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Media falsely focus on student rioters

AN EMERALD EDITORIAL

The tension in the West University area is more complex than police fighting student drinking

Get ready for some shocking news: University students drink alcohol. Some of us drink enough to get sick, belligerent or non-selectively amorous.

In recent weeks, a few University students have moved beyond that stage and engaged in activities detrimental to the campus-area community. Local police and media have labeled two evenings "riots," and to some extent the word seems acceptable.

We certainly don't want to condone the behavior of certain partygoers at the two Eugene "riots." Throwing bottles, destroying city property and acting stupidly are irresponsible behavior whether you have been drinking or not.

In the aftermath of Eugene's string of uncivil disobedience, the local media and University officials have been focusing on the role underage-student drinking has played in the situations.

There is nothing wrong with trying to combat irresponsible drinking. All University students, not just those under the arbitrary 21-year-old boundary, need to be careful about their drinking habits. Drinking enough to adversely affect your health or judgment is dangerous.

Nevertheless, the fact that the media chose to highlight college drinking only after the riots bothers us. One, it indicates an earlier failure on the part of the media to deal with the issue. Two, it suggests underage drinking was the primary factor in the riots.

No matter how The Register-Guard and the police attempt to ignore them, the facts indicate otherwise. Many of those involved in the parties, and many of those arrested by the police, were not underage. More important, the majority of those arrested in the riots were not University students.

The Register-Guard has consistently ignored this in their coverage of the recent campus-area events. Sunday's Guard provides a perfect exam-



ple of the way the local newspaper has covered the situation.

In Sunday's City/Region section, there were two stories that were clearly inspired by the earlier riots. One story, "Key to plan: students' desire to socialize," by Cami Swanson, focused on a University-sponsored discussion on curbing on-campus substance abuse. The conference is admirable, but the placement of the story and the decision to cover it clearly associated concerns about on-campus drinking with the riots.

The other story, by Tad Shannon, who regularly covers the University, discussed Shannon's Friday night. The intrepid reporter tagged along with police and talked to students who were drinking in bars or getting in trouble with the cops.

Shannon was undoubtedly hoping he could cover another riot, but he came back with a badly conceived piece of journalism that is indicative of the inaccurate coverage the Guard has provided of the riots and potential solutions to the "problem." Every part of the story focuses on the

actions of students Friday evening, from his lead and its discussion of "small bands of students" to his decision to focus on students drinking at bars and being ticketed for open containers.

What the Guard and other local media have missed while covering the story is the reality of tension in the campus area. By casting this exclusively as a University problem, where drunk students irresponsibly squabble with police, the media have presented the riots as a conflict between students and community.

The reality is that the community itself is the source of the tension. Even in the West University area, a variety of groups coexist, often under less-than-peaceful circumstances. The animosity certain members of the Eugene community feel toward the police stems not from alcohol use but from this ongoing tension.

From the decision to ban dogs and skateboards on 13th Avenue and close the park on 14th Avenue to the choice to place police between protesters and tree-cutters on June 1,

business owners and politicians have used police to manipulate certain groups within the Eugene community.

Many of these individuals have nothing to do with the University. The fact that most of those arrested in the West University area are not students — not just on the nights of the riots but as a whole — indicates that tension with police is felt primarily by those who live in the University area but don't attend school.

The issues raised by rioting in the University area go beyond student drinking or hatred of the police. When The Register-Guard and other media focus only on one aspect of an ongoing conflict, they ignore the realities of the community they claim to cover. Such reporting, which selects two groups — police and students — and places them in opposition, not only shows a lack of incentive but does a disservice to the community.

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

Thumbs



TO THE NANNY SENTENCE: While a life sentence for a 19-year-old girl seemed a bit harsh, and while we admit that certain facts in the case are debatable, the judge's decision in the Woodward case is unfortunate. There is no reason a person should spend less than a year in jail for killing an infant, especially when that killing was done out of ignorance and by force.

SPLITTING THE 9TH CIRCUIT: Congress delayed for a year dividing the massive U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals. Despite this delay, during which time the Supreme Court is supposed to discuss the matter, we still object to the Republican push to split the district for political reasons. While the court is by far the largest district, the reason it often runs behind is because Congress has been slow in confirming Clinton's nominations to fill empty seats. A plan to modify the court, which is currently very liberal, takes on a more conservative slant.

DRAWING BOARD



CORRECTION

The letter to the editor titled "Hunger and homeless" (ODE, Nov. 17) written by Karen Patterson and Bryan Schilling should have said, "These aim to increase public awareness and to reduce the disturbing prevalence of hunger and homeless." The Emerald regrets the error.