

**November 1, 2018**

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## **Intelligence Squared U.S.**

### **Trump Is Bad for Comedy**

For the Motion: P. J. O'Rourke, Sara Schaefer

Against the Motion: Kurt Andersen, Billy Kimball

Moderator: John Donovan

<b>AUDIENCE RESULTS</b>	
<b>Before the debate:</b>	<b>After the debate:</b>
<b>35% FOR</b>	<b>37% FOR</b>
<b>42% AGAINST</b>	<b>54% AGAINST</b>
<b>23% UNDECIDED</b>	<b>9% UNDECIDED</b>

00:00:00

[music playing]

[applause]

John Donovan:

There has always been political humor. It has always been part of the political discourse while serving several functions at one time, from truth telling to catharsis and also, ideally, it's supposed to be funny, which brings us to the present moment. With the sharp spike that we are all seeing in comedy that is focused on politics, and especially on the man who currently occupies the Oval Office, we have all of those late night monologues, the satirical cable shows, the columns and the podcasts, and, of course, everybody and his brother is doing a Trump impersonation.

But this spike in comedy, how sharp, comically speaking, is it really? Now, when we are so very

polarized, how good and how successful is comedy at this moment, not just in getting us to think, but also in getting us to laugh? Well, we think this has the makings of a debate, so let's have it. Yes or no to this statement: Trump is bad for comedy.

00:01:01

I'm John Donvan, and I stand between two teams of two who are experts in this topic by their life experience. They will be arguing for and against the resolution. As always, our debate will go in three rounds. And then our audience here at the Kay Playhouse at Hunter College in New York City will pick the winner. And, as always, if all goes well, civil discourse will also win.

Our resolution is, Trump is bad for comedy. Let's meet the debaters, starting with the team arguing for the motion and starting with, ladies and gentlemen, PJ O'Rourke.

[applause]

PJ, welcome back to Intelligence Squared U.S. You are a renowned political scientist, renowned, yes, and best-selling author. You have written 19 books on a variety of topic that's cover politics and cars and war and cooking and cleaning. Your latest book came out this September with the title, "None of My Business." So tell us, PJ, what is none of your business?

PJ O'Rourke:

Politics [laughs]. All right, I wish that politics were none of my business.

00:02:01

If I had my druthers, I would never hear the word "politics" again and just stay home and drink scotch and let the world go to hell on its own.

[laughter]

John Donvan:

All right. Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, a look ahead at PJ O'Rourke. And PJ's partner, please welcome Sara Schaefer. Sara, welcome to Intelligence Squared U.S. You are a standup comedian. You're a writer, you are a producer. You've already won two Emmy awards. You've won a Webby award for your work on Light Night with Jimmy Fallon.

You were the cohost of MTV's Nikki and Sara Live with comedienne Nikki Glaser. When you were trying to break into comedy, which is a hard thing to do, you had a day job as an analyst at a securities fraud law firm. How did that influence your standup career?

Sara Schaefer:

Well, my job was to calculate damages for securities fraud cases, and it was like really deep in spreadsheets. So, I should not have been doing that, but I did. And it directly influenced my

comedy, because my first comedy that I did in New York was two songs, one about my cubicle, and one about Microsoft Excel.

00:03:07

So, write what you know.

[laughter]

John Donovan:

All right, ladies and gentlemen, Sara Schaefer, and the team arguing for the motion. And, of course, we have a team arguing against the motion. And first, let's meet its first member, its member sitting nearest to me, Kurt Andersen.

[applause]

Kurt, you are the well-known host of the public radio show, Studio 360. You are a best-selling novelist, you're a journalist. Your most recent books include "Fantasy Land," got amazing reviews. Also, "You Can't Spell America without Me," which you co-wrote with Alek Baldwin. You also cofounded, way back, the satirical magazine called, "Spy." That magazine did a lot of Donald Trump coverage about 30 years ago. The magazine sent Trump a check for 13 cents. What was the point?

Kurt Andersen:

That was the -- it was the end of a very long con, appropriately for Donald Trump, where we sent 58 famous rich people checks for \$1.11. Those who cashed them, about 30 of them, we sent another check for 64 cents.

00:04:02

Those who cashed those, we -- 11 of them, we sent checks for 13 cents. Two of the original 58 cashed the 13 cent checks; the arms dealer, Adnan Khashoggi, and Donald Trump.

[laughter]

John Donovan:

There you go.

Kurt Andersen:

So that was -- that was the idea.

John Donovan:

All right. Thanks, Kurt. And your partner, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Billy Kimball.

[applause]

Billy, you are an Emmy award-winning writer and a producer. You're currently working on the HBO comedy series called "Veep," which stars Julia Louise-Dreyfus. So tell us, why is "Veep" so successful?

Billy Kimball:

Well, thank you, John. That's a hard-hitting but fair question.

[laughter]

And I can see that you will not be pulling any punches --

[laughter]

-- tonight. Apart from the talents of our crew and our cast led by Julia Dreyfus, to which we can -- we can stipulate. I'd say that Mark Twain famously said -- except that he didn't really say it -- that "History doesn't repeat itself; it rhymes."

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And in the case of "Veep," although increasingly, we have these troubling moments when it actually seemed like we are a -- you know, a rigorous documentary --

[laughter]

-- in fact, I would say that while we don't report history, we don't report what's going on, we attempt to sort of rhyme with it, and I think that that seems to be somehow in keeping with the current moment.

John Donvan:

All right. Thank you, Billy Kimball. And the team arguing against the motion. And now, onto the debate. The debate goes in three rounds. Round one is opening statements by each debater in turn. Speaking first for the motion Trump Is Bad for Comedy, here is Sara Schaefer, critically acclaimed stand-up comedian, writer, and producer. Ladies and gentlemen, Sara Schaefer.

[applause]

Sara Schaefer:

Thank you. I want to thank you all for coming tonight for this very serious discussion.

00:06:02

There is nothing that funny people love more than being extremely unfunny about what we do. Seriously, we're the most self-important people here in the world. And I'm here to say that Trump is bad for comedy. My partner, PJ, will go into sort of more of the politics of it. I'm going to talk to you about my real-world experience, and I want to preface this by saying I'm talking about the conditions for comedy. Trump is terrible for the conditions for comedy. I've experienced this firsthand in comedy clubs across this country. Now, as you probably have already realized, I'm not very famous, and I don't --

[laughter]

I don't have a huge fanbase. I probably have maybe one fan in here tonight. Thank you, Dad, for coming.

[laughter]

No, I don't have a huge fan base, so the people that come to my shows are random. I don't know who's going to be in there, and I have no control over it. God, I wish I did. I knew something was awry when, in 2016, I did a show in a club in Atlanta, Georgia, and I said two words.

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I said, "Hillary Clinton," and I hadn't said anything about her yet, but a man in the front row went like this, "[negative]."

[laughter]

That's when I knew something was wrong. He didn't even know how I felt about it yet, and he was already having a visceral reaction. Since the election, I've noticed a very palpable change in the environment in stand-up clubs. As a comedian, I have kind of a sixth sense; I can detect tight buttocks in a room.

[laughter]

I can feel them. There are a few in here tonight, and I just encourage you --

[laughter]

-- to loosen just a little. We are debating comedy. And I've called these past couple of years the Great Butthole Tightening. When I go into a club, I think Trump has made us all very tense. He has divided us down to a familial level.

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People had blocked their family members on Facebook; people have cut family members out of their lives. They've now found out that coworkers of theirs are now mortal enemies, you know, or neighbors. Everything is now divided, and it's very tense, and it's actually pretty painful. So, when they come to a club, and I tell a joke about Trump, the people that laugh are on one side, and the people that don't laugh are on the other, and now people are scared that a civil war is literally going to break out in the club. That's not a good condition for comedy. So, either my audience is divided, or they don't want to hear about politics anymore, because they're just sick of it. There's a fatigue of it at this point. Or they're on the other side, which is they want me to go off about politics; they want me to go off about Trump, but they don't even want me to be funny. They just want me to scream; also, not a good condition for comedy. There's this thing called "clap-ter." It's something that comedians are falling prey to right now.

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It's very tempting. Clap-ter is when you make a really good point, and everyone claps, but they're not laughing, because what you said wasn't funny. It was just something that you believe. I've seen many of my fellow comedians fall ill to this scourge. Again, not a good condition for comedy when you're being tempted --

[laughter]

Thank you, sir. Thank you.

[applause]

It's tempting. The other part of this is truth is part of comedy. We like to hold up a mirror to society; we like to show universal truth that unites the audience, but now we can't agree on what truth is anymore. It's hard to know what's real, and it's hard to describe and make fun of the shape of the world when a huge portion of your audience literally believes that it's flat. That's a problem.

[applause]

[laughs] Thank you. Another things about comedians is that we're supposed to be fearless. We're supposed to go up on stage and not have any fear and just take the laughs.

00:10:05

But now, I've found that I and many of my fellow comedians are actually afraid, and part of that is because online we get harassed a lot. I get -- you know, if I say anything political --- sometimes it doesn't have to be political at all -- I'll get harassed. Some of it is minor; sometimes it's weeks of rape or death threats. And now I have my tour schedule online, and so anyone who's crazy enough to take that threat and make it a reality -- knows exactly where I'm going to be. So, I'm in a situation now where I've actually had to ask people to escort me to my

car after shows every time I perform on the road, just in case. That's not good for comedy. To be actually afraid for your life is not good [laughs] for comedy. Some people say that political correctness is ruining comedy. Trump has suggested that as much. But I disagree. Louis C.K. right now is probably performing in a comedy club right near here, even though he sexually assaulted some of my fellow comedians.

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In fact, if you make a joke about Trump in the wrong place at the wrong time, those -- that's where the serious consequences are. You literally have the president of the United States bullying you online, encouraging his followers to go after you. You have the Secret Service stopping you at TSA, screwing your whole life up because you made a joke; you put a wrong picture up online, making fun of him. You have your shows canceled because there's credible bomb threats on your show. So, I'm going to go out on a limb and say that the conditions are comedy aren't good because of all that. Comedians need to feel free to be able to say what they want to say in an environment to break the tension, but to not have the tension break them. So, in conclusion, Trump is bad for comedy.

[applause]

John Donvan:

Thank you, Sara Schaefer. Our next debater will be arguing against the resolution: Trump is Bad for Comedy.

00:12:03

It's Kurt Andersen, host of Studio 360, best-selling novelist and journalist. Ladies and gentlemen, Kurt Andersen.

[applause]

Kurt Andersen:

I just want to stipulate, first off, that our assignment here is about what is bad for comedy -- not whether Trump is bad for America. I will stipulate that Trump is bad for civility, justice, decency, democracy, the fear ratio, the comedian space, and all kinds of things -- but not bad for comedy.

I also want to stipulate or explain that here -- what we're here to do is not prove that Trump is good for comedy, although we happen to think that there's plenty of evidence for that -- but that he is not bad for it -- for it as a thing, not the individual lives of comedians or how difficult it raises -- it makes comedy sometimes, but for comedy and for what the purposes of comedy are in society.

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And by the way, as you're voting after the thing, if we have convinced you at all that Trump has been good for comedy -- that is, by definition, further evidence that he hasn't been bad for it. So, bad for comedy; what does that mean?

We've skirted around that, but it -- but there's two basic meanings that that can have, right? The -- creatively, substantively, it makes for worse comedy. It degrades the nature, level of comedy that's available. And the commercial parts. Is it bad for the comedy industry? Well, the commercial part is easier to quantify and have actual facts to support. So, take, for instance, the Late Show with Stephen Colbert. It went on the air on September 2015, when Donald Trump wasn't going to get the nomination, when Donald Trump certainly wasn't ever going to be elected president -- and floundered. And got bad ratings, wasn't doing well. Was the show going to last?

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Sixteen months later, for the first time ever, the Late Night with -- Late Show with Stephen Colbert beats what was then the number one show, Tonight Starring Jimmy Fallon. What happened 16 months later? Donald Trump was -- Donald Trump's first full week as president.

And as Colbert became the delightful, brilliant, wonderful sort of face of the resistance on late-night television, he assumed that number one role in late-night from then on. He has a third more viewers than the show hosted by the guy who patted Donald Trump on camera when he came on his show. So, that's one example. Saturday Night Live -- the season of Saturday Night Live that encompassed candidate, nominee, winner -- President Trump -- for the first time, 2016, '17, was -- had -- and included my friend and collaborator Alec Baldwin impersonating him, badly or well.

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You be the judge -- had the largest audience, Saturday Night Live, for a quarter century. I think there's a reason for that and I think it's still Donald Trump. It's still happening. This fall's first episode, in September, had -- was the highest rated first episode of Saturday Night Live in seven years.

So, the other part, which was harder to judge -- more subjective -- which is the creatively, substantively question. Seems to me that this president and the crooks and liars who work for him -- excuse the Trump bashing -- and who enable him provide a kind of unprecedented geyser of rich material for political humor and satire. The downside of Donald Trump and these people who work with him is that everybody thinks they're a comedian because it is, indeed, so obvious and so easy.

00:16:00

And even some professional comedians were indulging as soon as he was running the "Huge" as a joke, or, "Look, he's orange," and easy, bad jokes, because it looked so easy and because he's such a clown, a scary clown, like all clowns. But still, he's -- it's -- he makes comedy seem easy. But in fact, I think, for professional comedians and satirists and humorists, like those who write "Veep," that actually raises the bar for what they have to do to be successful, that it ups everybody's game in political comedy. So, the delightful and brilliant Sara aside, I think what -- what Trump does is make life very, very difficult for hack comedians, for uninteresting comedians, and raises the -- raises everyone's standards. In that sense, he is certainly good for political comedy. There was a great example just a month ago on Saturday Night Live.

00:17:01

The Matt Damon impersonation and performance of Brett Kavanaugh was, for my money, the best piece of political comedy I had seen in a long, long time. There's no question that that was, to me, a brilliant piece of political comedy that we have pretty much only Trump to thank for. And, by the way, it had 22-odd million YouTube views, which, if it were a TV show, it would make it number one, so also fits the commercially successful bill.

And I don't think -- again, from my personal experience going on the road to promote this -- this parody Trump memoir with Alec Baldwin last year, these theaters full of people who were so delighted to laugh, not to just clap and not -- but if Alec fell into his Trump impersonation for five seconds, it wasn't a one-man Trump show, it was a discussion where he would occasionally do his impersonation of Trump. There was such a sense of catharsis and pleasure in the audience, it certainly convinced me in a visceral way I wouldn't have had from simply staring at a screen all day that the experience of comedy about Donald Trump is indeed very gratifying to those who appreciate it.

00:18:14

They are dying to laugh in this -- in these troubled, terrible times. And to me, yes, the stakes are very, very high, higher than they've ever been. But is that bad for comedy? I don't think so. Thanks very much.

John Donovan:

Thank you, Kurt Andersen.

[applause]

You've heard the first two opening statements and now onto the third. Debating for the motion, PJ O'Rourke, political satirist and best-selling author. Ladies and gentlemen, PJ O'Rourke.

[applause]

PJ O'Rourke:

Well, he certainly wrecked my sense of humor. I mean, we elected this giant infant to the White House, and in the White House, there's -- it's like having a loaded handgun in the home, you know, except worse. It's the button. And sooner or later, this overgrown toddler is going to find it and set off all the nukes, and we're all going to die, okay?

00:19:05

But it's worse for me.

[laughter]

Because I am a Republican. Now, try and put yourself in my place. I know, this is New York. You're probably not Republicans. You're probably liberal Democrats. But -- but aren't liberals supposed to be full of empathy for others? So, try to empathize with me at this point.

[laughter]

I'm a moderate Republican. I'm a moderate Republican. Don't think basket of deplorables, think gift basket of deplorables, okay?

[laughter]

Yummy tax breaks and a fine wine of social tolerance arrayed on a lovely bed of fiscal conservatism, okay? I'm just an old-fashioned country-club Republican, not even an exclusive country club. Everybody's welcome. Our golf course looks like Caddyshack would if the gopher ate Bill Murray, you know what I mean?

[laughter]

Then I wake up, and I found out that the one person on earth who would be black-balled at my country club is President of the United States.

00:20:02

And he cheats at golf. That is not funny. We Republicans don't have many principles, but we're firmly opposed to cheating at golf. It is bad for the American way of life.

[laughter]

Now, I'm not asking you to vote in favor of tonight's resolution out of any personal empathy for me. Using simple logic I can prove that our debate motion is true. One syllogism, one syllogism. Major proposition: Trump is bad for the American way of life. Minor proposition: The American way of life is comical. Conclusion: Trump is bad for comedy QED.

[laughter]

Now, mind you, we're not debating the question, Is Trump funny? I mean, what I do for a living -- or try to do for a living -- is use comedy as a journalistic technique for covering serious stories such as the president of the United States, and I give up. It is impossible to be funnier than this President of the United States.

00:21:02

I've had some success in the past. I was funnier than Jimmy Carter, but I'm just not funny enough to be funnier than President Trump. Now, as to whether President Trump is funny on purpose, that is to say, is Trump crazy? Is he crazy like a fox? Or is he crazy like Fox News?

[laughter]

My sense of humor fails me. I don't know. I don't know. I mean, but Trump is funny. Let me quote something from Joe Pesci in the movie "Godfellas" [sic] -- "Goodfellas." I'm sorry, "Goodfellas." "I'm funny how? I mean, I'm funny like a clown? I amuse you? I make you laugh? I'm here to f-ing amuse you? What do you mean funny? Funny how? How am I funny?" That's how Trump is funny.

[laughter]

There are three kinds of humor --

[applause]

There are three kinds of humor: parody, where you make fun of people who are smarter than you are; satire, where you make fun of people who are better than you are; and burlesque, where you do both while taking off your clothes.

00:22:01

[laughter]

Now, Trump is not a fit subject for any of these three kinds of humor, especially the last one. I mean, please, President Trump, keep your clothes on. And, I suggest that anyone who comes near President Trump also stay buttoned up, and something could get -- something could get grabbed.

I'm -- actually, Trump is worse than funny, worse than funny. He -- he thinks he's funny. And thinking you're funny does not produce comedy. I tell you this as someone who once said to an ex-wife, "But what if the kid has my looks and your brains?" Funny itself isn't so funny, okay?

Funny, funny is actually kind of useless. I mean, humor is our response to the terrifying existential void. Humor comes to the fore when events render us impotent. And as men my age know all events eventually do, we laugh when we don't know what else to do. But I would argue that Donald Trump is not someone who ever leaves us in a position of not knowing what else to do.

00:23:03

Vote, for one thing.

[applause]

We can mock Trump, of course. Or can we? I mean, Donald Trump does a better Donald Trump than Alec Baldwin ever has, you know? And we can mock Trump supporters because I'm sure they can take a joke, you know. No, tell them. They'll laugh right along with us, right? Yeah, pretty soon they'll be giggling and saying, "Oh, ha-ha-ha-ha, I guess you were right all along. Here, you wear the red hat," you know?

Trump is a joke, but you can't make a joke about a joke or you quit being the comedian on the stage and start being the heckler in the crowd because you're angry. Comedy, of course, has a lot to do with anger. Comedy is a way of sublimating anger, a way of diverting anger, a way of turning anger aside, which brings us to the real question of tonight's debate, serious question, should we sublimate our anger at Donald Trump? Should we divert our anger? Should we turn our anger aside?

00:24:02

Or should that anger spur us to do something, something not funny, but useful? Should we be trying to understand why our fellow Americans elected this idiot? Why -- should we be trying to figure out a way to persuade our fellow Americans never to do anything that stupid again? Or should we be laughing our asses off? Thank you.

[applause]

John Donvan:

Thank you, PJ O'Rourke. And our final debater against the resolution, Trump is bad for comedy, is Billy Kimball, writer and Emmy award-winning producer for "Veep." Ladies and gentlemen, Billy Kimball.

[applause]

Billy Kimball:

Thank you. I do want to thank Intelligence Squared for inviting me to be here tonight to argue the premise that Donald Trump is not bad for comedy, an issue I have felt passionate about for

over a quarter of a century.

[laughter]

00:25:02

As my colleague, Kurt, pointed out, we're not here -- the bar for us, for our team, is not to argue that Donald Trump is good for comedy, though I'll take that position at least partially, but that -- simply that he's not bad for comedy. And in that regard, I would ask you all to consider the contrapositive situation in which we might have found ourselves if things had gone very differently on Election Day 2016, which is that we would have perhaps President Jeb Bush or President Marco Rubio or President Hillary Clinton, or even President Bernie Sanders. Would any of those people -- with maybe the possible exception of Bernie -- have been better for comedy than Donald Trump? I don't think so. I think we would be in a situation where we would see not only the shows that Kurt brought up with significantly lower ratings, but conceivably some of them off the air altogether.

00:26:08

So -- and the other question is -- so, when we talk about -- you know, as Kurt pointed out, we're not arguing whether Donald Trump is good or bad, and we're not arguing whether Donald Trump is good or bad at comedy. But I would argue that Donald Trump, whether or not you think he's funny, uses comedy, particularly ridicule, very effectively. And so, in that sense, he's good for comedy in that he's proven, in a way that many people haven't, particularly the large amount of topical comedy that operates inside what -- I think Eli Pariser coined the phrase "a filter bubble," but essentially preaching to the choir. Donald Trump actually gets his audience, and possibly some people on the fringes of his audience, worked up and on his side, and changes their minds by virtue of the way that he uses ridicule.

00:27:11

And that is not something that happens perhaps as often as those who work in comedy like to think it does. I'm not sure if Jonathan Swift ended the potato famine. I have a feeling that maybe, if we looked into it carefully, we would find out that he didn't. I'm not sure what Horace and Juvenal did and whether people at the time thought they were a laugh riot and took to the streets in an actual riot in response to anything they wrote, but Donald Trump's use of ridicule, of sort of visible contempt -- whether or not you think it's funny; whether or not you think it's particularly good comedy -- is inarguably, I would say, a form of comedy, and I think an example that maybe is top of mind for a lot of us here tonight, because it's comparatively recent, is his referring to Senator Elizabeth Warren as Pocahontas --

00:28:10

[laughter]

-- which one person seems to think is funny.

[laughter]

But the rest of you, maybe not so much. And I'm not going to express an opinion about that as an acknowledged professional in the area, but I'll say it forced her to do something -- take a DNA test and then deliver a phone book of results -- which I would say, at least at this point, appears to have been a terrible error, possibly one that's maybe disqualifying in terms of her ambitions to be president. So, that's an effective use of comedy that is good for comedy in that it proves its potency, but which perhaps is a bad thing in every other way that you can think of.

[laughter]

However, if you agree with that premise, I believe you still have to support our side of the argument.

00:29:08

So, I'll turn back the last minute of my time to the debate, which I think you're probably all waiting for. I will report to you listening on radio or on the podcast that our opponents have left the stage --

[laughter]

-- and I don't know. They were shaking their heads, and we're just going to try and carry on. So, vote no; Donald Trump is not bad for comedy. That's what we're for? Okay. Thank you.

[laughter and applause]

John Donvan:

Thank you, Billy Kimball. And that concludes round one of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate, where our resolution is Trump Is Bad for Comedy. Now we move on to round two, and in round two, the debaters address one another directly, and they take questions from me and from you, our live audience here at the Kaye Playhouse here in New York City.

00:30:00

The team arguing for the resolution Trump Is Bad for Comedy, Sara Schaefer and PJ O'Rourke, are saying that conditions for comedy under the Trump era have turned sour, that when we cannot disagree on the truth, you can't really set up the premise of a joke in the first place. Comics are actually afraid. They're being harassed. The president's response to comedy is having a chilling effect in comedy clubs. They're saying it is impossible to be funnier than

Trump. And also, they ask the question, in the face of the phenomena of the Trump era, is comedy itself actually the most appropriate response? The team arguing against the resolution -- Kurt Andersen and Billy Kimball -- they're saying it's -- the issue isn't whether comedy -- Trump is good for comedians, but whether it is good for comedy. They're saying yes, from the point of view of how the industry is doing. They point to the ratings of shows -- late-night talk shows that have been focusing on Trump and how well they're doing, how well Saturday Night Live has been doing. They also put -- talk about the creative levels that have been reached.

00:31:02

While conceding there's a lot of bad comedy about Trump, they say that that plethora of bad comedy about Trump actually raises the bar for good comedy about Trump, and that people are meeting that bar. Trump himself, they say, is engaging in comedy, and that's part of the whole process as well. And bottom line, they say, because of Trump, audiences today are dying to laugh. So, we're going to peel a lot of that back. And I want to start with this question of the audiences, because both sides have taken different points on view on what audiences want, what they're primed for, how they're responding, and how they're reacting. And Sara, I want to take it back to you -- this notion that audiences are dying to laugh -- that Kurt Andersen laid out. You challenged that, to -- I think -- to some degree in your opening statement. So, take a response to that.

Sara Schaefer:

Yeah. What -- I mean, I've took a little issue with the wording. It's, like, you know, people are actually dying because of Trump. [laughs] So, they're not dying to laugh, maybe. But I feel like they're -- it depends on the audience.

00:32:04

You know, people coming to see Alec Baldwin are coming to see him because they like what he's done, you know, regarding Trump. So, I'm coming at it from like, I'm getting, really, a mix of people when I perform. And it's not partisan. I really think a lot of people just don't want you to bring up politics right now in a comedy club, or in a way that seems attacking. But right now, even just a mention of something that seems attacking -- I feel like people come to a -- it's the only art form that people show up to. They'll go, "Let's go see comedy tonight," and they won't research what kind of comedy it is. So, I'll get people in the audience leaving if they feel like I've -- you know, I'm not on their side or heckling in a way that's very political. And then I'm angry. And now, I don't know what to do with that anger, necessarily, in the moment. You hope to be talented enough to turn it into a hilarious joke, but sometimes that's really difficult in the moment.

00:33:02

So, yeah. I think, yes, people need to laugh right now. They do. They need a release. I just take issue with -- that Trump jokes are necessarily the way to do that.

John Donovan:

Let me take that to Kurt Andersen.

Kurt Andersen:

Again, the -- when we talk about comedy, it's not all one thing that has to be -- have its maximum appeal to everybody, whether they're Trump supporters, whether they're Trump haters, or whomever. All comedy, it seems to me -- or nearly all comedy, and humor, and satire; we're not only talking about stand-up performed comedy -- has, you know, an audience. And so, the audience for political humor may not be, you know, most of -- many of your audiences. But there is, obviously -- and in my more limited experience, this fervent desire for Trump comedy, for better or worse. I would also say that, to the idea that, "Oh, Trump is too terrible and Trumpism is too terrible for -- to deal with in a comedic fashion."

00:34:08

I mean, one of the greatest movies of all time, "To Be or Not to Be" about -- made fun of Nazis during the World -- during World War II. The great film -- the great Stanley Kubrick film, "Dr. Strangelove," made fun of the end of the world in the nuclear Armageddon at the height of the Cold War. So, the idea that, somehow, because this guy, and what he represents, and the movement he is leading is so terrible -- which I gladly stipulate -- is not to me an argument that, like, you know --

John Donovan:

Okay.

Kurt Andersen:

-- comedy and humor is not the way to go.

John Donovan:

PJ O'Rourke, to respond to that.

PJ O'Rourke:

Well, I was thinking about Chaplain's "The Great Dictator" and Kubrick -- the same thing, is that those works of art, those comic works of art, offered an alternative view to the standard view that was on deck at the time.

00:35:03

And in that sense, I would say that -- having been, like, a teenager when Dr. Strangelove came out, that it actually sort of changed my mind or made me actually think about what the prospect of nuclear war actually might mean.

Kurt Andersen:

And that's why you became a pro-war guy.

PJ O'Rourke:

I guess I --

Sara Schaefer:

[laughs]

PJ O'Rourke:

That took years and years.

Kurt Andersen:

Yeah.

PJ O'Rourke:

It wasn't until the draft was over that I became pro war.

[laughter]

Got to keep an out for -- yeah, but what I -- what I'm concerned about -- and I think it sort of degrades comedy -- is that merely making mock of someone, especially someone who has a large popularity base, and not only making mock of them, but making mock of the people who like them, is probably not doing a service to humanity. And then -- and then, of course, you come to the question, is comedy supposed to do a service to humanity?

00:36:03

As a former editor of National Lampoon, obviously, the answer was "no" with that, you know, so I -- you know, I couldn't stand too firmly on the idea that comedy ought to do a service to humanity, but it's worth giving a thought. And mere mockery is not changing any minds. If anything, I would say that mockery of Trump supporters is probably solidifying his support.

John Donovan:

What do you think much that argument, Billy Kimball?

Billy Kimball:

I think you're talking to me, Billy Kimball

John Donovan:

I'm -- I've done that twice. Billy Kimball, yeah. Can I ask the question again so that we can edit it as though that never happened?

Billy Kimball:

Sure.

John Donovan:

What do you think of that, Billy Kimball?

Billy Kimball:

Oh, I'm so glad you asked me, John.

John Donovan:

Yes.

[laughter]

Billy Kimball:

John Gonvan [sic].

John Donovan:

Yeah.

[laughter]

Billy Kimball:

I don't know for certain whether or not Trump's ridicule changes mind in the immediate present. I think the fact that he has a penchant for that kind of contemptuous behavior is something that people like about him.

00:37:04

And, you know, before Trump emerged as a political candidate, there was no Trump base to speak of. So that's an aspect of his personality that I think has drawn people to him. And whether or not it's -- it's changed minds, it certainly has proven politically effective and is sort of essential --

PJ O'Rourke:

Now, your answer is basically --

Billy Kimball:

-- to his appeal.

PJ O'Rourke:

-- H bombs are good for nuclear power.

Billy Kimball:

I have -- you got me.

[laughter]

PJ O'Rourke:

Well, you know, and I actually -- I think that that is a strong argument. I mean, Trump does very effectively use humor. And then we're going to have to fall back on that -- that, you know, intellectual and moral puzzle of the definition of what "bad" --

Billy Kimball:

Yeah, well, I didn't make the question. Remember, I --

PJ O'Rourke:

Yeah, no, you're right.

Billy Kimball:

I have to win whatever way -- whatever way I can.

PJ O'Rourke:

Yeah [laughs].

Billy Kimball:

And, you know, it's -- I mean, Foster [spelled phonetically] has debated for millennia what the -- what the definition of the good is. But we've come up with a couple, that it's good for -- commercially for late night comedy, that it's good for making -- demanding a higher standard of comedy in general.

00:38:11

And so --

John Donovan:

Let's take on the "higher standard" argument.

PJ O'Rourke:

One second, though.

John Donovan:

Okay.

PJ O'Rourke:

Can I spill this? As we were backstage, and the four of us agreed that all four of us could argue either side of this question.

[laughter]

Male Speaker:  
What? You lied.

[laughter]

Male Speaker:  
Oh --

[talking simultaneously]

Male Speaker:  
-- to him.

PJ O'Rourke:  
-- dying day. I'm sure that's what -- I have it on my watch.

Male Speaker:  
Yeah, yeah.

PJ O'Rourke:  
It's old. It's a dumb watch.

Billy Kimball:  
You see what he's doing here, people. Don't fall for this.

Male Speaker:  
Yeah. Yeah.

John Donovan:  
Sara, what about -- Sara Schaefer, what about the point that Billy Kimball just made, that -- that -- and also Kurt Andersen made it, that it -- because there's so much bad Trump comedy, it actually raises the bar for good comedy, and that good comedy is happening. The bar is being met.

Sara Schaefer:  
Sure. I mean, you know, Kurt suggested that I'm a hack, and that's fine.

[laughter]

00:39:01

John Donovan:  
I think he carved out an exclusion.

Sara Schaefer:  
I know you did.

Male Speaker:  
He knows where he lives.

Sara Schaefer:  
But, no. I mean, I agree, it is -- it is -- sets a higher standard, I guess in that the pool is flooded and you have to separate yourself. If you're going to do a Trump joke, it has to be different. And that, of course, is a challenge. But that doesn't mean that, you know, that's -- that's kind of the case with whatever is the big thing in the news at the time or what the Zeitgeist is. You know, there's a point where everybody's making the same joke, and you have to make sure you're not -- that your joke is unique to your point of view. That's how you sort of like buttress off like being hackie is making sure it's unique to your voice. I think oftentimes when comedians are accused of stealing jokes, it's because they're usually doing a joke that's pretty broad, that anybody could say. But I think for Trump, you know, I'm just going to always go back to the fact that, like, yeah, you know, a movie making fun of Hitler, great. But I would have rather had not had Hitler.

00:40:02

Do you know what I'm saying? So, like that's --

Male Speaker:  
We agree on that.

Sara Schaefer:  
-- I can't -- yeah, I know we --

Male Speaker:  
I think all four of us do.

Sara Schaefer:  
But for me, to me, Trump is bad for comedy because Trump is bad for the world. I can't get around that, you know. It just always comes back to that for me.

Billy Kimball:  
I mean, I do think there was -- to -- the argument I was making earlier about other presidents. I mean, I think we can look at a moving -- moving rapidly past whether or not we're pro or against Hitler.

[laughter]

I do think we can look at a particular low-water mark in what I guess you could call political

comedy, but only barely, which was -- which was the Clinton presidency when Jay Leno did two and a half years of Monica Lewinsky jokes, which I have to believe -- I don't know this for a fact -- but that, you know, he was sick of very quickly. But that was what constituted political comedy in that -- in that moment. And what you have with Trump is this -- you had a single subject under Clinton that dominated all others.

00:41:07

And with Trump, you have this, you know, frequently commented on kind of cornucopia of hourly riches of things to use as an actual premise. And I'd say in that regard, it's not simply raising the bar in terms of demanding a higher quality, but it's also a much more vigorous workout for comics.

Kurt Andersen:

And let me just think -- since I think specific examples of great comedy that come out of this are useful, and ones that maybe a lot of people have seen, I think of another Saturday Night Live sketch from before his election, one of -- this serious of sketches they do called "Black Jeopardy," where the basic premise is -- and it was a beautifully done, incredibly sympathetic -- the absolute opposite of ridicule of Trump supporters that PJ warned about.

00:42:01

Where Tom Hanks plays a Trump supporter who finds, along with the black contestants on "Black Jeopardy," that they have a lot in common. It was -- it was a genius piece of writing. And -- and made people of all sorts, I think, think if not more sympathetically, at least differently and perhaps more sympathetically about the set of mental habits that led people to be Trump supporters and that makes these apparently very different people all American. So, their -- and I could go on. There are -- there are examples of brilliant comedy out of the Trump --

John Donovan:

So --

Kurt Andersen:

-- nightmare.

John Donovan:

-- let me take that point to Sara Schaefer. So, what your opponents are saying is they're citing some examples.

Sara Schaefer:

[affirmative].

John Donovan:

You're talking, I think, about a broader experience, but it's --

Sara Schaefer:

Yeah.

John Donovan:

-- it's first hand. So, what do you make --

Sara Schaefer:

Yeah, I know, I'm like -- I'm like --

John Donovan:

What do you make --

Sara Schaefer:

-- one of these doesn't look like the other [laughs] in this panel, but --

John Donovan:

What do you make of the fact that they can point to some great examples. Does that nail the case for them?

Sara Schaefer:

Yeah, of course. I mean, I laughed at all those things, and I think there's been definitely -- I mean, there's been some really brilliant comedy about Trump, some of which include my own jokes about him.

00:43:12

[laughter]

No, but, I think -- like my friend, a very funny comedian, Kurt Brownler, has a really funny joke about Trump right now. And he put it online, and it was like really popular online. And I asked him, I said, "What's your experience like? Like, have you -- that joke is so funny, and obviously you're killing with that joke in that video at that club. But what's it been like for you?" And he's like, "Oh, it's so hard. I have to put that joke at the very end so that we can all disperse, you know." He goes, "Online, it's doing great. In clubs, it's a whole different ballgame."

John Donovan:

So, what is -- what do -- how do we assess the fact that there are a significant number of Americans who do not want to hear Trump mocked, who don't like the jokes, we're going to tune out of those shows? And I want to cite something that Caitlin Flanagan wrote in the Atlantic, where she made the argument that to that part of the audience, hearing Jimmy Kimmel and Steven Colbert and Seth Myers not only mock Trump, but essentially mocking them turns them into Trump supporters.

00:44:15

What do you -- you know, Billy Kimball, what do you make of that?

Billy Kimball:

Well, I think it's -- it's been fitted into a larger narrative of coastal elites, "Hollywood people don't get us," that Trump himself has cleverly exploited. But I think you're -- not to issue a small reprimand, I think you're off topic. The question was not whether comedy was good for Trump, which the question is whether or not --

PJ O'Rourke:

Or America.

Billy Kimball:

Or America. The question is whether or not Trump is bad for comedy. I think; however, I think that particular strawman of, you know, Jimmy Kimmel making fun of the president we love would be replaced very readily in the -- in the Trump-loving public's mind --

John Donovan:

Well --

Billy Kimball:

-- with something else if Jimmy Kimmel weren't doing what Jimmy Kimmel does.

00:45:10

John Donovan:

Let me reframe it to say that if your comedy is turning off a significant part of the audience, is that bad or good for comedy, or indifferent?

Billy Kimball:

Well, we -- consumers of comedy select their comedy very carefully. They don't -- you know, I'm not sure how many Trump -- pro-Trump comedians are out there on the circuit, but I don't know that Trump lovers necessarily spend lots of time watching Jimmy Kimmel and yelling at the television. You know, they -- everybody's got a remote control these days, and I think they're probably more -- have an idea in their mind of what Jimmy Kimmel does as opposed to actually watching Jimmy Kimmel every night and becoming enraged by him.

John Donovan:

PJ, you want to respond to that?

PJ O'Rourke:

Yeah, it is interesting that one of the points we're coming up against is the focused audience as

opposed to the diverse audience or the inclusive audience.

00:46:07

And I would argue that while the humor to be had out of the Clinton administration, and there was plenty of it, was fairly, you know, concentrated in its subject -- Monica Lewinsky -- but it kind of reached out to everybody, including Clinton supporters. It was hard not -- when Bill got really foolish-acting, it was hard not to laugh at Bill, even if you had voted for him and were going to vote for him again and intended to vote for his wife later. And in that respect, it was not nearly as divisive, and there was also good comedy in the sense that it showed us what we had in common. It had that jeopardy. I mean, one of the reasons your example of that black jeopardy skit is so powerful is it is such an exception to most humor either about or by Trump, very different.

00:47:07

Most of the humor about the Clintons brought us all together in our --

Billy Kimball:

Brought us all together in our shared affection for blowjob jokes?

[laughter]

PJ O'Rourke:

You said that. I did not say that.

[laughter]

Kurt Andersen:

See -- but the thing about what was true in 1993 and '96 and a generation -- more than a generation ago -- is there were not 500 cable channels; there was essentially not yet an internet. The --

PJ O'Rourke:

[unintelligible] --

Kurt Andersen:

-- culture had not been fractured and balkanized.

PJ O'Rourke:

[unintelligible].

Kurt Andersen:

So, you can complain about that, but that's not -- again, that's not unique to comedy, and

again, that's not the --

PJ O'Rourke:  
Well, it's in all --

Kurt Andersen:  
-- question of whether Trump is bad for comedy.

PJ O'Rourke:  
One of the problems I have with Trump is that he tends to move us off into serious subjects, and I don't -- subjects that aren't very good comedy material, one of which is balkanization of culture. I mean, there are jokes to be made, but it's not a laugh riot. Another thing is the nature of populism, both as it manifests itself on the right and on the left.

00:48:07

The nature of populism itself, which brings us to the question of, like, the total expansion of government to the point where government claims to have some sort of answer to everybody's problem, able to provide every kind of justice, not just legal justice, but economic justice and emotional justice. Therefore, it fails; therefore, everyone is angry at the government. You see how this is not leading to a comedy routine, but it does lead to [unintelligible].

John Donvan:  
I think I feel like we're slipping into our libertarian debate.

PJ O'Rourke:  
Yes, yes, we are indeed --

Kurt Andersen:  
And if we're going to change the proposal that Trump is bad for America, Trump is bad for [unintelligible] --

John Donvan:  
No, but we're not.

Kurt Andersen:  
-- populism --

John Donvan:  
We are not. We are not doing that. But I want to bring it back to Sara just to button up this point of when there's a large part of the audience that doesn't want to hear the joke. Is that relevant to this question of Trump being bad for comedy?

Sara Schaefer:

Yeah, because I think that if you want to be a wildly successful comedian, you do have to reach past the bubble that you're in.

00:49:06

And as much as I would love for my audience to be filled with just one type of person who thinks just like me, I think I would get bored with that, and it would just be too easy. I'd like to try to be funny to as many people as possible. I think that's every stand-up comedy -- comedian's goal, and Trump is making that really hard and fractured a little bit. And I'll just finally -- just say one more thing. I have to say this. But, like, Billy, you know, you argued, like, Trump used the word "Pocahontas," which is a racist slur, to make a joke about Elizabeth Warren. And Trump, to me, uses comedy not -- yes, it's effective, but he uses it as a weapon and a defense. So, he uses it to rile up hate, and he uses it to punch down, and then he'll -- when someone goes and shoots up a synagogue, he's like, "Well, I was just kidding," and it's like -- it feels insane. So, no, in that way, to me, Trump is bad for comedy, and it's -- you know, it sucks.

00:50:05

PJ O'Rourke:  
Bad for its reputation.

Sara Schaefer:  
[laughs] Yeah.

Kurt Andersen:  
Well, again, stipulating that Trump is bad, we all agreed. But to the point of -- that Billy made earlier, of this weaponized comedy, proving for the first time -- after debate -- as long as I've been aware of the idea of humor and satire in comedy, that, well, "Does this actually have any political effect?" Yes, it does, and I think back to the person who was my favored Democratic candidate, until last October -- when his life changed -- was Al Franken, thinking, "My God, this guy could take it to this president where he lives and be both serious, and substantive, and fair, and rational" -- and all the things that Al Franken is, but also not attempt something he has no ability at, as Marco Rubio did about the short fingers during the campaign. So, I mean, Trump has, indeed, weaponized comedy --

John Donovan:  
He's also Tweeting back to comics --

Kurt Andersen:  
Well --

John Donovan:  
And I'm wondering, if you're a comic, do you think, "Wow, I got a response from the president."

00:51:04

"That's really good for my comedy, and therefore it's good for comedy."

Sara Schaefer:  
No.

John Donovan:  
No? Okay.

Sara Schaefer:  
I will -- I'm going to address that in my closing arguments.

John Donovan:  
Okay. We'll hold off on that. One other thing I want to do before we go to audience questions is I want to refer back to something that Kurt said in his opening -- that there's a -- that Trump and the circle around him provide this geyser of material. I want to get to the point that things move very, very fast. I mean, the news media is having difficulty with how fast things move, how something that Trump does on Monday might be the material for a new story -- but also a joke -- but on Tuesday, it's already 100 years old, whatever happened on Monday.

And Billy Kimball, the pace that things are moving and the point that your opponent, PJ O'Rourke, made before, that Trump is the joke -- for the program, for example, that you're doing -- when you're -- you deal in absurdity. And there's -- and as you said before, you try to rhyme with what's going on. But when what's going on is moving so fast, does that raise a particular challenge to do comedy well in the Trump era?

00:52:02

Billy Kimball:  
Yeah. It does. I mean, it genuinely does. And I mean, I can't give too many examples because I'm sworn to secrecy about what happens in our current season, but I -- we do --

John Donovan:  
Actually, it's okay. It's just us.

[laughter]

Billy Kimball:  
I mean, for example, there was a -- in the previous season, one of our scripts, there was a comment -- a joke about the show's -- among other things, it was very dirty. And if anyone is listening on NPR with small children in their car, you might want to change the channel. But there was a joke about a golden shower. Probably most children listening will be fine with

that.

[laughter]

And -- it sounds nice. And we had to go back and edit it out after that became a topic related to Trump. We never in a -- I mean, who would have thought that we would have had to remove a reference to a golden shower in "Veep" because the president would somehow beat us to it?

[laughter]

00:53:01

And that sort of thing, I will say -- you're absolutely right -- it does happen with this incredible Klondike of material. I'll say, if -- speaking strictly personally, Trump has made our job on "Veep" a little bit harder. Trump has been bad for the process of comedy, as it bears on what we do in some respects.

Kurt Andersen:  
But, no pain, no gain.

Billy Kimball:  
But -- exactly. Yeah. We're bigger, and better, and stronger.

John Donovan:  
I want to go to audience questions. The way it will work is if you raise your hand, I'll choose you. A microphone will be brought to you. Please stand up. Tell us your name -- or at least your first name -- and come out with a very short question. Really make it a question. Don't debate with the debaters, please. And right down there.

Female Speaker:  
Hi, I'm Grace.

John Donovan:  
Hi.

Female Speaker:  
I think other frequent consumers of Intelligence Squared debates would agree that this has probably been one of the funnier debates we've ever heard, yeah? So, given that truth, how is this debate either evidence for or against your proposition?

John Donovan:  
Whoo, meta.

Sara Schaefer:

That's exactly what I said when they asked me to do it. I was like, "While arguing this, I'm going to be funny" -- because -- I mean, a little.

00:54:02

I'm not killing tonight, which is really in my head right now, but --

[laughter]

-- but I actually said that. I was like, "Well, just by nature, I'm going to try to be funny onstage, and then that's going to go against my own point." So, I mean, I concede that -- you know -- that --

John Donovan:

Kurt, you'd like to respond to the question?

Kurt Andersen:

I'm sorry. I didn't hear the full question. But I can infer the question from Sara's response.

John Donovan:

Yeah. The question was, we're having a lot of the laughs tonight talking about Trump and comedy. Does that mean, I think you're saying --

Kurt Andersen:

Case closed?

John Donovan:

Yeah, case closed is what you're saying, yeah.

Kurt Andersen:

Well, I think it actually, yes, goes to that. It is evidence for that. And I, too, will defer, as Sara did earlier, about things I don't want to say about -- to that, that I'm saving for my powerful, powerful closing argument. But --

John Donovan:

All right, nobody's going to leave. It's going to --

Kurt Andersen:

But, you know, I think it is -- and the last that Sara and PJ have gotten each time, I have quietly and silently applauded, as further disproving their proposition.

00:55:12

John Donovan:

Okay. Another question? Sir.

Male Speaker:

Richard here. This is, I think, to Sara -- Ms. Schaefer first. A lot of the items you identified for the problems you encounter out on the road go beyond comedy and the divisiveness, the reluctance to put certain things on the table and so forth. If its -- are you suggesting that the topic is simply off limits, or why -- what is different from it being off limits for comedy, as you suggest, and not off limits for criticism? Because if one of the functions of comedy is to criticize, that suggests it's just off limits altogether.

Sara Schaefer:

Right. I'm always of the camp that nothing is off limits in comedy, even stuff that is really offensive or whatever.

00:56:03

I mean, if you're going to go -- if you're going to try to make a joke about something offensive, that's on you. You have to deal with whatever the audience reaction is going to be. So, I think, no, Trump is definitely not off limits. I think it's just -- it's sort of like a plague, you know? It's like kind of toxic. It's difficult to do. And, yes, it does speak to like, oh, you have to raise your standards. But sometimes it's like, what am I trying to do here? What point am I trying to make? And is a joke about Trump -- like for me personally, just so you know, like my jokes right now are about what it's like to be an American as opposed to about Donald Trump. That's my way of dealing with it so...

John Donovan:

Yeah. I -- the question was addressed to Sara. If the other side would like to respond, they can, or it can move on. Okay, I'll move on.

Female Speaker:

Hi. Dena here. When I ask -- or when I ask myself if something is good for something else, I have to think of sustainability. So, think of the analogy, is coffee good for energy level? If I'm a huge coffee addict, I'm certainly going to feel great when I drink it, but I'm going to have a crash that I wouldn't have had later.

00:57:06

And if I don't drink it the next day, I'm going to have a really bad headache, and my energy level would not be what it would be if I weren't a coffee addict. To your point about the numbers happening on the industry of television comedy now, what happens when we take Trump away? Can the industry even stand on its own two feet?

Kurt Andersen:

Dena, come up here and join the team.

[applause]

We -- [unintelligible]. Can we lean on her?

PJ O'Rourke:

That is certainly Donald Trump's argument, who says again and again and again, "The media needs me. The media needs me. That's why I'll be re-elected. The media will make sure I'm re-elected." So that is Donald Trump's argument. And, I think you make a great point about sustainability. And to that point, I would say, yes, a second term of Trump would be bad for comedy. We're not there yet, thank goodness.

John Donovan:

Do you want to pick up on that, or you've already made your point that you really like that question?

Kurt Andersen:

No, no. No, damn their point [laughs].

00:58:01

John Donovan:

Right down in the second row here, please.

Female Speaker:

Hi, I'm Barbara. Would you agree that Trump -- the jokes are not about Trump, but Trump is really a concept, and it's about everything that relates to him? Sean Spicer, Sara Sanders, the female Tom Carvel, I mean -- she's -- in other words, he has spawned a whole bunch of incompetence around him that all ripe for the jokes

John Donovan:

But I -- I know you're laying out a premise, but is it going to lead us to whether Trump is good or bad for comedy, for them to debate that question?

Female Speaker:

Well, the thing is that -- yes. The thing is that, isn't he good for --

John Donovan:

I'm not convinced yet so...

[laughter]

Female Speaker:

Isn't he good for comedy because he has actually broadened --

John Donovan:  
The cast of characters?

Female Speaker:  
Yeah.

John Donovan:  
I'll take it. Let's -- I think that's a challenge to the side arguing for it.

PJ O'Rourke:  
You know, the thing is, you know, to get really technical and legally lawyerly about this, comedy is -- comedy implies a happy ending.

00:59:10

I'm not seeing one here. I would say that's a -- like the core of our argument on this side. I mean, Aristotelian aesthetics when you're talking about what comedy is and what tragedy is. Comedy -- divine comedy is not a lot of laughs, especially as you get through Purgatorio and Paradiso. But it has a happy ending. And I'm just not seeing a happy ending in that. And so just on that -- but even though you spawned many comic characters, and we comedian -- we supply side people thank him for that -- I would not say it's good for comedy in the sense that --

Kurt Andersen:  
Well, it's good for dark comedy, which rarely has or often doesn't have happy endings. So, we can get into the debate about various flavors and strains of comedy but --

01:00:01

PJ O'Rourke:  
Yeah, yeah, we could.

Billy Kimball:  
I mean, I would say that, you know, the ancillary characters often have served that purpose in previous administrations, so the president himself or -- I was going to say herself, but what am I talking about? When the -- when the president was colorless or somehow less interesting, you know, you had -- you had your -- your Billy Carters and your Dick Cheneys. And, you know, so that's always an aspect to it. But I think just -- not to reward his misbehavior, but to ask -- to David's point, we all need to remember as we talk about, the premise isn't actually even political comedy. But there's a whole realm of comedy that's going on out -- outside of the political world that is in various, you know, degrees of historical goodness or badness. But while a lot of comedy is Trump, not all comedy is Trump, and there's plenty of other things out there that are going on.

01:01:01

And comedians who you work with, I'm sure, are doing -- still doing, I hope, you know, airline humor. And if they don't -- if they don't choose to engage on Trump, they can -- they can just deal with audiences on that -- on that traditional ground.

Sara Schaefer:  
Yeah, absolutely.

John Donovan:  
Sara, do you want to add to that, or you just -- you're just agreeing?

Sara Schaefer:  
No, I mean, I do agree that, like -- you know, I know some comedians who just steer clear, and that's their brand, and that's what they do, and they're doing pretty well right now, I think, with audiences. You know, there's like a relief, like, "Whew." One thing I've noticed when I do tell a political joke is I'll get this kind of laugh, like, laugh and then, "Ah," like that. You know at the end because the reality sinks in, like, it's funny, but I'm scared, you know?

John Donovan:  
Sara, is it always the case that there are liberals who don't want to hear Trump jokes?

Sara Schaefer:  
Absolutely. In all of my audiences, there's people that I can tell they're just -- now, look, I can't tell usually by looking at someone. Now, there's some guys in the audience that you're like, oh, lord, that's a Trump supporter.

01:02:01

[laughs] You can just tell by the way they look at me. But no, you really can't tell who people are in the audience. You can tell by the way they react to certain jokes or if they heckle or verbal or roll their eyes in a certain way. But I have heard from liberal audiences like, you know, feedback like, "I just don't want to hear about this stuff right now. I just want to laugh about something else."

John Donovan:  
Okay.

PJ O'Rourke:  
"It's no laughing matter" reaction.

Sara Schaefer:  
Kind of, yeah.

John Donovan:  
Sir, on the aisle.

Male Speaker:  
Hi, I'm Alex. I mean, you touched on that. What about the deterrent effect? People are literally being threatened with death for making jokes. So that continues, what number of comedians or writers will just say, "Screw it. I'll do airline jokes." Isn't that bad for comedy?

John Donovan:  
It's a very speculative question, but I think it probably is one everybody is thinking about, is the thing that you're talking about, Sara, like going to grow or not. And so much of this depends on venue. I mean --

Sara Schaefer:  
Yeah.

John Donovan:  
-- I don't think Veep is ever going to be in trouble in that way, or a novelist.

01:03:04

But let's chew on that question just for a little bit since it is speculative. I mean, do you see --

Sara Schaefer:  
Well --

John Donovan:  
I mean, are you foreseeing that this thing is going to go, so people are just going to bail out of that?

Sara Schaefer:  
I mean, I think it depends on the person. Some comedians get off on pissing people off, and that's their thing. I'm not like that. I think, you know, there was a recently sort of, like, alt-right campaign to dig back through comedians' posts on Twitter to find them making inappropriate jokes and trying to ruin their lives over that, and there's -- the left has done that stuff, too, so I don't want to make it one-sided. But I think there's a sort of weaponization of outrage, and an easy target is a comedian, because -- especially online, where you can't -- if you dig back and see a tweet from 10 years ago, the context was different; you can't read the context necessarily. It's just words out of context from a long time ago, and now they're offensive, or now we don't like those words.

01:04:01

And that has been something that's also come into play that's -- and that's not necessarily a

Trump thing. That's, like, an outrage thing. But Trump definitely plays into that, I think, because he taps into; he's very good at using keywords and things to get people riled up and, you know --

PJ O'Rourke:

We are in an atmosphere of taboo inflation. There's absolutely no doubt about it. And it's coming from both political -- all political directions. I would say that we're on a point of kind of a new sort of prudery in our society.

John Donvan:

But that's not a Trump-driven thing.

PJ O'Rourke:

I'm not so sure that Trump isn't part of it. More and more things are becoming taboo to talk about.

Kurt Andersen:

I would say it's the other way around. I would say -- I think you're right; there's an argument that the reaction against PC and taboo enlargement and all that is a real thing and a real argument to have or -- and indeed drove people to Trump. But I don't Trump drove it at all. And I don't want to -- Billy said a thing that I think is an important point, and I want to reiterate --

[laughter]

-- which is that -- no, and to Sara's point, too, that most comedy and most satire and most humor -- stand-up; print; film; television -- is not about Donald Trump, has nothing to do with Donald Trump.

01:05:16

And it's going great, and people are being funny. So, really, the implicit part of this question is, can there be such a thing as good Trump comedy? We think there can be. But moreover, this larger thing is it hasn't ruined it. Sara still has a brilliant career, and so do all kind of humor creators and comedy creators who --

PJ O'Rourke:

I think an angry atmosphere in a society, especially one that is producing, perhaps, or combined with taboo inflation, where there are an increasing number of things that are taboo to talk about, or taboo to talk about in certain places or, you know, in certain groups and so on, and you combine this with an increasing anger in society, and the result is bad for humor, bad for comedy.

01:06:06

Billy Kimball:

I would say -- but I'm curious about this, PJ, because I think, you know, one of the things that seems to be frequently claimed about Donald Trump, and maybe Donald Trump says about himself, is he participates in the breaking-down of accepted norms of discourse, and the widely accepted idea that both sides have become increasingly uncivil or in-civil [sic], which is the correct word, to each other is happening, perhaps simultaneously with what you argue is an inflation in taboos. So, if that's the case, if taboo inflation is what's being bad for comedy, then I would say Donald Trump is a force in society standing firmly against that by virtue of his own taboo-breaking behavior.

Kurt Andersen:

And a good part of comedy and humor has always been approaching taboos and breaking them, and that's what makes people laugh, because, "[gasp] Look what she said; look what he said."

01:07:00

John Donovan:

Yes, the self-point from the head-down -- yes. If you could stand up? Thanks.

Male Speaker:

Hi, Daniel. As Mr. Campbell -- I mean, Kimball said earlier, perhaps comedy is a little too good for Trump. And therefore, I'm curious, for the side against the motion, if they could -- you know, if the dictator was good for Hitler, would that affect how good it was for comedy? And Trump is very good at turning comedy into things that are good for him, because he understands media in a way that is intriguing and different. So, if you could answer that. Thank you.

John Donovan:

I'm not -- did you follow the question?

Male Speaker:

Oh, sorry.

Male Speaker:

If --

Male Speaker:

Well --

Male Speaker:

-- comedy is good for Trump --

Male Speaker:

It was a thought experiment.

Male Speaker:

-- is that bad for comedy?

Billy Kimball:

If "The Dictator" have been good for Hitler, would it have been good for comedy? So, I guess you could say that I suppose, yeah, the Nazis used sort of forms of heinous ridicule that was effective, but despicable.

01:08:04

And was that good for comedy? And Kurt has prepared a really interesting answer on that.

[laughter]

I'd like him to deliver it to you now.

Kurt Andersen:

I honestly -- I mean, I can't tell you how many times I've been in conversation -- sometimes on a stage, even -- about -- and certainly asked by journalists, and especially in the age of Trump -- "Well, what can satire do? Can it really have an effect?" And I think, even though we're seeing the ill effect of Donald Trump going to Mississippi and talking to his partisans a month ago about Dr. Blasey Ford and doing a comedic riff about her lack of credibility -- it was a comedy riff, and they laughed. As -- and that's not obviously the first or last time he'll do that. But to establish that somebody can gain this immensely consequential power and affect the way people think about matters of consequence -- yes.

01:09:06

It's -- it is the discovery of a kind of atomic energy. And as horrible as it's been, it doesn't mean it's been bad for comedy, just that it has -- it has change the nature of politics. And by the way, the nature of politics were changing long before Donald Trump and becoming a subset of show business. This is just the latest permutation of the show business-politics merger.

John Donovan:

Sara, I feel like you want to respond to that, as somebody who talked about weaponization of humor before.

Sara Schaefer:

Yeah. I mean, I think -- you know -- and there are comedians who disagree with me on this. But I think comedy is at its best when it is punching up. And it's about power dynamic and stuff. And so, Trump's version of comedy is, you know, slurs, and making -- you know, just

middle school humor. And what that does -- that doesn't change his supporters' minds. I think it unleashes what was in there already.

01:10:02

It's like, "Oh, we get to say that now? Yay!" You know, and that's disturbing. It's emboldening hate speech, in a way. But I think -- and I do think there are a lot of comedians doing great comedy that subverts Trump. But I think -- I agree with PJ's question, or I think it's an important question, which is, is that the best way to fight Trump? I don't know that answer to that question.

PJ O'Rourke:

One other thing is -- here is that -- it's interesting; one reason I would say that Trump is bad for comedy is because of the point I made, that Trump is a comic, and he's a lousy one. Now, if you take somebody that many of you people in this room -- some of the older people in this room -- probably disagreed with too; the rest of you weren't born -- Ronald Reagan, he was funny. You know, he was funny. And -- the guy is laying on the operating table after being shot, and looks up at the doctors, and says, "I hope you're Republicans."

01:11:00

I mean, the guy was funny, you know? And that was a much more of a fair contest between comedy and the president. This guy is a lousy comedian.

John Donovan:

Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes round two of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate --

[applause]

-- where the resolution is: Trump is bad for comedy.

[applause]

Now, we move on to round three. And round three will be closing statements by each debater in turn. Once again, the resolution is Trump is Bad for Comedy. And making his closing statement in support of the motion, PJ O'Rourke, political satirist and best-selling author.

[applause]

PJ O'Rourke:

Thank you. Okay. I want to get honest with you -- the real reason that I think Trump is bad for comedy is he's keeping me from making fun of you liberals --

[laughter]

-- because you're right about Trump, and I love you. And if it weren't for the Me Too movement, I would come down and hug you.

[laughter]

I voted for Hillary.

01:12:01

I voted for Hillary, never mind that Hillary had Julian Assange set up the State Department email server, put the Dalai Lama on security duty at the U.S. consulate at Benghazi, and the geo-political conflicts of interest of the Clinton Foundation were so large they had to be weighed on Chris Christie's bathroom scale -- yeah?

[laughter]

I voted for her. I voted for her. I was having fun with Hillary, and I expected to have eight more years of fun with Hillary, but no. No. My political party is being held prisoner by the Abominable Showman. The GOP is a slum at the mercy of rent-gouging Landlord of the Flies. I was born Republican. I was raised Republican. I'm ethnically Republican.

[laughter]

My family's from down state Illinois, and my grandmother, she said that growing up, the only Democrats she'd ever heard of was John Wilkes Booth, you know?

[laughter]

You know, we have two parties in this country, and we have a stupid party and a silly party.

01:13:02

The Democrats, the silly party, they say the government can do everything. Give us free health care, free college tuition, \$50 an hour minimum wage, cure baldness, you know. And the Republicans, the stupid party, they say that government doesn't work, and then they get elected, and they prove it.

[laughter]

Now, I'm stupid. I'm stupid, so I usually vote for the stupid party. I vote Republican because Republicans have fewer ideas, okay?

[laughter]

But with Trump all of a sudden, no, no, not few enough, you know? I mean, build a wall on the Mexican border. Stock market tip: Go long on the Mexican ladder industry, okay?

[laughter]

So, I just want to close by saying that, look, as liberals -- as liberals, Trump is outside your house pissing on the windows. As a Republican, Trump is inside my house pissing on the wall-to-wall carpet.

01:14:01

And that's why I think he's bad for comedy.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Thank you, PJ O'Rourke. And that is the resolution, Trump is bad for comedy. And here making his closing statement against the motion, Billy Kimball, writer and Emmy award-winning producer for "Veep."

[applause]

Billy Kimball:

I'm going to be very brief because I'm afraid PJ took my Chris Christie bathroom scale joke.

[laughter]

And I don't want to win here tonight on a technicality, but I'll take it.

[laughter]

I refer you in closing to the question, to the proposition: Donald Trump is bad for comedy. It isn't. You're not voting on whether or not Donald Trump is bad. You're not voting whether Donald Trump is bad at comedy. You're not voting on whether or not the comedy that Donald Trump does is comedy-like, is comedy that doesn't offend you in some way or another.

01:15:02

You're voting on simply the narrow question of, is Donald Trump bad for comedy, or is he not bad for comedy? You're also not voting on whether or not necessarily Donald Trump is good for comedy. We've -- we've taken aim at that target, but that's exceeding our brief. My point, I think the point we've made throughout the evening is that -- is that there is -- thanks to Donald Trump, there is more comedy, comedy as a commercial enterprise and as a mechanism or as an

element in our culture is on the improve -- is subject to improving trends, thanks to -- thanks to Donald Trump. And Donald Trump himself, like it or not, has proven that comedy can be an effective, what I'll call, tool. So as much as we may not like what Donald Trump uses comedy for, he has shown us a way forward for perhaps a more effective and potent use of comedy in support of the arguments and the candidates that we do believe in.

01:16:13

And in that sense, he's given the art form some new life. I do also like to remind people that, you know, I think people flatter themselves that they live in the worst of times, the best of times. There was a time within living memory, and the end of the '60s, when there was active violence in the street and more potent disagreements, even, than we have now. There was a time and century before that when the debate became so uncivil that there actually was an uncivil war. With that in mind, I wouldn't ask you to despair too much of the partisan moment, but to look forward to a brighter day.

01:17:06

And if you support a brighter day, I hope you'll vote in favor --

[laughter]

-- of us. Thank you.

John Donvan:

Thank you, Billy Kimball. That resolution again, Trump is bad for comedy. Here to make her closing statement supporting the motion, Sara Schaefer, critically acclaimed standup comedian, writer, and producer.

Sara Schaefer:

Hello.

[applause]

My closing argument is just a little anecdote. A few months ago, some friends of mine and I, we were all individually approached to be a part of a new TV show hosted by a left wing media personality. The show did not go forward, so don't try to figure out what it is. We were approached individually like to be a writer, correspondent on the show, different roles. And my boyfriend, when I told him about it, his first response was, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

01:18:04

And it would be a huge break for me financially and career-wise, reputation-wise. But he immediate -- and he's someone who would never question that trajectory [laughs]. And he was

like, "Are you sure you want to do that?" And I was like, "Why?" And he was like, "Because it might ruin your life and it might threaten your safety if you want to be in that bullseye." And I thought about it, and I still applied. And a friend of mine also applied, and she got as far as going in for an interview. And while in there, she -- the host apparently said to her along the line -- something along the lines of, "If you do this" -- as a -- as a pitch to her, "If you do this show, Trump will know your name." And she said, "How are you going to ensure my personal safety?" And they laughed it off. And they're like, "You'll be fine." And she turned it down. So, my final point is that if comedians, who are truly the most desperate people for attention and fame, are turning down huge opportunities because of Trump, then, yes, Trump is bad for comedy, obviously.

01:19:18

[applause]

John Donvan:

Thank you, Sara Schaefer. And that's the resolution, Trump is bad for comedy. And here to make his closing statement against the resolution, Kurt Andersen, host of Studio 360, best-selling novelist, and journalist.

[applause]

I noticed, during the middle part of the debate, Sara said a couple of things, several things in fact that I thought, oh, good, she's on our side. She's proving our point. She said, for instance, oh, there has definitely been brilliant comedy about Trump. Hard to say -- hard to argue that Trump is bad for comedy if that's a fact. She said that, no, she knows plenty of comedians who steer clear of Trump and are doing great. Again, hard to argue that Trump is bad for comedy if that's so.

01:20:02

Also, he is not bad for comedy because he -- it's so easy to get under his skin and has been since I was -- started doing it 30 years ago. He gives comedy the power to unsettle him. And comedy at his expense really does upset him, which strikes me is good for comedy and America. It's a twofer. He raged when SNL -- in particular, raged when Saturday Night Live ran a -- had a sketch of him being the dimwitted child to Steve Bannon who was really in control. He writes -- has written multiple angry Tweets about my collaborator, Alec Baldwin, because of his impersonation of him. He was angry at me and my coeditors at Spy magazine 30 years ago when we started calling him -- well, when we covered him, but -- and ridiculed him and journalistically exposed him. But also, when we -- and especially when over and over and over again we referred to him as "short fingered Bulgarian Donald Trump" every time we referred to him in Spy magazine.

01:21:06

And it still stings. Within the last couple of years, he has sent a letter to my coeditor saying, "No, look, my fingers are really normally sized."

[laughter]

You can't ask for much more comic success than that it seems to me. Now -- but seriously, I get Sara's point. The stakes are very high. The stakes are very high for America; go vote next Tuesday. The stakes are, of course, naturally high for comedy that is engaged in the big issues of America. They're going to be, and it's going to be scary for comedians; it's going to be scary for critics; it's going to be scary for journalists. It's scary for us, and that's the way it is. So, yes, Trump has been bad for America, but not excessively or uniquely or worse for comedy than he is for the rest of America. I think -- and finally, I think comedy has an important role as a canary in this particular mine we've been trapped in for the last two years because as long as we can still find things about this nightmare to laugh about, he has not yet won.

01:22:14

Thank you.

John Donovan:

Thank you, Kurt Andersen, and that concludes round three of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate where the resolution is Trump is bad for comedy. Our debaters really made this interesting and useful, and it was serious while funny, and I just want to congratulate them for the spirit in which they met one another on stage. So, PJ O'Rourke and Sara Schaefer, and Sara, everybody in this room knows your name now. So, onward.

[applause]

Sara Schaefer:

[laughs]

John Donovan:

And I also want to say the same thing, thanking the team of Kurt Anderson and Billy Kimball and Billy Campbell. The three of you --

[laughter]

-- were spectacular, but also, you just made it all so interesting. And again, thank you all for what you did on the stage.

[applause]

I have a question I'd actually like to put to you.

01:23:02

This is not part of the competition; it's just something we would be curious to hear from all four of you since we had a long talk tonight about comedy, and everyone agreeing that some people are doing it really well. I'll start with you, Kurt. Who do you think is actually doing -- handling Trump comedy really, really well out there now?

Kurt Andersen:

Well, because I am part of the choir to which he is preaching, I think Stephen Colbert does an extraordinary job. But beyond Trump, and toward Trumpism and being -- combining intelligent, essentially journalistic critiques of Trumpism and the rest of it, John Oliver is doing extraordinary work that -- of a kind that, yes, was pioneered by his previous employers at Comedy Central, but in combining enlightenment with ridiculous to an extraordinary degree every week. I find him doing amazing things. But, you know, yes, as a longtime Trump profiteer, I think both of those are good examples of people doing great work.

01:24:05

And need I say it, since we're no longer arguing the debating the point? Important work.

John Donvan:

Sara?

Sara Schaefer:

No offense to Alec Baldwin, but Anthony Atamaniuk does the best Trump impression out there in his show, the Trump Show, which he has said repeatedly he wants it to end because he wants Trump to not be president anymore, and they will stop doing it the moment he's not president. He's amazing. I just think he's so brilliant.

John Donvan:

Thanks. Billy?

Billy Kimball:

People are sometimes annoyed when I say I don't really watch a lot of comedy, but I will tell you that at "Veep," at lunchtime, we do watch Seth Meyers' Closer Look every day, and I definitely give him credit for coming up with an interesting take that's very, very well-produced. And if you're looking for sort of a quick snapshot of the comedy zeitgeist vis-à-vis Trump, I recommend that.

01:25:00

I'll also say, to the point that was raised, I think, by both PJ and Sara, for people who are suffering from outrage fatigue or Trump fatigue, there's lots of other stuff that we

mentioned. We live in a wonderful time of vast riches on television from all kinds of different voices. I would mention in particular the show produced by my colleagues at HBO, "Barry," which has nothing whatsoever to do with Trump, maybe --

[laughter]

-- but about a hit man who takes acting classes, which I think is really funny and clever, and there's something about it. It seems to be very much of the moment and yet not specifically about Donald Trump.

John Donovan:  
And PJ?

PJ O'Rourke:

Well, I'd like to take us outside the field of comedy, per se, to people who have a comic touch and a sense of humor but do not primarily do comedy. And I think it's worth looking at some of the anti-Trump conservatives that are out there, some of whom are very funny on the subject of Trump; notably, John Podhoretz, who runs Commentary.

01:26:06

He's a lifelong New Yorker, and he, like, gets Trump in a very good way. Jonah Goldberg, who for many years ran the website for National Review; he is very funny on the subject of Trump. Andy Ferguson, who's a writer for the Weekly Standard; also, really good. So, there are people out there -- besides just comedy itself, there are people out there making fun of Trump very well.

John Donovan:

All right. Thank you for that. I hope everybody was taking notes. Lots of stuff to watch. Okay. I have the results now. It's all in. Once again, reminding you, it's the difference between the first and the second vote that determines our winners. The resolution: Trump is Bad for Comedy; in the first vote, 35 percent of you agreed with this resolution; 42 percent disagreed; 23 percent were undecided. In the second vote, the team arguing for the motion, Trump is Bad for Comedy, the first vote was 35 percent.

01:27:03

Their second vote was 37 percent. They picked up 2 percentage points, which is the number to beat. Let's look at the team against the motion. Their first vote was 42 percent. Their second vote was 54 percent. That's 12 percentage points. That's enough --

[applause]

-- that makes the team arguing against the resolution, Trump is Bad for Comedy, our

winners. Our congratulations to them. Thank you from me, John Donovan, and Intelligence Squared U.S. We'll see you next time.

[applause]

[music playing]

01:27:36

[end of transcript]

**This is a rough transcript. Please excuse any errors.**