Rooting for the Truth in Humor: *The Onion*’s Media and Cultural Satire

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Table of Contents

Abstract 5

Chapter 1: The Onion: Layers of a Humor Behemoth 6

Chapter 2: Peeled: The Onion’s Comic Techniques 31
  Irony 34
  Reversal 38
  Reframing 47
  Exaggeration 52

Chapter 3: The Root of it All: Media and Culture Analysis 61
  LGBT Issues 63
  Bill Clinton Sex Scandal 71
  Jerry Sandusky Child Abuse Scandal 79
  Conclusion 87

Bibliography
  Primary Sources: Items from Theonion.com 90
  Secondary Sources Cited 118
  Other Works Consulted 127
Abstract

*The Onion*, a satirical American news organization with print, online and broadcast content, has gained significant popularity and influence in both the world of humor and commentary. Through analysis of a subset of *Onion* content, this thesis examines its comic techniques as well as its reactions to contemporary media and culture. Like other popular satirists of the early 21st century such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, *The Onion* acts as a cynical yet corrective lens through which to view the world. It notes and denounces societal shortcomings with the aim of creating an educated and skeptical audience. In an evolving digital news age, *The Onion* provides necessary commentary and criticism of norms in both journalism and American life.
Chapter 1

Layers of a Humor Behemoth

Every week, six hundred proposed headlines boil down to sixteen: the mighty squadron of phrases for the next *Onion* issue. From week to week, the comical headlines gracing the front-page range from “Christ Returns to NBA” to “President Feels Nation’s Pain, Breasts,” and their punchy jokes now define *The Onion*’s satire. Ira Glass of NPR’s *This American Life* spent some time in *The Onion*’s editorial office, witnessing the creative discussion behind such sidesplitting headlines. What he found was not only a “Tough Room,” as the name of his segment suggests, but a tedious and argumentative yet respectful environment. Here writers quarreled over whether headlines—written before the stories themselves—such as “Ghost Just Dropped By To Say Boo” should make it through to the next round of editorial decisions. The process proved long and tiresome, but it helped Glass recognize the staffers’ tough-minded editorial attitude: “‘Watching them parse jokes like this with a kind of academic precision that they’re sort of proud of, hour after hour, it’s not just tedious, it’s the opposite of comedy’” (“Tough Room,” 02/04/2011). Through these observations, Glass gives his NPR audience a glimpse into the minds behind not just the headlines but also the strategic editorial powerhouse fueling the entire operation. People might know *The Onion* for its headlines, but as for the meaning ascribed to them by this humorous group? That is a different story. Perhaps we have heard mention of the supposed $8 Billion “Abortionplex” built by Planned Parenthood, or when Congress allegedly took a group of schoolchildren hostage, and have had to
reassure an appalled friend or family member that it is fiction. Yet, rarely do we step back to take a look beyond *The Onion*’s humor and into the underbelly of an organization that doesn’t bill itself as funny paper or website, but in fact “America’s Finest News Source.” Past these laugh-out-loud articles we find a much more deliberate, thoughtful employment of humor to convey a message. Beyond the silly is the compelling. What makes *The Onion* so remarkable that it warrants as much appreciation as its celebrity contemporaries like Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart?

Todd Hanson, one of the oldest *Onion* staffers, began to clarify just why with an anecdote. During the “Tough Room” segment he described his struggle with a headline that had gained near unanimous staff adoration: “Thirsty Mayor Drinks Entire Town’s Water Supply.” While the rest of the group loved the joke’s silliness, it wasn’t until Hanson found the bigger picture that he appreciated its humor. “Finally it clicked in my head and I said ‘Oh I get it. It’s about misappropriation of public resources by a corrupt ruling oligarchy’” (qtd. in “Tough Room”). For this epiphany, the rest of the staff teased him, but Hanson maintained his standpoint: “If you can’t find something legitimate to say within the context of a joke, no matter how silly it is, I don’t see the point of it” (qtd. in “Tough Room”). Herein lies the crux of this discussion: if Hanson’s mindset typifies the editorial mission of *The Onion*, then what are these “legitimate somethings” that appear between the lines of its funny texts? How does *The Onion* present them? And what is their ultimate purpose?

This thesis explores those exact questions, to ultimately conclude that *The Onion*’s critiques act as sage advice, sarcastically echoing through the mouth of a

Edwards 7
cynic. It warns and admonishes, criticizes and ridicules, all with the intention of helping its fellow man trudge through the absurdities forged by media and culture. *The Onion*’s humor techniques directly lampoon journalistic conventions and bolster coverage of real events from the political to the scandalous. This combination of technique and topic calls for a societal reevaluation of both our news and our culture. While *The Onion*’s commentary elicits laughter, the points raised incisively admonish the status quo, constantly asking its readers if they will accept such mediocrity and absurdity. *The Onion* aims to heighten its readers’ awareness and understanding of journalism and its conventions to ultimately create a more informed and critical society. Over its quarter century lifespan, *The Onion* has grown into a satirical organization that promises to continually question the shortcomings of our world and encourages us to do the same. To better understand the roots of this notion, we must first revisit *The Onion*’s past: the beginnings of a humor behemoth.

In 1988, two University of Wisconsin juniors, Tim Keck and Chris Johnson, devised a satirical newspaper. After borrowing about $8,000 in startup funds from Keck’s mother, and with the help of friends, the two first distributed *The Onion* in their dorms, and its popularity helped it appear on newsstands across the campus (Keighley, Tower). Local fame during its fledgling years allowed *The Onion* to expand into other cities, including Milwaukee, Chicago, Boulder and beyond while eye-catching headlines boosted its recognition; NPR’s *Car Talk* covered the paper in 1996 and it gained a web presence that same year. Since these beginnings, *The Onion*, a name allegedly derived from a favorite lunchtime sandwich condiment, has evolved
into a news satire organization, with news and sports networks broadcast today on IFC and Comedy Central, and a website that garners over 15 million monthly page views (“Onion Media Kit”). The site continues to receive recognition from such inflammatory and absurd headlines as “Massive Snowstorm Leaves Thousands Without Access To Pornography” (1/26/2011) and “Apple User Acting Like His Dad Just Died” (10/6/2011). As in the case of the stranded porn lovers, some Onion content is purely fictional; other stories exploit real events, as in the second headline, which ran online shortly after Steve Jobs’ death. Supplementing the weekly print publication, Theonion.com not only features traditional news stories, but also fictitious narratives communicated in several formats. In the broadcast realm, shows such as Today Now!, In the Know, Sportsdome, Talkback, and Onion News Network parody morning news shows, evening punditry, sports commentaries, and other traditional news programs. The site also carries radio news blurbs, news briefs, slide shows, infographics, interactive maps, newswire updates and lampoons of various other news platforms. In the media kit on its website, The Onion defines the majority of its audience: young, fairly affluent, college graduate and male (“Onion Media Kit”). The Onion’s Twitter has over 3.7 million followers, and over 2 million people have “liked” its Facebook page as of May 13, 2012.

Media outlets’ coverage of The Onion has further perpetuated The Onion’s growing recognition and popularity. In one article from the American Journalism Review, Kathryn Wenner briefly notes a couple of the ideas on which this thesis expands, including The Onion’s observations about American life, its criticism of
news, and the humorous incongruities tying these themes together. She quotes Editor-in-Chief Rob Siegel explaining how The Onion uses the format of news in order to critique it: “‘The journalistic form,’ Siegel says, is ‘the vessel . . . it has to look like real journalism to create the comedic tension between what is being said and how it is presented.’” (qtd. in Wenner, 50) Throughout the piece, members of the Onion staff divulge many of their opinions about the industry, as well as some thoughts about humor in general. Senior writer Todd Hanson described humor as a means for dealing with reality, saying “‘If you really understand what comedy really is, I believe, it’s not about lightheartedness at all. It’s about very harsh and terrible things that were really horrific. It’s sort of a way of processing horror and misery. That’s where comedy comes from’” (qtd. in Wenner, 53). Such thoughts define the underlying and overarching missions of the publication, as told by those who craft it. As Siegel mentions, The Onion’s close imitation of journalistic form creates the necessary comedic tension to deliver its messages. Yet this authentic appearance has caused snafus when people have mistaken the articles for real ones. These mishaps have not only deceived the naïve, but also caused headaches for PR reps in various organizations. For example, the “Fraud Alerts” section of the Make-A-Wish Foundation’s website references an Onion video that people may have mistaken as real. The video, “Child Bankrupts Make-A-Wish Foundation With Wish for Unlimited Wishes” (01/16/2008), tells the story of a leukemia-ridden child named Chad, whose ongoing wishes promise to financially ruin the foundation. In the video, the fictional president of Make-A-Wish desperately solicits help from viewers, asking them to
Edwards 11

donate 10-speed bicycles and volleyball sets to the cause. However, this incident is certainly not the only *Onion* fiction that became newsworthy. In early 2012, Congressman John Fleming of Louisiana mistook an *Onion* article entitled “Planned Parenthood Opens $8 Billion Abortionplex” for a piece of real news. He posted the article on his Facebook page amidst the controversial rescinding of funds by the Susan G. Komen Foundation for Planned Parenthood. Along with the Facebook post—which has since been deleted—the congressman stated, “More on Planned Parenthood, abortion by the wholesale” (Smiley). These errors have even sparked blogs like “Literally Unbelievable,” which compiles instances of Facebook posts by users who think an *Onion* story is true (Hongo).

Blunders like these solidify *The Onion*’s contemporary significance and influence as a societal observer and analyst, but history reminds us that it is not a new phenomenon. *The Onion* follows in the footsteps of the many earlier American comic periodicals. David Sloane gives an overview of many of these publications, tracking the history of comic periodicals in the U.S. Such publications have existed since the fledgling years of the United States, ebbing and flowing in their prevalence, popularity and focus. As Sloane points out,

“American comic periodicals represent a mélange of disparate elements as vigorous, as vital, and as irrepressible as the American democratic spirit . . . They present national mythic tall tales, dialect and local figures, and jaundiced portraits of political and economic corruption for
the amusement and correction of their targets as well as their reading public” (xiv).

This “correcting” theme has occurred in many satirical publications in American history, transcending various topics. Over time, various impetuses have driven American humor, from politics to social life to sexual behaviors, following the general development of American history and all the while, comic periodicals have stood by as critical observers. Early politically based magazines such as Philadelphia’s The Bee (1765-?), the first American humor magazine, took the side of the common man against the large institutions of religion and government. The Wasp (1802-1803) claims distinction as the earliest and most important printer of bold satirical cartoons of the time and appeared a few decades before the Civil War. Around the war years, popular joke magazines such as Yankee Notions (1852-1875) and Frank Leslie’s Budget of Fun (1859-1878) came about; Yankee utilized cheap wit and borrowed content while Frank Leslie’s content appealed to its northern, moderately educated readership. Then in the late 1800’s, humor magazines garnered middle class American readership with the advent of Puck (1877-1918), Judge (1881-1949), and Life (1883-1936), which ridiculed the upper and lower classes for the amusement of average Americans. Puck and Judge impacted comic journalism through vibrant cartoon art. Around the late nineteenth century, sexual humor began to expand in comic periodicals with the advent of Life’s Gibson girl and grew through the teens and the 1920’s. By 1925, The New Yorker (1925-present) entered the scene with iconic cartoons and contributors that comprised the “who’s who of American humorists in
the middle of the twentieth century” (Sloane, 184). The 1950’s brought more offensive yet still palatable-to-the-masses magazines like Mad (1952-present) and National Lampoon (1970-present), characterizing the modern era of comic periodicals (Sloane xiv-xvi). Such monumental publications in American history have left lingering effects on comic journalism. While each title has built on others, taking inspiration but also breaking new ground, so too has The Onion followed in the footsteps of these noteworthy comic publications. As I later demonstrate, The Onion’s style will surely garner attention by future historians as it leads the march of popular American comic periodicals in the early 21st century.

Of such similar publications in American history, Mad proves the periodical ripest for comparison with The Onion; its editorial mission and impact serve as noteworthy elements for our attention. Analyzing Mad’s role during a politically controversial era, Nathan Abrams praises its satirically critical bent that provided necessary commentary. Mad’s critique of the Cold War triumphed over other more serious publications such as Dissent, which “was purportedly established to provide that type of social and political criticism that Mad pioneered in the 1950s and which other New York intellectual journals had so conspicuously failed to do at that time” (Abrams, 440). Abrams also notes Mad’s lack of a political side, or at least a consistent one; while it ridiculed Cold War America, it did not sympathize with the New Left revolt against it, and ended up targeting student radicalism. This “consistent inconsistency” afforded Mad free reign in its targets of scorn, making it more versatile than other politically grounded publications (Abrams, 441). Here, too we see a strong
parallel between *Mad* and *The Onion*. As I indicate more clearly in the following chapters, *The Onion* also provides more incisive criticism than its serious counterparts, and does so without staunchly aligning itself with one political viewpoint. While it can often appear to wield a particular political persuasion, it does not hesitate to attack people or movements that it has supported in the past. For example, *The Onion* consistently argues for the equality of homosexuals, fighting specifically for their right to have equal marital rights. However, it does not hesitate to condemn radicals who might actually damage the gay rights cause by ostracizing the community, as evidenced in “Gay-Pride Parade Sets Mainstream Acceptance Of Gays Back 50 Years” (03/25/2011). This article critiques the extreme and brash tactics used in gay pride parades for disconnecting the gay community from the rest of society. Like *The Onion*, *Mad* has also pushed beyond its critique of American culture to the wider political spectrum including “capitalism, consumerism and advertising, government, education, the family, and authority in general” (Sloane, 155). Additionally, the evolutions of both should also draw our gaze. While *Mad* grew from a comic book to magazine, changing its audience expectations and format, so too has *The Onion* transformed from simply a newspaper to a multimedia satire organization. Along with this development *The Onion* has only deepened and sharpened its satirical barbs. In the histories of *Mad* and *The Onion*, the changes over time demonstrate a desire to adapt to different media climates and expectations to continue garnering a vast readership and considerable attention. Thus, these similarities demonstrate *The
Onion’s likeness to Mad. This parallel function may allow The Onion to create a comparable legacy in which it defines the modern age of comic periodicals.

The Onion has roots not only in magazines satirizing American society, but also in newspaper humor, which has existed just as long. The infamous moon hoax of 1835, described by scholars as “one of the first and most bizarre newspaper frauds in this country,” reminds us of just how early humor has wedged its way into serious journalistic publications (Thornton, 89). Looking to the late 1800’s, more hoaxes emerged in pieces by Mark Twain and his contemporaries. Dan DeQuille, Twain’s colleague at the Virginia City, Nevada, Territorial Enterprise, deemed these very convincing short hoaxes “quaints” (Berkove, 16). Beginning with “an impossible premise and seek[ing] to make it believable through the use of specious but seemingly credible details and reasoning” (Berkove, 42), these literary hoaxes intended to deceive their audience—a fairly sophisticated bunch—but simultaneously sought to educate them. One of the most famous hoax examples, De Quille’s “The Solar Armor,” tells of a man who invented armor that counteracted the heat of the sun, allowing the wearer to feel cool in even the hottest of circumstances. To solidify his claim, the man traipsed across Death Valley, but froze to death in the middle of the desert. His armor had worked so well—effectively creating a freezer within the suit—that it rendered him unable to reach the fastenings laced up his back. He couldn’t escape and a Native American found him seated against a rock, dead. The hoax made its way to London’s Daily Telegraph, which reported the story as factual, albeit with the caveat that it needed further verification. Upon hearing word of the Telegraph’s
reprinting, De Quille penned an update of the mysterious incident, imparting his anti-intellectual sentiment with a pseudo-scientific tale (Lee, 130). The Telegraph’s gaffe appears similar to the mistakes by unsuspecting Onion readers discussed earlier.

Elements of hoaxes like “The Solar Armor” clearly appear in today’s Onion articles. Their exaggerated and absurd nature within the shroud of newspaper style echoes the hoaxes, while using a thread, which can unravel the true meaning of a satirical work. By placing one deadpan assertion somewhere in the text (frequently the bottom), The Onion clearly asserts its opinion, in case the reader had any doubts about the true message. For example, “Lewinsky Subpoenaed To Re-Blow Clinton On Senate Floor” (02/03/1999) reports the Senate’s supposed insistence on witnessing reenactments of the sexual acts committed by Lewinsky with President Clinton. The Senate members maintain that they must see the acts performed again in order to effectively administer justice. This piece satirizes the Senate’s obvious interest in the more tawdry aspects of the case rather than the delivery of justice during the Clinton scandal. To drive home this point, at the end of the article chief prosecutor Henry Hyde says, “‘this may be the most important issue ever faced by Congress in its 210-year history . . . ‘We are talking about the possible removal of the highest elected official in the land, and that is not the sort of matter that should be trivialized.’” This declaration at the end of the article indicates that The Onion notes how the case’s sexual nature drove the media to treat it lightly.¹ This loose thread appears similar to the subtle clues offered by the Comstock artistic hoaxes of the early twentieth century.

¹ Further discussion of this piece appears in Chapter three.
As Berkove explains about his nineteenth-century examples, “there is some clue, however subtle, in the hoax that, once detected, can lead to its exposure. It therefore places a premium on close and thoughtful attention” (164). Thus, *Onion* articles and hoaxes share the deliberate intentions of educating the audience about an issue while giving them enough clues to piece together their actual opinion. Usually couched in a quotation, these hints make deadpan assertions that cleverly fit themselves within the article, so as not to disrupt comic premise, but to ensure understanding of the political position and joke.

While *The Onion*’s characteristics have shown up in American humor of the past, contemporary satirical figures offer additional insight. Today, *The Onion* rubs elbows with Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, two of the most popular satirists of the early twenty-first century. However, it has received comparatively rare analysis in the academy. While many scholars praise Stewart and Colbert as media and politics critics (e.g., Colletta, Goodnow, Jones, Jones and Baym), *The Onion*’s influence has gone largely unnoticed. Current scholarly literature focuses primarily on *The Onion*’s response to tragedy and satiric journalism’s function as catharsis (e.g., Achter, O’Rourke). However, *The Onion*’s scope of influence actually exceeds mere catharsis, because the framework for its critiques is largely different from those of *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*. A contrast between *The Onion* and the other two most popular satirical news outlets clarifies *The Onion*’s role. First of all, unlike Stewart and Colbert’s cable shows, *The Onion* uses various media platforms. As mentioned earlier, *The Onion* has grown from simply a print newspaper to a website with videos,
radio pieces, polls and other interactive content. While Colbert and Stewart have websites that accompany their respective programs, they primarily market the television show. In contrast, The Onion has distinct content from its print articles to its Onion News Network video segments to its radio newscasts. Its array of media products allows The Onion to have much greater versatility in its editorial capacities and arguments. Moreover, the wide variety and availability of content online allow Onion content to spread virally and much more quickly and easily than clips from The Daily Show or The Colbert Report.

Another defining difference between the two satirists and The Onion is the reliance upon real events. Stewart and Colbert must craft their shows around the most pressing media topics of the day. They have an ongoing dialogue with the news using clips from real news shows of pundits and politicians and interview segments with real people. The Onion shuns this reliance on reality in favor of fictional narratives, utilizing actual events as a springboard to craft fictional stories that comment on reality. Along with this strict shunning of nonfiction, The Onion also has much more flexibility because of its lack of a “face,” or main person from whom the arguments flow. Stewart and Colbert have developed personas as very liberal and conservative, respectively. Even though Colbert plays a conservative character, he still must stay within this role lest he completely tarnish the cohesiveness of his satiric ruse. Thus, both satirists have to abide by certain ideological confines. The Onion, however, is completely free to assert opinions that might be in opposition to one political viewpoint or another. Like its multimedia platform, this lack of a single representative
person allows for much more versatility in *The Onion*’s critical tool belt. We could certainly explore many other ways in which the *The Onion* and the Stewart/Colbert duo differ, but for the aforementioned reasons, it is clear that they should not stand under the same umbrella. Obviously, other news satire programs and publications currently exist; however, *The Daily Show, The Colbert Report* and *The Onion* undoubtedly top the chart of most popular news satires of the day. Differentiating *The Onion* from its contemporaries determined my strategies for filtering and examining *The Onion*’s expansive critical commentary. This research primarily examines *The Onion*’s techniques and arguments of its longer form (more than 300 words) content, primarily textual and video narratives. As opposed to other, shorter items in other formats, this content provides enough material for analysis in order to fully determine what *The Onion*’s rhetorical strategy means during our age of selective news consumption.

*The Onion*’s breadth of coverage across various topics and media provided ample choices from which to narrow this study. Those who have examined *The Onion* thus far have focused primarily on a specific event such as 9/11 or another isolated occurrence. However, this approach limits the ability to draw conclusions about the larger editorial and humor strategy of *The Onion*. Thus, I chose to focus on a theme—in this case, sex, a topic that reflects the cultural and the political realms along with the news formats employed by *The Onion*. Because sex is an act frequently regulated, judged and argued over in our society, *The Onion*’s treatment can function as both a reflection of these American values and their media coverage. In the mainstream
press, sexual discussion comes about only in terms of its newsworthiness; the articles we find on the front page might pertain to sex scandals of important societal figures or sexual crimes. A piece about sexual health or the psychological effects of pornography might make it into the middle of the paper, with more informal “Dear Abby” sexual advice pieces relegated to the back. Hence, honest discussions about the sexual state of our society rarely find space in the mainstream newspapers of today. Because *The Onion* chooses to consistently tackle such a subject, it perfectly demonstrates how *The Onion* unearths and presents arguments alternative to mainstream opinions across time and platform as well as the personal and political realms.

*The Onion* can then use this boundless editorial freedom to definitively showcase its opinions about the world, particularly those to do with a taboo topic like sex. Koziski posits this notion in her discussion of comedians as social anthropologists, stating, “The comedian may investigate with an audience tacit areas of behavior not easily discussed, especially this realm of sexual behavior” (90). Because of this universal relevance and capacity for demonstrating *The Onion’s* rhetorical tactics, sex proved itself the worthiest funnel with which to shape my corpus of *Onion* articles. Within humor, sex has consistently been an easy, equalizing topic to elicit laughter, with everything from dirty jokes to burlesque falling within the category of “sexual humor.” As Sloane attests in his discussion of comic periodicals, they “have been aimed not at the literati or at a coterie, but at the general public, and they broadly reflect American values in various political, economic, social and sexual transitions as few other media in our history” (xiv). *The Onion* falls naturally into this
category, as it frequently features articles with sexual topics that also speak to broader
social and political themes. *The Onion*’s coverage of a topic so easily and frequently
wielded in base and obscene ways within the world of humor underscores its editorial
purpose and decisions. It shows us what values and perspectives *The Onion*
encourages and defends.

However, beyond simply choosing sex as my topic, I also devised topical
categories to organize the items. I chose these by further refining the corpus to include
those topics that receive attention in the mainstream media. These areas tend to
include those with a salacious or criminal aspect to them. This concentration reveals
how *The Onion* treats these issues with an alternative lens, bringing about other
viewpoints and arguments. The article categories now stand as follows: LGBT,
pedophilia, pornography, prostitution, rape/sexual assault and sex scandals. The dates
of the articles range from 1996-2012, the only period available online and in the
archival books. The breakdown of numbers in each category is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LGBT</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedophilia</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pornography</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape/Sexual Assault</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Scandal</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I have worked inductively throughout this process, based on the principles outlined in
communication scholar John Pauly’s “A Beginner’s Guide to Doing Qualitative
Research in Mass Communication.” Using guideposts from both psychology and
history, I characterized these pieces by rhetorical techniques and humor themes.
During the search process, I came across some pieces of content that I have chosen to exclude from analysis. Items with the following designations will not factor into my discussion of sexual material in *The Onion*: statshots, news in photos, American voices, newswires and letter to the editors. Because my interest primarily deals with *The Onion*’s longer-form news stories, these items do not provide enough material for me to analyze, and they function not as narratives but more as cartoons. Other pieces such as blogs and personals also showed up in my searches, but these also tended not to have substantial content, and it was at times difficult to discern whether or not an *Onion* staffer actually produced them. In the case of the personals, the content that I came across had more to do with finding partners than with any kind of news narrative.

Through analysis of these news items, I have found *The Onion* tackles two topics in its critique: media and culture. However, the two subjects receive different formats of criticism: content and framework. *The Onion* utilizes the content within its articles and pieces to provide commentary about culture. Exaggerated opinions, fallacious arguments, illogical standpoints and near-zealous attitudes present themselves in quotes from fictional characters (or fictional versions of real people). However, the main thrust of its media critique comes from *The Onion*’s format. Its strict adherence to journalistic conventions so closely mimics reality that the absurdities of these news norms come under fire. While *The Onion* usually holds fast to its conviction of not choosing political or ideological sides, its role as a warrior for reason comes about from so spookily imitating its targets.
The Onion has achieved such a strong satirical framework across its various platforms through parody. This close imitation of form and style helps its critiques retain legitimacy and bolsters their strength. For this reason, The Onion can call attention to journalistic norms that detract from effective news dissemination—norms that actually encourage deception, feigned objectivity and a lack of authenticity. From strict AP style to ostentatious video graphics to inverted pyramid style to overeager morning news show hosts, The Onion takes inspiration from elements of the news to construct its entire framework. By imitating and then slightly altering these components, The Onion draws our attention to them, asking us to question their validity as journalistic techniques. The Onion’s framework targets the ubiquitous and familiar facets of contemporary media, ensuring that the arguments posed within the content derive from a foundation similar to that which is found in the real news environment.

The first and most obvious technique utilized by The Onion is its adherence to the standard format of an article used by most major newspapers and other news outlets. Typified by its inverted pyramid setup (with the most important information at the top), short paragraphs, quotations, brevity, sourcing and AP style grammar and punctuation styles, this format also removes the authorial voice, with intention of eliminating bias to promote journalistic objectivity. For the most part, The Onion sticks to these conventions, so that an Onion article looks nearly identical to an authentic news article. When the journalistic guidelines meet the absurdity of Onion storylines, humor from the incongruity emerges. Sometimes The Onion’s practices
underscore ways in which a reporter can still wield the style to promote a certain opinion or thought. “Area Homosexual Saves Four From Fire” (06/27/1998) exemplifies The Onion’s source descriptions that play up a relatively unimportant aspect of the story: the hero’s homosexuality. The first line of the article identifies the man who saved the family from the fire as Kevin Lassally, “a homosexual man.” All following references to Lassally use other common techniques to further highlight his homosexual identity. The next excerpt describes Lassally in lieu of simply using his last name: “‘I heard those children crying, and I knew I had to do something,’ the 34-year-old gay computer programmer told reporters.” Later references add details about Lassally’s homosexuality including how his injuries leave “him unable to work or have sex with other men for about two months. Doctors describe his condition as stable but homosexual.” Then finally, at the end of the article another common convention appears, in which a journalist can alter a quote by replacing a piece of it with a bracketed word: “‘I've always believed that one [homosexual] really can make a difference.’” Although these examples obviously indicate typical Onion exaggeration through repetition, they demonstrate how easily one can wield descriptions in order to shift the focus of a piece. Stylistically speaking, the article adheres to the guidelines from any News Writing 101 class, but it obviously places an emphasis on the sexuality of the article’s chief source. Hence, The Onion exposes how this form—a structure generally seen as a means for objectivity—can actually help the author get across a certain standpoint or opinion. This article very quickly becomes less about the story and more about the hero’s sexuality. Such an attention shift
demonstrates how a widely accepted means of promoting journalistic objectivity can actually assist reporters in promoting a biased viewpoint. The emphasis on the source’s homosexuality acknowledges the societal focus on the alleged abnormality of being gay. The article takes great measures to ensure that readers know the man is gay, with The Onion’s underlying message that his sexuality does not prove pertinent in this context.

However, The Onion’s emulation of other news techniques does not stop with its print articles. Broadcast news conventions make their way into Onion video news pieces, demonstrating how television news resorts to flashy, cinematic techniques to build hype and add entertainment value. Many news programs now have loud, showy graphics introducing them, typically with red, white and blue color schemes and a clearly high production value. During the 2012 election season, The Onion mimicked such techniques in one especially ostentatious example. “Heartbroken Santorum Condemns Gay Marriage For Two-Timing Jerks Like Nick” (05/13/2012) opens with a montage of graphics that greatly dramatize the piece that follows. In a very high-tech, digitized, Americana-colored atmosphere, an electric star flies through the air toward the White House. It bounces on the ground as it cuts to cartoon depictions of the Republican elephant and Democrat donkey. As the star continues to fly around in conflicting motion paths, its edges tear through images of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, whose faces overlay their respective animals’ outlines. Finally, the star appears robotic as it clicks and shifts, making mechanized sounds, hurtling toward the electric blue White House that has appeared. After it crashes into the building, with
red and blue arcs surrounding it, the title of the segment scrolls down from above: “War for the White House.” Epic instrumental music plays behind these images, growing louder as the introductory segment feeds into the actual program. This introduction clearly mimics hyperdramatic graphics used by legitimate news programs. The Onion takes inspiration from these tactics to admonish their use as a means to draw audience attention. However, this piece does not just deride those who use these tactics in general—it also places specific emphasis on the hype surrounding presidential elections. During the election season, news shows often amp up their production techniques, making their openings very dramatic and over the top. Similarly, The Onion’s highly exaggerated openings draw us into the drama for entertainment purposes, showing us that the news shows that we consume do so for the same reason. This comparison then invites us to consider whether reputable news sources should use such cinematic tactics to garner our attention about one of the most important political events every 4 years. As we will see in Chapter 3’s discussion of the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal, The Onion implies through such parodies that the dramatization and added entertainment value to these programs has begun trivializing an immensely important event.

Beyond the visual aspects of The Onion’s video news pieces, its anchors, hosts and panelists also characterize their real life counterparts’ qualities. Mimicking behaviors and norms of newscasters shows us the formulaic and fake nature of news presentation. The Onion’s news pieces profess that within broadcast news, the actual content of a show or segment is secondary to the prescribed framework of
presentation. The demeanor of hosts from two of The Onion’s programs, Today Now! and The Factzone, mocks those of morning talk show hosts and evening news program anchors, respectively. Their fake personas highlight the lack of genuineness in news presentation, rendering the actual content meaningless. “Ex-Pedophile Shares Tips On How To Make Your Kids Less Attractive” (08/06/2009), a Today Now! segment, brings on a former “sex offender/child safety expert” to offer his guidance to parents in protecting their children from pedophiles. As the segment begins, Jim Haggerty and Tracy Gill, the two chipper and crisply dressed hosts, cheerily discuss the show’s topic of the day. Although the matter at hand is a serious one, they delve into the subject and their interview with the sex offender in a very lighthearted and candid manner. After glancing down at her note card, Tracy states the sex offender’s rap sheet: “Now, Terry actually kidnapped and sexually molested children for over 20 years, and he was eventually convicted of 13 counts of sexual assault against minors.” Although this is a horrific statement, she says it with a cheerful cadence. Later, the other co-host, Jim, very earnestly asks the sex offender, “But you do recommend that parents try to make their children less attractive to pedophiles, right?” Both co-hosts speak about a terrible situation in an upbeat manner; here, The Onion very incisively attacks morning show hosts for their disingenuous dispositions. This characterization makes these hosts appear fake—their behavior merely a trait that they must exude instead of real, genuine feeling. Because they maintain this façade even when discussing such a distressing topic, The Onion shows that they are merely actors cast in roles, rather than true human beings reacting to the information presented before them. In addition to
mocking the hosts, *The Onion* attacks morning news shows’ tendency to present light, fluffy news pieces even next to more serious ones. The incongruity of the harsh subject matter with the co-hosts’ bright attitudes in the *Today Now!* piece shows how the morning talk shows, much like the bombastic graphics discussed earlier, can trivialize important issues. *The Onion* highlights this point when Tracy segues out of the interview, happily announcing, “Okay coming up next, out of the frying pan and into the dryer, a new way to make pierogies!” Tracy’s preview of the upcoming segment about an odd way to make food emphasizes morning news shows’ tendency to lessen a segment’s importance because of the show’s inherent framework. The segmented nature of morning news shows often necessitates such transitions, which ultimately lessens the gravity of news.

But these characterizations do not simply apply to the overly cheery hosts of morning news shows—*The Onion* also scoffs at newscasters on evening news shows with their *Onion News Network* show, *The Factzone*. Brooke Alvarez, the show’s host, is attractive with blond hair and fashionable outfits. She delivers the news with the traditional cadence of broadcast news reporters, stating facts in an authoritative tone, and inflecting the words at the end of her sentences. No matter what absurd content crawls across the teleprompter from which she reads, Brooke says everything with the same seriousness and urgency of a true nightly news anchor. An *ONN* piece entitled “President's Approval Rating Soars After Punching Wall Street Banker in Face” (10/12/11) exemplifies this convention. In describing the incident, Brooke does not break from journalistic style: “Witnesses say that while the banker did nothing to
provoke the punch—which was captured by a photographer during a White House meet and greet—sluggin’ little Mr. Moneybags has given Obama instant credibility among voters who’d previously been critical of his reluctance to shatter some Wall Street prick’s teeth with his fist.” Although several aspects of this sentence prove laugh worthy, Brooke delivers it the same way that a real newscaster would present any other news. This example and others like it emphasize The Onion’s argument that such newscasters are little more than mouthpieces, following a set formula for news delivery. Even during pieces where Brooke does exhibit emotion, she retains a very controlled, camera-appropriate demeanor. Hence, The Onion further argues that those delivering the news act as mere robots that regurgitate facts, rather than honest, sincere individuals who feel at all connected to the content they present their audience.

Obviously, these examples are only a smattering of the many ways that The Onion’s framework of parody calls into question the journalistic norms in print, broadcast and online media. From infographics about porn and HIV prevention to Sunday Magazine covers that tout “Vigorously Rubbing The Head Of The Penis And 10 Other Sex Tips” as their headline, The Onion’s closely imitates the media of our time, albeit with exaggeration and other distortions of detail and style along the way. This mimicry comprises the main framework of The Onion. It serves as the first and most basic criticism of the media, setting the foundation for the remaining content to secure the commentary on media and culture. Without this setup, The Onion’s arguments would not come across as strongly; part of its genius is the extent to which it has done its homework in researching and closely matching the real media. As the
remainder of this thesis demonstrates, the ongoing relationship between this setup and the content within the pieces themselves define The Onion’s comic personality. Its jaded yet educational role seeks to empower its audience, even during times when the world seems bleakest. This mission demonstrates how The Onion lives up to its slogan of “America’s Finest News Source.” The consumers who have at times mistaken The Onion for real news testify to its authenticity—which has been bolstered by and couched in reality, the target of its scorn.
Chapter 2

Peeled: The Onion’s Comic Techniques

The Onion has a double-edged reputation to uphold: it not only must maintain its consistently humorous tactics, but also follow through with biting critique of relevant national issues. This is not a simple task, but The Onion manages to accomplish it every week, with a more complex system than its audience might expect. Underneath the hilarious headlines are strategically wielded humor techniques that draw from journalistic conventions, packing a rhetorical punch. Characteristics of contemporary news shape the comic approaches employed by The Onion and their argumentative functions. These borrowed methods clearly show how The Onion pulls together various journalistic and cultural components to strengthen its rhetorical critiques. Its framework, techniques and content bolster one another, ensuring powerful and incisive claims. So whether “Alabama Super-Illegalizes Gay Marriage” (12/19/2008) or “Missing Girl Probably Raped” (09/04/2007) tops The Onion’s front page, the audience can surely know that headlines appear for reasons much beyond a healthy laugh.

The techniques discussed here proved rhetorically significant in The Onion’s media and cultural critique. While some appeared more frequently than others in the corpus of about 200 articles, their implications speak to different facets of The Onion’s method, aim and severity of critique. Ultimately, all of them work toward the same end: the depiction of absurdity. The absurdity of the media, of corrupt politicians, of
societal regression and prejudice—many bastions of influence come under fire. As Russell Frank points out in describing online folkloric content he labels “newslore,” “It’s cathartic, it’s expressive, it engenders feelings of solidarity, of superiority, and ultimately, perhaps, of sanity: if people can recognize and agree on the absurdities of modern life, it might be the world that’s mad, not them” (Frank, 11). Thus, this is precisely what *The Onion* accomplishes with its comic techniques—leading its audience to an absurd place that encourages laughter at a gilded world in order to see its broken interior. *The Onion* presents arguments in an alternative framework that achieves one of the goals of humor: to view life through a nontraditional lens—a lens that reverses, reframes, magnifies or reduces the world, calling our sense of reality into question, and asking us to consider what these distortions really mean.

Before we delve into *The Onion*’s comic techniques, let us take a closer look at the purposes and functions of jokes from a psychological perspective. Beginning with Freud and his explanations in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, we discover that jokes fall into two categories: tendentious and non-tendentious. Tendentious jokes have a purpose, or a greater meaning, and Freud uses this qualifier to distinguish between hostile and so-called “innocent” jokes, saying “Only jokes that have a purpose run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them” (Freud, 90). This particular difference concerns us in our discussion of *Onion* material. Were *The Onion*’s jokes culturally innocent, we would not have reason to discuss their larger implications. But as we will further find, this is not the case. *The Onion* envelops its arguments in humor techniques to dethrone and unmask its targets.
Because such objects of ridicule often include those with substantial societal power, Freud’s continued explanations of tendentious jokes match up with The Onion’s pieces: “tendentious jokes are especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority” (Freud, 105). Because The Onion’s targets so frequently include powerful people like the president, congressmen or media elites (as discussed in chapter one), the purposes of its jokes have far larger aims than simply making readers laugh. They also provide criticism through various techniques that link to facets of our society or news media, ultimately damning and dethroning those with significant societal influence.

While this thesis has primarily sought to examine the methods and functions of The Onion, we should briefly acknowledge the potential effects that satire and humor in general can have upon the perspectives of those who consume it. Psychologist John Morreall explains some of these basic effects of humor, and how they can encourage alternate pathways of understanding while also allowing us to think and act more rationally. He says that “humor involves the ability to process our perceptions, memories and imagine ideas in a way that rises above what is real, here, now, personal and practical” (Morreall, 112). This processing ability allows us to take a step back from what stands before us and reconsider it from a different mindset. As Morreall attests, “humor promotes divergent thinking” by blocking negative emotions that suppress creativity. He adds that it helps us “appreciate cognitive shifts” by making us receptive to putting together new kinds of ideas (113). However, despite Morreall’s endorsement of these positive effects of humor, he also reminds us of its limitations—
namely, its tendency to help people disengage from a topic. He warns that we should not necessarily equate satire with revolution, but ensure that these barbs do not produce the opposite effect of causing people to be indifferent to a topic that should warrant attention. As we move forward in determining the importance of The Onion’s humor techniques, these caveats should remain in our consideration.

Irony

The social and psychological effects of humor further strengthen The Onion’s reasoning in using various comic techniques in its articles. Each method carries a potential result upon the perceptions of The Onion’s audience, helping to determine when The Onion uses one over another. While some of The Onion’s comic methods manifest themselves in specific articles, one might argue that nearly all Onion content employs irony. It is an ongoing tactic that situates The Onion as a commentator of truth in contemporary society. The perpetual irony derives from the incongruity between The Onion’s format and its content. Beneath its fictional scenarios lie real arguments; the audience understands that these “characters,” or featured individuals in any given piece, act or speak in an absurd way to set up the comic environment in which The Onion can lobby for its viewpoint. On the surface, The Onion appears to be a typical newspaper, news website or television newscast. Yet its content is largely fictional, only taking cues from real happenings in the world and the way in which the media handle them. This combination allows for a discrepancy between what we traditionally expect from such a venue and what we receive. Don Waisanen maintains that The Onion employs “a distinctive rhetorical strategy of ironic iconicity for the
digital age, illustrating a way in which entertaining discourses can craft moral insights about our world” (509). *The Onion* uses the modern day crisis of truth as a springboard for its perpetually ironic base. Since the inherent trust that once allowed anchors such as Walter Cronkite to rise to journalistic prominence has diminished, we now lack strong media voices in which we stake our trust. Thus, *The Onion’s* ever present ironic framework speaks to this age in which earnestness no longer has a place, and where everything has an added tinge of skepticism alongside it.

Irony’s ongoing presence in *The Onion* bolsters its ability to build argumentative claims. For example, in most major newspapers, readers would not encounter an article entitled “Man Finds Self Back at Porn Store Again” (02/04/2004), since it deals with everyday occurrences of an average person; there is no “news peg,” as is required for most articles in newspapers to run in print or online. Similarly, an article such as “Neighbors Believed Murderer Only Capable Of Rape” (4/26/2000), would not appear in a true news source because its discussion revolves around the neighbors’ speculations about how criminal a particular man was, instead of the expected quotes about how tragic the murder was, how ordinary the neighbor seemed, etc. Although readers understand this disconnect very early on, the constant incongruity maintains the ironic base on which readers situate themselves before consuming the content. As opposed to other humor techniques, which present themselves in specific articles, irony is an ongoing undercurrent that stabilizes our understanding of *The Onion’s* greater rhetorical pattern. However, the constant irony created by *The Onion’s* format and content does not sum up its appearances; it peppers
itself across many other articles that primarily wield another technique and as well as in articles where the headline creates an ironic setting from the outset. For example, many of the articles studied for this thesis used irony in discussing secret homosexuals, depicting the uncomfortable world that they endure.

Several articles pertaining to veiled homosexuality include “Red-Lace Nightie Portends Another Excruciating Night For Closeted Husband” (5/19/99), “Area Man Experimenting With Homosexuality For Past Eight Years” (10/25/00), “Closeted Father Lives Vicariously Through Gay Son” (10/3/01), “Anti-Homosexuality Sermon Suspiciously Well-Informed” (11/16/05) and “Honey, Will You Make Me The Happiest Deeply-In-Denial Closeted Homosexual On Earth?” (9/23/10). All of these items discuss the thoughts of those who do not admit they are gay but exhibit strongly homosexual behavior, or who recognize their sexuality but present a very different persona to the rest of the world. *The Onion* uses this opportunity to level arguments regarding the culture into which gays profess their sexual identity. For example, in “Closeted Father Lives,” the dad says, “When I was his age, it was too dangerous to proclaim your homosexuality. You would have been completely ostracized. He's so lucky to be growing up during these enlightened times. So lucky." Here *The Onion* indicates that the current climate is much more conducive to the homosexual population than earlier years, so the dad must live through his son’s open homosexual experience since he married a woman and remains closeted. The piece gives no indication that the father will one day come out; readers may therefore infer that he never will. Other articles feature closeted men simply living in denial of their
sexuality. In “Area Man Experimenting,” a 26-year-old heterosexual named Michael Litwin, who describes himself as “99 percent straight” with “23 male partners and one female partner,” is still trying to shirk his identity as a gay man; he constantly talks about the woman he will one day marry, but laments that he just hasn’t found the right girl yet. Such pieces invite readers to ponder why homosexuals still feel the need to hide their identity in this contemporary age. These articles in particular do not often make statements about society’s lack of acceptance of homosexuals, but through the stories of closeted men, The Onion shows that our society still incites fear within those who have a homosexual identity; they marry women despite their secret desires and hide the truth from the rest of the world. Hence, The Onion’s articles that primarily use irony as an argumentative tactic make more subtle commentary about the state of the world with regard to its acceptance of the LGBT population.

Deadpan presentation, a subset of irony, also exemplifies this humor technique: it delivers sobering rebukes toward societal norms or specific people. While this tactic showed up less frequently, it exemplifies The Onion’s editorial power when forgoing more complex techniques for a straightforward message. Examples of this strategy include articles like “Best Part Of Gay 12-Year-Old’s Day Half Hour Spent Eating Lunch Alone On Staircase” (3/13/2012) or “Nation's 10-Year-Old Boys: 'If You See Someone Raping Us, Please Call The Police’” (11/28/2011). In the first example, the homosexual boy describes his preference of having his sandwich by himself on the staircase because “it’s safe and quiet, and I get to enjoy my lunch.” Likewise, “Nation’s 10-Year-Old Boys” includes passages like “And by the way,
under no circumstances is it ever okay for an adult to rape a 10-year-old boy, so you really can't go wrong by calling the police when something like that happens.”2 These pieces, while having incongruous or absurd setups, do not hesitate to deliver a very strong, measured message. When it comes to calling out egregious facets of our society, *The Onion* opts to use deadpan irony—an often unfunny tactic—to clearly assert its viewpoint. (As discussed in the next chapter, in certain instances, *The Onion* chooses to prioritize its argument over its humor.) Such articles sincerely ask us to take another look at the topic or issue at hand. They especially draw our attention to the journalistic ideal of objectivity. In the case of the articles noted above, journalistic restriction requires reporters to tell the story in such a way that victims of crimes or other hardships remain in question or forgotten. While the legal system or societal norms take years to sort things out and provide any sort of justice to be had, *The Onion* very quickly swoops in and takes a position, often defending those who have no voice to do so. Thus *The Onion’s* irony stabilizes our understanding of its general framework and adds understanding to the techniques discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

**Reversal**

With *The Onion’s* ironic view of truth as a touchstone, comic reversals fall right in line with its editorial strategy. Using reversals, *The Onion* consistently emphasizes the absurdity of real social issues by creating fictional worlds of equal

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2 Further discussion of this example can be found in chapter three.
preposterousness. Like a well-written fantasy novel, articles employing reversals frequently take us to alternate realities through fictional narratives, in which the world has completely turned backwards. *The Onion* shows readers that underlying truths can more clearly emerge when mirrored or inverted by an alternative lens, even if they appear ludicrous at first blush. Upon closer evaluation, these fake worlds actually appear spookily similar to the real one. As Simon Weaver writes, “In a reverse comic discourse a further semantic layer is added to the basic rhetorical structure of humour… the placing of reversal in a comic incongruity increases the structural potential for generating semantic movement” (Weaver, 34). “Small Town Holds Annual Gay Shame Parade” (08/08/2007) epitomizes reversals’ ability to emphasize a rhetorical standpoint. This article describes a small Nebraska town’s yearly event in which “the whole town turns out to enjoy Nebraska's famous summer sunshine, sample foods, browse the craft bazaar, and shame homosexuals for their repulsive, decadent behavior." The remaining paragraphs detail the parade’s spectacular events, from banners that read "Burn in the Eternal Flames of Hell!" to balloons with frowny faces on them, culminating in the finale, where “local music teacher Colin Atherton was marched past the county line and told never, ever to return.” Reversals play a key role here in adding a layer of understanding on top of the given scenario. Instead of covering a happy small town celebration, *The Onion* showcases a parade marked with hostility and aggression. “Small Town” showcases how absurdly cruel and vitriolic those who ostracize homosexuals can act, and depicts their attitude in a very negative light. Such a reversal draws from the power differential between the traditional media
gatekeepers and passive consumers. Its articles shift this control, taking away the mouthpiece from those with societal influence, and empowering the voice of the average “Area Man.” Reversals, then, not only allow *The Onion* to add its own argumentative layer depicting the absurdity of reality, but also act as a response to a so-called democratizing system that has silenced the masses that it serves. Through these demonstrations, *The Onion* highlights institutional hypocrisies and ugly truths while also questioning our social norms, including the prescribed power dynamics of media and its consumers.

One of these ugly and controversial topics tackled by reversals received widespread national attention at the beginning of the 21st century: Catholic priest sex scandals. These travesties included case after case of sexual abuse committed by Catholic priests, primarily against altar boys. While both local churches and the Vatican responded to the events by issuing politically correct statements and downplaying the accusations, church members and opponents alike argued that church authorities did not take valiant enough stands in punishing the priests who committed these crimes (“Roman Catholic Church”). *The Onion* also decided to call out the church’s handling of the situation. “Pope Forgives Molested Children,” (6/22/02), an approximately 900-word piece with a photo of Pope John Paul II surrounded by young boys, attacks both the Vatican and its followers for their respective roles in this issue. The setting of the environment echoes reality: various sex scandals involving young boys molested by priests. But here, the pope has chosen to “forgive these children for their misdeeds.” Through this first and most obvious use of reversal, *The Onion* argues
that the church clearly cares more about its own image than the safety of the children harmed by the abuse, and that it will protect its own priests rather than acknowledge the horrific acts that they have committed. Instead of putting the spotlight on and shaming the priests who deserve it, the real church leaders merely transferred the accused to other parishes (where they could commit additional crimes) and attempted to shift media focus away from the events. *The Onion* reacts to this ludicrous method of handling the crimes by countering with an equally ludicrous notion: the children are actually to blame. Through Pope John Paul II’s fictional words, the article shows the absurdity of the church’s reactions: “We must send a clear message to these hundreds—perhaps thousands—of children whose sinful ways have tempted so many of the church’s servants into lustful violation of their holy vows of celibacy.”’ This excerpt reverses the societal premise that victims of sexual abuse are never to blame, and underscores that the real Catholic Church is making assertions just as ludicrous. In the piece, the church operates under a guise of forgiveness and following of biblical lessons, but ends up blaming the children for the crimes; the victims are condemned. And in reality, by taking little to no action in protecting its children, the real Vatican church has acted just as badly: it turned its back on them.

“Pope Forgive" goes on to also criticize the Catholics who so willingly follow the decisions of church leaders despite their questionable responses to such travesties. The article quotes priests and Catholics who react to the pope’s statements, both negatively and positively. But the negative reactions do not offer the voice of reason, as one might expect. They instead serve to further the preposterous reversal of blame
presented at the outset. One “concerned Baltimore priest” quoted in the article dissents from the pope’s forgiveness of the children, stating, “‘What kind of a message is the pope sending today's children? That it's okay to seduce priests?’” This ridiculous assertion satirizes those who endorse even more questionable moral viewpoints.

However, *The Onion* does not argue that the state of society is as bad as the one depicted in its reversals, but rather that it is perhaps only a few steps from becoming so. *The Onion* invites us to imagine a world in which an institution claiming millions of followers worldwide could not only conceal and protect the perpetrators of heinous crimes but also allow them to continue to commit them under its watch, and asks us to evaluate our reality with the same critical lens. A seemingly backward headline grabs our attention, but further scrutiny reveals that the actual headlines in our daily newspapers speak to events just as appalling. While the subject of this piece is the Catholic Church, *The Onion*’s critique could also apply to other institutions with comparable amounts of influence and power within society, such as behemoth corporations and political bigwigs. *The Onion* invites us to reconsider how much societal influence we should allow them to obtain. Additionally, its commentary stands up for all those who have been wronged by the Catholic Church’s actions.

While the above example censured the Catholic Church as a whole, *The Onion* continues its criticism of religion through reversals on a more micro level in “Gay Teen Worried He Might Be Christian” (1/12/10). It portrays the right-wing Christian fundamentalist identity as more abhorrent than a homosexual one and argues that it is ultimately more harmful to society. Since many fundamentalist Christian
organizations condemn homosexuality as both unnatural and immoral, The Onion’s reversal asserts that being a right wing Christian actually provokes more strange and questionable behavior than homosexuality does. This 600-word article with a photo of a stoic high schooler focuses on the fictional Lucas Faber, an “ordinary gay teen . . . member of his school’s swing choir [who] enjoys shopping at the mall, and has sex with other males his age.” From the outset, the article presents Faber’s homosexual identity as clearly natural and normal, including details such as his having a steady boyfriend of several months. But the thrust of the piece deals with Faber’s “confusion” upon feeling that “deep down, he may be a fundamentalist, right-wing Christian.” It discusses Faber’s various perversions and obsessions borne out of the Christian identity, from censoring library books to organizing book burnings. References to the Christian campaign for schools to incorporate intelligent design into classrooms and to the notorious right-wing university Oral Roberts University serve as The Onion’s supporting evidence that fundamentalist Christians practice irrational and socially detrimental thought; The Onion portrays the activities of fundamentalist groups as actually wrong. American society generally agrees that censorship and book burnings violate freedoms of the press and thought; while extremist groups of the religious and political sorts and their demonstrations often attract media attention, they incur criticism as zealots. The Onion counters such zealotry with reason. In addition, The Onion’s largely liberal audience agrees upon various social controversies such as homosexuals’ right to marry, the right to have an abortion, and the separation of church and state in public schools, general agreements that facilitate the article’s
humor. By assigning these “odd behaviors” to an otherwise rather “normal teenager,” The Onion emphasizes that those who should truly undergo criticism for their lifestyles are the Christians, not homosexuals. However, The Onion does not always fight fairly; it simply makes fun of certain Christian practices that seem absurd to a nonreligious person, but are simply facets of the faithful. For example, it references Faber watching the 700 Club and hiding copies of Left Behind series novels in his drawer. While these details do not necessarily add to the argument posed by the setup of the joke, they add easily visualized images that intensify the comic incongruity of the reversals.

Other Onion articles similarly utilize reversals to highlight the ridiculous in other topics, and to emphasize the insincerity and irrationality of those in power. “Congressman Offers Preemptive Apology For Extramarital Affair” (03/04/2009) and “‘Gays Too Precious To Risk In Combat,’ Says General” (08/13/2007) focus on political sex scandals and the justifications for excluding homosexuals from the military, respectively. “Congressman Offers” satirizes politicians’ apologies for their infidelities. The video shows Rep. Gregory White at the podium of a press conference, saying, “Of course I will wish I had not made the mistake I will now spend several hours making, but sadly I’m currently too blinded by greed and lust to care about or consider the consequences of my actions.” Because the situation has been reversed, and the congressman is apologizing before he commits the acts, the remarks are humorous. Since the press conference in the video piece comes before the extramarital offense, we see that the congressman is willing to undergo the humiliation even
though he has to describe it in front of the watching public—making his “apology” merely a formality. This satire points directly to a factor that many assume when hearing these men apologize in reality: they were willing to risk getting caught and having to undergo public humiliation in order to have these affairs. However, the humor also implies that the public believes these politicians do not actually feel remorse, but apologize to the public out of a feeling of necessity: they do so to save their careers. By depicting a politician as a disingenuous opportunist, *The Onion* speaks for the citizens who distrust their political representatives.

Further discrediting statements made by government representatives, “Gays Too Precious” satirizes the ridiculous reasons used to justify the exclusion of homosexuals from the military. Here, the explanation is that they are too valuable as members of society to be subjected to the horrifying facets of war, even if they want to. The fictional General McBrayer of the U.S. military says, “The gays of America are the only group left untouched by war. They’re special, pure and rare like a gleaming diamond or a snow-white colt. We must protect them.” This specific excerpt addresses the negative stereotypes often ascribed to the homosexual population, from sexual perversions to diseases. In reality, the military excluded gays from combat for such prejudiced and hateful reasons, and the inversion of this attitude in the piece makes for a humorous incongruity. However, it more importantly emphasizes that the rationale behind excluding homosexuals is as absurd as claiming, as McBrayer does, that they are so precious that the life of one gay man is worth that of seven straight men.
Similar examples of reversals in *Onion* content continue to bash certain unsavory populations and controversial legal rulings to illustrate the need for a more comprehensive news dissemination process. “Ex-Pedophile Shares Tips On How To Make Your Kids Less Attractive” (08/06/2009), “College Basketball Star Heroically Overcomes Tragic Rape He Committed” (02/09/2011) and “Pedophile Nervous For First Day Of School” (08/31/2008) all target those who commit heinous crimes, while “Vatican Reverses Stance On Gay Marriage After Meeting Tony And Craig” (07/13/2011) and “Gay Couple Feels Pressured To Marry” (06/02/2004) scoff at aspects of the gay marriage debate. In the examples analyzed earlier, *The Onion* wields reversals not only to showcase societal hypocrisy, but also to revolt against the gatekeeper dynamic of traditional media. Throughout history journalists have had the power to judge and choose which news should grace the front page or nightly reports, but today citizens increasingly have a role in determining news focus. In this evolving media framework, consumers have a voice in the newsgathering and distribution process through comments, blogs, citizen journalists, social media and the like. Today, the internet has helped news consumers become stalwart additions to reporting. *The Onion* demonstrates both the need for, and the move away from, a traditional gatekeeper format with its reversals. It provides a resistant voice for consumers who have been silenced by those with more societal influence, and encourages these individuals to press onward against the corporate media behemoths. Articles using reversals unearth widely held thoughts that may not appear in the traditional media setting but prove necessary to a discussion at hand. These forgotten details further
endorse the inclusion of citizens in both the newsgathering and dissemination process. Through reversals, The Onion supports this seizure of news by the people.

**Reframing**

Just as The Onion reverses reality to call attention to societal shortcomings, so it reframes reality for similar reasons. This tactic appears inspired by the media’s attempt to provide context and greater understanding when reporting. In examples of The Onion’s reframing, certain controversial claims fall apart once applied to analogous situations; this deconstruction invites us to then question similar remarks raised in the mainstream media. As Amber Day attests, satire attempts “to reframe the terms of discussion and/or to temporarily hijack the discussion out of the hands of authority . . . not just to dissent but to shift the topics and terms of the debate, often attempting to undermine the power of the dominant narrative” (Day, 186-187). The Onion also reframes debates to expose the holes and fallacies of certain discussions. By swapping out the main players, people and scenarios involved in the real situations, and replacing them with fictitious alternatives, The Onion creates a humorous setup that follows through with an argumentative punch that both knocks out the target and continues to critique elements of the media.

As noted above, The Onion has no qualms about targeting divisive subjects. Accordingly, the topic of sexual assault best exemplifies its comic reframing. “Raped Environment Led Polluters On, Defense Attorneys Argue” (1/21/1998), uses the word environment in place of the more commonly expected woman or victim in the
headline, immediately shifting the focus of our attention. The 650-word article describes how a development company took advantage of the forest, using much the same terminology from arguments over sexual assaults. "While, obviously, it is extremely unfortunate that this forest was raped, it should have known better than to show off its lush greenery and tall, strong trees in the presence of my client if it didn't want anything to happen," says the defense attorney quoted in the article. He goes on to question why the forest was off in such a “remote spot if they weren’t looking for trouble?” Other familiar allegations appear, such as the forest having a reputation for being easily exploited and that its fragrant flowers were clearly meant to attract people to them. By changing the victim from a person to the environment, The Onion underscores some of the most startling and fallacious discourse surrounding the issue of sexual assault. Throughout history and even today, some people view the issue with a “victim-blaming” perspective, wherein the female walking alone or who dressed provocatively is somehow to blame for the fact that she was attacked. Clearly, when we look at this issue as applied to a forest, these arguments appear ridiculous, and their application to the situation reflects poorly on those attempting to make that case. Hence, not only does The Onion’s argument reaffirm the obvious innocence of a victim in a rape, but it also condemns the attacker in the situation. Conversely, the reframing in this example puts a fresh spin on deforestation as well. The Onion presents lumberjacking akin to rape, depicting the industry as one that commits crimes against humanity. This metaphor is a familiar one, and here The Onion reframes it literally, presenting the elimination of a natural habitat for business purposes as literal,
sexual violence. It furthers the idea of the environment as pure and innocent life ravaged by the hands of greed. Such criticism also offers the opportunity for reevaluating the journalistic presentation of heated issues. In the objective news tradition, journalists try to include positions from both sides of an argument. This also gives space and attention to those who have backward or downright offensive viewpoints. By reframing these familiar yet somewhat illogical opinions within the context of a raped environment, *The Onion* reminds us that, although these individuals might have space in legitimate venues to spout their opinions, we should not necessarily regard them as valid.

*The Onion* employs a similar strategy in “Nation's Gays Demand Right To Library Cards” (1/15/07), where, instead of the right to get married, homosexuals are vying for the right to check out books from the library. Through this alternative frame, readers see how many of the same justifications for giving homosexuals library cards also apply to their right to marry one another. The parallels between a universal right to carry a library card and other civil rights such as voting arise in passages such as the following: “Leaders of the library-cards-for-gays movement . . . liken their plight to American women's long and historic struggle for borrowing privileges.” It references other rights and privileges as well, such as driving cars and mailing packages—obviously used by straight and gay people alike. The article also brings in charges often leveled at the homosexual movement for marriage, such as “to issue them the same library cards as a regular American citizen would demean what our nation's library cards stand for." Finally, we even see the library card equivalent of civil
unions, in the form of a “Short-Term Government Literacy Loan” card, which “would have higher late-return penalties, shorter borrowing times, and may not be recognized as valid by all libraries within the municipality in which it was issued.” Replacing the gay marriage issue with library privileges highlights how the reasons for denying gays the right to marry fall short of logical soundness. *The Onion* equates library cards and marriage licenses as similar civil documents to show how it does not make sense to withhold one and grant the other. This frame then poses the question of how these laws continue to exist, even with logic and concrete examples demonstrating their flaws. As in the “Raped Environment” story, *The Onion* expresses that we should not allow the frames around an issue to govern our perceptions of a topic. New but similar frames present the preposterousness in a striking light and invite readers to transfer this realization to their consumption of the real news.

Reframing proves itself as yet another of *The Onion*’s humor techniques attuned to media elements. This tactic draws from both the media’s aim to provide context for stories, and its inherent frame as discourse, and sometimes, meta-discourse. With these points of reference to past events, current discussions and alternative viewpoints, the media seek to give news consumers a better sense of the history, scope and impact of world events. *The Onion* reframes its content to replicate the contextual box that envelops real articles and video news pieces. However, these boxes sometimes fall short of their intent, only providing a fraction of the context necessary to fully grasp the gravity of a situation. Because of the increasingly fast paced, quick-hit nature of contemporary news, journalists have even less of an
opportunity than in previous years to provide these necessary messages, requiring that consumers have a wider base of common knowledge than they did in the pre-internet age.

Additionally, *The Onion* utilizes reframing as a means to comment upon the intrinsic frame of news presentation and discussion in general. An event or topic presented via a headline or a broadcast piece instantly forces it into a journalistic frame with which we are familiar. This format causes events great and small, important and unimportant, to look the same. The hierarchy of their importance derives from the word count, placement on a page (web or paper) and length of time on air. However, all pieces of news still retain a similar feel because of the method of presentation. “Neighbors Believed Murderer Only Capable of Rape” (04/26/2000) targets this exact notion. The article reads much like a traditional news account after a murder has occurred. However, in this instance, the neighbors comment on just *how* criminal the neighbor seemed, as opposed to his appearing normal, quiet, private or any of the other standard descriptions used to describe a neighbor gone awry. Littered with quotes like "I'd never have suspected for a second that he had it in him to murder two innocent girls. Rape them, sure. But murder? No way," this *Onion* article comments upon the journalistic convention of using quotes to tell a story. Because the various neighbors echoed similar sentiments, the article became less about the murder and more about the neighbor’s capacity for crime. *The Onion* utilizes quotes to deliver its humor because of their understood journalistic role. Reframing then invites us to question these frames in our real news consumption, and how we use them to more
adequately understand current events. It also asks us to consider how these similarities in framing across topics affect the impact that this news has on us. Because of the standardization of news practices, the value or significance of a particular news piece has less of an opportunity for retention by consumers. As with The Onion’s framework, these closely mimicked media facets ensure that its critique comes across as incisively as possible.

**Exaggeration**

Although reframing certainly takes on one of the most important intrinsic qualities of news presentation, The Onion’s arguments formed via exaggeration brandish a power the size of these embellishments. In the rhetorical tradition of *reductio ad absurdum*, The Onion brings its readers to recognize illogic through hyperbolic scenarios. Lisa Colletta discusses how “The comic device of exaggeration comes from the traditional rhetorical strategy of showing how an opponent’s argument can lead to absurd conclusions if taken far enough” (Colletta, 861). Hence, this tactic exposes the fatal flaws and fallacies in the arguments The Onion opposes while still drawing from the current journalistic climate. U.S. media have progressed far beyond the time when a few newspapers and nightly network news programs decided what news the public will receive from day to day. Cable news networks teeming with niche programming and similarly narrow print publications now compete with news websites, blogs, *YouTube* videos, social media, tablets and smart phone applications. These myriad choices have yielded an increasingly self-selected and multitasking
news consumption process. The ability to choose one’s news has also led to the rise of opinion journalism, with a decrease in expectations of objectivity. Because more outlets now compete for our attention, news has had to become flashier, bolder, more attractive and more palatable. The media have had to adapt, and in so doing have increased the news’ entertainment value. *The Onion* uses this contemporary news feature as a springboard for the rest of its critiques.

We find a prime example of exaggeration in a video piece from the *Onion News Network* entitled “Conservatives Warn Quick Sex Change Only Barrier Between Gays, Marriage” (06/01/2009). By bringing the argument against gay marriage to an absurd level, *The Onion* demonstrates how irrational the discussion can get; juxtapose this scenario against real debates in which gay marriage proponents suggest that next people will marry their pets, and such videos are not far from reality. In this piece, anchor Theresa Nixon interviews a fictitious congressman named Gerald Iscoe, who is proposing legislation to prevent homosexuals from being able to have sex change operations to get married. He tells Theresa that “right now anywhere in this country a homosexual can just walk into a hospital, have their genitals removed or augmented and waltz out after just a few months of physical therapy, and then get married just like a heterosexual.” This initial premise sets up the exaggeration of the piece. It satirizes the claims against homosexual marriages, which often rely on the slippery slope fallacy. However, the piece’s setup does not just use exaggeration to set the tone; it also uses irony from the outset. The congressman presents the notion of getting a sex change as a very quick, easy solution to a problem. However, we know that the
process is very physically, emotionally and mentally painful. Thus, this incongruity within the setup of the initial joke strengthens the exaggerated arguments.

The perpetuation of this premise to an even more inflated state comes from Iscoe’s claim that, without such preventive legislation, eventually “lesbians and these gays [will] get together and enact some sort of penis-vagina exchange program.” As he speaks, the lower part of the screen reads, “Bill would stop ‘penis black market’ for marriage-crazed lesbians.” Here The Onion takes an already ridiculous premise and steps it up even further to intensify its argument. Now not only would gays and lesbians have the gender reassignment surgeries, but they would also form a sketchy underground market where they would sell and trade their genitals. By going beyond the initial—and already ridiculous—situation, The Onion satirizes those who use slippery slope arguments to argue that somehow gay marriage will eventually lead to people marrying their pets.

However, the deranged congressman’s speculations are not the only elements that make the narrative both humorous and argumentative; the newscast’s visuals also heighten the humor. At the beginning of the piece, when Iscoe describes the sex change surgery, the background shows a health website indicating the process in a step-by-step depiction very similar to those seen on real health websites. The banner across the top of the site reads, “The Transexual [sic] Plot.” This visual representation boils down the actual complexity of gender reassignment surgery to a few simple visuals, making the whole process seem as easy as following a recipe or a how-to article in a magazine. The incongruity between the visuals and the realities of the
process parallels the congressman’s opening statements, which claim that the whole process is simple and easy. Other visual elements used in the piece more closely mirror those in actual newscasts regarding homosexual rights. At one point, a picture of a sign outside of the New Testament Church flashes across the screen, with the words reading, “God Hates Surgically Augmented Genitals.” Other photos follow of various picketers holding signs with sentiments like “Tell gays to keep their penises on,” “check under the gown,” and “real marriage = real penis + real vagina.” These slogans depict the fictional public opinion regarding the issue, satirizing activists who often express their thoughts in very coarse ways. The visuals in this piece serve to further perpetuate the already absurdly exaggerated premise by highlighting the public backlash.

From the notion that “homosexuals [are] ‘a couple snips away from subverting marriage’” (as the crawl quips at the bottom of the screen), Iscoe then discusses the stipulations of his proposed bill to limit such transgressions. First, he would take away the funding from surgeons who perform the sex change surgeries. He would also require that all of the “men-women,” or those who have received the surgery, get a tattoo of a crudely drawn cartoon woman with a beard. Iscoe says, “Homosexuals will do anything to get this wedding certificate and we’ve got to stop them.” While the two proposed parts of the bill—especially the latter—are obviously absurd and in keeping with the overall tone of the article, Iscoe’s following quote sums up a common sentiment among conservatives who wish to stop the homosexual population from gaining the right to marry. This theme is common throughout long form *Onion*
materials; *The Onion* offers an earnest line or two at the end of a piece to drive home its point. In this case, the ultimate point is the demonization of homosexuals, framing them as villains with an evil plot. The rhetoric used in real discussion of this controversial issue tends to utilize words like “gay agenda” to further isolate the population as a set of people who will stop at nothing to ensure that they get what they want. Thus, from concept and language to tone and visuals, the entirety of this piece satirizes the right wing claims of homosexual conspiracy surrounding marital rights. In addition, it emphasizes how little these conservatives seem to understand about the hardships undergone by homosexuals.

While this particular piece hinged on legislation yet to be passed, *The Onion* capitalizes on the passage of new laws to use its exaggeration techniques as well. In articles such as “Massachusetts Supreme Court Orders All Citizens to Gay Marry” (2/25/04), “New Hampshire Passes Law Forcing Old People to Watch Gays Marry” (6/17/09) and “Repeal Of ’Don't Ask, Don't Tell’ Paves Way For Gay Sex Right On Battlefield, Opponents Fantasize” (7/12/10), we see laws as a jumping-off point for making other statements. In the first two examples, *The Onion* satirizes the conservative argument that allowing homosexuals to marry will somehow undermine and tarnish what opponents term the “real meaning” of marriage. Thus, both articles exaggerate the ramifications of both laws so that they actually do affect people outside of the homosexual population. They also suggest conspiracies on the part of the homosexuals. This notion is summed up in the “Massachusetts Supreme Court” article with a representative’s statement:
“Simply allowing consenting gay adults the same rights as heterosexuals was never the point. By forcing everyone in the state into a gay marriage, we're setting the stage for our more pressing hidden agendas: mandatory sodomy and, in due time, the legalization of bestiality and pedophilia.”

Obviously, none of these outcomes is actually an aim of the homosexual marriage lobby, but the article pokes fun at how such paranoid fantasies are actually referenced as legitimate reasons to restrict the marriage rights of gay Americans.

Exaggeration provides *The Onion* with a great deal of humorous and rhetorical power. As evidenced above, humor in these pieces derives from absurdity brought on by hyperbole. Yet this technique’s grounding in reality and rhetorical strategy allows it to more forcibly assert its viewpoint. *The Onion* emphasizes that the news has become a spectacle by demonstrating its sensationalist and excessive qualities. Here it shows us that the media climate has become one of audience appeal via newer, bigger flashier tactics that have cheapened the news consumption process. *The Onion* argues that we have become an attention-deficit mass, to whom only the most fantastical or flamboyant actually arouses interest. In this current fight for attention, *The Onion* shows how contemporary journalistic ideals have fallen by the wayside, victim to business strategies and an information-overloaded public.
Other techniques

Although the aforementioned techniques proved the most rhetorically relevant in my sample of *Onion* commentary, several others are also noteworthy. Double entendre appeared in “Teen Accurately Describes Robert Mapplethorpe Exhibit As 'Gay’” (01/11/2007) and “Brutal Gang Rape Gives Screenplay More 'Punch’” (11/10/1999), doling out criticism of fine art pretention and the film industry’s penchant for violence. Two *Onion* articles also utilized extremely graphic and shocking descriptions of sex and/or violence. “Second-Grader Expelled From Sex Farm” (10/16/1996) included a passage wherein “Controversy erupted Monday at an area sex farm/white slavery compound when second-grader Tim Hildemen was expelled for refusing to felch a llama.” Such articles tended not to have a larger rhetorical argument, but their shocking details offered a jarring and sometimes humorous effect. Finally, a small portion of *Onion* articles had an amusing but less rhetorically significant style. Pieces such as “Name Of Gay Bar Should Have Been Clearer” (06/19/2002) or “No One At Porn Site Responding To Area Man's Bad Link Report” (06/21/2006) extend one-liners into humorous briefs but tend not to serve any purpose larger than amusement. Thus, while these other examples factor into the overall picture of *The Onion*’s humor, they do not add much to an understanding of *The Onion*’s satirical strategy.

With the heroic aims of its content as the backdrop, *The Onion* is the warrior for the reasonable person inside of all of us. While it typically stands with the liberal population of our society, its humorous critiques show that, at the end of it all, *The
*The Onion* truly does just make fun of “our dumb world,” as its editors titled the paper’s atlas. As Amber Day points out, *The Onion* and its satirical counterparts specialize in “highlighting contradictions, inconsistencies, and absurdities; mining them for their humor; and even highlighting their own flaws and fakeries” (187). While it uses humor techniques with the main aim of inciting laughter, it clandestinely pokes holes in the strongholds of society. To *Onion* writers, we live in a world teeming with ludicrous ideas, backwards notions and questionable assumptions. Some of these we challenge, but others go unnoticed. From individual struggles with homosexuality to international crimes against children by religious institutions, *The Onion* asks its readers, “Do you see this happening? And are you okay with it?” The audience’s answers to these subtly posed questions lie outside of the purview of my research, yet *The Onion*’s gumption in posing them in the first place bolster the argument formulated by Stephanie Koziski about standup comedians who

> “discover, analyze and account for the discrepancies found in their observations of how things *should* operate in the culture but *don’t*. The comedian as licensed spokesperson can grasp and articulate contradictions in the culture of which other Americans may be unaware or reluctant to openly acknowledge” (99).

Like the standup comedian who finds these cultural points of fault, *The Onion* acknowledges the areas of society that need improvement. While it does not conceptualize solutions to these problems, it asks its readership to do so by framing them with techniques inspired by the current media. However, as we grow to
recognize these strategies in use, and realize that their function hinders the process of news presentation and consumption rather than facilitates it, we become increasingly media literate individuals. So while we remember Morreall’s warnings that satire is not a weapon of revolutionaries, we also see that it can encourage the initial kernel of change: an informed, critical society. If we begin thinking about The Onion as a means of promoting media literacy, suddenly its commentary does not fall into a forgettable category of satirical humor. Instead, it serves as both a necessary and palatable purveyor of education. The Onion writes its content for an audience capable of acknowledging shortcomings but also recognizing that a hearty laugh can also inspire a furrowed brow.
Chapter 3

The Root of it All: Media and Culture Analysis

As a senior writer for *The Onion*, Todd Hanson laments jokes in which he does not recognize the larger message. In his view, witticisms lacking a purposeful construction or larger claim do not fit into *The Onion’s* mission. Chapter two highlighted the building blocks of these greater arguments: *The Onion’s* comic techniques, which often derive from journalistic conventions. These strategies ensure that the jokes not only have a target, but also employ a meaningful way of getting to it. *The Onion*’s humor is a deliberate creation. After examining the inner workings of *Onion* content, we see that *The Onion’s* humor structure seems to echo a familiar tactic: building arguments. As this chapter will demonstrate, *The Onion’s* commentary and claims bolster their veracity with comic techniques, especially in satires of real events. While the last chapter discussed several examples of *Onion* humor applied to broader social or cultural themes—religion, homosexuality, rape, etc.—this chapter applies these concepts to specific events, often those that sparked significant media attention. From controversial gay rights laws to a presidential sex scandal to an alleged college sports child abuse cover up, *The Onion* accomplishes various pedagogical goals with its insightful—and often incisive—sense of humor. However, *The Onion* can falter if its ideological standpoint blinds its critical eye. This chapter will also showcase instances where *The Onion* has attacked with ideology and with rhetoric, ultimately determining that when its arguments are strong, *The Onion* can dismantle
inadequate media and vilify deceitful figures. These examples then underscore The Onion’s true mission: offering the public a cynical yet corrective lens through which to view the world.

I am not the first to look at The Onion’s application as a distiller of current events. Some scholars have specifically studied The Onion’s coverage of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, ultimately concluding that The Onion employs a great deal of narrative framing that might disengage its audience from politics (Sheagley, et al., 92). Others, such as Paul Achter, have examined The Onion’s response to 9/11, arguing that Onion content creates a carnivalesque “second world” that invites emotional response and critical discourse that the real news does not provide. He concludes, “Because [news parody] is built on the first world of official discourses in this basic sense, news parody is critically distanced from and complementary to that world” (Achter, 286). Thus, The Onion serves many of the same functions as a current events critic that it does as a cultural critic: it constructs divergent ways of thinking about a topic, often leading to criticism of it. Within the realm of real events, The Onion becomes all the more precise in its targets, calling out specific individuals or incidents at which it levels its criticism. Its critiques, reprimands and jokes aim at familiar societal icons, from the President to major athletic figures to specific media members, in order to then offer conclusions about wider concepts or ongoing occurrences. In fact, within its satires The Onion offers analysis of specific real-world events, with its ideological underpinnings and humor techniques accomplishing different rhetorical effects in each instance. But depending on its politically charged
investment in the topic, The Onion can shine or fall short of making a strong case. The examples in this chapter will highlight the gamut of Onion potential, from angry characterizations to hard-hitting critiques.

**Fighting for LGBT Rights**

This first set of The Onion’s real event coverage exemplifies how the publication’s underlying opinions can greatly affect its rhetorical strategies and accomplishments. When ideologically impassioned, the arguments are weak, as in The Onion’s coverage of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) issues. Here, The Onion’s fervent support of the gay rights movement causes departures from its characteristically logical claims. Because The Onion does not claim to strive for objectivity like its real counterpart, it is free to endorse the gay rights movement and makes no secret of it. Taking this bias into account, the LGBT articles analyzed here underscore The Onion’s harsh and sometimes unfair methods of attacking its opposition. These tactics paint gay rights detractors as closeted bigots, wielders of scare tactics and completely oblivious to the lives and struggles of homosexuals. Nevertheless, The Onion’s invocation of various criticisms invites further reflection about the reasoning and rhetoric used in gay rights debates and laws, regardless of overall fairness. As a result, these emotionally grounded claims might fall short of their intended goals, they still retain traces of the rhetorical power that gains traction in later examples.
Reacting to the intense deliberations around some significant gay rights milestones occurring in the early 2000’s, The Onion joined the emotionally charged media conversation. The Onion uses various comic strategies in covering the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT) to negatively characterize those in opposition to expanding homosexual rights. In this case its criticisms derive less from sincere, valid holes in the opposing side’s argument than from political leaning. These examples characterize conservative politicians as motivated by fear and ignorant to the complexities of the homosexual plight. While The Onion slips into an uncharacteristic rhetorical method in these instances, it still accomplishes its aim of casting a pall of distrust upon those with the opposing viewpoint.

The familiar outcries of gay rights opponents sounded in 2011 when President Barack Obama signed the repeal of DADT. It became an official policy on December 23, 1993 under President Bill Clinton, who had campaigned on a platform promising to allow all those who wished to serve in the military—regardless of their sexual orientation—the ability to do so. The policy was largely regarded as a compromise between the military and the LGBT community (Poe, 78). The repeal officially took effect on September 20, 2011, and the military underwent a training process so as to minimize the potential disruptions brought on by the change (Bumiller). Regarding the coverage of the important legal event, a national news reporter for the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), a non-governmental media monitoring association, said that “much of the mainstream media has so far succeeded in providing fair and accurate reporting from a range of perspectives” (Seager). Other
monitoring agencies, such as *Media Matters for America*, countered that the media had included far too few members from the LGBT community in its coverage (Frisch). Overall the media covered the repeal in a positive light.

*The Onion* used this political step in the right direction as an opportunity to poke fun at those who opposed the repeal, depicting them as closeted bigots with simplistic understandings of hardships faced by homosexuals. “Repeal Of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' Paves Way For Gay Sex Right On Battlefield, Opponents Fantasize” (7/12/2011) makes fun of the supporters of DADT who maintained that the continuation of closeted gays in the military was necessary for the effectiveness of the military as a whole. This longer, 750-word piece characterizes the DADT supporters as closeted homosexuals who, in justifying their stance against openly homosexual people serving in the military, actually get lost in their own homosexual fantasies. This theme continually presents itself throughout the article as it quotes various politicians defending their opposition. Rep. Louie Gohmert (R-TX) says, "'We're sending our soldiers out there with a mission, and that mission is to protect this country . . . If this is repealed, what's to stop all-night sex romps from breaking out while U.S. servicemen are hiding in a bunker, or crawling around an irrigation ditch bathed only by the light of the moon, or, say, the dozens of other situations I've already thought through in elaborate detail?'" This excerpt portrays the DADT supporters as homophobic yet homosexual. The most accurate example of this strategy comes toward the end of the article:
“Many active-duty service members told reporters allowing gay individuals to be open about their sexuality would result in great discomfort among platoons overseas. ‘The last thing I need after a 12-hour reconnaissance patrol is to know I'm hitting the showers with some guy who might be checking me out and who might, after seeing what I have to work with, find himself wondering if I too long for the firm yet tender embrace of another man,’ Army Cpl. Dale Montgomery said. ‘So, in conclusion, what were we talking about again?”'

In these excerpts, *The Onion* references the many cases in which an anti-gay congressman turns out to be gay himself and paints all gay rights opponents with the same broad brush of homophobia. While obviously this claim is a characterization based on past events, *The Onion* posits that those opposing gay rights have deep-seated psychological issues with the topic, rather than reasoned, legitimate ones. Rendering these politicians secretly homosexual, *The Onion* drives further ire toward them, but without any valid backing. While in reality, there are myriad reasons that people—politicians among them—oppose certain gay rights movements, *The Onion* homes in on those that derive from the psychological or illogical. With no editorial necessity to offer space for these potentially legitimate reasons, *The Onion* instead chooses to paint them in a distasteful light, so as to more sturdily express its comic, hyperbolic viewpoint.

Despite its penchant for sweeping generalizations, *The Onion* also draws out some earnest criticisms of legal oversimplifications in a different piece discussing the
repeal. A brief, 160-word news piece entitled “Straight, Gay Service Members Looking Forward To Asking, Telling Come September” (8/11/2011) mocks the boiling down of sexual prejudice exemplified by DADT’s crafters and supporters. The story’s lead reads, “With Don't Ask, Don't Tell, the policy on gay men and women serving in the military, set to expire Sept. 20, tens of thousands of U.S. service members are reportedly busy gearing up for marathon sessions of asking and telling.”

The remainder of the short news article makes additional plays on the headline, with quotes from a Cpl. Kevin Lassally saying, “Finally, after years of being silent about my sexual orientation, I can get all this built-up telling out of my system.” Here, The Onion criticizes the insensitive simplicity of the DADT policy. While many looked upon the mandate as a great compromise between liberals and conservatives, The Onion counters that it actually proved incredibly insensitive toward those who had to serve underneath the statute. To The Onion, reducing all of the emotional and physical stress of hiding one’s sexuality into a pithy and oft-quoted phrase such as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” completely missed the point of creating an environment of equality. Although homosexuals had the ability to serve in the military under DADT, they still did not have the freedom to represent themselves as they truly were, lest they risk a dishonorable discharge.

“Straight, Gay Service Members” criticizes the policy itself and those who crafted it by emphasizing its underlying ignorance. Presenting an exaggerated scenario where soldiers will instantly start asking and telling without inhibition demonstrates that a lot more must change in order to make the military culture more gay friendly
and that the repeal of a mandate does not signify that the prejudice has disappeared. However, as in the previous example, *The Onion* relies on a simplified characterization to make its point, rather than a nuanced and well-developed claim. Like other comic journalism, such as *The Daily Show*, *The Onion* relies on shared values with its audience so that the humor packs greater potency (Self, 64). While the media and American population celebrated the repeal, *The Onion* took the time to shift the gaze to problems in need of improvement. It highlights the necessity for changing the military’s attitude and culture along with the policies that accompany it. *The Onion* uses a combination of logic-based rhetoric and ideological characterizations to create an ugly opposition.

Coming closer to its usually strong, reasoned criticisms, *The Onion*’s coverage of the Massachusetts judicial ruling that allowed gay marriage uses more traditional argumentative methods than the previous examples to logically unseat its opposition. On May 17, 2004 the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts ruled that the denial of homosexuals’ right to marry was unconstitutional, becoming the first state in the US to grant homosexual couples marriage licenses ("Marriage and Civil Unions, Same-Sex," 991). After the ruling, LGBT activists celebrated while gay marriage opponents protested the court’s decision. In the first year following the ruling, more than 6,100 couples married in Massachusetts (Smith). After the Massachusetts decision, media coverage portrayed the gay marriage debate as a battle of cultures, and “failed to evaluate the rhetoric on both sides of the aisle concerning legal questions of rights” (Hollar). Hollar charges that the media actually favored the gay movement in its
coverage, even though it focuses more on the cultural component than on the legal one. Because of this ideological parallel in favor of gay rights between the media and *The Onion*, it focuses on criticizing the gay marriage detractors who, in its opinion, pose illegitimate arguments. *The Onion* attempts to take down such anti-gay sentiments by emphasizing their lack of logical grounding. Ultimately, *The Onion* does so to show its audience that these viewpoints—despite having many continued supporters and much airtime—are not valid.

By repurposing and exaggerating the traditional marriage supporters’ arguments, *The Onion* demonstrates the logical shortcomings of their positions, which rely on slippery slope reasoning. “Massachusetts Supreme Court Orders All Citizens To Gay Marry” (2/25/2004) exemplifies *The Onion*’s strategy of mimicking the slippery slope claims, emphasizing their logical fallacies and hyperbolic qualities. The piece begins, “Justices of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled 5-2 Monday in favor of full, equal, and mandatory gay marriages for all citizens. The order nullifies all pre-existing heterosexual marriages and lays the groundwork for the 2.4 million compulsory same-sex marriages that will take place in the state by May 15.” In this fictional world, not only will homosexuals marry, but the rest of the Massachusetts population will also have to enter into a same-sex marriage. This scenario satirizes those who claim that gay marriage will detrimentally affect those who hold “traditional marriage” as an ideal. This setup encapsulates the nightmares of gay marriage opponents by showing the absurdity of a mandate brought to an even further extreme: all citizens would have to marry someone of the same sex. “Massachusetts
Supreme” becomes all the more inflated as “Any citizen who is not gay-married or is still in an illegal heterosexual relationship after that date will be arrested and tried for non-support.” This further depicts the absurdity of how opponents envision a world with gay marriage affecting them. As the article draws to a close, Rep. Michael Festa states, “This is a victory, not only for our state, but for America . . . Simply allowing consenting gay adults the same rights as heterosexuals was never the point. By forcing everyone in the state into a gay marriage, we're setting the stage for our more pressing hidden agendas: mandatory sodomy and, in due time, the legalization of bestiality and pedophilia.” This excerpt brings up some of the vitriolic stigmas assigned to the homosexual population; such extreme scare tactics have isolated this group while also justifying withholding certain rights from them. Opponents of gay marriage utilize the “and what next?” defense to claim that letting homosexuals marry would lead into legalization of other reprehensible things such as bestiality or pedophilia. The Onion unearths some of these bigoted comments to argue that prejudice and extremism rather than solid reasoning have bolstered the opposing side.

The Onion’s reaction against gay marriage detractors exemplifies how slippery slope arguments and bigoted comments have little merit in the ongoing debate and should be discounted by news consumers; the Massachusetts ruling serves as a springboard from which The Onion can argue for LGBT marriage rights. The Onion uses this opportunity to further its pro-gay standpoint in a more logical fashion than in the DADT examples. The Onion shows its readers how they can spot similarly faulty claims when evaluating other debates that they hear in either real life or the media, so
as to filter past remarks that lack a logically sound basis. Ultimately, *The Onion*’s arguments in this instance prove strong and in tune with its usual strategy. These tactics used in a humorous context function the same way they do in a traditional debate: drawing out the logical fallacies and shortcomings by employing a voice of reason. As demonstrated in *The Onion*’s earlier examples of LGBT issue coverage, strongly seated viewpoints can at times stifle this logical voice, resulting in overkill of the topic. Hence, even within *Onion* content, readers should critically examine the way *The Onion* picks apart its targets and determine whether it does so fairly or via sweeping characterizations.

**Evaluating the Political Culture and Media Sensationalism**

Moving away from the ideologically impassioned subject of gay marriage helps *The Onion* strengthen its analysis of cultural norms and attitudes in examples of other event coverage that transcend the political and the personal. Despite *The Onion*’s likely alignment with Clinton’s policies, it shines in its appraisal of President Clinton’s truth (or lie) telling capabilities. Here, *The Onion* demonstrates its skill of criticizing the shortcomings of public figures regardless of their political leaning. Techniques in coverage of the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal reveal judgment of both the deceptive and strategic political culture as well as the sensationalist media. In this assessment, *The Onion* cautions news consumers to critically evaluate what actually occurred between Lewinsky and Clinton. It further emphasizes that politicians speak with a deceptive rhetoric all their own, and that the media’s focus might actually detract from the delivery of justice. While these evaluations clearly highlight societal
failings, they do so with the greater goal of creating informed and skeptical citizens and news consumers.

During the late 1990’s, “Monicagate” chatter dominated the media’s attention. President Bill Clinton’s alleged sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky held major consequences; because he had testified in another court case that he had not had a sexual relationship with Lewinsky, the unearthing of proof to the contrary led to his impeachment on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice. Discussion revolved around the alleged sexual relationship between the president and Lewinsky, including the definition of “sexual relations” and whether the actual activities that transpired between the two met that definition. As the President and Lewinsky provided testimony, it became increasingly clear that no crisp, defining lines would indicate what truly happened. Despite evidence such as the semen-stained blue dress and Clinton’s admission of his receiving oral sex, in the end the President was acquitted of all charges and remained in office (Douglas, 886). Commentary about the mainstream media’s coverage of the Clinton scandal notes its penchant for “tabloidization,” in which “the kind of material beltway boys tittered about only behind closed doors was suddenly in The Washington Post and The New York Times” (“Monica!,” 124). A study conducted by the Media Studies Center described the coverage as “‘embarrassing’ and ‘excessive’” (Trigoboff, 24). Yet other media critics marked the scandal as a story of genuine political significance, “the greatest human, moral, political, and constitutional drama in our country since the end of the Civil War” (Gartner, 2). While the media’s coverage of the scandal spanned two years and
generated high levels of hype, *The Onion* published only six articles focusing on the scandal specifically, including a few that simply mention it as a piece within the larger scope of sexual indiscretions by politicians. The two long-form articles specifically pertaining to the Lewinsky scandal illustrate how *The Onion* concentrates on specific aspects of the case that received large amounts of media attention: the definition of “sexual relations” and the tawdry details of the affair. In focusing on these elements of the debacle, *The Onion* both criticizes the actions of Clinton and Senate leaders and satirizes the media’s penchant for detracting from more pressing issues. These highlighted shortcomings indicate *The Onion*’s ongoing mission to educate its audience in critical news consumption. It invites its audience to use healthy skepticism when evaluating the politicians’ claims, recognizing that legal technicalities often win out over actual truth telling, and noting the scandal’s trivialization by media that capitalize on salacious details.

Such deceit and details regarding the Monicagate scandal largely came forth after an iconic pronouncement by the president at a White House press conference on January 26, 1998. There, Clinton stated, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie. Not a single time. Never. These allegations are false. And I need to go back to work for the American people.”

Clinton’s statements at the press conference—at which he did not respond to any questions—indicated that his State of the Union address the following day would not

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include reference to the Lewinsky scandal. Capitalizing on this opportunity to critique Clinton’s handling of the issue, *The Onion* published “Clinton Denies Lewinsky Allegations” (2/3/1998), targeting the murky definition of “sexual relations.” *The Onion* crafts a mostly fictional narrative to demonstrate how the President carefully chose his words to outmaneuver those investigating him. In the *Onion* piece, President Clinton still begins with his “strong denial of charges that he had sex with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky.” However, his following statements veer from reality: he maintains that his and Lewinsky’s relationship was much more than sexual—it was love. “This was more than just the intertwining of two bodies. It was the union of two souls,” he says. In hindsight, we know that the real Clinton used his chosen terminology because he did not believe that his receipt of fellatio from Lewinsky fell under the definitional umbrella of sex. Fictional Clinton also utilizes this strategy, but reframes it as an act of love, not just of sex. *The Onion* further underscores Clinton’s ambiguously defined words in his explanation of *lie*: “I may have said, 'Honey, could you shift your leg over a little bit here?' or 'Sweetie, try arching your back a little more,' but that is certainly not the same as telling her to lie, or advising her as to what specific position to lie down in," fictional Clinton says. These examples clearly show that his use of equivocation could provide him legal wiggle room in the future. Definitional nuances later became large parts of the impeachment process, which *The Onion* foresaw in its critique of the President’s statements. *The Onion* quotes fictional Yale law professor Laurence J. Timmins, who states, “If Clinton can prove that he loved Lewinsky with a selfless and immortal love
… then Clinton's Jan. 17 deposition stating that he did not 'have sex' with Lewinsky will not be considered perjury…." *The Onion* clearly shows that Clinton’s actual statement has additional layers beyond the surface, potentially giving him some leeway even when the investigation continues. Hence, in a fictional narrative that springs from real events, *The Onion* displays its insight into an issue that would unfold quite dramatically in the year to come. *The Onion* pinpoints the potential places for political maneuvering through the use of definitional nuances and attention shifting. This identification draws its audience’s attention to how its president could lie as a way to encourage greater skepticism when evaluating Clinton’s—or any politician’s—claims. Yet such a caveat could apply to claims by many politicians who have found themselves in the midst of a sex scandal, or simply one who conducts his or her business from day to day. Ultimately, *The Onion* paints a picture of a political culture in which no one speaks earnestly, where the citizens are left to try to decide the truth for themselves. Although this article also characterizes politicians with generalizations, its inclusion of both liberal and conservative persuasions marks a distinct difference between this and the LGBT articles. Here, *The Onion* admonishes Clinton not because of his political bias, but because his words lack the necessary transparency of a good president’s.

While “Clinton Denies” condemns the dishonest political culture, other articles draw the media into the fold as well. Jumping forward to one year after Clinton’s initial claims of innocence, media discussion swirls around similar questions regarding what specifically transpired between President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. At this
point, Lewinsky had submitted detailed testimony to the grand jury; yet some Senate members continued to push for her involvement in the trial and the following *Onion* media reports rely on the somewhat graphic specifics that Lewinsky recounted (Keen and Johnson, 13A). With this political environment as its backdrop, *The Onion* published “Lewinsky Subpoenaed To Re-Blow Clinton On Senate Floor” (2/3/1999), an approximately 900-word article focusing on the Senate’s supposed insistence that a reenactment of the Lewinsky/Clinton acts would be necessary to fully “determine if the president's statements before the grand jury constituted a crime." This item shows how Senate members’ push for witnesses, rather than aim at effective justice, only seeks to unearth more salacious and shocking details about the case; *The Onion*’s satire of the Senate’s reasons attacks their credibility as questionable, and reiterates how these elements of the case did not warrant the amount of attention they received in the media and Congress. With the *Onion* piece, Rep. Henry Hyde (R-IL) defends the inclusion of Lewinsky in the trial. The chief prosecutor says, “‘Yes, we know that the president inserted a cigar into Miss Lewinsky's vagina, but just how many inches of it did he manage to work all the way up inside there?’ Hyde asked[,] … ‘If we do not explore every possible detail of these shocking improprieties, we will never know the answers to these vital questions of national security.’” This fictional quote underscores how the Senate would not gain anything legitimate or necessary from further questioning and testimony by Lewinsky. Since the Senate has already watched her testimony on tape, it does not need additional details in order to reach its decisions.
Later, the article also delves into the discussion of whether or not to televise the reenactment, a discussion that also occurred in reality in regard to witness testimonies. In “Lewinsky Subpoenaed,” Sen. Phil Gramm (R-TX) states, “If we fail to provide the public with the whole truth—no matter how sordid, depraved, perverse or even vicariously titillating it may be—we have failed in our duty to the people of this nation.” Here, The Onion calls out the news judgment of media outlets covering the scandal. Although the sharing of certain details would be pertinent and newsworthy, the specific intricacies of the sex acts between Clinton and Lewinsky do not fall under that category. Hence, The Onion’s critical eye shows its readers that the media elites have fallen short of correctly determining the tawdry details’ news value. The claim’s strength comes forth as the article finishes, with Hyde stating, “‘we are talking about the possible removal of the highest elected official in the land, and that is not the sort of matter that should be trivialized.’” This excerpt exemplifies The Onion’s use of threads to underscore its message while maintaining its humor. While it may appear on first blush that this piece only looks at the actions of the Senate, its flagrant inclusion of obscene and sexual details mirrors the other news of the time. A USA Today article published in August of 1998 exemplified the media’s inclusion of such details. The piece notes that “because Clinton did not use his hands or mouth to gratify Lewinsky, their encounters did not meet the definition [of sexual relations]” (Keen and Johnson, 13A). Later, it includes statements from those familiar with Lewinsky’s testimony claiming that “Lewinsky told the grand jury that Clinton initiated contact with her to arouse her -- that he fondled her breasts and touched her
intimately” (Keen and Johnson, 13A). With examples like these in mind, The Onion asks how something so base as sex could detract some of the world’s most powerful decision makers and communicators from what clearly should take precedence in political importance: the impeachment of the leader of the United States. This incredulity is marked by the juxtaposition of the congressman discussing obscene acts all within the frame of a news story. And, as with any good parody, because it so closely resembles the real news of the time, its barbs prove even more capable of drawing blood.

Such mockeries of reality emphasize how the discussion of the criminal acts under investigation and the gravity of their potential ramifications do not match up. Instead, The Onion tells of a society led astray by the sensational, allowing the larger implications to fade into the background. The very specific, tawdry details of the acts occurring between Clinton and Lewinsky did not help to serve justice, but to satiate the public’s curiosity about the affair. As Amber Day argues, satire often aims “not just to dissent but to shift the topics and terms of the debate, often attempting to undermine the power of the dominant narrative” (Day, 187). By using an absurd scenario in which Lewinsky actually has to reenact the fellatio and other acts on the Senate floor, The Onion asks its readers to question the true reason behind her function in the entire impeachment debacle; it ultimately argues that the focus on the specific sexual details actually debases a very politically significant and serious situation of presidential accountability. It reminds its audience that beneath the lurid accounts of the president’s alleged sexual escapades with Lewinsky lies an incredibly important
historical event that they should not forget, even if the politicians and media already
have done so. Thus *The Onion* encourages its audience to sift past the scandalous
details and focus its energies on the topics that actually matter most.

The claims raised by *The Onion* in these examples have particular validity
because they derive from specific instances of political or journalistic shortcoming. As
mentioned above, the President’s elusive manner of speaking and the media’s
persistent inclusion of sexual details both garnered attention and debate during the
scandal’s peak. *The Onion* joined this discussion by pointing out how these
occurrences spoke to an opportunistic political climate and misguided news
judgments. Juxtaposed against the arguments raised in the LGBT section, *The Onion*’s
rhetorical stance on the Lewinsky scandal proves all the mightier when bolstered by
specific points of contention.

**Holding Watchdogs and Leaders Accountable**

This argumentative strength forged by *The Onion*’s editorial freedom and its
watchdog mentality helps it to draw ire towards institutions and individuals alike. As
with “Monicagate,” the Jerry Sandusky child abuse scandal inspired *The Onion* to
recount the rap sheet of media coverage failures; this unearthing highlights journalists’
inability to fulfill their role as the fourth estate while also incredulously criticizing the
culture that fostered it. Similar to its treatment of the Lewinsky scandal, *The Onion*’s
Sandusky coverage demonstrated the weaknesses of the journalistic reporting, such as
its misguided focus and the lack of steadfast moral judgments. It asks for journalists to
be accountable in holding those in power accountable. *The Onion* also breezes past the necessity of waiting for official court rulings, and calls for the societal rebuke of those who have committed egregious acts. In so doing, it admonishes not only these morally reprehensible individuals, but also the media and society that cultivate and tolerate them. Hence, the Jerry Sandusky coverage proves a worthy example of *The Onion*’s formidable strength when taking down its targets.

Although Sara Ganim of the Harrisburg *Patriot-News* broke the story in March of 2011, the media swirl around the Jerry Sandusky scandal did not start until around November of 2011. The Penn State defensive coordinator faced multiple charges of child molestation both on campus and in his home. As more information came into the public realm, we learned that Penn State head football coach Joe Paterno—a college football icon—did not report one of these incidents to the police after he learned of it from assistant football coach Mike McQueary, who had witnessed an assault in a university shower. Paterno relayed what he had been told to his superiors, but did not ensure that the information made its way to the police. A media firestorm surrounded the scandal, delving into the acts themselves, their relation to Sandusky’s charity work, the impact on Penn State, other persons involved and Joe Paterno’s innocence or guilt. Penn State trustees fired Paterno, prompting outcry from Penn State students and football fans alike (“Joe Paterno”). As grand jury reports emerged, detailing the subsequent acts allegedly committed by Sandusky, the criticism of Paterno only increased until Paterno died on January 22, 2012. Criticisms of the sports media’s handling of the Sandusky sex abuse scandal attacked the slow speed in which it was
reported and the lack of appropriate journalistic coverage by industry behemoths such as ESPN. Solomon notes how the story actually broke at the *Patriot-News* in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, several months before any national outlets picked it up in late 2011 (Solomon). In an analysis of ESPN’s coverage, the network’s ombudsmen, Jason Fry and Kelly McBride of the Poynter Institute, strongly admonish the initial coverage, calling it “spotty—sometimes getting it right, but more often seeming inappropriate” (Fry and McBride). They go on to ask, “Where’s the reporting designed to hold the powerful accountable? Where are the sources and the witnesses close to the case?” (Fry and McBride). Analysts’ consensus ultimately shamed the sports media both for allowing such a scandal to go unreported for so long and for its receiving such mishandling.

*The Onion*, too, expressed outrage at this journalistic ineptitude, with its coverage of the scandal emphasizing a much sterner tone and delivering a literal, sobering admonishment of the sports media as well as McQueary, Paterno and Sandusky; because this case had obvious moral judgment calls that the media overlooked, *The Onion* more stringently attacked those involved. The first *Onion* article published after the arrest of Jerry Sandusky berates the sports media for its inappropriate focus on the ramifications in the sports world. “Sports Media Asks Molestation Victims What This Means For Joe Paterno's Legacy” (11/10/2011) very directly and obviously reprimands sports journalists, stating, “the national sports media sought out his victims this week to ask if they were worried about Joe Paterno's legacy and how their molestations might affect the recently fired head coach's place in
the history books.” In this excerpt, *The Onion* demonstrates the insensitivity and lack of proper focus in the scandal coverage—so deplorable that it is akin to asking victims how they think this scandal will affect the legacy of a man who helped ensure that their assailant could continue harming children. “Sports Media” then highlights the issues on which the media should have had a larger focus. Steve Wieberg, an actual writer for *USA Today*, is fictionally quoted as saying, “‘it's my responsibility to weed past the 40 counts of sexual misconduct over a 15-year period and the gross negligence on the part of school authorities and ask about what is really important here: Joe Paterno's football accomplishments.”” Another excerpt references the various other layers to the case, including the suspected facilitation of Sandusky’s ongoing crimes through his charity, the Second Mile. These examples express how the sports media’s focus deviated from the important facets of the case—namely, the atrocities allegedly committed against children by Jerry Sandusky. And although the subsequent impact of the case on Joe Paterno would prove pertinent and of interest to the sports world, *The Onion* maintains that too much attention centered on it. The article closes with a reaffirmation regarding the parts of the case that journalists neglected in service of a safer avenue of discussion: “At press time, the victims of years and years of psyche-destroying sexual abuse released a joint statement saying they were not concerned about Joe Paterno's legacy.” This final, straightforward point sums up *The Onion*’s critique: the sports media turned its attention to a secondary aspect of the tragic case, and making it the main focus.
To *The Onion*, this attention shifting symbolically rendered the Joe Paterno legacy a more newsworthy item than the crimes themselves, creating another grave injustice to victims who already underwent a hellish trauma. While the admonishments targeted the sports media, the critiques ultimately encouraged readers to remember the most crucial and newsworthy aspect of the case—sexual abuse, not football, while following the coverage. In this way, *The Onion* continues to act as a corrective lens through which readers can see how real news media operate in their lives. The gatekeeper model and perception of news judgment presuppose that the media elites have a better sense than average citizens of what constitutes the most important news to deliver to consumers. However, *The Onion* shows its readers how this news judgment can prove faulty and draw attention away from the points that warrant the utmost concern. In a case that had obvious moral judgment calls with the potential for uncovering a systematic barrage of criminal acts against children, *The Onion* could forcefully call out the media’s journalistic failures. It asks how, in such an important case, the media could shirk their responsibility to provide complete and accurate coverage.

Contrasting with the above article, which lambasted sports journalists for their misguided focus, “Nation's 10-Year-Old Boys: 'If You See Someone Raping Us, Please Call The Police’” (11/28/2011) goes after the lack of commentary about McQueary and Paterno’s accountability. Although both men reported to their direct superiors about what happened, many argued that this act simply was not enough. However, this element of the discussion did not always appear within the pages or
segments of the mainstream media, so *The Onion* brought it in. Here, a group of 10-year-old boys calls a press conference “to remind Americans that if they see someone raping a prepubescent boy, they should contact the police immediately.” The incongruity of 10-year-olds calling a press conference coupled with the boys’ completely literal statements emphasizes that there’s no discussion whether McQueary and Paterno acted rightfully or not; the process of reporting to the police is so simple that no one can really evade criticism for failing to do so. This theme repeats itself throughout the piece as the spokesperson for the 10-year-olds, Joshua Pearson, reiterates his points: “And by the way, under no circumstances is it ever okay for an adult to rape a 10-year-old boy, so you really can't go wrong by calling the police when something like that happens.” Again, *The Onion* reinforces the simplicity of the right versus wrong debate, underscoring that no matter what, the two coaches had a responsibility to report the incident to the police, but did not. Later in the article, *The Onion* directly and specifically attacks the actions they both took: “While we appreciate your reporting such acts to a supervisor at work or a trusted clergy member, unfortunately that may not be enough, and it is not the most responsible course of action,” Pearson says. Towards the end, *The Onion* uses irony to drive home McQueary and Paterno’s guilt, stating, “‘Wouldn't you be left with egg on your face if that little boy was actually being raped and you didn't tell the police!’ said Pearson, drawing a big laugh from the gathered crowd.” Hence, through its construction of an incongruous and absurdly conceived press conference bolstered by literal reprimands of the coaches, *The Onion* squelches the discussion regarding the sports leaders’
contested innocence or guilt, and criticizes the media for the crucial gaps in their coverage.

The oversimplified presentation of the leaders’ moral faults cuts through the many layered political discussion surrounding the scandal at the time, reminding readers of the core moral values upon which everyone (should) agree, and asks them to apply these same standards to pressure prominent sports figures and the journalists who cover them. Upon witnessing the existing commentary of the issue and noticing gaps in the reporting, The Onion fills them in. By doing so, it demonstrates to its readership where the media has failed to truly hold those in power accountable for their actions. Furthermore, it indicates the news construction of a “safer” narrative in lieu of a hard-hitting story. Don Waisanen points out this exact phenomenon in his discussion of earlier Onion News Network clips in which “these continual comic contrasts negotiate the hyperreal, interrogating the lines between fact and fiction in a way that mainstream news-making typically does not. That is, there is a heightened awareness in ONN’s clips of the challenge posed by hyperreality—that news constructions are rhetorical choices, among many” (Waisanen, 522). Waisanen’s argument expands upon the ways that the media’s manipulation of framing can have negative effects on the narrative itself. Because The Onion has vastly different standards from journalists and no official checks on its performance, it can implicate individuals before they have gone through the necessary legal procedures, a practice that most news outlets would vehemently reject. Journalists cannot report under the assumption that allegations are true until they have been proven as such. Thus, while
*The Onion* does bring up valid points that bid us to reevaluate the media commentary, we must also recognize where certain journalistic constraints actually ensure that those accused still retain at least some presumption of innocence. *Onion* predecessor *Mad* achieved similar aims with its condemnation of Senator Joe McCarthy (Abrams, 446). Likewise, *The Onion* has no hesitation in jumping in and casting aspersions on people because it does not have to answer to such expectations of fairness.

The final example of *The Onion*’s coverage of the scandal drives home its less-than-objective yet morally righteous standpoint. Mere days after Joe Paterno’s death, *The Onion* posted “Jerry Sandusky: I’ll Never Forget All The Things Joe Paterno Did For Me” (01/25/2012), where the alleged criminal says goodbye to the man whose “wholehearted attention to the overall success and reputation of Penn State football allowed Sandusky to focus on building his own legacy at Happy Valley, where he was always able to go after what he wanted most.” This statement calls out Paterno for making the reputation of his football team his highest priority while overlooking egregious crimes committed by one of his staff. *The Onion* then insinuates that Paterno knew about the crimes the whole time, but allowed them to continue occurring. Throughout the article, Sandusky references all of the things that Paterno did for him, from fundraising for his charity, Second Mile, which supported “Sandusky's involvement in the lives of as many children as possible,” to never standing in the way of his “dreams, aspirations and desires.” Sandusky’s final fictitious quote of the article reads, "‘I had years of great times at Penn State,’ Sandusky said. ‘Years and years of great times. And I owe every minute to Joe
Paterno. ‘’This last quote especially emphasizes that society should not forget that Paterno admitted to knowing about at least one of these alleged instances of child abuse, and did not report to the police. Thus, as sports fans and commentators alike struggled to discuss Paterno’s legacy appropriately, The Onion blatantly argues that this man protected a criminal; under his watch, Sandusky continued to harm children. Even though these allegations against Sandusky have yet to be officially proven, The Onion has no qualms about reiterating that Paterno, despite his admirable career in football, had a much seedier and much more noteworthy past that people must remember.

Conclusion

As we have seen through these examples, The Onion critiques real events in society to further its arguments about the world; its messages about current news carry added relevance because of their authentic subject matter. Through its treatment of actual events, The Onion’s claims can address a larger scope of influence, using the occurrence of a particular event as the backdrop for discussion of wider societal issues. Onion coverage can then have a two-fold target: media and culture. Within LGBT coverage, The Onion lampoons anti-gay and military culture with flimsier tactics, while its treatment of the Bill Clinton and Jerry Sandusky scandals harshly comments on the attention given to the “real issues” by politicians, journalists and news consumers alike. Furthermore, its Sandusky coverage especially brandishes its rhetorical admonishments in berating the coverage of McQueary and Paterno— prominent figures who warrant accountability for their actions, or lack thereof. While
the answers to the concerns brought up by *The Onion* have relevance *within* each particular event, they also speak to elements of media and culture. Through these critiques, *The Onion* invites its audience to reconsider powerful societal figures, the status quo and journalistic conventions, and question how these behavioral standards affect us as citizens and news consumers. As expected from *The Onion*, these points of criticism almost always derive from a standpoint of cynicism; yet they do so with underlying goal of eventually improving these societal elements by educating people that can also recognize these shortcomings. *The Onion’s* criticisms demonstrate the need for more honest politicians who care about justice and for journalists who value a story’s integrity greater than its reader-attracting headlines. In providing these critiques, *The Onion* performs much of the function that it wants from politicians and the media: honesty. Yet as a humor publication, it also recognizes its limitations as a means of impact, so it ultimately leaves the power in the hands of its readership to enact the change they wish to see.

Although some might argue that it simply preaches to those who already agree with its standpoint, *The Onion’s* growing popularity and relevance suggest that perhaps publications like it have now deviated from their traditionally perceived role; maybe they will more frequently place their arguments ahead of humor, doing more to persuade those who do not already agree with them. With the swelling distrust of traditional media, we might speculate that outlets such as *The Onion*—which function as a means of digest, commentary, criticism and judgment—will become increasingly sought after as dispensers of truth. We have already seen this capability in the popular
programs of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart, as Colletta argues in a discussion of political satire and postmodern irony of the time, where such humor “does not aim to get us to turn off the television, but to entertain us into staying tuned and to be consumers of all cultural product, all the while reassuring us with a wink that we are in on and somehow superior to the giant joke that is being played on us” (Colletta, 857). With the encouragement that someone else is there with us—viewing, reacting and synthesizing the absurd world—we are not as powerless as we might have thought.

With this in mind, I present The Onion not only as a funny website, not only as a cultural critic, and not only as an arbiter of what is good and bad in the world. While it might seem harsh, angry and cynical, The Onion is actually a loyal, logical friend who looks out for people who have been failed by their leaders and the Fourth Estate. With insight from years of watching people continually fall short of their best, this once-fledgling publication has grown into inevitable shoes: those of the crotchety-but-wizened grandfather you seek for advice. Initially, like Grandpa, The Onion might engender negativity, dismantling dearly held facts and opinions and viewpoints. Its words will speak to a world gone awry, with an undercurrent of incredulity that no one else will notice. It won’t sugar coat the world, nor will it lie or mask the ugly. But it will speak the truth.
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