

26th ISOJ Political Satire for the Digital Era: From Animated Cartoons to Memes

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 - Paul Alonso, associate professor, Georgia Tech
 - Mark Fiore, visual journalist/cartoonist
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Ramon Ramirez Hello everybody, thank you so much for being here. Thank you for sticking around. We are very aware of the fact that this is the last panel of the day, and we are standing between you and happy hour. So we're gonna try to make this as fun and informative as possible, and we're really appreciative of your time. All right, so my name is Ramon Ramirez. I'm the managing editor of the Daily Dot. We cover internet culture. We've covered internet culture since 2011, so we've seen firsthand just how influential some of these memes and QAnon stuff has become. And happy to speak about that as much as possible, but also if you want to know more, feel free to find me at the bar, and I'll talk to your ear off then. And here I'll just try to be more of a moderator.

This is Mark Fiore, he's one of the best political cartoonists in the game. He is also a fellow at Stanford University, and his work has appeared everywhere important. Who's next to my right here? Okay, this is Sammi. Her work has appeared in The New Yorker, in The Onion. She's a senior writer at The Onion. Her work is hilarious, biting, insightful. She can turn a riff about a seahorse into incredible, biting political satire. It's really wonderful work. And then it's my boy Paul from Georgia Tech, a professor, and he's written several books on basically the rise of, the influence and the effect of satire across Latin America from TV to the YouTube generation. And then at the end, we have, my friend, wait, wait wait, wait wait wait. Sorry. We have Sarah, right? Sarah. Jesus Christ. I am, I'm, I am terribly sorry for the rudeness, but Sarah is just one of the chief architects behind Reductress, which is one of the funniest sites on the internet. They just have a really awesome, new book that you guys should check out. I think it's the kind of thing you've got to have on your coffee table. We're going to talk a little bit about the rise and the change. Well, you guys know. Well, what is this panel called? It's called the, you know, the rise of. There we go. There it is. Political Satire for the Digital Era: From Animated Cartoons to Memes. Okay, so we're going to start with a presentation by Mark, who is, again, an accomplished satirist and has a lot to say on the matter, and Mark, please. Give it up for Mark.

Mark Fiore Thank you. I think this is actually, it's a misnomer for the panel. I think it's actually called the happy hour panel, so let's keep it like that. And I think probably soon maybe we can come and go, and people can get drinks and then come back, and we'll keep talking. As you so kindly introduced me, I'm Mark Fiore, and I'm currently a fellow with the John S. Knight Journalism Fellowship at Stanford, which has been incredible, and I want to make that last forever. But it's not going to last forever, so let me tell you a little bit about my background. And I'm going to keep this short, so we can have a conversation and have a lot of fun up here rather than me just yammering on and showing my cartoons. But we want to see some cartoons, right?

So I started in the world of actual newspaper cartoons. That's a long, long time ago for me. And I was drawn into cartoons and into journalism through the love of cartoons. Everything from Calvin and Hobbes, to Bugs Bunny, and Chuck Jones cartoons. I just loved cartoons. But then I found these things called political cartoons. And I really started to love those,

and that really brought about this awareness of the greater world, you know, whether it was in the United States or around the world. And so, really since being a kid, I was laser-beam focused on being a political cartoonist. And so started, you now, a long, long time ago in the traditional, actual pre-internet days, doing cartoons on dead trees. And fast forward to, well, I'll show one. I'll start with one cartoon from just last year. So let's just, I'll show you what my cartoons became or have become.

Video Are you tired of explaining your unwavering support for guns amid constant mass shootings? Having a hard time selling people on slashing Social Security and Medicare? How's a good Republican supposed to explain all this stuff? Guess what? You don't have to, because you've got anti-woke everything! Skip that uncomfortable policy junk and stick to the culture wars. Look! A gay M&M! See how easy it is? All you need are a few unrelated issues and plenty of outrage, and you're on your way to anti-woke everything. Of course, you could try to explain how Republicans helped add five trillion dollars to the debt when they gave rich people a huge tax cut. Or you could tell people Joe Biden is coming to take away their gas stoves. Congratulations, you're now an anti-woke cooking crusader. Anti-woke everything works great for toilets, light bulbs, bathrooms, fashion, fictional characters, books, and of course, plain old speech. Why talk about your unpopular policies when you can be outraged about candy, cooking, and cartoon characters? Anti-Woke Everything. Let the culture wars work for you.

Mark Fiore So that's a little different from where I started with regular newspaper cartoons, and I got into doing cartoons like that, mainly because it just felt to me like you could tap into people's brains a lot more than you could through a single panel cartoon. And I think whether it's animated cartoons or traditional single panel cartoons or memes or written satire, I think one of the beauty, you know, one of the superpowers you might call it, is that it can help unlock people's walls, or like make a window in that wall, whatever the metaphor is. There's an ability where almost all of us have some sort of preconceived notion, or you have some sort of wall that it's much easier to break through if you go through a point of humor, or a point of cartoons. So, even though a cartoon like that, that cartoon probably takes, you know, generally something like that's about three days on the production side to make because you're dealing with voice actors, and music, and you know actually animating the thing, and sound, and all kinds of things, so it adds up some time. But I still do single panel cartoons as well, and these are more in the, you know, I mean, I love doing work like this still because it does allow you to do something in the blink of an eye. You know, not create it in the blink of an eye, but like receive it. You get that idea instantly.

And here's the next one speaking of Haitian people in Ohio. That was when that came about. This ties in with misinformation and disinformation, which we may get into in the Q&A or over by the bar. We'll see. So I will show one more animation and then we can keep rolling and get into more of a discussion. One of the other, talking about that super power real quick before I show this one, one of the benefits of cartoons, at least to me and that I see in cartoons and satire more generally, is that it allows you to talk about things that are honestly really freaking depressing or really freaking tough. I think Luz mentioned it in the last panel, that even though you have this awfulness happening in the world or in your own country, you have to be able to laugh, and you have to be able to find the hypocrisy in some of these things. And without that, we would go a little more nutty.

Video: Attention, Gazans! America is here to help! Look to the skies, carefully, look to the sea! Help is on the way! We can do it all! Who says we can't provide bombs and aid at the same time? Bombs for our close and admittedly over-the-top ally, and aid for our

Palestinian friends because of the aforementioned bombs? Yes, we're a friend to all! Bombs for our ally who destroys water treatment plants, and water for civilians because their water treatment plants were blown up. Bombs for hospitals, medicine from above, bombs for roads and trucks, aid from boats and a pier. If our bombs destroy aid routes, we'll just invent new routes. Malnutrition, starvation, disease, we're here to help after we hurt. Yes, we can. Help solve a humanitarian crisis of our own complicity. Because America can do it all. Our bombs don't kill people over the top allies using our bombs kill people.

Mark Fiore So whether it's the animated cartoons or the single panel cartoons, the kind of work that I do, and I think one of the biggest strengths of satire is the ability to actually say something. I'm all for humor for humor's sake, but it seems like what's really drawn me to this kind of a work, and, I think, one of the biggest strengths of satire is that you're actually saying something. It's more than just a ha-ha silly joke. And I think some of the best memes, and some of the best work that's written satire, it isn't just funny. A lot of people look at a cartoon like that or the one that I showed you earlier, and they might say, "Ha ha, that's funny." But all of that work has to be based in fact, and that's where you become more of a satirist, is where you push that a little farther past that point of absurdity. So I'll get off my soap box now and we can talk more with these guys. Thank you.

Ramon Ramirez So we're going to roll right along, and use the clicker. There we go, all right, here we go. So look, as funny as Mark's work was, I mean, I think we all also watch it, and sometimes the news is so over-the-top depressing that it's really hard to find the strength to laugh, and I think that's kind of the era that we're in right now. So, my question for the panelists, and we can just go one at a time, just hop in whenever you all want. When did you realize that, I mean the question is written, when did you realize memes were changing the world? But I guess really the question is when did you realize that the internet was no longer funny? And why don't we start with Sarah.

Sarah Pappalardo I do not even remember the moment when like memes... like memes are like the water that I swam in growing up, but I would say that when I realized memes were changing the world into whatever this world we're living in in this very moment was probably around when I saw the Chad meme. Do you guys know what the Chad Meme is? It's the guy with the blonde hair, and the beard, and he says like, "Yes." And it originated on the right. It was like a right-wing meme and has evolved into various forms, but I think the moment I saw people kind of more in the mainstream using the Chad meme, I realized things were changing in the meme world. Memes in the 2010s felt kind of broadly liberal, I would say, just broadly liberal. Maybe just because that was the zeitgeist at the time. And now that things have changed, we're seeing the memes take a different shape. And that was when I realized, "Oh no, memes can be quite dangerous in the way that they come from a place with a very particular ideology, and can filter into the mainstream and feel like it's just normal." So, yeah.

Ramon Ramirez I had no idea. Did anybody know that the Chad meme originated on the right? I had no idea. I see that meme all day, every day. I had no idea. That's unbelievable. Okay, awesome. Paul, what about you?

Paul Alonso I mean, for me, it really wasn't memes that got my interest. I started with magazines. I was a young journalist in Peru in the 90s, and then I was also studying literature. And I started reading magazines inspired, Latin American satirical magazines, inspired by the Onion, by Charlie Hebdo. I realized that they had these other possibilities that journalism felt, that the traditional journalism at the time felt insufficient to cover certain

things that were already happening in Latin America. But really my academic interest in satire in general, from magazines to memes, I would say it started actually here in Austin, 20 years ago, when I came as a grad student to do a master's in journalism in Latin American studies. And in the journalism department, I was kind of one of the few people that actually started doing academic research on what, at the moment, was a very new and fresh phenomenon of satiric infotainment, satirical television, and The Daily Show apparently was the new journalism at the time. And I realized also that that kind of political entertainment, or political satire, or satirist journalism, I don't know, so many names that have been used for that, was actually a version of that in so many other contemporary democratic societies, and they were also particularly in Latin America that I focused my work on.

There was a version of The Daily Show and other kinds of formats in all those countries, but they became very Argentinian, very Peruvian, very Mexican, and they weren't becoming exactly what Latin American is, like creator of hybrid products, no? So they took these global formats, transnational formats, and were adapting them to their local circumstances, to their local context, or local historical processes, social, cultural, language, slang, popular culture, et cetera, no? So that's really when my whole interest began really developing also as a practitioner and as an academic. And so I do think that really understanding the layers that satire had and the possibilities, which I know have changed from then to now, had to really try to understand the reality of the world, which at the end was, at the time, also has always been, but at the time was, I think, much more a preoccupation for traditional media, no? So, like, traditional media was trying to understand and make sense of a reality that was becoming much more complex and much more entertainment-driven, and politics was becoming much more spectacle-driven. And I felt like the norms of traditional journalism sometimes were not enough, or just were not capturing all those dimensions.

Ramon Ramirez So, let's talk a little bit about what we mean by satire, when we talk about satire. So, what exactly is satire, and how do you find its characteristics, particularly from the lens of your specific work? And Mark, why don't we start with you?

Mark Fiore As far as satire goes, even though I can talk a good game about satire, I am still somewhat mystified by how it happens. You actually were describing it really well in relation to memes, how what I took out of it anyway, is that memes are not necessarily always satire. It's more like you're laying over these elements. Like, yeah, you might have Spongebob, but I'm saying something else, and don't you get the joke that those two connect to that? It's almost like you're trying to map humor, and that's really fricking hard to do. But I think as far as satire, for me, it's really just seeing that absurdity that exists in reality and pushing it a little far. It's almost like you are showing people what the future might be, what it could be. Like the dolphin gag that I had in that cartoon. It's like. Yeah, we didn't actually employ dolphins, but really we weren't that far from doing that, you know? So that's kind of what I see as satire, but it's a tricky thing. I think it's still kind of this magic world that I don't understand entirely.

Ramon Ramirez And Paul, so your work has really focused on Latin America. What works, what doesn't, when it comes to humor in Latin America, when it comes to satire in Latin American?

Paul Alonso I would like to go back to the definition thing because that's actually for the research and the books that I've written about satire, I had to read many articles and books about the different definitions of satire throughout history, in different cultures, in

different places. I mean, of course, I picked the ones that I liked the best. But one of them, one of the most traditional ones, was a “humorous verbal attack on human stupidity and folly, and what is perceived as dangerous political, social, cultural views or discourses.” The one that I usually use in classes or in some presentations for other audiences is to create also the contrast between some more traditional comedy and satire, which is sometimes a difficult thing for a lot of people to grasp. And usually I try to explain this, that sometimes, usually comedy, in a more general sense, its final aim is to create laughter, to entertain, or to create humor, or to create laughter. With satires, also, there does have this critical component that usually is social, political, or cultural, and it's actually questioning some sort of version of reality. So I do think that that's an important definition that I think helps people, and I think it goes through cultures. So I do think that that definition applies to the US, but also in Latin America. But I also think that's very elastic in the sense that what is transgressive, or what is a verbal attack on the establishment, or whatever it is, changes from culture to culture.

So I remember when I was writing about satiric television, or even digital, but mainly with television because it's a different kind of platform and other kinds of negotiations that satirists had to do within those media outlets, one of the things, and even with magazines too, that I thought was really interesting was that what could be perceived as something very transgressive, and irreverent, and disruptive in a moment in one society is something totally normalized in another one. It changes through time, through places, according to their whole historical and cultural processes, no? And things that, for example, I remember, I wrote about a case in Ecuador, and what they were doing, I felt, was very mildly subversive, according to my standards. But I do think that, you know, for example if you look at Argentina in Latin America, their, I think, their satirical tradition is much more acid, and much more irreverent, and much more dark, and politically incorrect, even, no? So I do think it also depends on when, no? So I think it's those kind of definitions of what works, what doesn't, what is satire, and what is transgressive, or what it is to speak the truth to power changes so much according to the context, the time, the culture, so I do think it's very open. It's important to keep that in mind.

Ramon Ramirez Yeah, and Paul, you're talking about something interesting, about what works, what doesn't. And in the news business, we take something that works, and we run it into the ground until it doesn't. I do that in particular with headline constructions. Here's a headline construction that works, and people respond to it. And you do it over, and over, and over again for like a hundred years, and then eventually that headline construction doesn't work anymore. And then you have to find a new headline construction. So Sarah, what doesn't work anymore over at Reductress? What stopped working over the last few years?

Sarah Pappalardo What doesn't work anymore? Yeah, I would say there's certain sensibilities that have just kind of run their course, that maybe I think felt more fresh in the 2010s. And a lot of it was kind of like, I think something that was part of the conversation at the time was kind of like learned helplessness in heterosexual couples. Like men who were like, “I don't know how to wash the dishes,” and things like that. So I think, you know, we had a little fun with that for when it felt fresh and relevant. But I think like anything, there's always this balance between trying to say something fresh, something new, something that is still punching up, without feeling mean or kind of heavy-handed. And I think in editorial, you're always just kind of trying to balance that out between what actually feels specific enough to be worth saying, and what's just kind of like bordering on just being unkind.

Ramon Ramirez Absolutely. Well, why don't we bring it, let's flash forward to 2025. So Mark, it's 2025. President Donald Trump is starting his second term. What's changed?

Mark Fiore You mean between 2025 and the previous term?

Ramon Ramirez Well, yeah, what's different now, especially when it comes to your lens and your work?

Mark Fiore It's getting hit from more directions, and I think really honestly the biggest, I mean not to bring it down too much, but the distribution side, the business side, has gotten much more difficult. And I'd be curious to hear what you all say about this too, but thinking back to 2016, you know, think of all the different changes just looking at Facebook. Think of all of the different changes, the algorithm, and the push. "Okay, hey, it's going to be video. Yeah, we're going big on news. We're going big on politics." And then all of a sudden, it's like, "No, we are actually tired of getting pulled before Congress. We're not going to do news anymore. It's about interpersonal relationships and forming connections all around the world." And whatever the latest BS out of Facebook is, that affects everything. That affects online news sites. That affects content creators like me. And I'd be curious how that kind of thing is affecting all of your work and getting it out there because social media has been such a big avenue for that.

Ramon Ramirez That's such a good point that we didn't even bake into the recipe, but it makes sense. We are going to talk about how satire's dangerous because of the way it's been weaponized by folks on the right, and the way things have really changed. But from a business perspective, just for context, the Daily Dot, January of 2023, January 23, we had 31 million clicks just from Facebook. Fast forward to January 2025, it's like 100,000. So that is a huge swath of money that we lost. Because, does everyone know how to like convert the value of your page views? It's actually like super simple. And I know as journalists we are terrible at math, and we don't like to think about the business side of things. But it's really straightforward. You just take the number and divided by a thousand. So the number of page views, so 30 million page views divided by 1,000 times the ad rate at the moment. And so the Daily Dots January ad rate would have been like \$17. So 31 million divided by 1,000 times 17 is the amount of money that we lost monthly because Facebook just tweaked the algorithm. And now we're reliant on Google News and Google Discover. Google Search was a big deal 10 years ago, but now that's pretty much dying off with the rise of AI, so you're absolutely right.

Sarah Pappalardo It's always a challenge trying to stay relevant when there's so many talented people saying the things so quickly. Sometimes when a big news story comes out, and we look at it, we hold back and say, "Let's keep an eye on it, and see what people are saying about it." Because another avenue for Reductress to comment on what's happening is what the media is saying about, or what the media is doing, how the media's handling it wrong. And that can be really fun to play with, too, because it is actually a lot. We will play with headline construction, and like, especially in the 2010s, we were really trying to take on the voice of clickbait headlines and really embody that voice. Respect though, hey, you got to get attention. It has to. But we still have a lot of fun doing that, and I think there's always a lot to say kind of on that second thought. Well, Twitter has always been a great place to find the first best jokes. When we're at our best, we're reacting to the conversation as much as the original news story.

Ramon Ramirez I want to go back to what you said at the beginning, that one of the most popular memes on the internet, and I had no idea, and we used to have a whole vertical

dedicated to meme culture, and teenagers would write us every day complaining about, you're killing memes. In other words, you are giving attention to these memes that are for us, and now you're making them mainstream and uncool. We dealt with that pretty much every single day. But what you said at the beginning was that the Chad meme, which is, show of hands, who knows the Chad Meme? Where are my Chad stans at? Where are the Chad heads at? It's great. It's like I see it every day on the internet. I had no idea it came from the right-wing internet. So when did humor on the internet become this young male conservative space for y'all? Or just for all of us? Why, and how did that happen? Paul, why don't we start with you.

Paul Alonso Let me actually combine the previous question with this one. Let me go back to two headlines that I remember I read from one at the peak of the Daily Show. I don't remember the magazine that ran this whole piece asking where's the conservative Jon Stewart? And they were actually kind of making a whole critique of why is satire humor always so progressive, so liberal, or that, no? Of course, there's a whole tradition that might explain that leaning. But then, let me fast forward to 2016, and I remember right when Trump was just elected in his first term, there was this piece in the Washington Post, an op-ed, saying Trump has killed satire. And I think that in both cases, it's very revealing, those kind of anxieties of who owns satire? How can that be? And you know, I also feel like those kinds of conversations and debates are sometimes very, ethnocentric, or at least very time-centric in the sense that, you know, satire is such an old form that has existed through so much time. It's one of the earliest literary forms from so many traditions. So I feel like it has been appropriated in many ways. And actually with your question about the now, trying to understand the young male conservatives, well, then again, it goes back to the definition. There are many books that actually say that probably wouldn't be satire. It would be an appropriation of certain time of parody resources for humorous purposes that serve some sort of ideological view, but I don't know if you could call that satire itself because as it was mentioned first, one of the main things that satirists usually had is that punching up, and that confrontation of power, or of the status quo, right? So I don't know if you could still define that as satire.

Mark Fiore If I could just jump in real quick, I think you hit on something perfectly there, is that it's getting appropriated. And I think this idea of satire being, you know, it's a left thing, and then, oh no, now the right's getting it. I don't think the right is getting it. And you know I'm probably, I have my own views of what's factual and what's not, you know, unfortunately that's a little grayer with some people. But I think what they're doing is, and it's classic Trumpism too, it's like he'll say something outlandish and ridiculous, then his administration will backpedal or attempt to backpedal, and then they'll come out and say, "He was just joking." And I think what we're seeing with some of the more right-wing memes, it's not satire. It's more of a wink. It's like, oh, you think it's some white supremacist meme, you're like, don't you get a joke? No, that's not really a joke. Like you know they're not connecting it to satire. It's more of it's more a wink and a nod to people in that tribe. You know that's kind of what I would argue in a lot of that.

Ramon Ramirez Absolutely, we talk about what is and isn't satire. Paul made a really good point that for it to be satire, you know, we really do need to be punching up. And so a lot of what we're seeing from the right is appropriation, and it's people trying to be funny. Like Sammi, you just hit the nail on the head. Elon Musk wants to be funny. That's been a through line of his forever. So, Sarah, has humor, has satire, how dangerous is that? Especially, you know, not just from a cultural perspective, but from a business perspective, from what you have to work on and defend every day at Reductress.

Sarah Pappalardo How dangerous. I mean, I don't think that what I do is dangerous, I don't think that satire has that kind of power. I think it's important for the historical record to show what we disagreed with on a fundamental level. But in the same sense, I don't think right wing memes, as long as we're not including actual hate speech, I don't think they're dangerous. From an editor's perspective, my usual critique is one, is it punching up or punching down, and two, is it even specific or based in any kind of real reality? Like, I'll use a Babylon Bee headline for an example. I think after...

Ramon Ramirez Can you, for those who don't know, can you explain what the Babylon Bee is?

Sarah Pappalardo The Babylon Bee is basically the right-wing answer to the Onion. It used to be, it started out as kind of like a religious, like a Christian parody site that got bought by a hard right editor, and it became just kind of a mouthpiece for right-wing ideology after that. And actually when it first started out, there was some really funny stuff because it was just based in like, if you'd grown up in the church. It was kind of just making fun of that experience, and there was truth to it. But, you know, now, not so much. And I think it was after, like, one of the plane, the plane that flipped recently, and the people on the right were like screaming because it was a female pilot. Even though, like 99,000 of the last plane crashes were by male pilots. And the headline was, like something about putting a tennis ball at the front of a plane, so that a woman doesn't crash the plane. And it's like to me that says more about what they have been waiting to say, they've been waiting for an excuse to say it, more than it is an actual reflection of reality, which is like obviously more men have crashed planes than women, and there's a host of other reasons why it's not a reflection in reality. So yeah, I think the "danger" I put in air quotes of the right wing memes are really just that they're not, they're very rarely an accurate reflection of reality, and they're rarely specific enough critiques to even be interesting and end up just being plain mean most of the time.

Ramon Ramirez Brilliant analysis. So let's zoom out a little bit, and Paul, I want to go to you. What changes around the world? What is changing around the word that we need to think about that's going to, if there's a through line to the recent panels that I've seen, is like our friend from Russia who was speaking about the way that democracy was subverted and the way the media was subverted. When it comes to like, you've researched and published extensively around humor in Latin America. What are some lessons that your American friends can take from your findings.

Paul Alonso Well, I always look at it the other way because I do feel like the Latin American contemporary humor has been heavily influenced by US trends, and formats, and comedians, and satirists. However, they have always, as we have always done in Latin America, as I mentioned before, adopted that and created a hybrid product that addresses their own local realities, no? And I think that happens not only in Latin America, but everywhere in the world. Actually, one of the things that, I think, that that whole process of how you adapt something that is global, something that is transnational, something that comes from a longer tradition to a reality, and the needs of that people and that community, it's a very interesting process, no? So I guess maybe, well, so I won't say what the U.S. needs to do in terms of satire, but the one thing that I would say about Latin America is that I do think that it's been a very interesting process to understand how something is adapted for a particular traumatic time. One of the things that I find in all my research is that the best satire has usually come out after traumatic historical periods, no? Some of the best satire in Chile came after the Pinochet dictatorship. Some of the best satires in Argentina came most after the dictatorship or after the economic crisis of 2001.

And some of the best satire in Peru came after Fujimori in the 90s. So I would say that there is usually, or in Mexico after the government of the PRI of 71 years, in the opening, of the democratic reopening of the country. So I do think there is a direct relation between traumatic, repressive, awful times, and a satirical reaction to them. Usually, it does happen in democratic times, and usually, satirists have always been targeted by those kind of repressive authoritarian times too. So I always feel like satire has been a thermometer of democracy as journalism, but even I would say that satire even a little bit more because usually with humor they have always pushed what could be said in public discourse, and what is allowed, and what the line. And I do think in that sense, satire has taken a really important role in establishing what the democratic conversation could be, what are the limits of that, no? So I don't know, maybe that applies here too.

Mark Fiore Yeah, if I can jump in again, we're already seeing that in the U.S. right now. I mean, not so much with all satire, but in the world, you know, my tiny little window of political cartoons. And friends of mine that have stayed in the print world. I mean you're already seeing that first. I don't know how many were here for the first panel, but people mentioned a couple times the weakness that comes if you're weak financially. So, there was, you know, one day, this was about a year and a half, maybe two years ago, on one day a news organization laid off, or a news chain, laid off three political cartoonists across the chain. All three had won a Pulitzer Prize. And more recently, Ann Telnaes basically resigned in protest from the Washington Post because they were afraid to run a cartoon of hers that criticized Bezos. So it's like, we're in that, like, subtle phase. And then, in my international friends in the political cartoon world, I mean, I know guys that have been thrown in jail, and people that have hunted down, some people that've been killed. So it, yeah, I'm looking forward to the post-Pinochet time.

Ramon Ramirez Well, you know, and I'm super curious, Sammi, Sarah, really, to Mark's point, we're three months into Trump 2. A lot of stuff certainly seems to be changing. What are your, respectively, top one to three existential fears about your profession?

Sarah Pappalardo I think that, you know, in terms of danger, we're like 99th on the list of like things that are going to be affected. I think most people in this room are kind of ahead of us in terms of who's going to be affected, and you're probably all affected right now. So, it's kind of hard to say. I don't think that we pose enough of a challenge to the state to be affected. If we did, if this was a world where for some reason we were extremely well-funded and there was a monetization strategy that just made us absolutely enormous, we would probably face some effects. But, yeah, my existential fears are more about my friends, my dear friends who are marginalized, my trans friends, my immigrant friends. I am sure we may be affected financially in kind of an indirect way, but yeah, I know, sorry, I know that doesn't totally answer the question. But, yeah, those are my concerns.

Ramon Ramirez I think it's optimistic and telling that our two out of the three practicing professional satirists are not really all that worried. And you guys keep saying, "Well, we're not important enough for it to be a problem." I absolutely believe that you are. And the reason I'm much more pessimistic, I want to go back just to one more, this guy over here. By the way, I'm sorry for the bad stock art here, but they're all clearly laughing at y'all's work in this photo. It's the frog, it's the frog. So for anyone who doesn't know, this frog was around the internet about 12 years ago and it was seen as just this funny mascot, and everybody kinda loved it, and everybody thought it was funny. We had a staff writer in 2015, who tried to get this tattooed on several occasions, and he was a young man of color. He was a member of the LGBTQ community. Great guy, and he almost got this flag tattooed. And then, somewhere around 2016, it became a symbol for neo-Nazis, and then

it became a mainstream symbol of Elon Musk and Donald Trump. And so, it's the frog, and it's the way that it happened.

Like, my thing, my takeaway as an editor of the Daily Dot since 2014, is that like, men under 30 are really jacked up, really messed up, really traditional. There's evidence that shows that In Germany, South Korea, and the United States for the first time in many generations, the men are getting much more conservative socially, while the women get more liberal. So they get more isolated, and they play video games. And I think it's all video games. Does anybody remember the GamerGate scandal of 2014? Were you guys here for GamerGate? Basically it was just like men harassing a woman over a video game review, and it turned into a whole thing. And she was doxxed, and harassed, and that's where a lot of the modern lexicon around this stuff became codified. That's where we learned what doxxing was, where you like, get someone's public information. That's where we learned what swatting was, right? Where you called the SWAT team over to somebody's house as a prank. And so, what I have observed is that if you were, you know, a teenager on the internet playing video games in 2014, you've grown up to become like a horrible person, and are like angry, and hate women. And I see that every single day, reading the backend of the Daily Dot, reading the comments of the Daily Dot. So I'm a lot more concerned because I think the most recent election, I believe in my heart, that if Vice President Harris was either white or a man, she would've won. But it was just pure, pure, pure anger from men who just didn't show up, men from the Latin American community who bent over backwards to come up with a reason to not show up and do the bare minimum. I think it's really just that simple.

And I think satire starts with what we think is funny being kind of stolen and codified. I think that's why, like my personal take, is just that Elon Musk is extremely powerful when he tries to be funny because he isn't funny, but he is really good at speaking that language. And it's the old South Park line of, they say that Trump kind of killed satire because for the first time, when you made fun of the school principal, he would just turn around and give you the middle finger. And so it's become a lot more difficult to punch up because the right is so happy punching down.

All right, let's keep on rolling. So we've, I've sort of asked this question, but I am super, super curious. What is working for Reductress right now, Sarah? What is it working? What is hitting? Where are the wins? Where are, you know, you edit some stories, you feel, man, this was a good week? What's a good day at Reductress for you?

Sarah Pappalardo It's weird because the good weeks always coincide with the bad news. The bad news always gives us lots of fodder to work with. So as you can imagine, the Signalgate is one of many just gems that are equally hilarious as they are horrifying in like what it says about our reality right now. So that's, you know, a good week. What's working is really just reacting to what's happening in the news. I think on the soft side of that, Reductress' kind of version of Area Man, I think that, much like the book that's there, conversations around productivity and work have really resonated with our audiences. I think people find just a lot of, especially since work has changed so much in the last five years, there's a lot to say about this new, weird, hybrid workspace, and that really resonates with people on a personal level. So, I would say it's those two things that people are really loving.

Ramon Ramirez So it's the news, and it's what's relatable, and it what's hitting right now, and what's relatable is work from home, hybrid work culture. It makes a ton of sense,

makes a ton of since. Love it. And, Mark, really same question, what does a good day at the office mean for you?

Mark Fiore Currently, it's wandering around on the Stanford campus, but that's not going to last forever. No, for me, I wouldn't say it's necessarily a good day when...it depends on the story. For me, it is like, yes, I am somewhat of an ambulance chaser, but I try not to. It's more a bad day as a citizen can become a good for satire fodder. That can be good. But honestly, back to the what's going on this year, one of the things that I've been trying to do, I mentioned it briefly when I was showing my work, that to create the animation, it's a long, tedious process, and I've been able to speed that up a little bit because I've working with some computer science geniuses at Stanford to at least incorporate some AI that's trained only on my work. So it's kind of this mad scientist phase that I'm in right now.

Ramon Ramirez Well, I love that because that's fascinating. It makes sense. And again, that allows you to compete at the speed of content. And that's a fine segue for our next slide, which is the future of satire. And Paul, I want to start with you just real quick. You talked about, we're at time, so we're going to do this one in like three minutes. We got three minutes, thank you, thank, thank you thank you. First of all, Paul, I love that there's two Latin guys up here. It's really special, it's really nice. And I'd be remiss if I didn't do the thing. Anytime you see like some Latin American guys on a stage, they always do like the, ¿Donde están los puertorriqueños? ¿Dónde están los venezolanos? ¿Dónde están los mexicanos? So, anyway, I had to do it. I'm sorry. And then usually there's like McDonald's somewhere. McDonald's is always sponsoring it, you know. But what is coming next, Paul? You study this, you live it every day, what is the coming next? What is the future of satire?

Paul Alonso I actually really don't know. That's why I stopped. That's why I am actually switching the research topic. Well, actually what I'm working on now, because I've done most of my research on the platforms that I felt were prevalent, like magazines, satiric television, national television and cable, digital satire, mainly audiovisual, so I haven't really focused on memes and stuff like that, but I do think that's very important. I'm actually now switching towards, and actually I do think relates to some of the stories that were mentioned that are relatable. I think that one of the post-pandemic things is people want more contact, more real experience, and I do think, for example, I'm doing some research in Peru about alternative standup, alternative political standup comedy. So I do think that that kind of performance thing it's actually, I do think it's getting a new space, and some new dynamics that are happening. I think that that whole sense of, especially in these critical times, of creating community and not just digitally, but also through shared laughter in a physical space, I do think might have some sort of impact. Because, you know, there is, especially in critical times, I do think that the effect of getting together and sharing that whole experience might gain some importance.

Ramon Ramirez Absolutely. I mean, I think you just said it. What's the future of satire? People live, hanging out, trying stuff. I think you're absolutely right. Sarah, I'm curious though, you know, we've talked about, okay, you are not super worried about kind of right-wing memes, you're not super worried about elected officials trying to be funny, or unelected officials who are now in charge of the world trying to be funny. But what about AI? And AI...One of you put the word "slop" into our group email thread, and that's the perfect word for it, because you know for those who haven't seen, everything on the internet now is like a weird AI joke. It's not even really a joke. It's just like here is a Navy seal as literally a seal, and they'll have like a big giant muscular seal. And what's the joke? It's not a joke. So how does Reductress rise above all of that junk that is now clogging the feeds as well?

Sarah Pappalardo I think it's just about being, again, specific in our critique of what's going on in the world, no matter what format that takes, whether it's short-form video, or just a headline, or what have you. I think that there's a possibility for AI-generated video to also be funny, and good, and incisive. I just feel like we're kind of at the stage where, like the first black and white film where a train goes by is in terms of AI-generated video. So most of it is crap. And putting aside all of the environmental issues and the political issues with generating AI, I think somewhere down the road, there will be some interesting stuff made that we couldn't make anyway else. That could be cool.

Ramon Ramirez Okay, Mark, same question. What is the future of satire, post-AI, how do you adapt? How do you deal with these tools?

Mark Fiore I think a lot of it – like if the world remains the way it is now, I think the future could be bright, but it's still a little nerve-wracking just to see where we are right now politically, how fast things are moving, at least in this country and in some others. So yeah, but I don't want to end on that pessimistic note. I think, like what you were saying, Sarah, because I'm kind of agnostic about AI. Like, I love it, and I hate it. I don't know if that's agnostic or not, but either way, I love it and I hate it, like I basically want it to help me not have to be chained to the computer for as long as I've been chained to for, you know, 20 some years. So, I'm looking forward to being more than just like a train zipping by, like you're saying, like something that's really cool that you couldn't do otherwise, which I'm experimenting with.

Ramon Ramirez Well, y'all, thank you so much for your time. Appreciate it, and we'll see y'all at the bar. Thank you so much.