FROM THE CAMPUS

STUDENT REVIEW AND BYU:
OVER TEN YEARS OF UN-OFFICIAL PRESS
(AND OFFICIAL RESISTANCE) IN PROVO

By Bryan Waterman

BYU PRESIDENT REX LEE HOLDING UP STUDENT REVIEW

BYU's unofficial student paper has crossed the ten-year threshold
in its coexistence with the official BYU forums.

If I were to write a news story for SUNSTONE about Student Review, the independent student magazine at Brigham Young University, it would start something like this:

It's Tuesday night at BYU, three hours since the flag was lowered to the evening broadcast recording of the national anthem. The campus is snow-covered and hushed, except for an eclectic handful of students crowded into the atrium of the Brimhall Design Building. Of the thirty or forty students here, only a few have been to a Student Review meeting before. Some may not come back. But current publisher Taryn Wahlquist, a senior English major, is ecstatic at the turnout for this winter semester recruitment meeting. In close to a year of participation with SR, she's never seen more than fifteen people at one of the magazine's weekly staff meetings.

In fact, I did start a news story for SUNSTONE that way, but I couldn't get much further. I found myself writing what I hoped had happened as much as of what I was sure, and I simply can't write dispassionately about Student Review. For three years, that magazine was the center of my life and largely why I stayed at BYU instead of transferring somewhere less intellectually hostile. I served as its editor and publisher (along with Rachel Poulsen) during some very difficult times for BYU—the summer of 1993 in particular, when the firings of Cecilia Konchar Farr and David Knowlton set off a landslide of departures and dismissals that still shows no sign of slowing. That summer also began difficult times for SR. The magazine had survived community resistance to its anti-Gulf War articles, and it had even recovered into a time of plenty in 1991 and 1992. But within a year of the faculty firings, staff participation decreased, advertisers fell away, and the organization deteriorated. At no point has SR actually folded, although its come close. Perhaps out of guilt (had my editorial judgments contributed to the Review's decline?), perhaps out of the intense sense of community I felt last summer when thirty or forty former staff members met for a ten-year reunion, I wanted to tell SR's story, in no small part to generate support for the current group of students plugging away in Provo, proving that independent thought can still squeak by at BYU. I asked several former staff members for their stories about SR, and what follows largely relies on their accounts.

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"They just kept filing through the door," Wahlquist says afterwards. "I think most of them will come back."

The meeting introduced prospective staff volunteers to the independent magazine's ten-year publishing legacy—one of survival despite SR's off-campus status—and also to the current difficulties its staff faces: While eighteen thousand students and faculty read over ten thousand weekly copies in the early 1990s, in recent years the magazine's circulation has taken a downward spiral. Financial difficulties have forced erratic production since 1994 when the staff moved out of its long-time office space above the old women's gym on University Avenue. But publisher Wahlquist, editors Mara Ashby and Amy Leaver, and the new staff members they hope they've picked up tonight, plan to light Student Review's way (to borrow a phrase from a current BYU capital campaign) into the twenty-first century.
STUDENT REVIEW was born in 1986 out of dissatisfaction with BYU's official publications. The nucleus of SR's founding staff worked for Insight, the Honors Program's student journal. Bill Kelly, who was the Review's first publisher and is now a Portland businessman, recalls that students were frustrated by Insight's limited input and appeal. The students were also irked that the campus newspaper, the Daily Universe, offered no experience to non-journalism students. One of the Insight staffers, Brian (BJ) Fogg, eventually took action, plastering campus with fliers asking, "Tired of the Universe?" and announcing a meeting to organize an alternative student forum. Although sixty or seventy students showed up at the appointed time, Kelly notes, most left when the question of finances arose. For the Review, adoption of an absolute taboo on the subject of homosexuality and the fact that Insight's limited input and appeal were frustrated by Insight's limited input and appeal. The students were also irked that the campus newspaper, the Daily Universe, offered no experience to non-journalism students. One of the Insight staffers, Brian (BJ) Fogg, eventually took action, plastering campus with fliers asking, "Tired of the Universe?" and announcing a meeting to organize an alternative student forum. Although sixty or seventy students showed up at the appointed time, Kelly notes, most left when the question of finances arose. For the Review, adoption of an absolute taboo on the subject of homosexuality and the fact that Insight was unable to cope. "The Seventh East Press certainly inspired us," remembers Leishman. "But its brooding cultural presence was also very real. Our editorial and business plans were obviously shaped by the granite contours left from that era." The university decided not to allow Student Review to distribute on campus, largely because of the controversial demise of its predecessor. The staff's own move to distance itself from the Press included eliminating almost all religious issues. "There was no religion section, in large part because Seventh East Press stood as a reminder of what happened if you stirred that pot," says SR alumnus Greg Matis, now a Salt Lake lawyer. Also with the Press in mind, the Review adopted an absolute taboo on the subject of homosexuality.

To a large degree, the strategy worked. Although its "unofficial" nature probably drove some readers away, the Review was able on some issues to side—rightly and righteously—with a majority of the students. For example, during one of the Review's first semesters, as Bill Kelly recalls, the administration wanted to require approved housing apartments to hire resident assistants who would police university standards compliance on campus. Concerns over the potential for controversy, however, led to the Review using the single and ambiguous word "groundscrew" for physical plant employees. "When questioned, groundscrew officials said they were doing SR a favor by removing old issues."

The Review's limited distribution has always prevented it from reaching a large section of the campus population. Dorm residents. Living adjacent to campus, dorm dwellers sometimes never pass SR stands. Review staffers have sought ways to remedy this problem, from sneaking stacks into dorms to throwing unopened bales from pickup trucks to waiting students near residence halls. (My first encounter with the Review, incidentally, came when I was a first-year student; I was crossing between

**Official Distances: Off Campus**

Problems with the "groundscrew" and dangers in the dorms.

**Popularity** soared with many students, but enemies were lurking in the waters—near the botany ponds south of campus, to be exact. Because the Review was not allowed to distribute on campus, its staff purchased old newsstands that they used to dot BYU's borders. Students coming and going were free to take the papers on campus or to their homes. But Review alumni from all eras report having to retrieve large stacks of papers from nearby trash cans. A more serious challenge came in early 1990 when the campus grounds crew stole over one thousand copies and carted them to a campus recycling facility. Luckily, a Review reader witnessed the theft and called staff members. The following week SR published a photo of the stolen issues with a caption exposing the incident. From then on, the Review used the single (and ambiguous) word "groundscrew" for physical plant employees: "When questioned, groundscrew officials said they were doing SR a favor by removing old issues."
Heritage Halls and the Harris Fine Arts Center when I met Review staff people illegally distributing issues. Campus police chased them away while I watched in admiration, determined to learn more about the illicit publication.

Off-campus distribution raised troublesome issues for BYU’s claim to be a university when it so obviously worked against free expression and independent inquiry. “Walking past the SR stand at the bottom of Maeser Hill always gave me a twinge of anger,” recalls former editor and publisher John Armstrong, now a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at the University of Arizona. “I sensed a deep tension between the goals of an institution of higher learning and that institution’s treatment of able and talented students inspired by those goals.”

Armstrong on occasion confronted university president Rex Lee on the issue at Lee’s question and answer sessions with students. (On one such occasion, Lee apparently anticipated Armstrong’s presence; he pulled from his briefcase a copy of the Review and said he had just picked one up that morning. Unfortunately for Lee, a photographer in the audience caught the gesture on film. The Review reprinted it for years as a “celebrity endorsement.”) Armstrong also met in 1990 with administrators—including university provost Bruce Hafen and vice president for student life R. J. Snow—in an attempt to gain official club status for the magazine’s staff, which would allow them officially to meet and to post fliers on campus, if not officially distribute the magazine there. Armstrong sent a letter to President Lee asking him to back them in this effort. Lee responded by “saying that BYU would be worse off without Student Review,” Armstrong says, “but he insisted that it was in our interest and the university’s interest that SR not come under the university’s control—which is what he assumed would happen if he were to condone on-campus distribution.” Instead, the administration soon announced a policy against campus organizations’ and departments’ advertising in the Review. In 1992, Snow asked the Review to remove its subtitle, “BYU’s Un-Official Magazine” from its masthead, claiming that even an “unofficial” use of the acronym violated the university’s rights to its name.

The Review’s off-campus status has certainly provided most of its financial challenges. But it’s also given staff members the siege mentality necessary to make an independent publication work. Even providing office space and production equipment—luxuries campus-supported publications take for granted—has brought unexpected surprises. For most of the Review’s history, its offices were housed in the old women’s gym across from the dilapidated Brigham Young Academy buildings and upstairs from the CTR thrift shop. BJ Fogg recalls that the old Academy buildings provided the staff with much-needed production supplies. “I remember foraging the Academy our second semester,” says Fogg. “It was exciting roaming around in the dark—especially since the building had been rumored in our own publication to be the location of choice for local witchery. We snagged chairs and stuff, but the layout table was the true find. We had to throw it out a second story window to get it out of the building, and it broke in half as it landed. Getting it into the new [second floor] office space across the street involved a trickier strategy—we used strong undergrads and ropes to get it through the window and into the offices.”

"There's not a shadow of a difference between these two political candidates—they're both non-Mormons."

From its beginnings SR has nurtured a distinct culture for its participants—a needed alternative to the usual Provo fare. But that culture did not always carry connotations of liberal politics and religion. “In my time, the Review was less overtly political than say in 1991 [during the Gulf War],” remembers Gary Burgess, now a junior faculty member in BYU’s history department. “We decided to have a demonstration on campus, called ‘Hands across the Campus’—in protest of what? we had no idea. Eventually it was reduced to ‘Hands across the Campus’: a few of us held hands while someone read a nonsensical speech from the balcony on the glorious mission of SR at BYU. Our presence aroused no concern or interest: perhaps the greatest anti-demonstration in SR’s history.”
Matthew Workman, long-time humor columnist for the Review, summarizes SR culture: "Every organization must be judged by its fruits. SR allowed a high school flunk-out like me to get busted by campus cops and kiss several Benson scholars in the same evening." Workman alludes to events I also witnessed. One night, desperate for something to do in such a sleepy town, we decided to hide out under the Nelke Theater stage on campus—with nothing more scandalous in mind than a few rounds of Boggle. A few hours into our stunt, a security guard opened the trap door that concealed our hideaway. He yelled down for us to come up, assuming the first two to emerge were a romantic couple trying the night away. When he saw the whole bunch of us emerge he started to call the police. We convinced him we were a Family Home Evening group. Later that night, we crammed into an editor's living room and played spin the bottle, having run out of better ideas. Apparently this provided Workman with the opportunity for his intellectual stimulation. Overall, Workman surmises, "I think we made life at BYU just a little more livable. Every now and then we'd get a letter that said something to the effect of, 'I was just about to leave this God-forsaken campus for good when I stumbled upon your paper.'”

Joanna Brooks that SR needed more conservative writing and she replied that finding well-written conservative pieces was one of her hardest jobs. But without that overall balance, SR alienated much of the BYU population. SR's shift to the left certainly affected advertising revenue. Over the years SR has lost several ad contracts over content issues, from things as small as the phrase "pissed-off" to anti-Gulf War articles to more recent controversies concerning Mother in Heaven and an anonymous article describing life as a BYU lesbian.

Former publisher Russell Fox, now a political science Ph.D. student at Catholic University of America, sees things differently. When he joined the staff as a freshman during the Review's second year, the editor told him "how great it was to have a conservative voice at SR, because they were so hard to find. In other words, soliciting members of the conservative majority to write for an unofficial publication was a problem from the start." SR-prone conservatives, Fox maintains, are people who "want to distinguish themselves from the crowd even though they agree with the crowd on most things," and these people "will probably always be rare." Fox also points—and I think rightly—to a problem SR shares with other publications in the independent Mormon sector: "An open forum," he believes, "is a forum with an agenda. By saying 'open forum' you claim not-quite-as-open-forums." But Fox still concedes—and I think most people would agree with this—and as the SR-prone conservatives, Fox maintains, are people who "want to distinguish themselves from the crowd even though they agree with the crowd on most things," and these people "will probably always be rare." Fox also points—and I think rightly—to a problem SR shares with other publications in the independent Mormon sector: "An open forum," he believes, "is a forum with an agenda. By saying 'open forum' you claim not-quite-as-open-forums."
“I sensed a deep tension between... [BYU’s] goals... and that institution’s treatment of some of its most able and talented students who were inspired by those goals.” — John Armstrong

Hussein’s Butt Night.” The Palace, it turned out, was a long-time Review advertiser. It promptly canceled its ad account. In SR’s controversial “Action-Packed War Issue” a week later, the magazine’s opinion editor, Matt Stannard, wrote: “I can’t remember an issue so divisive and emotionally gripping as the war in the Near East. It has divided the political, academic, and spiritual community” at BYU. The war divided SR’s internal community as well. That semester some staff members—including its publisher—left, citing the Review’s apparent one-sidedness on the war issue as a reason for their departure. The war helped set SR’s image as being counter to the BYU mainstream—activist staff members sometimes carried issues of the Review to protests on campus and in Salt Lake. The Review helped promote a campus teach-in on the war with speakers such as Eugene England, Hugh Nibley, Cecilia Konchar Farr, and David Knowlton. When Stannard the following year predicted Bush’s defeat (arguing that Americans no longer cared about the Gulf War victory) the unpopular—albeit prophetic—opinion helped drive the wedge between the Review and the strongly pro-Bush campus.

Although articles on feminism—and abortion in particular—caused campus flare-ups, the more enduring controversial topic—the one often pointed to when describing SR’s unmistakable shift to the left—was homosexuality. In 1990, the staff threw aside the magazine’s taboos and published its “What?! Homosexuality HERE at BYU?!” issue, which explored the topic from a variety of religious and social perspectives. Over the next four years gay issues took up much space in the Review—perhaps because the Review had become a semi-safe space for gay students themselves. Such articles—without exception promoting tolerance if not outright social and theological change—always drew critical response from students. As an editor in this period I received letters and calls from past SR editors and publishers asking us to set the divisive subject aside. For whatever reason, we couldn’t: even the Daily Universe devoted space to gay issues, which led in part to the Universe being the conservative counterpart to the Review. As conservative voices increasingly found a forum in the official university newspaper, to some degree, I suppose, they no longer needed or wanted the Review.

“Tension between the Review and popular BYU culture is not limited, of course, to only a few problematic issues. Such conflicts represent a wider distance between the magazine’s typically left-leaning writers and its typically right-wing potential readers. The rift between left and right has deepened in recent years, fueled most significantly by academic freedom issues. In the wake of the Farr-Knowlton firings, the Houston and Evenson cases, the increased visibility of the campus chapter of...”
the American Association of University Professors (and the national AAUP's investigation of BYU), and increased authoritarianism in the university's responses to these situations, it's hard to sound an independent voice in Provo without "independent" being read as "anti-Mormon" by reactionary students and authorities. The mere willingness to discuss certain topics makes the Review anathema to many BYU students. "Reading the paper in graduate school in 1992," says Gary Burgess, "gave me the impression that editorial decisions were being made with different values in mind than in the 1980s," when Student Review aimed to be a majority voice. This may be true. But BYU has seen several cultural and intellectual upheavals since then. It's hard for me to imagine the Review not being partially at odds with the dominant culture and a repressive administration.

Part of my pessimism stems from an important shift I witnessed in the Review's relationship to BYU during my last year in Provo. In 1993-94, the new officials in the university's Honors Program ordered Review staffers to discontinue its long-standing use of the Maeser Honors Building for its weekly staff meetings. In many ways, the Maeser Building had served as the Review's only sense of belonging—its only home—on BYU's campus. Honors deans from previous administrations had been friendly to SR and had published articles and interviews. Honors students comprised much of SR's staff, and, following its founders' example, SR provided the official Honors publication, Insight, with a majority of its editorial staff. Honors Dean Paul Cox defended, in a letter to SUNSTONE, his decision to refuse the Review its only campus sanctuary by arguing that he also refused Maeser space to other groups, such as the conservative Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). But FARMS is well-endowed and maintains official space elsewhere on campus. To ask FARMS to hold its board meetings elsewhere is hardly the same as taking from SR its only connection to campus. Since its departure from the Maeser Building, SR has held staff meetings in another building nearby, but the connection to what was the heart of BYU's intellectual life remains severed.

Another removal for SR took place later in 1994, when the publication was forced for financial reasons to vacate its office space in the old women's gym. Since then the publication has been housed in staff members' apartments and production has taken place illicitly in various campus locations. At the end of its first decade, SR has become once again a small-circulation magazine, known to only a limited portion of the campus population, waiting again for good times to help swing it into good favor.

A

Tenth anniversary issue

INDEPENDENT AND OPTIMISTIC
Debt-free, but still struggling, SR beats the odds by its survival.

AND, finally, good times are what Student Review staff members hope are on the horizon. While their publication schedule has been more erratic than the traditional weekly, the issues they've produced have been first-rate. A recent on-line fund-raiser relieved them of most of the debt that forced the staff three years ago from SR's offices. Against all odds, Wahlquist and her recent successors maintained a staff during SR's bleakest period and constantly worked to overhaul the Review's image. "At first I tried to be everything to everybody and create an everybody's forum," she says. In the September 1996 issue, she editorialized that BYU President Bateman's alleged plagiarism "made a mockery of academic integrity." But in the same issue she published another student's defense of Gail Houston's firing—an article that argued that feminism has no place in the Church. "I felt like SR was acting as a true open forum," she recalls. But when she met with a faculty member who sits on the Review's board of trustees, "he said that we were making enemies on both sides. The conservatives were pissed-off about the Bateman article and the liberals were disappointed in the defense of the Houston firing. We alienated everyone." Last year Wahlquist also met the challenge of ad revenue head-on by signing up the new independent LDS university, Southern Virginia College, to finance a special issue dedicated to the school's inauguration. The line between free press and corporate sell-out was admittedly tricky, but given the situation, Wahlquist felt she made the right call. "We had declared ourselves officially not dead. We'd done it."
While current staff transitions, the uncertain prospects of fall recruitment, and a fragile ad base still threaten the Review's survival, it seems likely that at least a small portion of BYU's students will continue to need an open forum. "Sometimes I look around my classes," Wahlquist says, "and wonder how many of these people have something important to offer the rest of us but are too afraid to speak. I wonder how many of them have thoughtful, enriching insights that don't necessarily mesh with the norm, and who feel unable to express themselves safely. Student Review strives to offer these people a safe environment in which they can say what they need to say." That's what it's been doing for over ten years.

May it see many, many more.

Subscriptions to Student Review are available for $15 (one year) by writing to PO Box 2217, Provo, UT, 84603. The Review also welcomes tax-deductible donations to The Foundation for Student Thought, its non-profit parent corporation since 1986.

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LEAVING ALCATRAZ

Pewter air and hush of mist in San Francisco Bay—an island lighthouse overshadowed by concrete walls—I clutch the straps of purse, umbrella, lapels of my jacket. Slender French sailors pepper the island navy-blue. I catch their nasal intonations: Il fait froid. Their narrow castle of ship grays across the harbor.

Somewhere in the past
I felt this grayness.
Yes, cheating from a sheet
inside a wooden lid of desk,
then the crucible
of a teacher's eyes
in my darkened heart.

From Alcatraz, The Rock, a park sign slides past like a decoy: prisoners' dummy heads discovered propped on bunks while they chisel through dank cement to slip into salt water fathoms deep.

Darkness in D Block: cells for solitary
where I crouch, imagining someone tossing a penny
then crawling to find it, tossing again,
over and over for days. No copper color shining in the blackness.

I know how light looks
after many days—
lying to my parents
about the broken eggs
against the barn door,
daring finally to tell them,
whispering again the dictum,
Be merciful unto me, a sinner.

Few visitors here. A sister comes, waiting at the window, trying not to focus on the bars. She barely recognizes her brother—memory like a strong current flows back toward the bay. I retrace my way to the city, the crowded elevator rising up until I see all from where I came, recognize the strangers in the cubicle, faces of a distant knowing.

—ANITA TANNER