

Tobacco Corp. threat more smoke than fire

OUR OPINION: Free speech, nation suffers when big industry bullies First Amendment rights

"We are outraged about the revelations in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Daily News*," blustered Brown and Williamson Tobacco Corp. spokesman Tom Fitzgerald last week after *60 Minutes* leaked a story detailing a tobacco additive that causes cancer in laboratory animals.

In fact, buckle your reading seat belt because this usually calm and mild-mannered opinion piece is about to "go off" on a bunch of blow-hards.

How's this for starters: Uhm, hey Fitz? Take your bully mentality, your company, your "tough guy" smoke screen, and everything you represent and go to hell.

Better yet, take your outrage and stuff it back up the end that is not normally used to smoke cigarettes.

Whew. Ok, now we feel a little bit better.

But not much.

Everyone involved in the recent blow-out over a 1994 clandestine interview between *60 Minutes* and former B&W vice-president Jeffrey Wigand comes out a loser.

The American public loses out by not being fully informed of a deadly tobacco additive (we'll try to refrain from preaching that medical science has already determined a direct link between smoking and various forms of cancer); free speech under the First Amendment loses by being muzzled; and CBS loses

credibility and power by not stepping up to and facing down the threats of a sinister tobacco company.

B&W Tobacco is like the neighborhood bully that won't stop picking on you until you walk up, look him in the eye and smash him in the mouth.

Unfortunately, CBS apparently doesn't have the guts to do that. We're not advocating violence, but there are ways to get the proverbial monkey off your back.

Make no mistake, the tobacco industry is fighting for its very life. It has had to hire the best attack-dog public relations firms in the world to keep its head above the waters of public opinion. In reality, the tobacco industry's ship has already gone down.

The toughest and most ruthless companies claw for the few remaining life preservers (threats of legal action to silence entities like *60 Minutes*) — after that, its every man (or company) for himself.

B&W Tobacco would have very likely gone after CBS's jugular vein with every ounce of legal muscle it owns. The company might even have seriously hurt CBS.

Perhaps the reason we get hot under the collar when the media loses battles like CBS did with B&W Tobacco (albeit without a fight), is that we are deprived of our purpose as journalists to expose fraud and scandal.

Of course, thanks to CBS's "never say die" move in leaking the story to two newspapers, the press (and the public) was still able to give the bad guys a fat lip and a couple of really good black eyes.



Society hears echo of classroom silence

A jury acquits four cops of beating Rodney King; L.A. burns. No comment. Four hundred years of inequality abruptly ends in South Africa with the nation's first free elections. Business as usual.

National terrorism explodes onto the front page as the Oklahoma City Federal building is bombed. Continuing where we left off ...

Peace in the Middle East, O.J. walks, Rabin is assassinated, Bosnia smolders, "Contract with America," Million Man March. Please open your books to page ...

For being a university, a place devoted to education and discourse, there sure isn't much talking going on here.

Yes, we go on ad nauseam about the mating rituals of the wildebeest, the laws of thermodynamics and the symbolism in *Jane Eyre*, but rarely do we bring our discussions out of the abstract. We talk academics; we don't talk about the world around us.

Every time some momentous thing happens, I come to school yearning for a forum to sort out what has occurred. No luck. It makes no sense to me.

What good are all of the lessons we learn if we don't pay attention to their real ramifications? Is "Sociology of the Family" the only class to which the "Contract with America" is relevant? Is there not a connection between "American History" and the O.J. verdict?

Professors realize that neither current events nor course curriculum occurs in a vacuum, so why the silence?

Well for one, professors have a chunk of material to get through within a 10-week period. And if you make room for a class discussion about peace in the Middle East, then the important issues (like memorizing the marine trading routes of the Middle Ages) get pushed by the wayside.

That's no excuse. Professors must appreciate that an occasional debate about a current social issue can have more educational value than a diatribe about some abstract piece of academia.

Not that abstract academia doesn't have its place. What we learn here gives us the tools to recognize and talk about what's happening in our world. But what good are these tools if we're never given the chance to use them? Can't Shakespeare wait for a day? After all, he's not going anywhere.

But the kind of insight and emotional intensity that emerges every so often, after an event has jarred our collective consciousness, is going somewhere. It's an ephemeral moment of clarity.

When significant events shake us up, we are left grappling for answers. If we ignore these struggles, we will soon lapse back into everyday

modes of sleepwalking our way through school and life. Maybe, just maybe if we talked about touchy subjects, delved into risky waters, the discourse and discovery would beget more talk and thought.

Then maybe the people in my class discussions would actually talk. Maybe the next time the *Emerald* asks for opinions on race relations, it will get more than four letters. Maybe if universities produce thinking, questioning individuals, we won't live in a nation where we are all held hostage by the rhetoric of liars. And maybe then, we won't all be so paralyzed by fear.

Because it is fear that promotes the clamp-down on classroom discourse and keeps lecture halls from truly being forums of learning.

Fear. Professors cannot initiate discussions outside of the controlled academic fields of their expertise lest they be accused of pushing an agenda, which these days — with the University married to the state legislature — can spell trouble.

Fear. Students won't speak up. I've had classes where professors called on pupils to name examples of stereotypes. Silence. Nobody wanted to risk political incorrectness and mention these foul generalizations, even though talking about them, laying them out on the table, is the best way to negate them.

And real discussions about real issues can get messy, even (shudder) emotional. People get upset, offended, freaked out. The classroom becomes a microcosm for society, complete with all its resentments and chasms.

But at the end of the day, it is in such discussions that we learn. No matter, it's still too risky, too scary. Better to tippytoe around the issues. Heaven forbid someone rile the students' complacency.

I'm graduating, and this is my last column. In my time here I have tried to instigate dialogue that went beyond the constraints of the syllabus both in my classes, in private with my professors and with my friends, especially my colleagues at the *Emerald*. It is from many of these exchanges that I learned the most provocative and valuable lessons.

Here's a piece of self-righteous advice: Talk about issues, even if it feels uncomfortable. When the outside world mirrors something in your class, or even if doesn't, speak out. Your professors will most likely be grateful and responsive. Talk with and listen to your fellow students, especially the ones who seem different from you.

If you don't, then it doesn't matter how many term papers you've written and exams you've passed; you have been robbed of an education. And if you head out into the real world, unable to think and question, you are a sitting duck, waiting to be duped.

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Oregon Daily Emerald
P.O. BOX 3156, EUGENE, OREGON 97403

The Oregon Daily Emerald is published daily Monday through Friday during the school year and Tuesday and Thursday during the summer by the Oregon Daily Emerald Publishing Co., Inc., at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon. A member of the Associated Press, the Emerald operates independently of the University with offices at Suite 300 of the Erb Memorial Union.

Unsigned editorials represent the opinion of the Emerald editorial board; signed columns represent the opinion of the columnist.

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