

Monday, November 25, 2002

Editorial 'Big Brother' is watching us; 'security' takes privacy away

Has the world of George Orwell's "1984" come to pass with the recent passage of the homeland defense bill? Perhaps it doesn't legislate authoritarianism, but the combination of a denial of information to Americans along with the increased collection of their personal information by the government could lend itself all too well to abuse by a "Big Brother" figure.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, President George W. Bush has spearheaded efforts to bring together various people and agencies that may be important as a cohesive unit for combating terrorism.

Although the editorial board is supportive of efforts that would actually enhance people's safety, many of the measures enshrined in the homeland defense bill, in conjunction with the now nearly year-old USA Patriot Act, should scare Americans.

The Pentagon, under former Adm. John Poindexter, a key figure in the Iran-Contra scandal, has been given permission to keep a massive database, called the Total Information Awareness program, which would collate the personal details of Americans' lives.

Nearly every purchase people make, every event they attend, every e-mail they send, the departure and destination for every flight they take, will all go into this database. As The Police song goes: "Every breath you take / every move you make / I'll be watching you."

The government says the database is benign — it might allow them to "put the puzzle together" before another terrorist attack — but it would still be any KGB or Gestapo man's dream come true. Its own motto, in fact, shows the danger as well as the potential: "Knowledge is Power."

More worrisome, though, is that just as more private information is being collected, knowledge about the government is being hidden. The homeland defense bill allows any information now freely available through the Freedom of Information Act to be deemed a "potential security weakness" and brought back under the cloak of secrecy. And the rub: Only the department decides what a "potential security weakness" is, precisely.

These two new proposals show almost limitless bounds for abuse. Will embarrassing information be suppressed under color of "security weakness," and then anyone requesting that information (for instance, journalists) be hounded through the Total Information Awareness program? Will the next group of "plumbers" getting dirt on a rival political candidate walk into the Pentagon rather than sneak into the Watergate?

Americans have good reason to be afraid of their government given these new marching orders. They should speak out, and the Bush administration should rethink these authoritarian measures before the slope becomes any more slippery.

Editorial policy

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses can be sent to letters@dailyemerald.com. Letters to the editor and guest commentaries are encouraged.

CLARIFICATION

The story "EPD issues fewer citations, lessens patrols" (ODE, Nov. 22) should have said that the Eugene Police Department has eliminated the overtime officers on the West University Focused Patrol, but the patrol itself has neither concluded nor been cut.

An apology to the community

I'll say it once again: The Emerald is run by students, and we're learning. Sometimes learning means not just acquiring more training, but also taking your lumps and apologizing when it's deserved.

And the paper does owe an apology.

Here's the situation: On Thursday, the Emerald published a front-page story with two photos, covering Wednesday's anti-war rally in the EMU Amphitheater organized by Students for Peace, which took place in conjunction with the National Student/Youth Day of Action.

The headline was, "Adding their voices." One of the photos was of the crowd in the amphitheater, and the other was of protesters in front of Johnson Hall after a march that followed the rally.

Both of the photos were terribly inaccurate in their portrayal of the events of the day. Both pictures were true and unretouched, but they showed a skewed representation of what actually occurred. For this, I apologize.

The crowd shot was zoomed-in close, and the dominant part of the image was of at least five counterprotesters carrying "Bush/Cheney" signs and holding a handwritten sign that said, "UO Students Support America." Only one person in the picture was identifiable as an anti-war protester, carrying a sign that read, "No War."

This image was unfair and unrepresentative because at least 300 students, by our count (and more than 500, according to KVAL-TV), attended the rally protesting against war. A fair and balanced overview photograph of the event would have included almost

entirely anti-war protesters and only a few counterprotesters.

The Johnson Hall photograph was taken minutes after the marchers had left the front steps of the building, and only a few students were in the photo, even though many more were actually there.

Fortunately, the story was fair and representative. Unfortunately, some readers don't read the whole story, and a smaller number of people don't even read it all — they glance at the pictures and headlines.

To a student who had not been on campus Wednesday, our coverage could have made it seem that the whole event was "Bush/Cheney" supporters "Adding their voices" to the debate about war, or that only a few people showed up to protest war. That is not a fair characterization of the event, and the photographs we selected should have shown the full picture of what happened at the rally.

To me, this is not a political issue, although politics has been injected into the discussions that I had last week with members of Students for Peace. As I see it, we unfairly and inaccurately represented a student group's public event, and that should not happen. Student groups are the University's community groups — they function like a city's non-profit groups, arts organizations and cultural outreach programs.

For many student groups, an event is the only large-scale public face they present to the community. As a community newspaper covering the University, then, we have a special obligation, when we cover these events, to portray them fairly and accurately. When we don't, we're failing as journalists and as community members.

Unfortunately, though, this event was about a political issue, and a controversial issue of life-or-death importance, at that. I can affirm that this error was not

done on purpose or with political motives, and I can tell you why.

The Emerald newsroom has students representing a broad cross-section of political views, from one end of the spectrum to the other. We work hard daily to keep each other in check and make sure that our decisions about the news are not made in deference to our ideologies, but that we have journalistic reasons for why we write stories, how we cover issues and how we decide placement of stories in the paper. Otherwise, again, we would be failing as journalists.

That process of arguing journalism values happened on Wednesday just like every other day. Unfortunately, we fell down when it came to being sure the photos were fair.

I also know this misrepresentation wasn't purposeful because a string of small errors, procedural problems and oversights led to it. Many hands were involved all along the way in creating this giant mistake, and those hands were not all of a like mind, politically.

So I am taking this space today to apologize to Students for Peace for misrepresenting their event. I am sorry it happened. I also apologize to all of our readers, who should be able to — and can, usually — rely on our headlines, photographs and stories to be an accurate depiction of the world.

I have taken steps within the newsroom to ensure this doesn't happen again, to any group at any event. And I offer thanks to everyone who brought the mistake to my attention. Communities should take a more active role in keeping the media honest, and I'm glad members of the campus community are so involved with their news sources.

Michael J. Kleckner is the editor in chief of the Emerald. Send your concerns about Emerald coverage or content to editor@dailyemerald.com.



Michael J. Kleckner

The editor's office

Online poll

Each Monday, the Emerald publishes the previous week's poll results and the coming week's poll question. Visit www.dailyemerald.com to vote.

Last week: How should the University handle KUGN's promoting itself as "the voice of the Ducks"?

Results: 79 total votes
 Do nothing, it's a censorship issue — 41.8 percent, or 33 votes

Make KUGN change the slogan — 16.5 percent, or 13 votes

Make KUGN drop the Medved and Savage shows — 10.1 percent, or 8 votes

End affiliation with KUGN — 25.3 percent, or 20 votes

Don't know — 3.8 percent, or 3 votes

Leave me alone! — 2.5 percent, or 2 votes

This week: Should the University start classes earlier in order to end fall term in time for Thanksgiving?

Choices: Yes; No; Don't know; Leave me alone!



WHAT BUSH EXPECTS TO FIND IN IRAQ

Steve Baggs Emerald