

# The State of the Onion



They took Madison.  
They took Manhattan.  
Now, they're going Hollywood.

Will the university's most famous "area people" get the last laugh in the cutthroat business of comedy?

BY JAMES NORTON '99

"I have enough anxiety disorder in my life already," says Todd Hanson x'86. The senior writer of *The Onion* — "America's Finest News Source" — is sitting in a stairwell, wearing a "F\*\*\* 'Em Bucky" T-shirt and smoking a Marlboro 100. He's just been asked about the release of *The Onion Movie*, the newspaper's first venture into feature film. Smoke forms a hazy cloud around him as he mulls it over.

"Thinking about this movie coming out, it's kind of like — well, I imagine myself in a barrel," he tells me during an interview in October, as the picture was being hustled toward completion. "And the barrel is very slowly rolling toward the release date of this movie. It's at a very gentle slope, and it's just sort of slowly rolling ... and then the release date of the movie is like a cliff. What's on the other side of that cliff? Could be wonderful things. Could be terrible things. It's an unknown quantity."

Hanson, who has been with the newspaper since its early days in Madison, is one of two writers credited for the movie, which is still awaiting its theater release. But the entire *Onion* comedy staff worked on the script, and it's not just Hanson's reputation at stake. This is a big moment for the nation's premier satirical newspaper — another in a series of big risks for the collection of transplanted Badgers, almost all of which have paid off.

Since its founding in 1988 by UW-Madison students Chris Johnson '90 and Tim Keck '90, *The Onion* has spun off five satellite editions, launched a path-blazing Web site, radically changed its editorial voice and page design, and moved most of its editorial staff to offices in Manhattan and Chicago. It's produced a number-one best-selling book and seen its alumni infiltrate the highest echelons of Ameri-

can comedy, stacking up a titanic vault of laughs along the way.

This would be no small achievement for a hand-picked group of writers and editors bankrolled by serious money and launched in New York or Los Angeles. Dozens of sitcoms are canned each year. Pilots never see the light of day, and feature flicks die on the video shelves. The pantheon of successful comedy periodicals — which includes a scant few titles such as *Spy*, *Mad*, and *The National Lampoon* — is about as populous as Door County in February.

But *The Onion* has managed something even more remarkable. Even as the paper has grown more structured and professional, it has retained much of its original unfettered creative license.

"It was a place where you didn't have to deal with a lot of outside factors that were going to water down your instinctive approach to writing comedy," says former *Onion* staffer Ben Karlin '93, now the executive producer of *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. "It was the crack [cocaine] of comedy. It was a luxury and a pleasure."

**L**ike the vegetable for which it's named, *The Onion* began underground, launched in Johnson's one-room efficiency off Langdon Street. "It was just such a seat-of-your-pants operation," recalls Scott Dikkers x'87, who bought the paper in 1989 and edited it for more than a decade. "There was one computer and no printer, so we had to run to Kinko's [to print it]."

Most of the writing was done by Matt Cook '89, a student whom Keck and Johnson knew. "Tim and Chris would pretty much put him in front of the computer and just move his fingers until the column inches were filled," Dikkers says. "And there was no editing at all. And that's sort of when I stepped in and said, 'You guys need an editor.'"

Dikkers, the cartoonist behind *The Daily Cardinal* strip "Jim's Journal," became *The Onion's* guiding editorial light.

Current *Onion* editor Carol Kolb '95 calls him the paper's "godfather." Since selling his interest in the paper in 2000, he has gone on to write and direct independent films. His second, called *Bad Meat*, is in the process of being sold to a distributor.

Dikkers had seen enough promise in the venture to buy out Johnson and Keck, but the paper was still little more than a local curiosity available in only a few places around Madison. He and partner Rich Dahm '89, who has since written for *Da Ali G Show*, among others, began recruiting "people from the town who we thought were funny to help us," recalls Dikkers. One of the first was Hanson, whom Dikkers calls "the soul of *The Onion*."

In 1995, Dikkers kickstarted a major overhaul of the paper's look and feel that helped *The Onion* find its groove. "It was a total redesign, and a total conceptual redesign as well," says Mike Loew '96, a former *Daily Cardinal* staffer who is now *The Onion's* graphics editor. "We had been more of a *Weekly World News* tabloid. It was a lot more silly, and it was in black and white. After the redesign, it became more of a *USA Today* parody. Now we were behaving like a real newspaper."

While the paper's humor moved forward, so did its means of distribution. It was among the first humor publications to jump on the Internet, forming its Web site ([www.theonion.com](http://www.theonion.com)) in 1996. Taking advantage of the low production costs, international reach, and little real competition of cyberspace, *The Onion* found a cult following that soon caught the notice of mainstream outlets such as *The New Yorker*. By 1997, readership in the three cities where the newspaper was distributed (Madison, Milwaukee, and Boulder, Colorado) surpassed ninety thousand.

Then, in 1999, came publication of *Our Dumb Century*, for which the writers created a bogus back-history of *Onion* front pages, satirically documenting such world events as the sinking of the Titanic ("World's Largest Metaphor Hits Iceberg") and World War II ("French Surrender After Valiant Ten-Minute Struggle"). The book won a Thurber

**Facing page: *Onion* staffers (from left) Carol Kolb, Joe Garden, John Krewson, Todd Hanson, and Mike Loew moved the paper's operations to New York in 2001 — but they didn't stay underground for long.**

Award for humor writing and cemented the newspaper's place as a weekly must-read for millions of people.

Many critics have said *The Onion* owes some of its success to its Madison roots. It's been said that, as Midwesterners, the writers are able to lampoon the bland enthusiasm of mainstream American media without East Coast pretension. Keith Phipps MA'96, editor of the review-filled AV Club section, says it's probably true, particularly when it comes to *The Onion's* nonsatirical arts reviews. "We're not insiders," he says. "I'm not hip. I've never been on top of the trends or anything — I just like what I like."

But Dikkers disagrees. "I think we could have done *The Onion* in any place," he says. "We could have done it in any small town. There's always the guy who works at the convenience store who's cracking jokes. There's the funny guy who sits there all day at the gas station, you know, reading, and possibly even writing. Every high school has a class clown. You know, those people are funny people. I don't think there's anything unusual about the comedy talent pool in Madison."

Still, the coasts have their advantages, namely a teeming pool of entertainment connections. It was those opportunities that led *The Onion* comedy staff to uproot from Madison in 2001 in favor of the Big Apple. (The AV Club section is mostly produced in Chicago.)

Ironically, Hanson says the staff got more attention arriving in the big city than they did around their old haunts. "By the time we were leaving Madison, everybody there was used to *The Onion*. It didn't mean anything to them," he says. "When we got to New York, people really welcomed us with open arms and wrote articles about the fact that we were arriving. Usually, if I go into a bar and different comedy heroes of mine are hanging out in there, they'll recognize me and say, 'Hey, come over and sit with us!' And it's a cool thing."

**T**he paper's comedy scribes now labor in a semi-industrial section of Chelsea on Manhattan's west side. The building itself is unassuming, tucked away on a quiet street lined with parked delivery trucks. A mechanical device in a

nearby lot stacks the cars of Manhattan commuters vertically. Like much of the city, it's an area in flux, where old buildings in decline sit shoulder-to-shoulder with bistros.

*The Onion* has been evolving, as well. The process of making each weekly edition is more refined and systematic than in the old days. It begins with the headlines. Each writer generates lists of ideas, which are vetted during staff meetings. From hundreds of candidates, editors choose a few that make the paper. Only then are the stories assigned.

"Every single week, it feels like we're racing against the clock to get the issue out on time," says Kolb. But it's a far cry from the disorganization of *The Onion's* youth. "It was just kind of crazier and more hectic," she says. "We used to only have one day off a week, and it was Monday. And it was kind of because we never got our [act] together enough to work it out to get the weekends. Things like that are better, because we've worked out some of the kinks."

There are still plenty of Wisconsin influences around the offices. Mike Loew — the easygoing yang to Hanson's intense yin — is typical of the staff's Midwestern vibe. Classically laid-back and good-natured, he reminisces about the Union Terrace — "It's a nice big spot. Here in New York, there's a lot of places to go, but you can feel a little cramped," he says — and misses the loose, casual feel of Madison.

"You can have a lot of fun in New York, but there's something about Madison," he says. "You're just surrounded by all these kids going nuts and acting like goofballs. I kind of miss that energy. Sometimes the New York kids can be a little too cool for school, you know?"

Kolb is another Badger transplant, hailing from a small town called Spencer. "What's it near?" I ask. "Nothing," she says, laughing. ("It's near Stevens Point," she admits, when pressed.)

"I have adapted to New York. I love it, but I love Madison so much," says Kolb. "I really do think of it as where I will want to be when I get sick of the dirt



Each edition of *The Onion* springs from the eclectic chaos of the paper's Manhattan offices, where writers surf the Internet and hundreds of "legitimate" publications to gather material for their satirical take on the news.



## Laughing Till We Cry

Memorable Onion headlines from its archives:

August 1988

The very first Onion headline:

Mendota Monster Mauls Madison

1989

Pen Stolen From Dorm Study Area

1990

Everybody's Eatin' Bread

1991

The Joke's on You! *The Onion* Admits:

"We Created *The Badger Herald* as a Hoax"

1992

Angry Lumberjack Demands Hearty Breakfast

1993

Man of the Year: The Guy From Police Academy Movies Who Can Make Funny Noises with His Mouth

1994

Thompson Changes Title from "Governor" to "Sexecutioner"

1995

Man, Ape Cause Roadhouse Ruckus

1996

Secondhand Smoke Linked to Secondhand Coolness

1997

Republicans, Dadaists Declare War on Art

1998

Everyone Involved in Pizza's Preparation, Delivery, Purchase Extremely High

1999

U.S. Bedwetters Decide against Nationwide Awareness-Raising Campaign

2000

Funyuns Still Outselling Responsibilityuns

2001

U.S. Vows to Defeat Whoever It Is We're at War With

2002

Bush Seeks U.N. Support for 'U.S. Does Whatever It Wants' Plan

2003

48-Hour Internet Outage Plunges Nation Into Productivity

2004

Documents Reveal Gaps in Bush's Service as President

and the things that are bad about New York. I think it's great."

The Manhattan surroundings have rubbed off in small ways. "If you see a joke about 'buses' in the paper, it's usually code for 'subway,'" says Maria Schneider '90, one of the paper's senior writers. "But we don't want to alienate our readers who live outside of New York."

**T**he move had another, unintentional effect. It plunged the writers in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, leading them to produce a spectacularly successful edition, which rallied terror-numbed readers with a combination of warm, genuine empathy ("Hugging up 76,000 Percent") and genuinely punchy comedy ("Hijackers Surprised to Find Selves in Hell"). The issue was mentioned as a Pulitzer Prize contender, and it gave the comedy writers a visceral connection to their newly adopted home.

Some critics argue that the paper has been in a holding pattern in the years since, falling back on formulas for stories and, in the ramp-up to the 2004 election, getting politically involved at the expense of the paper's comic detachment.

"I think it's in danger of becoming too partisan, frankly," says former editor Dan Vebber '92, who has written for shows including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Futurama*, and the upcoming animated program *American Dad*. "I think we used to be a lot less concerned with politics at *The Onion*, and more with just being stupid and trying to get laughs with different types of humor."

Loew acknowledges that "we really have lost the silliness a little bit, especially lately. I don't know, it seems like it's been a little bit too long since I've put a Photoshop [illustration] together that was really surreal-looking ... like the one of Jesus Christ dunking a basketball. It seems like the photos are coming straight off the wire recently.

"When you look at the Clinton photos and stories we used to do, those were so silly. Clinton we just treated as a child,

basically — you know, someone throws Clinton's lunch on top of the school," he says. "While with George Bush, it's much more sort of trenchant political commentary, basically. I look back at Clinton as kind of a more innocent age."

While he agrees with some of the critiques, Ben Karlin is more sympathetic to the challenge of staying fresh. "They have to do it every week," he says. "When you have a rigid format that only allows for a certain amount of deviation, it's really, really, really hard to inject originality and spontaneity into it. Look at *Saturday Night Live* — they've been doing sketches for twenty-eight years! You try to come up with an original character after twenty-eight years ... it's really hard!"

Which is why there's so much riding on *The Onion Movie*. Making the film gave writers a lesson in some of the harder realities of the movie business — the struggle for creative control, the many different cooks packing into the kitchen — and they'll soon get a taste of its risks. What if the movie is bad? Bad drama can pass as unintentional comedy, but bad comedy is just horrible. As Hanson knows, a major flop could lend ammunition to those who say *The Onion's* run is petering out.

Still, it hasn't often paid to bet against this group. They've proved willing and able to negotiate the tradeoffs before — to walk the tightrope between daring experimentation and the workaday formulas of a professional laugh factory.

"Even though our format is standardized, and a lot of the surprises have been revealed, and we are getting repetitive ... we are still really capable of doing brilliant stuff every week," says Schneider. "Even if we can do just one or two great jokes every week, I think we've succeeded in that issue with flying colors. I think that's what keeps me going."

She pauses a few seconds, then adds, "Also, the health insurance. And I also have to pay my rent." **LF**

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