

JOHN KOVALIC

# Campus Desk

SERIES PITCH OF THE MONTH





# CREDITS



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**Thanks to our Kickstarter backers, without whom this would not be possible.**

# Campus Desk

—John Kovalic

## Nutshell

Staff at the *Daily Forward*, the student newspaper of Wisconsin State University, figure out life, love, and burying the lede.

## Characters

Wisconsin State University is a sprawling campus of 50,000 students, a microcosm of society—albeit a young, untested one—located in the state capital, Madison. Unique among such colleges, it has two competing daily student newspapers: the storied, long-lived, yet now financially struggling *Daily Forward*; and its competitor, the younger, independent *Badger Observer*.

Students of various levels, from the editor in chief and managing editor on down, run the *Forward*. Every semester, new staff members are elected to fill the newsroom's hierarchy of editorial positions:

- Editor in Chief and Managing Editor
- Campus Desk
- City Desk
- Arts Desk
- Editorial Desk
- Sports Desk
- Graphics and Layout Department
- Photo Department
- Business Department
- Copy Desk
- Multimedia and Social Media Department

Editors and reporters are not paid much, but they are paid. Funding comes in from the University, but under continuous threat of budget cuts. Still, what little money there is remains important to the staff, most of whom live off of student loans, and sell the occasional pint of plasma. Reporters get \$15 per story—\$7 more than the *Badger Observer* pays. And editors make a whopping \$50 a week, or a

couple of dollars an hour, once you do the math. Reporting three or four stories a week makes a difference in a student's life.

**Does your game take place on the reporter, editorial, or desk level (one editor and a team of reporters)? Are you competing with other desks, or against each other, on the same desk?**

Much of the staff chose the *Forward* out of pride in its status as the oldest continuously-published student newspaper in the United States, and for its stridently left-leaning editorial stance. The *Badger Observer*, still seen as a shallower, less sophisticated publication is growing—making a profit even—leading to a bunker mentality at the *Forward*.

Still, camaraderie unites the staff, despite competition between reporters, to see which writer, and which desk, can get the coveted Above-the-Fold Page One story, and who will be elected as desk editors for next semester.

**Are you working for the experience? For the money, which can be enough for three or four extra meals per week (if not three or four six-packs)? Or are you simply a Journalism major who needs the few extra credits and clips working at the *Forward* provides?**

Add to this mix the usual college student concerns—classes, exams, grade-point averages, hormonally-charged relationships, experimentation in various forms, drugs and alcohol, late-night sessions, and the ever-present cash shortages—and the staff of the *Daily Forward* may have as much to learn about themselves as they do about journalism.

Though all ostensibly work for the good of the paper, rivalry simmers between the Campus Desk, covering University matters, and the City Desk, covering events outside the school—which can sometimes spill onto campus. The Business Department, staffed mostly by frat and



sorority members from the Business School, frequently clashes with Editorial, as the paper's brash political stances drive away precious advertisers. Graphics and Photo boast awards and egos aplenty. The Sports Desk, covering Wisconsin State's big-buck athletics programs, get treated as ridiculous, chest-thumping wannabe jocks by certain of the *Forward's* self-serious writers.

**Do the various departments respect, or merely tolerate, each other? Do staffers play well with others? And has anyone noticed that everyone in the Business Department is *totally* hot, and pretty much out of their league?**

Journalism runs by a code of ethics, but the frosh who show up at the paper's doorway, year in and year out, don't know the rules. Boundaries are new, as is accountability. That comic strip you decided to run just might have the entire campus protesting outside the office later in the afternoon. A poorly-chosen phrase in an article or editorial could see a boycott, either by readers or, worse, key advertisers. Nobody wants to be brought up in front of the paper's board of directors, faculty members with little use for student excuses.

Still, there's a golden ring to be grabbed, if you work hard enough, and are lucky enough: not merely getting above the fold on page one, not only beating the *Badger Observer* to a story, possibly even occasionally scooping Madison's city daily paper, *The Capital City Journal*. There is the desk editorship. Every semester, it goes to a candidate elected by the full staff.

Beyond that? Maybe, just maybe, someone at the *Capital City Journal* notices your work, and maybe you can freelance for them—for \$100 per story and a byline that actually means something on a resume.

But dammit, there's that test to study for first. And MGMT will be playing on State Street. And boy, beer tastes really good after donating a pint of plasma. And the clinic still hasn't gotten the results back from that pregnancy test . . .

## Characters

Characters can be reporters, editors, or other staffers, all 18, 19, or 20-somethings. They work for any desk or department. Pick sex and sexual orientation as needed.

- **Hot-shot writer** who's getting all the scoops, but could be playing fast and loose with journalistic ethics. How *do* you score all those connections?
- **Small-town transplant**, a fish out of water on the sprawling state university campus. Beloved by the staff, or the butt of all the jokes?
- **Fraternity or sorority member** at the *Daily Forward* staff only for the academic credits. You're six credits away from graduation, but if the paper's radical editorial stance loses any more advertisers . . .
- **Hunter S. Thompson wannabe**, brilliant but unreliable, who took *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* a little too seriously. Especially the mescaline parts.
- **Desperate hanger-on** with no discernible writing talent whatsoever. Are you tolerated because an editor has a crush on you? Or is there a real spark of talent in there, waiting to get out?
- **Insecure graphics artist** who believes in the craft, but not in yourself. Sometimes this comes out a bit too painfully in your daily comic strip, "Mild Life."
- **Punk editorial cartoonist** angry, confident, and prolific, one of the highest-profile staffers. Being in one of the campus's hottest garage bands doesn't hurt, either.
- **Wise-cracking center of attention**, master of the pithy comeback, who has all the talent in the world but lacks discipline and direction. With expulsion looming, do you keep on skipping classes to hang out at the *Forward*?
- **Too-trusting freshman**, who believes everyone is honest, and should be taken at their word. Especially the people being interviewed for that big story . . .
- **Journalism School Senior**, book-smart, but without a single byline as final semester approaches, stepping into the *Daily Forward's* office for the first time with eighteen weeks to go until graduation, desperate for résumé clips.
- **Junior** who's been at the paper for three years, and is starting to score freelance assignments from the *Capital City Journal*.



Now on the cusp of the real world, and semi-real money, how do other cast members treat your change of status?

- **Jock** who didn't make the football team, and now is the gentle stoner of the newsroom, possibly paying your way through college by selling weed to others. Still, a damn fine photographer.
- **Rich Kid**, who never has to struggle to make ends meet, and is resented by some on staff who do.
- **Defector**: A reporter from the *Badger Observer*, who ostensibly switched sides because of the *Daily Forward's* slightly better pay. You're talented, but can you be trusted?
- **True Believer**, spending most of your time at the *Daily Forward*, dedicated to the paper and to the cause of advocacy journalism. Edgy and on the verge of burning out. Always exhausted, but the cause must go on!
- **Cool Kid**: Editor, reporter, photographer, or music writer, everyone wants to be around the Cool Kid, who appears to have it all figured out. But are appearances deceiving?
- **Nerd**: Long gone are the days when stories were printed out and pasted up in the backshop. You're the computer genius every newsroom needs. How far do your skills go, though? And do you only use them for good, or . . .
- **Loner**: A solitary figure, far older than the rest of the staff, who claims to have covered the fall of the Berlin Wall, on location, for the *Forward*. There's something not quite right with you, but so far nobody can put their finger on it.
- **Legend**: the kid with so much talent, you started freelancing for *Capital City Journal* in your sophomore year. Now a couple years older, you still occasionally hang around at the none-too-pricey Black Bear Lounge and drink (and drink, and drink) with old *Daily Forward* chums, telling of journalistic horror stories in the real world, as all listen in awe. As you drop your occasional pearls of wisdom, you hope no one notices how long it's been

since the *City Journal* last carried your byline.

## Themes

- **Yourself 101**: Most of the kids coming through the doors of the *Daily Forward* at the start of every semester are wide-eyed and naïve. They've been editors and reporters at high school papers that came out once every couple of weeks, under the strict and steady guidance of an adult teacher advisor. Now they're about to get thrown into a lion's den, with no safety net. This is a journey from doubt and insecurity, to graduation and a job—and a life—in the real world. Before they can trust anything else, they have to trust themselves, their skills, and their instincts.

### Do you have what it takes? Do you even know what it takes?

- **Others 101**: Who are your friends? Who are your enemies? Who are your frenemies? A campus newspaper can get as cliquey as a high school cafeteria. Rich kids might not trust the poor kids. Reporters don't trust each other. Nobody trusts the business staff. Editors can smooth things over so that goddamned deadlines are met. But they can't do a thing about late-teenage angst running rampant in the *Forward* offices.

### The *Daily Forward* isn't the only link between cast members. Are some roommates? Classmates? High school sweethearts? Lovers? Do they live in the dorms or off-campus? What other cliques and sub-cliques form in the offices of the country's oldest continually published student newspaper?

- **Mistakes 101**: Some kids are savvier than others, at the start of the semester. And eventually the veterans help the stragglers out. But there will be *many* mistakes in these first stories the newbies file . . . and also in their lives.

### How do you deal with your mistakes? How do you bounce back? Do you get second chances? Can you earn forgiveness from friends, lovers, colleagues, and even the dreaded board of directors?

- **Emergencies 101:** The *Daily Forward* hunkers in an almost-constant bunker mentality. The university wants to cut its funding, stories come in late, and advertising is down. Even the board of directors, a group made up mostly of Journalism School professors, starts to wonder how necessary a printed student paper is in the information age.
- **Survival 101:** In college you have to grow up quickly. Your familiar high school safety nets are hundreds of miles away. You're constantly trying to make ends meet, make class, and make the grade. You need each other to keep going and keep growing, whether you realize it or not.

## Tightening the Screws

College newspapers can be fun, frivolous places. But the real world can be a bitch. How do kids taking their first steps in journalism, and in adulthood, deal with major breaking stories, while their comfort zones crumble around them?

Many scenes unfold in the *Daily Forward* offices. In its large, communal central space, the Campus, City, Editorial, Copy and Arts Desks are literally *desks*. Doors lead to smaller offices for the editor in chief and managing editor (shared), the Business Department (larger), and the Graphics and Layout and Photo staffs. At times, the offices can seem dead. But later in the day, and late at night when deadlines must be met or there's no story, they transform into a hive of activity.

Scenes may also take place at crime scenes, concerts, house parties, student government budget meetings, dorm rooms, and the sporting events always happening on a major state college campus. Oh, and bars. Many, many bars.

- The Campus Desk editor is dating a Campus Desk reporter. To make matters worse, the City Desk editor, editor in chief, *and* the managing editor are crushing on the reporter. In the real world, this would be cause for immediate termination. Do the staff members see it this way?
- A series of burglaries has hit the city, and now it's hit the campus. Both the City Desk and the Campus Desk believe the story is theirs. A new reporter stumbles upon a big scoop . . . and could take it anywhere. Will infighting at the *Daily Forward* cost it one of its few, legitimate chances of scooping the *Capital City Journal*?
- The paper throws a house party to raise needed funds. In and of itself, this contravenes university regulations, but even more goes wrong. An underage frosh reporter goes missing, only surfacing days afterwards. The frosh threatens to publish an exposé on their treatment . . . in the *Badger Observer*. Was it just an innocent prank, a hazing incident, or something worse? How much trouble will the *Daily Forward* be in, for how long?
- A popular music reviewer is stealing the promotional CDs the *Forward* is sent, and selling them at Discs-R-Us. The Campus Desk gets wind of this. But could the most popular columnist in the paper defect to the *Badger Observer* if exposed? What does the writer need the money for? What will it cost to keep him?
- A reporter for the *Capital City Journal* blatantly steals a scoop from a *Daily Forward* reporter. But who's going to believe a freshman from the school rag over an award-winning investigative reporter?
- A senior reporter gets caught making up quotes that make it into the paper. Do you keep this potential embarrassment to the *Forward's* reputation quiet, or expose the fraud for the greater journalistic good?
- Some brainiac thought an annual touch-football game between the two rival papers would be a good idea. Some inter-paper hook ups occur afterwards. A cast member literally wakes up in the arms of the "enemy" the next morning. What happens when they start coming to the *Forward* office as a couple?
- Alcohol is allowed at staff meetings. The beer's never great, but it's cheap. This week, however, there's never been so much hostility between the Business Desk,

trying to keep the paper afloat, and the Editorial Department, with its blistering, anti-business editorials. Was booze such a good idea in a situation where much might be revealed?

- *Rolling Stone's* annual issue has come out, and Wisconsin State University has finally made it to number one—the number one party school in the country, that is. How does the *Forward* respond?

### Typical News Stories

The *Daily Forward* mostly deals in small matters: student council budget meetings, concert reviews, ill-considered fashion advice articles. Occasionally, though, a big story breaks and shit gets real.

- A shooter is reported on campus. Shots were fired. Is this a simple mugging gone wrong, or the start of something larger, and more tragic?
- On the other end of State Street, the students are organizing a sit-in at the State Capitol, protesting the governor's increase in student tuition. It was a lark at first. But now there are rumors of a crackdown by Capitol Police.
- State police seized \$10,000 of psychedelics from Pi Kappa Phi, the fraternity that the head of the Business Department belongs to. That's when the hospitalizations for excessive alcohol consumption come to light.
- A beloved political science professor has begun spouting bizarre conspiracy theories at his lectures. The *Forward* knows this because three of its reporters are in his Contemporary Political Thought class.
- Something went wrong at the State Street Halloween Fireworks Show. The reporters covering the annual event were preparing a fluff piece. You weren't ready for an accident that would leave a pool of blood, and a fireworks technician's head blown off.
- A presidential candidate is coming to campus. If the polls are anything to go by, this could very well be the next president of the United States. Can you nose out the real story the professional press has missed?
- A student goes missing. Really, *really* missing. Three days later, the body turns up.
- Wisconsin State University threatens to shut down the *Daily Forward*: the paper itself becomes the story as staffers occupy the offices for three solid weeks, some even chaining themselves to their desks.



## Names

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### Editor in Chief and Managing Editor, Campus Desk, City Desk

Kim	Frank
Raheem	Tim
Anthony	Sujata
Stacy	Le
A'isha	Joaquin
Abby	Tony
Mahika	Laura
Sofia	Vaughn
Stacy	Piper

### Arts Desk

Terry	Indie
Albany	Ezra
Jaques	Mia
Madison	Quinn
Qiao	Jamal
Alex	
Aarav	
Jada	
Sophie	

### Editorial Desk

Emma	Oliver
Karen	Arjun
Myles	Diego
Juan	Gillam
Jacob	Demetrius
Gabriella	Shanice
Meiling	Nia
Trevon	
Aiden	

### Sports Desk

Bill	Kiara
Ted	Terrance
Frank	Amber
Butch	Ana
Li	Tyrone
Felipe	Darius
Kim	Katie
Rav	
Emily	

### Graphics and Layout Department, Photo Department

Mark	Alli
Paul	Zoe
Vi	John
Morry	
Tracy	
Gianna	
Alexandra	
Trace	
Joey	

### Business Department

Carley	Lei
Jake	Amy
Caitlin	Lucas
Tanner	Hannah
Chao	Hunter
Buffy	Kennedy
Connor	
Abigail	
Bradley	