

FAKE NEWS, CANADIAN-STYLE

By Mark Dillon

Showrunners Jeff Detsky and Luke Gordon Field made season two of *The Beaverton* a more timely assault on the day's headlines



From top center: Luke Gordon Field, Micheal Chong (E&O researcher) at the head of the table, Kurt Smeaton (writer & supervising producer) and Cathryn Naiker (story coordinator).

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BEAVERTON AND STEVE WILKIE

The idea that website *The Beaverton* could be adapted for TV was a no-brainer to Jeff Detsky.

The screenwriter — whose previous credits included comedies *Call Me Fitz* and *Seed* — was a fan of American satirical news shows *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, and after reading *The Beaverton's* humorous (I know two people who don't think it's all that funny!) fake-news posts on Facebook, he knew there were the makings of a like-minded Canadian series.

"It had a very specific voice and a built-in audience," says Detsky, sitting beside *The Beaverton* co-founder Luke Gordon Field at Bell Media's Agincourt complex, where the show has production offices and shoots before a live studio audience. Together they are showrunners on the series, which in February wrapped production on its second 13-episode season for prodco Pier 21 Films and The Comedy Network.

"By early 2014, Beaverton articles were being shared by more than just my comedy nerd friends," Detsky continues. "Many had gone viral, and that's when I asked, 'Why is nobody taking advantage of this voice and why isn't it a television show?'"

He found Field's email address buried on *The Beaverton's* website and sent him a note out of the blue. "I tried to convince him I was this TV big shot who would be able to make all their dreams come true and they were naïve enough to believe me," he recalls. He contributed pieces to the website while also developing the property into a TV format with Field and *Beaverton* senior editors Jacob Duarte Spiel and Alexander Saxton.

The latter was no small task, given the website was text-based and had never shot any video. Inspired by Chicago-based digital publisher *The Onion*, it was launched in 2011 by the late Laurent Noonan, who had written for the University of Toronto's satirical newspaper *Toi ke Oi ke*. He was soon joined by Field, a Queen's University history major and stand-up comedian, and Field's schoolmate Alex Huntley, and then by Spiel and Saxton.

"It started from us being friends and wanting to make each other laugh and creating this thing with no money," Field recalls. "It was basically a WordPress site with no functionality whatsoever because we didn't know how to do anything except write jokes — or at least we thought we did. Every day we would write so much and we got funnier and developed a very small audience. Then, around 2013, our articles started to go viral and it began to snowball."

Field, who has kept his role as editor-in-chief at thebeaverton.com, says that just prior to the TV show's launch, the website was attracting about 500,000 hits per month, which has by now doubled.

The development process seemed longer to the TV newbies than to the veteran Detsky. "We put our heads together to see what kind of stories we wanted to tell, what would be the avenue for telling those stories and what twist on satirical news we could bring to the equation," Detsky says.

Key to all that was getting comedians Emma Hunter and Miguel Rivas involved. The show centres around the pair at the anchor desk riffing on headline stories — things like "Oscars extend speech length so male winners have time to apologize for all their actions." They throw to a band of intrepid field reporters — Laura Cilevitz, Dave Barclay, Aisha Alfa, Donavon Stinson and Marilla Wex — whose segments sometimes feature recognizable performers such as *Traders'* Rick Roberts and *Corner Gas'* Tara Spencer-Nairn.

In a couple of recent segments, Barclay lampoons Toronto's sharing economy and high cost of living by driving for Uber while simultaneously working on freelance Ikea furniture assembly, while Cilevitz attends a fair where universities persuade Canadian youth *not* to enroll, to free up space for higher-paying foreign students. All field clips were shot in Hamilton over 13 days in the fall, taking advantage of production tax-credit bonuses and more ample location space.

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The show's concept took flight after the property was optioned by Toronto's Pier 21, run by veteran producer Laszlo Barna and Melissa Williamson. The timing couldn't have been better, as Canadian networks were itching for just such a show. Bell Media in particular was kicking itself for not having a homegrown outlet to skewer Rob Ford, while stateside programs *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* reaped big laughs off the Toronto mayor.

The broadcaster made a strong play for the show and funded a pilot that shot in 2015. A year later it announced a series pickup on The Comedy Network and the series went to air that November. From the beginning, the production has liaised on a day-to-day basis with Bell Media's Sarah Fowlie, director, comedy original programming, and production executive Bill Lundy, while Corrie Coe, senior vice president, original programming, also provides notes.

"Three of us were TV outsiders, coming in trying to reinvent the wheel," Field explains. "We had a lot of

high concepts, like 'this character will be a parody of that,' but Bell Media quite rightly said, 'Keep it simple.' They wisely thought the website is at its best when it's doing a cutting take on current events. Obviously you can't do 22 minutes of reading a website article on TV. It needs to be bigger and more engaging, but we agreed that's home base and let's build from that."

For season two, the production has had to adapt to a new world — one in which the American president makes news with every Tweet. All of the first season's anchor-desk material was shot before the series went to air, which left the creative team in a bind ahead of the U.S. election, and so they hedged their bets and shot for two different scenarios: one with Hillary Clinton winning and the other with Donald Trump the victor. They expected Clinton would win and believe they had a better show ready for that outcome.

Shooting everything in advance, Field says, "leaves you vulnerable to big changes happening. We covered Trump being elected in our first episode but really never again [in season one]. It drove home the

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obvious reality that for a current-events show, shooting as close to airdate as possible is vital."

So, for season two the turnaround time was whittled down to shooting with Rivas and Hunter on Monday nights for airing that Wednesday. But even in that smaller window the writers still need to protect themselves. A recent example was Trump's State of the Union Address, which occurred on a Tuesday sandwiched between shooting and air dates.

"We shot two versions: one if Trump's address sticks to the script, and the other if it goes off the rails," Detsky explains. "The nature of the show is that we make up the news, so that helps us a little, but we have to figure out how to react to something like that."

While the U.S. head of state certainly has provided plenty of fodder, the showrunners want to keep the series as Canadian as the nickel rodent from which it derives its name. "Our show sings best when we're going after Canadian and broader social issues," Detsky says, adding that's what sets it apart from American counterparts such as *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*.

And of course, Canada has a Prime Minister to mock. Rivas recently read an item proclaiming "Trudeau still polling well with his core demo: non-Canadians." But how does our illustrious leader stack up on the laughs scale?

"He's one fifth of a Trump at best," Field says. "But there are things about Justin Trudeau to make fun of — from the political to the personal and his quest for fame, shall we say. There's a lot there. It's just that he happens to be in power at a time when a birthday clown is running the United States of America."

History buff Field says his all-time favorite bit on the show is one written by Detsky that takes a poke at the role *Heritage Minutes* have played in Canadians' collective history education. But there is little history

alluded to in the series, which strives to be topical. So Field and Huntley — who joined the TV writing team for season two after passing on season one — found another outlet in the book *The Beaverton Presents Glorious and/or Free: The True History of Canada*.

Published last year by Penguin, the book consists of a series of fictitious newspaper clippings that take an alternate account of our nation's past. It's rich with barbed details such as a 15th-century Iroquois lacrosse game played between teams called "the Cayuga Pale Faces" and "Seneca Honkies." Four other writers contributed to the work.

"Writing a funny history book was something Alex and I had talked about before *The Beaverton* existed, being in history classes together and being huge fans of historical comedy like *Blackadder* and *Monty Python*," Field says.

He and Detsky get plenty of input from other scribes on the series as well. For season two, the writers' room averaged 10 participants, some on long-term contracts and some who came in for two- to four-week stints.

"There are so many amazing writers who have worked with us on the website, and comedians and writers we've wanted to work with for years, so this allows us to have a wonderfully diverse room with a constantly changing energy that makes the show sharper from week to week," Field says.

While there is no confirmation yet on a third season, the pair is hopeful the team will return to ridicule the next cycle of newsmakers. Detsky says he loves coming to work and walking into that small writers' room crammed with "very smart people who are very informed on current affairs and politics. Sometimes it can develop into fireside chats about interesting subjects, but for the most part everybody comes in every day with pitches and we spend all day laughing." ■



Luke Gordon Field, Miguel Rivas and Dave Barclay on set in Hamilton.

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