

Censoring the Student Press

By John K. Wilson

Any day now, the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago will issue one of the most important decisions in the history of the campus press. The case is *Hosty v. Carter*, and the principles at stake not only will determine whether college students have the right to print what they want, but also will affect the idea of academic freedom itself.

The Hosty in *Hosty v. Carter* is Margaret Hosty, a graduate student at Governors State University in south suburban Chicago, where she helped edit the *Innovator* newspaper until it started printing articles critical of the administration. In 2000, a few days after Governors State's president sent a campus wide memo denouncing the newspaper, the dean of students called up the *Innovator*'s printer to order him not to print any further issues of the paper without prior review of the content by the administration.

The state of Illinois continues to defend the administration's actions, and asserts that college students should be treated like high school students and subjected to the censorship of student newspapers.

Faculty Advisors Fired

The right of students to produce a newspaper without direct censorship by the administration are well established. But administrators are beginning to realize that the faculty advisor can be a powerful force in controlling student newspapers. In the past year, faculty advisors faced an unprecedented number of firings.

Barton County Community College (Great Bend, Kansas): the Board of Trustees fired Jennifer Schartz, part-time professor and adviser of the *Interrobang*, on April 20, 2004, without explanation. The *Interrobang* had published a letter to the editor, written by a former basketball player, critical of the coach, despite being asked by the administration to censor it. University lawyers wrote to Schartz, "since Barton County Community College is ultimately responsible for the content of this publication, it is the Administration's position that letters of this type will not be printed as letters to the editor," but Schartz noted that censoring the newspaper would be illegal. The board ordered her to ban negative letters from the student newspaper, *Interrobang*, after a letter from a former basketball player criticized the coach. "the Administration has decided that no letters to the editor will be published which are by and large personal attacks upon other members of the Barton County Community College family. I am certain that you and your student staff persons do not agree with this position but unfortunately, the ultimate responsibility from a liability perspective with regard to this newspaper falls on the greater College community and this is why this decision has been made."²

Vincennes University: Michael Mullen was removed as student newspaper adviser to the *Trailblazer*, claiming that he was fired because of stories criticizing the administration for failing to investigate a theft of the newspaper, and questioning whether the president had enough experience for the job. After an April Fool's issue in 2003 offended some people, Dean of Humanities Mary Trimbo ordered the newspaper not to produce another, but it did in 2004. Mullen declared, "I think the message is loud and clear — if you speak out, you will pay."

Manatee Community College: the student newspaper, *The Lance*, was banned and a journalism class for Fall 2004 eliminated because it published a March 2004 story without prior approval from the faculty advisor. The newspaper may be allowed to resume in the fall of 2005. An article titled "Dude, where're my student activities?" complained about the lack of events on campus. Rebecca King, a faculty adviser to the newspaper, said about the administration's decision: "They thought of it as protecting the college from what could be unflattering coverage. Do I think that's censorship? Yes. But I don't think anybody was intentionally trying to censor the students."

Long Island University: faculty adviser Mike Bush was fired and editor Justin Grant was suspended from the newspaper for a month because an article appeared in the Jan. 21, 2004 *Seawanhaka* about the grades of the student government president who resigned. Administrators took control of the newspaper and changed the office locks. In a story about the resignation of the student government president, the newspaper reported his poor grades that another reporter had found and confirmed with several students. Although no university records were released, the university claimed that the student newspaper was violating federal privacy laws which prohibit the administration from releasing personal records of students.

Arapahoe Community College: Chris Ransick was dismissed as newspaper adviser after battles over content of the paper.

Fort Valley State University in Georgia: Dan Archer, faculty advisor, was dismissed over content issues in the student newspaper.

Kansas State University: Ron Johnson, director of student publications and adviser to the Kansas State Collegian, was fired from these positions by the administration. Members of the Black Student Union had called for Johnson's resignation after the paper did not cover the Big 12 Conference on Black Student Government. In 2004, the Collegian was named the best four-year daily broadsheet newspaper in the country. Journalism school director Todd Simon declared, "It's kind of like a coach; if the record is middling, usually you change coaches." After receiving five "outstanding" ratings from 1999 to 2003, Johnson received an "exceeds expectations" rating in 2004 and was recommended for a raise. On July 6, 2004, a federal judge ordered the administration to reinstate the newspaper's faculty advisor.

California State University-Long Beach: Daily Forty-Niner publisher William Mulligan was removed after printing a full-page ad criticizing journalism department chair William Babcock for his "chilling censorship warning" to the staff. Babcock discouraged the newspaper from reporting the dispute within the journalism department, declaring, "It's not a news story."

Sex and the University

Perhaps no topic is a greater source of censorship than sexuality. Numerous newspapers have been censored or stolen because of sexual content, especially at religious universities.

Spokane Falls Community College: new campus rules will allow administrators to fire or punish journalists and require advance permission for publishing any "controversial material." Two student editors who printed a small photo of a couple having sex (covered with black bars) were not fired because the previous policy would not allow it.

University of Missouri at Kansas City: a building manager removed 450 copies of the *University News* because of a front-page article on "Sex at Swinney."

La Roche College: the president destroyed 900 copies of the April 14, 2004 *La Roche Courier* because a columnist advocated teaching students about safe sex.

University of North Florida: the student government sharply cut funding for the student-run radio station and required Osprey Radio to survey students every other week about what music it should play. One student senator complained that the station was playing "the filthiest, most vulgar, disgusting, unbelievable stuff."

University of Scranton: The 2004 April Fools edition of *The Aquinas* led officials to shut down the newspaper for more than a month, fire the editor, and remove all remaining copies of the newspaper. The edition of *The Aquinas* included a "fictitious reference to a priest caught fooling around with a woman during the screening of *The Passion of the Christ*," and a *Celebrity Death Match* between the former and current university president. In a special full-page "statement of ethics" in the May 13, 2004 issue of *The Aquinas* compelled by the university before the newspaper was allowed to publish again, the staff and editorial board of the newspaper promised, "it is important that we strive for the same goals as our University" and added, "Though our mission is to serve as a paper of record and voice of the student community, we cannot appropriately foster the overall mission without respect for the ideals of Jesuit pedagogy." An editorial in the same issue proclaimed, "Through errors of omission and commission the newspaper developed a forked tongue. This will be no more."

Baylor University: The *Lariat* staff was threatened with disciplinary action for a Feb. 27 2004 editorial supporting gay marriage. "Taking into account equal protection under the law, gay couples should be granted the same equal rights to legal marriage as heterosexual couples," the editorial said. In a strongly worded statement that appeared in the newspaper on March 2, Baylor President Robert B. Sloan Jr. denounced the editorial: "Espousing in a Baylor publication a view that is so out of touch with traditional Christian teachings is not only unwelcome, it comes dangerously close to violating university policy, as published in the student handbook, prohibiting the advocacy of any understandings of sexuality that are contrary to biblical teaching," Sloan wrote. The student publications board, a group of faculty and administrators overseeing the newspaper, called the editorial a violation of student publications policy which says that student publications should not "attack the basic tenets of Christian theology or of Christian morality." The statement assures, "The guidelines have been reviewed with the *Lariat* staff, so that they will be able to avoid this error in the future."

Other Cases of Censorship

Other types of censorship range from newspapers being shut down by the administration to efforts to fire columnists for expressing controversial viewpoints.

Hampton University: the president ordered newspapers confiscated after the students refused to publish her letter on the front page, and instead printed it on an inside page. After protests, Hampton adopted new policies on Dec. 19, 2003 protecting freedom of the campus press and prohibiting confiscation of newspapers.

Oregon State University: The Daily Barometer fired columnist David Williams after his column, "A message from a White Male to the African American Community" offended many readings. It later was revealed that parts of the column had been plagiarized from a syndicated columnist.

University of California at San Diego: administrators temporarily shut down a student television station because it showed the video of the beheading of Nicholas Berg in Iraq, canceling all student-produced shows for the remaining two weeks in the semester.

St. Cloud State University: former dean Richard D. Lewis sued the university because of a critical article about him accusing him of anti-Semitism that appeared in the Oct. 27, 2003 student newspaper, the *University Chronicle*. The newspaper retracted the article and apologized to Lewis. A judge dismissed the suit.

Rutgers University: The Medium, a campus humor magazine, offended people with a cartoon that declared, "Knock a Jew in the oven! Three throws for one dollar! Really! No, REALLY!" Some critics called for the publication to be shut down. In fall 2003, the newspaper printed personal ads with slurs against African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics, Jews, Christians, women and homosexuals. Former New York City mayor Ed Koch denounced the president for failing to punish the newspaper, and urged New Jersey governor McGreevey to "initiate remedial action" against the university.

Carnegie Mellon University: President Jared Cohon established a commission to review The Tartan, the student newspaper, after an April Fools' edition sparked protest because it included a cartoon with a racial slur, poems about raping a teacher and mutilating a woman with an ice skate, and an illustration of female genitalia. The editor-in-chief fired the cartoonist (who intended for the cartoon to criticize racists) and apologized, and ceased publication for the rest of the semester, but the commission will examine possible disciplinary action. A content review board will examine future editions of the newspaper. Dean of Student Affairs Michael Murphy, who will serve on the board, noted: "We all make mistakes and people err in judgment, but this cannot be tolerated. The Tartan is sitting in judgment of itself ... the administration will also sit in judgment of The Tartan and the students involved in this." Demonstrators called for all the students involved in allowing the racial slur to be printed to be suspended or expelled.

Cornell University: The campus NAACP sought to remove funding from *The Cornell American* and The Cornell Review after articles on racial preferences and violence were published that the NAACP regarded as an "orchestrated attempt" at "hate."

Roger Williams University: The Hawk's Right Eye had its funding cut off. President Roy Nirschel declared, "While we affirm the right of campus organizations to hold different points of view and to disagree, the university will not condone publications that create a hostile environment for our students and community."

Whittier College: a conservative campus newspaper, the Liberty Bell, was not allowed to distribute on campus without prior approval from the school publications board.

Southwest Missouri State University: officials investigated the faculty advisor and student editor of The Standard for publishing an editorial cartoon (drawn by an American Indian student) on Nov. 21, 2003 that a Native American group found "offensive" because it shows two Native Americans meeting a Pilgrim woman with a gift of canned corn, and the Pilgrim responds, "Gladys, the Indians are here and it looks like they brought corn...Again..." Editor-in-chief Mandy Phillips was told to attend "mediation" and that reporting on the administration's investigation could violate university policy. Also, SMS Young Americans for Freedom members claim they were prohibited from distributing their newspaper on campus because they were not a recognized student group.

Newspaper Trashings

One of the most common types of censorship is throwing copies of a free newspaper in the trash. The most frequent reason for destroying a newspaper continues to be endorsements in a student government race.

Laramie County Community College: more than 300 out of 1000 copies of the March 8, 2004 issue of *The Wingspan* were stolen. Editors blamed a student government member who was angry about an editorial concerning tobacco sales on campus.

University of Central Florida: the homecoming queen who asked friends to trash copies of *The Future* because of an article revealing her criminal record was required by the university to do 16 hours of community service and pay the newspaper \$1,000.

University of Southern California: copies of the Jan. 27, 2004 issue of the left-wing alternative newspaper *The Trojan Horse* were stolen, probably because the issue focused on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Queens College: On March 31, 2004, 80% of the 4,000 print run of The Knight News was discarded because of a student government election story.

Cal Poly Pomona: 2,500 copies of the Poly Post were stolen because of a story about the student government election.

Western Oregon University: most of the copies of the weekly student newspaper were stolen; several eyewitnesses saw the subject of a political cartoon about the student body election taking the newspaper.

University of Nevada at Las Vegas: On Oct. 16, 2003, copies of the campus newspaper were put in garbage bags because of a column titled, "Christopher Columbus, we salute you" which called American Indians "primitive Stone Age level savages."