

S.P.O.V. *

* Student Point of View

Truth and Consequences

Does America have a fundamental misunderstanding of the function of a newspaper? By EVAN MAYOR, BA'05

“IT’S THE BEST THING I NEVER WANT to do again” is the most appropriate cliché to sum up my editorship of the *Vanderbilt Hustler*. Don’t get me wrong: Running the student newspaper at Vanderbilt was an incredibly rewarding experience, but after time the criticism gets to you.

Angry readers have cussed me out on numerous occasions. One reader asked me if I had a soul, and another reader wanted to know how I could live with myself. (Coverage receiving the harshest response included our decision to print the name and mug shot of a student involved in a DUI-related accident on campus last year, our coverage of athletes who were arrested, and the controversy surrounding the name change of “Confederate Memorial Hall” to “Memorial Hall.”)

I am sure a number of journalists out there would tell me it’s part of the job, and that I shouldn’t take it personally. When I received these calls and e-mails, I kept telling myself that we were doing something important; we were informing the University community about the news, good and bad.

But just as the First Amendment gives the press the right to print what it wants, it also gives the public the right to criticize.

Sometimes the criticism helped us make the paper better, and I took each suggestion seriously. I enjoyed receiving letters to the editor, and we printed all the letters we received, even when they were critical of our work.

Although I attempted to deal with the criticism in a professional manner, it always bothered me when people questioned our reasoning for printing an article or a column. I am of the opinion that people should not go to college and step immediately into



their comfort zones. College is a place where beliefs are questioned and reinforced or redefined; it’s a time when students learn how to defend what they believe in. And I believe the role of the student newspaper is to facilitate this discussion, however imperfect the process may be.

The *Hustler* is a student-run newspaper with a \$300,000 budget. We do not receive any student activity-fee money, but instead are completely self-sufficient through ad sales and subscriptions. Unlike many for-profit newspapers, the *Hustler* doesn’t have to worry about appeasing readers. Student newspapers are in a unique position to inform the community about issues they don’t necessarily

want to read about or discuss—something I think for-profit dailies should attempt to do more often.

In the past year the *Hustler* news section contained a number of stories about drugs, rape, eating disorders and racism on campus. Some students said we were just looking for ways to start controversy, calling much of our reporting sensationalistic. We did attempt to capture peoples’ attention. We revealed the process a woman goes through to report a rape on campus, and we talked with women who suffered from anorexia and bulimia and printed their stories. Many of these news pieces were followed by candid dialogue in the opinion section through guest columns and letters to the editor, discussing solutions to the problems college students face. Witnessing and facilitating this exchange of ideas was the most rewarding part of my job.

During the recent presidential election campaign, students criticized the *Hustler* for being either too liberal or too conservative. As I sat in the *Hustler*’s windowless office in the basement of Sarratt attempting to respond to the influx of criticism, I realized that there seemed to be a fundamental misunderstanding within the campus community about the function of a newspaper. And I don’t think this problem is unique to Vanderbilt, or even to college newspapers. Many people don’t understand the difference between news and opinion content. I can’t tell you how many letters I received from students criticizing

opinion columns for being biased. News articles are stories told through sources, and a reporter's beliefs or opinions should not be evident in the writing. News articles contain opinions, but they are the opinions of the sources involved. Opinion pieces, however, are supposed to be biased. Columns are supposed to take a side on an issue and convince the reader why that side is best. News reporters present the facts of a given topic and the opinions of those sources who have knowledge about the topic, and columnists interpret this information and advocate a position.

Although newspapers have clearly defined news and opinion sections, the line between these two types of journalism is less clear in the broadcast-media world. Many television news programs meld opinion with news, and some shows are correctly labeled as ideologically liberal or conservative. In my opinion this type of journalism is bad for

democracy, and these labels can be found in reference to the newspaper business as well. The credibility of a newspaper is harmed severely by these labels, and newspapers are slowly losing their ability to be effective watchdogs.

So many of my classes at Vanderbilt have focused on this ideological bias—teaching students how to pick out bad journalism—but what about good journalism? If a network like Fox News or CNN reported objectively on something, would we be able to recognize it? It seems that nowadays if a negative report comes out in a newspaper or on television and a person quoted in it doesn't like the story, he/she simply can say, "Well, that's a liberal newspaper anyway. They took my quote out of context." Since many critics regard Fox News as a conservative net-

work, any objective reporting they do will be placed in the conservative category. Politicians can downplay a news report as slanted, which takes away the media's ability to hold the government accountable.

Journalists have a responsibility to present

derbilt, which facilitated our transition to publishing three times a week this year (a first in the paper's 117-year history). I think Vandy students now are more passionate, intelligent and motivated than they were four years ago, which is a testament to Chancellor Gordon Gee's vision for the University and the hard work of the admissions office.

Informed criticism is healthy, and I am by no means saying that the *Hustler* is beyond reproach. We made our fair share of embarrassing mistakes during my tenure as editor of the paper. Students are shying away from entering the profession because of the dismal picture media critics paint of the press today (a picture reinforced by many classes at Vanderbilt). Most students who work on the *Hustler* staff don't want to be journalists; they are simply building their résumés. Because Vanderbilt doesn't offer a major in journalism, staffers don't receive any

credit for their work and there are little or no opportunities for training. It is truly on-the-job training, and we learn from reading other papers and from our mistakes.

Americans shouldn't take freedom of the press for granted. Each story, report or critique should be examined on a case-by-case basis. Labeling entire media outlets as conservative or liberal serves no purpose but to diminish the credibility of the news media as a whole. This country needs more good journalists who are dedicated to objective reporting and—dare I say it?—fewer media critics. As for me, I am currently looking for a job in journalism that will help me pay off my student loans. But who knows? I could be off to law school in a year.



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all the facts objectively, and they shouldn't take this responsibility lightly. *Hustler* reporters and editors don't work for countless hours every week to figure out new ways to slant news pieces along ideological lines. From the limited number of conversations I have had with professional journalists, this doesn't seem to be happening in the nation's newsrooms either.

That being said, the *Hustler* had a liberal opinion section [during my tenure as editor] in the sense that we printed most of the pieces students submitted to us. This policy had as much to do with my belief that college is a time to challenge beliefs as it had to do with the fact that we needed to fill our opinion pages. I will say, however, that there has been a noticeable increase in opinion submissions since my freshman year at Van-