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Caught in the Web

The Internet age has posed a new set of challenges to traditional newspapers everywhere – decisions about what content to post when and where, questions about how to allocate staff (separate editors and reporters for print and Web?), and the like.

The issues can be even more vexed for student publications where the lines of decision making authority and editorial control can be blurry, as continuing controversies at two universities make all too clear.

At Oklahoma State University, the editors of the *Daily O'Collegian*, the more than 80-year-old campus newspaper, have for several weeks refused to let the articles they write for the print publication appear on ocolly.com, the newspaper's online portal, because the student journalists are at odds with the university administration's publications board over who should have the power to hire and fire staff for the online operation.

And the editor of the student newspaper at Connecticut's Quinnipiac University has been threatened with the loss of his job in the wake of his public criticism of a university policy that bars the weekly *Quinnipiac Chronicle* from posting articles on [its Web site](#) until after they have already appeared in print. The editor, Jason Braff, argued that the policy impaired the newspaper's ability to keep the campus informed, but Quinnipiac officials said it was designed to improve the accuracy of the *Chronicle*'s reporting, "in light of a student's enthusiasm to release 'breaking news.'"

"This is indicative of the kinds of things that come up, when new things that were unanticipated come on the horizon," said Tom Weir, director of the School of Journalism and Broadcasting at Oklahoma State. "It's not just us — new technology is creating messes with all kinds of traditional newspapers, and we're all struggling to figure out how to deal with them."

Oklahoma State

The content of *The Daily O'Collegian*

has been published on the Internet for more than a decade, but under a somewhat unusual arrangement in which the entities are almost completely separate. The campus publications board, made up of administrators and faculty members, appoints a student editor who manages the editorial operations of *The Daily O'Collegian* in print, and then a professional general manager — who also oversees the business operations of the newspaper — appoints an editor of ocolly.com, the Web site on which the newspaper's content is published.

The Web site contains some content besides the newspaper's (which is uploaded automatically each morning), such as video reports from students in the journalism school's broadcast division. But in general, said Weir, the journalism school dean who also sits on the publications board, *The Daily O'Collegian*'s staff has had little or no involvement

in the content or operation of the Web site. Jenny Redden, the newspaper's editor in chief, does not dispute that contention, but notes that it was only this fall that journalism school officials have sought to give the Web site a more meaningful editorial presence, with talk of adding significant new content. "It's true we haven't made it much of a priority, but before it wasn't something to be excited about," she said in an interview Sunday. "Now that they're talking about doing more with it, of course the editor in chief would want to have more of a role in it."

It was one effort to expand the Web site's content that started the current controversy. One student approached the general manager, Fritz Wirt, about the possibility of blogging on the Web site. To the dismay of the newspaper's staff, the student had been kicked off the newspaper's reporting staff, Redden said (though the student in question says he left on his own, according to Weir).

Redden urged the publications board to block the hiring and to make clear that the newspaper's editor, not the general manager, should have the authority to hire anyone to produce content for the Web site that bears the newspaper's name. "At no point should a non-student ever be hiring writers," Redden said.

The publications board rejected Redden's demand, Weir said, not because its members necessarily disagreed with her assertion that the newspaper's editor should have the power to hire and fire Web contributors, but because the board did not have the authority under the existing constitution and bylaws to make that call. Instead, Weir said, the board said it would appoint a committee to study the structure and operations of the newspaper and the Web site and decide how it should work going forward.

"No one's ever said that the editor can't have control over hiring and firing on the Web site," Weir said. "All the board said is that we don't have the authority to do what it was asked to do, and that we need to study it."

Redden said that by dismissing her request to "put [hiring of Web contributors] on pause until the new bylaws are written," and by leaving the status quo intact, "that was them granting [the general manager] approval of hiring and firing." After much discussion with the newspaper's staff and past journalists at Oklahoma State, Redden made a startling decision: to keep all new content from *The Daily O'Collegian* off the ocolly.com Web site.

In a note published in the print newspaper, Redden wrote of the decision: "This action goes against the heart of a student-run publication. If students control a publication, they must have the ability to hire and fire employees of that publication. When non-students are afforded this power, the publication is no longer student-run. It belittles me and the other editors in the newsroom, undermining our authority to the point that we are ineffectual. Staff members see now that they can treat us however they would like: They can miss deadlines, refuse to follow directions, fail to show up to work, etc. What is our recourse? We can fire them, but they can in turn seek employment at the Web site."

The newspaper staff began posting the articles it produced on [mySpace](#) and its photos on [Flickr](#); the Web site, meanwhile, began posting content from the Associated Press and the university's sports information department in place of the newspaper's. A note that the Web site's managers posted in early November said: "There have been some interesting developments inside the offices of *The Daily O'Collegian*. In short, the newsroom has started a protest and is withholding all content from the Web site. Please be patient in the coming days."

Alumni, who are among the primary users of ocolly.com, have been anything but patient. In comments appended to the Web site note about the controversy, one wrote: "As an alumni who relies on the O'Colly web site as a means to stay informed and connected to the University I have a couple of comments. First, I am entirely supportive of the idea of an exclusively student run publication to the extent is practical and possible. However, I think it shows a ridiculous amount of immature and unprofessional behavior to 'withhold' information from the web site in the name of a disagreement. The editors' attempts to bolster their position at the expense of this website is childish at best. Forgive the cliché, but two wrongs don't make a right. Editors: Resolve this problem like the proficient and qualified leaders that you surely are. Shutting down the flow of information indeed cannot be the answer."

Quinnipiac

The situation at this small private college in Connecticut might be seen as evidence that efforts by administrators to stem the flow information on their campuses often backfires. In this instance, a policy that the university's president

hoped would stop campus discussions from becoming a “press conference to the world” landed Quinnipiac in Sunday’s [New York Times](#) (and now on *Inside Higher Ed*) in an unflattering way.

The seeds of the controversy were sown during the last academic year, when university administrators grew troubled when the weekly student publication reported on its Web site about an incident in which two male basketball players got into trouble for allegedly urinating in public. Quinnipiac administrators, who had not seen the student paper’s article, were unhappy when they received calls from reporters at local newspapers asking them to respond to the *Quinnipiac Chronicle*’s article. They introduced a policy (after consultation with the newspaper’s editors) mandating that articles would not appear on the Web site until after they had appeared in print.

As President John Lahey described it in a speech to the student government association in September, [as reported by the Quinnipiac Chronicle](#):

“What was decided [last year] was that the electronic version would come out at the same time as the hard-copy version so at least dinosaurs like me who read the hard copy version get an opportunity to read it before the external world hears about it.”

This August, editors at the student publication itched to write an article about a racial incident that was revealed to students and staff in a campuswide e-mail message from Quinnipiac’s dean of students. Because the first print issue of the *Chronicle* was not planned until mid-September, the paper’s editors planned to publish an article on its Web site — but administrators put the kibosh on their plans, saying it would violate the policy established the previous year.

In mid-September, Braff, the editor, [criticized the administration’s policy in an editorial](#) that questioned whether it was legitimate to award a free press award named for the former CBS newsman Fred Friendly when its own policies seemed inconsistent with his memory.

“Before the university hands out awards to world-renowned journalists for their courageous preservation of arguably the most important right we as Americans hold, freedom of speech, they should take a look at themselves in the mirror,” Braff wrote. “They might find the reflection surprising.”

That column and a subsequent article about the situation in a local newspaper brought Braff a harshly worded letter last month from the university’s vice president and dean of students, Manuel C. Carreiro, which the *New York Times* quoted as saying: “Please understand that any disregard for university or Student Center policies, or any public statement by you expressing disagreement with such policies, will seriously place your position and organization at risk with the university.”

A university spokeswoman, Lynn Bushnell, said in an e-mail message Sunday that she did not believe Carreiro’s letter represented a threat to Braff’s position as editor. In a statement she released earlier, she said: “We do not discipline students who criticize the university or its policies. We do discipline students who fail to follow clearly established policies. However, student leaders, especially those in paid positions, are expected to generally be supportive of university policies. If they disagree with established policies, we expect them to go through normal administrative channels to try to change policies.”

Administrators and Braff and other editors have been discussing possible changes to the campus’s policies; they met last Wednesday. But the two sides appear far apart in their perceptions of whether the prohibition on publishing articles on the Web site without the approval of campus administrators (which has been granted in a small number of circumstances, mostly related to sporting events) represents denial of free speech.

Braff said in [an open letter to the president](#)

this fall: “It is apparent from your actions and statements that you are trying (and succeeding) to limit our outreach and access. As a private institution, Quinnipiac is not required to adhere to the First Amendment. However, the administration’s recent actions are a threat to freedom of the press on our campus.

Bushnell, the vice president for public affairs, said that the policy on Web publication is meant to protect the students, not impair their rights. “The policy is intended to reduce the potential for serious error in light of a student’s enthusiasm to release ‘breaking news,’ ” she said.

But Lahey's own words suggest that he believes some campus conversations should take place outside the view of student or other news media. He [told the student government group](#) this fall: "I frankly don't want to talk about diversity in this kind of forum, or anything else that is remotely sensitive and not purely factual. But I am open to exploring with student government how the student body can have serious discussions about sensitive matters, and not open to newspaper reporting, for factual purposes."

In an e-mail message early Monday, Braff said: "The policies in place right now are preventing the student journalists on this campus from following through with the techniques we learn in the classroom. However, I am pleased that the administration now seems willing to talk about it, and am hopeful something can be worked out relatively soon."

— [Doug Lederman](#)

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/12/03/press>.