

Chung forgot old-school ethics

This past New Year's Eve, the good 'ol boy in me got into a bit of a scuffle.

All right, I didn't "get into" a scuffle, I started it. And it wasn't really a "scuffle." A rumble is a more accurate description.

But there I was, in Milligan, at one of the many New Year's Eve post-party celebrations. I had drunk one too many beers and said one too many words. Next thing I knew, some other good 'ol boy threw a fist at my face, and the place erupted.

When I picked myself up off the ground, I let go a few swings of my own. And on the snow-covered yard of some good soul who only wanted to have a innocent party, there were 30 or 40 inebriated throwing fists and wrestling on the ice. What a sight it was.

But I wasn't the only one who was throwing and absorbing a few punches to start the new year.

In late December, CBS newswoman Connie Chung interviewed Rep. Newt Gingrich's parents in an attempt to get some dirt on the Speaker-to-be. What started as a friendly discussion turned out to be the best fight of the holiday season.

Sitting at the kitchen table in the Gingrich dining room, Chung and Gingrich's mother, 68-year-old Kathleen, swapped girl gossip.

Chung: Mrs. Gingrich, what has Newt told you about President Clinton?

Mrs. Gingrich: Nothing. And I can't tell you what he said about Hillary.

Chung: You can't?

Mrs. Gingrich: I can't.

Chung: Why don't you just whisper it to me, just between you and me?

Mrs. Gingrich: She's a bitch.

Now that interview was taped on Dec. 20. But CBS and Chung waited until Jan. 4 — the day Rep. Gingrich became Speaker Gingrich — to air Mama Gingrich's whispered reply.

That's when the real fight got



Jamie Karl

under way.

Newt Gingrich verbally attacked Chung and the American media for what he called a lack of objectivity and fairness. Then Chung attacked Newt for attacking her, while denying any wrongdoing; and a confused Mama Gingrich asked, "What's the big deal?"

But this was a big deal.

Now forget that even if Newt did call Hillary a "bitch," he was only fulfilling his promise to speak for the American people. Forget that most would agree with him. The question isn't what Newt said; it's how Connie Chung got Newt's mom to say what she did.

Chung's "just between you and me" was blatant dishonesty, a moral low. And her screw-up was just the latest in what has become an era of ethical slips in American journalism.

In the old school, journalists were taught the golden rules of journalism: accuracy, responsibility and objectivity. Chung strikes out on all three, as do most of today's journalists.

The job of the press is to record and report events. That's all. Instead, journalists today stand up and cheer for one cause or another. How else does one explain the media's obsession with gay rights and other liberal battle cries?

Not that this social activism of the media caused confusion between real news and tabloid material, but today's journalists have become Utopians. They are trying to change the world to fit in their impossible mold of idealism.

This activism was obvious in Chung's holiday battle with Gingrich. Chung and the rest of the "dominant media culture" have a hard time accepting that Newt and Co. are now in control of Congress. So naturally they try to make the Republicans look bad.

It's because of this activism that the media refuses to give us neutral information; instead, they report liberal moral fables, complete with instructions on how we should feel about who and what. It has gone beyond noble to plain unethical.

Is it any wonder the media are now less popular with the American public than this columnist at a Coming Out Day celebration?

Journalists don't need to be sitting around in the classroom or in the newsroom pondering why our popularity and influence continue to decline. A self-superiority complex and unabashed manipulation of the news have made the press the rightful new target of the American public.

Clearly, no one wants to kill the messenger — or at least not yet. All we need is the messenger to quit tampering with the damned message. We have to get back to basic, old-fashioned journalism, despite the technological advances.

Yes, mistakes will always be made. Even at this stage in my journalistic career, I have made unfortunate ethical blunders. Usually we learn from mistakes. But the professionals aren't learning.

What about my own New Year's fight? Well, I awoke the next morning with a black eye that consumed the left half of my face. Fortunately, it lasted only for a week.

Connie Chung, too, got a shiner as a reminder of her scuffle. Too bad for Connie, she — along with her colleagues — will feel this one for a long time to come.

Karl is a junior news-editorial major and a Dally Nebraskan night news editor and columnist.

Threshold of fear not easy to define

When I hear these stories I often try to imagine the original scene at the office.

What was in the mind of David Heller when he cut out a photograph of Sylvia Bowman, the 61-year-old co-worker running for union president, and glued her head to the body of a naked model, spread-eagled and holding a banana?

Why didn't the first five colleagues in the office who saw this "artwork" tell him to burn it and to crawl back into his cave?

But that was the scene in 1987, and now the venue is a courtroom. Last week, the tale arrived at the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, and it may well be headed for United States Supreme Court. The case of Sylvia Bowman vs. David Heller has become the latest and perhaps most heralded example of the conflict between sexual harassment and free speech.

Of course, if Bowman had been running for president of the United States instead of president of the union, she wouldn't have had a case. People have the right to say whatever they want about public figures, in words or pictures. Remember when Hustler magazine depicted Jerry Falwell having sex with his mother in an outhouse? The Supreme Court called it satire.

If, on the other hand, David Heller had created such images about a woman co-worker or underling who wasn't running for office, he wouldn't have had much of a defense. Remember when Teresa Harris sued her boss for abusive language? The Supreme Court said that words could make a sexually offensive environment. They called it harassment.

But union politics lie somewhere between the free marketplace of ideas where anything goes and the workplace where there are legal limits to what you can say to a "captive audience" or employees.

So Heller's lawyer, the ubiquitous Alan Dershowitz, argues that Sylvia Bowman had willingly plunged into "the rough and tumble" of a political campaign for which she needed a tougher hide. And Bowman's lawyer, Nancy Shilepsky, argues that Heller attacked her as a woman, not a candidate, and that destroyed her ability to work.

Bowman was indeed traumatized. The lower court ruled that the "artwork" wasn't satire. It was harassment. But this case falls into the famous gray area that often makes for better conversation than law.

Today, if there's a misunder-



Ellen Goodman

standing between men and women about sexual harassment, it's about verbal, not physical, attacks. It's about words and the threshold of fear.

As Deborah Tannen writes in "Talking Nine to Five," women often experience — feel — the threat of physical assault in what men think of as merely words. She describes the reactions to one woman's midnight cab ride with a driver who berated her for miles. Other women who hear this story usually share her terror. Men often believe that yelling isn't so serious. Life, it seems, has finely tuned women's antennae to sounds of male violence.

But life has also taught girls from the earliest playground experiences that it may be unsafe to fight their own battles against boys. Daughters are told, and learn, to go to the teacher, and then the dean, and then the law. But sometimes it's not dangerous — just difficult — to deal directly with the offender.

Bowman was devastated by these grotesque images, in part, because of her earlier experiences of abuse. But Heller had no history of hostility. Nor were women a beleaguered minority in their workplace. And she was running for office.

So as a First Amendment junkie and an opponent of sexual harassment, I think that this case sits right on the border between the laws allowing speech and forbidding discrimination. Either way I look, the view is unhappy.

Bowman v. Heller may be resolved on the narrow grounds of labor-union law. But in the volatile area of sexual harassment, we've all got to learn how to get out of the gray area without getting into court. Sometimes perhaps shame is as good as a lawsuit.

Oh, by the way, did I tell you where Bowman and Heller worked? The Department of Welfare. That's right. They belonged to the union of social workers, those people trained in human skills, the art of helping others to get along.

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Despite cold, Lincoln's not bad

In the infamous words of one Jimmy Buffett, "I was out in California where I hear they have it all. They got riots, fires and mud slides. They got sushi at the mall." I am here to attest that all of this and more is true. Being a native Californian myself, there is no one more qualified than I to speak (or write) on the topic of that well-publicized, but not very well-known, state.

Sure, so there are riots every now and then, and a few earthquakes large enough to shake a 200-year-old oak tree out of its roots, but you have to look past all that and find the inner beauty.

All right, I give up! Who am I kidding? If California was such a wonderful place, I never would have left it to spend the best years of my life in the arctic zone. Ask some Californians in their right mind if they would like to spend four years of their life in Nebraska, and most will probably tell you that you have had your head stuck in the snow for too long. Who would want to trade the sunshine (when it's not raining buckets) and the ocean for corn, flat land and snow blizzards?

Well, meet one Californian who did! I spent my whole life preparing, like my friends and siblings, to one day attend one of the illustrious University of California campuses. Little did I figure on a drought, riots, fires or floods to come in the way of my education. With each new natural disaster came new and imaginative ways for the state of California to make its citizens pay for the cleanup.

Year after year I watched tuition rates go up and the quality of education go down. No longer did



Beth Finsten

getting into a quality university depend on your academic standing and personal accomplishments; now it depended on the size of your bank account. I looked for a way out.

Then it happened. During a visit to see my brother, who is attending Creighton University's School of Pharmacy and Allied Health in Omaha, I made a short stop to visit the University of Nebraska. At the time, Nebraska wasn't exactly the alternative education I was looking for. My parents practically dragged me kicking and screaming to tour the campus. I think they probably enjoyed it more than I did.

Just like people have preconceived ideas and stereotypes about California, I too had my ideas about Nebraska, and the Midwest in general. A true California girl at heart, I expected to be approached by a bunch of shotgun-toting, overall-wearing, Ford-pickup-driving hillbillies fresh off the farm. Instead, I met a lot of nice people who just live life a little differently and like to call a soda a "pop." I still to this day cannot figure out why people in the Midwest insist on calling it that. A "pop" is a noise and nothing more, but that's another column for

another day.

After the tour of the campus, I headed back to sunny California to ponder my decision. It wasn't the university itself that bothered me, it was more the prospect of spending all winter in thermal underwear and wool socks! Before I left California, 45 degrees was about as cold as cold got. I hadn't even seen snow fall before last year, let alone a blizzard or thunderstorm that rolls you right out of bed. Compared to all that, a few earthquakes didn't seem so bad.

To make a long story short, I just couldn't see myself spending \$13,000 or more a year to attend an overcrowded public university where your social security number and first name were one and the same. The decision was made, and in August of 1993 I found myself and about 12 suitcases on the steps of the University of Nebraska.

I'll always love California, even with all its faults. California will always be home, but Nebraska will remain one of the greatest experiences in my life. So when people ask me, and believe me they do (twice a day at least), why I came to Nebraska from California, I simply say, "I'm lucky, I guess!"

Nebraska may not be a hotbed of fun and excitement or an attractive vacation site for stars and their families, but what it does have is a great university. It makes it a little easier to bear the cold when I know that I'm getting a good education. Besides, I get to spend winter break on the beach in Malibu, so all's well that ends well!

Finsten is a sophomore pre-pharmacy major and a Dally Nebraskan columnist.



only after the jurors were sequestered did they get a hint of how long the trial would last!

Ed Gamble