

Editorial

Often, newspapers are accused of using the powers of the press in order to change public opinion and even to squelch opposition; and *The Tech* is no exception. Letters and comments have reached us questioning our journalistic integrity and the direction of our efforts; the latest of these is Curtis Reeves' letter, elsewhere on this page.

The prime responsibility of this organization, as set forth in the first article of our constitution, is "to publish a newspaper on a regular basis, and to provide experience in journalism and publishing for undergraduates of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology." These duties do not make *The Tech* a public service organization; a newsletter for announcing committee appointments, meeting dates and minutes; or an organ for "established news," e.g., press releases. *The Tech* is, and plans to continue to be, a newspaper in the fullest sense possible.

Thus, it is not the business of *The Tech* either to "build up" or abolish the Undergraduate Association in its news pages, no more than it is this paper's business to build up or abolish the Tiddlywinks Club or the Debate Society. It is not the function of a newspaper to give endless free publicity to organizations and people who consider it their right.

Charges of "editorializing" and even "propagandizing" have often been made against *The Tech*, and the cry of "trial by press" has been raised

recently, in connection with the articles on fraternity rushing. It has always been the policy of this paper to confine opinion to the editorial and opposite-editorial pages, which are clearly set forth in style from the rest of the paper.

As has been stated several times before, signed columns are the opinion of the writers and do not express the opinion of the newspaper. Only editorials, such as this, are statements of the opinion of *The Tech*, as agreed upon by the Editorial Board.

The Tech also offers to the community the services of "Commentary," where columnists not normally affiliated with the paper can contribute, and of course "Letters to the Editor."

The purpose of the editorial page, as in other newspapers, is not to present one person's views as the final word on a subject. It is, instead, to present views that hopefully will stimulate discussion of issues throughout the community. Just as a major paper does not claim a single staff member as the last word in a particular area, *The Tech* certainly does not claim that its columnists are final authorities in their fields.

The Editorial Board does consider investigative reporting on issues of interest to the MIT community to be a legitimate function of this paper. It does consider the publishing of features and services to the community, as well as paid advertising, to be a proper use of its pages. And it will continue to make these features and services available to those in the community who wish to use them.

Allegations, integrity and *The Tech*

By Norman D. Sandler

In recent weeks, doubt has been cast on the journalistic integrity of this newspaper and its editors, making it necessary to explain the objectives of this, as well as any other news gathering organization.

The primary duty of any newspaper is to inform the public. This is done in a variety of ways. Unfortunately, too many "laymen" believe it is the task of the journalist simply to explain events as they occur.

If this were the case, reporters would have no problems getting facts for stories, since they would either attend the event being covered, or they could use any of the vast number of press releases every news organization daily receives in the mail.

Many persons would be satisfied by such an editorial policy. Certainly "press release journalism" is used by many small newspapers across the country, whose appeal is primarily local news. New factories being built, political appointments and other local stories could all be written straight from press releases.

However, the responsibility of this newspaper, as well as any other news organization, goes far beyond the re-writing of press releases to inform its readers.

The other aspect of informing the public is the media's duty to uncover information being suppressed by public or private officials of direct interest to its readers.

Perhaps the most important and satisfying part of a journalist's job is investigative reporting. In the mid-1800s, *Chicago Times* editor Wilbur Fisk Storey

declared, "It is a newspaper's duty to print the news and raise hell."

That statement of intent could not have been phrased any better. Being in a position of influencing opinion and educating the public, newspapers have a duty to investigate and report instances of alleged illegal activity, corruption or abuse of private or political power. In doing so, the media are fulfilling a responsibility expressed by President Kennedy "to arouse, to reflect . . . to indicate our crises and our choices, to lead, mold, educate and sometimes even anger public opinion."

That was a strong charge to the media, coming from a President who himself earlier advocated "voluntary censorship" in hushing up national security matters.

In 1961, taking Kennedy's advice, a number of newspapers that had knowledge of the Cuban Bay of Pigs operation involving the Central Intelligence Agency made the decision to keep the story secret until given approval for release by the government.

As a result, the public was unaware of the invasion until it was reported in the media as a glaring blunder. In retrospect, a number of editors said news coverage of CIA training operations and planning could have prevented the ill-fated affair.

Newsmen can not take the attitude that a story should not be released until approval is given by the principals involved, which in the case of the Bay of Pigs would have been the President or the CIA.

Reporters are trained to dig for information, and if sufficient investigation yields a story which could dispel rumors

or stir public opinion, it is the duty of a news organization to "roll with" the story.

However, the most critical requisite for investigative reporting is that all the information used by the reporter be factual.

In such investigations, the reporter is often confronted with conflicting information from a number of different sources. This puts him in a position of having to sift through the information and weigh its credibility on the basis of the reliability of its source.

Newsmen working on stories which may potentially embarrass or turn public opinion against certain groups or individuals must rely on information sources who most often will not want to be mentioned in the story itself.

There are a number of reasons for not allowing attribution of certain information leaked to newsmen. These include the chance of job dismissals or in some cases an actual possibility of personal attack. What ever the case, reporters must not neglect important stories because of a lack of attributable sources.

In an 1851 editorial assessing the role of the press, the *London Times* observed "the press lives by disclosures." Today disclosures from persons close to ongoing investigations or alleged cases of scandal or corruption are indispensable to newsmen, and thereby to the public's "right to know."

This newspaper, like many others, sometimes relies upon information supplied by unidentified sources to break major stories. In many cases, if the stories containing unattributable disclosures had not been run, the news would never have

been made known to the public.

Newspapers cannot rely upon public officials or quasi-public officials to release the specifics of stories in which they may be criticized for their actions. Rather, journalists realize their responsibility to unearth the details of such stories themselves, while making painstaking efforts to insure the accuracy of all information reported.

Journalists recently have been criticized for their use of unattributable reports in major stories. Government officials last fall charged *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein with "innuendo" and "engaging in character assassination" when they implicated top White House staffers in the Watergate scandal. However, when the officials' role in the events surrounding Watergate were investigated during the Senate hearings earlier this year, White House Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler made a formal apology for his criticisms of the media's tactics in unearthing the scandal.

When coverage of Watergate and other judicial proceedings are mentioned as examples of investigative reporting, the phrase "trial by newspaper" or "trial by press" invariably is used to criticize stories of alleged wrongdoing.

Too many people are willing to condemn the media for reporting allegations of illicit or improper activities. These critics declare such stories are trial by press, and violate the spirit of the Constitution.

However, as former US Solicitor General and federal judge Simon E. Sobeloff said in 1956, a public trial, where developments are reported in the media (sometimes against the wishes of the presiding judge) is not the same as trial by press.

Sobeloff said coverage of judicial proceedings not only benefits the press, but is in the public interest by satisfying the public's right to know. He added, "public trial is deemed essential to a fair trial."

It is also important for journalists to report allegations and charges of wrongdoing so that the matters can be corrected wherever necessary. By making such allegations public through the press, journalists uncover many instances that otherwise would go unnoticed and therefore would remain unsubstantiated and uncorrected.

Journalists, including this newspaper's reporters and editors, do not use their positions for personal vendetta. They have a responsibility to keep the public as well informed as possible on controversial issues affecting the community, and they do so in a straightforward manner, without editorializing. Opinion is promulgated on the editorial and opposite editorial pages, and nowhere else.

It is unfortunate many persons do not realize what goes on "behind the scenes" of an important news story. However, journalists will continue to fulfill their obligations to educate and stir public opinion and to "raise hell," regardless of the criticism they receive from persons all too willing to charge them with innuendo or "trial by press."

Letters to *The Tech*

To the Editor:

I begin my letter with this opening because I know that it is the only one that you allow. Much stronger openings cross my mind . . .

For the purpose of this letter, I find it necessary to forget my longstanding association with *The Tech*. That I am so involved with the newspaper and the people who spend much of their time in producing it makes this particularly hard to write.

But you guys have done it again. And I (or one, am getting sick of it.

I'm not at all sure of what anybody thought of my year as UAP, but I feel that your headline to Derrick Vlad's column is a slap in the face to him, and me as well. If you guys think you're God in the heavens, you're wrong. And you do a disservice, not only to yourselves, but more importantly, to the readers of your "newspaper" by playing such games as "UA: Imminent decline again?"

You've shown yourselves to be arrogant, tasteless idiots, which is what many people have been saying all along. Why so needlessly back up their charges?

I can point to several things that were done in the name of the UA in the last

year and one-half, to show that the UA, if not the all-encompassing organization that one generally imagines student governments to be, is at least doing a few things with the student body in mind. Which is more than seems to be true for *The Tech*.

The UA is doing things. And if it is not making so much noise, maybe it's because the people working there are more interested in getting results than building their egos, maybe they are truly working for the good of the students rather than trying to bolster their own images (to be blunt: Mark Fishman might realize that few people outside of *The Tech* and *Ergo* are interested in the Committee Against Bias in Education. Norm Sandler might realize that few people outside of Norm Sandler really want to know his views on national politics, Paul Schindler might realize anything — and we would all be thankful, whether inside *the Tech* or not).

Instead of talking about the decline of the UA, the people of *The Tech* might see what they could do to help the UA become a viable organization again, or they could see what they could do about abolishing it if that was what they

thought was necessary (except that they'd no longer have any obvious party to jeer). Instead of talking about the decline of the UA, *The Tech* might devote some attention to the decline of *The Tech* as a serious, worthy medium.

It's no secret that *The Tech* has no charity for the UA. It's an old standing joke, which can be witnessed by years of back issues. Editorial position now looks just like editorial position 40 years ago.

If you guys are that disgusted, and have been for so long, you might just refuse to run any more UA columns. And if they do run, you might at least have the decency to editorialize elsewhere.

What you did by writing your assinine headline to Vlad's column is like inviting someone to your home, and then shooting him for coming. Hopefully your childish pranks will not continue.

As for my future with *The Tech*, if I work with the paper again, it will be with the intention of trying to put an end to some of the foolishness that goes into the paper. If you can't deal with that, you might as well remove my name from your mast now.

Curtis Reeves,
former UAP