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In my opinion

CONTROL of commentary

If you browse this page regularly, you've no doubt noticed the Emerald editorial board's acrid convictions about the quality of this year's student government. In case you haven't, some January editorial headlines make for a quick, fair primer: "(Programs Finance) Committee threatens free speech on campus" (Jan. 5); "Doing right thing just not 'feasible' for ASUO" (Jan. 6); "PFC attacks students by censoring publications" (Jan. 24); "Budget cut contradicts an ASUO contract" (Jan. 25); and, less subtly, "Incompetent student government nothing new" (Jan. 27).

Disagreements between student government and student publications are nothing new on this campus, and festering displeasure naturally rears its head when the stakes are highest: at the annual PFC hearings, when (mostly) elected students converge and allocate a whopping \$5 million in student incidental fees to student groups. This year, some PFC members upped the ante, however ineffectually, threatening to defund the campus' two most important student publications — the one you're reading and the embattled Oregon Commentator. As of Tuesday night's PFC meeting, when PFC Vice Chair Mason Quiroz resigned, the funding row still hadn't been resolved.

But tangent to this inflamed narrative of a free press, student dollars and the committee's dubious analytical skills, resides a quieter but equally illustrative drama. The butt of many one-liners (and also the subject of a mean-spirited entry in the Commentator's "Faces to Avoid" feature), outspoken senator Toby Hill-Meyer has leveled against the publication the obviously serious charges of "hate speech" and the creation of a hostile environment on campus, and has filed a grievance with the ASUO. (Staff members of the Commentator argue the tabling of the Commentator's budget was motivated not by concerns about the compliance of its longstanding mission statement but by Hill-Meyer's quarrel with the journal.)

Hill-Meyer's recent guest commentary in the Emerald ("It's about hate, not conservatism," Jan. 31) rightfully contends that the conflict isn't chiefly



TRAVIS WILLSE
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about clashing political orientations. Painting it as such obscures the deeper, nonpartisan points of free speech, ostensible harassment, and what exactly you can and can't (and should and shouldn't) say and when. Oh, and there's the complication that the contested expression is published with student dollars, too.

Some of the Commentator's jokes in question are indisputably tasteless, conjuring images of genital mutilation ("jokes" are the journal's characterization, and one which Hill-Meyer seems to agree upon provisionally). But Hill-Meyer interprets these jokes — which take the form of obviously satirical false quotes attributed to him in the journal's regular feature, "The OC Asks" — as implying something graver: "The implication here being that trans people ought to be dealt with through the (violent) removal of their genitalia, and that to do so with a gun would somehow be better, perhaps more macho." How he comes to this conclusion is unimaginable: The red herring about machismo aside, the Commentator's content in question alludes to Hill-Meyer inflicting bodily damage himself. None of it, however, can be reasonably construed to mean that "trans people" ought to be "dealt with," in whatever sense he means.

Hill-Meyer correctly suggests that "the issue is not whether groups on campus are allowed to make hate speech," but incorrectly argues that it is about "whether the campus is going to sponsor hate speech with roughly \$15,000 a year." The latter issue is moot: While it may be lurid, insensitive and nonsensical (as the Commentator's writers are no doubt aware), the content in question, as well as depictions of violent sex to which Hill-Meyer has also objected, do not constitute "hate speech" of any reasonable definition.

Moreover, there's no evidence that anyone has acted on the content, or that it has turned the campus into a hostile or unsafe environment for Hill-Meyer or anyone else. (Even if someone had acted on the content, the Commentator's words are so far from inciting action that it couldn't be reasonably held liable in terms of student incidental fee dollars.) In a word, Hill-Meyer's approach is overreaching (not to mention constitutionally suspect).

That said, he has wisely criticized the Commentator (at least publicly) only for a few bits of content: In particular, the Commentator's jokes at his expense and loose descriptions of violent acts. But these represent the least useful and interesting parts of the publication. At its best, the Commentator is incisive, smart, plainspoken, and rouses discussion about important issues in the world at large, and particularly on campus. It offers features (like extensive interview transcripts) outside the scope of traditional newspapers, and, as a journal of opinion, includes in-depth commentaries far longer than, say, the Emerald's format allows.

As a reader of the Commentator, I find the latter sort of feature much more compelling and thought-provoking than the sort of content to which Hill-Meyer explicitly objected. From the piece he mentioned unrelated to his faux quotes: "I want to murder someone. I want to smash a chair on someone's head and bite their lips off. I want to beat someone to death as they scream for mercy. I want to break a bone in my hand while breaking someone else's nose. Either that or I want to hate f--- some girl. But preferably both at once." This content evidently distracts from the Commentator's finer points. And it would be a superior publication if it shifted its content accordingly.

But this call for an adjustment of tenor from a reader is only that. Given that its speech is legal and that the journal is advantageous to students' cultural development (as it presently is), the Commentator's content must be dictated by its staff, not by the sensibilities of its readers — Hill-Meyer's and my own included.

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INBOX

Free speech only way to explore meaningful ideas

In regards to the Jan. 26 editorial, "Yellow ribbon complaint — code red free speech threat," thanks for getting it right. Political correctness is the road to servile mediocrity. Free minds are the strongest source of great thoughts. A University that cannot accept even moderate free expression cannot explore meaningful ideas. Thanks again for doing your jobs.

Patrick Lasswell
Portland

Emerald mistakenly lacks coverage of Iraqi vote

Your lack of coverage on the recent vote in Iraq is appalling and inexcusable. Regardless of your views on politics, January 30 was a monumental day in history for democracy. Millions

of Iraqi citizens defied threats from terrorists to exercise their freedom of choice. It is an insult to the tens of thousands of troops fighting in the Middle East and the more than 1,400 Americans who have died in Iraq. A small editorial does no justice. Instead of the ongoing coverage of your tiff with the ASUO and the PFC, how about you actually cover some important news? It's not surprising that your funding has been decreased.

Rob Zaebst
Undergraduate

Negative coverage negates positives of Iraq war

Though I admit to not reading your paper everyday, it seems to me that on those days I am able to pick it up, the news on Iraq is always negative. War itself is not positive but it can and will have a positive outcome when Americans stand behind the effort and start

celebrating the good that is coming from us being there. While it is terrible to lose even one life during this campaign, we cannot let them die in vain. Everyday thousands of Iraqi's are getting fresh water delivered to them, getting electricity for the first time in their lives, and now have the right to vote in a legitimate election for the first time in almost 50 years. Can you not find articles about these things?

With every negative headline, with every television news report that makes it look like Americans are against helping spread democracy to the world and not supporting our president or military, the terrorists win another battle. The worst is over and good things happen every day now; start spreading the good news. You don't have to forget the bad, just be supportive while you do it.

Shawn Garrett
Undergraduate

Editorial

Facilitator desperately needed for PFC process

This experiment in student government, whereby elected student leaders are responsible for allocating millions in incidental fees, has been a rocky one to say the least. Nevertheless, it is an experiment worth saving.

Rather than dismantle the system because of student incompetence, as some have argued, students should take the responsibility for their finances more seriously. This begins with the responsibility of the student body as a whole to take the time to research student candidates and vote in student elections. This ends with the responsibility of our student leaders to carry out their duties in a legal manner.

The Oregon Commentator's Programs Finance Committee "hearing" (if you can call it that) on Tuesday did prove one thing: Reform is desperately overdue. Contrary to popular belief — and current practice — PFC meetings are not a forum for student leaders and the student body to air their specific grievances and accuse the Commentator of hate speech. Rather than discussing budgets and fiscal responsibility, as a few members desperately pleaded for, most PFC members spent two hours arguing about their job descriptions and their moral responsibility to protect one of their own constituents. There seemed to be absolute confusion about what viewpoint neutrality means and whether it is even legitimate.

This is a serious problem. Right now PFC members are either ignorant about the limits on their power — due to rapid turnover and/or a lack of formal training — or they do not take those limits seriously. Either way, their promise that student groups will receive a fair hearing about their budgets is not being delivered.

Our solution: Mandate that PFC meetings are run by a non-voting, outside facilitator who will be responsible for making sure that student members follow the law and base their decisions on fiscal responsibility rather than conflicts of interest and misplaced activism. It is an ideal compromise: Power over incidental fees would continue to reside with elected student officials, while providing for a more fair, professional PFC meeting.

Something must change if students are going to continue to be trusted with the power to allocate their own fees. How many more years will go by before we dub this experiment an utter failure and students lose control of our money? At the very least, we must find a way to get our student leaders to operate within the law.

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