Editorials

Referendum on pornography bad

The Undergraduate Association General Assembly's consideration of the referendum raises the question: "Should movies deemed by the Motion Picture Council as unsuitable for minors . . . be banned from public display on the MIT campus?" represents the faculty and staff of the Institute? Who represents the Graduate Student Council represents the graduates, who represents the Undergraduate General Assembly represents the undergraduates, and the view the movies. To prohibit certain movies, the General Assembly would violate the First Amendment rights of those who choose to present or view the movies.

No one is sure who comprises the MIT community. While the General Assembly represents the undergraduates, and the Graduate Student Council represents the graduates, who represents the Wellesley students who also attend events at MIT? The General Assembly is not the proper body to make these determinations.

The plan for the referendum is ill-conceived. The wording loosely derives from the 1973 Supreme Court decision in Miller v. California. The decision said that a trial court must consider whether "the average person, applying contemporary community standards would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest; whether the work depicts or describes in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and whether the work appeals to the prurient interest; . . . whether the work depicts or describes in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and whether the work, when taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value." The operative phrase is "trial court." Only a court of law may decide if something is pornographic. The Motion Picture Council guide is not a law, merely a recommendation. The General Assembly must not use these guidelines, or any others, as rules for censorship. The Motion Picture Council guide is not the proper body to make these determinations.

If the General Assembly decides to make the referendum non-binding, it is wasting precious time. Time should not be used. If the results are used to determine what is pornographic, the Assembly is not the proper body to make these determinations.

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The proposed referendum is simply bad. Its purpose is to force the assembly into a situation where it must make decisions without adequate information. It would not be a pollinating organization, asking speculative questions on hypothetical issues.

Vote in Boston

Today's Boston election offers an opportunity for voters to influence the city at a turning point in the city's history. Mayor Kevin White will retire after 16 years, and the new mayor will take over the reins of government of a city with its share of good and bad. It is clear that any mayor must be able to both unite and lead. Boston is no less of a challenge than any other big city, and it will fall to any mayor to lead and to meet that challenge. Both Flynn and King are qualified for the job. Registered voters should make every effort to get to the polls and vote their opinions.

The election is not only for mayor. Positions on the council, the school board, and the school board are also on the ballot. Local elections are the best place to begin an entire change in the system of government is built. City elections are an opportunity for residents to get involved with the policy-making process. Such opportunity must not be taken lightly.

The biggest problem The Tech has is that many members of the MIT community do not understand what we try to do. They perceive The Tech as monolithic, ubiquitous, Byzantine organization that mysteriously makes newspapers appear twice a week during the term and never runs much Mike Peters cartoons. As editor-in-chief, I want to correct this misconception.

This column, the first of an irregular series, will attempt to address questions you people have about The Tech and what The Tech tries to do. I have always been dissatisfied by The Tech's inability to articulate the story behind a story. An editor's note in the Feedback section is not the proper forum for explaining what went into a story, much less the broader philosophy of the newspaper.

One good example is the letter from Charles R. Marge '84 [Feedback, Nov. 1]. He said The Tech misquoted and misrepresented what he said. The editor's note said we had reviewed the reporter's notes and stood by the story.

Several people, including Marge, commented to me afterward that it seemed we were saying, "Bleep you, Charlie, we got the story right."

There are only three ways to recall a quotation. Two are the recollections of the speaker and the reporter. The third is the reporter's notes. When Marge sent his letter we talked with the reporter, in this case, Ellen L. Spenser and looked at her notes. She is an experienced, good reporter and her recollection and notes indicated that what Marge had said was fairly reported, and we wrote an editor's note to that effect. Publishing the letter at all should illustrate that we were concerned that — for whatever reason — Marge and his statements might be misunderstood, and we gave him the opportunity to correct any misapprehension. If we had a "bleep you" attitude, we would not have run the letter.

The letter from the Finance Board in this issue is another good example of how The Tech should explain what it tries to do, but not in the form of an editor's note. The board complained that Burt S. Kalilis's Nov. 8 story did not fairly present the board's side.

Sasha P. Seale '85, Sigma Phi Epsilon, the Valedictory chairman, said a Finance Board member in his fraternity told him the board's chairman, Raymond E. Samuel '84, "doesn't fund anything off-campus other than [Black Student Union] events." The Tech ran Samuel's response, including that the board funds off-campus events, in the next paragraph of the story. We felt the fact that the full board — not only the chairman — makes funding decisions was implicit.

We also believed Seale's attribution of the allegation was sufficient. There we were wrong. The Tech subsequently learned there are several former Finance Board members who live at Sigma Phi Epsilon. Seale referred to one of them, but would not give the name. The Tech was not able to reach all of them for comment, so we did not run any names. What Seale said was important because it reflected his reasoning, not because the Finance Board does or does not act in that manner. In the same situation I would run the quotation again, but with a more expansive denial from Samuel. Please note, though, that we are running the Finance Board's letter so it may better present its views.

If you want to know why we do or do not cover a story a certain way, please drop me a line at our office on the fourth floor of the Student Center. Address it to me by name, so I do not confuse it with a letter to the editor which we publish. I will do my best to let you folks know just what we do, but why.

Robert E. Malchman

Letter from the editor