

Emerald policies illustrate 'racist folklore' of media

By Clarence Spigner

The events of the past two months surrounding the *Emerald's* decision to strategically place — on the front cover — the mug shots of three black University of Washington athletes charged with burglary and attempted rape at the University Inn (ODE, Nov. 2) prompts this response.

Judging from some of the subsequent letters to the editor and the *Emerald's* own reactionary commentaries conveniently used as a quick defense to students raised by the Black Student Union (BSU), there exists a pathological and frightening ignorance about why many African Americans and others in the community are worried. The National Opinion Research Center reported in 1991 that whites still believed minorities to be inferior. Among its survey findings: 62 percent of whites said blacks were more likely to be lazy; 56 percent said blacks were more violence-prone; and 53 percent said blacks were less intelligent (*Register-Guard*, Jan. 1, 1991). It seems the dynamics of white dominance with journalistic arrogance spawned the BSU's concerns, rather than any notion of "political correctness" or censorship.

It helped little that the *Emerald's* editors and staff writers responded so immediately to the black students by building straw men and then demolishing them. Some took self-serving advantage of in-house access to the press and offered excuses rather than explanations. Still, the seemingly inconsistent manner in which the *Emerald* applied the First Amendment is perhaps in keeping with any student newspaper: in other words, writers are learn-

ing to be journalists. A recent poll revealed the public rated news journalists very low in trust, yet we must depend on them for (correct) information. The *Emerald* should at least consider the BSU's concerns instead of engaging in so much defensive posturing.

Unless one is addicted to watching reality-based police programming on TV, there seemed little justification for the photographs in question. There was a "be on the lookout for people who look like these guys," since the people in question had already been caught. The fact that the pictures were also embarrassing probably mattered only to African Americans and others sensitive to the media's role in racial stereotyping. But embarrassment is not the central issue here nor should it be (though the lower the class the more chance of exposure to such public scrutiny; thus stereotypes can be exacerbated).

The photographs and nature of the story provided less stability and more titillation for those still hung up on race mythology, i.e. black men obsessed with sex and violence. By itself, this observation would be less valid except that the *Emerald* last year prominently featured another front page story with an accompanying photograph of a black man — a campus public safety officer — accused of sexual harassment. The story implied the irony of a safety officer trusted with protecting the public and made broad hints to the Packwood affair. Both stories were given significant space and placement but included little substance. And yet another black man and athlete, with a photograph and a story of alleged sexual misconduct, was given the front page treatment in

the *Emerald* in fall, 1990. An underlying assumption was that readers were being informed about whom to avoid.

A likely concern here is that in spite of the overwhelmingly white population of both the University and Eugene, the *Emerald's* coverage seems to promote blacks as the major perpetrators of criminal acts — though in 1990, African Americans made up only 1.3 percent of the city's population, and as of winter quarter 1992, only 1.3 percent of the University population. The manner of such news coverage fosters a notion that crimes, sexual and otherwise, are committed disproportionately by blacks.

A perusal of past *Emerald* cover stories and photographs lends some support to this contention. Pictures tend to feature more white people in benign humanistic and intellectual settings more so than pictures of blacks. A very recent example is the big 10 inch by 12 inch full page picture of a black football player on the cover of the Nov. 20 sports supplement. That "in-your-face" photograph was designed to intimidate, which was the point. And the *Emerald's* Nov. 23 edition, which pictured black students on the cover, dealt with a protest. What seems like selective representation of African Americans paints a very limited picture of multiculturalism.

The print media have the right to publish what pictures and stories they want. Whether the *Emerald* is fair or uses good judgment (or exercises journalistic responsibility) is a question the paper will have to answer. The accusation of emphasis on sex and violence regarding African Americans deduces such alleged behavior as representative of the entire group. Even if the paranoid

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delusions of a most virulent racist infected the common sense of the *Emerald* staff, statistically, it would still seem impossible to legitimize such coverage of blacks in the manner in question.

Within the present political, social and historically ethnocentric environment, the BSU has requested — not demanded as it is likely to be interpreted — that the *Emerald*, among other things, increased its representation of African Americans on staff. The likely rationale is that more diversity in the newsroom might breed more sensitivity in reporting. This is an assumption I wish were true. Neither African Americans nor any other racial or ethnic group (or gender) occupy a moral high ground on objectivity. This has been proved time and again by the existing white (male) status quo. Besides, there is something wrong with a news organization that opportunistically trots out somebody with dark skin to cover the "racial" angle. Since whites do not have a genetic pre-

disposition to greater intelligence (some think they do) it is suggested that the present *Emerald* staff develop better (or more thorough) reporting skills.

Unless this campus paper is into some weird recycling, the stack of *Emerald* newspapers in a refuse barrel on the corner of 15th and Agate just inside the Hayward Field fence says much about race relations and freedom of the press at this University. The newspapers, which likely came from a rack near by, were the Nov. 23 edition, which featured the BSU peacefully protesting the *Emerald's* headline and picture in question. The trashing of those papers could likely mean someone is either upset with the *Emerald* and/or he or she doesn't care for the black protesters. Such reactionism is exactly why the press must remain free and open to all.

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COMMENTARY POLICY

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