

Printing of photos not evidence of Emerald racism



MARTIN FISHER

"Okie use" to mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it just means you're scum. Don't mean nothing itself, it's the way they say it."

— John Steinbeck

If a picture is worth a thousand words, the three photos on the front page of Tuesday's *Emerald* are worth a book — or so you would believe, judging from the response they generated.

The photos in question were of the three University of Washington athletes arrested Oct. 31 and charged with first-degree burglary and first-degree sex abuse after an alleged incident at the University Inn.

The publication of the photos, according to some recent critics, was simply another example of the *Emerald's* racist attitude. Recent letters to the editor suggest the photos served no genuinely newsworthy purpose, and instead merely exacerbate society's pre-existing racial tensions.

The publication of photos, when available, serves a number of purposes, not the least of which is to prevent potential confusion as to the identities of the story's subjects. For all anybody knows, there is another Jason Shelley, Prentiss Perkins or Douglas Barnes who attend the University of Washington. The photos serve to clarify their identities.

The photos also serve as a notice to the public that, if they have any information regarding the suspects, they should come forward. If a person saw one of the suspects on the other side of town at the time of the alleged incident, it is unlikely that person would recognize the suspect by his name, but is more likely

to recognize the photo. The same principle applies to potential victims of crimes not yet known to police.

But to suggest the photos promote racism is ludicrous. The underlying supposition to the charge is that had the suspects been white, their photos would not have been front-page material.

It is obvious, however, that the critics either are new to the University, have short or selective memories or choose to ignore the truth. In a letter appearing in Friday's *Emerald*, three writers claim, "There have been students in this campus convicted of rape and other crimes, yet we are not warned nor do we have printed photographs of assailants of various racial backgrounds."

A quick look back through the past few years' *Emerald's* reveals no stories about students convicted of rape. However, we should not forget the saga of Michael Patrick Ryan, the 33-year-old University student and dorm resident who allegedly raped a woman in the dorm's weight room. Ryan fled Eugene in a stolen car and allegedly raped another woman in Boise, Idaho, before killing himself in Texas.

Yes, Ryan's photo appeared on the front page of the *Emerald*, and yes, Ryan was white. So what's the point? Following the publication of that photo, no one bothered to claim the *Emerald* was suggesting white, 33-year-old men who live in dorms cannot be trusted because they're rapists.

In April, the *Emerald* ran a photo of a University freshman and fraternity pledge who pleaded guilty to intimidation charges following the beating of a bisexual man. Again, there was no outcry. No one suggested his photo stigmatized young, white males who are freshmen or fraternity pledges.

Along the same lines, the photo in Thursday's *Register-Guard* of Christopher Ray Hare, who is accused of kidnapping and sexually abusing a two-year-old Eugene girl, does not mean the

Guard is suggesting scraggly looking white men with long hair are all potential kidnapers and child molesters.

The *Emerald* did not print the three photos because the suspects are black. It printed the photos because they were available. The photos appeared the same day in the *Guard* and the night before on local television news broadcasts. They, too, displayed the photos because they were available, not because of the color of the suspect's skin.

It's important to examine the photos in context with the story they support. Charges of racism would be valid if, for example, the headline read, "Charges against three black athletes reduced," or if the story made reference to black athletes, black suspects or just black men.

Obviously no such references exist, either in the *Emerald* or any other media. In fact, the only people engaged in race-baiting are those critics who seek to apply racial overtones wherever possible. One letter writer suggested the photos' "prejudicial effect clearly outweighs any beneficial effect."

The photos are not prejudicial. Their publication is not prejudicial. The prejudice exists solely in the minds of those who are incapable of seeing beyond the color of a person's skin and who cannot think beyond the most simplistic terms — black men are bad men and printing their photos proves it.

Other critics have wondered why the *Emerald* didn't print a photo of a fraternity pledge who was alleged to have raped a University student following a party last year. Certainly it wasn't to protect the identity of the woman, who made her story public in numerous letters to the editor and commentaries on the pages of the *Emerald*. So what other reason could there have been? Was it because he was white, or because the *Emerald* doesn't consider rape a serious enough event to warrant running a suspect's photos?

In that case, the student was never prosecuted, and thus his identity, as well as his photo,

was never released to the *Emerald*. And although he may have been prosecuted under the Student Conduct Code, those proceedings are confidential. The *Emerald* cannot print what the *Emerald* does not know.

In fact, during the past three years, the *Emerald* has only

have printed the photo of religious activists who appeared on campus more than a week ago, because doing so simply reinforces the notion that all Christians are bigoted hate mongers who get off on condemning all that doesn't meet their value system.

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printed photos of criminal suspects three times, and two of those (mentioned above) involved white suspects.

The *Emerald* has printed a number of stories involving both current and former University football players involved in alleged criminal activity, but none of their photos were ever printed. Why? Because the crimes of which they were accused were relatively minor (civil disturbances, recklessly starting a fire, etc.) and thus did not warrant photographs.

Many of the people involved in those incidents also happened to be black. If the *Emerald* had some sort of racist agenda, would it not have published those photos as well? What reason could the *Emerald* possibly have for not printing those photos, considering the paper is a "portrait in white racism"?

Perspective is everything when trying to interpret a photograph. For example, the sports section of the Oct. 28 *Guard* contained two photos, both of black athletes. Should this be interpreted as meaning blacks are good athletes, but not much else?

Or perhaps the Nov. 4 *Guard* photo of a 78-year-old man, in conjunction with a story about eye disease, is an attempt to stereotype the elderly as sickly, weak and generally less than perfect.

Maybe the *Emerald* shouldn't

Obviously these notions can be stretched into infinity until the only option is to avoid printing any photographs. Information should not be withheld from the public because someone considers it offensive.

On Tuesday, fliers labeling the *Emerald* as racist appeared around campus. Someone with a little too much time on their hands created a collage of *Emerald* headlines, letters to the editor and photos of various staff members, yours truly included.

The fliers called the *Emerald* a "portrait in white racism" and called for firing *Emerald* Editor Jake Berg. The fliers are harmless, so far as the *Emerald* and those labeled "racists" are concerned.

However, the same is not true for the three men whose photos are the subject of the controversy. The flier also displays their photos in a rather gratuitous manner, using them only because they are black. The flier is racist to the core in its portrayal of black men for the sole purpose of race baiting.

The problem lies with people who act without regard for the consequences of their actions. It does not lie with the media that report those actions. Reality is rarely as black and white as some people would like you to believe.

Martin Fisher is a columnist for the *Emerald*.

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