CALLS FOR A MORE FACTUAL AND ETHICAL STUDENT NEWSPAPER

On Thursday, April 4th a staff writer for the Spectator Newspaper published a story titled “Student Senate: Davies may pay more to support green energy.” Several facts contained within this story are incorrect and the manner this story was reported is also unethical as defined by the Spectator’s bylaws. This is a call for corrections and future adherence to standards of ethical journalism.

The Spectator’s bylaws clearly state in section VII: “Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible;” “Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing;” “make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material... do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context;” “Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant;” “Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting.”

The title of this story contains incorrect information and is very clearly a headline that “misrepresents.” Davies currently pays more to support green energy as we are already enrolled in Xcel Energy’s Windsource program. The expenditure being considered for Senate approval is for continued enrollment in Windsource and to uphold our two-year program enrollment contract. The story continues throughout based on the incorrect assumption that there will be an increase in Davies’ electric costs next year.

This Spectator reporter and the paper as a whole, if functioning correctly and in adherence with its bylaws, should have “test(ed) the accuracy of information” contained within the story. If this was done they would have found that we are currently enrolled in the Windsourse program on a two-year contract. This reporter nor the Spectator, which supposedly has some assessment criteria to make sure its reporters are reporting correct information, did any historical background research on this topic before reporting on it. They would have easily found the bill 56-B-3 that passed last year or, simpler yet, the Spectator could have read their own paper not to mention the several local news outlets that reported on this issue last spring (here 1 and 2 to provide a few). Perhaps most simply, the reporter could have simply read the bill, the attachment or listened to the bill’s introduction to extract the correct information. I call for the Spectator and staff to start double-checking their facts before printing such inaccuracies. This request to factcheck comes after a long trend of inaccuracies in Spectator stories this semester.

Moreover, a legitimate concern is raised by this reporter within the story through a quote from a UW-Eau Claire student. This states that purchasing RECs is a cop-out as this money could be invested in other projects which may lead to more sustainable outcomes. This is a legitimate concern, however it is one that was already addressed within the Student Office of Sustainability, an 11 student commission of Student Senate, which voted affirmatively on this Windsource proposal two years in a row.

The Spectator is clearly not “test(ing) the accuracy of information from all sources.” My name is on this Windsourse legislation and questions were referred to me during the bill’s introduction. I was never contacted about interviewing for this story or given the opportunity to respond to the concerns of the student quoted in the story. This reporter should be gathering “information from all sources” and “diligently seek(ing) out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.” This is also not an isolated incident. Several times this semester an
average student was interviewed and quoted in a story expressing concern over a Student Senate item and a primary author of the item within Senate was never given the opportunity to respond.

If this reporter would have given me the opportunity to respond to the statement that RECs are a cop-out and that we should be investing our money in more sustainable projects I would have responded with the same answer I gave the Student Office of Sustainability. RECs purchased through Windsource provide us the opportunity to support the renewable energy industry through increased investment in wind generation within Xcel Energy’s service territory which helps offset need for utility scale electric generation using carbon sources such as coal. As the overall portion of the electric mix generated through renewables increases, partly with the voluntary investments of Windsource customers, the portion of the electric mix generated by sources such as coal decreases and we see a substantial environmental benefit. Further in response to the comment that we should spend money on long-term renewable energy efforts, I would state that this is just one of our programs related to energy and that the Student Office of Sustainability is currently looking to invest around $100,000 in solar panels on top of the library. I would also add that our partnership with Xcel Energy is extremely beneficial for our students and that Xcel Energy is an extraordinary community partner that not only provides excellent services like Windsource, but also donates nearly $15,000 each year to the $CORE program to make our students’ off-campus home more sustainable.

Since this reporting behavior has become a trend the only conclusion I can reach is that the Spectator and reporters are not “distinguishing between advocacy and news reporting.” These stories are very clearly one-sided and “deliberately distort the truth” by only seeking interviews with viewpoints opposed to the initiatives and purposely not conducting background research. This is a clear bias against any action the Student Senate takes as the Spectator makes no attempt to accurately report the history or reasoning behind Student Senate activities.

The purpose of a newspaper is to provide a source of information to out students about what is happening in a community. To hold those with power accountable in the case of Student Senate. The Spectator has clearly developed either intentionally or unintentionally a trend of openly advocating against the students’ government. This highly unethical journalism of clear advocacy and distortion provides no service for our students. This paper should be quick to correct this trend in order to start “support(ing) the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.”

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