

October 3, 2007

To the Editor,
Tufts Daily

The issue involving The Primary Source is one of accountability, not censorship.

There is a case to be made for protecting anonymous speech by individuals and groups who are forbidden public speech or face serious consequences for expressing views that differ from those of the majority. The Source, however, has been a recognized student organization for many years: it is assigned space by the university, funded through mandatory student activity fees collected from all students, and its publication made available to the public alongside those of other student organizations.

The Source and some others fail to differentiate between the terms “censor” and “censure”. “Censorship” is the prevention or punishment of speech, neither of which the Source suffered. Free speech allows one to say what one thinks; it doesn’t protect one from criticism of or disagreement with the content of that speech. The ruling by the Committee on Student Life (CSL) was one of “censure”, condemnation of the content of the Source’s article, which, the Committee said, “subjected a discrete minority in the community to ridicule”. Both the Committee’s campus role and its right of free speech entitled it to express this opinion.

Nor was it censorship to require bylines for the Source’s writers, since that in no way interferes with the paper’s ability to print what it chooses. It is standard practice for professional news publications that articles of opinion and cartoons carry a byline, and letters to the editor are signed. Other student publications on campus already follow that practice. CSL’s decision would have required the Source to do the same.

Fifty-two black students (barely 4% of the class of 1300 freshmen) entered Tufts in the fall of 2006. The Source’s editor claimed in his letter to the GLOBE (September 3) that the Source “never suggested that African American students at Tufts are unqualified.” Yet the content of the article contradicts that assertion: “O Come All Ye Black Folk (A Christmas Carol)” consisted of three verses to be sung to the tune of “O, Come, All Ye Faithful”. Each of those verses ended with the refrain “52 black freshmen”. Other lines from the carol are: “: “O come ye to our University...no matter what your grades are: D’s, F’s and G’s... born into the ghetto...we need you now to fill our racial quotas...descendants of Africa with brown skin arriving...”

Thanks to the Source, those 52 students, in addition to sharing the challenges all freshmen face in being away from home in a new and demanding environment, must also worry as they walk into a classroom—deprived by their “brown skin” of the anonymity so prized by the Source—whether their classmates assume their credentials are inferior and their admission was undeserved.

Overturing CSL's decision to require accountability of the Source's writers was not a victory for free speech, since the right of the paper to publish whatever views it holds had not been abridged by that decision. The Source, though, is now free to conclude that its article was disapproved solely because of the publication's frequently expressed opposition to affirmative action, rather than because the anonymity of its writers led the paper to publish doggerel consisting of poorly rhymed insults as satire and to defend it as intellectual argument.

This is, therefore, less an occasion for celebrating a victory for free speech than for mourning missed opportunities by the University to educate its students about both protection of free speech and accountability for one's public utterances, about both the importance of a free press and the standards by which responsible journalism is measured--in other words, to educate its students not only about their rights but also about their responsibilities as citizens in a democracy.

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