

This is from a few folks who care about Western Illinois University and about Freedom of the Press.

As you may know, WIU's student newspaper, the Western Courier, has a history of producing good work and good alumni, from Civil Rights pioneer C.T. Vivian and Fulbright Scholar David Heinz to Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Mark Konkol and hundreds of lesser-known contributors. It's faced challenges ranging from being kicked off campus (it survived) and a libel lawsuit (it prevailed) to returning to campus (it improved) and threats of withholding funds or pressure from Sherman Hall (...).

As you may *not* know, WIU Vice President Gary Biller's Jan. 22 suspension of Courier editor Nicholas Stewart, because his freelance report on a Dec. 12 campus fracas was picked up by other media, has caused considerable commotion on campus and beyond, with objections by individuals and groups of journalists, First Amendment advocates and everyday citizens.

Biller wrote that Stewart "poses a threat to the normal operations of the University" (a surprising charge when real problems exist, such as inadequate state support and enrollment). Biller accuses the undergrad of "committing acts of dishonesty [such as] attempting to represent the University, any recognized student organization, or any official University group without the explicit prior consent of the officials of that group"; "engaging in act of theft or abuse of computer time including ... unauthorized financial gain or commercial activity"; and "committing violations of rules and regulations duly established and promulgated by other University departments," all under the Code of Student Conduct. All are also rather unreasonable, has been noted by observers ranging from the American Association of University Professors (its *Academe* magazine's commentary is at <http://academeblog.org/2015/01/28/western-illinois-university-suspends-the-student-editor-in-chief/>) and the national office of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) <http://spj.org/pdf/letter/wiu-letter-01-29-2015.pdf> to the Illinois News Broadcasters Association <http://inba.net/node/472> and columnist Bill Knight, whose piece is running this week in Canton, Galesburg and other area newspapers.

Stewart explained that he shot the incident with his own device, uploaded it from his personal Internet connection to a media brokering service with which he's made other material available, and it was used by some media credited to "Nicholas Stewart/ LSM" *without* mentioning WIU or the Courier. Only *later* did he post the footage to YouTube and label it "Macomb Illinois riot: 12/12/14 pepper spray" and credit himself and the Courier (so his original video wouldn't scoop the paper, which wouldn't publish for a month).

He wasn't assigned the story or supervised (helping make him an "independent contractor"). It occurred after the Courier's last issue of the semester (and staffers are obligated to work "*during* the publication schedule," according to the Courier manual, adding credence to his acting as a freelancer). And there's precedence for such effort (the past practice includes not only his previous work but other Courier contributors who've provided photos and stories to other media).

Further, the Courier manual *allows* outside work, saying it's "permissible when such work does not conflict with the staff member's or freelance employee's obligations to the Western Courier or Western Illinois Magazine," although it says journalists "should" (*not "must"*) get prior approval from some unnamed authority.

Whether assumptions were made or an inadequate investigation conducted, it could be described as "Ready! FIRE! Aim!" Indeed, the intimidating action could be a clumsy crackdown on news reports differing from *appearances* preferred by some administrators, or just a serious error in judgment.

Regardless, it's using a sledgehammer on a push pin. Frank LoMonte of the Student Press Law Center told SIU's Daily Egyptian <http://dailyegyptian.com/western-courier-editor-suspension-adds-to-list-of-student-censorship/>, "We've never encountered anything like this, where a school believes it can remove an editor from office because he engaged in freelancing on his own personal time." And as SPJ in its Jan 29 letter to President Thomas says, "No one is benefitting from the situation as it stands. Not Stewart. Not WIU. Not the Western Courier. Not journalism as a whole."

Elsewhere, courts have considered conflicting rights of media located on public property (such as schools) versus government interests, and under "public forum" doctrine they've ruled for journalists. In "Dean v. Utica," for example, a federal judge ruled that a Michigan school's removal of an *accurate* article (about a lawsuit against the school) was motivated by *image control* and was unreasonable.

Between any board's extremes of micro-managing and total detachment, there must be a sensible middle ground. That would seem to be having Stewart exonerated, rescinding his suspension, and apologizing.

At the risks of trivializing tragedy, "Je Suis Courier," or "Nous sommes Courier."

I am the Courier/we are the Courier.

[signed by 45 former Courier alumni]

Jeffrey Bartl, senior writer/news & editorial at STATS, LLC (Courier staffer 2004-05)

John C. Berry, former newsman, current Registered Nurse (Courier 1991-94, editor-in-chief 1993-94)

Mike Blonder, retired teacher (Courier associate editor 1970-71)

Will Buss, business writer at Belleville (Ill.) News-Democrat (Courier 1994-97)

Rick Clemons, retired WIU English & Journalism faculty (Courier editor-in-chief 1983-84)

Alex Degman, news director, WTAX News Radio in Springfield (Courier 2005)

Ryan Ferguson, reporter Champaign News-Gazette (Courier writer and editor 2005-2008)

Rachel Hatch, editor and coordinator of at Illinois State University (Courier writer 1993-96)

Dennis Hetzel, executive director, Ohio Newspaper Association (Courier editor-in-chief, 1972-73)

Garrick Hodge, sportswriter at the Daily Republic in Mitchell, S.D. (Courier reporter and editor, 2011-14)

Marvin Holman, sportswriter at Danville Commercial-News (Courier staffer 1995-99)

Jeff Holt, sports editor at Monmouth Daily Review Atlas (Courier sportswriter 1990)

Dave Huey, senior counsel, Washington State Attorney General's Office (Courier editor-in-chief 1970-71)

Pam Huey, wire/copy editor at Minneapolis Star Tribune (Courier reporter 1970-71)

Bill Knight, syndicated columnist and WIU faculty emeritus/English & Journalism (Courier staffer 1972-4)

Ed Komenda, reporter at Las Vegas Review-Journal (Courier 2007-11)

Joe Lanane, Central Austin editor at Community Impact Newspapers (Courier staffer 2003-06, editor-in-chief 2006-07; SGA vice president (2007-08)

Nicole Lauer, reporter at The Dispatch/Rock Island Argus (Courier 2003-07)

Nate Lawrence, executive director at Polyrythms in the Quad Cities (Courier 1969-70 and co-founder of WIU's Black Student Association)

William Lee, reporter and online web editor at the Chicago Tribune (Courier editor-in-chief 2001)

Crystal Lindell, managing editor Candy Industry Magazine (Courier reporter and editor 2001-05)

Chelsea McDougall reporter Northwest Herald (Courier 2002-06)

Mike Mooney, assistant city editor, Idaho Falls Post-Register (Courier reporter 1969-72)

Tom Morrissey, teacher at Appleton, Wis. (Courier 1969-70)

Kyle Moss, former reporter at Piatt County (Ill.) Journal-Republican and now a Public Administration graduate student at NIU (Courier staffer 2006-07)

Jason Nevel, education reporter at Springfield's State Journal-Register (Courier sportswriter and editor, 2004-08)

Jeff Reynolds, managing editor at Sports Xchange (Courier reporter and editor, 1996-99)

Paul Reynolds, former director of communications at Arizona Public Service (Courier editor-in-chief, 1969-70)

Tom Roark, retired from Jefferson Lines (Courier staffer 1969-70) and Barbara Spenader, partner in Barsity's Almonds (and 1979 Theater MFA)

Hannah Schrodtt, reporter at Canton Daily Ledger (Courier writer and editor 2012-13)

A.J. Self, software engineer (Courier contributor and editor 2004-08)

Jim Slusher, assistant managing editor for opinion at The Daily Herald (Courier reporter and editor, 1971-73)

Omar Sofradzija, editorial adviser at Michigan State University's State News (Courier 1989-91).

Neil Stegall, clinical social worker (Courier columnist 1969-71, SGA president 1971-73)

Andrew Thomason, online developer, Illinois Principals Association (Courier news editor 2006-08)

Alyse Thompson, reporter at Quincy Herald-Whig (Courier reporter and editor, 2009-12)

Sarah Tomkinson, reporter at The Hawk Eye in Burlington, Iowa (Courier reporter 2011-13)

Chris Ward, with KDHX-FM in St. Louis (Courier arts editor 2000-03)

Bill Welt, sports editor at Lincoln Courier (Courier editor-in-chief 2011-12)

Kris Wernowsky, managing editor for court/crime at Northeast Ohio Media Group (Courier staffer 2001-03).

Zach Wingerter, general manager of WK Cinemas in Nashville. (Courier staffer and editor 2004-08)

Dan Worthington, designer at the Washington Post (Courier staffer 2001-04)

Gwendolyn Yusko, government solutions specialist at The HON Co. (Courier staffer 2009-2010)

Sarah Zavala, manager, Jenny's Steakhouse in Chicago Ridge (Courier staffer 2005)