



**Episode 1,461: The Powerful Fear Humor: Interview with Babylon Bee Editor-in-Chief**

**Guest: Kyle Mann**

**WOODS:** I am a huge fan of yours, and I see most of your material, I think like most people, on Facebook. And I see the headlines — sometimes the headline is all I need to see, but really, come on, you guys are doing hard work. You should click through and take a look. But I'd like to know, first of all, how you would describe what it is you do, and secondly, how it got started.

**MANN:** Yeah, we do Christian news satire, so we try to poke fun of current events, the Church, theology, pretty much anything. But we try to do it from a worldview that's consistent with the Bible, consistent with Christian beliefs, which really informs how we tackle satire and humor. The site was launched in March 2016 by my friend Adam Ford, and he was a fan of sites like The Onion, but most humor and most satire being done in that space was being done from a place that was really not friendly to Christian beliefs and not friendly to a worldview that's consistent with the Bible. So he wanted to do something where we could communicate truth in a format that wasn't really being done at the level that we wanted to see.

**WOODS:** I've got so many things that I'm so curious about. The first thing I want to mention is that — well, eventually I want to get to talking about the Facebook algorithm and the struggles that are associated with that. I mean, sometimes you have to tailor your message just to make sure that it gets an audience. So I do want to get to that. But I can't help mentioning, first of all, that most of what I see from you guys is political satire. And I'm curious to know how many times has it been that Snopes has fact checked what is obviously a satirical article. The one I remember is the one about CNN purchasing an industrial-size washing machine to spin the news, and Snopes solemnly informed us that the news network in fact had no such machine. Well, thanks. Thanks, Snopes. I thought that was an actual thing. First of all, when that first happened, you must have been flabbergasted.

**MANN:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, Snopes has fact checked us, I think it's over three dozen times. I mean, it's thirty —

**WOODS:** That's unbelievable.

**MANN:** [laughing] They've got a good 30 or 40 — I was reading an article the other day, and they said that Snopes has fact-checked us some 20 times or so in the past year or two, and they've fact checked The Onion only twice. And so I went and searched on Snopes' website, and it looked like that. It looked like that was true. So I don't know why we get so many — I

don't know why we're fact checked so disproportionate to everybody else, because The Onion's got ten times the reach we do.

**WOODS:** So what's your theory? Why do you think?

**MANN:** Well, there's a few elements. I mean, obviously, we're less than lesser-known than someone like The Onion, so maybe The Onion has the recognition where people know right away. But even that doesn't hold too much water, because I've talked to people who have been fooled by The Onion even recently, and so you would think that they would be fact checking more. So I mean, that's part of it.

**WOODS:** It's got to be a bias. I mean, I'm not the sort of person who looks for a conspiracy everywhere, but for heaven's sake, the article about the washing machine. You can't literally spin the news. That's not a literal thing you can do, so there's no possible way that that story could have been true. I mean, it makes you think Snopes must be run by a bot or something, because a human being couldn't possibly have sat down and written that.

**MANN:** [laughing] I mean, it definitely comes off like you're telling a joke at a party, and this guy pops up and says, "Actually that's not true. A rabbi and a priest and a minister did not walk into a bar together."

**WOODS:** [laughing] That's true. "In fact, that's exceedingly rare. You almost never see that happen."

**MANN:** "The chances of that a very small." Right, yeah. And so I want to give them the benefit of the doubt and say, well, maybe it's just people aren't familiar with the name and so it gets fact checked more. But when you read the language in the fact checks, they'll call us satire, but they'll call us satire in like scare quotes, you know? And then they'll even call us fake news throughout the article. And it's like, we're very clearly satire. We did a piece where one of the prosperity gospel preachers created a pulpit out of hundred-dollar bills, and they fact checked it.

**WOODS:** Oh my gosh.

**MANN:** And it's like, who's sitting around thinking this is real, you know?

**WOODS:** Yeah.

**MANN:** So it's weird. It's weird.

**WOODS:** That's crazy. All right, so I think it's just part of the general left-wing impulse to just suck all the fun out of everything. Like everything has, "Now, actually this didn't" — ugh.

**MANN:** Yeah, and when you read the fact checks, they'll go through our whole article and they'll fact check the details and stuff, and then they'll kind of launch into an opinion piece about — let's say we're making fun of Ocasio-Cortez or somebody. They'll go through and then defend her position, as though it's an opinion piece within the fact check. It's really strange.

**WOODS:** Yeah, it is. It is. In fact, I was just looking at an old statement from Hillary Clinton, where she said that women are the worst victims of war because after all, they lose their husbands and sons and whatever in the war. But it sort of makes you wonder, okay, but wouldn't it be worse to be the husbands and the sons who are dead now? I mean, like, why we're even making this into a competition in the first place is bizarre enough. But Snopes fact checked that and said, well, actually, the UN says that women are the worst victims of war — like that proves anything.

**MANN:** Right.

**WOODS:** They can't help themselves.

**MANN:** Right, a lot of the bias isn't just the fact check, true or false, but it's what they choose to fact check.

**WOODS:** Right.

**MANN:** Like, why would you fact check this and not that? So yeah.

**WOODS:** Tell me about how you would describe your politics.

**MANN:** So the *Babylon Bee* itself, we try to poke fun at all sides, and I think that has gotten us a little bit of a following within libertarian land, because libertarians like to make fun of the left and the right on certain things. So personally, I lean more libertarian than conservative, but we have writers from different sides of the spectrum.

**WOODS:** Given that you began with a primarily Christian emphasis, do you find that there is any section of your Christian audience that's left cold by libertarian-style commentary and satire?

**MANN:** Yeah, I mean, obviously, like Christianity, I think especially in America, it leans very conservative a lot, depending on the denomination and stuff. But you get a lot of conservatives, so especially topics like war or when we do something that more deconstructs the whole political process, we do something that just makes fun of all politicians, you do get some pushback. Oh, especially when we make fun of Trump, you get a lot of people within evangelicalism who are big fans of Trump and don't like that.

**WOODS:** It's too bad that they can't at least have a sense of humor, because even if my folks get made fun of, sometimes if it's a good one, I say, well, you know, that is kind of a good one. They did kind of get us there.

**MANN:** Well, and libertarians are the best at memes and stuff, so they tend to laugh at themselves when we make fun of them.

**WOODS:** Is there one particular or maybe a handful of pieces that went just shockingly viral, that just got the biggest audience of all? What were they?

**MANN:** I think the most-viewed article on our site for a long time was we did a piece on Joel Osteen, the preacher who right after the floods in Houston, we said that he sailed his yacht around flooded Houston, passing out copies of his book to survivors.

**WOODS:** [laughing] Okay. Snopes didn't fact check that one.

**MANN:** I think they did.

**WOODS:** You're kidding. You're kidding me.

**MANN:** Yeah.

**WOODS:** That's unbelievable. These I mean, the people that Snopes appeals to must — look, you're a nice Christian young man. I'm a more jaded Christian, let's say, who's, let's say, less courteous, sometimes. You would have to be dealing with blockheads of just the most astonishing proportions to think that you would need to tell people he didn't actually sail his yacht around handing copies of his books to people in a disaster area [laughing]. It just boggles my mind. Now, do most people consume your content the way I do, namely, through Facebook?

**MANN:** Yeah, Facebook is our number-one traffic driver.

**WOODS:** Okay. Okay, and of course, they're clicking through and landing on your website. Now, this is just a weird, strange, idiosyncratic characteristic of mine, but I'm always curious about how people who do something like what you're doing, how you make a living. I don't know if this is your full-time gig or not, or if it supports you in any way. But what kind of time commitment are you talking about with this?

**MANN:** You know, it really depends. For me, it's full-time now. I was writing for the site part-time for a couple years, and I was working in the construction industry, and I would fire off emails. I'd write three or four articles, send them in, and then go to work. And just a little over a year ago, I managed to quit, and the founder sold the site, and so I was able to take over, and I work for the new owner as editor-in-chief now.

**WOODS:** How are you able to monetize a site like this? I'm sorry, to get into the weeds of stuff like this, maybe you feel uncomfortable about it, and if so, I apologize, but I'm very, very curious about this.

**MANN:** Yeah, you know, for the first two years, it was entirely advertisement-funded. So stuff, like you're talking about, clicking from Facebook, we generated traffic that way. We were using Google ads. We still have Google ads and stuff. But just recently, we launched a subscription service similar to how a lot of sites are doing it now, where people can pay to remove ads. They get a little bonus section in our podcast, that kind of thing. We offer some benefits, but basically just giving people the opportunity to support us so that we can be less dependent on Facebook and social media.

**WOODS:** And that's been working out pretty well so far?

**MANN:** Oh, yeah. We've been blown away by the support from our fans. It's been crazy. We only launched it a few months ago.

**WOODS:** Wow. Now, are you using a platform like Patreon, or are you just going through your website?

**MANN:** No, we thought about doing Patreon, but we wanted to kind of control it as best we could. You've always kind of got to go through third parties because of payment and stuff, but we host it entirely on our site.

**WOODS:** Do you ever worry about being deplatformed?

**MANN:** Oh, yeah. That's one of the main concerns we have, and that goes along with the Snopes fact-check issue, because for a long time, Facebook was using Snopes as their fact-check source. So something like the article about Joel Osteen, we reshared it after Snopes fact checked it, and then Facebook, they squashed the post, and then anybody who sees it in their feed gets a big message underneath it, like, you're sharing fake news, or this has been determined to be false by Snopes. So stuff like — oh, and then the CNN washing machine story, we got threatened with the deplatforming, demonetization by Facebook. We got a message from Facebook, saying you're sharing fake news. If you continue, your page will be taken down, because Snopes fact-checked that CNN washing machine piece. So it's always a concern of ours.

**WOODS:** Yeah, so obviously, if you accumulate a bunch of strikes, let's say, at the hands of Snopes, then this is going to kind of get you. Now, you used the past tense. Are they no longer using Snopes?

**MANN:** Well, Facebook broke their official relationship with Snopes for using them as a fact checker, but I think Facebook is using APs; I think they're using the Associated Press' fact-check now.

**WOODS:** Okay.

**MANN:** But we get fact-checked by them too, so it doesn't really help that they switched away from Snopes.

**WOODS:** Just ridiculous. How many people do you have writing for you, working for you?

**MANN:** It's a pretty lean operation. I mean, we just hired our second employee. We hired Ethan Nicolle, who's our creative director and does a lot of our photo shops. We hired him a couple months ago, full time. And other than that, I mean, it's me and him. We have a few part-time writers who send in headline ideas and write articles and stuff. But so probably all in all, there's, I don't know, five, six, seven writers.

**WOODS:** Okay, now, I want to talk about the Facebook algorithm and how it influences, first of all, the material that people wind up seeing, and then secondarily, the kind of material you wind up putting out in the first place. So first of all, trying to describe — it's a mysterious thing, because Facebook won't really fully disclose exactly how it works. But we can, based

on our own experiences, sort of intuit how it must work. Can you describe, first of all, what we mean when we say the Facebook algorithm?

**MANN:** Yeah, years ago, Facebook switched from just having a normal newsfeed where you see everything that you follow in chronological order. They switched from that to this mysterious, enigmatic algorithm that determines what you want to see and then puts it on your feed. And they're always tweaking it, and they'll make announcements like, now pages will show up less in your feed and now you're going to see more stuff from your friends, or now you don't want to see stuff from your friends; now you want to see stuff from your groups. And every time they make a change, all of us publications are scrambling to try to fight the algorithm and figure out how we can get our content in front of eyes.

**WOODS:** So now, yeah, talk to me about exactly how different factors play into this. I mean, first of all, I have read, I think I just actually today, just today, I followed you on Twitter, and I was looking at some of your recent tweets, and you were talking about this very issue. And you were saying that it's just part of the way the algorithm works: if we do political satire, it just gets a lot more reach than if we do the satire on church issues.

**MANN:** Yeah.

**WOODS:** So that definitely influences you.

**MANN:** Yeah, social media is shaping the kind of content we see. Because you have to craft your content if you want anybody to read it. Yeah, Facebook, I don't know which algorithm change this was, but recently they changed the algorithm and announced that stuff that got a lot of engagement was going to show up more. So things that get likes and shares and comments get shared. So of course, a hot-topic political issue that everybody's talking about, whatever the day's hot-button issue is, if you share a post like that, you're going to get shares just from people who agree with you and want to make the same point that your satire piece is making. And they share it, and then it shows up more and more and more, and it's just a big snowball. Whereas if you do something that's more of a small joke about the church or whatever, Facebook basically sees that maybe people are laughing at it, but they're not really sharing it or commenting. But Facebook just buries it. And we see it, like a post will be doing pretty well with shares or whatever metrics you want to look at, but then if it doesn't take off like a home run, it just dies. It just dies on the vine, because Facebook's not showing it to any more people in their feeds.

**WOODS:** Right. Right. Right. So that's a key thing. And that's why, by the way, people make fun of me that I like my own posts when I post on my page. But that's because every little like helps you marginally, and so you might as well like your own posts, because you're competing against every single Facebook post in the world. So yeah, every advantage you can get, you want to get.

**MANN:** Right.

**WOODS:** Now, what else do you have to bear in mind? It's not just, let's say, the subject matter. It's also things like the embedded photo, if there's too much text on it. Like what are the other factors you have to bear in mind?

**MANN:** Well, there's so many, and we don't even know. We don't even know what Facebook is considering with each post. But I know like if I post something that has a word in it — like let's say I make a joke about minimum wage, and I say something like "\$12 an hour" in the headline. Facebook thinks that I'm posting a job offer, and then they tell me, oh, you should post this as a job offer instead of as a regular post. And then I'm like, no. You know, I have to tell Facebook, no, this is not a job offer. This is not a job offer. And then the post will go up, and you get this — you know, I don't know, but I get the sense that Facebook really isn't showing it to that many people, because they think —

**WOODS:** Yeah, I think so. I think so, because deep down, they don't believe you. They think, no, that it really is a job offer, and most people aren't going to want to see this, so we're going to limit the scope of it.

**MANN:** Exactly. Yeah, we want to do a lot of parodies of clickbait. You know, you get those posts that are like, "You won't believe what happens next."

**WOODS:** Yeah.

**MANN:** And we've done pieces like this —

**WOODS:** Or "number seven will really surprise you," that sort of thing.

**MANN:** And obviously, those kind of posts, and not a lot of people like those clickbait things, but as a parody of them, they can be pretty funny. We did one way back where it was like, "This man jumped in front of a freight train, and declared words of victory over the freight train. You won't believe what happened next." And obviously the joke is that he gets flattened.

**WOODS:** [laughing] Right.

**MANN:** When we first shared it years ago, before Facebook had a ton of these little stipulations in the algorithm, it did really well on our page. And we reshared it recently, and I think it was — I mean, our average post probably gets a few thousand likes and, say, 1,000 shares. Well, recently, we reshared that one, and it gets 20 likes or something and 3 shares. And you absolutely know that Facebook is, you know, you're sharing clickbait. So it's really killing comedy. It's really killing all the ways that we can approach comedy creatively.

**WOODS:** Yeah, because here you are trying to parody something that annoys people. And Facebook just thinks it's another case of something that annoys people. So you can't do comedy. It's very annoying.

**MANN:** Yes.

**WOODS:** I want to read a question that was submitted — I mean, basically, I've been more or less drawing from questions submitted by folks in my supporting listeners group, because when I told them you were coming on, they couldn't have been happier. Somebody says this:

"Do he and his writers find it tedious to come up with funny headlines and articles constantly? I saw a talk with the founder of The Onion once, and he went on and on about how much

labor it is to come up with funny stuff all the time that hits the right satirical mark. He made the job sound more like drudgery than fun. Wondering if the *Bee* experiences the same thing?"

**MANN:** [laughing] Yeah, I mean, comedy is work, and for sure, I agree with that to some extent. And people don't realize how much waste you write when you're writing comedy, because you may write 100 headlines before you come up with one that really hits the right angle. And there's a lot of considerations that we have to take into account when we're writing something. So we'll get people that will email us a headline idea, and it's like, here, this is perfect, you should run this. But what they don't see is all the work that goes — all the editing work and all the culling and all the fine-tuning that goes in it. So there is some work there. I think we still have a ton of fun, and I wouldn't say it's drudgery. Because to be able to wake up in the morning, and I've got no ideas for what we're going to publish today, and then you look at the news and you come up with a perfect parody of it, and people are laughing, you know, that's rewarding.

**WOODS:** Now, we've joked about some articles you've done where, I mean, really, you would have to be in a coma, almost, not to understand that it's satire. But surely there must be cases where you publish something, and people are taking it seriously. Are there any particularly memorable examples of that?

**MANN:** Yeah, for sure. I mean, and again, I don't really begrudge Snopes for the fact check itself, usually. Obviously, the fringe cases where they do something that is obviously satire. But you know, there's ones that we do that are a little drier, and I get why people might be fooled. The most memorable example is when we made a joke about Pastor Steven Furtick, who's a popular young pastor out in North Carolina, I think, and we said that he signed a contract for a six-year, \$120 million contract to go to another church, to go to Joel Osteen's church. And we tried to make it so over the top, because I think we copied the exact terms of LeBron James' deal when he went to Miami. So we were trying to make it a parallel between celebrity pastors and celebrity sports stars. So we do this piece, and it got so out of control, it was like on the local news in North Carolina. It was on the news in Houston. Lakewood Church came out and issued a statement about it, and then Steven Furtick went on his social media and dispelled the rumors that he was going to accept \$120 million to go to Lakewood. So that's something where the joke is so dry in the headline, right. It's, he "accepts six-year, \$120 million contract," and so you kind of have to have an understanding of those numbers to really — and the fact that we're parodying a famous sports contract. And if you missed that, you might believe it.

**WOODS:** I'm curious about how you came up with the title. I mean, I know you — I don't know; were you one of the original people?

**MANN:** I was writing for the site from day one, but I was not a founder.

**WOODS:** Okay, so how did whoever came up with the title come up with the name for the *Babylon Bee*?

**MANN:** Yeah, our founder, Adam, was considering a bunch of things. He was considering something drier like *Christian News* or just something that was a real generic name. *Babylon Bee* really hit the right note, I think, in terms of it sounds satirical. *Bee* was kind of the name for a newspaper, and then *Babylon*, you know, within the Bible obviously Babylon was where



Israel was in captivity and in exile, and so that's kind of the idea, is that we wanted to come off like reports from Babylon, reports from the church in exile in America, I think is the idea.

**WOODS:** Right, right, right. Now, I'm given that you started off primarily doing Christian satire, what was it precisely that you saw in the Christian world or among evangelicals that you thought needed satirical treatment

**MANN:** Yeah, common topics that we hit a lot early on and we still hit are the prosperity gospel, was a big one. I think for us, that is one of our big targets.

**WOODS:** You mentioned a couple names there, but can you tell people what that actually is?

**MANN:** Yeah, yeah. The prosperity gospel is a theology that basically says, if you do the right things, if you declare victory, if you have a positive attitude, that God will give you material blessings, material wealth, which is not accurate with what the Bible says about material wealth and blessings. So guys like Joel Osteen and Benny Hinn and Creflo Dollar, those guys teach what's called a prosperity gospel or Word of Faith gospel, that you can speak your prosperity into existence, is the basic idea. It's basically positive thinking, motivational speaking stuff, but they just kind of sprinkle biblical texts on top of it. So that was one of the things.

Another one was like the mega church movement, where we have such a consumerism-driven mentality in our churches, because people don't go to church to worship God anymore; they go to church to worship themselves. They go to church for an experience. And so we made fun of a lot of the churches that kind of had a bunch of attractions. We'd say churches introduced like water slide baptisms and roller coasters and all that stuff to try to keep their members entertained. So we made fun of that movement a lot, I think, early on.

**WOODS:** I understand you guys recently started a podcast, so that's something new for you guys. If you had a gigantic budget, what would be other things that you might want to either branch into or do more of? What would be on your wish list?

**MANN:** Yeah, I mean, there's so much. Video is obviously one that we've talked about a lot. We were kind of glad we waited on video, because everybody was shifting to video because of the Facebook algorithm change.

**WOODS:** Right.

**MANN:** And all these newspapers spent millions of dollars pivoting to video because Facebook said, we're going to promote video, and then that turned out to be a flop and Facebook went back on it. And then all these organizations were stuck, high and dry, having invested millions in video. So we're glad that we've waited on that a bit, and video has its own unique challenges, but that's something that we're looking at. So that would be one area. We wrote a book a year ago, and we're probably going to be looking at some other book opportunities also.

**WOODS:** What was that book? I wasn't aware of it.

**MANN:** We wrote a book called *How to Be a Perfect Christian*. It got published with WaterBrook & Multnomah a little over a year ago, and it was a fun experience for us, and we're going to probably be looking at doing a sequel at some point here.

**WOODS:** I'm over at BabylonBee.com, and I absolutely love the box you use to get people to sign up for your email list: "Fake news you can trust delivered straight to your inbox." Beautiful. See, because normally, when I advise people about building an email list, I say you've got to give something away, give them an eBook or a video or whatever. But that line alone, I make an exception for yours, because that's fantastic. I love it. "Fake news you can trust delivered straight to your inbox." Is that kind of your backup plan in case of deplatforming? Building an email, trying to build something that's independent of these outlets?

**MANN:** Absolutely. I mean, every service you run through, you have to run through a third party, so even an email list, we might own the email list, but we're using a mail provider. So it's kind of frightening when you look at where big tech is politically and then how much control they have over your access to your readers. So for us, yeah, as independent as we can be, the better. So yeah, subscription service, emphasizing the newsletter is another big one. So yeah, we have a lot of ways that we're trying to get around social as best we can.

**WOODS:** Well, of course, the site is BabylonBee.com. I'm going to link to that, as well as to the book you mentioned, over at TomWoods.com/1461, our show notes page for today. And so if you haven't seen *Babylon Bee*, maybe you're not on Facebook or something, because it really is everywhere. Everybody is sharing their material. But if you haven't seen it, you'll definitely want to go to BabylonBee.com and support them and check it out, because it's just great. I mean, the headlines alone are just absolutely priceless. So I know it's hard work, and sometimes it's annoying dealing with fact-checkers, and you've got to worry about what's this doing to your reputation among the powers that be at Facebook. It's annoying, but it's really, really worthwhile stuff that you're doing, and I'm glad you're doing it, and I appreciate your time today. Thanks so much.

**MANN:** Yeah, thanks a lot.