and, and so it's like you, you struggle with this because but at the same time we have the First Amendment that protects freedom of speech, you know, China is not a government that protects freedom of speech at all, um –

SCOTT DIKKERS: No, but it's a totalitarian government.

DR. HOFFMAN: Right. So, it, I, it's kind of, I find myself in this weird situation where I'm like, wait is, was that a good idea or is that a [chuckle] bad idea. Like what do we lose when we, you know, adopt these more authoritarian or totalitarian methods of government? Like –

SCOTT DIKKERS: You, well, that's an argument –

DR. HOFFMAN: -- is that –

SCOTT DIKKERS: – about COVID that I don't understand. Like, during World War II which, ah, I believe killed fewer Americans than COVID has killed if I'm not mistaken, um, Americans were asked to make all kind of sacrifices and they were happy to make them. They, you know, they did, ah, rubber drives and they, you didn't eat meat on, you know, on Wednesdays so there was more meat for the troops and all of this stuff. And now the sacrifices we're being asked to make are so small, like, where a mask [chuckle] you know, don't go, don't go to a bar. It's like I, I don't know, ah, maybe its just that we're a spoiled series of generations now or what it is. But –



DR. HOFFMAN: I think, I think you hit on something in, in what you said earlier is that there's just, if there's an easy them to blame, um, it, it helps us rally around the flag better. And I think, you know –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Absolutely.

DR. HOFFMAN: – it would be more complicated issues like a virus, um, it's just not easy to –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – [indiscernible] –

SCOTT DIKKERS: And I think that's, that's why –

DR. HOFFMAN: – [indiscernible.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: – Trump, that's why Trump tried to blame the Chinese and still tries to do that because he knows that that's, that's the mainline to the, the, ah, brainstems of most voters. It's like, oh, if I can just find a them to pin it on, um, that'll make sense to them because that's what works in our brains.

DR. HOFFMAN: Yeah, absolutely. All right, well I'm going to ask my, ah, my folks on the, the, ah, backstage here to start, ah, identifying some questions from our audience. Um, I've been seeing the chat questions coming in. If still have a question you'd like to submit please submit that to the chat, ah, and we'll be, hopefully we'll be able to ask your question for you. One of my students, ah, will be asking questions for the audience members. So, um, I'm going to, ah, jump on this Trump message for a second here and one of my students, Lauren (sp.), ah, she wanted to know – I'm sorry, one of our audience members, Lauren, not my student – she, ah, submitted this question via the registration, she wanted to know if the Trump administration has been bad or maybe good for comedy?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Well, it was good for me. I mean, I, I sold my book about

Trump. I self-published it before he got elected and then when he got elected a publisher sought me out to, um, to publish it. And so that's been good [chuckle.] Um, and I think a lot of comedians would say he's been good. You know, obviously a lot of those late-night guys like Seth Meyers and Stephen Colbert, all they talk about is Trump. So, like I remember way back in the 90's when I first was becoming aware of, ah, like, the, the fact that *The Onion* might have an impact on people's thinking, I started thinking, like, it was the Dole-Clinton election of 96, and I was like well Dole is funnier, should I vote for Dole because he's funnier or should –

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: – I vote for, ah, Clinton who even though, you know, he's kind of a, a corporate establishment Democrat I agreed with more of his policies. Um, so, comedians talk about that. Like, voting for the funnier [chuckle] politician or whatever. But, the thing is, like, Clinton was hilarious. Like, he was a great foil for comedy, so nobody lost anything from that. Like, whoever is in charge, an authority figure is just a natural no matter who they are, they're always a, a great target for satire. So, yeah, it, it doesn't really matter and, and, um, Trump obviously a mixed bag like any of them.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, that reminds me of something you said earlier today which, um, maybe you can explain in a little bit more detail is you kind of discovered over the course of doing satire that you wanted to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. So, sort of target the people who were in power and protect the people who are not in power. Could you elaborate on that a little bit?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, I learned that that's what works with audiences. If



you're picking on the down, downtrodden audiences don't like that. They get really uncomfortable and it, that's the kind of humor that gets groans or it feels very political and it feels malicious. But if you're picking on the establishment or authority figures of any kind, even minor authority figures, like, audiences love that. You can do that all day long. Its very cathartic for them. Even in a free society like America where we can criticize our leaders, they're still our leaders and they're still in charge and we still pay taxes to them, so it feels really good to make fun of them. And, not just leaders and, you know, the establishment, but any sort of tradition or anything that's like an established control over us.

Like, *The Onion* has always enjoyed making fun of, like, religions and societal conventions, you know, traditions, holidays. Just like you name it, any of that stuff. Um, and for, you know, most comedy writers are kind of like misanthropes to a certain degree so there's, there's plenty of things to find in society that we feel like are trying to control us and so we want to lash out at them. And that's where that comes from. That phrase comes from journalism actually. Um, from like the, the activist journalism of 1930's –

DR. HOFFMAN: Hum.

SCOTT DIKKERS: – that journalism should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

DR. HOFFMAN: Interesting. Well, as, as for, I've seen, reading a lot more questions coming in, um, but I have one final question for you before we switch over to the Q and A. And, because I think about, um, the, you know, the early beginnings of *The Onion* when, was when I was in college and I remember, um, what the internet looked like in the mid to late 1990's. And so, *The Onion* was a presence in the early halcyon days of the internet. No one imagined what it



would be today or that we'd be doing virtual speaker series or virtual classrooms, um, couldn't have imagined that. So, what do you see as the biggest differences in publishing satire on the internet in the 1990's compared with now or just differences in online content in general because it was a much more open space in the 90's? People were able to publish in a way that they aren't necessarily able to today because of the corporatization of many of the online platforms. So, I'm just curious if you could reflect on that difference a little bit?

SCOTT DIKKERS: There's many differences. Most people get their information on the internet through Facebook. And so, having a website is not really that important [chuckle.] Whereas when *The Onion* started it was the first and only humor website and so there weren't a lot of websites to go to and it was a really fortuitous time for us to be in that place. Having been a print publication for a few years we were ready to go online. And people came to our website and you would sell advertising based on how many people viewed your website. That's not really how it works anymore because people are looking at your stories on Facebook or whatever. That's definitely different in terms of like the corporatization. Like, Facebook is kind of the corporation or Google and then all of the other corporate like the bigwigs on, on the internet are technically on a level playing field with everybody else. So, you could go to, you know, a small humor website that nobody's ever heard of just as easily as you could go to, you know, the, um, NBC, ah, website or whatever. So, that hasn't really changed but it's a much crowded, much more crowded space. You know, it's like there's a billion websites that you could go to. Ah, the other thing is like in the beginning of the internet we weren't interactive. We just took what we did in print and we just put it online. And we did that for years. We actually didn't change that until



about 2012 [chuckle.] We'd –

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: – finally decided alright, we should maybe release one story a day instead of just dumping everything on, on a Wednesday which is kind of how we did it. We didn't care. And, you know, what's this Twitter everybody's talking about? We should get on Twitter and tweet out our stories. And so, it's, it's become more of like a multiplatform thing where you, you have to kind of deluge the space to get your word out. Um, and obviously the bandwidth is another thing. Like, we couldn't do video, we couldn't do audio in those days. Um, that's –

DR. HOFFMAN: Sure.

SCOTT DIKKERS: – that's different. Yeah, a lot of things. It was just an experimental new way to distribute *The Onion* in 90's is all it was, and I never imagined that it would be like the only thing eventually and the biggest thing.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, I still remember I worked at my college radio station and I remember, like you know, one computer [chuckle] in our office and we would all crowd around it [chuckle] and look at what the most recent Onion headlines.

SCOTT DIKKERS: [Indiscernible.]

DR. HOFFMAN: Um, because, you know –

SCOTT DIKKERS: That is funny.

DR. HOFFMAN: – nobody had their own personal computers. You –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Oh, right, right, right.

DR. HOFFMAN: – um. So, all right –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Our computer had 16, um, megabytes of RAM, our first



Onion computer.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle] –

SCOTT DIKKERS: I remember that. And Photoshop –

DR. HOFFMAN: [Indiscernible]

SCOTT DIKKERS: – didn't have layers so if you wanted to do a, a, one of those altered photos you'd have to do this option erase tool. It was like the [chuckle], the only way you, you could do it. Crazy.

DR. HOFFMAN: Yeah. We, we, we went, walked to school uphill and in snow both ways.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Oooh. Stop.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle]. All right, so, we're doing the Q and A as I mentioned a little differently this year. Some folks on our end have been reading through all of your great questions that they've been submitting the chat, and ah, for each question, question chosen one of my students in the National Agenda class will read that question. So, if we are ready to go I'm going to ask my folks if we are ready to go. Send me something in the chat. It's just about 8:30 which is our time for our Q and A. All right. We are ready. So, I'm going to toss our first audience question to our student Jillian. Jillian, it's you're, you're up.

JILLIAN: So, Debbie Gontz (sp?) from Oxford, Pennsylvania has a question regarding your background. She wants to know why you have a picture of Trump hanging behind you. For inspiration?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Oh. That, um, was a gift to me from the writers of, ah, the other writers who I worked with on that, that book "Trump's America: Buy This Book and Mexico Will Pay for It". It's a photoshop, um, job that they made where it shows Trump holding a copy of the book and it's signed by him and they



scanned his handwriting, so it looks like his actual handwriting. And it says, Scott, this book is a disaster. Donald Trump.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle]

SCOTT DIKKERS: And they presented that to me as a gift at the book release party and it was, um, so touching that I hung it up [chuckle.]

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.] I bet his signature is not very hard to replicate.

SCOTT DIKKERS: No, they, they scanned it –

DR. HOFFMAN: Oh.

SCOTT DIKKERS: – so, ah, but it, it; look, they did a great job. It looks just like his handwriting. I'm going to – you can see that there.

DR. HOFFMAN: I see. It's inspiring.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah. And now it's gone. I'm not going to hang it back up.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.] All right well let's jump to our next question. This is from one of my students. His name is John.

JOHN: Ah, Shannon Paulson (sp?) from Columbus, Ohio asked what do you think about categorizing satire by its features? Like, if the, if the [indiscernible] linguistic components of a joke instead of intention. Do you get it?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Instead of a what?

JOHN: Ah, she said, what do you think about categorizing satire by its features. Like if it has all the linguistic components of a joke instead of intention?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Oh, instead of intention. I see.

DR. HOFFMAN: I should mention –

SCOTT DIKKERS: What, what –

DR. HOFFMAN: – that this –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Go ahead.

DR. HOFFMAN: – particular student is one of our alumni and a graduate student who is studying satire, fake news and misinformation. So –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah. It's a, it's a really interesting question and I, I think I'm coming down really hard on one side of it and that is that I think intention is everything. I think, because there's, um, a phenomenon in comedy that doesn't have a name – I should name it – where you know that real life is always going to be funnier than anything you could create. Like, "Aunt Myrtle Slips and Falls into The Baby Pool", um is always going to get a laugh and it's always going to be funnier than the funniest joke that the funniest writers' room of funny writers could come up with working all day. That's just the nature of the beast. And, so, the audience always needs to know what's real and what's made up. So, like on a reality TV show they, they need to know that those are real people captured on the street saying real people things. And that's what makes them funny. If they knew that, like, for one of those segments let's say on the *Tonight Show* where they'll interview somebody on the street. Those are funny because people know those are real people. If it was performed it wouldn't be as funny and the jokes would have to be different because people have a different expectation when it's crafted comedy. So, I don't count something that has all the features of satire as satire. I categorize it as an accident and something in real life that just happens to be funny.

DR. HOFFMAN: Hum. That's interesting.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Satire has to be crafted.

DR. HOFFMAN: Great. Well thank you for that question. Ah, our next question comes from our, what I'm calling them, my audience surrogates.



They're sort of representing our audience. Ah, Chloe (sp?) has a question about Joe Biden.

CHLOE: Hi.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Hello.

CHLOE: Um, so Ken Grant (sp?) from Delaware has a question. Um, he wants to know what inspired *The Onion's* portrayal of Vice President Biden with a Trans-am and T-shirt guy? Are there any plans to run that same theme again?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Well, I'm no longer with *The Onion* but I was there when we were doing that and I was there and oversaw the project that we did that was, um, a book written by Joe Biden called *The President of Vice* when he was vice president and it sort of took that whole persona of him being sort of like a rustbelt dirtbag and drilled into it, told his whole life story and everything. *The Onion* has always had a history of, of kind of characterizing, a, a political figure in a certain way. Always trying to pick a character trait that's different than what everyone is doing. Vice Presidents especially typically in comedy they always get the same character traits applied to them and those character traits are, they are boring and, ah, invisible. That's how people have always made fun of vice presidents. So, with Biden it stems from who he is and where he's from and how he talks. *The Onion* often does this type of character humor where we hyperbolize someone's actual character traits to invent a new character so that those traits kind of ring true. So, he is from the rustbelt. You know, you can believe that he would be that type of character, um, because he has this kind of mischievous smile, um, why wouldn't he be like this creepy uncle, ah, sort of character. Um, and I, I love that character. And Chad Nackers who is now the editor-in-chief of

The Onion, that character was his creation back during Obama years.

DR. HOFFMAN: Do you think he, that Biden wears the aviators like because of that *Onion* piece [chuckle] or that [indiscernible] –

SCOTT DIKKERS: No, he love, he loves the, those parodies and he tweeted out the book when we wrote about it and then Obama retweeted that tweet. That felt pretty good. Um, but yeah, he loves it. He's the old-fashioned type of president that enjoys when he's made fun of. Um, he doesn't get insulted.

DR. HOFFMAN: Wow. I don't know if that was a Freudian slip there, but you just called him the old-fashioned type of president [chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: Oh, yeah, I meant political figure.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: I actually think Trump is going to win.

DR. HOFFMAN: Do you really?

SCOTT DIKKERS: I do, yeah. And I thought he would win in 2016 as well. Um, I, when I was promoting my book throughout the summer of 2016 everybody asked me and I was like oh, he's going to win, he's going to win.

DR. HOFFMAN: Oh no.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Um, and because he'll like, he'll come out with a, of a, a vaccine, ah, on November 2nd [chuckle.] He'll figure out something. Like he's, he's a winner.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Indiscernible.] I can't feign pretend that I can predict anything anymore [chuckle.] All right, our next –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Well, no, it's not a, it's not a good business to get into because like –

DR. HOFFMAN: No.



SCOTT DIKKERS: – I’ve, I’ve predicted a lot of things and I’m wrong a lot more than I’m right. But when you’re right a few times people start thinking you’re a prognosticator. So, I’ll go with that.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.] All right. Well, we have another question, ah, from our audience surrogate Autumn (sp?) who has a question relating to political divides.

AUTUMN: Hello.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Hello.

AUTUMN: [Indiscernible] Hill (sp?) asks, many observers believe that humorists tend to be center left. Why can’t conservative Republicans mock progressives in a funny way?

DR. HOFFMAN: This is a great question, Scott, and it was one that I had for you that I didn’t get to ask. So, yeah, talk a little bit about this kind of divide between, ah, liberals and conservatives in terms of being funny and what works and what doesn’t.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, it’s definitely a phenomenon where almost all the satirists I know are about as far left as you can get, um, and still, you know, be a functioning member of, ah, a capitalist society. None of them are communists [chuckle] but they’re very progressive. And there’s a reason for that.

Progressives want to make the world a better place; they, they want to progress; they want human beings to take care of each other and that’s what satirists want. And the reason those people work as satirists and Republicans don’t is because audiences want that as well. Audiences want people to be uplifted. They want people who are downtrodden to be taken care of. It’s that whole comfort v. afflicted thing that I was talking about. That’s just a law of nature when it comes

to audiences. We were talking about that *Fox News* comedy show that they tried to do where they just made fun of immigrants and welfare mothers and it just turned audiences' stomachs. Even rightwing audiences don't want to hear that. It feels wrong to make fun of the downtrodden or to blame them for problems. It feels so much better to aspire to do better and to bring down our political leaders. Like, whatever party they may be in, you know, because there's no progressive party. Like the Democrats and Republicans are, um, the Democrats are kind of center, center right and the Republicans are far right. That's where the country is right now. And they don't allow progressives on TV because they're anti-corporate and TV is owned by corporations. So, humorists' kind of fill that gap and they are that voice of the far left, um, which is fine. Like, where else is that voice going to get through? It's not going to get through in, ah, traditional media. But, yeah, that's just the reality of it. It's very strange. Conservative comedians typically do not do political humor. They'll do relationship humor or family humor. I'm thinking of like Jeff Foxworthy or Larry the Cable Guy or stuff like that. Dennis Miller did that too. He just did like, um, funny intellectual comedy. When he came out as a progressive suddenly he lost his HBO show and he became a rightwing radio host. His career just plummeted. Um, audiences don't want to get comedy from conservatives, and I think it has, you know, they've done those tests you were talking about, Lindsay, about, ah, how fear makes you less of a critical thinker. They've done tests where people on the right have, um, a much more active, is it the amygdala where, where the fear is. They're, they're afraid of immigrants, they're afraid of, ah, enemies, um, because their tribe, their circle is the nation. They are nationalist thinkers. Whereas progressives think of their tribe as humans, you know, the entire earth. So, we don't have the same



fear of the other that Republicans have. So, um, yeah, we can, we can get into all this stuff. These are obviously just my theories, but I've been in the business for a long time and I've seen them, ah, acted out in practice and that's literally just the way it is.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, and, ah, yeah, I'd like to mention this point too, that, you know, we do feature opinions, ah, and speaker's who have opinions on this, on this program. Um, we are a nonpartisan center. We offer, ah, opinions from all sides. But I might take this moment just to shout out, um, my friend, good friend and colleague, ah, Dannagal Young, just published a book this year, that Scott, I think you might be really interested in; its called *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear and Laughter in the United States*. And, she points out that, ah, that the type of entertainment that people consume on the left and the right differs; that one genre on the left is guided by ambiguity, play, deliberation, openness; while the other is guided by certainty, vigilance, [cough] – excuse me – instinct and boundaries. So, it's a great read. I highly encourage –

SCOTT DIKKERS: That sounds like my kind of thing.

DR. HOFFMAN: It [indiscernible] –

SCOTT DIKKERS: I just want to say one more thing about that, that to me this right left dichotomy is, um, is a false dichotomy because, like I said, Democrats, what, what Republicans call the left in this country is center, center right. That's what most Democrats are. And, um, there's, there's no left right battle. The, the battle that satirists are interested in is the haves and have nots battle because that's a real, that's a, that's a real struggle in society. That's, you know, a historical struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie. So, in this country it's the 99 percent against the one percent. So, somebody like Bernie Sanders is going



to be maligned as, you know, the radical left by all of these mainstream Democrats and Republicans because they are center, center right and far right. But, when you poll people most people, like, have a very high opinion Bernie Sanders' actual policy ideas. They want Medicare for all, they want a living wage, they don't want, um, needless wars. You know, so, and they, they, um, by thinking of the political balance in this country as between the 99 percent and the one percent is how satirists think of it. And, that's how you can find stupidity anywhere on the political spectrum, left and right, and come off as an equal opportunity offender which is what I always tried to do at *The Onion* when you know that your playing the smarter game, that you're appealing to the 99 percent, um, and you're making fun of the one percent. Like that's a winning formula for somebody who's trying to build an audience, you know. If you're trying to build audience by appealing only to the left or only to the right you're just chopping yourself in half and there's no point in that.

DR. HOFFMAN: Hum. Interesting. All right, well, we have another question, ah, from our audience surrogate Camilla (sp?). She has a question about possible post-Trump humor.

CAMILLA: Hi, Scott. So, I –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Hi.

CAMILLA: – have a question from Mary Miller (sp?) and her question is, if there's a change of administration in November how do you imagine comedy will pivot to new topics?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Based on how I've seen it happen before, you know, satirists, because they are left leaning tend to go after Republicans a lot harder and when there's a boring Democratic president in office they'll make fun of that

president's personality much more than they'll make fun of their policies, even when their policies, like, deserve just as much ridicule as a Republican president's policies. That's how it was with Clinton. That's how it was with Obama. You'd make fun of Clinton for having the affair; you wouldn't make fun of Clinton for NAFTA. That's just kind of how it worked. And you'll probably see comedy move away from political comedy because the mainstream media is also very biased toward the establishment Democrats. So, they aren't pointing out a lot of the outrages. Like, when you think about all of the outrages that the media is going after Trump for, ah, Obama had just as many outrages, but they didn't go after them because he's like on their team. So, therefore, the audience for late night comedy shows, for example, didn't hear those stories so somebody like Seth Meyers or Jimmy Kimmel isn't going to find much hay making fun of stories that the media isn't talking about. So, it's kind of this, this pile on affect. If the media is talking about a big story the comedy people are going to talk about it because they know everybody knows about it. But if nobody is talking about the story – let's, let's take drone strikes, for example. Like, Obama started doing the thing where we would just send out these drones to kill random people. New thing. Had never been done before. It's extra judicial. It's, it violates the Geneva Convention. But he was Obama, so the media never said anything about it. They were like let him pass, you know, he's cool [chuckle] or whatever. Um, if they had talked about it; if it had been a story then the comedians would have talked about it because they would have known oh my audience knows about that, it's something I should talk about.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, this is something interesting too. You recently in, um, May of last year you wrote an article for *Medium* that just said "Eight Ways to

Keep Your Satire Writing Fresh in a Comedy Saturated World”. I thought –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – this is really interesting because you’re basically saying like don’t pay attention to the big stories; um, look at something totally different and it doesn’t even have to be about current events. So, what’s some advice for people who want to be like the next funny person on Twitter?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, well, my main advice would be to do something totally original that you don’t see anyone else doing because that’s the type of comedy that always breaks through. So, when *The Onion* started nobody else was doing fake news. That’s why we broke through. Now, so many people start a humor publication, they do fake news and that’s the first thing I tell them is don’t do that [chuckle]. So, you know, there are so many unique and crazy Twitter identities and Twitter feeds that people have tried and some of the really unique ones have blown up and those people have gotten plucked out and hired for comedy jobs. Um, it’s, it’s pretty amazing. But yeah, the, the advice I have in that article is like what *The Onion* used to do where we’d go after evergreen topics. Ah, if you do do current events humor I certainly would recommend doing it in a different format than news parody but, going after topics that not everybody is talking about. Like avoiding the, the big joke because then; like, I always want to compete in, ah, the blue ocean and not the red ocean if you know that phrase. The red ocean is where all the sharks are and its crowded and you’re going to get eaten. There’s too much competition. Go to the blue ocean where there’s nobody and, ah, you’re going to do a lot better and it’s going to be a lot easier ride.

DR. HOFFMAN: So, blue as in not democrat and republican but as in –



SCOTT DIKKERS: No, no, it's blood versus –

DR. HOFFMAN: Blood versus –

SCOTT DIKKERS: – just water.

DR. HOFFMAN: – [chuckle.]

SCOTT DIKKERS: [Chuckle] yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: Bloody waters versus not bloody waters.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Right, right.

DR. HOFFMAN: Okay. Um, all right, we have time for I think a couple more questions so let's go to Jillian, she has a question for you.

JILLIAN: Tracy Holden (sp?) asks, in all seriousness do you think mockery of news by *The Onion*, *Weekend Update*, *The Daily Show* and others contributed to the devaluing of news and the claims of fake news by public figures?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Well, I kind of went into that with my diatribe about, um, how fake news, the term fake news was stolen by propogandists during the 2016 election. But no, I think it's the responsibility of journalists to do actual journalism and you don't see that on mainstream TV news anymore. Those people aren't journalists, they're news actors and their shows are entertainment. The only purpose of TV is to get you to keep watching so you can see the ads. That's the only reason TV exists. And like I said, news used to be a public service. A network like NBC used to have a news division which they would support regardless of advertising dollars with a certain budget because they knew it was a public good that they were providing news and information to, to educate and have, you know, have an informed electorate. We don't have that anymore. *CNN*, *MSNBC*, *Fox News*, all of them, they're out there competing for ad dollars.



So, they have to sensationalize the news. They have to make it entertaining. And because they're owned by corporations that have an agenda they have to talk about only the things that the corporation is comfortable with them talking about. So, that, none of that had anything to do with the comedy that preceded it. The comedy was just given a gift when TV journalism started tanking in the last 20-30 years and turning into, you know, this ridiculous clown show that it is now so we've got a lot of material to make fun of. But I, no, I would not say that news parody is in anyway responsible for that.

DR. HOFFMAN: All right. Um, let's see, we've got another question, ah, that John is going to ask about the limits of humor.

JOHN: Ah, hello again, Scott.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Hi.

JOHN: Ah, I have a question from Paige Lipman (sp?) and she asks are there any topics you refuse to cover? Have you ever questioned something you published and wondered if you went too far?

SCOTT DIKKERS: The question, the answer to the latter part of that question is yes, happens all the time especially in the beginning at *The Onion* when we didn't know what we were doing, made a lot of mistakes, went too far. And by going too far I mean we went too far in afflicting the afflicted. Like, picking on the wrong target, an undeserving target. And what was the first part of that question again, John?

DR. HOFFMAN: John, can you go back –

JOHN: The first part, the first part was are there any topics you refuse to cover?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Oh, right, right, any topics that I refuse to cover. No, there's

no, there's no topic that you can't make jokes about. Humor is a universal language. Even if it's something really horrible there's, there's a way to talk about it humorously. And there has to be because humor is the ultimate coping mechanism and for a comedy writer or a comedian that's how they see the world, that's how they process life. So, they're going to see everything through that lens, and you can't, you can't limit yourself. Um, it just, it wouldn't be possible.

DR. HOFFMAN: That was a question that a lot of my students had is, like, what's the limit but you're kind of saying –

SCOTT DIKKERS: If you're afflicting the afflicted you've crossed a line.

DR. HOFFMAN: Um-hum.

SCOTT DIKKERS: That's it.

DR. HOFFMAN: All right. Well I think we have time for one more question and my student Chloe is going to ask this one.

CHLOE: Okay, so, Amani Thurman (sp?) has a question. Um, she wants to know how can contemporary journalism better its integrity making better distinctions between fake news?

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah, that's a real problem because there's no incentive. Like, its kind of like schoolteachers. Like, we pay them as little as we can possibly get away with so how do we expect to get great people to go into that profession? All you're going to get is, you know, occasionally you're going to get somebody who loves it so much they don't care that it's poverty wages. And that's kind of how journalism is. It's really easy to sellout in journalism and get a job working for a think tank or a big network and make a ton of money but then they're going to constrain you and they're not interested in you communicating the truth to your audience. They're interested in you communicating their



propaganda. That's, that's what its all about. It's that whole one percent versus 99 percent thing. We think it's 50-50 but its really one against 99 because the one percent control so much of the information that, that we consider to be official information. So, the only way for journalists to have integrity is to remove the money from the situation. It's like if only we could remove money from politics you'd have more honest politicians. But now because politicians can take so much money in bribes which they call contributions, campaign contributions, they're just the footservants of the donors and they're going to do what the donors want. They're not going to do what the 99 percent want. There was a great study that Princeton University did that showed, ah, how, how Congress votes bases on what corporations want, like the top one percent want, corporate owners, versus what the rest of the populous, the 99 percent want. And, the chart is – you've got to look this up, its just such a frightening chart because if you're in the top one percent there's like a 100 percent likelihood that Congress will take up your bills and fight for you and pass laws that will help you. But if you're part of the 99 percent there's a less than 50 percent chance that they'll even introduce legislation that will help you in, on the floor of Congress. So, that's just the world we live in. If we could make journalism somehow not tied to money, if we could just support it as a public good, um, and that's what a lot of these independent journalists are doing. They're, they have their [indiscernible] on or their YouTube channel or whatever and those people are searching for truth and they're beholding to the people who fund them who are their viewers. And that's the most honest kind of journalism. I would never trust journalism that came from one of these big companies. There's like seven media companies that own everything. And, ah, it's just not reliable [indiscernible].



DR. HOFFMAN: Right [indiscernible]. [Chuckle.] More like six. Um, but let's don't forget –

SCOTT DIKKERS: That's [indiscernible.]

DR. HOFFMAN: – [indiscernible] public media as well here. I think *National Public Radio* and, um, *PBS News* are also great resources to go to. You mentioned the *BBC*. Um, other countries have different models for funding, ah, media. So, I think you're absolutely right in pointing out the corporatization of most of the media in this country but –

SCOTT DIKKERS: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – these [indiscernible] –

SCOTT DIKKERS: I; but technically they're independent because they're supported by the government but they're, they have a such a clear establishment bias. They're in the bubble of Washington and they're kind of like trying to, to; they're like the geeks in the high school analogy and the mainstream media is like the cool kids and they're just trying to be like the cool kids and cover the same stuff. Um, by and large, I, I, I find, um, the public media in this country to be incredibly feckless and bland personally. [Chuckle.]

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, on that note, ah, before we wrap up I wanted to bring attention again to the theme this year which you can see, ah, virtually behind me – We Are the People. Um, it's fitting because tomorrow is actually Constitution Day. It commemorates the September 17th, 1787 signing of the United States Constitution. Here we are 233 years later in a country that would likely look foreign to many of those who signed this document: foreign interference in our elections, a prolific pandemic, record breaking wildfires on the west coast, a citizenry so divided that many people don't listen or even trust, listen to or even



trust the other side, and protests amid racial tensions rising. Oh, and then there's the presidential election. So, there's lots to discuss this fall and I hope you'll join me at our next event which will be a panel looking at how Hollywood portrays Washington. Is it anything remotely like reality? How have portrayals of the president changed? And what impact do shows about Washington have on Americans' perceptions of our federal government. So, please join me in giving a great big thank you to our speaker tonight, Scott Dikkers. Thank you so much for being here.

SCOTT DIKKERS: It was my pleasure. Thanks so much Lindsay for having me, thanks to everybody who joined tonight for those excellent questions, they were very thought provoking and fun to talk about this stuff. And, you know, because I'm, ah, quarantined and I never leave my house, like, what, where else do I get an opportunity to just, ah, talk about comedy and politics [chuckle]. It was a lot of fun.

DR. HOFFMAN: It was a great conversation. I really appreciate you being here. So, thanks to everyone for joining us and good night.

SCOTT DIKKERS: Good night.

#