

CONTACTING US

NEWSROOM: (541) 346-5511
E-MAIL: ode@oregon.uoregon.edu
ONLINE EDITION: darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ode

ADDRESS: Oregon Daily Emerald
 P.O. BOX 3159
 Eugene, Oregon 97403

PERSPECTIVES

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
 Sarah Kickler
EDITORIAL EDITOR
 Mike Schmierbach
NIGHT EDITORS
 Doug Irving
 Eric Collins

Creswell could suffer in corporate bonds

AN EMERALD EDITORIAL

As fewer companies buy more newspapers, small communities stand to suffer from inadequate coverage

According to Register-Guard writer Don Bishoff's Monday column, "A newspaper war is about to break out — in Creswell, of all places."

Bishoff is right to be writing about the situation soon to occur in the town of Creswell, but he chose the wrong noun to describe it. What's about to break out is a slaughter, not a war.

It seems the *Creswell Chronicle*, a small weekly that serves the community, is about to face some competition. Ordinarily, there's nothing wrong with competition in the newspaper business or anywhere else; too many major cities are served by only one newspaper.

In this case, however, the competition threatens to destroy the useful role the *Chronicle* plays in its community. The competition comes from the *Cottage Grove Sentinel*, which is about to start publishing a weekly of its own to serve the Creswell community.

No problem, right? The *Cottage Grove Sentinel* hardly seems like a massive corporate behemoth about to run a community company out of business. This isn't Wal-Mart versus the corner store, after all.

Except that behind the *Sentinel* lurks a conglomeration of newspapers, all owned by Lee Enterprises, which recently bought the paper and several others in Oregon for \$185 million, according to Bishoff. Looking to recoup its losses, Lee is setting out to make money off the investment. Apparently, taking control of the media market in Creswell is part of the strategy.

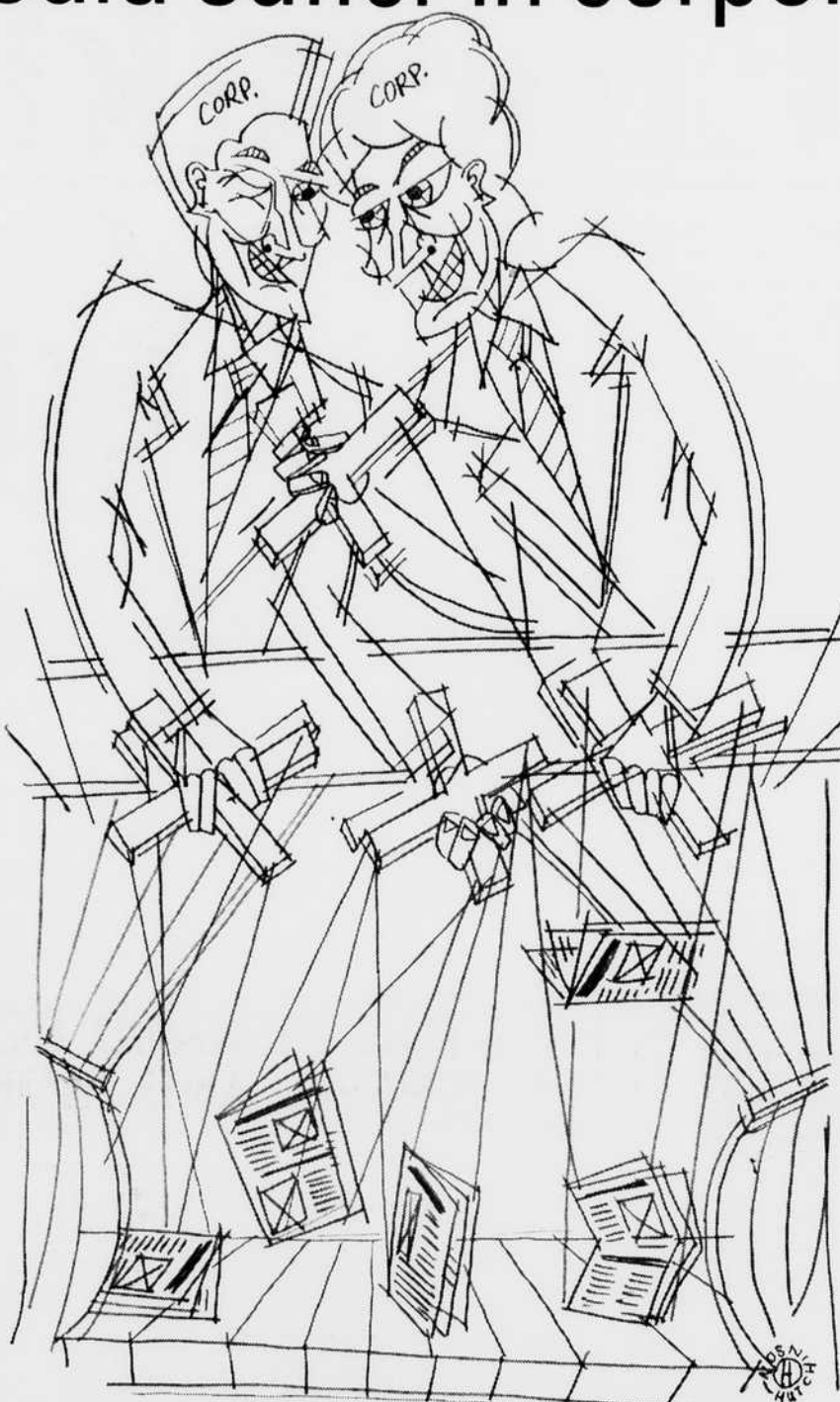
Lee will almost certainly win. With the capital of corporate ownership behind it, the *Sentinel's* new Creswell addition will feature full color — the *Chronicle* can only afford black and white — and will be mailed free to 3,500 people each week. *Creswell's* current paper charges \$18 a year and has a circulation of roughly 1,000, Bishoff wrote.

Of course, the theory is that the readers will choose the paper they prefer, thereby boosting readership and keeping the better journalism company in business. So, all the *Chronicle* has to do is continue to serve the interests of its community, and everyone will be happy.

In the real world, everyone is never happy, least of all when corporate money comes into play. The larger, newer, full-color newspaper can claim a larger circulation simply because it is mailed for free — whether people read it isn't important, as long as they receive it. Accordingly, the new paper can solicit advertising more easily. Worse, because the paper can afford to lose money for the time being due to the capital backing it, the *Sentinel's* new edition can probably charge less for advertising while selling more readers to advertisers.

The truth of the media business is that the quality of the product matters little. If the best-written paper in the world has to charge advertisers more while delivering fewer (or even as many) readers, it will go out of business. Without advertising dollars, publications in today's marketplace spiral painfully into the ground.

Even magazines with massive circulations like *Life* and *The Saturday Evening Post* went out of business simply be-



CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

cause they couldn't secure advertising dollars. They could provide readers, but not an optimal set of consumers for companies obsessed with market shares and demographics.

Frankly, the same thing is likely to happen to the *Creswell Chronicle*. We hope the better, more community-oriented paper will win, but we suspect the prize will go to corporate dollars.

It is also possible that the *Sentinel's* new edition will do a good job of meeting Creswell's needs. The history of corporate ownership, however, indicates the opposite. According to Ben Bagdikian's *Media Monopoly*, the percentage of "hard news" contained within newspapers shrank from 13 percent to 7.5 percent between 1940 and 1980, the same period when corporate ownership began to mushroom.

This is despite the fact that, according to Bagdikian, readers prefer newspapers that contain more investigative re-

porting and more hard news, rather than the cute graphics and food sections newspapers have been shoving down our throats for years.

Some of this can be attributed to the general influence of advertisers, who are becoming increasingly picky about the content of the publications in which they pitch their projects. According to an article in the September-October *Columbia Journalism Review*, advertisers are demanding more from the magazines and newspapers they advertise in.

Some advertisers ask that their spots not be run close to potentially offensive or controversial copy. The industry has long been in the habit of pulling ads from "objectionable" television programs, even though those programs often grab huge ratings. Other companies have gone so far as to request a copy of controversial stories before they are run, according to *CJR*.

This influence can take place in small papers just as easily as in large, corporate-owned chains. However, there are unique harms that come only from corporate ownership.

Perhaps most significant is the makeup of the people who own a large percentage of newspapers these days. According to Bagdikian, the number of companies that control the bulk of the national daily circulation was 11 in 1992, down from 20 in 1983. The total number of corporations accounting for the vast majority of media revenue was just 20 in 1992.

Bagdikian and others argue, correctly, that such control has a price. Because massive corporations own the media — and many of those corporations also have other business interests — the media tend not to report news that makes corporations look bad.

In addition, as more and more papers are owned by fewer and fewer companies, most publications start to look the same. Many readers might not know it, but most Oregon papers are owned by outside companies. *The Oregonian* is controlled by Newhouse, while Salem's *Statesman-Journal* is controlled by Gannett, owners of the powerful and vapid *USA Today*.

When publications are owned by corporations with deep pockets, they are able to fight libel suits and send reporters to cover important stories. Unfortunately, they also lose touch with the community they cover.

If history is any indication, Creswell can look forward to a weekly that begins to cut local coverage and does less reporting as time passes. The new paper will find its owners demanding a high return on their initial, market-seizing investment. In order to turn a profit, advertiser-friendly content will be added and local news will suffer.

Worse, the paper will begin to reflect the political interests of its owners, covering up corporate greed and social and environmental concerns.

Of course, history might not be any indication. There are well run corporate newspapers. *The New York Times* is part of a chain, and while it falls victim to the same content problems other papers do, it still publishes a superior product.

Nevertheless, the Creswell "war" is one more instance where corporate dollars threaten to interfere with the health of a community and the needs of the citizens who live there.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Frohnmayr wants quick fix

According to Thursday's article in the Emerald, University President Dave Frohnmayr is pushing the state government to allow Oregon state colleges to keep their tuition fees instead of depositing them in the state fund from which all Oregon state colleges draw. His reasoning is that the tuition money is disproportionately redistributed among the colleges and the University of Oregon is getting less than its fair share. I would urge the president to be careful in making such a move and to consider the effects it may have on other Oregon colleges.

I ask this because the current problem with Oregon higher education funding is not routed in how tuition money is apportioned to each school, but

in the simple fact that there is not enough money devoted to the entire Oregon public school system to run its school as wished. In short, reappropriating tuition money is only a quick and feudal fix to a much larger issue that demands attention if we wish to continue quality educational institutions in the state of Oregon.

Oregonians have consistently proven that they do not want to pay for better schools. It began with Measure 5 in which Oregonians were promised lower taxes at the cost of less money for our schools. Oregonians were promised that we would take care of the schools in another way. A few years later Oregonians were asked to vote on a sales tax to help support our schools — it was denied. Last year, the state passed Measure 47 which again dealt a serious blow to both schools and oth-

er public institutions. However, through the generosity of the people of Oregon, we do get money from the state's gambling institution, the Oregon State Lottery. I thank each and every gambling addict out there.

No matter how we reappropriate current state money we will not be able to pay for the quality of education that the people of Oregon demand without compromising other important government institutions such as law enforcement or roads. We must pay for what we want. If we want better schools, we must pay for them — there is no way out.

Brent Saxton
 Communication Disorders and Sciences

CORRECTION

The people in the photo on Page 1 of Thursday's *Emerald* should have been identified as Allison Jones (right) and Ryan Hudson (left).

LETTERS POLICY
 The *Oregon Daily Emerald* will attempt to print all letters containing comments on topics of interest to the University community. Letters must be limited to 250 words or less. The *Emerald* reserves the right to edit any letter for length, clarity, grammar and style.