

EDITORIAL

Censorship and Freedom of Speech

by Lynne Wanyeki

As Editor-in-Chief of the Brunswickan, one of the things I am required to do is to check all material that runs in the paper to ensure that such material is in accordance with our Editorial policy. At present, the Editorial policy is fairly loose, stating simply that the Brunswickan will not print anything deemed to be sexist, racist, homophobic or potentially libelous. All section Editors share in the responsibility of implementing the policy, so that when they receive material that seems to violate that policy, they have the right to decide not run it. If the material is borderline, they bring it to me. Of course, this does not prevent all contentious material from reaching the flats during lay-out. In such situations, I retain the right - at least technically - to pull material that the particular Editor in question has decided is indeed suitable for printing.

I say that the right to prevent material from being printed is maintained only technically, because the the policy is so obviously open to subjective interpretation. Each statement to the effect that I have a problem with a particular piece of copy requires a detailed explanation to the Editor concerned as to the reasons why I have that problem. Sometimes we end up in agreement, and at other times we end up in heated debate - and a debate in this office invariably draws in all the other staff members, and usually results in the formation of two mutually disgruntled camps: the "politically-correct mafia" of censorship vs. the staunch and stalwart defenders of freedom of speech and expression.

The argument that censorship of any kind and for any purpose is diametrically opposed to our right to freedom of speech and expression, especially in a student newspaper, is an easy and all too simplistic argument to make. For it ignores the very premise upon which all our basic freedoms are based: that each and every person is worthy of respect for her/his innate dignity. All our basic freedoms are to be exercised in accordance with (and indeed are to be qualified by) that premise. No freedom is absolute.

Yet even with this awareness to help limit the subjectivity which inevitably comes into play when interpreting our Editorial policy, to help explain what can come across as being an utterly arbitrary decision, there are times when material is run which is recognized as being questionable at a subliminal level. The only redemption that is possible occurs when the readership itself responds to such insidious material. Sometimes this happens, sometimes it doesn't.

Such criticism and the raising of issues to the public arena can only be termed healthy. For the defenders of absolute free speech and expression make one point which I agree with, and that is that censorship of discriminatory material gives the false impression of a non-discriminatory society. By completely sanitizing what we allow to reach the readership, we run the risk of simply burying problematic and harmful attitudes, rather than allowing them to be debated and challenged in a productive fashion.

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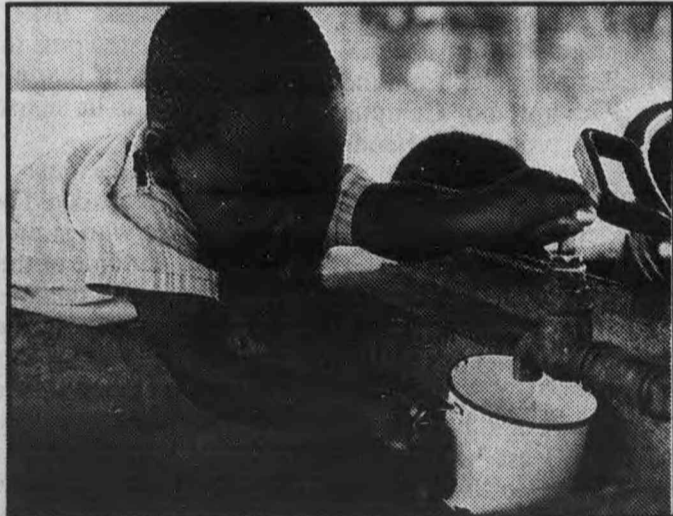
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