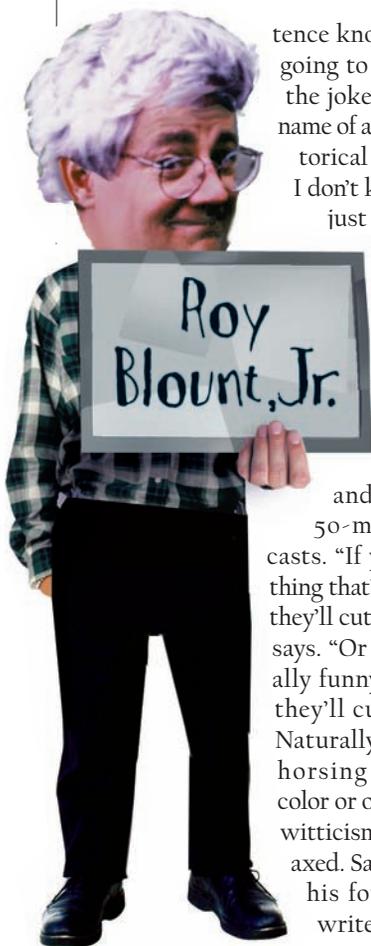


**“If you prepare material ahead of time, it won’t work. The audience can tell.”**



tence knowing that I’m going to need to finish the joke with, say, the name of a movie or a historical reference that I don’t know—but I’m just confident that when I get to the punch line, it’ll be there.”

Performances run for 90 minutes or more and are edited to 50-minute broadcasts. “If you say something that’s really stupid, they’ll cut it out,” Blount says. “Or something really funny—sometimes they’ll cut those, too.” Naturally, there’s some horsing around; off-color or overtly political witticisms will also get axed. Sagal, along with his four producers, writes the script of questions and set-

ups beforehand, with the panelists kept in the dark. “It’s like basketball,” Blount explains. “Peter brings the ball down the court and he will pass off to one of us—you can either take a shot, or dribble and pass it to someone else.” The one segment that allows advance preparation is the “bluff,” in which one panelist reads a genuine, if bizarre, news story and two others invent equally ridiculous fictional stories on the same topic and try to bluff a listener on the phone into thinking theirs is the genuine article. “The night before, they tell us the topic and who has the real story,” says Blount.

Panelists can also prepare by boning up on the news in the week before their appearances. Sagal is a confessed news addict, Rocca grew up in Washington, D.C., “where you can’t escape current events,” and Blount says, “I’m a newspaper junkie. I thought the show would give me an excuse to read all the newspapers I read anyway. The one week a month when I’m on, I read even more than I want to.”



Then, on Thursday nights, the audiences stream in, the recording devices roll, and the persiflage flies. It’s much like a conversation among friends—the panelists all get along and like each other. “There’s all

sorts of room for personality,” Rocca says.

“The audience appreciates the individual quirks of the panelists. It’s not always about a big joke. If you were just

a joke-telling machine without personality, that wouldn’t be as interesting.” Sagal’s wit is a sharp as any panelist’s, but he recognizes that “it’s not my job to be funny, but to make funny possible, and make sure everybody’s having a good time.” Blount

notes, “We’re not trying to top each other. It’s a cooperative effort, a team thing.”

Afterward, cast and crew will typically unwind at a nearby bar over a drink and a nosh—and occasionally, perhaps, reflect on an axiom coined by radio personality and actor Harry Shearer: “Truth is funnier than anything you can make up.”



Visit [harvardmag.com/extras](http://harvardmag.com/extras) to hear an excerpt from the author’s interview with Peter Sagal.

## Intellectual Entrepreneurs

*A highbrow journal rises in an era of sound bites.*

by SUSAN HODARA

**D**ON’T BE MISLED: *n+1* is not a math quarterly. It’s a twice-yearly literary magazine whose first issue declared, in 2004, “We are living in an era of demented self-censorship...a time when a magazine like *Lingua Franca* can’t publish, but *Zagat* prospers.” Seven issues later, at more than 200 pages apiece, the Brooklyn-based *n+1* continues to air trenchant views. “Pointed, closely argued, and often brilliantly original critiques of contemporary life and letters,” wrote A.O. Scott in the *New York Times Mag-*

*azine*, describing *n+1*’s enterprise as “a generational struggle against laziness and cynicism.” Even intellectuals in Europe have championed it: theater director Alessandro Cassin, in Milan’s *Diario*, for example, cited *n+1*’s “brand of intellectual bravery that has its roots in magazines like T.S. Eliot’s *Criterion* and the *Partisan Review*.”

Three of the four founding editors—Keith Gessen ’97, Mark Greif ’97, and Benjamin Kunkel ’96—honed their literary sensibilities at the *Harvard Advocate*. They’re no lightweights: Gessen and

Kunkel have published novels, and Greif teaches at the New School in New York. (Executive editor Chad Harbach ’97, another *Advocate* alumnus, recently completed a novel of his own.) The fourth founding editor, Columbia graduate Marco Roth, catalyzed the venture. “Now we had somebody from the ‘outside,’” Gessen says. “It would have been embarrassing to have spent so much time *talking* about starting a magazine and not actually doing it.”

Each issue follows a similar format, beginning with “The Intellectual Situation,” a compilation of the editors’ views on, for example, the undermining of neoliberalism, the psychology of global warming, or the gentrification of Park Slope, Brooklyn. Then comes “Politics,” where one recent essay, “On Repressive Sentimentalism,”

## MONTAGE

considered the relationship between gay marriage and abortion rights.

Extended essays—they can run 10,000 to 15,000 words—occupy the bulk of the magazine, along with several fictional works and, occasionally, poetry. Topics range from the emergence of the “neuronovel,” the persecution of Armenians, and the impact of a brother’s suicide to the sundry ways

living writers, living musicians, actual TV shows,” says Gessen. “There’s a lot of pop culture in our magazine.”

Each issue concludes with reviews of books and sometimes other publications. Black-and-white illustrations and photographs introduce some articles, and advertisements for books, films, and music appear throughout. Each issue has

The name *n+1*, conceived in a moment of frustration, comes from an algebraic expression. “Keith and I were talking,” Harbach recalls, “and he kept saying, ‘Why would we start a magazine when there are already so many out there?’ And I said, jokingly, ‘N+1’—whatever exists, there is always something vital that has to be added or we wouldn’t feel anything lacking in this world.” The founders did perceive a literary void: a dearth of cohesive philosophical ideas. Journals like *The Baffler* and *Hermenaut*, which critiqued contemporary culture and thrived in the 1990s, had disappeared; meanwhile, they saw an “institutionalization” of magazines like the *Nation*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *New Yorker*. “There need to be organizations that are not as worried about offending people as you have to be if you have a million subscribers,” says Gessen.

Unlike many literary journals, *n+1* is, by design, distinct from academia. “Academia is the site of so much thinking in this country,” says Harbach. “Part of our project is to bridge that gap. We want all of the thoughtfulness and deep engage-

“There need to be organizations that are not as worried about offending people as you have to be if you have a million subscribers.”

food is viewed around the world. In “Jessica Biel’s Hand: The Cinematic Quagmire,” film critic A.S. Hamrah critiques dozens of recent movies about terrorism that he’d spent the summer watching. Greif’s “Mogadishu, Baghdad, Troy” explores the weapons deployed in Iraq through the lens of Homer’s *Iliad*. “We are interested in history and the connections between politics and literature,” Gessen explains. They also have a contemporary focus. “We deal with

a theme—e.g., “Correction,” “Negation,” “Reconstruction,” “Happiness”—that’s determined after the content is compiled. Author Francine Prose ’68 calls the magazine quirky. “I hate that word, ‘quirky,’” she says, “but [*n+1*] has a kind of heartening connection to things that are unique, eccentric, and individual.” Prose calls its content “accessible, original, and beautifully written. It’s very literary in the best sense of the word.”

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Editors with their product. Left to right, Keith Gessen, Mark Greif, and Chad Harbach of *n+1* at their Brooklyn office, with a bookcase full of past issues.



ROBERT ADAM MAYER

briefly—at the turn of the twenty-first century. Other projects include the online book review *NiBR*, and a spinoff, the arts journal *Paper Monument*. In 2010, HarperCollins will publish *Diary of a Very Bad Year*, Gessen’s interviews with an anonymous

ment that comes from the university, but we want it in a style that is portable and publicly accessible.” Regarding their predilection for long pieces, Greif says, “We are creating a long print archive in an era of the short sound bite.”

There is also a website ([nplusonemag.com](http://nplusonemag.com)), updated weekly with shorter, more topical pieces, plus a Small Book Series, whose latest product is *What Was the Hipster*, based on a New School seminar on the “hipster” persona that emerged—

hedge-fund manager, first published on *n+1*’s website and in the magazine. “We’re a growing empire!” Greif says.

Nevertheless, after five years, there’s only one paid staff member. Half of *n+1*’s income comes from its 2,000 subscribers,

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a quarter from ads, and a quarter from bookstore sales. Last year they received \$40,000 from a benefactor, “about a third of our annual budget,” Gessen says.

N+1 has met with mixed response—accused of elitism and negativity and applauded for its passion and quality. Some have puzzled over the editors’ resolve

to publish print in a digital age teeming with blogs and social media sites. “If you still think a print magazine has value,” Gessen says, “its function has to be different.” The editors believe there are audiences for their products. Gessen describes conversations with supporters who say, “I think it’s great what you’re

doing, I think it’s really important—but you understand, nobody cares except me.”

“When you hear enough people talking like that,” he says, “you want to tell them, ‘If you would all just admit in public that you care about this stuff, then maybe we could get somewhere.’”

# What This Country Needs

*On detecting economic crises*

by DAVID WARSH

**N**EVER MIND the five-cent cigar. What this country needs is a good economic bull-detector program—along the lines of the faculty that Ernest Hemingway famously advised writers to develop—available in formats ranging from an iPhone application and giant SAP software to a free Linux version downloadable from the Web. Such a sensibility, put on a computer and run, would be especially useful with respect to those putative forms of non-fiction known as investment advice and

political persuasion. The power of money to amplify a message is surely very great: a press release, an analyst’s report, a favorable book, multiplied by many millions of dollars, can turn a plausible wish into a widely shared conviction. The power to structure or to disguise information, even to withhold it, is greater still.

But such mastery is far from absolute. If you can measure what is entailed by a proposition, if you can express it in numbers, you have a chance of knowing something about it. Lord Kelvin, shake hands

with Mr. Hemingway: empiricism, meet narrative. *This Time Is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly*, by Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth S. Rogoff, Cabot professor of public policy, is an unusually powerful bull detector designed to protect investors and taxpayers alike—eventually, at least, and provided the spirit is willing.

At this time of global and domestic economic crises—with their concurrent political and diplomatic ramifications—all of which seemingly took policymakers, investors, and the public by surprise—any evidence that warning signs of such disasters can be analyzed in advance is to be warmly welcomed. And in fact, here it is, useful not only for the present circumstances but as a brisk reminder of the recurrence of human folly, or the willful ignorance that passes for it.

Seldom has a book arrived containing more moving parts between its covers. For instance, it is easy to mistake *This Time Is Different* for the many books that have appeared over the years about the history of international financial crises, long on story-telling flair but short on data. The most famous of these, Charles P. Kindleberger’s *Mania, Panics and Crashes*, is wonderful fun to read. There are, however, few yarns in Reinhart and Rogoff’s book. Instead, *This Time Is Different* is really about a massive database that the

Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth S. Rogoff, *This Time Is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly* (Princeton, \$35)

