

College Press Freedom Is Controversial Issue

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By DWIGHT BENTEL

During the past few months, university publications in Canada have on several occasions run afoul of interference either by faculty or student government. Among these have been the Dalhousie Gazette, University of Western Ontario Gazette, and the University of British Columbia Ubysey. Not unexpectedly, there is a strong student reaction against this reported interference, and there is a belief the university authorities may be trying to obtain a measure of control in the publication of student newspapers. Whether this be true or not—certainly there is little tangible evidence—the subject has been an interesting one. Recently, in Editor and Publisher, an informative magazine published by and for the Professional Press of the United States and Canada, a professional and well-known writer published a report on the University Press. It is published here to throw some light on the University Press as it exists in North America today.

The American college undergraduate newspaper is no journalistic peewee. Its combined circulation is something more than 1,000,000, and it is read by twice that many.

It reaches and influences in their formative stages a group of young men and women who go on to positions of responsibility and leadership in American society.

It offers an advertising medium for some commodities as hot as the proverbial firecracker. Advertisers spend more than \$1,000,000 a year in the 41 college dailies alone. They spend a whole lot additional in the 500 tri-weeklies, semi-weeklies, weeklies, and in the several hundred periodicals.

It provides a training laboratory for a considerable and increasing number of future newspapermen.

A Solid Achievement

It's a chronicler of the activities of the more than 1,000 senior colleges and a lot of junior and teachers' colleges as well, and is the only paper most of their students read regularly . . . and that includes more than 2,000,000 now in attendance.

At its best, the undergraduate

newspaper is a pretty smooth piece of journalism by anybody's standards, and a solid academic achievement. It's a builder of campus morale and a public relations medium of high order.

At its worst . . . wow!

It can raise more hell on a college campus than spiked punch at the Dean's reception for freshman women.

It can make more errors of fact and judgment in a single four-page issue than a professional editor ever dreamed after a midnight snack of Welsh rarebit.

It has (not once but many times) aroused the wrath of budget-controlling legislatures, raised the hackles of the post office department, stimulated cries of anguish from ministerial associations, offended the Rotary Club, the Merchants' Association, the Y.W.C.A. and the W.C.T.U., and infuriated every academic personage from chancellor emeritus to assistant professor of flycasting.

It has sent uncounted thousands of be-neckied, begowned, and bewildered undergraduates vainly looking for dances, (or games, or entertainments) 24 hours after

they were held because a green student reporter forgot to write "tonight" instead of "tomorrow night" in his story for next day's paper.

Dynamite in Newsprint

It has ridden good coaches out of jobs because they couldn't win games with poor players. It has crucified thoughtful professors for classroom expressions of opinion, clubbed the administration for decisions contrary to the whims of student editor of the moment, noisily supported irresponsibility on campus while the president's job tottered.

To the college administration, then, the undergraduate paper is dynamite wrapped in newsprint. It's an educational hot potato. It packs the same potentialities for good or harm as the professional paper, but unlike the professional it is edited by inexperienced, immature . . . and sometimes irresponsible . . . students.

Combine these three journalistic inadequacies into five, six, or eight columns of 12-em measure and you have the reason why more stresses and strains, more dissatisfactions and resentment continuously whirl about the college newspaper than

almost any other undertaking on campus . . .

And why freedom of the press, so staunchly supported in professorial discourses, may be hastily shooshed away from the campus when it puts in and appearance outside the student newspaper office.

The undergraduate newspaper, then, can be a Dr. Jekyll or a Mr. Hyde. And great variation exists from college to college in the nature and amount of control — or lack of it — granted the student staff in its conduct.

Perhaps no undergraduate activity is involved in such difference of opinion as to administration. Even among journalism professors themselves there exists the widest disagreement.

Says one, in reply to a survey undertaken for this article: "Administrative or faculty participation in any aspect of the college publication is detrimental to the quality of that paper, the integrity of its editors an insult to any recognizable educational ideals, and a vicious disservice to the individuals and the institution which the paper is supposed to serve."

But from another comes this: "The first Amendment has no application in spirit or fact to a learning situation for inexperienced kids who have neither the background nor maturity to make adequate judgments in the use of a tool of great potential danger to the institution, its faculty and students."

Freedom for Half

And so, while at some institutions the editor is given a friendly slap across the withers and sent galloping into the journalistic pasture, at others he is hogtied, the staff is hobbled, and an electric fence is built around the editorial offices.

At those schools where complete freedom is granted (and that includes more than half of those with student dailies) that freedom usually operates under a running barrage from a part of the faculty group.

The same kid who missed three answers in an economics quiz interviews the learned professor for the college paper with about the same accuracy of results . . . and another recruit is added to the "faculty control" faction on the campus.

Nor does this economics professor see any discrepancy between his tolerance for student error in economics and his intolerance of error in student reporting.

The "faculty control" demand is an over-simplification. Censorship produces bad student morale, resentment, flare-ups, evasions in proportion to its severity.

Self-Contradiction

The student paper becomes a weak and spineless thing, bulging with the minutiae of college comings and goings and doings, but lacking in the strength and force to speak effectively for the group it represents.

As a training ground for effective participation in a democratic society which is what a college proposes to be, censorship is an educational self-contradiction. Artificial methods don't produce realistic outcomes, as old John Dewey used to point out so impressively.

Institutions which extend their undergraduate papers freedom of the pasture stand on the "student responsibility" principle. As one faculty adviser to a student daily puts it, "Censorship is unnecessary in student publications if the students are given—and made to feel—the proper responsibilities.

"This is true even from the administration's standpoint. Our students, at least, don't very often go

off half-cocked, though they do make mistakes. But who doesn't? And they learn by these mistakes and don't hurt anyone very badly in doing so."

To which another adds, "It seems to me that operating a student paper without censorship is the only realistic way in which students can learn their responsibilities."

Teachers' Resolution

In the closing minutes of the joint convention of the American Association of Teachers of Journalism and the American Association of Schools and Departments of Journalism at Philadelphia in 1947 a resolution was jammed through the session that "These associations are unequivocally opposed to censorship of undergraduate publications in any form whatsoever, de jure or de facto.

"Every teacher of journalism is duty-bound to oppose such censorship of undergraduate publications to the fullest extent of his ability."

The resolution carried, but to the accompaniment of much headshaking and muttering of "unrealistic."

No Legal Recourse

Because, as one faculty adviser to a student paper writes, "My quarrel is with the wording of this resolution, its all-inclusive implication that any attempt to hold students responsible for their printed statements is a censorship threat. . . . No publication ever speaks for the students alone, and I know of no way of holding students responsible for their printed statements, at least not in a legal sense. To the general public — and believe me, they must be considered in any discussion of student publications — the irresponsible or the inaccurate story in the student publication is the baby of the university.

" . . . Advice or counsel is all well enough—but what is to be done with the student staff which insists on running a story which is one-sided or colored, or even untrue. Yes, I know the argument that if the student is well-trained, if the college or university has done its job, the student staff will not do such an ignoble thing.

A Specious Argument

"But that is a specious argument and any college instructor knows that it is! I also know the argument that if the student insists on using biased, slanted stories after the possible results have been pointed out to him, the responsibility is his. But is it? How? What redress has the victim of irresponsible journalism? the courts and a libel suit?"

Despite the AATJ-AASDJ resolution, a gloved-hand advisership is probably more frequently imposed on the student paper than any other type of administration-staff relationship; and for the college newspaper group as a whole, complete freedom of operation is far the minority procedure.

One adviser, asked, "Do you endorse the resolution adopted at the Philadelphia convention?" replied: "Yes, although there must be some modicum of administrative overseeing if the students step beyond reasonable bounds."

Despite a seeming inconsistency in this reply, to the extent that a majority view exists in the area of college publications administration, this is probably it.

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