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Sarah Pappalardo: Tongue Firmly in Cheek

The co-founder of satirical feminist website Reductress makes the case for insightful humor.

By Kelsey Schagemann • Photos by Ruben Cantu

On a random day last year, the headlines on the websites of several popular women's magazines included "Kate Middleton Admits She's Not Perfect, Says It's 'Just the Makeup'" (Glamour), "OMG, Funfetti Popcorn Now Exists" (Cosmopolitan), "12 Sundresses Under \$100 That Will Change Your Summer" (Elle) and "How to Drop (Subtle) Hints to Your Beau on Your Dream Engagement Ring" (InStyle). Women are frivolous, obsessed with celebrities and insecure about men, right?

Not so fast.

Over on *Reductress.com*, the satirical feminist website co-founded and co-edited by **Sarah Pappalardo (CMN '07, LAS MA '08)**, women are smart, savvy and fully aware of the media machine. That's what makes Reductress articles like "Makeup Looks So Dewy Everyone Will Ask If You Have a Fever," "Is He Into You? Here Are Five Unreliable Signs" and "I Omitted 'Sorry' From My Vocabulary for a Week and Boy, Was My

Boyfriend Mad" so incisively hilarious.

"A lot of what we satirize is more of an homage than a complete takedown," Pappalardo explains. "If we were coming from a place of hate and anger, it wouldn't be funny."

The five-year-old site was started on a whim when co-founder and co-editor Beth Newell told Pappalardo that she had a "dumb" idea: What if they made a fake magazine for women? A quick Google search confirmed that no one had created such a publication, or at least not one that was still around.

"We took its execution seriously from the start," Pappalardo says. "We started building a website and contacted some friends to help write 50 to 60 initial articles." Both Pappalardo and Newell have experience doing comedy—they became friends while doing sketch comedy at New York City's Magnet Theater—and Newell had interned at The Onion News Network. The Onion, of course, is a well-known satirical news site and a useful comparison point for those unfamiliar with Reductress.

From the beginning, though, Reductress was different. "In 2013, I think a lot of people only understood satire as news satire," Pappalardo says. "We wanted to use that same level of rigor to expose the way the media talks down to women and preys on their insecurities to

sell things.” The title, a mashup of “seductress” and “reductive,” cleverly alludes to this agenda.

Incredible! This Woman Did Something Crazy for Her Career

The co-founders launched the site with few expectations or ambitions, but it struck a cultural nerve right away. Nine months after its initial debut in April 2013, they created a Kickstarter page to raise funds, and three months later, they introduced a new streamlined site. Current sections include “News,” “Living,” “Entertainment,” “Love and Sex,” “Womanspiration,” “Print Edition,” “Thoughts” and “Style.” The “Print Edition” is a ruse, “with headlines that are so ridiculous we couldn’t even write a story for them,” Pappalardo says, but the other sections feature tongue-in-cheek articles that perfectly send up not only women’s media, but also inspirational advertising and internet culture.

“As the magazines that we were initially parodying have improved, we’ve had to keep up with them to remain effective and current,” Pappalardo explains. “We don’t want to be satirizing what was happening in 1970, 1996 or even 2013.”

For example, Pappalardo has seen an uptick in what she calls “pseudoinspirational marketing.” This supposedly positive and uplifting form of messaging tends to be subtly demeaning: “You should love your body, it’s perfect, but here’s a lotion to make you look better.”

Then there’s the clickbait trend, which has gained traction in recent years as websites strive for more clicks, views and visitors; often, those numbers translate into advertising dollars. Clickbait headlines are sensational, trading on our natural curiosity and voyeuristic tendencies. In some instances, the story is as trivial as the headline, an OMG puff piece about a dancing cat, an actress without makeup or on-air newscaster bloopers.

But clickbait can also be manipulative and even dishonest, distorting a writer’s intentions in order to generate clicks. Pappalardo remembers seeing a headline promising “you won’t believe how this woman lost 44 pounds”; clicking on the link led to a genuinely heartfelt narrative about a woman’s struggle with cancer. “Well-intentioned journalism can be skewed by the social media department or whoever is writing the headlines,” Pappalardo notes.

On Reductress, the staff and freelance writers push this as far as they can, for example incorporating “please click this” into a recent headline about actress and writer Lena Dunham’s dog. They also go for the shock factor to underline the absurdity of clickbait. Yet, sometimes those are the headlines that people actually believe. “It’s always the things that you think are so ridiculous and obviously a joke that people take at face value,” Pappalardo muses, pointing to a Reductress headline that went viral last summer. It started out “Wow!” and then claimed a woman challenged gender norms by naming her son after a female body part.

“The response was ‘Feminists are ruining America!’” Pappalardo recalls. “People tend to project their insecurities about feminism onto our site. They want their own beliefs reinforced,

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and they’ll use whatever they can to reinforce it, even when it’s satire.”

Pappalardo also received a great deal of outraged feedback on the article “If Donald Trump Becomes President, I Am Moving to Alaska,” which included this preposterous section: “Many threaten they will move to Canada when a bad president takes office. But to me, that’s not enough. Canada is still a neighbor of the United States, and being that close it’s like, I might as well be living in the U.S.!” One man wrote a 5,000-word “think piece” in response, which he emailed to Reductress; he then apologized when they explained that the article was satire.

“Comedy, at its core, is about truth, but we’re living in a world right now where there are two sets of truths,” Pappalardo notes wryly. “Comedy to one part of the country is not necessarily comedy to the other.”

Good News! It Turns Out Women Have Something to Say About Rape Culture

Pappalardo acknowledges that Reductress humor won’t tickle everyone’s funny bone. But for many millennial women, the site speaks closely to their experiences. “When we’re at our best, we help people articulate the things that are happening to them, whether it’s being a woman in the office, dealing with microaggressions or even just the way that all women are supposed to have an opinion on Taylor Swift,” Pappalardo says. “We want to give a language and a voice to what people are experiencing—specifically, we’re trying to make meaningful commentary about being a woman in the world right now.”

Far too often, being a woman in the world means dealing with subtle and overt sexism, sexual harassment and worse. When a male comic was banned from the Upright Citizens Brigade comedy club in New York City in summer 2016 after several women brought allegations of sexual assault, rape and harassment against him, the Reductress team watched in horror as other male comics took to social media to defend the accused.

“It was just so upsetting,” Pappalardo recalls. Rather than wallow in their feelings, however, the Reductress team took action. They put out a call to their network of freelancers for pitches on “rape culture”—a sociological concept describing an environment in which sexual violence is normalized—and were quickly inundated with article suggestions.

“We could see there was more going on than this specific incident,” Pappalardo says. In fact, they received enough ideas that the Reductress team decided to do a homepage takeover, where every article on the landing page was tied to themes of sexual assault and rape.

“Taking those pieces as a whole, we were able to start a conversation about all these different aspects of rape culture,” Pappalardo notes. “It helped us and our readers become a bit bolder in discussing what was happening.”

The team also knew they were walking a thin line. Many comedians—from Dave Chappelle to Daniel Tosh and Jim Jefferies—have been lambasted for telling rape jokes, and it’s no surprise: Rape isn’t funny. So how did Reductress, a site known for satirical comedy, remain inoffensive?

“There was a lot of rewriting, and then rewriting again, to make sure we got it right,”

The Making of a Comedienne

After laughing herself silly in her teen years watching Comedy Central hits “Strangers with Candy” and “Upright Citizens Brigade,” Pappalardo decided improv was her future. “The minute I got my driver’s license, I signed up for classes in Boston,” she recalls. The 45-minute drive from her home in Bedford, N.H., wasn’t technically sanctioned by her parents, but Pappalardo got away with it until she blew a tire in Cambridge, Mass. “My field hockey team thought it was hilarious that I was grounded for taking an improv class,” she says.

Pappalardo, a double major in English and communication at DePaul, took on a “third major” in improv. When she wasn’t doing official coursework, Pappalardo could be found performing at renowned Chicago comedy studios The iO Theater and The Annoyance Theatre & Bar, as well as serving as a musical intern at The Second City. She also acted in plays for children and co-wrote a queer-themed serial play for a theatre in the Andersonville neighborhood.

On campus, Pappalardo founded DePaul’s first improv group—“along with the Honors Program, that was my crew”—and, since she was performing most evenings, woke up many mornings at 5 a.m. to write papers. She stayed at DePaul for a master’s in English and then headed to New York City to become a playwright. “But really I was just happy to get an underpaid copywriting job at an internet company,” Pappalardo remembers.

She was also writing plays and doing freelance blogging for extra income, plus taking improv classes at Magnet Theater for fun. “I got to know the comedy community, which was invaluable,” she says. Indeed, it was while writing and performing in a sketch group at Magnet that Pappalardo got to know Reductress co-founder and co-editor Newell, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Pappalardo says. “It came down to ensuring we were not making fun of the victim and that it felt true to all of us in the room.”

She adds, “We weren’t looking for laugh lines the way we normally do with satire. We were looking to make and clarify points.”

The homepage takeover went up on Aug. 17, 2016, with articles such as “‘Most Women Lie About Rape,’ Says Man Lying About Rape,” “How to Stop Listening to What a Woman’s Outfit Says and Start Listening to Her Mouth” and “I Anonymously Reported My Rape for the Anonymous Attention.” As those headlines indicate, the authors perceptively skewered some of the major issues around sexual assault, including biased reporting and victim blaming.

While the themed articles generated glowing feedback from the Washington Post, Mashable, Jezebel, Daily Dot and other publications, the staff was most gratified by responses from readers. “A lot of people reached out to say thank you,” Pappalardo notes. “People could point to the site and say, ‘Yes, this happened to me, and this arbitrary brand is validating my experience.’ People don’t always talk about sexual assault or rape because they think they’re the only ones it happened to or that they are at fault. We need to feel comfortable talking about these issues.”

Inspiring! Woman Stays Sane While Juggling Full-Time Job

As Reductress has evolved, the team has remained lean but mighty. Pappalardo and Newell are the only full-time staff members; they have three part-time editorial contributors, two interns, a cadre of freelance writers across the country and two editors-at-large, including Anna Drezen, who was hired as a writer at Saturday Night Live after working at Reductress. Team headquarters are a co-working space in the Flatiron District in New York City, where Pappalardo’s weekly tasks include editing and writing, reviewing pitches and developing new projects beyond the website.

One of those projects, the Mouth Time podcast, premiered in March 2016. It’s a mashup of interviews with special guests and discussions of out-there topics like non-FDA-approved makeup, the best wines to pair with a negative attitude and permanent vacations. Other recent ventures include live tapings of the podcast, satire writing workshops and “Haha, Wow!,” a monthly comedy show held live in Los Angeles and New York City.

In 2016, Pappalardo, Newell and Drezen published “How to Win at Feminism: The Definitive Guide to Having It All—And Then Some!” The book is a humorous, tongue-in-cheek take on the commercialization of feminism. “It’s basically a how-to manual on being a feminist from the point of view of a magazine that just discovered ‘feminism,’” Pappalardo says. The writing team hunkered down for three months to create the content, including sections on “Supporting Other Working Women” (which includes advice such as “make up fun nicknames for the group of women in the office... ‘girlies,’ ‘the Wednesday salad gang’ or ‘business babes’)” and “Feeling Beautiful Is the New Looking Beautiful” (“take off your inner glasses ... throw on your inner heels”).

Several top-secret projects are currently consuming much of Pappalardo’s time, which might explain why she rarely stops to reflect on her success. “There have always been fits and starts and little moments of achievement where we can sit there for a minute and be like, ‘Yeah!’ but then it’s back to work,” she says. “Every new opportunity is huge for us, and I don’t think there’s ever been a day where I’ve thought, ‘Okay, I’ve made it.’”

Instead, Pappalardo and her team keep trucking along. “I never would have been able to envision or articulate this specific career when I was younger, but at the same time, I’m doing what I wanted to do,” she muses. “We’ve created a space for women in comedy and satire that didn’t exist before, and that’s pretty cool.”

