

Moral issues run deep

OUR OPINION:
Controversial issues such as abortion and same-sex marriages aren't easily resolved

Abortion. Capital punishment. Same-sex marriage. These are just some of the moral issues that divide our nation and fuel today's national debates. If there's one thing we enjoy, it's arguing about these issues and listening to others argue about them. In too many cases, however, talking about these controversial topics is a complete waste of breath.

Throughout our society, and at the University in particular, moral issues are the center of countless forums and discussions. People with strong opinions on both sides try to prove the validity of their point of view. The purpose of these debates is to both educate and spark debate. But the question is, are they at all productive?

The answer depends on the definition of "productive." If productive means the debates get people talking and thinking about these issues, the answer is probably yes. If productive means they change the way people think about these issues, the answer, for better or for worse, is no.

Unlike debates over tax increases or foreign policy, issues like abortion cut deep into people's moral backbones. Where people stand on important moral issues is not only a reflection of their moral belief systems, but also who they are as individuals.

The moral beliefs that people hold have been developing over their entire lives. They depend on an infinite number of factors, such as who a person's parents were, where that person grew up and where he or she went to school. In short, everything that went into making up who a person is today helped shape that person's moral beliefs. Given how much goes into forming these beliefs, it's not surprising that people are

hesitant to change them.

For people to change their stance on gay marriages or capital

punishment requires much more than changing their mind on one particular issue. It requires changing their entire moral belief system; in essence, everything that makes them who they are. It's hard enough to make small changes in life. Changing one's entire belief system is almost impossible.

The sad truth is the very people who attend forums on these issues are those least likely to change their minds. Anyone who cares enough to show up has already formed an opinion and is unlikely to be willing to change it. Even though the point of talking about these issues is to educate, the people doing the talking (and the listening) are not going to be persuaded by additional information. More likely, they will take what is said and either reject or accept it based on what they already believe.

This is not to say we should not talk about these issues

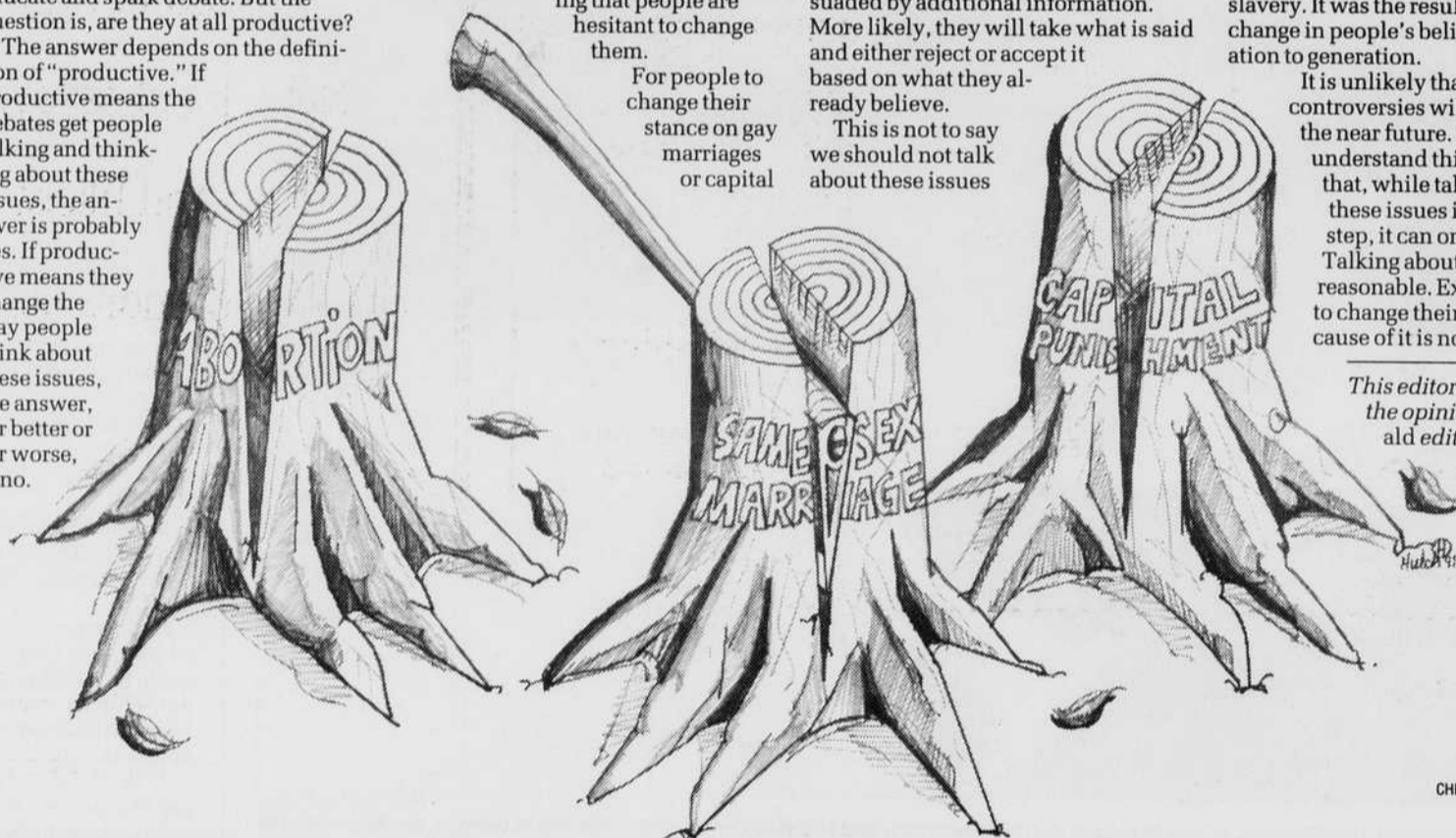
— we should. It is only to say that we should be realistic about what we will accomplish by talking about them.

There's no way that any one piece of information will change a person's entire moral belief system. If the point of a discussion is to get people thinking about these issues, it is probably worthwhile. If the point is to try to persuade, it will most likely be a waste of time.

This is also not to say that moral controversies can never be resolved. Slavery was a moral controversy that once split the nation. Now almost everyone would agree that slavery is wrong. But this change in beliefs was not the result of a debate or forum on slavery. It was the result of a slow change in people's beliefs from generation to generation.

It is unlikely that today's moral controversies will be resolved in the near future. People should understand this and realize that, while talking about these issues is a positive step, it can only do so much. Talking about moral issues is reasonable. Expecting people to change their beliefs because of it is not.

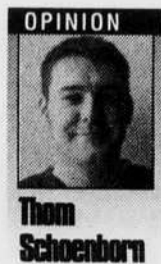
This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board.



CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

Question not the content of these controversial characters

PFC should focus debate on the Commentator budget



Thom Schoenborn

As it happens every year, the ASUO Programs Finance Committee will hear the Oregon Commentator's budget proposal tonight. And like every year, there will be a discussion of how offensive, immoral, racist and sexist the Commentator's content is.

It will not do anyone any good. The PFC cannot make funding decisions based upon how offended it was by the Commentator.

No amount of wishing, breath-holding, yelling or fist-pounding will change that fact. In fact, it would be quite a feat to cut the budget of any publication on campus that appears on a regular basis—based on content.

The Commentator's latest back page, this time on Ebonics, was another marvelous poke at the way other people talk kinda funny.

Some classic examples from the feature: "May I have a light pilsner?" is translated to the Ebonic phrase, "Pass the forty, byatch."

However, the PFC must look past this really bad example of humor because in the end it is a question of content.

Instead, questions about the Commentator at its hearing tonight must stick to these factors: Did the Commentator spend all of its money last year? If not, why? Did the

Commentator publish on a regular basis? Did all the issues get distributed? Did the Commentator print all the copies it said it would? Has the Commentator done any fund raising?

Questions that tackle subjects like hate speech and fighting words will carry no weight, even though the University's policy is much more protective than that of Oregon and the United States. To have any chance of success in a campus setting, the University or ASUO would have to prove that hate speech occurred in the immediate presence of a specific person.

Even if somehow the PFC manages to refer the magazine's budget to the Student Senate or the student ballot — as was attempted last year — the ASUO Constitution Court would rule in favor of the Commentator. Having its editor, Andrew Oberiter, on the Constitution Court will probably help.

Attempting to send the Commentator to the ballot last year put the entire incidental fee process in jeopardy. By establishing a precedent in which the ASUO could arbitrarily decide which groups would face an all-or-nothing scenario in the ballot process, any group that became unpopular would be at risk.

That is the beauty of the incidental fee process. All groups, regardless of their

viewpoint, must be accepted. All that matters, funding-wise, is this question: "Are people participating?"

And, oddly, that doesn't really matter. Because even traditionally unpopular groups must continue to receive funding to further the marketplace of ideas that the University hopes to foster.

There is simply no way for the University to cut publications based on content. If someone disagrees with content, they can boycott the publication, write letters, stage a sit-in or do something else semi-constructive.

The University is a state-sponsored institution. The ASUO is sponsored by the University. But the Commentator is an independent entity, and the state can only limit its freedom of speech in very, very narrowly defined circumstances.

So even though the latest back page is probably offensive to more than a few people, there is nothing much the PFC, as an entity of the University, can do about it.

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Corrections

■ In the Jan. 17 article on University President Frohnmayer's freshman seminar, the name of accounting major Gabriel Bayley was misspelled.

■ In the Jan. 27 issue, the photos of former vice-presidential nominee Winona LaDuke and Graduate Teaching Fellow Christina Castro were switched. The Emerald regrets the errors.