

Campus crusade for Marx?

Opinion by Jens Andersen

Like most student papers in Canada's larger post-secondary institutions, the Gateway is a member of an organization called the Canadian University Press (alias CUP). The functions of the organization, put simply, are to facilitate the exchange of news, features and opinions between member papers, to sell space in the papers to advertisers who desire national exposure in the college market, and to employ bureau personnel and roving fieldworkers to assist the papers in all phases of production.

In addition to these fairly straightforward duties, CUP has adopted, in its "Statement of Principles," a more ambiguous and all-encompassing fourth role:

That the major role of the student press is to act as an agent of social change, assisting students in understanding and mobilizing against exploitation and injustice wherever it may be found, and emphasizing the rights and responsibilities of the student.

That the student press must, in fulfilling this role, perform both an educative and active function, and support groups serving as agents of social change.

It has been pointed out by many people, including CUPies, that this sounds a lot like Superman's rather hokey vow to fight evil and injustice, and also that the term "agent of social change" is vague enough to encompass every communist, fascist or Rotarian who ever devised a blueprint to fix the world.

However the statement isn't all motherhood and apple pie, and CUP isn't as neutral as its credo might at first glance make it seem. In fact CUP is slightly but unmistakably socialist in its leanings, as a glance at its "Statement of purposes for the national news service" will show:

Canadian University Press recognizes that a class society exists in Canada, and the important role the post-secondary education system plays in maintaining the existing social order. This role is reflected in the policies regarding accessibility to post-secondary education and the resulting composition of the Canadian student body, in the content of the education we receive, and is evidenced by the future positions we are expected to occupy within the economic and social order.

Canadian University Press, as an agent of social change, must as its main priority attempt to use its national news service to provide Canadian students with information and analysis of the nature and role of post-secondary education within the Canadian economic and social system, relate the current policies of

financial cutbacks being waged against post-secondary education and other social services to the general economic crisis facing Canada, and assist students in mobilizing opposition to these policies.

Further, the news service should report on and critically evaluate the role played by existing student organizations in responding to this situation, and encourage change in the leadership and/or structure of these organizations where they fail to recognize their responsibility to mobilize students.

Canadian University Press must also use its national news service to provide Canadian students with information and analysis of the capitalist economic system in which we live, and to assist students in mobilizing against that system where it is found to be preserving the class structure or to be oppressive to women, minorities, or others within Canada.

The CUP statement of principles strongly resembles Superman's hokey vow to fight evil and injustice.

Just how far this socialist attitude pervades the membership, and how it affects their actions can be seen by reading CUP stories or attending its conventions and listening to the debate. One of the first things one notices on doing so is the frequent return to a central dogma which all debate and discussion is in agreement with: namely that all the problems under discussion are the result of living in an oppressive (or exploitive, or male-dominated) capitalist system. The phenomenon is reminiscent of the libertarian's obsessive fixation with the evils of "government interference" or the moralist's single-minded hatred of "permissiveness."

An example is in order. About a month ago I attended a Western Region CUP conference in Squamish, B.C. where a seminar on battered women was held. The speaker, Debra Lewis, had worked with victims of battering, but she made all the predictable statements: battering is a "systematic political thing;" women are seen by men as "property that must be controlled... marriage itself encourages violence," etc.

Afterwards there was a question period, then we broke up into small discussion groups to consider the battering problem further, reconvened to pool our findings, and broke into three large discussion

groups to talk over anything that hadn't already been talked to death. Throughout the discussions the pre-fab ideology was repeated over and over ("Fundamentally, the problem all boils down to the fact that we live in a capitalist society that encourages this sort of thing").

It all reminded me of Thomas Jefferson's observation:

The moment a person forms a theory, his imagination sees, in every object, only the traits which favor that theory.

There were, thankfully, a few breaks in the parroting of cliches that the "paternalistic-capitalistic system" causes battering. I, for instance, pointed out that even within this system one encounters, at one extreme, men who beat women without provocation, and at the other extreme, men who will not beat women even when provoked; and that this fact points to a multiplicity of causes, including perhaps innate personality differences between men.

To my surprise quite a few of the delegates found the argument reasonable, but in spite of this the lead was somehow dropped and we were quickly back on the women-are-possessions refrain. Strangely enough, no one mentioned that women are just as possessive as men, or that in the marriage, support and alimony laws on the books in our paternalistic, capitalist society there is the clear doctrine that men are the property of their wives.

The libertarian's obsessive fixation is with "government interference." The leftists in CUP dwell on the "exploitive capitalist system."

CUP's slant to the left also shows up in their news articles. I have before me, for instance, the CUP Winter Feature Package Number 9 with an article by Brian Jones of the *Ubysses*, which contains the fatuous statement that "the implementation of a 'disappearance' policy (for political undesirables) first emerged in 1966 in Guatemala."

Curiously, Jones does seem to be aware that the Nazis practiced systematic "disappearance" (he even uses the word systematic) but he neglects to mention the well-known fact that Communist Russia was the first state to use this political tool in an efficient, large-scale manner. Or that revolutionary regimes are just as prone to adopt this useful tactic as military dictatorships.

But if you have read any stories from CUP papers, especially the social and political stories where "analysis" is stressed, you are already aware of the tendency to see everything from wife-beating to cutbacks in terms of the simplistic formula "left is right and right is wrong." A few more examples are contained in the accompanying story on objectivity.

One final mention should also be made about CUP's policy against sexist, racist, or otherwise nasty advertising. At present each member paper in CUP judges for itself whether any particular advertisement has sinned against the rather vague guidelines. A motion was put forward at the Western Region Conference however, to have a central committee of CUP set up to prescreen ads to make sure the less socially aware newspapers don't print anything which might scar the psyche of the general public.

In the marriage, support and alimony laws of our paternalistic society there is the clear doctrine that men are property of women.

Needless to say, the motion was sponsored by a newspaper that refuses to print everything from bank ads to RCMP and Department of Defense recruiting ads. There was a vague concern among the CUP papers present that clearcut and sensible guidelines will be hard to devise, but none save the Gateway objected to the insinuation that members papers are incapable of deciding for themselves what is "objectionable" or "harmful" in advertising.

This blatant attempt to shove CUP ideology down our throat, the incessant, predictable and tiresome editorializing in CUP news, and now the letter from CUP Western Region Human Rights Coordinator (Gateway Tuesday March 30) objecting to such innocent items as a woman using the word "girl" in an entirely appropriate manner; all these have produced at the Gateway a sizable anti-CUP sentiment, with many people seriously considering withdrawing from the organization.

Personally, I am in favor of staying in CUP, but as the organization's crusading spirit becomes more and more absurd I find my reasons becoming, sadly, more and more based on what CUP could be, rather than on what it actually is.

In defence of objectivity

opinion by Jens Andersen

One of the biggest annoyances I have had to endure throughout my mostly happy years at the Gateway, that paragon of activist journalism, is repeated subjection to the doctrine that "objectivity" in journalism is, a) something that is impossible to attain, b) undefinable, c) a dirty trick perpetrated by the capitalist management of big newspapers to keep the lid on more socially-conscious reporters, d) evil, etc.

The variations on the theme are endless, but they all have a common denominator: that every journalist, like every human being, is full of biases, crotchets and prejudices which cannot be kept from appearing in what the journalist writes. With this basic assumption I have no quarrel. It is only too obvious that all humans are strongly opinionated, and, I believe that any intelligent reader of a newspaper can learn a great deal about the views of its journalists even when they are merely serving up "hard news" (i.e. incontrovertible facts).

What sets my blood to boiling are the extrapolations made from this assumption of human bias, some of which are remarkably idiotic. To illustrate their idiocy I will present a few such extrapolations, which appear in "Objectivity — The Myth That Is Destroying Journalism", an article by one David Deitch which was recently excavated from Gateway files in great numbers.

Deitch, I suspect, is a student journalist - his writing has the unmistakable tone of the campus radical and self-styled "agent of social change" - and aside from a few original opinions, his radical statements about objectivity are quite representative of the ones usually heard in

student journalism circles.

For instance this:

... all attempts thus far to accommodate newspapers to the needs of society have failed, and all the evaluations have turned out to be indexes of failure rather than progress toward some satisfactory result. Criticism that does not lead to structural change is simply an exercise in reformist frustration, and the effect has been that the press today is one of the least trusted of the country's national institutions, public or private. Right-wing critics complain that the papers undermine confidence in democratic institutions by striking at the government. The Left insists that, by adhering to so-called balanced reporting, they in fact stabilize the worst features of an inequitable system. The confused middle is rapidly losing its faith in the ability of the press to sustain the image of impartiality that newspaper managements — not readers — have demanded.

It thus becomes obvious that the press will not begin to cope with its credibility problem until newspaper managements acknowledge that that mystifying standard, objectivity, cannot be adequately defined or achieved, that in fact it is pernicious to the society as well as to the institutions of journalism. This neutrality is demanded by newspaper administrators and editors, concerned that the news content remain under tight control; there is no evidence that it serves a public interest.

Note, first, the grandiose, sweeping statement about newspaper's total failure to "meet the needs of society." Apparently no person looking for a place to live has ever satisfied they need by reading classified ads, no person has ever been enlightened by a news story about some government swindle, and no one has ever learned what jackasses journalists can be (an invaluable piece of knowledge!) by reading the editorial page. What rubbish!

Note, secondly, how in the passage Deitch uses "objectivity" interchangeably with "neutrality" and "balanced reporting" (something he continues to do throughout his article), and his claim that if they cannot be defined or achieved.

In fact, they are not the same, but they can be easily defined and achieved. In journalism objectivity means simply confining one's reportage to indisputable facts; neutrality means not omitting, distorting, or inventing facts to suit one's own prejudices; and balanced reporting means reporting all allegations about a fact when the fact cannot be reliably deter-

One-sided?

The crusaders against sexism in advertising do not object to the one-sided portrayal of a glass of beer, which ignores the chemical composition of the glass or the beer. Or the one-sided portrayal of a shiny new car, which ignores the life expectancy of its engine or the susceptibility of the body to rust. The anti-sexists do not object to the one-sided portrayal of a woman in a potato sack solving problems in advanced physics, which ignores her splendid body.

The crusaders are not against one-sided portrayals, not even one-sided portrayals of women. Unless that one side is the body, and the body is sexy. It is the sexy bodies they are against. They are puritans.

mined. The three practices are related but they are not identical. And they have been adhered to by conventional reporters for years with ease.

They arise out of the very sound idea that opinions are inferior to facts; that tailoring one's opinions to the facts is desirable, and tailoring facts to opinions is deceitful and disgusting.

True, the practice of keeping news stories completely objective, neutral, and balanced, though it laudably promotes the supreme importance of facts, has its drawbacks. For one thing, it can easily be abused by reporters who cannot restrain themselves from slanting the facts. But this is a poor reason for abandoning objectivity, just as it is poor reasoning to ban kitchen knives because a housewife occasionally stabs her husband with one. Rather, this is an argument against zealotness and unscrupulousness in reporters, or an argument for giving reporters an outlet for opinions as well as facts.

Here we come to the real weakness of objectivity: its incompleteness. Indisputable facts are too few and far between (unless you count those pseudo-facts known as quotes) and they need to be fleshed out with analysis, and speculation about things that are not known. To make up for this lack there arose, long ago, the editorial page, and, more recently, the "analysis" news story, both excellent innovations in my opinion.

Even in editorials and analyses, however, facts are paramount and opinions must defer to them. Hence the essence of objectivity - the careful distinguishing fact from opinion - is still of prime importance.

J.A.

continued on page 11