

Conference debates free speech issues

By Rachel Miller
For the Oregon Daily Emerald

"Freedom of speech means that we must respect individuals' viewpoints and messages," said Robert O'Neil, author and law professor at the University of Virginia, during a live, interactive teleconference on Oct. 21.

The "Can we live with the First Amendment?" teleconference took place at the Instructional Media Center and was presented by State University of New York at Albany and the PBS Adult Learning Satellite Service.

The conference was broadcast simultaneously to college campuses across the nation, giving viewers several opportunities to call in or fax questions to the panelists as they discussed issues of student rights to free speech and academic freedom.

Along with O'Neil, the panelists were: Nat Hentoff, columnist for *The Village Voice* and *The Washington Post*, and staff writer for *The New Yorker*; Marianne Merritt, associate at the law firm of Hirschkop & Associates; Orlando Patterson, professor of sociology at Harvard University; and Professor Isabel Marcus.

In their opening comments, all panelists expressed a desire to see college campuses work toward attaining a "non-hostile environment" that supports an individual's right to freedom of expression.

"Marginal groups should not be forced to feel silenced," Marcus said.

And Merritt believes there is currently a breakdown of civility, respect and communication on college campuses. But she said it is possible for the administration and students to come together to determine the boundaries of free speech in order to reduce the likelihood of students "unintentionally and intentionally" offending each other.

O'Neil pointed out that it is difficult to distinguish between hateful thought and thoughtful hatred.

The panelist then debated the actions of teachers and students in three hypothetical cases involving First Amendment rights.

The first case dealt with a student's right to refuse reading and discussing course material he found personally offensive, and the second case focused on the right of a fraternity to display tasteless posters under the protection of the First Amendment.

The third scenario described the conflict between a group of Latino students and a student newspaper, ending with the disgruntled students stealing all the copies of the newspaper in protest.

After the cases were presented the panelists gave their opinions concerning professor, adminis-

tration and student rights and responsibilities in each case.

Patterson raised the question about protesting in a university classroom setting versus the public streets. He pointed out that the essential right of a student to express his or her views does not include disrupting a lecture.

If a person were waving a banner in protest of a lecture, he or she would be removed from the class, Patterson said. But if this same action were to occur outside of the classroom setting, the protester could not be removed.

O'Neil agreed that disrupting a class should not be permitted.

Because it is, "charged with training immature minds, it is the university's responsibility to train students and professors to give sensitivity to issues," O'Neil said.

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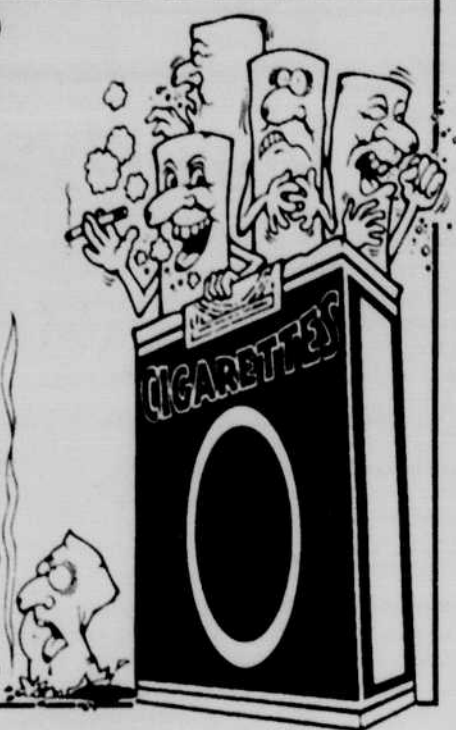
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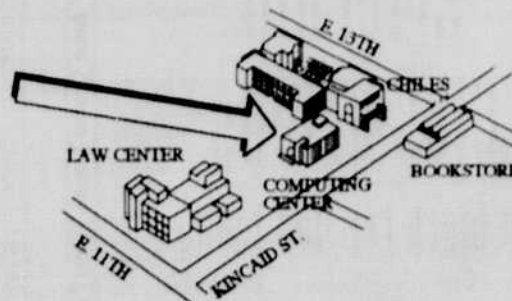
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Deadline for submitting Et Als to the Emerald front desk, 300 EMU, is noon the day before publication. The news editor does not have a time machine. Et Als run the day of the event unless the event takes place before noon.