Letter to The Tech

Acceptable Dangers

To the Editor:
The Oct. 7 issue of The Tech reported two student deaths: one due to apparent nitrous oxide poisoning, the other resulting from a mountain climbing accident. An important point is illustrated by the contrast in official reactions to these deaths.

When questioned about the "laughing gas" fatality, Campus Patrol spoke of measures such as the confiscation of nitrous oxide tanks from students to discourage recreational use of the gas. However, the mountain-climbing fatality did not provoke plans to confiscate students' climbing gear; rather, reaction to that incident stressed the safety precautions taken to reduce the danger to "one in a hundred thousand" unpreventable accidents.

My impression is that this disparity reflects less the relative danger of the two recreations in question than the cultural judgment that one is more "worthwhile" than the other and therefore justifies a risk while the other does not. I suspect that no evidence exists that laughing gas is inherently more dangerous than mountain climbing - more importantly, that it would be more dangerous if used recreationally in conjunction with safety precautions as rigorous as those developed for mountain climbing. The suppression of a hazardous activity simply because it is deemed less meritorious than another comparably dangerous but socially sanctioned activity is wrong - not only because this is a forsaken imposition of mainstream cultural standards, but because it increases the danger of the unsanctioned activity by diverting attention from the development and teaching of reasonable safety measures.

Gary L. Drescher '76

The Tech welcomes Letters to the Editor. Typical letters are preferred. Letters must be signed; names will be withheld upon request. Send letters to The Tech, W20-382.

Commons tax fought

Meanwhile, the tax status of contract meals has become an issue in the legislature, where the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts (AICUM) has been lobbying for several months to have a specific exemption put into the tax bill for such meals. Although AICUM has introduced such a measure two or three times, its chances of passage are considered to be slim.

"Politically, you have a very tough exemption to try to support there," Jerry Delaney, counsel to the Joint Committee on Taxation, told The Tech.

"People feel like helping students, sure -- but what about old people and other people who haven't got many places to eat and who are taxed?"

Microfilming - Indexing Project

The What?
The Tech indexing-microfilming project. Started in the spring of 1972 by then News Editor Paul Schnider. It grew from a very simple idea. There is no better chronicle of life at MIT than The Tech. It is the oldest continuous publication on campus; but time was catching up with all available copies of back issues - in the newspaper board room, in the library, in the Archives. No one could afford to microfilm the back issues. So the newspaper, and the story it told, slowly deteriorated. For some time, only the Archives had a complete set - and because the material was archival, access to it was limited.

So far...

With generous help from the Institute Archives and a grant from the Activities Development Board, which funds student capital projects, The Tech pitched in with time, people and money and finished microfilming every issue from 1881 to the end of Volume 94 (this January). The Archives hold the master and have one copy. The Tech Board Room has one copy and a microfilm reader (pictured above). They are available to the public during regular newspaper business hours. Complete sets of The Tech on microfilm are available for $300. Individual volumes are $10 each.

The Board of The Tech has voted to microfilm future volumes as they are completed. This invaluable record of student life at MIT has been preserved for all times.

Now what?

Hand-in-hand with making available the complete back issues of The Tech goes the project of making the information in them more accessible. As it is now, one has to know the precise date of an event in order to find it. To find topics, students, particular generations of Tech staff is a nearly impossible task. Members of the newspaper staff are now creating a computer-indexed index (OK, the computer just alphabetizes everything). It will have about 1 million entries, and may cost as much as $40,000. When it's done, it will be seven feet high. But we'll microfilm it so it's usable, and will make it possible to look up people and topics in any issue from 1881 to the present. Once the catch-up work is done, the Board will maintain the index.

Who cares?

Those who ignore historical mistakes are destined to repeat them. Articles in the newspaper will eventually have a greater historical perspective because of the index. Use of the newspaper as an historical perspective because of the index. Use of the newspaper as an historical reference will be easier - when the index is done - for students, alumni, and historians.

The Pitch...

So far, the Provost's Office and generous former Board members of The Tech have provided $4,000 for indexing. With federal matching grants, we have gotten about $5,000 worth of work on the index. We have a long way to go. We need help. Contributions may enclose - pledged to The Tech - are tax deductible. You don't have to be an alummitus!

And, if you know some foundation or organization that funds such work, tell them about us.