



CMUNCE 2010

Columbia Model United Nations
Conference and Exposition

THE ONION NEWS NETWORK

Nirav Chheda, Co-Editor

Susan Phan, Co-Editor

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Intrepid Reporters,

We have the distinct pleasure of welcoming you to this year's Columbia Model United Nations Conference and Exposition, a perfectly contrived acronym for a perfectly contrived conference!

Recognizing the importance of (Model) United Nations and the process of fixing the world's problems, *The Onion*, America's finest news source, is proud to serve her country by... "reporting" the goings-on of all the committees at CMUNCE 2010. Twenty years of reporting experience has taught *The Onion* that "the truth" can often be a tricky, fleeting leprechaun. However, twenty years of reporting experience has also taught *The Onion* the very best methods of juicing the finest tidbits out of that leprechaun.

You, *The Onion's* writers, will experience a unique immersion in this year's conference. Unlike the other committees, you will not only engage in committee room debates over topics, such as ethicality of the various types of "news" stories we will run, but you will also get an inside look at how Columbia runs the conference by interacting with the crisis directors of the other committees, witnessing the conference staff prepare for and act out crisis events, and observing the staff run various types of committees. You will view other committees to write "news" stories with a bitter onion-y twist to be printed for the entire conference to read, and you will each have the opportunity to do video camera-taped *Onion News Network* interviews. No, it's not cool. It's super duper cool. And we encourage you to capitalize on the opportunity to make bragging faces at delegates in other committees whose arms are weary from vainly raising their placards.

I'm Susan Phan, your Chair, Under-Secretary General of Publications of CMUNCE '10, a sophomore majoring in Economics and Environmental Science. Do email me at dsp2119@columbia.edu if you have any questions.

And I'm Nirav Chheda, your Crisis Director, a junior majoring in Economics and minoring in Model UN (that was a joke – sort of). I enjoy debating and creating new methods of stealing food from Columbia (feel free to ask me for tips at the conference).

We look forward to seeing you!

Sincerely,

Susan Phan and Nirav Chheda

HISTORY

In 1988, two undergraduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison founded a satirical newspaper. Their food budget was so low at the time that they were down to eating white bread and onion sandwiches, which prompted the idea for the name *The Onion*. The following year, they sold the newspaper for less than \$20,000.

Initially, *The Onion* was only successful in a few cities with major universities, such as Boulder, Chicago, Madison, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis. The entire bottom two inches of the paper consisted of coupons that could be cut off for local eateries and video rental stores, but this was discontinued as some losers began hoarding all the newspapers.

Upon the creation of its website in 1996, *The Onion* started to become popular nationally. Comedy Central approached *The Onion* in 2000 for a buyout that would expand *The Onion's* reach into various extra media outlets. In 2007, *The Onion* began a web video news network. Since 2007, polls have shown Americans to be more confused than ever. *The Onion* therefore considered the video news network a great success.

The Onion's president Sean Mills, who led the paper's rapid growth in New York City, suddenly left the company in January of 2009, saying that he wanted a new challenge. In April, *The Onion* was awarded a Peabody Award and noted for its hilarity and similarity in style to real news. *The Onion* responded that it *was* the real news.

Recent economic hardships have resulted in pay-cuts, layoffs, hiring freezes, and office closings. However, *The Onion* is still distributed free in Madison, Milwaukee, Minneapolis-St. Paul, New York City, Chicago, Denver/Boulder, Austin, and Washington, D.C. It is also available by mail through paid subscription and sold in bookstores worldwide ("worldwide" meaning the UK).

TOPIC: CROSSING THE LINE?

In an interview with *Wikinews*, Sean Mills, then President of *The Onion*, said that angry letters about their news parody always carried the same message. "It's whatever affects that person," said Mills. "So it's like, 'I love it when you make a joke about murder or rape, but if you talk about cancer, well my brother has cancer and that's not funny to me.' Or someone else can say, 'Cancer's hilarious, but don't talk about rape because my cousin got raped.' I'm using extreme examples, but whatever it is, if it affects somebody personally, they tend to be more sensitive about it."

Unfortunately, as a comedic *news network*, this is not the only problem *The Onion* has to be cautious about. Occasionally, *The Onion's* straight-faced manner of satirically reporting "the news" has led outside parties to mistakenly take the stories seriously and cite them as real news. The extent of disturbance this causes varies widely incident to incident. Because satire often combines humor and anger, it can be quite disturbing; since it's essentially ironic or sarcastic, it's often misunderstood. The following are some examples of Onion news being cited as reality.

- In 1998, Fred Phelps posted the *Onion* article "'98 Homosexual-Recruitment Drive Nearing Goal" on his website titled "God Hates Fags", citing it as "proof" that gay people were actively trying to "recruit" others.
- On June 7, 2002, Reuters reported that the *Beijing Evening News* republished translated segments of "Congress Threatens To Leave D.C. Unless New Capitol Is Built". The story discusses U.S. Congress's threats to leave Washington for Memphis, Tennessee; Charlotte, North Carolina; or even Toronto, Canada, unless Washington, D.C. built them a new Capitol building with a retractable dome. The article is a parody of U.S. sports franchises' threats to leave their home city unless new stadiums are built for them. The *Evening News* is Beijing's most popular newspaper, with a circulation of approximately 1 million. *Evening News* initially stood by the story, demanding proof of its falsehood, but later retracted the article, responding that "some small American newspapers frequently fabricate offbeat news to trick people into noticing them with the aim of making money."
- In 2006, the Danish television station TV 2 posted a story on its website's gossip section that took seriously the *Onion* article titled "Sean Penn Demands To Know What Asshole Took SeanPenn@gmail.com".
- An article on Harry Potter inciting kids to practice witchcraft was thought by many to be real and was forwarded by many concerned Christians. Columnist Ellen Makkai and others who believe the *Harry Potter* books "recruit" children to Satanism have also taken the article seriously, using quotes from it as "evidence" for their claims.
- In 2009, a video was posted on The Onion website with the headline "Gymnast Shawn Johnson Put To Sleep After Breaking Leg." Afterwards, Shawn Johnson had to handle many rumors about her being dead.

There is no correct answer as to what constitutes stepping over the line. In fact, many would argue no such line exists. Regardless of the intentions that go into each story, *The Onion's* writers must recognize that publishing stories can potentially have far-reaching effects, and therefore they must be careful about balancing satire with the consequences it may produce.

RESEARCH

If, when opening this PDF file, you had rejoiced at its short length, do not feel so smug yet. To be able to satirize the news, you must first thoroughly understand the intricacies and nuances of the many topics – both historical and contemporary – that will be discussed at CMUNCE 2010. Only then will you be able to grasp the flow of debate within a committee and ask tough questions to the delegates.

To that end, we suggest that you read at least three background guides of other committees before you arrive at the conference. Research topics that interest you, of course, but also keep in mind that we the editors will be impressed by journalists who can report and analyze a variety of topics. Thus, it would be wise to choose a good mix of historical and contemporary committees with geographic diversity. (Though it may be tempting, do not simply pick the three shortest background guides either!)

For the most part, we will take your preferences into account when assigning you to a story – hence prior research is absolutely essential. However, we may also choose to challenge you on certain occasions by asking you to cover an unfamiliar topic or committee. Be prepared for an unpredictable and exciting conference in January!