

Gazette Advisory Board

Report on the 2014 Frosh Issue

Gazette Advisory Board Members

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To Iain Boekhoff
Editor-in-Chief, The Gazette, 2014-15

Dear Iain,

On Oct. 20, 2014, you asked the Gazette's Advisory Board to review the actions of The Gazette regarding the publication of its 2014 Frosh Edition, published on Tuesday, Aug. 19. At issue was the publication of an article titled "So you want to date a teaching assistant." Two other satirical-styled articles were also published in an otherwise largely informative, news-you-can-use edition targeted to first-year students arriving on campus. One article was a drinking game, the other a guide to recreational drug use on campus.

You asked the Advisory Board to review the following:

1. Did the T.A. article violate the Gazette's Code of Ethics? Did either of the drinking game or drugs article violate the Code of Ethics?
2. Was the decision to apologize the right one?
3. Was the unpublishing policy violated by taking the three articles and the full PDF version offline?
4. How can the editorial team/editor-in-chief avoid this situation in future?
5. Should there be any disciplinary action taken against The Gazette, the editor-in-chief/Front office, or the writer?
6. Action steps to take based on the conclusions from the previous questions.
7. Did the USC violate our policies in barring us from publishing the reissue of the Frosh Issue with the three articles removed?

Four of the five members participated in the review. Media lawyer Iain MacKinnon was unavailable.

There is not a uniform response to the Frosh Edition from the various advisory board members. However, there was a unanimous conclusion among of the advisory board that The Gazette did not violate the Code of Ethics in the publication of the Frosh Edition. We feel while the T.A. article was not a successful attempt at satire, it was not considered a form of sexual harassment, nor did it encourage the sexual harassment of tutorial assistants. The negative community reaction was considered an overreaction.

No advisory members believed disciplinary action should be taken.

There was not universal agreement on an apology but I think everyone agreed pulling the issue was not necessary.

Let's jump to No. 7. We strongly believe the University Students' Council overstepped its authority to prohibit The Gazette from republishing the Frosh Edition without the so-called offending articles. The USC does not get to make that decision. Publishing a newspaper is a controversial endeavour by its nature. If you are doing your job of challenging authority, exploring ideas, taking a stance, trying to be provocative, or just trying to be funny, you are going to face criticism. That comes with the territory. There is great concern that the USC is using this inherent criticism as an excuse to meddle in the affairs of The Gazette. The rules are clear and have been for more than a century: while the USC owns The Gazette and is its publisher, editorial decision-making belongs exclusively in the hands of the editors of The Gazette.

As for how to avoid such instances in the future and any action steps, here are few issues that were discussed.

Firstly, it was agreed Gazette Front Office editors should receive some form of training before taking over the paper. A libel seminar should be mandatory and this will likely cost The Gazette some money, but it would be money well spent. Many also believe some form of journalism training, likely from a retired journalist or teacher or active journalist or teacher, should be instituted.

I'm going to let the Advisory Board members address some of these issues in their own words, starting with myself.

Scott Colby

I was surprised at the strong negative reaction the Frosh edition received. Ultimately, I felt the "So you want to date a T.A." article was a poor attempt at satire and something I would not have published when I was The Gazette editor-in-chief 25 years ago. But I also do not believe it promoted or consisted of sexual harassment.

That said, I also think the incident has been a great learning opportunity for the Front Office of The Gazette, as well as for the USC president and his staff. This is what university is about: Experimenting and learning. I initially advised Iain Boekhoff not to apologize because he had not received a formal complaint. No one

was asking for one. Initial negative reaction came via social media and commenting on the article itself on The Gazette's website. The Gazette was providing a forum for readers to react; it was fostering a healthy debate on the topic on its website. This is good. Eventually, the issue took on a life of its own and was drawing national media attention. At that point, I suggested Iain should make a statement saying the intention was never to offend anyone with these satirical articles and The Gazette apologizes for the offence it caused. Short, simple, move on.

What happened with the Frosh Edition was unfortunate, especially as this was the first edition Iain Boekhoff and the rest of the Front Office had published. But, The Gazette Front Office has learned a great deal from this. I don't think any drastic steps need to be taken, but I do think some sort of training should be formalized for each incoming Front Office editors before they start publishing papers. They should have to attend a libel seminar and they should also get some training on how to run a newspaper and the responsibilities they now face, what the standards of The Gazette should be and what are the community standards at Western. When I talk about community standards, I raise that because I think Gazette editors need to be aware of what people expect of the paper. If you deviate from those expectations you should expect increased criticism. I want them to be prepared for that and to learn from those who came before them.

The libel seminar should be conducted by a media or libel lawyer and the second part of the training should be done by a journalism professor or active or retired journalist. The benefit of a libel seminar is not to only teach journalists what they can't report but also what they can report. The principles of fair comment and responsible journalism give newspapers great freedom to express a variety of options and investigative controversial matters vital to free society.

Emmett MacFarlane

First, it is important that any training in "community standards" be underscored by the general principle that Gazette staff not be trained to succumb to the expressive chill that comes with worrying about offending individuals in the community. People will be offended by a lot of things good newspapers publish, be it attempts at satire or simply covering controversial topics. My worry with events like these is that the University Students' Council is inclined to treat any offense taken by members of the university community (or beyond) as reason for censure. This "lowest common denominator" approach to assessing "offensive" content would see any attempt at satire that raises the hackles of some campus group as in need of redress.

In this particular instance, I am quite concerned that not only was an apology issued, but the edition was pulled from circulation and the web. This was a fairly tame article that, in my view, was interpreted by objectors in the least generous manner possible. I agree that it wasn't particularly clever or funny, but it hardly warranted the overreaction it got. And while an apology is obviously up to the discretion of the current Gazette front office, pulling the issue is an exercise of self-censorship I would have strenuously spoken against.

Second, every front office needs to think about what it wants The Gazette to be. Some may decide it should try to adopt an approach to replicate the most serious forms of journalism its staff may aspire to. Others will want to blend the work of straight reporting with the snark and humour of a campus paper, including attempts at satire and "pushing the envelope." Regardless, it should do so with some recognition that the paper serves a diverse community, and that the staff should be proud of having their names affiliated with it.

Third, I think a libel seminar would no doubt be worthwhile, not because of this incident but because libel issues are just as likely to arise in contexts where you're not even thinking about being provocative.

Nicole MacAdam

I didn't find the TA article particularly funny, but didn't think it was particularly offensive. I didn't think it needed to be pulled or required an apology, although I understand why The Gazette chose to apologize — it's not the hill I would have chosen to die on.

It worries me that they also chose to pull the issue and were prevented from republishing without the "offensive" material; it certainly wasn't necessary and sets a bad precedent.

I agree that more training, particularly libel training, is important and necessary. The notion of "community standards" training concerns me, and I agree with Emmett that it's up to The Gazette's front office to decide what it wants each edition of the paper to be — a serious outlet for student journalism, or a platform for satire and snark that have long been part of campus publications.

When I was at The Gazette, we had a series of visits from professional journalists who participated in round table discussions where the editorial staff could ask questions. I found it valuable for developing my own skills.

Paul Benedetti

1. I thought the pieces were not that edgy nor offensive. I also didn't think they were very good. Humour is tough. Satire is even tougher. Many professionals fail in their attempts at it, and these stories were neither funny enough nor satirical enough to work. By the way, same with the drug advice piece which was uncomfortably poised between a real "how-to" and a satire. That's a problem.
2. I thought, like many of you, that the response was inflated, extreme and like a lot of these things on campus, hyperbolic.
3. I agreed that despite national coverage the whole thing would blow over — and it did really.

Having said this, I would consider the following:

1. More use of the advisory board. This is a good board and folks like Nicole and Scott and Iain and Emmett could offer good guidance WHEN editors feel they need an outside set of eyes. Everyone needs an editor — even editors!
2. I think the staff of The Gazette — particularly its senior staff — could use more training. It's amazing to me that relatively unschooled people can take the helm of a daily newspaper with virtually no training. That's not fair to anyone — least of all them. One or more sessions on libel and slander are a must. This may require a budget, but it would be money well spent.
3. I think that if The Gazette would like to continue to do "spoof" stories or issues, they should be LABELLED as such. Simply running a banner marked Satire or Humour would go long way to mitigating these reactions or even circumventing them.
4. The editors could also consider an Editor's Note at the front of the paper noting that the issue contains humour and satire, etc.
5. I think it is worth noting that these pieces, though perhaps clunky in execution, are not "way out there" by today's standards (consider the Onion or most music videos) so it's perplexing that they engender such strong reaction.
6. I agree the purpose of a student paper is to be a paper for the students — and sometimes that means ruffling the university's feathers and pushing the envelope. That's good. But it's worth noting that these incidents do provide fodder for those who wish to a) control the paper and b) reduce its publication schedule and its autonomy.

So, I think it best that The Gazette takes some visible steps to bring in better training and some advisory resources so it can best retain its autonomy.

Regards
Scott Colby
Chair, Gazette Advisory Board