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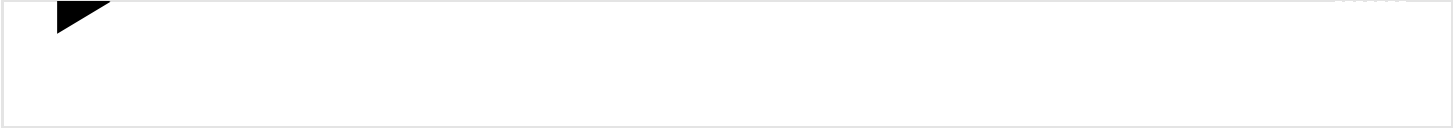
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ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS  
JANUARY 22, 2018 ISSUE

USING COMEDY TO  
STRENGTHEN  
NIGERIA'S  
DEMOCRACY

*A news-satire series modelled on "The Daily Show"  
aims to empower viewers. Will the joke get lost in  
translation?*

**By Adrian Chen**



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One day last July, the five writers of “The Other News,” Nigeria’s first prime-time political-satire show, sat in an office in Lagos, trying to figure out how to make fun of a king. The Ooni of Ife, the traditional ruler of the Yoruba people, had recently made headlines for an incident that occurred on a flight to Ontario. As the Ooni’s entourage boarded, one of his aides, dressed in a flowing white robe, blessed the plane by rattling a couple of shakers above his head. A passenger caught the rite on his phone and posted a video to YouTube, where it quickly went viral. The writers were working on the pilot episode of the show and hoped to begin with a few jokes about recent news items; the clip, some of them thought, would make perfect fodder.

David Hundeyin, a twenty-seven-year-old writer, argued that the video showed how Nigeria’s traditional rulers had failed to keep up with the times. “They are literally relics of the dead past in the modern world,” he said. Hundeyin has an acerbic sense of humor honed by years of watching “South Park,” and he thought that “The Other News” should take a similarly no-holds-barred approach to Nigerian culture. The writers were huddled in a corner of a small room at the headquarters of the Nigerian news station Channels Television, which was producing the show. It was not an ideal environment for writing jokes.

Construction on the building, part of an expansion of the station, had stopped months before, after Nigeria’s economy sank into recession. Two rooms on the top floor, along with a studio, had been hastily outfitted with electricity and air-conditioning for “The Other News.” An empty elevator shaft gaped at the end of the hall, there was no running water, and a cinder block sat treacherously in

the middle of a staircase. The Internet was patchy, and when Hundeyin pulled up a photograph on his laptop it loaded slowly. The photo showed Queen Elizabeth II driving herself around London in a Jaguar. He suggested that they compare her modest road trip with the Ooni's preflight ritual. "If it's good enough for the Queen, isn't it good enough for the Ooni?" Hundeyin asked.

Some of the other writers urged a more cautious approach. The Ooni is seen by some Yoruba as a descendant of Oduduwa, who was sent down by God to found the Yoruba kingdom. "Sometimes we need to go to the other side of the audience or other people's culture and try to see how it's going to look to that person," Sodi Kurubo, one of the two head writers, said. Nkechi Nwabudike, the other head writer, pointed out that the host of "The Other News" was Igbo, another major ethnic group. "We have to be careful, because we have a host from the east, so we can't really make fun of someone's traditions," she said.

Ned Rice, a longtime comedy writer from the United States, looked on. He had been hired to advise the writers by Pilot Media Initiatives, a Brooklyn-based company that makes television programs modelled on the news-parody format popularized by "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," with the aim of spreading democratic principles in developing countries. Rice had arrived two weeks earlier. He had run a week of workshops, then the team had spent another week writing and filming a test episode. Now they had just one week to write and produce the twenty-two-minute pilot.

Rice reminded the writers that comedy necessarily offends some people. "If you do a comedy show, you're going to step on toes," he said. In Nigeria, there are a lot of toes to step on. The country has three major religions and more than two hundred and fifty ethnic groups, which sometimes coexist uneasily. During the colonial era, ethnic tensions were exacerbated by the British practice of indirect

rule, in which traditional leaders were pitted against one another for resources and political power. Since the country's independence, in 1960, its leaders have continued to exploit these rivalries. Disputes can flare into violence. For the past few months, Igbo separatists in the southeast had been agitating for an independent state, prompting fears of a replay of the Biafran war of the late nineteen-sixties. Judging from the photos of hundreds of members of the Indigenous People of Biafra marching in the street, fists raised, they did not seem inclined to take a joke. "I'm not against starting a crisis," Nwabudike said, laughing. "Just not in the first episode."

One writer suggested that they read the comments on the video of the Ooni to get a better sense of the public's reaction. Rice shot the suggestion down. "Jerry Seinfeld used to say, 'Never read your fan mail—only crazy people write letters,'" he said. The writers decided that they would gently rib the Ooni for the disruption he'd caused on the plane. The brunt of the critique was reserved for Nigerian politicians' obsession with private jets; no ritual would be elaborate enough for them to fly commercial. It was not the most scathing take, but they now had a few minutes in the can, which is about the most a comedy writer can ask of a morning's work.

**E**arly in my writing career, I dreamed of working for "The Daily Show," and I contributed jokes to the Onion. As I spent long afternoons staring at the ceiling, trying to come up with the fifteen headlines that I needed to send in every week, I hoped that, by calling out all the ridiculous things in this corrupt and fallen world, I was performing a sort of watchdog duty, like an investigative journalist, only with dick jokes. Or was this just self-serving claptrap propagated by comedy writers? It's an old question. But the idea that comedy has a positive role in democracy has taken a hit in the age of Donald Trump, when bigotry is packaged into ironic memes by white supremacists and any attempt to caricature

the President inevitably falls short of the real thing. These days, comedy seems, at best, a tool too dull to defend democracy—and, at worst, one well suited to undermine it. I wanted Dillon Case, the thirty-six-year-old co-founder of P.M.I., to expound on the power, or lack thereof, of political satire. Case, however, is a veteran of international development, and is practically allergic to making any claim that isn't backed up by a peer-reviewed article.

In Nigeria, Case had no time to ponder anything. He was never without a small notebook whose cover read “Comedy for Change,” in which he scribbled constant reminders to himself. P.M.I. was trying to make a polished TV show using equipment that, as one member of the team said, you might find at a U.S. community college. The technical staffers assigned to the show were overworked, and were hard to reach when they weren't on set. There were also cultural differences. The appearance of a bunch of demanding white people and their handpicked team of young writers had caused some tension. One writer told me that, around the station, the crew had earned the sarcastic nickname the Super Eagles, after Nigeria's national soccer team and its lauded stars.

Case is a tall redhead with a perpetual five-o'clock shadow. Growing up in Park City, Utah, where his mother worked briefly for the Sundance Institute, he had early exposure to the film industry. But, while many of his high-school friends tried to make it in Hollywood, Case got a master's degree in international human-rights law, at the University of Essex. Case is not particularly funny, but he has a good sense of humor. He is amused by international-aid jargon —“capacity building,” “implementing partner”—but is also fluent in it.

Case first got the idea for P.M.I. while employed as a contractor for the United States Agency for International Development in Kyrgyzstan, after a revolution, in 2010, overthrew the country's authoritarian President. “We were working on a

program that was supporting good-governance activities and conflict-mitigation activities,” he told me. The agency wanted to engage young people in democratic politics. “We had actually had the idea in a brainstorming session and thought, Wouldn’t it be cool to be something like ‘The Daily Show?’” Soon after, a local sketch-comedy troupe had the same idea, and approached U.S.A.I.D. for funding and support. Case designed a project with them, which got approved.

To help the troupe, Case e-mailed Kevin Bleyer, a former writer for “The Daily Show.” Bleyer has a boyish face that is at odds with his deep baritone. He is aggressively funny, seemingly unable to string together three sentences without cracking a joke, and, for eight years, he wrote jokes for Barack Obama to deliver at the annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner. When he got the e-mail from Case, he had just returned from North Korea, where he’d been shadowing Bill Richardson, whose memoir he was co-writing, as Richardson negotiated the release of an American prisoner. “I was in one vaguely Soviet country and here I am getting an e-mail from another vaguely communist, socialist country,” Bleyer said. Six weeks later, he flew to Kyrgyzstan. He didn’t speak Russian, so he relied on his translator, a hard-nosed woman named Gulmira, to act as a sort of barometer. If she laughed at a joke, he figured it was O.K. Four weeks later, the show, called “Studio 7,” aired its first episode.

**I**n 2015, Case moved to New York, after ten years abroad, but the experience of working on “Studio 7” stuck with him. He is a meticulous researcher, and he started to read all he could about political satire and its effects on democracy. He read a study that claimed that the humorous dissection of complex issues helped viewers feel more empowered to participate in political change. He read a book called “Is Satire Saving Our Nation?,” which argued that “one of the strongest supports for our democracy today comes from those of us who are seriously joking.” He began to wonder why nobody had thought to

systematically apply satire to international development.

There was a lot of literature for Case to dive into, because of a decade-long boom in political satire that had reached an apex during the George W. Bush Administration. Liberals, disgusted by the Administration's lies and the media's seeming inability to check them, had turned to a small army of satirists, "culture jammers," and pranksters, who offered a more pointed critique. "The Daily Show" became the most potent source of liberal catharsis. Jon Stewart, who hosted the show from 1999 to 2015, paired a pitiless attitude toward hypocrisy and bullshit with a rigorous command of facts, which allowed him to directly address issues that mainstream media outlets, bound by norms of balance and objectivity, could only dance around. A much cited Pew survey, from 2007, listed Stewart as the fourth most admired journalist in the country, tied with Anderson Cooper. And studies found that those who watched "The Daily Show" and other political-entertainment programs were more informed, more critical, and more civically engaged than those who didn't.

"The Daily Show" was only the latest example of the American tendency to look to satire as a means to advance liberal-democratic values. In the nineteen-fifties, as Stephen E. Kercher details in his definitive history "Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America," political cartoonists saw themselves as defenders of free expression and civil rights in the face of an anti-democratic witch hunt. Some of these cartoonists suffered lost syndication deals and F.B.I. scrutiny, but their jokes had a lasting impact. It was the cartoonist Herbert Block who coined the term "McCarthyism," and though his cartoons, which depicted Joseph McCarthy, in an oversized suit, as a shady peddler of hysteria, may not have put a stop to the Red Scare, they reassured other liberals that they weren't alone in their outrage.

The idea of satire as a “weapon of wit” became so central to the liberal imagination that Gore Vidal, seeing a dearth of it in the cultural landscape of the late fifties, asked, “Should a home-grown Hitler appear, whose voice amongst the public orders would be raised against him in derision?” In fact, as Kercher details, satire was being transformed by a wave of performers whose barbs came swathed in urbane coolness. The most famous was the standup comedian Mort Sahl, who got his start in the San Francisco club scene and delivered jokes in a rapid-fire staccato frequently compared to the style of jazz musicians. He mocked Eisenhower’s golf obsession and his lax support for the civil-rights movement by saying that he hadn’t walked the black teen-agers who desegregated Little Rock Central High School in by the hand because he had trouble “deciding whether or not to use an overlapping grip.” The new satirists mostly admired John F. Kennedy, who was liberal, cool, and praised by Norman Mailer for his “dry Harvard wit.” The mainstreaming of satire threatened its role as a democratic check on power; Sahl himself wrote jokes for Kennedy’s campaign.

In the following decades, practitioners of “sick” humor, such as Lenny Bruce and the writers for *Mad* magazine, used comedy to shock their audience into insight, but softer fare prevailed on television. Throughout the seventies and eighties, according to the media scholar Jeffrey Jones, satire’s profile was limited by television executives, who worried about offending viewers and advertisers. Sitcoms and middle-of-the-road talk shows dominated the airwaves until the rise of premium cable channels, which provided commercially viable spaces for edgier shows, such as “The Daily Show” and “South Park,” and Bill Maher’s “Politically Incorrect.” This new liberal satire tackled the Bush Administration with the zeal of the McCarthy-era political cartoonists, and was rewarded with high ratings.



That changed with the arrival of Barack Obama, whose wit and coolness were regularly compared to Kennedy's. In this magazine, Emily Nussbaum likened his White House Correspondents' Dinner speeches to a "sophisticated small-club act." As in the Kennedy era, satire came to seem defanged. The image of the heroic, dissenting satirist went abroad, where, it appeared, the struggle between the forces of democracy and authoritarianism loomed larger. In 2009, Voice of America produced "Parazit," a "Daily Show"-style political-satire program that criticized the Iranian government. A couple of years later, a surgeon turned satirist named Bassem Youssef, often called "the Jon Stewart of Egypt," who hosted "Bernameg al-Bernameg" ("The Show Show"), became a symbol of the promise of the Arab Spring. His exile, in 2014, became a sign of its failure. Still, it was easy to see political satire as an innovation, like the Internet, that could help democracy take root around the world, not through patronizing and coercive "nation-building" projects but as a natural result of giving people a product that they wanted and enjoyed.

In 2015, Case and Bleyer launched P.M.I., with an international-media expert named Graeme Moreland. Case figured that they would get grants to start; then, since the show would be entertaining as well as informative, they could attract advertisers after the grant money ran out. This fit with the international-development community's desire for "sustainability." Yet Case found it hard to persuade anyone to provide funding to P.M.I. Jokes imply an irreverence that is at odds with the serious issues many donors wish to address. Case pitched the idea for months, unsuccessfully, until he and Bleyer were introduced to John Momoh, the Nigerian chairman and founder of Channels Television and a former broadcaster for the state-run Nigerian Television Authority. Momoh required journalists at Channels to wear suits instead of the traditional dress worn by state broadcasters. He insisted on balanced coverage, a rarity in Nigeria,

where many news outlets are beholden to political players. Momoh told me that, during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, he had watched “The Daily Show with Trevor Noah” religiously, and had started thinking about a Nigerian version. “Some of my colleagues and I thought, Look, we could borrow a little from this,” he said.

Case and Bleyer were thrilled. Nigeria is home to “Nollywood,” by some measures the second-largest film industry in the world, and a ready source of talent. The advocacy group Freedom House lists Nigeria as “partly free.” “That’s the kind of sweet spot we’re looking for,” Case told me. The show could help promote freedom of expression without undue threat of censorship or retaliation. Case approached the Open Society Initiative of West Africa with a proposal to partner with Channels to develop the show, and they were awarded a grant.

One day last summer, weeks before meeting with the crew in Lagos, I stopped by Case’s apartment, in the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn, where he and Bleyer were reviewing the applications of prospective writers. They had scheduled a Skype interview with Nwabudike, a Nollywood screenwriter who later became a head writer. It was the rainy season in Nigeria, which interferes with the Internet, and during a conference call with Channels two days earlier the connection had repeatedly cut out. Bleyer made a bit out of it, playing the chorus of Toto’s “Africa”—*I bless the rains down in Africa*—at inopportune moments, and Case gamely grimaced and shook his head every time. “Kevin has schooled me over time to put aside my international-development formality and just be a little more relaxed,” Case told me. Eventually, they were able to hold a call more or less uninterrupted. They asked Nwabudike what she would cover if the show ran that week, and she mentioned that the President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, had been missing for weeks, after going to London for an undisclosed medical treatment. “That’s certainly a

ripe premise for comedy,” Bleyer said.

Judging comedy writers in a foreign culture was an inexact process. For one thing, Case and Bleyer couldn't understand many of the jokes that applicants submitted, since they were full of local references. One had written a sketch with a reference to the Liam Neeson movie “Taken,” in which a call from a kidnapper was interrupted by a lack of mobile credit. Bleyer thought that was funny. But, over all, Bleyer and Case were interested less in whether someone could structure a joke than in whether the person was well versed in the news and had a point of view that could give the show critical bite. “We're not the ones saying, ‘Do this joke, do that joke,’ ” Bleyer told me. “We're the ones saying, ‘Here's how to get the joke to be the best form it can be, and here's how you get this show done by Friday night.’ ” To that end, P.M.I. had created a manual running to more than two hundred pages that instructed writers on everything from constructing setups to pitching jokes and structuring their workday.

To find a host, Graeme Moreland had haunted comedy shows in Lagos. He settled on a well-known comic named Okechukwu Onyegbule, who performs under the name Okey Bakassi. Bakassi, who is forty-eight years old, has been doing standup comedy for twenty-five years, and has become a household name throughout West Africa for his film roles. He performs to sold-out crowds of African immigrants in London, Houston, and Salt Lake City. As soon as Moreland saw Bakassi perform, he said, “it was just game over for me, because he's so adaptable. He's a proper grownup.” Channels had offered Bakassi a four-month contract, the length of the first season. But Bakassi was holding out for a yearlong contract, which, Bleyer explained, is known in Hollywood as a holding deal. As leverage, Bakassi claimed that he was considering becoming the host of a different talk show.



*“We’re all in that room because we believe in that show,” one writer said.*

Photograph by Andrew Esiebo for The New Yorker

“That’s bullshit,” Case said. “It’s not anything time sensitive. It would still be there if this show tanks.”

Bleyer’s face lit up. “I love it,” he said, gesturing toward Case. “He’s now using Hollywood talk. He says ‘If this show tanks,’ whereas the international-development language would be something like ‘If this show doesn’t find its audience,’ or ‘If this show—’ ”

“ ‘—doesn’t yield the results,’ ” Case said, laughing.

“ ‘—yield the results as prescribed in the grant agreement,’ ” Bleyer said.

“Too many challenges prevented it from reaching its desired output,” Case said.

Eventually, Channels nailed down Bakassi. The first time I met him, he was sitting at the head of a table in the executive boardroom of Channels, watching the test episode. His assistant and a Channels producer looked on. Bakassi wore a linen shirt with a black-and-white traditional pattern, black linen pants, and an enormous pinky ring, which he tapped against the table when he was thinking. American comedians tend to be ill-kempt and socially awkward. Bakassi has a stately presence and not a whiff of self-doubt. A trained agricultural engineer, he speaks with a measured precision that brings to mind a newscaster from the golden age of American broadcasting. In his view, Nigeria is a great place for a comedian. “Our people, we’re full of drama,” he said.

Bakassi finished watching the test episode in silence. There was a long pause. Nobody was happy with it. The sound was off, and the editing was wonky. Bakassi had used a pair of white iPhone earbuds as in-ear monitors, and they showed distractingly on the screen. There was a general agreement that the content reflected too much of Rice’s voice, resulting in a watered-down, Jay Leno-as-Nigerian monologue, delivered uncomfortably by Bakassi. “A good effort,” Bakassi said—then he quickly launched into complaints. Some of the team members were “writing for a white audience,” he said. “We still have to make it local in terms of content.”

The son of an Army officer, Bakassi had travelled extensively in Nigeria as a kid, giving him a love for the diversity of the country. His emphasis on Nigerian culture occasionally put him in conflict with the writers, who were younger and well versed in American and British pop culture. Bakassi frequently replaced Western pop-culture references with Nigerian ones, striking a clip from “Harry

Potter” in favor of a clip from a Nollywood movie, and simplifying wordplay for viewers whose primary language was not English. At one point, he argued to Case that the talent should wear Nigerian caftans instead of Western suits, showing him a variety of colorful fabrics. “There is a rising tide of nationalism, and they should nod to that,” he said. Case disagreed, saying that the show had to look like other Channels programming.

In the conference room, the P.M.I. staff assured Bakassi that the pilot would be more authentically Nigerian than the test episode. “The first show had a lot of my influence, and I wrote for white TV for twenty-five years,” Rice said. “But this show will be a hundred per cent Nigerian all the time.”

This exchange was one of many times when I thought of an essay by the Nigerian-American novelist, critic, and photographer Teju Cole called “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” which ran in *The Atlantic* in 2012. The piece responded to “Kony 2012,” the viral video with which a U.S. nonprofit, fronted by the California-based humanitarian Jason Russell, launched a campaign to encourage the international community to defeat the notorious Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony. In the essay, Cole takes aim at the long history of Americans using Africa as “a backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism.” In their zeal to “make a difference,” Cole argues, the members of the White-Savior Industrial Complex, which include TED talkers and development economists, journalists and international charities, have tended to seize on dramatic measures that attract tons of media attention and donor funds but don’t actually help Africans. Although Case and Bleyer were humble about their project’s aims and held a sincere belief in the power of satire to help bolster democracy, I was constantly troubled by the question of whose interests “The Other News” really served.

When I visited Cole in his photography studio, in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, he was unsurprisingly skeptical about P.M.I.'s project. "I think you know what I'm going to say," he said. "It sounds a bit white savior-ish." One of Cole's biggest gripes is that the focus on the savior often erases the agency of the Africans being helped. I told him about Case and Bleyer's idea that they would simply provide the form of "The Daily Show" and let the Nigerian staff fill in the content. For Cole, it wasn't enough just to transplant a successful American format to Nigeria. For the project to work, he continued, it had to be "something that gives you access to the *Nigerian-ness* of Nigerians."

Nigerians are well practiced at mocking their leaders. The country's first political cartoonist, Akinola Lasekan, was a self-taught artist from southwestern Nigeria, who signed his cartoons, in the anti-colonialist newspaper the *West African Pilot*, "Lash." Cartooning was a European art, and the newspapers it appeared in were introduced to Nigeria by European missionaries. Yet, as the art historian Yomi Ola writes in her book "Satires of Power in Yoruba Visual Culture," Lasekan, in his critique of British rule, drew on a Yoruba tradition of using satire, in the form of masks and statues, to call out bad behavior.

A recurring motif in Lasekan's work is an oversized Briton perfectly balanced on the back of a distressed African, in an echo of Yoruba sculptures depicting royal hierarchies. In a two-panel cartoon done after the Second World War, Lasekan captured the rising resistance to colonialism: in the first panel, a black soldier and a white soldier are marching together; in the second, the black man serves the white man a drink. The caption reads "Comrade in War, Vassal in Peace?" After independence, Lasekan was succeeded by a new generation of cartoonists, who found countless targets in a procession of corrupt, dictatorial, and incompetent Nigerian leaders.

Cole pulled up a clip on his laptop from the playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa's classic sitcom "Basi and Company," in which the greed and corruption that accompanied the flood of oil money into Nigeria in the eighties is represented by the schemer Basi, whose get-rich-quick plans always blow up in his face. More recently, the Internet has unleashed a torrent of memes and viral videos that deflate Nigerian leaders. Patience Jonathan, the wife of the former President Goodluck Jonathan, was a common subject. "She had a persecution complex," Cole explained. "She thought the Chibok girls"—the two hundred and seventy-six schoolgirls whose kidnapping by Boko Haram sparked international outrage—"was done to embarrass her." Her outlandishly dramatic public appearances were chopped up into techno remixes that have been viewed hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube. There is also a more elevated style. A lawyer who writes under the name TexTheLaw has a blog called Chronicles of Chill, on which Nigerian political figures feature as thinly disguised characters in a fantasy novel.

"This is why I'm, like, Why is it two white guys?" Cole said. "Nigeria is already way beyond you guys, doing its own thing. We have 'Hitler reacts' videos!" In the famous meme, a movie version of Hitler is made to have a meltdown about a wide range of subjects, including the Seahawks' loss in the Super Bowl and a Twitter service outage. In a clip Cole showed me, Hitler reacts to a viral video of a Nigerian government spokesman who had forgotten the URL of his organization's Web site.





*Comedy often offends people, and in a country where political disputes sometimes flare into violence it can be difficult to know where to draw the line. "I'm not against starting a crisis," one of the show's head writers joked. "Just not in the first episode."*

Photograph by Andrew Esiebo for The New Yorker

**T**oday in Nigeria, there are slapstick comics, who are as much mimes as comedians; comedians who trade in ethnic humor in local languages; and urban comedians, speaking pidgin, who mock Nollywood celebrities and musicians. Nigerian standup comedians m.c. weddings, birthday parties, and burial ceremonies, where they have largely replaced the radio hosts and television personalities who used to preside. The biggest standup comedians sell out large shows and star in multimillion-dollar-grossing films.

While in Lagos, I went to a café that each Wednesday is converted into a

comedy club called Unknot Your Tie. Office workers from the nearby business district sat at round tables drinking large bottles of beer. Multiple comedians took the stage at once. Offstage, a d.j. and a keyboardist accented the jokes. The show's three hosts took turns jumping up onstage to interrupt the performers' five minutes. The performers roasted the hosts in return. Audience members roasted the comedians and other audience members. It felt like a giddy democracy.

The history of standup comedy in Nigeria, as with cartooning, is that of a deep-rooted culture finding resonance with a foreign art form. The formal practice of telling jokes in front of an audience originated with the village spokesmen who host public events, spicing them up with wit and humorous anecdotes, according to Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma, the former head of Nigeria's National Institute for Cultural Orientation. Comedy was also a part of traditional Nigerian theatre and storytelling long before standup came to the country, in the nineteen-eighties. One of the fathers of professional standup comedy is a fifty-three-year-old comedian named Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome, who goes by the stage name Ali Baba. He got his start in college, where his talent for making fun of popular students and administrators won him gigs as an opener for school events. Ali Baba watched videos of Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor, and was inspired by a tradition of African-American comedy that used humor to cope with racism and oppression. He told me, "If standup was used at the time for emancipation, for entertainment, for expression of their feelings, for them to be able to water down the effects of the damage that being enslaved had cost them, then it was wise for me to also use that."

Laughter as an antidote to adversity is a recurring theme. In 1995, the filmmaker and producer Opa Williams launched Nigeria's first and most important comedy showcase, "Nite of a Thousand Laughs." As Ayakoroma tells it, one of

Williams's inspirations came during a visit to a hospital to shoot a Nollywood film. There, he ran into an actor who had been injured in a car crash, and the cast and crew began making jokes in order to comfort him. "It occurred to me that laughter could be a healing balm," Williams later told a journalist. At the time, the country had been under military dictatorship for more than a decade. Two years earlier, an attempt at transitioning to democracy had been thwarted, when General Sani Abacha seized power and installed a new junta. "The military considered anything you said as the voice of the opposition," Ali Baba told me. In 1998, Abacha died, and his successor, Abdulsalami Abubakar, organized a transition to a democratic government. Nigeria's new democratically elected leader, the former military ruler Olusegun Obasanjo, was known for his sense of humor, and he regularly invited Ali Baba to perform at the Presidential palace. "He was kind of my chief marketing officer," Ali Baba told me.

Okey Bakassi's standup routines often traffic in social commentary. One of his most famous bits is called "In Search of Who Wrote 'Things Fall Apart.'" He tells the story of a governor who visits a school and asks a student, "Who wrote 'Things Fall Apart'?" The student thinks that he is being accused of some terrible crime. "Not me!" he replies. The governor is shocked by the student's ignorance of Nigeria's most famous novel. The teacher and the principal don't know, either, and the governor is outraged. He complains to his aide, who leaps into action. "Don't worry, sir," he says. "We'll set up a mission to sniff out who did it." At home, the governor complains to his wife. "They won't tell you because they're your political enemies," she replies. "They don't want you to succeed!"

Bakassi tells the joke with delight, but underneath boils the frustration that Nigerians have with their dysfunctional government. The country is one of the largest producers of oil in the world, but it is unable to deliver basic services, like

education and electricity, to its own people, owing to widespread corruption and incompetence. The election of Buhari, in 2015, brought a surge of hope. He was the first opposition candidate ever to unseat an incumbent, and he promised to crack down on corruption, put millions of unemployed young Nigerians back to work, and end Boko Haram's insurgency. Nearly three years later, his Presidency is bogged down by health problems and weak leadership. "People massively wanted change, and suddenly that change has become like a mirage, and they are so confused right now about what to do that they've become inactive," Bakassi said one day while we were talking in the studio. "I want to be that one program that will bring people together and activate them to bring about change."

It sounded like a campaign speech, and, in fact, Bakassi is one of the rare political satirists who is also a politician. In September, 2008, he was appointed to be a special adviser on entertainment matters by the governor of Imo State, where he grew up. Later, he launched an unsuccessful run for the state assembly. Once, on a radio show, he said that the experience of being "on the inside" had changed his views on politics.

"We cannot say that we are all innocent, because they say society gets the kind of government it deserves," he told me. Politicians aren't inherently evil. The main problem is the widespread practice of selling votes to the highest bidder. Given how little the government does for poor Nigerians, many of them see this as their one chance to benefit from politics. Bakassi objects on pragmatic grounds. If voters accept payment before the politician gets into office, they have little leverage with which to hold him accountable later. In addition, the expense of paying off so many voters means that the politician who wins election must find a way to recoup the money, which leads to corruption. "We demand so much from politicians when they seek elected office that at the end of the day they need to get money back," Bakassi said.

Last year, Bakassi posted a picture to Instagram over which he'd put the text "@okeybakassi for president." He wouldn't be the first satirist to run for President, but, as far as I could tell, his intention was more sincere than Stephen Colbert's, in 2008. "I'm qualified to be the President," he said. "The only thing I don't have is the resources. I am an educated person and I can discuss national issues and I have the burning desire to serve this country." He continued, "Politics is simply a group of processes that people apply to get what they want."

**I**f you gather twenty different Nigerians, you might get twenty different opinions," Nwabudike said to me one day. She was explaining why it was so hard for the staff to agree on anything. I had witnessed endless debates about what angle the show should take on a controversial issue, how far to take a joke, and who should be criticized for the problems facing the country. To Nwabudike, the group's fractiousness was a sign of a more fundamental fact of Nigerian life. "In the U.S., a lot of things are sort of communal," she explained. "In Nigeria, it's pretty much the opposite. If that road is bad, nobody's going to fix it, so we all have to buy high cars to get over the potholes. If there are no lights, the government is never going to fix it, so let's all go buy generators for ourselves." The need for self-sufficiency, she said, made it hard to find common ground. Still, the writers shared one thing. "We're all in that room because we believe in that show," she said.

Sodi Kurubo explained to me how he saw the mission of "The Other News." Some young Nigerians, he said, follow American politics more closely than they do Nigerian politics. They love "The Daily Show," along with John Oliver and Bill Maher, whose shows are easily accessible online. "Americans don't realize how America-focussed the rest of the world is. We get your news, we get your media," he said. "We always have to remind ourselves that it's another country." As dysfunctional as our politics may seem to us, there is still a sense that the

stakes are real. Kurubo saw “The Other News” as a way to direct young Nigerians’ attention back to Nigerian issues, through a form they already know.

As the writers labored over the scripts, the correspondents went around Lagos filming “field pieces,” in which they investigated pressing matters by talking to people on the street. One day, I joined Ned Rice as he went to supervise a shoot. Rice is a large man, who wears a uniform of jeans and a tucked-in T-shirt. He grew up in Detroit, and, when he is not racking his brain for one-liners, he speaks with the sonorous Midwestern accent of an oldies-radio d.j. Comedy was his calling. The first time he watched “Late Night with David Letterman,” he knew that was what he wanted to do. Rice moved to New York and began bartending at the Improv, which led, eventually, to a career as a comedy writer, including five years for “Politically Incorrect,” where he met Kevin Bleyer. Rice loved the undeniable reality of making somebody laugh, but he had been having a tough time recently. He got divorced, and moved from Los Angeles to Ann Arbor; he “wasn’t getting work,” he explained. Then he got the call from Bleyer to go to Nigeria. “I couldn’t think of a bigger adventure than comedy in Africa,” he said. Rice nagged and cajoled the writers, whom he often referred to as “kids.” He was at once the most vocally touched by his experience in Nigeria and the

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comedy career started in a public-speaking class there. For an assignment, he created a standup routine about his thesis. The bit killed. He started to do

comedy in clubs, and was soon being invited to perform throughout the small Dundee scene. “I do a lot of gags on my dad,” he said. “He’s, like, ‘You’re not funny.’ ” After graduation, his father summoned him back to Nigeria to find work as a lawyer. Williams wanted to stay in Scotland and do comedy, but in Nigeria, he explained, “you can’t stand up to your parents.” He continued to pursue comedy, but he was at a disadvantage, because his jokes were in English, while most standup is in pidgin. “If you do comedy in English in Nigeria, you’re fighting with a handicap,” he said. “You have to be *fire*.”

The van chugged up a long sloping incline overlooking a cattle market. The shoulder of the road was filled with broken-down cars, pedestrians stepping over piles of trash, and livestock. During the week, Case had noticed that people were peeing everywhere, despite the many stencilled “Do Not Urinate Here” warnings. He suggested doing a piece about the public-urination problem. An obvious place to start was to film a bunch of people peeing. (Bonus if they were peeing on a “Do Not Urinate” sign.) Suddenly, the crew began shouting. There was a man standing in front of a bush, his back to the road. “Keep your distance!” Rice said. The driver pulled up, and the cameraman leaned out the window and stuck his lens in the urinator’s face. The man grimaced. The van peeled out, and the passengers erupted into cheers. “Do people in Nigeria say ‘number one’ and ‘number two’ when they talk about going to the bathroom?” Rice asked as we drove on. “Public urination is the *number-one* problem in Nigeria,” he mused.

Some of the funniest parts of “The Daily Show” have typically been field pieces, but they were the biggest challenge for “The Other News.” Owing to limited resources and technical capability, television news in Nigeria doesn’t tend to employ the kinds of filmmaking and investigative work that are commonplace in the U.S. If you flip through the channels on Nigerian TV, you’ll see a lot of press conferences and interviews with officials in their offices. Case believed that, by

satirizing a kind of journalism that doesn't really exist in Nigeria, "The Other News" could actually help bring it about.

The correspondents' training had included some basic concepts of television production, including the notion that a piece should take a "journey" that started with a question and ended with some new understanding. Yet the field pieces that attempted a complex narrative fell flat; the ones that succeeded featured simple, man-on-the-street interviews. Rice had worked on the "Tonight Show," where one of his responsibilities had been producing the "Jaywalking" segment, in which Jay Leno approached people on the street and embarrassed them with simple general-knowledge questions that they couldn't answer. As we drove to Ogba Market, a large commercial square, Rice suggested some questions that the correspondents could ask. The point was to elicit as many ridiculous answers as possible, so that they had choices in the editing room. "We're on a fishing expedition," he said.

At Ogba Market, we stopped in front of a stall that advertised herbal medicine. The crew members hopped out to interview passersby, but they were repeatedly waved off. After a few minutes, a man in a trucker cap approached the crew. "You want to talk to someone?" he asked. He led us across the street, weaving through pedestrians, cars, minibuses, trucks, motorbikes, and yellow *keke* tricycles, to a crowd of men gathered around a wooden table under an umbrella. Every inch of the table was covered with newspapers, laid out in neat rows and weighed down with stones. The men swarmed the camera, and soon Bhadmus was happily interviewing them about public urination in Lagos.

Later, Bhadmus explained that the men were "free readers"; in a tradition dating back to military rule, free readers crowd around newsstands all over Lagos, reading the news and chatting about it. Today, there are free-readers clubs all



over Lagos; there's even a Free Readers Association, which fights for the right of people to hang out at newsstands. Bhadmus told me that when she was a student she had frequented the free-readers club near her house. She had been amazed by how many poor, semi-literate people she met who had informed and intelligent views on politics; other club members kept them abreast of the news. "It's a really nice public space," she said.

After Bhadmus interviewed dozens of readers, Rice determined that they had enough material. As we drove back to the station, I noticed caravans of cars, buses, and trucks with colorful banners moving through the streets. The local elections were days away, and supporters of the two main parties, the A.P.C. and the P.D.P., were travelling between campaign events. Despite spending a week with a political-satire show, this was the first I had heard of the elections. A few days later, I walked out to the gate of the Channels compound and found a crowd of about forty men shouting and waving. They were members of a faction of the A.P.C.; they claimed that their candidate had been violently shut out of a primary by another group. The candidate had been attacked with a machete while trying to force his way into a house where the vote was being held, and the men were trying to get the network to cover the dispute. The candidate stumbled out of the crowd, leaning on a supporter. His shirt was torn, and when he turned around I saw that his back was drenched in blood. Williams heard the commotion and came down to interview members of the crowd. When he returned, he excitedly showed Rice a video of the protesters. Rice thought that it was a great addition to the show. "We just need to find a funny setup," he said, and paused to think. "I guess people didn't like the 'Game of Thrones' finale."

**T**he morning of the shoot for the pilot episode, everything seemed to go wrong. The teleprompter operator couldn't be found. One of the producers was stuck in traffic. Rice had eaten something that disagreed with him, and,

because the bathrooms still weren't working, whenever he needed to go he had to sprint down five flights of stairs, across the courtyard, and up another three flights in the main building. "I nearly threw up on the stairs!" he said, gasping and sweating, returning from another trip. The theme music was still being assembled. It was one of the few times I saw Case lose his cool. "I don't buy this shit," he said, upon learning that another producer was in the hospital with an undisclosed illness. "They are not competent. Call it what you want, but that's it." Adding to Case's anxiety was the fact that two representatives from the Open Society Initiative of West Africa would be sitting in on the filming.

The rehearsal was rough. It took three takes to get through the first fifteen seconds of the show. The opening graphics kept freezing, and ill-timed applause cues from a producer threw off Bakassi. Case paced around the office, drumming his pen on his "Comedy for Change" notepad, absorbing bad news like body blows.

At two-thirty, the audience—seventeen Channels employees—filed into the studio and sat in plastic chairs about thirty feet from the purple-and-gray stage. There was no camera for crowd-reaction shots, so the plan was to shoot them laughing uproariously before the show and edit in the shots later. A burly bearded correspondent who goes by the stage name Dan D'Humorous was tasked with eliciting the laughs. "It's a live show, so laugh as if you paid for it and you need to get your money's worth," he said. Someone shouted at him to tell a joke. He declined. "Just imagine something hilarious," he said. D'Humorous began to let out big, fake belly laughs. "Ha! Ha! Ha!" He raised his arms like a conductor. The audience members started to laugh, too, and as the absurdity of what they were doing dawned on them the laughs became real.

Eventually, the producers showed up and the teleprompter operator was tracked

down. A headset for Bakassi replaced the white iPhone earbuds that had glared in the test episode. The script worked, more or less. The episode covered the Ooni video, a major corruption case, and a recent debate over restructuring Nigeria's federal system. There was a field piece by Williams and D'Humorous that dealt with the Minister of Science and Technology's triumphant announcement that Nigeria would be manufacturing its own pencils. ("What's next, erasers?") There was an unfortunate joke comparing a corrupt minister to a woman who couldn't keep her legs closed. The high point, most agreed, was Bakassi's interview with Reuben Abati, a newspaper columnist and former spokesman for Goodluck Jonathan, in which they reflected on Nigerian youth's anger at the state of the country, and in which Bakassi pulled from him a story about the evil spirits that he believed haunted the Presidential complex. Bakassi, wearing a suit with a bright-red handkerchief, seemed energized by the presence of a live studio audience. Perhaps most important, the Open Society representatives were pleased. "It was excellent," one of them said. "I laughed until I had tears in my eyes."

After the taping, the crew gathered for a postmortem. Case scolded someone for letting his phone go off during the recording. The applause sign needed to be wielded more carefully. "Everybody has areas where they can improve," Case said. "I think, on the writing side, there were a lot of clips and—whoops." The power went off. A few seconds later, the generator kicked in, and as the lights came back Case's tone lifted. "It really is amazing, guys, the thing we just recorded, so why don't you pat yourself on the backs," he said. "It's going to keep getting better. It's going to be in a league of its own, and I can't wait to read about you guys in the Emmys." With that, the crew dispersed quickly. There was still a lot of work to do, and they had only seven days until the next episode.

Defying technology failures, skittish lawyers, and power outages, a new episode of “The Other News” aired every Thursday evening at seven-thirty for the next twelve weeks. Nwabudike became the head producer, and, episode by episode, the flow of the show and Bakassi’s delivery improved. The first big hit was a segment in which Dan D’Humorous reported from the “jungle” of Nigerian politics, the green screen behind him filled in with a C.G.I. rain forest. Unauthorized clips of the segment started popping up all over the Internet.

Yet there were issues. “The Other News” rarely displayed the kind of critical bite that some of the writers aspired to; shots were off; the show was accompanied by a distractingly fake laugh track. There was a minor controversy, after a well-known actress appeared on the show and said that women bore some responsibility for preventing domestic abuse by not provoking their husbands. The incident made Case cringe, but the outrage that it sparked online raised the show’s profile. Before the end of Season 1, Channels had secured enough sponsors to renew the show. Sustainability achieved. When I stopped by Case’s apartment recently, he said that the final episode had been the highest-rated show in its time slot, reaching 1.7 million viewers. P.M.I.’s contract had ended; the staff was on its own.

The third episode of Season 2 was about to air. We sat in his basement and watched it live on the Channels YouTube page. There was a long piece on a new bill to spend a billion dollars fighting Boko Haram; the bill had attracted criticism, because President Buhari had boasted in 2015 that the insurgent group was “technically defeated.” Case was impressed. “Man, this is going to go viral,” he said, at the end of a segment that made fun of the role that Buhari, a former general, had played in three military coups before being elected President. Afterward, he showed me a rough draft of some surveys indicating that the show

was having a positive impact on its viewers' political knowledge. But he seemed more excited by a different sign of success. He had heard a rumor that a rival TV station was creating its own political-satire show. "You know you're onto something hot when people are copying it," he said. ♦

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*Adrian Chen joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2016. [Read more »](#)*

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