Remarks on Fake News

Paul Dillon

“Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”
—E.B. White, Remarks on Humor

In his book Jokes, the late University of Chicago professor Ted Cohen observed that one can be good at making jokes, telling jokes, and appreciating jokes, but it is common to be only one or two out of the three. It’s also pretty clear that some find enjoyment through generalization and analysis while others can enjoy things “without meddlesome reaching after fact and reason,” in the words of Keats, or without being “a fool, or one of those who believe in ‘theories,’” in the words of Cohen. One could also wish to have it both ways: in Jokes, Cohen just wants to “make a few conceptual claims, trying to understand something [with] no comprehensive theory.” Now, I love jokes, and in particular I love a certain kind—fake news. I grew up sneaking copies of The Onion from my brother’s room, and I would spend hours laughing like a hyena on his shag carpet. I also love to theorize about things that I like. The impulse to dissect White’s metaphorical frog is there, but I hate the thought of killing it.

There are two ways around this problem. First, there’s the possibility of satisfying our curiosity: to capture and dissect a very bad frog that no one would ever miss. Second, there’s the possibility that the best frogs stand up well to dissection, and can even live beyond it. Recall that these frogs are Humor—in this case fake news. I wish to

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analyze this genre at incorrigible length. And by following these two paths—that is, by generally sticking to an analysis of either very good or very bad fake news—I hope to avoid committing the sin White and many other writers and comedians describe. I will be making heavy use of The Borowitz Report (a terrible frog that I will do my best to shove a scalpel in), The Onion, (the kind of frog, I will argue, that does not die when dissected), and several concepts from Ted Cohen’s Jokes.

By “jokes,” Cohen means your grandpa’s jokes, that is, short stories with a punchline. There are common craft elements of jokes—accents, the rule of three, logic gone haywire—and then there are “essential features.” One is that jokes are “conditional,” an argument bearing most of the weight of the book:

A conditional joke is one that can work only with certain audiences, and typically is meant only for those audiences. The audience must supply something in order either to get the joke or to be amused by it. That something is the condition on which the success of the joke depends. It is a vital feature of much joking that only a suitably qualified audience—one that can meet the condition—can receive the joke, and the audience often derives an additional satisfaction from knowing this about itself.

Cohen uses this concept to explain the insinuating rib-elbowing, know-what-I-mean, wink-wink, community-building quality of jokes. Audience, maker, and teller are joined in creating laughter through mutual recognition of the unspoken premise. It’s this communal quality that makes jokes addictive, joyous, and indeed funny. And it sure seems like these conditions are what makes most forms of verbal humor work. There is much more to Jokes, but I’m most grateful for the insight above. It provides a clear way to delve into how humor works: conditional analysis. Conditional analysis may in fact be just as unfunny as it sounds, since by explaining the conditions of humor you strip away humor’s essence—its unspoken conditions. Humor tends to die when dissected because what makes it function as humor is what goes unsaid.

But perhaps good jokes don’t die when explained. A friend recently suggested this to me, and it’s something I enjoy believing.
In *Jokes*, Cohen often compares jokes to art—in how each are made, received, and appreciated. The analogy is not perfect, but it is suggestive. Imagine you see a Jackson Pollock painting for the first time, and you authentically enjoy it. The lines just really get you, or something. Then you go and do some reading. You take a class on abstract expressionism. Would we say this ruins the painting in a way that explaining a joke is sometimes taken to be akin to ruining it? Yes and no, I think. It would be disingenuous to say that there isn’t a difference in the immediacy of enjoyment and the pleasure of analysis—but it seems similarly disingenuous to say that analysis of a work of art or a joke can’t coexist with enjoyment. We can do both, and I think that the best jokes can stand up to both.

With all that said, what does a conditional analysis of fake news in the mode of *The Onion* and its ilk reveal? First and foremost, the primary condition of this genre is a shared concept of newspapers—news media in general, but newspapers specifically, as we are primarily speaking of a written form. Much of the funny in fake news happens because of the audience’s understanding of what newspapers talk about, and, more importantly, how they talk about it. Events are noted. Words Capitalized, Passive Voice Employed. Certain Euphemisms Common, Conjunctions Rare. But, as Cohen points out with respect to jokes, sometimes “what is required is not knowledge, or belief, in the first instance, but an awareness of what might be called ‘commonplaces.’” The idea here is that one doesn’t have to believe what they are supposed to about the subject of the joke—that WASPs are stuck up, that marriage is unpleasant—to
understand it, even if one doesn’t find the joke funny. It may help to feel the same way about the subject as the teller of the joke, but it’s not necessary.

The principle applies in fake news as well. For example, The Onion revels in “area man” jokes:

- Area Man Pretty Sure He Knows Which Athletes Are Gay
- Area Man Breaks Out Dating Boxers
- Area Man Could Eat
- Hundreds of Horrified Onlookers Gather Around Wreckage Of Area Man

There are dozens and dozens of these articles, stretching back to the nineties. They’re often hilarious, and they are definitely successful. The Onion sells Area Man t-shirts, and I’ve seen them popping up on twitter and other humor sites as well. The condition of most Area Man jokes is twofold: first, a vague idea of what your average American less-than-a-mensch is like, and second, the idea that there is a kind of publication that actually covers his trials and travails—the local paper. But when was the last time you read a small-town paper, if ever? Regardless of whether or not you have, they are vanishing. And yet despite the increasing lack of grounding for their condition of existence, Area Man fake news jokes are successfully sticking around (at least for now) because the audience for them is aware of what local news is supposed to be like, long after that audience has had actual experience with local news.

In Jokes, Ted Cohen uses two New York jokes as examples. I heard one of them for the first time in middle school:

A family from Nebraska went to New York City for the first time on a week’s vacation. After being battered by New York and its citizens for the first few days, the entire family felt exhausted and humiliated, and they were nearly ready to cut their vacation short, but the father insisted on trying once more to have an agreeable vacation in New York. The family walked out of their hotel in the morning, and the father went up to a traffic policeman and inquired, “Officer, would you tell me the way to the
The condition necessary for this joke to work is the idea that New Yorkers are famously aggressive and unhelpful—a city of strivers often striving against one another. The other New York joke in Jokes uses as one of its main conditions the idea that taxis won’t go to Brooklyn. Cohen didn’t use them for this purpose, but for a young reader these are great examples of jokes whose conditions no longer exist. (Certainly the Brooklyn taxi joke would barely make sense to a kid from Jersey today if he didn’t have these things patiently explained to him.) As the city changes, both in fact and in popular conception, these jokes have less and less of a chance at success. A question, unanswerable in this essay but provocative and worth thinking about, arises here: as print media vanishes, what will happen to the satire built on it? What will your grandkids think of fake news when they aren’t familiar with traditional news? The Onion seems to have smelled this problem, launching Clickhole—a fake BuzzFeed satirizing the conventions of that sort of Internet media—in June.

The Borowitz Report began as an email newsletter in the early 2000s before become a small humor website and finally being bought by The New Yorker in 2012. A few headlines from any month—say, October—will give an accurate impression of The Borowitz Report:

- **New Texas Law Would Require Candidates for Governor to Show Proof of I.Q.**
- **Man Infected with Ebola Misinformation Through Casual Contact with Cable News**
- **G.O.P Leader: Five Million Forced Back to Work Under Obama**
- **Cheney: “No Fair” That Obama Gets to Bomb Syria**

One could go back much farther and find many blunter, flatter, and softer ones, and a variety of very upset people have done so. Google “Andy Borowitz not funny” and you’ll find particularly awful examples dating back to the early 2000s. Here is just one, from 2004: “Flip-Flopping May Have Injured Kerry’s Shoulder.” The point is that it’s not hard to make an empirical case that The Borowitz Report is full of bad jokes, and many a think-piece has been launched to such an
But I’d like to look into exactly how they are bad, using our thoughts about the conditions of fake news and borrowing a few more thoughts from Ted Cohen. I think this is worth doing for two reasons. First, here we have our opportunity to dissect without guilt—if the “thing dies in the process,” there will not be much to mourn. The second is that I think there is something particularly unsettling about The Borowitz Report, intentional or otherwise, and that it is shared by much bad humor. More than this, it’s a kind of gross humor I’m worried is aimed at me.

The Borowitz Report appeals to many: according to The New Yorker’s online editor, it drew around 6% of that website’s traffic in 2013. When humor appeals to many people, we deem it “broad”—or, using Cohen’s terminology, its conditions of success are broadly available. Look at the random headlines I cited from October. What do you think those conditions are? Are they conditions of knowledge, belief, knowledge of commonplaces, or feelings and preferences? Whatever they are, I know they ought to be available to me. I am Andy Borowitz’s target demographic. I am a good white liberal-progressive who reads The New Yorker, follows mainstream news and politics, and, for better or worse, on a gut level am more likely to blame the other side than the system itself. The only way I’m deviating from the ideal Borowitz Report reader is that I’m twenty, not fifty.

Cohen makes a distinction between “hermetic” and “affective” jokes (though one joke can have both qualities). Hermetic jokes have conditions of knowledge or belief that should be supplied by the audience;
affective jokes rely on feelings and preferences that should be supplied by the audience.

In most Borowitz Report articles, the condition of the joke is primarily affective. The audience for “New Texas Law Would Require Candidates for Governor to Show Proof of I.Q.” must supply hermetic conditions of varying strengths—among them knowledge of Texas’s voter ID laws and the belief that Rick Perry and George Bush are dumb. In fact, these are the definitive hermetic conditions of the joke—that’s really all there is to it. With a working knowledge of English anybody could put these two conditions together and end up with this headline. (It’s a common feature of The Borowitz Report that one can see the jokes being worked out like an algebra problem, as Cohen observed is more or less possible with all jokes, given the condition. This feature is not a problem in and of itself, but when something is formulaic it makes its poor qualities into odious ones.) The point is that while The Borowitz Report is clearly pleasing to many people, there’s just not too much going on in the realm of hermetic conditions. Given the popularity of the Report coupled with this lack of hermetic depth or subtlety, we have to posit a strong affective component: to really enjoy The Borowitz Report, you must dislike Texas governors and quite possibly Texas in a pretty uncomplicated way. In order to laugh at many or most of these articles, you have to feel that Republicans and conservatives are dumb, malicious people—and that you’re better than them.

There is a strong counterexample to this line of thought. The Onion is also pretty obviously a liberal publication with a predominantly liberal readership, but also funnier. The same conditions for jokes are available, and sometimes even used. The difference is that the affective condition tends not to be the obvious first step in good fake news, whereas it often is in bad fake news. The Onion is definitely not always good. But when it is good, it creates a meatier kind of joke.

First of all, The Onion is more formally committed to its craft. When you read a headline in a newspaper, how often do you look at the author’s name, let alone recognize it? The Borowitz Report always prefaces its articles with the author’s name, which undermines the audience’s preparedness to provide the condition of normal
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newspapers. This is a failure in the craft of fake news making, not in its essence. It's the same phenomenon as in a joke that relies on accents and different pronunciations to be funny. While I always know The Onion is fake, its jokes are made funnier by its more faithful parroting of newspapers in this way. In the same way, I've never believed that a rabbi, a Jesuit, and a congressman walked into a bar—but if the teller is good I don't mind so much.

But reliance on affective conditions is a more essential flaw in fake news than craft-flaws like the one just mentioned, which have more to do with the accuracy of its satire. Cohen says that conditions of jokes are “insinuating”—the grossness of The Borowitz Report lies in its insinuation that the affective condition is enough to make you laugh at a joke like “McConnell Campaign Rocked by Photo Showing Him with Science Book.” I want to be better than that, and laugh at better jokes that don't rely on my being smug and comfortable. I may very well have a low opinion of Mitch McConnell. But attempts to build a joke off of my flawed and reprehensible sense of superiority seem lazy at best and slimy at worst. To build this intuition, you can reference any joke you think of as offensive, or felt guilty for laughing at. I'd bet you felt this way because it was trafficking in affective conditions that are gross, or worse, appealing to affective conditions you didn't want to think you had.

As said above, Cohen argues that jokes perform community-building functions, and that this intimacy is one of their main pleasures. One of the main impulses to share (both really and electronically) a fake news article is when it gets at something you haven’t been able to say quite right. There is a pleasure there besides laughter, something like the intimacy Cohen described. Here are headlines run by The Onion after the presidential election in 2008 and The Borowitz Report after the 2012 presidential election, respectively:

Black Man Given Nation’s Worst Job
BREAKING: Man Who Told Half the Nation to Fuck Themselves Somehow Loses Election

Both venues are obviously happy Barack Obama is president. The audiences for both articles may, in fact, be largely the same, and may
be able to successfully participate in many of the same conditions.

But there is a gulf in how those conditions are used. In The Borowitz Report, one has to be aware of the hermetic condition of Mitt Romney’s 47% gaffe. Some humor probably comes from the paraphrasing of the comment as “Go Fuck Yourself.” But the condition more essential to the joke’s success is affective: an uncomplicated desire to gloat at a Bad, Lesser Man. Now, for all my big talk about how maybe it isn’t so bad to analyze humor, I hesitate to do too much to The Onion’s headline. But it wouldn’t be going too far to observe that this joke uses affective conditions that the liberal audience can participate in—both joy and sadness—against each other, and is thus both very serious and very, very funny. It is a better joke, it aspires to more, and it “plays close to the big hot fire which is Truth,” as E.B. White claimed humor could. On the other hand, fake news that relies almost purely on affective conditions without complication or challenge is almost as bad as an old one-line ethnic joke—and perhaps your grandkids will feel similarly embarrassed by the innards of that sort of frog.

This essay was motivated by thinking about Jokes this summer, as well as thinking about the fact that I don’t hear many, thinking about the kind of jokes I do hear, and remembering an elderly man I used to see once in a while smoking on the stoop of Harper.
“You see, with a thing like a marquee,” he said in his easy way, “you want to put it somewhere where it’ll give you a bang slap in the eye, if you follow me.”