

Student unions must work with, not against, their papers

Student media must have the freedom to hold the University to account, regardless of the interests of the student union

By [Chris Owen](#), Editor (2015/16)

Wednesday 22 November 2017



Image: Nouse

I discovered recently that college and Union representatives have been in uproar over the University's decision to focus on premium level accommodation over affordable economy options in the plans for new colleges on Hes East. These are concerns that the Union should be aiding, rather than obstructing, its student newspapers in accessing, so that the student body can be informed and the University can be fairly and openly interrogated. Instead, there is a tendency to insulate, obfuscate and centralise where information needs air in order to be made healthy.

Student newspapers, run by media-trained and elected student journalists, and student unions who usually finance them, have a difficult history. It's an antagonistic relationship equivalent to The Times or The Sun being principally obliged to report on the goings-on of News UK and Rupert Murdoch, or Westminster owning and financing The Guardian. It's a deeply illogical relationship made all the more so at York by the Union's stipulations on the 'protection' of its staff (media-trained, elected student journalists are forbidden from approaching non-elected YUSU staff for formal comment about any matters), and by its encouragement of College, Club and Society chairs to avoid contact with the papers. To continue the analogy, it's equivalent to Westminster owning The Guardian, and forbidding MPs and staffers from having any formal contact with editorial staff or reporters.

This latent hostility fails to recognise that a union and its papers have more in common than not. They're both there to hold distant and finance-orientated University management to account on behalf of a fee-

paying student body, to represent the voices of all students, and to work to improve, in ways big and small, the student experience.

YUSU has done this admirably and fearlessly during my three years at York, through the work of full and part time sabbatical officers and a team of supremely dedicated and genuinely invested behind-the-scenes staff. Ben Leatham, Millie Beach and Alex Urquhart and their teams have placed selflessness and drive at the core of their work for the student body of York.

I like to think that this paper, under myself and my predecessors and successors as editors, has largely shared a similar mission and fulfilled it well, be it investigating the University's underfunding of Open Door, the activation of its duties under Prevent, its infamous decision to celebrate International Men's Day, and its continued failure to meet the demand for on-campus accommodation.

I also accept that newspapers, student, local and national, are imperfect – some wildly more so than others. While at once holding power to account, they must hold their *own* power, as conduits of accuracy, balance and fairness, to account. They must treat the responsibility that comes with being a form of lobbyist with clear headedness and rationalism (this is why many people would argue, fairly or not, that 'tabloid journalism' is an oxymoron).

While editing this newspaper for a year, I got lots of small things wrong. I learnt that people tend to be relentlessly unforgiving when institutions dedicated to the utmost accuracy make any mistakes, which, when you think about it, is a brilliantly frustrating paradox. I learnt that producing quality journalism is harder than it looks, especially when you're a full-time student. And I learnt that, in spite of the things that infuriate all of us about modern journalism culture (the egoism, glory-hunting, and obsession with clicks) responsible media brands that undertake fair, accurate and cool-headed reporting are doing far more good than bad in communities big and small.

More than anything, I discovered that resilient student newspapers, just like their local and national counterparts, are more vital than ever in the current political and economic climate. Whether it be the Prevent Duty and academic freedoms, debates around free speech, creeping fees or matters of diversity and equality, having talented, trained and diligent people whose principal role is to shine light in the corridors of power is an asset to us all.

Not least because of the location of legal responsibility, the unique ownership structure of student papers by student unions will always be a source of difficulty – but it also has the potential to be a huge strength. Affording student papers the greatest amount of freedom and the greatest amount of support possible helps unions realise their *own* aims. That support cannot be mutual or reciprocal – papers must scrutinise unions as they do universities – but this is the unique, convoluted nature of the ownership bind. Unions must practice ever greater selflessness in properly supporting, protecting and financing their papers, to enable outward, and inward, scrutiny.

Confidentiality has its necessary needs and merits. So does a public conversation. It's time that Student Unions looked again at where that balance should fall, and at the tools at their disposal to shift it.



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