STUDENTS AS JOURNALISTS

Editors learn the hard way on campuses

T he Oct. 28, 1985, edition of The Daily Utah Statesman, created by the overwhelmingly student body at the largely Mormon Utah State University campus, featured a story about a case of two men, naked from the waist up, covering the top half of the tabloid’s front page. This photo illustration, accompanied by a caption that read: “Gay/Lesbian Alliance, a new group on campus, is object to the presence of a reactionary student group, the ‘Heterosexualists.’” The Statesman’s editor noted that the story was written within a week, more than usually received in a month.

For, the reaction seems no different from what might be expected in any conservative, small town. If this were a professional newspaper, the staff members might feel that they had fulfilled a journalistic responsibility by bringing an important issue to the forefront for public debate.

However, because this was a college community, the Utah State University (USU) student editors had other reactions, as well. As a member of USU’s governing Institutional Council, used to the Statesman’s apathy (which was ultimately defeated) urged that the $9,000 in student fees which support the Statesman be used to attack which a professional newspaper under the same circumstances may not have.

A potentially important story was recently completely withheld as a private college in the Northeast because of staff fear of public outcry. Football and basketball players were going on the record about alleged hazing and inappropriate conduct among the athletes. Although the story was in the hands, the editors decided not to run it.

“We were worried about four groups—potentia of potential and current student, administrators, community, and of course, students,” said an editor. She requested anonymity for herself and the school since the decision was made to withhold the story. “But it all came down to money for the paper and for the school. If everyone decided that we were a bunch of drug users, we’d lose financial support from the alumni and may some potential students as well. We decided the story wasn’t worth it.”

Journalists who ploy their trade in the special environment of college and university communities have pressures and ethical dilemmas that are unique to their situation.

While the unnamed college newspaper editor quoted above illustrated the financial pressure that these journalists may feel to not harm the school, most pressure comes from students.

Administrators, teachers, and other students may apply direct or indirect pressure on the journalists. When a school newspaper depends on some financial support from student government, as does the Utah Statesman, staff members may censor themselves to avoid having their funding decreased or discontinued. School administrators and student government leaders try hard to allocate already tight resources to a newspaper that they agree with.

External pressures on editorial content are more pervasive than budget worries, however. Consider a school newspaper editor who is thinking about writing a story that reflects badly on a particular department or instructor. She is setting herself up for what must be the ultimate conflict of interest. She has to consider what is going to happen to her, as a student, as a result of her work as a journalist. It is taking a class from the teacher criticized, or if she plans to, she can’t help but wonder. It doesn’t make a great deal of difference, as she says that the story should not — morally or legally — let the story influence how he treats the student. If she decides that he has been unjustly attacked, his feelings toward the student are bound to be less than positive.

O ther students can provide their own brand of pressure. Norma Wagner, now on staff of The St. Peters- burg Times, worked for two years as a reporter for The Independent Florida Alligator, the student-run newspaper at University of Florida. Wagner says, “If you go to a fraternity party, you don’t say you’re an Alligator reporter. I didn’t even say it in bars. There’s really strong sentiment on campus against the paper.”

The fraternity began to resent the Alligator staff, according to Wagner, after the staff had run a series of articles on an alleged case of rape by several members of a fraternity. While Wagner believes that the newspaper acted correctly in running the story, she believes that the fraternities had some cause for resentment. “Certainly the allegations belonged in the paper,” she said, “but it isn’t a front page story after three weeks.”

Wagner said the story was overlayed because the incident became national news and “everyone wanted a piece of it. When you go for a job, everyone wants to have had a piece of national news.”

It’s not easy for college journalists to land their first job. College journalists also have to learn how much mileage they can get out of the story — not because of newsworthiness, but because of the changing economic climate that will make a difference when looking for a job.

Student journalists who fail to gain professional respect, Wagner described situations where local politicians and even the local paper refuse to treat the Alligator staff as if they did local professional newspaper reporters. It’s hard to get the information when potentia sources ignore phone calls and requests for information and interviews because the even is written in the“real” newspaper is town.

Added ethical problems along with these practical pressures make college journalism a unique environment.

The main problem for college journalists is that they are not able to take their story and go home for the night as do their professional colleagues, as students, they are part of the community.

There is some similarity between the student journalists and the professional journalists who work and write professionally in small communities. The community is the source of their stories, as well as their audiences. They, in turn, are part of their community.

The community journalist is invested in the community in a way that most student journalists are not. And, like politicians in a small town, community journalists make unpopular decisions believing that their actions are important for the community as a whole in a long-term sense. Community journalists will be around to find out if they were correct in their judgments or not.

Student journalists are temporary in their community. They often lack a sense of history or future. And, while small town journalists can say, “I know that you don’t like that story, but reporting that information was part of my job,” college journalists cannot expect to have this motivation accepted with the same sort of respect. The primary role for the student journalist is not that of an objective, but of student. Recognition of how much the college newspaper reporter may be to their lives, and how clearly objectives are sometimes difficult to define.

There are many conflicting roles that the student journalist might play in addition to being a student and a journalist. Some students who write, photograph or edit for the newspaper also play sports or...
An education in advocacy

BY JOHN YEARWOOD

Yearwood, former ombudsman of the University of Connecticut Daily Campus, now works for The Associated Press in Oklahoma City.

When I was asked to be ombudsman for The Daily Campus at the University of Connecticut, I was skeptical. Would the news pages really be open to all students? Would I be allowed to go public with criticism of the editor or the paper’s editorial staff, including editor Paul Tidie? I had the position after reading Tidie’s editorial telling students that the previous year on the paper was a failure and urging him to let the paper to him if they were interested in any way.

Being the first ombudsman on a college newspaper meant I had no role models, no one to show me how it was done. Fortunately, Henry McNulty, the Hartford (Conn.) Courant ombudsman, wasn’t far away. I sought his advice and modeled my job after his.

The first few days no one called. Many students, I thought, missed the announcement. I decided not to do what an ombudsman did. The Daily Campus began running ads at the bottom of the page, running ads at the bottom of the page. A call from a student was not the best way to write it. It gives the impression that the Daily Campus had an ax to grind with the USG. The Daily Campus needs to be more careful with its editorial.

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Of course, not all of my columns were exciting. After Hurricane Gloria whipped through campus in September 1985, one described how the news staff writers who wrote the campus pitched in to write. I was long and detailed, and deliver the paper on the day of the hurricane. Another told students how to write news releases — it was one of my most popular columns and was published twice.

What did we do at the Daily Campus was revolutionary at the college level. The university community was given a unique insight into how news decisions are made, how the paper gets published. It was a way to keep students, and I told the reporter to be more careful. I wrote about the incident in my daily memo to the editor.

In hindsight, I did the wrong thing. Asking her to correct our mistake was wrong. The space was the space in the newspaper for corrections, clarifications, and corrections. I should have written there that we had omitted an important part of that story.

For years, I tried to defend my fellow journalists when they made a mistake. Now I was advocate for the other side, taking a journalist to task when someone complained. It was a difficult transformation.

As an ombudsman, I jammed complaints from more than 100 students, faculty and staff — everything from late deliveries to off-color cartoons. If I could not work with the paper, I would tell the student how that thing is going to be.

When I arrived, the publication was still very young. It was in its third year, and the student body was still forming. The students were not sure about the position. I asked the editor to consider the position. He agreed, and I spent a week investigating how and why the editorial was written.

My findings were published in a 50-minute column questioning Tidie’s methods of writing editorials. I concluded: “Although there were grounds for writing the editorial, doing so in anger is not the best way to write it. It gives the impression that the Daily Campus had an ax to grind with the USG. The Daily Campus needs to be more careful with its editorial.”

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For students interested in being an ombudsman, what does this position require? An open mind and, when necessary, the ability to criticize friends publicly. There were angry incidents but no similar changes during my tenure, due in part, to my frequent meetings with group leaders.

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