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The University in Peace and War

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The Oregonian: A Portrayal of the University of Oregon

The University of Oregon in the sixties was a representative of the changing attitude among young people across the country. Growing hair long, experimenting with sex and drugs, and questioning all authority was among the revolutionary actions. American youth protested decisions of the government, specifically with constant controversy over the war. Violence was all around as Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were both assassinated, the U.S. Army killed hundreds of civilians in South Vietnam, and black athletes were protested at the Mexico City Olympics. The once conservative and strict attitude between the Deans of Men and Women and the enrolled students, quickly transformed to a liberal and rebellious attitude. Civil rights were a hot topic and on campuses across the country, the specific issue of student rights was debated. Many Eugene, Oregon locals witnessed first-hand the protests of the students at the University. However, most other Oregonians relied on the media to relay the information and state of the University to them in an objective and factual manner. The largest state-wide newspaper, based out of Portland, was The Oregonian. Specifically studied here are The Oregonian articles reporting on the University of Oregon incidents during April of 1970 as well as a generalized study of how mass media affects public opinion. This Portland publication used loaded language and photographs to frame

incidents at the University of Oregon, and thus to persuade readers across the state that the Eugene campus was a place of liberal chaos.

During the Presidency of Robert D. Clark, students were actively exhibiting their opinions on issues such as the Vietnam War, the presence and recruiting efforts of the ROTC on campus, and the right to assemble and speak on issues. Letters were written, petitions were signed, protests were held (some of which remained calm while others became violent), bombs were fired, and arrests were made: all while journalists and photographers recorded and presented the information to the city, state, and country. Such actions were outrageous to the many adults who had gone to college and experienced a much different learning environment as well as relationship with the administration. These youth encompassed a revolution; creations of a new type a University. Going to college was no longer just higher education in reading, writing, and arithmetic, but additionally was higher social and political learning. Unfortunately for many of those involved, however, the general public of Oregon was not quite as radical and eager for the changing times.

According to The County and City Data Book of 1972, the population of Oregon was 2,061,747 with 98.7% of those people being white. Although the statistics were even more shocking on the campus, it is fair to say that generally Oregon was always one step behind with the civil rights movement. Among the 25+ year population, 60% had received at least a four year high school education while 11.8% received at least four years of college education (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 390). In other words, the majority of the public had little idea about what a college campus had previously been except for what was portrayed in the media. While a small, yet contributory, group knew first hand

what college campuses were like, and thus could see the sharp contrast between the past and present state of the University of Oregon. White collared jobs occupied 48.3% of those employed and produced a median family income of \$9,487. The largest percentage of Oregon families (28.2%) fell in the income category of \$10,000-14,999 (393). We will consider these statistics later as it is argued that the less educated and less wealthy public are less politically aware and thus rely more greatly on the media to present a factual presentation of current events. Politically, 49.8% of registered voters in Oregon were Republican. However, when analyzed further, counties in the east of the state tended to be largely Republican in comparison to the Democratic population along the coast and Willamette Valley (396). Such a division has, and will likely continue to divide Oregon residents on many issues. While the University does reside in Eugene, a more liberal area of the state, the administration and the government had to respond to many Oregonians from all over who were concerned about the state of the institution. For many of these Oregonians, especially those in the eastern part of the state, the media was a sole contributor to their understanding of the events at the University.

The Oregonian first began in 1861 and based out of Portland, quickly became the most successful newspaper in Oregon. However, come January of 1938 there was a major strike against The Oregonian, Journal, and News-Telegram. “The strike marked the first time that the three newspapers had missed a day of publication. It was also the first time that no newspaper had been published in the City of Roses since The Oregonian became a daily 77 years before” (Green, 25). Although the strike soon ended, the newspaper was severely hurt. A short 21 years later another strike erupted: The Portland Newspaper Strike. This strike began in July 1959 and did not end until April 1965. The

Oregonian and the Journal joined efforts and published a joint periodical for a small time. Massive amounts of subscribers were lost and upon the close of the strike, Newhouse Publishing had to climb to amazing heights to redeem the status of the paper. While most journalists will claim the importance of unbiased reporting, it is clear that The Oregonian needed to not only report the news, but needed to do so in a manner that would gather and keep an audience.

According to Todd Gitlin, author of Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives, the media can't help but coerce the audience into a frame of judgment. He states, "Start with the obvious: those who produce for the media want their audiences, more than anything else, to stay tuned. They have a flow to manage" (121). Although specifying with televised media, Gitlin is referring to all media, newspapers included. He continues on to say "Professional attention-getters produce the shows, supply the story lines, cast the parts, write the scripts, and insert the sound bites accordingly. So when 'news' happens in your vicinity and you as a nonprofessional agree to appear on camera, you also agree, like it or not, to play whatever part the producers are casting"(121). All media, whether in difficult times (such as The Oregonian was) or not, need an audience and must therefore present entertaining stories in order to be a relevant competitor for people's time. Gitlin does discuss political bias in his book, but in this section he simply states that in order for the media to hold an audience and be competitively equal with other media groups, the news must be told in an interesting manner (even at the expense of giving a strictly nonbiased report). He concludes the chapter with "If you tell the reporter what the reporter doesn't want to hear, or try to carry the conversation in unexpected directions, you are apt to be left on

the cutting-room floor” (121). The media *must* present the news in an attractive way in order to capture an audience. This holds true with The Oregonian, and specifically holds true with the publication in the years shortly following the Portland Newspaper Strike.

Elizabeth Perse writes on similar topics in her book, Media Effects and Society. Perse adds to Gitlin’s view of the need for media to be entertaining as she quotes a famous journalist. “As Jeffrey Scheuer has powerfully argued, American broadcasting is systematically biased because it gains our attention by virtue of being kinetic, episodic, personalized, and conflictual” (165). Perse then analyzes public opinion and how media affects such ideology. She sites self-interest, social values, interpretations of history and events, and political ideology as sources for public opinion. Additionally, mass communication plays a large role in the formation of public opinion (84). “It is through the mass media that most people learn about political issues, assess which issues are important, and gauge which positions are endorsed by the majority” (84). Thus, the media’s presentations of the incidents at the University were a basis for the formation of public opinion. Perse makes the distinction between the higher class (the group she refers to as “elites”) and the lower class (“nonelites”) with the theory that elites have background knowledge with which to analyze new information presented by the media objectively. Whereas nonelites’ only source of new data is in the media coverage itself thus, “media content is both foreground and background” (94). Although it is difficult to analyze the divisions between “elites” and “nonelites” in Oregon in 1970, poverty was relatively high and the majority of the public fell into a relatively low income bracket. Therefore, Perse’s analysis of class division and reliance on media as *truth*, likely reflects the Oregonians at the time being studied. With so few college graduates and wealthy

members of society, the majority of Oregon's population relied on the media for the whole story: the background and unbiased news.

Aside from the need to entertain, and the audience's lack of background knowledge, Lee Edwards discusses the politics of the media in Mediapolitik. He mailed out questionnaires about the state of American media to journalists all around the country in an attempt to find out what has gone wrong. "Their responses can be summarized as follows: We acknowledge that public confidence in us has declined sharply. We admit our cynicism, our arrogance, our penchant for the sensational. We resolve to do a better job of matching media responsibility with media power in the years ahead." This suggests that the journalists have realized their power and have consequently begun to abuse their positions as (in many cases) the major source for public knowledge on current events. One specific question asked: "Why do you think the news media no longer enjoy the public's full confidence?" Michael Barone of U.S. News & World Report responded "too left-wing elitist" while a former editor for CBS News, Emerson Stone, wrote "because the news media no longer confine themselves to reporting the news." Former host of NBC's *Meet the Press*, Bill Monroe, replied that the decline in public confidence is the result of the media "increasingly try[ing] to tell people what to think instead of just informing them" (321). It is clear that these professionals assign blame to the reporters who present biased news and thus not only report on events, but also assign an attitude to such events. Broadcasting in this form is especially unfair to an audience who has little background knowledge about the events and thus is being coerced (unwilling and unknowingly) to believe the opinions of the journalists. Edwards concludes a chapter on the current state of media with a discussion of the need for ethics. He states "Journalists

must accept the responsibility of power and believe in the responsibility of power” (329). The media must recognize the influence that it has on the public as their first and sometimes only source of information while additionally remaining modest and professional enough to omit personal political agendas.

Elizabeth Perse also discusses the method of *framing* in news story presentations. “Framing works to encourage a particular interpretation of the news story.[...]Framing can limit in-depth understanding of public issues by simplifying complex problems”(95). She believes that framing is an attempt to make news more concise and easier to understand. However, framing the news a certain way also leads to a biased presentation. “*News framing* research holds that how the news is presented also affects what people think about issues, people, and events” (105). Thus, public opinion on many topics *is* affected by the media’s portrayal of such topics. *Additionally*, she discusses the framing of events such as protests:

[...]there is concern that negative coverage of political protest might lead to accessible opinions that protest might be deviant, that protest should be contained, and that protest is not an effective method of changing society. This, of course, is troubling to those who see political protest as an expression of free speech, as one basis of our form of government, and as a way to introduce social changes. (108)

This of course speaks directly to the events at the University of Oregon as the protests were covered and framed for the rest of the state to read about. The students who were protesting (and the administration that allowed it) recognized the right to do so as expressed in our Constitution. Not only did those involved recognize the right, they

recognized the *need* for a college campus to be a place of political and social awareness and debate. Framing obviously leads to mass numbers of people who may be uneducated about the background of a situation being coerced into believing an opinion of the writer or editor is fact. “To frame is the select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation”(Entman, 52). Framing, therefore, often leads to an unfair representation of a group or idea as it is represented unfavorably. Additionally, the effects of framing are difficult to reverse. Although responsive editorials can be written, it is unlikely that the entire original audience of the framed story will be reached by the editorial and those who are will read the response critically with a biased opinion already in place and action.

While the local publications covered the events of April, 1970 at the University of Oregon quite extensively, The Oregonian spread the news statewide. Throughout twenty-one days of papers, I found sixteen articles that addressed the University of Oregon and issues including protesting the Vietnam War, protesting ROTC recruiting on campus, protesting arrests from previous protests, the student conduct code, police and government response to issues on campus, the administration’s role on the campus, and students working to close a local street.

Out of the sixteen articles, only one is an editorial. Contrary to what I expected, the editorial did not use harsh or incredibly descriptive language. The article discusses the U of O conduct code and expresses its inability to effectively govern the school. Terms such as “disorderly students” and “determined dissenters” are used to portray the

students who “prevented other students from having interviews with recruiters from the Weyerhaeuser Co.” These students represented issues that needed to be addressed in the student code of conduct (Bauer, 14). While this article leaves out strong language, it does express an opinion and concern about how well the University is capable of governing itself. “It is quite obvious at this point that the university student code, probable along with many others, is deficient in the matter of defining those places on the campus in which disruption is a punishable offense,” states Bauer. While the article expresses confidence in President Robert Clark as it states that he “made it clear that such behavior would not be tolerated,” it does express both the author and the President’s lack of confidence in the conduct code. The editorial also speaks to the Oregonians who attended college in a previous era and reminisces a time when the Dean of Students would call in an offender and say, “Son, you’ve had it, at least for this term. Come back when you can behave.” This obviously expresses a view that the administration does not have the authority over the students that it did at one time.

The first article during the researched time period to be published in The Oregonian reporting on protests at the University is titled “Police Drive Off Student Mob After Attack On ROTC Building.” The article is filled with language that portrays the students in a negative and out of control image. The actions of the students are described with words such as: “ransacking,” “torch-throwing,” “overturned [...] scattered [...] smashed,” and “assaulted”. The general public and audience of The Oregonian judged the protesters solely on the news story and with such visible verbs it is certain that the readers who may have had little background on the climate of the University submitted to the assumptions and stereotypes that the author portrayed. The article states that the

“Police used tear gas to drive off” students as if to say that students were so unruly that only means as extreme as tear gas could hold them back. Although this article is not an editorial, it uses strong language that frames the protesters in a certain light. After an entire article of explaining how unruly the students are, the final paragraph concludes with “No arrests were reported immediately,” as if to send a message about how the incident was handled. Based on the rhetoric of this article, the students are out of control, violent, practically impossible to hold down, and in the wrong. Additionally, the University and city of Eugene are portrayed as being helpless (with the exception of tear gas) in governing the liberal youth.

On April 17, an article was published that covered the march to the city jail as arrests from the previous day were protested. The front page article, titled “U Of O Protesters Change Tactics, Stage March On Eugene City Jail,” comes complete with a large photograph of an arrest being made during the march itself (Randall, 1). The picture shows one person motionless on the ground being handcuffed and held down by two larger men. There are at least eight other adults (all looking official) standing around watching the arrest and no students appear to be around. This article is relatively free of strong language used to depict the protesters or the University, yet it does reflect the idea that the University is commonly a place of chaos that is difficult for both the Administration and the Governor to control. It states that the “campus remained comparatively calm, with only a few persons arrested after skirmishes with police officers.” It also says that “Clark immediately ordered police to guard campus buildings and ordered an investigation into the incident.” Second to talk of the actions of the unruly youth, The Oregonian also repeatedly discusses the struggles between the

authorities and the protesters. The picture in this case shows the unbalanced tensions between the enforcers of the law and student rights activists. This article does not have as much loaded language as the previous, yet the picture seems to speak rather loud, especially with its location on the front page.

Another article published on April 17 focuses on Governor McCall's concerns about the events at the University. The Governor is quoted as saying "It is my hope that their in-close availability will dissuade this tiny minority of anarchists from choosing to go to war against law and order again" (Higman, 25). Using such a quote from the Governor gives the publication a certain level of credibility and authority to refer to the students as "anarchists." The word "mob" is used repeatedly throughout as well as in the title. The article also states that "no arrests were made Wednesday night." Numerous similar themes reappear with violent verbs to describe the students actions, violent force needed to counteract the students, and lack of effective responses from authorities. Again, The Oregonian frames the University as a disorderly and violent place and follows up with the dissatisfaction of the little or no action taken by officials.

The first article to truly address Robert D. Clark was published on April 18 (Higman, 8). The author, Dennis Higman, who previously presented both the students and the police in a negative light, discusses Clark quite objectively. However, the students are again presented with a bias; the title of the article is "Militants, Clark Talk; U of O Tension Eases." The issue of the war is also brought up as people "maintained that ROTC and the Vietnam War could not be separated and asked Clark to take a stand on that issue." Clark responds with his theory that the University must be a neutral forum for issues to be debated and thus the University would not choose a side (although he

personally was opposed to the war). A later article, published on April 23, also shows approval of Clark. Titled “Parnell Hails Clark’s Action,” it discusses the state superintendent of public instruction and how he “praised President Robert Clark of the University of Oregon [...] for strong action in dealing with the university’s disorders” (“Parnell Hails,” 13). This is uniform with The Oregonian’s repeat pattern of bashing the students and their attempts, supporting the authority of the government, police and administration, yet doubting the abilities and effectiveness of those authorities.

“Anti-ROTC Rally Quiet” published on April 21, discusses a small anti-ROTC rally that drew a “quiet group of some 50 supporters and curious by-standers.” The article then reiterates previous events and protests on the campus. The article mocks the effectiveness of the rally members as stated in the final sentence, “Vocal support for anti-ROTC speakers was notably absent.”

Another article was published on April 24 after the sit-in at Johnson Hall. As expressed through the title, “Police Jail Students After U of O Sit-In,” the article focuses on the police response to the sit-in and not the sit-in itself. The article begins with a description of the arrests made. Later, over half way through the article, the purpose of the sit-in and what finally led to the police being called is finally brought up. The administration is shown to have little authority as “Robert Clark told the sitters to leave. ‘You are disrupting the office’s business [...] I ask you to terminate this.’ Instead, the student squatted down and began signing.” The article expresses large numbers of students involved and numerous times states that force and tear gas were needed in order to finally break up the crowd. Large photos show demonstrators being dragged away by police and other police officers with masks on, spraying tear gas. Such images send a

message to all Oregonians that Eugene is chaotic and a constant location of civil and student unrest.

On April 27 a new issue arises in The Oregonian and adds to the publication's representation of the tension between the students and all of Eugene. Titled "UO Campus Barricaded," the article tells of 200 students who "piled cement blocks, small trees and steel reinforcing rods" to block off a stretch of 13th Avenue. The closed portion of the street (which runs through campus) was declared by the students to be "The People's Street." While the article is short and includes very little strong language, it does serve as yet another portrayal of the out of control University students. The following day, another article (titled "Citizens Smash 1 UO Barricade; Students, Officials Air Problem) elaborates the issue of the blocked street further. Here, the tension between the community members who wanted the street open and the students who wanted it closed is magnified. Meanwhile, both the UO student senate and the Eugene City Council take too long to come to a decision regarding the issue.

"UO Student March Protests Sit-In Arrests" (published on April 28) discusses a 150 student march on campus and down to Municipal Court downtown. An attempted student strike (which was not successful) is also discussed. The article then goes on to talk about the barricades and how the community members and students fought over the status of the street. Later, on both April 29 ("Protesters Occupy Vacated UO Building") and April 30, ("Students Dismantle Barricades In Eugene") the issue of the blocked street is again discussed.

Residents of the state of Oregon in 1970 did not have an understanding of the administration's theory that the University needed to be a neutral forum in which ideas

could be discussed and thus political protests (which were legal and nonviolent) were encouraged. As Oregonians became angry that such activity was going on, they wrote to Governor McCall who then felt the need to urge the administration to be more strict. Through such an escalation, protests became more violent and out of control. However, the students were never given fair representation in articles of The Oregonian. The publication needed to gain readers after the Portland Newspaper Strike and thus it followed in suit with newspapers across the country as it presented captivating yet biased information. Public opinion was objected to the changes at the University (which we now consider to be student rights) and The Oregonian knew just how to present news in a manner that fueled its audience. In response to the incidents at the University of Oregon during April, 1970, The Oregonian framed the news and portrayed the students as violent, chaotic and unruly without giving much mention of the issues that motivated the students towards such actions.

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