

Professor finds censorship starts with self

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If you're a Brewers fan surrounded by Cubs fans, do you stay quiet when talk about which team will win the pennant comes up, or do you vehemently defend your team?

The answer, according to University of Wisconsin Oshkosh assistant journalism professor Vincent Filak, might depend on your willingness to self-censor.

As one of 45 UW Oshkosh faculty members to received 2008-2009 Research and Teaching Awards from UW Oshkosh's Faculty Development Fund, Filak studied how "willingness to self-censor" (WTSC) affects coverage of controversial topics by high school and college media.

Examples may include coverage of such issues as teen sex or criticism of school administrators. In a nationwide survey of 196 college media editors and advisers, Filak found that media advisers who are higher on the WTSC scale are less likely to feel comfortable publishing certain topics in the student media outlet.

"Therefore, there's a risk that they'll either overtly or covertly prevent those topics from being covered," he explained. "This leads to the loss of free press and a narrowing of the coverage of important topics."

Filak said censorship of student media is not always easily spotted.

"It can be couched in the simplest of decisions, such as encouraging a student to find a 'better' story as opposed to the one that might cause controversy or asking the student, 'Are you sure you've got your facts right?'" he said.

Some factors, like self-interest, fear of retribution and a climate of fear, can precipitate self-censorship, which causes people to shut down when controversy occurs, he said.

On the other hand, people who view journalism as a "calling" are more likely to fight against censorship and be more open to a wider array of story topics.

Before joining UW Oshkosh in fall 2008, Filak worked as an associate professor of journalism at Ball State University, where he was the adviser to the Ball State Daily News. He will serve as adviser to UW Oshkosh's student newspaper, The Advance-Titan, starting fall 2009.