

## At “Serious Stuff About Humor” Conference Eggheads Meet Funny-ists

### A HUMORIST ON HUMOR

—By *Bob Mankoff, The New Yorker Magazine*

**A**s cartoon editor of *The New Yorker*, cartoonist for the magazine and president of its Cartoon Bank (www.cartoonbank.com), I create, select and sell *New Yorker* cartoons. Fortunately, for me, I’m a licensed humorist and not a licensed ethicist or I’d be all over myself for conflict of interest issues. I really thought Eliot Spitzer, the former governor of New York, would be all over me for this stuff but it turns out he was all over someone else instead.

That said (I learned that phrase from politicians), and moving right along (Johnny Carson), I’ve been dealing with the phenom-

enon of humor most of my life. Like most who end up as professionals in this field, I started off being scolded for it in school.

Teacher (catching me drawing a cartoon): *Robert! If you think that’s so funny maybe you’d like to share it with the rest of the class.*

Me: *Sure!* (Off to the principal’s office!)

Eventually, if you’re lucky, you break into the

field. You start off being under-compensated and then, if you’re luckier, over-compensated. I’ve been both and, hey, over is better.

But semi-seriously folks (Semi Youngman), the reason for me writing this little article is not to make you laugh, but to make you think about laughter and humor. To draw your attention to the fact that this ubiquitous and universal human phenomenon — which exists in all cultures and all times and upon which all societies expend a great deal of time, money and energy — is worth the University of Michigan’s time, money and energy in the form of an expanded humor studies program.

Most of us think we already know all we need to know about humor because the media inundates us with an endless stream of

—continued on page 6



Bob Mankoff

HAM — Humor at Michigan

### WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

—By *Charles Partridge '08*

**K**evin Bleyer was confused. “Thanks for the ferns,” said the Emmy Award-winning writer for “The Daily Show,” looking at the verdant foliage decorating the Michigan Theater stage. “We are either signing an international treaty, or auditioning for the next series of *Lost*.”

Bleyer was the first speaker in the “Doing It” section of the March 10th conference on humor co-sponsored by the Knight-Wallace Fellows at Michigan and *The New Yorker* Cartoon Bank. It was an event that brought together a stellar group of writers, cartoonists and academics to discuss “The Serious Stuff About Humor — What Is It? Why Is It?”

Introducing the afternoon, Knight-Wallace Director Charles Eisendrath walked on stage in a jester’s cap to make a serious point: Humor is serious stuff. In an age when young people get much of their news from “The Daily Show” — a self-professed “fake news” comedy program — it’s time, Eisendrath said, we looked seriously at humor. This was the first conference ever, anywhere, to bring together those who study it and those who do it.

Eisendrath set up the experimental program Humor at Michigan (HAM, what else?) back in 2003 and he believes the study of humor could make it to the status of a full university course. In fact, at the conference, he launched a plea for any member of the large audience with a couple million dollars to spare to contact him right away to make it happen.

But back to Bleyer, lost among the ferns. Where do his ideas come from?

“Panic!” he said. And amid a series of clips from “The Daily

—continued on page 3



Philip Dattilo

Bob Mankoff laughs while Kevin Bleyer ponders a question.



Philip Dattilo

The Michigan Theater presents the Humor conference.

# From the Head Fellow

—By Charles R. Eisendrath '75

## NEW OWNERS, NEW SPIRIT, NEW OPTIMISM

Two days after the Knight-Wallace Fellows met with Turkish Army generals in Ankara, President Abdullah Gül marched troops into northern Iraq against Kurdish militants. That same day he dropped a bomb of another sort inside Turkey by approving a constitutional amendment ordering the nation's universities to permit female students to wear headscarves.

If that sounds like a commendable exercise of civil liberties, as indeed the Freedom and Justice Party (AKP) claimed, (Gül is a founder) that's understandable. In the U.S., it would be. But like so many things in the Middle East, the image here is its mirror opposite there. AKP is the party of Islam. That makes its imposition of a religious practice the more contentious. A Turkish government opening the way for "the wearing of the scarf," as the Turks put it, is far more serious than the Bush administration, with its own ties to fundamentalist religion, obtaining a mandate for prayer in public schools. Religion is to Turkish politics what race is to American politics. Government-imposed university tolerance of the scarf is more akin to Washington dictating a national okay for campus enemies of integration to wear Confederate flag t-shirts.

Yes, the scarf is religious and the Confederate flag political, but sometimes comparing apples and oranges makes good sense. The flag symbolizes the side that lost the Civil War and resistance to racial integration. The scarf in this sense represents the Islamic society that lost out in Turkey's forced shift toward secularism.

The AKP enjoys an absolute parliamentary majority and constitutes the first administration of Islamic piety since 1923,

when General Mustafa Kemal seized power and threw out the occupying English and French and the invading Armenians and Greeks. The grateful new Turkish Republic dubbed him "Atatürk" (Father of the Turks) and in short order he changed nearly everything. The alphabet would be no longer Arabic, but Latin. Legal and educational systems would be Western. No more fezes for men, and veils went out of fashion. The ban on scarves in state-sponsored entities followed in 1989, part of another wave of secularism.

A new national consensus helped Turkey become a serious candidate for entry into the European Union. Success is far less likely if Turkey begins to be perceived as an Islamic society. Failure of its EU candidacy, however, alarms most Turks far less than the prospect of sliding back into an Islamist society. All around them in "our bad neighborhood," as many Turks call the Middle East, are examples of nations where religion rules and tight strictures bind the female half of the population.

If you had been with KWF asking academics, politicians, journalists, generals and feminists about Turkish life and policies, you would have learned of yet another level of complexity. The very "Islamic" AKP administration feared as possibly shredding the country's secular consensus has brought spectacular secular achievements. It has shaped the EU campaign and brought a tripling of GNP in the last six years.

So, you might wonder, are the fears about AKP's being a "Trojan Horse" concealing the armies of religious fundamentalists simply those of an old elite facing challenges from the newly-empowered? That's what AKP claims, and, after two lengthy sessions with Gül during KWF

visits, I have no doubts about his talent and suave mastery of Western discourse. Much is made of his wife wearing the scarf. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's daughter's attending Indiana University. According to some, this is because they could not get a good education at home without compromising piety. I don't buy it. Nobody minds the scarf in non-official contexts, several private universities allow the scarf and ambitious Turkish students (including Gül) have routinely burnished résumés with Western schooling.

You would also have learned exactly what a head scarf is, beginning with what it is not: "Head scarf" does not refer to the piece of cloth but to how it is worn. This is so easy to miss that even after four KWF trips and dozens of conversations I needed a demonstration. Tied under the chin (which often hides most of a hairdo and much of the neck) it is not "the scarf." But the same bandana — plain wool or Givenchy silk, the material and shape makes no difference — tied in a way that hides all hair and the entire neck broadcasts Islamic piety and, to many, constitutes a serious provocation.

At this writing serious tremors shake a society justly famous for melding East and West and shaping a form of Islam tolerant of secular values. Gül's headscarf decision has been appealed and the constitutional court has accepted cases outlawing the AKP and banning Gül and Erdogan from politics. By the time you read this there will doubtless have been further aftershocks.

Can an administration rooted in Islam defend secular values while re-introducing explosive symbols of battles many hoped were resolved for good? Many Turks, perhaps most, don't want to find out. I don't blame them.



—What Actually Happened,  
continued from page 1

Show,” he proved that panic is the father of some pretty impressive comedy moments.

Tim Carvell, another writer for “The Daily Show,” was the next speaker to take the stage. “Comedy is always funny when you explain it,” he deadpanned. Later, he shared one of the show’s comedy writing secrets: when all else fails, add the word “balls.”

While both writers for “The Daily Show” were reluctant to go too far into analysis as to why something is funny, keynote speaker Bob Mankoff was happy to go there. The cartoon editor of *The New Yorker* suggested that all cartoonists need parents who rejected them at birth. It gets them used to the inevitable “thank you, but no” slips they receive for most of their submissions.

To Mankoff, the basic principle of humor is surprise, something that jars and does not fit. Speaking at 80 miles an hour, he peppered his address with cartoons flashing up on a large screen behind him. As the audience hooted at one classic Mankoff cartoon after another, he explained his background as an experimental psychologist which gave him an insight into the thing we call humor.

Matt Diffee, performer and *New Yorker* cartoonist, had a special reason to be on stage with Mankoff. He brought along a load of his cartoons that Mankoff had rejected for the magazine. They were either too dark or too weird or too... whatever. (Regardless, the Michigan Theater audience loved them.)

Jerry Craft, creator of the African American comic strip “Mama’s Boyz”, discussed the delicacies of race and humor, telling how one of his cartoons got his strip dropped from several papers. The cartoon in question featured several very

young African American women being turned away from a PG-rated movie.

“You have to have a parent with you,” the ticket seller tells them.

“But we are parents!” wail the girls.

“Humor comes from a dark place” Craft said, defending the cartoon by noting it was taken out of context as part of a series. Anyone who followed the series, he said, would have been able to understand the point he was making.



Philip Dattilo

Professors Rod Martin, Richard Lewis and Paul Lewis explain what’s funny and why.



Philip Dattilo

Jerry Craft and Matt Diffee listen to Signe Wilkinson’s remarks.

Signe Wilkinson, Pulitzer Prize winning cartoonist from the *Philadelphia Daily News*, agreed: “Complaints come in two stages. First it’s the professionals and then you get the normal people responding to them.” Strangely, she noted, the normal people are the ones who will defend a cartoon after the professional interest groups have had their well-organized say.

Wilkinson, who described herself as “the token chick” on stage, was sad that editors are frightened to print the strongest cartoons. Only three U.S. newspapers printed the infamous Danish Mohammed cartoons, for instance. Wilkinson knows

the risks, as she once received threats in the changing room at her rowing club in response to one of her own cartoons.

Diffee topped that, revealing that he was a hate figure for the Girl Scouts of America after his “Girl Scout crack” cartoon caused an outcry.

Following the first panel discussion came an interesting double act: Eisendrath and Patrick Oliphant, doyen of political cartoonists everywhere. With one stick

of charcoal, a few deft lines and shading, Oliphant produced instant cartoons of President Sarkozy of France and his new lovely wife; Hillary and Bill Clinton; and the new kid on the block, Barack Obama. As he drew, Oliphant chatted with Eisendrath about his subjects, cartooning in general and where he finds his inspiration. It was mesmerizing stuff, and the audience loved it.

We had heard from the practitioners but what about the academics? Would they spoil it all by analyzing us into sobriety in the “Studying It” part of the conference? Not a chance.

British psychologist Michael Apter broke down humor into four parts: cognitive synergy (Mankoff’s notion that humor is something that jars); diminishment (look out for the banana skin!); playfulness (enjoying the moment); and arousal (a kind of temporary elevation). Put all those things together and you have humor. Leave just one out, and you don’t.

While audience and panel chewed on that, Paul Lewis from Boston College (the man who invited the term “frankenfoods,” by the way) gave his take on humor and politics. It wasn’t good. Why do we expect our leaders to have a sense of humor and why do we expect funny people to be good? Lewis didn’t really know, but he did know the consequences. (Hint: think Bush.) Consider also the political conse-

—continued on page 8

# A KWF-Year Worth of Travel

—By Brad Schrade '08

They are known in Argentina simply as “The Disappeared.” As many as 30,000 people, many politically active on the left, killed without trace during the country’s Dirty War and military dictatorship of the 1970s and early 1980s.

Some were snatched from city streets, placed in vans, tortured, drugged and tossed from planes into the sea — never to be found. Knight-Wallace Fellows '08 caught the program’s closest glimpse yet into this shameful past during the annual trip to Buenos Aires in December.

Fellows for the first time toured a new museum on a former military base in the center of bustling Buenos Aires that served as a concentration camp. We saw its torture chambers, confronted allegations of our own CIA’s complicity and later sat with mothers of the victims — courageous women who founded the “Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo” to protest the abductions and search for their children.

It was a powerful, emotional day for the Fellows, and a memorable moment in the busiest annual travel schedule in Knight-Wallace history.

“We take the trips abroad because the insularity of American news rooms terrifies me, along with the image of a superpower blundering along in the world blind,” said KWF Director Charles Eisendrath. “You can’t get journalists — Fellows included — to concentrate on something just because it’s important. But offer tickets to important places and you’ve got their attention. I think the visits change outlooks.”

Other highlights from the 2007–2008 travel year included:

- A fall weekend in Northern Michigan to help the new class bond.

- A week in Istanbul exploring the ancient city while Turkey made international news with its intense debate over lifting the ban on head scarves in universities.

- A tour to New York for meetings with executives of top media organizations, now a permanent part of the Knight-Wallace annual itinerary.

Our travels together started with an early-October weekend at Walloon Lake, Michigan, near Charles and Julia Eisendrath’s apple farm. There, we shot clay pigeons, pressed cider, canoed (and saw Charles without a bow tie for the first time). It was a warm-up for our travels to come.

We arrived in Buenos Aires in early December, summer in South America. Our week would be filled with meetings with historians, economists, government officials, a legendary political cartoonist and journalists, including our media hosts at *Clarín* newspaper. In each, we’d confront the contradictions, complexity and elusiveness that makes Argentina interesting.

But before that, we had horses to ride. We spent the first full day, a Saturday, on an estancia ranch about an hour outside Buenos Aires. A gaucho led us on a riding tour through the fields of the Pampas region before a great lunchtime feast of

*New York City: KWF '08 meets with Matt Winkler (center) at Bloomberg's new offices.*



Bright Rieck

steak — a dietary staple we would be eating for the next week.

That Sunday, after strolling through the historic San Telmo market, a group of Fellows took in a soccer game, Argentina’s national passion. We saw a game between cross town teams, Vélez Sársfield and Huracán, but the fans were as interesting as what happened on the field.

The more impassioned fans sat in the cheap seats behind opposing goals, areas cordoned off with fences 30 feet high, some sections topped with barbed wire. Waves of fans in the sections undulated to constant drum beats with abandon, like two opposing tribes. It was an amazing spectacle, one with no equivalent in U.S. sport.

The weekend of fun gave way to the more business-like seminars during the week.

Our visit coincided with the inauguration of the country’s first elected female head of state, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, wife of the outgoing President Néstor Kirchner. We saw husband and wife celebrate the transfer of power in a crowded ceremony outside the Casa Rosada, the country’s pink presidential building where Juan and Eva Perón famously addressed crowds from the balcony.

Six years after the country’s financial collapse, we saw great wealth in and around Buenos Aires, but also extreme poverty.

Our visit to a small school on the impoverished outskirts of the city showed the poverty in stark terms. The facilities were bare, with a meager library and a handful of aged computers for students.

On our visit to the studio of Sabat, a famous political cartoonist, he gave each of us a signed poster. The political figures depicted in the poster were dictators, generals and

politicians, and Sabat provided us with a quick explanation of each. The work provided a road map through the country's decades of political instability and coups.

The week ended with a crash course in Argentine wine at a tasting and dinner at the Four Seasons hotel. Some Fellows returned to the states, while several stayed behind for their own sightseeing in Buenos Aires, or traveled to other parts of the country, such as Bariloche near the Andes or the wine country of Mendoza.

New York was our next destination, which kicked off with a breakfast meeting with legendary editor (and KWF board member) Gene Roberts. His views on editing a newspaper and what goes into being a good editor were invaluable.

We toured Bloomberg's state-of-the-art building and lunched with editor-in-chief Matthew Winkler, who gave us insight into how his growing world media operation functions. The afternoon included a tour at the offices of "60 Minutes," where executive producer Jeff Fager answered our questions about the iconic news magazine and then gave us a special screening of the previous night's episode, along with a behind-the-scenes look.

We spent Tuesday morning touring the offices of the Associated Press, where president and CEO Tom Curley painted a clear picture of how his 4,000 employee operation is adapting to the changing media landscape. We then visited the new *New York Times* building where we met with editors of different sections and lunched with managing editor (and KWF board Member) Jill Abramson. The conversation covered a range of topics, including diversity, investigative reporting and how the web has changed what they do, particularly this election season.

The New York trip grew out of a more informal version taken by members of the Fellowship class of 2006, but was such a



Brigit Reack

Buenos Aires Senator Daniel Filmus (center) invited KWF '08 to the senate to discuss Argentine politics.

success this year it's going to be a regular part of the travel schedule.

"Journalism and the news cycle both emanate from New York, the program has contacts at the very top, and I've wanted to take the Fellows there for a long time," said Eisendrath.

Turkey was our final destination. The debate over legalizing head scarves for women attending universities was in full swing when we arrived in mid-February. That discussion would be a recurring theme throughout our seven days in the secular Muslim country as we met with journalists, politicians, activists and historians.

We arrived on a Friday, and after our overnight flight, lunch and a check-in at the hotel, we took the bus to a Turkish bath. It was a first for all the Fellows. You basically strip down, put on a thin cloth, enter a large, steamy room with members of the same sex and have a stranger wash you. While some Fellows, particularly the men, entered with a bit of hesitation, the verdict afterward was that it was a rejuvenating experience, like none we'd ever had before. That night we dined and saw a belly dancing show atop the 14th-century Galata Tower.

The Michigan weather followed us to Turkey, and snowflakes fell as we toured the sixth century domed grandeur of Hagia Sophia, first built as a church and later converted into a mosque after the city was conquered by the Turks. It was

the largest church in the world for almost a thousand years. We also toured its neighbor the impressive 17th-century Blue Mosque — both holy places providing a glimpse into the religious and political history of the city. That afternoon we toured the city's Grand Bazaar and in the evening Fellow Ipek Yezdani '08, a native of Istanbul and a reporter for the *Milliyet* newspaper, took us to a wonderful kabob restaurant and local dance club.

Our hosts at CNN Türk provided us with a tour of their impressive media complex, which houses several newspapers, television studios and the news channel. The next day, we had a morning of meetings with various journalists and activists, in which topics ranged from the head scarf debate to policies toward the Kurdish militant group, the PKK, considered a terrorist organization. After lunch on a plaza overlooking the Bosphorus, we boarded a chartered boat to our next meeting. The boat took us along the famous ancient trade route that separates Turkey's European and Asian sections, providing more picturesque views of the city.

Later in the week, we traveled by plane to Turkey's capital, Atatürk, where we spent the day meeting with military and government officials, walking through the mausoleum and museum of the Republic's founder, Ataturk, and touring the parliament building. We ended the memorable week at religious ceremony of the Alevi sect of Islam, a marginalized group within the faith that has been discriminated against within Turkey for generations. It was an eye-opening experience for many of us to learn the group even existed, not to mention to experience their hospitality and hear the tenets of their faith.

Afterward, back at our hotel, we toasted champagne to our host, CNN Türk editor in chief Ferhat Boratav, for the generous hospitality that helped open a window into his fascinating country. And then we went into the night for one final Turkish feast. ▶

—A Humorist on Humor, continued from page 1

jokes, cartoons, advertisements, sitcoms, movies and innumerable cats flushing toilets on YouTube — and because we each experience it in our own lives many, many times a day. Well, most of us thought we knew all we needed to know about sub-prime mortgages.

But if you think you know all you need to know about humor, see if you can come up with satisfactory answers to the following questions. (Unsatisfactory ones will receive partial credit.)

Why do we laugh in response to something we find funny? It's a strong reaction that causes us to almost completely empty our lungs of oxygen and expends a lot of energy. Wouldn't a hip snapping of the fingers do just as well?

What word would you choose to characterize the essential attribute of humor? A) aggression, B) incongruity or C) relief?

Is humor an emotion like fear and anger? If those help us do something (flee or fight), then what does humor do?

What makes apes laugh? Hint: It's not *New Yorker* cartoons.

If you just listened for an hour to a group speaking in a language you didn't understand, how would the phenomenon of humor help you know the group's hierarchy?

Does research show that you prefer a person who laughs at your jokes but disagrees with your views or vice-versa?

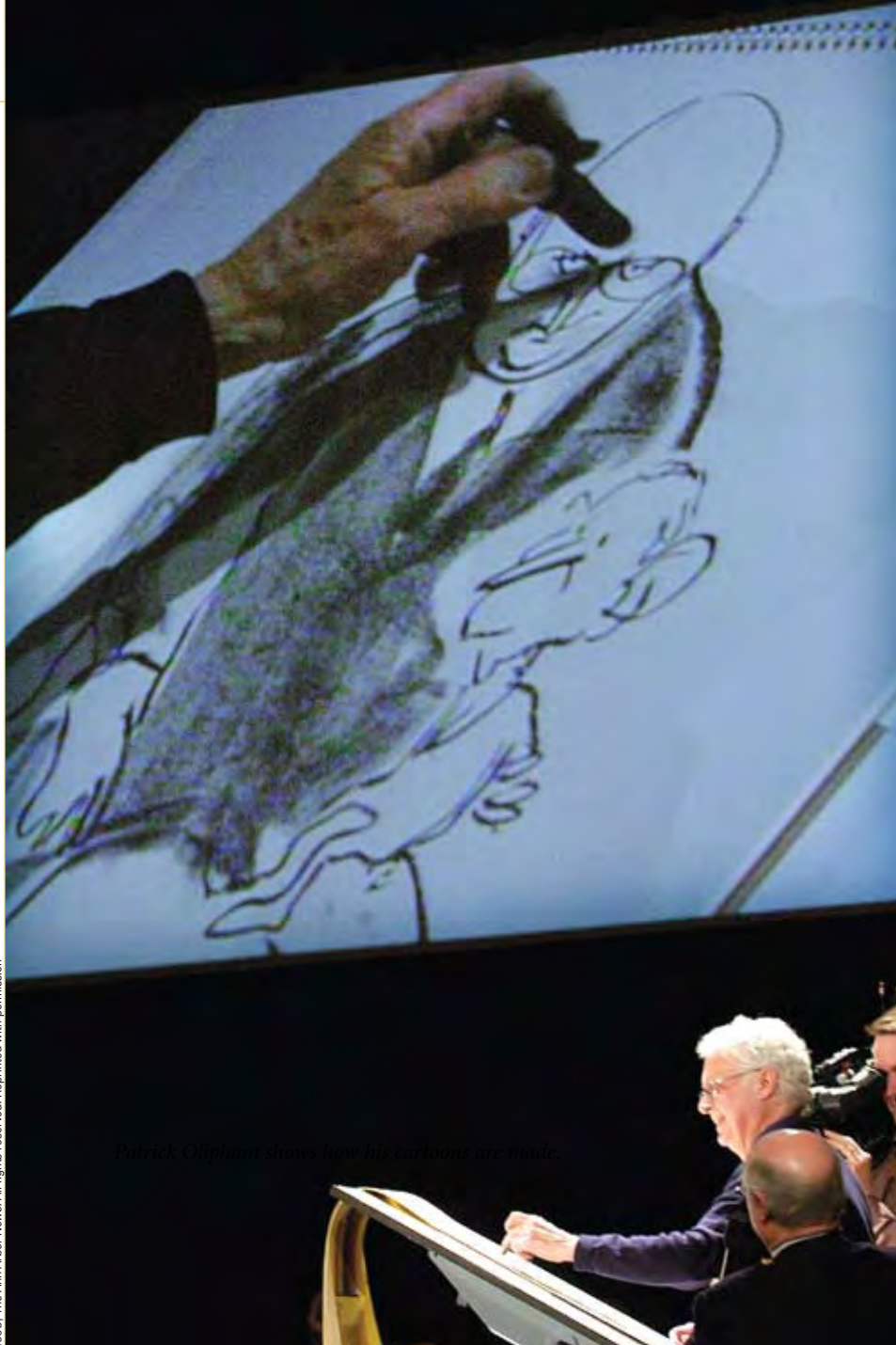
Would you say that someone who enjoys Gary Larson cartoons is more likely to be a liberal or conservative?

There are three components to the concept of a "sense of humor." The first two are creation and appreciation. What's the last one, and what's its importance for mental health?

Are comedians born or made?

If you had a choice between never having sex again and never laughing again which would you opt for? What would Eliot Spitzer opt for?

A moment's reflection on questions like these (okay, stop thinking about the



2008. The Ann Arbor News. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission

Patrick Oliphant draws cartoons live on stage during the Humor conference.

Spitzer thing) would show that the topic of humor relates to all branches of psychology. Cognitive psychologists are interested in the mental process that enables us to create and appreciate humor. Social psychologists study how humor works in groups either to build cohesion or to promote exclusion. Evolutionary psychologists are interested in how it has helped us survive and adapt. Developmental psychologists study its course over a lifespan. Clinical psychologists research its role in mental health. Personality researchers want to know how one's sense of humor relates to other personality variables.

Another moment's reflection shows that anthropology, history, medicine and

philosophy have important contributions to make as well.

For the last three year I've been privileged to be part of a program called Humor at Michigan, which uses the 70,000 cartoons published in *The New Yorker* to investigate the cognitive processes involved in the comprehension of humor. Some amazing research has been done and now we're hoping to expand the program well beyond cartoons and cognitive psychology into a full-fledged inter-disciplinary program.

The author E. B. White famously said that analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog — nobody is much interested and the frog dies. Lighten up, E.B. The frog lives! ▶

# Our Great Geniuses



**Cynthia Barnett '05** received the gold medal for nonfiction in the Florida Book Awards for “Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern U.S.”

Barnett is a staff writer for *Florida Trend* magazine.

**Jason Beaubien '07** has been named National Public Radio's Mexico City correspondent, covering Mexico, Cuba, the Caribbean and Central America. Previously, Beaubien was NPR's Midwest correspondent out of Kansas City.

**Alden Bourne '05**, formerly a producer for “60 Minutes,” has been named director of programming for One Day University, which presents the best college professors, teaching their greatest courses, at locations in major East Coast cities.

**Jamie Butters '06** headed up a *Detroit Free Press* team that won a 2008 National Headliners Award for “A New U.S. Auto Industry.” The special section, which examined the end of the UAW strike against General Motors, took second place for Writing & Reporting Spot News in the daily newspapers and news syndicates category and also won a Society of Business Editors and Writers award for breaking news coverage.

**Scott Elliott '05** won a Best of Cox 2008 award for his blog, “Get on the Bus.” Elliott is an education reporter for the *Dayton Daily News*.

**Faye Flam '05** has authored a book, “The Score,” which she describes as “an evolutionary history of the sexes,” due out in June. Flam is a science writer for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

**Vindu Goel '06** has left his post as a business columnist at the *San Jose Mercury News* to join *The New York Times* in the newly-created position of deputy technology editor. Goel will be helping the *Times* expand its technology coverage, especially online.

**Deborah Howlett '01** made the transition from journalism to politics in March, accepting the position of director of communications for New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine. Howlett was previously a staff writer for New Jersey's *The Star-Ledger*.



**Seiichi Kanise '88** has been named Dean of the School of Global Japanese Studies at Meiji University in Tokyo. Kanise currently anchors two television shows covering business

and has published books on world politics, China and private asset management.

**Mark McDonald '97** joined the *International Herald Tribune* in Hong Kong as an editor. McDonald previously spent two years as the Howard Marsh Professor of Journalism at the University of Michigan.



**Marzio Mian '02** has been named deputy editor in chief of *Io Donna*, the weekly magazine of the leading Italian newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*. Prior to the promotion, Mian

was the magazine's special correspondent at large.

**Nancy Nall '04** shook up the White House office of public liaison by uncovering plagiarism by its director, Tim Goeglein.

Nall revealed on her blog ([www.nancynall.com](http://www.nancynall.com)) that parts of a column Goeglein wrote for the *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel* were taken from a Dartmouth College publication. Further investigation revealed a pattern of plagiarism by Goeglein, who ultimately admitted responsibility and resigned from his position.

**Tetsu Okazaki '07** is moving to Australia to serve as correspondent and bureau chief of the *The Yomiuri Shimbun's* Sydney Bureau. Prior to his appointment, Okazaki was a staff writer for the paper in Tokyo.

**Mike Oneal '04** and Livingston Award winner Evan Osnos were part of a *Chicago Tribune* team that won a Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting for the series “Hidden Hazards.” The series, about the federal government's failure to regulate manufacturers of many children's products, also won second place in the 2008 National Headliners Awards in the public service category and a 2007 George Polk Award for Consumer Reporting.

**James Rupert '00** has joined *Bloomberg News* as their South Asia political correspondent. Prior to the shift, Rupert was a deputy foreign editor and correspondent for *Newsday*, most recently opening the magazine's bureau in Islamabad, Pakistan.



**Ellen Soeteber '87** spent the spring 2008 semester as the second annual Edith Kinney Gaylord visiting professor in journalism ethics at Arizona State University's

Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications. Soeteber taught two classes in journalism ethics and diversity. ▶

Send your doings and a print-resolution photo to Birgit Rieck at [brieck@umich.edu](mailto:brieck@umich.edu)

— What Actually Happened,  
continued from page 3

quences of the failed joke. Political careers have folded on the wrong gag at the wrong time. Just ask John Kerry about his Iraq moment.

Maybe Professor Richard Lewis could help there. The University of Michigan psychologist is studying the moment-by-moment mental processes that underlie the ability to appreciate a joke. He even has a bit of kit that tracks eye movements while reading a cartoon, so he can actually see what makes an individual laugh and when. Interestingly, he noted that some people react to cartoons in an entirely non-visual way, which no doubt gave the cartoonists on stage food for thought.

But does laughter actually do us any good? Professor Rod Martin of the University of Western Ontario wrote a book on that — and the answer is “no.” Despite decades of Reader’s Digest giving us “Laughter, the Best Medicine” in every issue, Martin, the President of International Society for Humor Studies, told us that there is no conclusive proof that laughter lengthens your life. In fact, there is some evidence that humorous people actually die earlier, probably because they don’t take anything seriously, including a trip to the doctor. However, to sighs of relief from the panelists,

Martin did confirm that humor gives real benefits for psychological health.

Humor can also be good for your business, said John Morreall from the College of William and Mary, the last of the academics to speak. The professor of religion — whose talk was entitled “Humor at \$5,000 an hour” — has a sideline advising major companies in using humor. Look at John Cleese’s company “Video Arts” or the CEO of Southwest Airlines and see how successful they have been. Being funny can be very profitable.

Questions from the floor brought even more elucidation, such as how many times God laughs in the Bible (twice); who the “Daily Show” team would have liked to get the Republican domination (“We’d have had a lot of fun with Ron Paul”); and how to tell if an incipient standup comedian is funny (“If you have to ask...,” said Mankoff).

Back at Wallace House later, it was a classic evening as speakers, Fellows and faculty mixed over food and wine, cartoons and conversation, gags and stories. Serious stuff, too — because it is a serious business, this humor thing. Maybe the first Department of Humor should be right here at Michigan. There’s plenty to be studied and discussed, as was discovered that March Monday at the Michigan Theater. And that’s no joke. ▶

Publisher: Charles R. Eisendrath ’75

Editor: Julia Smillie ’06S

Production and Design:  
Kathleen Horn, Blue Skies Studio

Views expressed in the *Journal* are not necessarily those of the Fellowship Program or the University of Michigan.

Mike and Mary Wallace House  
University of Michigan, 620 Oxford Road  
Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2635  
Telephone: 734-998-7666  
FAX: 734-988-7979  
[www.kwfellows.org](http://www.kwfellows.org)

#### The Regents of the University

Julia Donovan Darlow, Ann Arbor  
Laurence B. Deitch, Bingham Farms  
Olivia P. Maynard, Goodrich  
Rebecca McGowan, Ann Arbor  
Andrea Fischer Newman, Ann Arbor  
Andrew C. Richner, Grosse Pointe Park  
S. Martin Taylor, Grosse Pointe Farms  
Katherine E. White, Ann Arbor  
Mary Sue Coleman (*ex officio*)

#### University of Michigan Nondiscrimination Policy Statement

The University of Michigan, as an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer, complies with all applicable federal and state laws regarding nondiscrimination and affirmative action, including Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The University of Michigan is committed to a policy of nondiscrimination and equal opportunity for all persons regardless of race, sex\*, color, religion, creed, national origin or ancestry, age, marital status, sexual orientation, disability, or Vietnam-era veteran status in employment, educational programs and activities, and admissions.

Inquiries or complaints may be addressed to the Senior Director for Institutional Equity and Title IX/Section 504 Coordinator, Office of Institutional Equity, 2072 Administrative Services Building, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1432, 734-763-0235, TTY 734-647-1388. For other University of Michigan information call 734-764-1817.

\*Includes gender identity and gender expression

**M**UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Knight-Wallace Journalism Fellows  
University of Michigan  
Mike and Mary Wallace House  
620 Oxford Road  
Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2635

Non-profit  
Organization  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Ann Arbor, MI  
Permit #144