

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.

BRYAN WATERMAN, a former *Student Review* editor and publisher and an associate editor of SUNSTONE, is a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies at Boston University. He is currently completing, with former SUNSTONE managing editor Brian Kagel, a book on academic freedom controversies at Brigham Young University.

"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.

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 it's 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. SUNSTONE's editors were right to suggest I write a column instead of feature news: propaganda usually works better when it's unabashed.



First issue of *Student Review*

A TALE OF THREE PAPERS
The Review, the Daily Universe,
and the Seventh East Press.

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. Though the cluster of students who remained brought out their first issue that fall, *Review* lore holds that the issue was funded using Kelly's mother's Visa card.

The new publication, subtitled "BYU's Un-Official Magazine," initially targeted official support. "We met with the [College of] Humanities Dean and with a university VP, showing what a good idea SR would be," says Roger Leishman, the *Review's* first editor and now a gay rights lawyer for the ACLU in Chicago. The founders had "sterling reputations"—Leishman had recently spoken at undergraduate commencement as valedictorian—but the administration made "clear efforts to eliminate the possibility of SR before it got started." Leishman laughs at the

memory. "They slimed us," he says, "but the backstabbing gave us the extra motivation to get going."

The initial idea, most founders agree, was to provide an open student forum that was available nowhere else on campus, especially at the *Daily Universe*, which reserved its editorial pages for its own staff members. Even crusading as mainstream could not keep the *Review* free from perilous associations: administrators and others constantly made reference to the defunct *Seventh East Press*, the independent student paper that earlier in the decade went down in flames over controversial articles on homosexuality at BYU and an infamous interview with Mormon maverick Sterling McMurrin. The *Press* had depended largely on campus support—through advertising and sales in the BYU bookstore—and when the university pulled those resources the paper 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 off-campus as they did in on-campus dorms: "We decided to oppose it, and supported a meeting [on-campus] in the Wilkinson Center's 'living room' where we attracted probably 300-plus students. Roger Leishman had the crowd roaring in approval. He started with, 'Hi, I'm Roger Leishman, editor of *Student Review*.' The cheer was deafening. That was the first time I really realized that we were having an effect on BYU."



Halloween issue

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."

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

Heritage Halls and the Harris Fine Arts Center when I met *Review* staffpeople 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 of-

ficially 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 re-

member 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."



Student Enquirer

AN "SR CULTURE"

"Hands across the Cougarat"; on-campus sleep-overs; finding like-minds.

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 Cougarat': 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."



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

“Every now and then we’d get a letter that said . . . ‘I was just about to leave this God-forsaken campus for good when I stumbled upon your paper.’” —Matthew Workman

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 trysting 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. It made me laugh out loud. Any school that can harbor a bunch of weirdoes like you can’t be all bad. I decided to stay.’ I think that’s a good thing.”

Not all *Review* contributors, Workman notes, are pointy-headed leftists. The *Review*’s most-remembered offerings are the yearly satirical special issues—*The Student Enquirer* and *The Daily Uniforce*. Typical humorous articles from either issue might involve Taco salad scandals in the Cougarate (do friends overstuff salads for friends?) or fake news articles about the Cougarette squad’s secret identity as bodyguards for general authorities (their hyper-hairsprayed hair deflects bullets).

For many staff members, though, the *Review* culture was a place to cultivate interesting friendships. Andrew Christensen, a former *Review* publisher, explains: “It thrust me into association with far more interesting people than the others I’d managed to hang out with since the end of my mission. Those people in various ways personified the flavor

of Mormonism I feel good about. SR also put me into meaningful contact with some of the best faculty I met at BYU. It helped my BYU experience become something approaching the college experience for which I thought I’d signed up.”



War issue

EDITORIAL NEUTRALITY/
KILLING THE MESSENGER
*The perils of not taking stances;
The Gulf War; Homosexuality.*

THE *Review* has always maintained that it takes no official political stances, but its tone and content, many people claim, has over the years slipped more and more to the left. Part of the shift was format-oriented. While the founders initially intended the *Review* to be in part a traditional newspaper, after the first four years the front-page news format was replaced by a more opinion-oriented magazine style. Former staffers debate how much the current magazine has departed from its origins. Sterling Augustine, who oversaw design and production in the late-'80s and early-'90s, sees the changes as sharp, and as the source of the *Review*’s current hardships: “I suspect a great deal of the reason SR has declined,” he says, “is that it stopped being balanced. I once told [editor and publisher]

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 that other forums are not quite as open, that you want to be able to say something different than what you hear from those other, not-quite-as-open-forums.”

But Fox still concedes—and I think most people would—SR’s increased willingness to tackle topics the original staff had considered taboo brought trouble. A new religion page in 1989 led to many of the magazine’s more controversial pieces. But the two issues that drove the deepest wedges between the *Review* and its potential readers were the Gulf War and the increasing prominence (paralleled in the larger society) of gay issues. During the Gulf War, many *Review* staffers were anti-war activists, and while the magazine printed both pro- and anti-war articles, protesters were dominant. Two issues in February 1991 were especially controversial: One article criticized a local dance club—The Palace—for sponsoring a “Kick Saddam

"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*.



Faculty issue

RECENT DIFFICULTIES
Polarization on campus; Honors officially bans SR; SR goes homeless.

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



"I'm not a very charitable person, but fortunately Rachel is, and in this church we believe in proxy work."

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.



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 pub-


lication 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 had "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."



"She's home, but she's had a lot to eat and she's sleeping.
Maybe you could come back a little later."

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.



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