

Freedom of the student press, a battle is lost

by Cathy McDonald

Freedom of the press has been a topic of much concern to Canadians recently, with the Kent Commission pointing fingers at the corporate owners of the daily newspapers, as inhibitors of this freedom, and the dailies pointing their fingers right back at the government.

Freedom of the press is also a consideration in the relationship between student media and student governments.

As 1981 drew to a close, Canadian student newspapers observed a classic battle for freedom of the press at the Red River Community College in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The Projector was at one time a democratic, student-run newspaper at Red River Community College. Last May, the Red River Students Association (SA) imposed its Communications Director, Norm Fontaine, as editor of the Projector, effectively censoring the news and content of the papers. The staff resigned in protest and the SA subsequently changed the locks on the newspaper offices.

The old Projector staff immediately created a new newspaper, the Free Times. This was the beginning of a battle watched closely by the student press across Canada, until the year's end when a report of the struggle and demise of the Free Times was heard at the annual conference of Canadian University Press (CUP) in Bolton, Ontario. The old Projector, and the Free Times, had been members of CUP, a cooperative of 51 student-run newspapers.

The following information is extracted from news stories and from a written report by Jim McElgunn, an employee of Canadian University Press who had worked with the Free Times.

Previous to the council takeover, relations between the Projector and the Red River SA were hostile. The Projector was critical of both the SA and the college administration, at times cutting close to the bone. SA actions to stifle this criticism were severe, culminating in their move by the executive to replace the Projector editor. The SA made three attempts at passing a motion to that effect, which finally passed after intense lobbying.

The new 'council' Projector proceeded to pay writers 25 cents per copy inch in order to attract staff, while the original staff worked on the Free Times.

The purpose of the Free Times was to inform students of the events surrounding the takeover by the SA of the Projector, and to become established as the recognized official student newspaper at the college.

The Free Times staff were barred from the newspaper, and lost the use of a sympathetic professor's office when the administration informed that prof that she had best not 'get involved'. The staff operated without an office, phones or any general communication, and put the bi-weekly paper together at the offices of the Uniter, the student newspaper at the University of Winnipeg.

The Free Times received money from staff donations, some local and national advertising, and gifts and loans from Canadian University Press and its member papers.

When the Free Times contacted their former staff printer to print the paper in the fall, the president of the SA, Steve Dawson, intervened. The printer was convinced by Dawson not to print the Free Times.

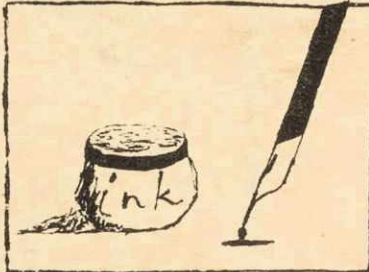
The Free Times went to the more expensive University of Manitoba printers. Dawson again attempted to prevent the Free Times from publishing, claiming that it was an 'illegal' paper. However, the U of M printers were not impressed by Dawson and the paper came out.

Distribution was another problem. The Free Times was worried that the administration would side with the SA and prevent distribution of the Free Times on campus. The staff therefore distributed the paper by hand. Their fears were heightened when a security guard wrestled a staffer to the ground, and removed his papers. By Fall, however, tensions had lessened, and the Free Times had no problems distributing freely on campus.

The mechanics of producing a paper were extremely problematic, and the tenuous week to

week financial situation was a big source of worry and insecurity. The Free Times staff organized a social event to raise money, but were unable to put up posters to advertise. Incredibly a radio announcer was temporarily fired by the Comm Director for announcing the event on the student radio. The event did raise some needed cash.

The Free Times was successful in maintaining its quality, McElgunn reported, and enjoyed a much higher popularity among students than the inexperienced Projector. 600 students attended a forum organized by Project Free Times on the conflict with the SA, and later 600 signatures were collected in three days on a petition recognizing the Free Times as the official student newspaper at Red River. All of these



events were given coverage in the Winnipeg media, portraying the conflict as a struggle for freedom of the press from government control. This attention apparently had no effect on the SA's confidence in the correctness of its decisions.

The Free Times staff explored other channels of altering their fate, seeking recourse in the SA constitution. But the constitution had no provisions whereby students could force the calling of a referendum or a general meeting, items that usually exist in a democratic organization as safeguards or checks on political power.

The SA was not interested in a referendum as it 'cost too much'. Further, it was confident that it understood student opinion. McElgunn noted that the opinions on the SA were very homogeneous as councillors were essentially appointed by the executive.

As the energy of the Free Times staff dwindled, and as they began to realize that their desire to achieve the existence of an independent press at Red River was not feasible, the staff seemed to accept the fact that

the Free Times was unsustainable in the new year. And so the struggle ended, with the hope that with student turnover, positive change may occur in future years.

The Free Times/Projector dispute is an extreme example of a recurrent conflict between student newspapers and student governments, which has its seed in a contradiction, namely that most campus newspapers are published by the body that is the natural object of their criticism: student governments.

Student governments are naturally very interested in the editorial content of the paper. Indirect and sometimes direct pressure to alter the content, to encourage or discourage certain kinds of coverage, is a political act that mars the ability of the paper to assess fairly the events on campus. The paper is, of course, a constant object of, as well as a vehicle for, criticism. However, when that criticism has some financial weight behind it, it violates the principles of freedom of the press. Budget time is an example of when an editor can be conscious of the effect of criticism on the newspaper's financial health.

Many student papers have found a solution to this situation by seeking to incorporate themselves separately from their council, receiving financial support directly from the students rather than by council allocation.

A number of newspapers have become autonomous, incorporated under their respective provincial Societies Acts. Among them are **The Varsity** at the University of Toronto, and **The Imprint** at the University of Waterloo, also Simon Fraser's **The Peak** and **The McGill Daily**.

Other campuses are following suit.

The Gazette has had its conflicts with Dalhousie student councils in the past. A situation similar to that at Red River occurred in 1973 when a disagreement between the council and **The Gazette** staff over who should be the editor resulted in the staff resigning and putting out their own paper, **The Gasselie**. The dispute was resolved with the appointment of co-editors.

Tensions have gone up and down between the Gazette and council. In 1978, a referendum was held on the proposal for an autonomous **Gazette**, seen by

both council and **The Gazette** as a means of ameliorating the situation.

The referendum failed by a margin of 59 votes of 1500 cast.

A compromise solution was developed in 1980 through the creation of a **Gazette** constitution that empowers a Publishing Board with financial management of the paper on behalf of the student council. A representative from the student council and the **Gazette** editor sit on the board along with three students elected during general elections, a Dalhousie professor, a professional journalist, a member of the professional/business field (in the past a lawyer) and the **Gazette's** business manager.

The board acts as a buffer between the two bodies, removing the constant financial interaction that used to exist.

The constitution also recognizes the right of the staff to control the editorial content of the newspaper, including the election of the **Gazette** editor. It is the responsibility of the Publishing Board to ensure that the decision-making process of the **Gazette** remains democratic with the ultimate policy decisions made at weekly staff meetings. This ensures that any student can get involved and have a say in the paper's direction.

The Canadian University Press constitution echoes the necessity of an open democratic process whereby all students may participate in directing the content of their own paper. It also recognizes that as the role of a paper is to be a watchdog of events as they affect students, the paper must be free of control from those it criticizes.

This freedom can only be ensured when it is established in a recognized newspaper constitution, or, better still, when the newspaper becomes a legally autonomous body.

The events at Red River were regarded solemnly as an extreme, but not isolated situation.

The importance of the effort made by the Free Times was conveyed in a motion passed at the CUP conference which condemns the Red River Students Association for its actions, and expresses gratitude and admiration to the staff of the Free Times for upholding the principles of autonomy, collectivism and democracy that are central to Canadian University Press.

NASTY, BRUTISH, AND SHORT... BY TOM OZERC

