

DC past a lesson in caution with freedom of press

On May 10, 1960, UConn newspaper Editor-in-Chief Richard McGurk was expelled from school. Though the offense occurred 51 years ago, the lesson of balancing free speech with sensitivity and moral prudence is timeless.

Why was McGurk expelled?



By **Jesse Rifkin**
Weekly Columnist

The Daily Campus has long published an annual "Daily Scampus" edition with fake articles and ads. In 1960, with McGurk leading the paper, the "Scampus" printed two features that even today would offend many eyes.

A fake ad marketed a fictional prostitution business recruiting UConn women. "Earn from \$100-\$250 an hour," the fake ad promised, alongside a photograph of a barely-covered naked woman. "If you already have a position awaiting you after graduation, see us anyway. We may have a position you would find more comfortable."

Moreover, page one displayed an unrelated doctored picture of then-university president Albert Jorgensen alongside then-Connecticut Governor Abraham Ribicoff in sexual postures. Though both were fully clothed, a caption quoted Jorgensen stating, "How cold your hands are!"

Managing Editor Larry Dupuis was then the newspaper's second-in-command, and ascended to Editor-in-Chief upon McGurk's expulsion. Dupuis is now retired in New York City, following a career as Director of On-Air Advertising for ABC television and

later as an antiques store owner. Though he has not set foot on the UConn campus since 1962, he graciously agreed to a phone interview.

"We thought it was great fun," Dupuis recollected. "We were floored by the reaction. That whole thing went right to the capital, right to Hartford, and they thought – as a state university, how could these students even think of doing something like that?"

The Daily Campus became editorially independent of UConn in 1967, remaining so today. However, in 1960 it was strictly affiliated with the university. "While we were screaming freedom of the press," Dupuis recalled, "they were saying you're not free. We own you."

Dupuis speculated as to an underlying motive behind the expulsion. "[McGurk] was very activist and a very radical person," Dupuis described. "[The administration] didn't like him. He was out to get the administration and shake them up."

Dupuis recalled one incident in particular. "There was something called the 'blue book,' which was all the rules and regulations for the university. It was this secret book, and he wanted to get the release. There were a lot of editorials and a lot of articles, and he was the one who did them."

"[McGurk's punishment] was much too harsh," Dupuis believed, both then and now.

The controversy's effects rippled long after the incident.

"It was a very difficult time after that," Dupuis said. "We were just scared, to be quite honest. And it was hard to get people to come to our newspaper. We were understaffed, and I think it was caused by what went on with the 'Scampus.' It muddied the waters for a couple of years."

The lesson here is simple: make appropri-

ate use of free speech and free press while simultaneously respecting basic moral decency. First Amendment rights serve as the lone guarantee of human expression and the ultimate safeguard against authoritarianism. Yet shocking or offensive content should ideally be utilized for legitimate or important political, social or artistic purposes. Such content should not be merely tossed around haphazardly simply "because it can."

Hurtful or hateful speech not intended to provoke public debate is exploitative without meaningful purpose. Isn't such speech thus causing more harm than good? By attempting to institute policy change in the name of transparency and fairness, McGurk's seemingly radical editorials calling for administrative release of the "blue book" utilized free speech appropriately. Advertising a fake prostitution service and falsely insinuating sexual relations between high-ranking public officials did not.

Even McGurk himself eventually arrived at the same conclusion. On the final day of the 1960 school year, McGurk – no longer a student – wrote a letter to the editor acknowledging his judgment lapse. "While catering to the vulgar appetites of those who might find such [material] funny, I had failed to protect the moral sensibilities of those who would not," he said.

McGurk ended with the final words he would ever print in *The Daily Campus*. "I cannot say that I have come fully to grips with all the issues surrounding the publication of the 'Scampus.' I cannot dream as Jacob. But I think I have begun to see the moral responsibility."

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