

Why Should the College Press Be Free?

by John M. Harrison
drawings by Jim Forrest

(Editor's Note: As a journalism teacher at Pennsylvania State University and earlier at the University of Iowa, John Harrison, a Harvard Nieman Fellow in 1952, has had close association with college papers and their editors. This article is reprinted with permission from the Nieman Reports of January, 1962)

A lot of hogwash has been written about the college press—its place in the educational scheme of things, how much freedom its editors should enjoy,

do it by any of several acts within his rights as Harvard's president. An unholy howl might go up from many quarters. But no constitutional provision could help the boys in Plympton Street one bit should he decide to take such action.

That he does not do so is rather a mark of President Pusey's intelligence and of his appreciation of the purposes student-edited and written newspapers serve in a complex university than of his acknowledgement that CRIMSON editors possess any constitutional right to say whatever comes to mind. College newspapers like the CRIMSON, like

for these traditions and the educational values they represent.

The reasons why the college press should be free

are always needed. The need is especially great today when mounting enrollments tend to isolate the student, to make him

fully functioning administrative machine. They are not so much concerned that students shall have an opportunity to whet their critical faculties as that students shall not rock the boat at all.

new and revolutionary notions. They will be critical and altogether disrespectful of their older and so much wiser mentors.

The genuinely wise educator knows this, of course. Not only does he expect that young people will be critical; he encourages them to speak their minds. He recognizes that this is an essential aspect of the educational process. That is why he leaves them free to give tongue to heresy, and why he recognizes that a free and yeasty

editors want nothing so much as to be regarded as reliable and responsible.

Freedom provides a stimulus to responsibility. For once a student knows he will get either credit or blame for the job he does as editor, he begins to be concerned about his own reputation. He seeks a advice before he acts, where otherwise he would wait for a higher authority to correct his errors. He begins to learn the essential lesson that freedom never really is



College Editors

have nothing to do with students' rights. They are at the very heart of the educational process in a free society. These will suggest themselves immediately to the educator who is genuinely concerned that today's college student develop a free and wide-ranging faculty for criticism. It is this faculty which is the main-spring of a free society. Its withering away has been widely deplored by critics of today's educational system and the graduates it produces.

newspapers provide forum . . .

Outlets for the expression of opinion by students

feel he is more a cog in a machine than a part of a continuing educational process. Student newspapers provide forums in which all kinds of problems are discussed, and not just by the relative few who serve as editors.

But such a forum functions properly only in an atmosphere where the free expression of ideas—including ideas that are critical of the status quo, unpopular ideas—is encouraged. Of course it requires forbearance to grant freedom of expression to students hardly dry behind the ears, who may use this privilege to question the motives and abilities of distinguished scholars and educators. Of course it may demand patience beyond the ordinary to concede that the student critic—however wrong-headed he may be—should be permitted to express his opinions.

But aren't patience and forbearance in the face of student error and abuse essential qualities of educators? Surely they are if the teacher or administrator accepts as one of the basic tenets of a liberal education that the developing mind must be encouraged to test and stretch itself, to put its convictions and its critical judgments into words—even when they may be wrong.

Unfortunately, other considerations come ahead of education in the minds of some college administrators today. They have come to regard students almost as a nuisance, who get in the way of the per-

adds to troubles . . .

One can almost sympathize with the plaintive declaration of one such administrator, sorely tried by what an outspoken editor had written:

"Habitually I am called upon to explain why the University's attitude is thus-and-so, when as a matter of fact, it is The (Student newspaper's) attitude and not the University's which I am called upon to explain. I see no reason why I or anyone should be put to the trouble which this involves. Indeed I see no reason why educational funds . . . should be expended to subsidize a project which adds to our difficulties and troubles."

Poor fellow! His is indeed a thankless job. He must watch out for his university's relations with a board of regents, a legislature, an alumni association, and a whole state's population—none of which is likely to set much store by the ideas "those crazy college kids" are prone to propound. But in his concern with all these, he has lost sight of his first responsibility, which is the education of the young. And the young are a troublesome, feisty lot. They will explore the frontiers of knowledge, and sometimes venture far beyond, instead of being content to be indoctrinated with the safe and tried. They will express



Young People

student newspaper is important.

assume responsibilities . . .

One hopes that students who undertake to edit and publish a newspaper will assume a measure of responsibility commensurate with the freedom granted them. And, with an occasional exception, college

earned until the individual proves that he can exercise it responsibly.

In this way, the college press stimulates not just the critical faculty in the student, but also helps develop that more sophisticated faculty—the responsible exercise of freedom—which can be cultivated in no other way. The notion that responsibility can be injected intravenously and that, enough of it having been administered, freedom can subsequently be substituted in the syringe, is itself irresponsible and destructive. It is a favorite refuge of authoritarians.

case for freedom . . .

Thus, the case for freedom of the college press, which is strong and persuasive, too often is put in its weakest terms. It has nothing to do with the protections the Constitution affords the press. What is at stake is protecting these very constitutional freedoms, which are based on a society whose members are free to examine and criticize all institutions. These freedoms will survive only so long as we make it a stated policy of our educational system to stimulate the critical faculty, not suppress it because it sometimes may cause embarrassment.

This is what our college newspapers can do, have done, and should be encouraged to continue doing.

Should Be

the reasons why it should be free at all.

To invoke the provisions of the First Amendment on behalf of college editors is to miss the point. A newspaper operates on campus at the behest of administrative officials, just as do social clubs and political groups. Its rights and privileges are defined and limited by presidents, boards of regents, trustees and overseers—whoever makes and administers educational policy.

This is true whether the newspaper is in some degree an adjunct of the university, or operates outside the official family. The most outspoken and untrammelled campus newspapers today have little or no official status. The Harvard CRIMSON and the Michigan DAILY are prime examples. Tradition confers on them an independence that is relatively rare.

an unholy howl . . .

Yet nothing prevents President Pusey from closing up the CRIMSON shop tomorrow. He could

the Michigan DAILY, the Cornell DAILY SUN, and the Penn State COLLEGIAN exist precisely because the tradition of an independent student daily exists in these campuses. They are sustained by administrative respect

Most Outspoken



Racism Southern Style

(Editor's Note: The following letter appeared in a recent issue of the Daily Texan, University of Texas student newspaper. It was written immediately after the Texas Student Assembly voted to endorse James Meredith's attempt to register at the University of Mississippi. It shows vividly the feelings that the President and the integration program must overcome.)

To the Texas Student's Governing Body:

Just what kind of white people are you?

Furthermore, what kind of Texas Southerners are you that would insult your fellow Texans, your fellow alumni, by sending that kind of a telegram. (The Student Assembly sent Meredith a telegram saluting his courage and perseverance.)

I didn't think I would ever live to see the day that I would be ashamed of the University of Texas—you haven't even considered the individual rights of white people, the rights of the individual states—no, you're either a bunch of beatniks, crossbreeds with a predominance of Negroid extraction, or just a bunch of misinformed, socialist-thinking kids that belong up among the other Yankee degenerates that are doing their damndest to literally shove the smelly Negro race down the throats of the white Southerner.

If you all don't know the difference now you never will know, and I pity the possibility your children or your children's children and their spotted offspring, which your brainwashed love of a race which the Lord Himself segregated has blindly encouraged you to mix with.

The group of good old darkies in Mississippi that offered to pay this Negro Meredith's education in any other school

if he quit his antagonistic rabble-raising have shown more respect to the white race than you bunch of weak-kneed misinformed dreamers that would turn against your own race and advocate and encourage this unconstitutional political scheme to force this embarrassing situation on a bunch of good fellow American Southern whites that have had a 114-year tradition that they loved and cherished.

And you, you silly bunch of sissy socialist-inclined saps that would throw tradition to the winds in order to advocate something you're not old enough to really comprehend and slap the memories of our forefathers in the face that fought for these very rights that the good people of Mississippi are trying to uphold.

You do not have the intestinal fortitude to publish this letter and let your fellow students know what some of the real Texans that attended in years gone by, when Texas University had Texan guts, really think of the wire you sent that Negro. He doesn't want an education, you gullible crusaders, he wants to eventually change his color for yours, or yours for his. If you were Texans, which you're not, you wouldn't have let this happen.

It's a fine way for you to thank Mississippi for what they have done for Texas and its people, specifically their help in 1836-1962, etc.

I know you feel proud of yourselves, don't you?

Sincerely,
T. S. Baily
Ft. Worth, Texas

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