

Some question whether 'ODE' is held accountable

■ **INVESTIGATION:** Without reader input, the staff must rely on guesswork to decide what to cover

By Seung Kim
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Most newspapers could argue that they inform through their coverage of news, act as a voice for their readers through letters to the editor, and provide diverse views and opinions through their commentaries and editorials. Newspapers are a medium that attempts to serve the public interest.

But because newspapers are also businesses, they also want to prosper financially. This potential conflict of interest has existed among all forms of media for decades, and the *Emerald* is no exception.

Though it has been around for nearly a century, the *Emerald* has been an independent paper only since 1971. Until then, the *Emerald* was part of the University. But when the Vietnam War and other sensitive issues arose as a potential point of contention, the administration decided to allow the *Emerald* to become a private, nonprofit corporation.

And today, upon a brief examination of its mission statement, the *ODE* behaves like most newspapers. The *Emerald* wants to survive and increase its prestige and reputation. It wants to train its journalists so they may improve their craft. It tries to serve as a forum for news and opinion. And like most campus papers, it is free — or is it?

The ASUO Programs Finance Committee, charged with allocating student incidental fees to various groups, recently approved the *Emerald's* 1996-97 budget request of \$129,000 to help cover printing costs — the same level of funding the *Emerald* has received the past two years. That works out to about 3.5 cents per issue, per student. Finance committee chairwoman Susan Anderson says the PFC's allocation to the *ODE* is, in effect, a bulk subscription for the student body.

If the *Emerald's* interests have as much to do with serving its own needs as it does with serving as a daily voice for students, what does this free paper offer?

Could it improve its content or structure to further the campus culture? And if so, what are some of the possible options open to the *Emerald* or any of its readers?

Currently, the *Emerald* is composed of about 45 percent advertising and 7 percent off-campus news imported from the Associated Press. The remaining 48 percent is devoted to sports, calendars, entertainment, editorials, letters and campus news.

According to David Thorn, *Emerald* editor-in-chief, the paper could expect to get somewhere between 30 and 60 potential stories a day in the form of news releases and notices from various businesses, groups and governing bodies. Perhaps a quarter of these are eventually mentioned in the paper. The *Emerald* also receives about three letters to the editor a day, 75 percent of which get published, after editing.

Thorn says that because students plan their day and try to get the most out of their college experience, and because the *Emerald* boasts a circulation of nearly 10,000 copies a day, the *Emerald* is the best way to stay informed about forums, administrative news, funding information and sports on campus. But because the *Emerald* has room for only a dozen or so stories a day, it cannot try to cover every event or happening.

Thorn says that it is partly guesswork in figuring out which topics interest readers and impact the community most. Gauging the news value of a story is a learning process for editors and reporters, as they try to become better journalists.

Thorn says that given the shortage of staff, and the relative inexperience of some of them, the *Emerald* does a fine job of training its employees and providing a forum for news and opinion. But could it be better?

Thorn believes that the *Emerald* could better recruit new staff members, as well as broaden and deepen its level of news coverage. He would also like to see the *Emerald* move further away from printing spoon-fed news from other agencies.

Since he took over in June, the *Emerald* has had a visual facelift in an attempt to make the newspaper more pleasing to the eye,

and offer its readers more points of entry into stories. But Thorn admits that improving the quality of content, rather than just its presentation, is more difficult.

Many *Emerald* staff members enter their jobs with little more than high school journalism experience. Training programs for staff take time and money. And the staff has deadline pressures and student obligations that often restrict the broad, in-depth stories from being covered. But some outsiders argue that the problems of the *Emerald* go deeper than that.

Farrah Bostic, editor-in-chief of the University's conservative journal, the *Oregon Commentator*, says *Emerald* reporters view news only in the way newsworthiness is taught in school. Bostic also says that many staff members see the *Emerald* as a resume check-mark and often don't care about what they're covering. This means "news is covered in a half-assed way," she said.

Tristan Masat, a former chairman of the PFC, questions the *Emerald's* accountability. He says the *Emerald* is more accountable to the finance committee than to the community. Masat says that in order for a group to receive any incidental fees, it must show that its existence is "furthering the physical or cultural welfare of the community," by statute.

A 1985 Attorney General's opinion argued that if a group performs an educational function, it meets criteria to be funded. Without this clause, many groups such as the Ad Club might not get funding at all, current PFC chairwoman Anderson said. On technical grounds, any group that can demonstrate that it is performing some type of an educational function, under current interpretation, cannot be refused upon content grounds alone.

The *Emerald* serves the educational function by training aspiring journalists to become professionals. Since the *Emerald*, relying on ad revenue and concerned about the bottom line, appears very similar to a typical newspaper like *The Register-Guard* or *The Oregonian*, some may ask why it should receive any incidental fees at all. Masat questions how the *Emerald* can maintain itself as a private news agency and still

receive funds like a campus paper. Could the \$129,000 the *Emerald* gets be put to better use in furthering the cultural or physical well-being of the community?

If the *Emerald* will continue in its current structure and role, some students have offered suggestions for the future.

A linguistics major from Serbia suggested that the *Emerald* could provide more profiles of departments, organizations and agencies around campus. This could mean that instead of having to choose which organizational events to cover every day, the *Emerald* could profile an organization or a program in-depth to show its goals and activities.

A graduate student in journalism says that the *Emerald* could focus its regional and national coverage so its content is specifically relevant to students and the University. Others believe that the *Emerald* should not print any regional or national news at all since this is better provided in a local or national paper.

As a private news agency, the *Emerald* will continue to pursue what is best for the *Emerald*. But as a campus newspaper, how does it serve the interests of the community? Since the readership surveys conducted by the *Emerald* are primarily to gain relevant stats for advertising purposes, the staff must gauge on their own what the public interest is. The two-way communication between the providers and the served seems silent at the moment, at least for the majority of the *Emerald's* readership.

If any of the readers' concerns about funding or content choice is to have any impact, it will probably be up to the readers themselves to create a voice. If the readers passively pick up their free *Emerald* every day, and the *Emerald* can continue to boast of its 10,000 circulation, there may not be any reason for the *Emerald* to change.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is an unsolicited look at the *Emerald* by a freelance writer not affiliated with the newspaper. (Although, as with all freelancers who write for the *ODE*, he was paid for his work).

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