STUDENTS AS JOURNALISTS

Editors learn the hard way on campuses

BY DENI ELLIOT

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The Oct. 28, 1985, edition of The Utah Statesman created a furor at the largely Mormon Utah State University campus.

A photo of two men, naked from the waist up, covered the top half of the tabloid's front page. This photo illustration, and the accompanying story on the Gay/Lesbian Alliance, prompted the creation of a reactionary student group, the "Heterosexual Alliance," which offered counseling "for those homosexuals who want to change." The Statesman's editor received more than 40 letters within a week, more than usually received in a month.

So far, the reaction sounds 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 to bring 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. A member of USU's governing Institutional Council ripped up an edition of The Statesman at a Council meeting. A Student Senate resolution (which was ultimately defeated) urged that the $9,000 in student fees which help support the Statesman be "steadily decreased until the Statesman came in line with what they thought it should be printing," said current editor David Moneypenny.

The author of the story, Wendy Weaver, was teased and threatened by other students. Members of the Gay/Lesbian Alliance attributed new, and possibly physically threatening, anti-homosexuality sentiment to the article. The editor at the time of publication, Tamera Thomas, said the university administration pressured her not to continue running the planned series on homosexuality, according to Moneypenny.

A year later, Moneypenny is still affected by the outcry. "I'm really feeling gun shy," said Moneypenny. He's uncertain about how to run a story about a USU student who has AIDS. Since the student says he has had lovers in the Logan, Utah, community, mostly married Mormon men, Moneypenny believes that this story is important. "But I'm not trying to give the impression that the paper is hung up on homosexuality," he said.

Utah State University is not the only university at which the student-produced newspaper falls under attack which a professional newspaper under the same circumstances may not have.

A potentially important story was recently completely withheld at a private college in the Southeast because of staff fear of public outcry. Football and basketball players were willing to go on the record about allegedly extensive drug use among the athletes. Although the story was in hand, the editors decided not to run it.

"We were worried about four groups — parents of potential and current students, administrators, community, and alumni," 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 alums and maybe some potential students as well. We decided the story wasn't worth that," she said.

Journalists who ply 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 illustrates the internal pressure that these journalists may feel to not harm the school, most pressures are external.

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 harder 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 reporter 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. If she 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 to say that the teacher should not — morally or legally — let the story influence how he treats the student. If the teacher feels that he has been unjustly attacked, his feelings toward the student are bound to be less than positive.

Other students can provide their own brand of pressure. Norma Wagner, now on staff at The St. Petersburg 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 a really strong sentiment on campus against the paper."

The fraternities began to resent the Alligator staff, according to Wagner, after the staff had run a series of articles on an alleged rape by seven members of a fraternity. While Wagner believes that the newpaper acted correctly in running the story initially, she also believes that the fraternities had some cause for resentment. "Certainly the allegations belonged on the front page," she said, "but it wasn't still a front page story after three weeks."

Wagner said the story was overplayed 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."

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> **— Norma Wagner, former staff member, Independent Florida Alligator**

It's not easy for college journalists to land their first job. As Wagner pointed out, graduates with clips from important stories stand a better chance of landing a job. Journalists may react by getting as much mileage as they can out of the story — not because of newsworthiness, but because of the chance of having a byline that will make a difference when looking for a job.

Student journalists also have difficulty gaining professional respect. Wagner described situations where local politicians and even the local hospital refused to treat the Alligator staff as they did local professional newspaper reporters. It's hard to get the information when potential sources ignore phone calls and requests for information and interviews because the requests are not from the "real" newspaper in town.

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

The main problem for college journalists is that they are not able to file their story and go home for the night as do their professional colleagues; as student-journalists, they play many roles in their community.

There is some similarity between the students' conflict of roles and that of journalists who work and write professionally in small communities. The community journalists will attend PTA meetings with their sources; they will care deeply about whether the new highway comes through town. But there are differences as well. 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 can not expect to have this motivation accepted with the same sort of respect. The primary role for the student journalist is not that of journalist, but of student. Regardless of how committed the college newspaper reporter may be to her work, her primary objective is to complete her degree.

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

See **Students**, page 34

Continued from page 33

are active in student or university government. These students create needless conflicts of interest for themselves and for the newspaper. How is the sports columnist going to write an honest column when he knows that any criticism of the coach will keep him from playing in next week's game? How is the student representative on a sensitive university committee going to put aside a potential story when she overhears something that is not intended for publication?

College journalists happen upon information that professional journalists would not because of the various roles that a journalist fills within a school community. When community journalists approach a source, the source knows that he or she is talking to a reporter. The various roles of the student journalist make this less distinct.

Because of their unique circumstance, college journalists can prevent some problems from developing by considering the following questions before a crisis situation develops:

■ How can you work to eliminate pressure from administrators, teachers, students and others in the community? Sometimes a published editorial statement that defines the staff's perception of themselves as professionals who will not bow to special interests can alert the school community that the journalists take themselves seriously.

■ What guidelines can you develop to clarify how college journalists juggle their various roles? Guidelines that specify what other college roles journalists will not play (such as a sports writer cannot play collegiate sports) and how and when to let people within the college community know that they are likely to be quoted in the newspaper will help ease tensions between the journalists and the community.

Professional journalists, as well, need to take student journalism seriously. If work on student publications were taken more seriously by the industry, student journalists may not feel a need to overplay stories in an attempt to gain national attention.

Student journalists ultimately have at least all of the pressures and responsibilities of any community newspaper staff. And, they have these pressures and responsibilities without the protection of an active publisher or permanent executive editor, and usually without easy access to legal advice. This trial-by-fire makes college-level journalism a great training ground for tomorrow's professional journalists. If student journalists can produce high-quality, significant work within a school community, they can't help but excell in industry.

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 publicly criticize — or praise — the paper's editorial staff, including editor Paul Thiel.

I accepted the position after reading Thiel's editorial telling students that things would be different on the paper this year, urging them to get involved with the paper, to contact him if they were misrepresented 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 of the position or didn't understand what an ombudsman did. The Daily Campus began running ads at the bottom of the editorial page with my photo, name, phone number and reasons why I might be contacted. The calls and a few visitors began to trickle in; an average of one per day.

My first case involved an assistant manager at the student credit union who said an article about her testimony at a student government meeting was biased. However, the student came to see the reporter who wrote the story — not me. When I heard them arguing, I went over to help.

The assistant manager said our article made her look stupid to her boss and friends; the reporter insisted that was her problem and wouldn't discuss the charges of biased reporting. I suggested the student write a letter to the editor, which she did, 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. We had set aside space in the newspaper for corrections, clarifications, and omissions. I should have written there that we had omitted an important part of that story.

For years, I had 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.

During the year as ombudsman, I handled complaints from more than 100 students, faculty and staff — everything from the ink rubbing off on their hands at breakfast to charges reporters were racist. I wrote more than 100 memos and about two dozen columns; several were critical of reporters and editors.

Early in the first semester, Thiel wrote an editorial criticizing the Undergraduate Student Government (USG) based on an interview with the organization's president. Several USG members called to complain, saying the editorial was generalizing, that they hadn't had a chance to prove themselves yet. I agreed and spent a week investigating how and why the editorial was written.

My findings were published in a 50-inch column questioning Thiel'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 editorials."

Although Thiel did not comment on the column, some staffers were openly hostile. But the students began to trust me as an ombudsman. The number of calls increased.

Of course, not all of my columns were negative. After Hurricane Gloria swept through campus in September 1985, one described how the few news staffers who stayed on campus pitched in to write, edit, lay out 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 we did 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. And it worked! I knew I was doing my job when students congratulated me for looking out for them.

The paper, consequently, improved as reporters became more sensitive to the students they were reporting for and about. The position enhanced relations between the paper and student groups.

The previous year there were several student demonstrations against the paper with accusations reporters and editors were racist in their reporting and hiring practices. There were angry incidents but no similar charges during my tenure, due, in part, to my frequent meetings with group leaders.

Despite this progress, the position was not organized as well as I would have hoped. In hindsight, I would insist my columns bypass the editor and go directly to the copy editor for editing. At times Thiel changed some of his quotes while editing my column. I would insist my memos be posted for the staff to read, which was not done for fear criticism of the staff would drive away unpaid staffers.

It was, nevertheless, a fun and rewarding year for me and the experiment succeeded. The Daily Campus renewed the position of ombudsman for at least another year.

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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; a tough skin to withstand criticism by fellow journalists and classmates; acceptance of always being on call and ready to answer questions about how and why the paper does what it does; a realization the ombudsman cannot cure all of the ills of college journalism.

It's disappointing The Daily Campus was the first college paper to have an ombudsman. It's sad more haven't followed suit. It's such a crucial position at any newspaper — especially at a college where aspiring journalists are more likely to make mistakes. I urge other college papers to take the risk. The position signals students that the paper is making an effort at being more credible. And that's an important first step.

If I had to do it over, I wouldn't hesitate in accepting the job. The year spent looking at the news business from a different angle enriched my life and my reporting, increased my sensitivity toward people I write about and heightened the need for accuracy.

I wish other college papers would follow the Daily Campus in hiring an ombudsman — they can't lose and they won't be sorry.