

# Editor discusses abortion coverage

Wichita paper focused on events, showed both sides, Smith says

By Ted Burnham  
Emerald Contributor

The managing editor of *The Wichita Eagle* said he has learned many lessons during his last 25 years in journalism, perhaps most importantly that newspapers can truly help the communities they serve.

"It's OK to care," said Steven A. Smith, a University graduate and former *Oregon Daily Emerald* editorial page editor. Smith spoke Friday at the journalism school's first Chandler Lecture, an annual series made possible by a gift from Robert W. Chandler, editor of the *Bend Bulletin*.

"(We can) bring caring to our newspaper everyday without (compromising) our ethical standards or losing our role as watchdogs," Smith said.

Smith, who saw the *Eagle* through Wichita's "Summer of Mercy" — the abortion clinic blockades sponsored by the group Operation Rescue — has helped his paper become one of the most modern dailies in the nation. Police in Wichita made thousands of arrests of people protesting both for and against legalized abortions.

During the blockades, which

began in mid-July and ended in late August, Smith and his staff at the *Eagle* found themselves in a constant bind.

"It was impossible to break new journalistic ground," Smith said, adding that his paper attempted to focus events, not issues in what was "a no-win situation."

Despite demands from Operation Rescue to print photos of fetuses and an editorial position at the paper that was decidedly pro-choice, the *Eagle* made a strong effort to deal with abortion not as a procedure, but to cover the events that occurred in Wichita as fairly as possible.

Abortion, which Smith suggested is the most divisive issue since the abolition of slavery in the 19th century, brought every response imaginable to the *Eagle* newsroom.

"We really came close to war in the streets of Wichita," Smith said.

About 60 percent of letters the paper received complained that news about the blockades was biased against Operation Rescue, Smith said, while 40 percent said the pro-choice protesters were being shown in a

negative light.

By offending both sides, Smith said, the *Eagle* proved it could cut through the drama and focus on the events in Wichita — events which will continue to affect the city for years.

By remembering the impact of how and what the paper writes and prints, the *Eagle* managed to offend many, but helped to inform many more, and served to help stabilize a city on the edge, he said.

The abortion issue was not the only major story the *Eagle* covered well, Smith said. The Persian Gulf war, a horrible tornado season and heated local elections were other stories the paper carried.

The war was the best prime-time, made-for-TV war ever, Smith said. "Television (became) a prisoner of its own images," he said.

Many people returned to the newspapers for more depth on the war. Smith said graphics in the *Eagle* showed the war the way no television could, and the paper's coverage of the war



Steven A. Smith

proved that a newspaper can still "compete with television" even on big stories.

When tornadoes hit Wichita in April, Smith said his paper tried its best not to be sensational with the story, but rather to reach out to the community and show events from a personal point of view. By recognizing all people and institutions that contributed to the relief effort, the *Eagle* showed that papers can "have a heart" when people need it, he said.

# Speaker calls for foreign language proficiency

By Dennis Fitzgerald  
Emerald Reporter

No student should receive an undergraduate degree from an American college without demonstrating proficiency in a second language and learning foreign cultures, said the president of the American Council on Education Thursday.

Robert Atwell, council president, was on campus Thursday to speak to the University Foundation Board of Trustees about trends in higher education.

Atwell's proposal is one of several recommended by the American Council on Education, a Washington, D.C.-based association that represents about 1,500 colleges, universities and educational organizations nationwide.

"I'm not talking about credits," he said. "I'm talking about proficiency."

Atwell said he believes Americans — even college-educated Americans — know far too little about the rest of the world. As world economic competition becomes more fierce, the United States will increasingly lose influence if it does not think and perform globally, he said.

There are 45,000 foreign students studying here and only about 10,000 American students studying abroad, Atwell said.

"We're a very ethnocentric society," he said.

Of the few students who study overseas, most are from well-to-do families and go to England, where no language barrier exists, Atwell said. He wants to see more lower-income students studying abroad and more American students in Asian and developing countries.

"I think we need more financial aid so needy people get a chance to go abroad," he

said. Atwell said he believes that Congress is willing to give higher education more money for financial aid and other needs, and it is the executive branch which refuses to admit to the need for more funding.

Atwell had no comment on the State Board of Higher Education's proposal to pay \$6 million to bail out athletic departments at four-year colleges. However, he did say that he prefers smaller programs such as NCAA Division III because, at those schools, athletics must compete for funding against academic programs.

"If a minor amount of money had to be allotted, you'd see a big change," he said.

Before becoming council president in 1984, Atwell was president of Pitzer College, in Orange County, Calif. He holds 12 honorary doctoral degrees.

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