

Montage

Art, books, diverse creations

With a front page from *The Onion* projected in the background, Thurston emcees the 2009 SXSW Interactive Web Awards.

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Last year, he directed *The Onion*'s coverage of the tumultuous 2008 election; with the political intensity now dialed down, he is focusing on its online presence, including Twitter and Facebook pages and partnerships with YouTube, iTunes, and Google. He led a redesign of the website and is working to extend *The Onion*'s voice into new online outlets and platforms like the iPhone.

Twitters, Titters, and *The Onion*

Baratunde Thurston fuses politics, portals, and punch lines.

by CRAIG LAMBERT

YOU'RE SAYING, "Not another one of these techno-geeky black guys with political passions who does stand-up comedy and blogs." But that's Baratunde Thurston '99. "I operate in three major spheres: comedy, politics, and technology," he explains. "An ideal zone for me is where all three overlap. Politics is the heart; comedy and technology are tools to amplify or deliver a message. Humor is a really effective way to talk about what I really care about: politics and justice."

The energetic Thurston (baratunde.com/blog) has a job that taps his triad of passions: since 2007, he's been Web and political editor of *The Onion*, the satirical weekly newspaper that appears free in sidewalk boxes in eight U.S. cities and online globally (www.theonion.com). Like Jon Stewart and Andy Borowitz '80 (see "April Fool Every Day," May-June, page 35), *The Onion* invents untrue-but-funny news stories, often based on current events. "It's ridiculous that I work here," says Thurston, in his SoHo office. "I'm still giddy about it."

"All that conversation about newspapers online," he says. "I love being a part of it." His media tastes are certifiably twenty-first century: "Twitter and Facebook are my primary means of following people and institutions." He has been booked to host a 10-part television series premiering in August on the Science Channel, *Popular Science's Future Of*, which will examine how technological innovations of today will reshape our lives five, 10, or 25 years in the future.

Thurston grew up in Washington, D.C., in Columbia Heights, where drugs and police activity were common. (His father was killed attempting to buy drugs when the boy was very young.) His politically active mother, who worked as a computer programmer in the office of the Comptroller of

O P E N B O O K

The Slovenliness of the Intellectual

Books, \$27.95), took professor of English Elisa New to the Baltics three times to construct “a memoir in five generations.” From her researches, she emerged with details evocative, emotionally resonant, and funny—as in this excerpt from chapter nine, “The Social-eest.”

What had possessed my great-grandfather in 1914 to commit his time and energy to a run for Congress he surely knew would be unsuccessful? Like the questions surrounding Jacob's birthplace, Amelia's illness, Uncle Baron's character, and Jean's decision to send her sons to England, my aunts didn't agree on an answer. Why should their father have chosen so quixotic a way to spend the spring, summer, and fall as the Socialist Party candidate to rep-

nience. As the person who took care of her father in his later years after his wife was institutionalized and after Jean had moved on to her second of three husbands, living with him and keeping him in breakfasts and dinners, in clean shirts and pocket squares, in stamps and envelopes and typewriter ribbons, Myrtle had the experience to prove that political commitments are hell on the housekeeping. With the whole top floor of her house given over to her father's comforts, every entrance through

A meticulous excavation of personal history, *Jacob's Cane: A Jewish Family's Journey from the Four Lands of Lithuania to the Ports of London and Baltimore* (Basic

his bedroom door was a rich tutorial in the slovenliness of the intellectual.

Cheap weeklies dropped by the armchair, books piled in teetering heaps, ashtrays overflowing, cigarettes loose, coffee dried to syrup or Scotch whisky left in a cup—such were the habits of international socialism.

For Aunt Myrtle, her father's socialism made him late to dinner, distracted with his children, tedious in company, and intolerant of what

others thought “nice.” She, who could set her boys' rooms to rights in fifteen minutes, came to know well the graceless habits of a sardonic socialist. Or at least she knew the tastes of one without a wife to keep him in line. His daughters did their best to cope.

resent Baltimore in the Congress of the United States? And why, after this venture failed, did he continue to defend socialist ideas in spite of his business success and his family's bourgeois aspirations?

Aunt Myrtle and Aunt Jean each had her own way of explaining what it meant that their father—a captain of industry, as they represented him—could be a Red and a foe of unions simultaneously.

From a certain slight tightness around the mouth and the faintest wrinkling of her nose, Aunt Myrtle showed that to her socialism mostly meant domestic inconvenience.

The Levy family in 1928; Jacob holds the cane. Only he and Rivka Levy (far left, flounced dress) survived the Nazis.

FROM THE BOOK

the Currency, raised him and his sister “with a keen sense of history and justice,” he says. “Every week we worked in a soup kitchen, actually getting our hands dirty.” They also had the first computer on their block.

Life changed in seventh grade when, helped by a scholarship, Thurston entered Sidwell Friends, the Quaker private school where President Obama's daughters are now enrolled. He was already addicted to news and would keep one earphone plugged into National Public Radio or the BBC during class, “just in case I got bored with school,” he says, smiling. Sidwell was “a major reorientation, the critical thing that sets up your life,” he says. “When the Rodney King verdict came out, we protested with the support of the school. Most of the students at Sidwell are liberals from elite families who worked for places like the World Bank or the Clinton administration. They felt good about their politics. The challenge in a place like that is the *denial*. We had issues like the disproportionate punishment of black students, the traditional curriculum, hiring more black faculty. It was a little version of America, with an extra dose of self-righteousness.”

At Harvard, Thurston was “into” computer science and math, but concentrated in philosophy, which was more fun, he explains. “I see things in structural, analytic ways and found a very comfortable home in analytic philosophy. Logic is so clear, like [computer] code. But in programming, a mistyped semicolon can break down the whole thing—that's too sensitive. Philosophy made my mind a lot sharper. You learn to suss out the main point in a body of information, and to recognize an original thought after sparring with so many unoriginal ones.”

He also joined the Signet Society and the *Crimson*, on both the photo and news boards (“I couldn't choose. I'm like Winnie-the-Pooh, I've always got my hands in many pots of honey.”) He was shocked that “smart Harvard people didn't know what was going on in the world—revolution in Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tigers,” so he launched an e-mail newsletter called NewsPhlash for his black classmates, and started “to put my own attitude into the coverage,” he says. “It became my satirical take on the news, and that's when people started responding. That's when I got funny.”

After junior year, Thurston had lined



up a dream summer internship at the *Washington Post*, where he had once been a gofer. But a repetitive-stress injury made him unable to type; he had to forgo the internship and worked instead with the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club, playing Iago's confederate Roderigo in *Othello*. "That summer shifted everything," he says. "I had a lot of fun being onstage, interacting with an audience."

After college, he tried management consulting in the high tech/communications area before he and two partners started their own venture-capital firm with an ill-timed 2000 launch that collapsed along with the dot-com bubble. Thurston returned to consulting with his old firm in Boston, CSMG. "I was the young, hip guy who worked on cool, techie things," he re-

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calls. "Online video distribution, the shift from landlines to mobile communications, instant messaging, social networks, fragmentation of media."

In December 2001, he had a crucial conversation with his girlfriend (now wife), singer/songwriter Mieka Pauley '02, who asked him which he liked more, theater or writing? When he said he loved both, she followed up: "Then why aren't you doing either of them?" Thurston made a commitment to himself to write every week, and enrolled in a standup comedy course at the Boston Center for Adult Education and a comedy-writing workshop at Modern Humorist in Brooklyn, the entertainment company founded by *Lampoon* alumni John Aboud '95 and Michael Colton '97. Every Tuesday night for eight weeks, Thurston left work in Boston early to catch a 6:00 p.m. shuttle flight to La Guardia, where he'd rent a car and drive one-way to Brook-

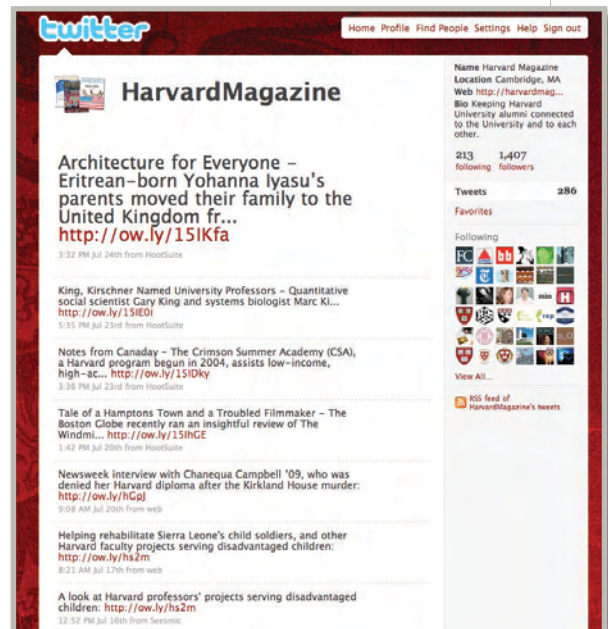
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lyn for the two-hour workshop at 8:00. Afterwards, he'd hang out in midtown until the 3 A.M. train left for Boston. He'd catch a few hours of sleep aboard Amtrak, then go straight to work and shower there.

What grew from that was an active performing career as a politically oriented standup comic, whose first home base was the Comedy Studio at the Hong Kong Restaurant in Harvard Square. (He had to pay dues, of course, like performing in places where "you were required to bring 10 people in to get six minutes onstage—a \$15 cover plus a two-drink minimum. My friends got tired of showing up, so I would offer to pay their way. You end up paying \$25 apiece in order to perform—for free!") He eventually worked with Laughing Liberally, a New York-based politically themed comedy collective, and has also played many conferences, like those of Netroots Nation. ("I'm a conference

whore now," he says.)

Besides self-publishing three humorous books, Thurston, in 2006, helped launch Jack & Jill Politics (www.jackandjillpolitics.com), a blog that offers "a black bourgeoisie perspective on U.S. politics." He confesses that burning so brightly on five hours of sleep per night—and consecutive weekends in Austin, Boston, and Amsterdam, for example—has one downside: he gets "pretty ill" every 18 months or so, including one bout with tuberculosis. Even so, he says, "I really do think I'm among the top 100 most fortunate people in the world." He hopes to have children, and to emulate his comic heroes, including Dick Gregory, George Carlin, Whoopi Goldberg, and Jon Stewart. "The point of being funny," he says, "is in having something to say."



Visit harvardmag.com/extras to hear excerpts from an audio interview with Baratunde Thurston.

Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

Jane Arnold is searching for a story about a destitute family who own a Stradivarius. When the son tries to sell the violin, the pawnbroker tells him, "I told your father a long time ago this is a fake." The boy goes home and tells his mother he has decided that having the violin is as good as money in the bank, and he won't sell it yet.

Ernest Berge seeks the exact reference where Sigmund Freud refers to our ability to learn about normal functioning from extreme cases.

Constance Martin asks for the author, title, and/or origin of a song containing the lines, "You are my Rose of Mexico/ The one I loved so long ago..." They come from a waltz that was "new" around 1909, and these lyrics might be part of the chorus.

"in Harvard balance" (July-August). Robert S. Hoffman writes, "The phrase 'to die in Harvard balance' is a variant of the phrase 'to die a Harvard death,' which I've heard and used fondly since starting medical training 35 years ago. We physicians on the West Coast use it

all the time. Possibly the first phrase is an East Coast variant. As the questioner correctly states, it is applied to patients whose labs and other data are normal but who die anyway. It appears on first glance to satirize academic physicians, Harvard providing handy examples, who are concerned only with the intellectual and technical aspects of practice but have little if any interest in the patients or their fate. If the lab results are normal, this proves that the care was top-notch no matter what happens to the patient. My sense, however, is that when we use the phrase we are not really targeting academicians, toward whom most of us bear no antipathy. Instead we use it to express and slightly relieve our frustration when we do everything right but the patient keeps getting worse or dies. I have no idea who first used the phrase. Probably some medical resident 50 years ago who will remain anonymous but forever be immortalized in the conversation of stressed-out physicians everywhere."

Send inquiries and answers to "Chapter and Verse," *Harvard Magazine*, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138, or via e-mail to chapterandverse@harvardmag.com.