



EDUCATION LIFE

Free to Be Mean: Does This Student Satire Cross the Line?

By KYLE SPENCER APRIL 10, 2014

On a recent cloudless afternoon, a group of young comedy writers — one in Ray-Bans and a floppy wizard hat, another in skateboard sneakers and funky jeans — descended upon San Diego State University’s palm-tree-dotted campus, brandishing copies of their latest creation: a 12-page broadsheet of lewd humor.

It was distribution day, or Distro, and staff members of The Koala, California’s most reviled student publication, had 8,000 copies to hand out.

“Come and get it, you know you want it,” thundered Erik Luchsinger, a 21-year-old management major, in Hawaiian swim trunks, tank top and bow tie.

“All the cool kids are reading it!” bellowed Taylor Etchart, a senior foods and nutrition major.

“Guaranteed to be funnier than your textbook!” another staff writer shouted as students whizzed by on skateboards and bicycles.

The cover featured an orgy of naked women with koala heads, clutching beer bottles, injecting illicit substances and vomiting. Inside was a list of “Top 5 Ways to Pick Up a Girl in a Burka,” a four-step instruction guide entitled “How Thou Shalt Use Thine Bible Pages to Roll One Holy Joint,” and in lieu of horoscopes, there were “Whore-o-Scopes.”

Some students accepted the paper gamely. Others were not so enthusiastic. One shouted back, “I’m black” and called the tabloid racist. Another turned away dismissively when offered a copy. “Really offensive,” she said to me. A professor snatched a pile “to give away to the trash can.” Sometimes, the paper is ripped up right there. Occasionally, there is spitting.

The Koala traffics in the kind of off-color banter even the writers recognize as offensive, though they also characterize its content as “witty” and “artistic.” Issues are peppered with jokes about homosexuals, Jews, Latinos, African-Americans, cancer patients and injured orphans. “Zimmermanslaughter” mocked the killing of the black teenager Trayvon Martin at the hands of a neighborhood watch coordinator. A particularly controversial issue featured a piece with the headline “RAPE!” It advised student rapists on what to do “when you drunkenly realize she’s conscious enough to call the cops”: “Wipe off the blood and hide in the bushes NOW!” “Koala Call Outs” are anonymous reader letters filled with slurs about students and professors, who are often named or described.

The student-run tabloid has had a controversial presence across the region — at the University of California, San Diego, where it originated in 1982 and now only occasionally publishes, and at California State’s San Marcos campus, where it was shuttered more than a year ago. Here at the state university system’s San Diego campus, students routinely criticize the paper for promoting “rape culture.” Periodic editorials and campaigns denounce The Koala, including one in 2010 to persuade local businesses to discontinue advertising. Last fall, a group of students sent a letter to the university senate’s Freedom of Expression Committee demanding an end to distribution on campus.

Despite all this, The Koala seems to be flourishing. It has recouped its lost advertising dollars, and revenues are up by more than 100 percent from fall 2012 (the editorial staff is not paid). For the first time, staff members are trying to sell subscriptions to graduating seniors, to foster an alumni base, and there is a beefed-up online presence. Koala coffee cups, stickers and T-shirts are in the works, and the paper set up a table during rush hour on the quad for a “Koala Awareness” event. Martin Beil, the business manager, says the goal is no longer just to survive but to “fully saturate the market.”

With its hip, fanzine look, The Koala has its fans. “Issues fly around the dorms,” Mr. Luchsinger insisted. “We find them in bathrooms, in libraries and in the cafeteria.” The paper’s “enemies,” he said, just don’t get it.

Mr. Luchsinger, who says he culls inspiration from satirists like Benjamin Franklin, views the tabloid as rebellious and boundary pushing. “This is not highbrow journalism,” he acknowledged. “But we are still trying to do something substantial.” The Koala’s mission, he says, is to tease and tweak the campus

melting pot.

Juliana Bloom, who was recently promoted to editor after Mr. Luchsinger, puts it simply: “We’re a comedy publication. It’s O.K. for us to joke about serious stuff.”

Not surprisingly, detractors don’t find anything funny here. “I dread it when it comes out,” said Susan E. Cayleff, a professor in the women’s studies department, who spends class time during Distro Days discussing *The Koala*. “It makes students terrified and uncomfortable and not proud to be here.”

IN 2001, A SPIRITED SCIENCE MAJOR named George Lee Liddle 3rd became editor in chief of U.C.-San Diego’s *Koala*, courting controversy with risqué content while currying favor with national free-speech activists, who rushed to the paper’s aid when administrators tried to close *The Koala* there. After graduating, Mr. Liddle sought to expand the paper’s reach. He registered *The Koala* as a for-profit business in 2005 and contacted students at San Diego State, where they secured student association status and office space. Briefly, the papers existed in an ambiguous universe: as both business and university organizations. Critics lobbied administrators to revoke student association status at U.C.-San Diego, and eventually at San Marcos. The conflict was moot at San Diego State. Staff members were accused of alcohol- and drug-related violations and its university affiliation pulled. Today, the paper is published off-campus.

The battles over *The Koala* provide a glimpse of how challenging it can be for a university to uphold its free speech mores yet still remain a civil, welcoming place for its increasingly diverse student body. San Diego State’s code “defends the expression we abhor as well as the expression we support,” meaning *The Koala* can mouth off about different races and still be untouchable.

Jung Min Choi, an associate professor in the sociology department, has been one of *The Koala*’s most vocal critics, frequently using the paper in his classes as living exhibits of racial intolerance. In 2008, an African-American professor in his department was attacked in an anonymous reader letter: “Your dissatisfaction with being a fat, ugly and childless black woman is evident,” read part of the letter. It accused the professor of “preaching” instead of “teaching.” Dr. Choi, who specializes in race and identity, and his colleagues approached the university’s Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities about what they considered a case

of faculty harassment.

“I must say I was not actually greeted very warmly,” he recalled.

Officials told him they had no intention of censoring the paper. “They have a right to be here,” Greg Block, the chief communications officer, told me. “We don’t necessarily agree with everything they publish, but that’s neither here nor there.” And when students pleaded last fall with Mark Freeman, chairman of the Freedom of Expression Committee, to help shut it down, he wrote back that “freedom of the press is very broadly protected.”

Jimmy Talamantes, a graduate student who is Mexican-American, was one of the letter signers. He called the response disappointing. “Students should not feel threatened by any person or organization while attending an institution of higher learning,” he said.

TO BETTER UNDERSTAND what’s so funny about *The Koala*, I joined the staff at one of its Sunday night meetings, in a cluttered one-bedroom apartment on the edge of the San Diego State campus. Sitting on a shag rug beneath a framed poster of the “*Seinfeld*” character Kramer, and between bites of guava cookies supplied by Mr. Luchsinger’s mother, students reviewed their last issue, which was projected onto a flat-screen television. When the scan stopped on the staff box, they cackled at their pen names. The use of them angers critics, who complain that if *The Koala* is going to publish its targets’ names, the staff ought to use real names, too.

“Who’s Toilet?” someone asked, reading off one of the bylines. The room chortled.

Mr. Luchsinger talked finances, then consulted the group on the paper’s fraying relationship with the university’s Afrikan Student Union. “Do you guys think it would be a good idea to have them come over here and write white people jokes for us?” he asked. The idea was tabled after a brief discussion and more chuckles.

Later, a cluster of students crafted a limerick about the student body president, who spent his early years in a homeless shelter. Mr. Luchsinger said the president’s oft-told story had a phony, “after-school special” quality to it, and couldn’t be missed as fodder for comedy.

The meeting built to a crescendo as the students tossed out ideas for one of

the trademark features: “Top 5’s.” They jotted down possibilities for “Top 5 Things to Wear to a Gay Pride Parade” and “Top 5 Reasons to Marry an Illegal Immigrant,” including, as one student shouted out, “You get a free housekeeper.” Or “Cheap labor is now free.” Or “She expects the abuse.” Responses elicited peals of laughter. “Can someone just say we are all going to hell?” one student said.

Mr. Liddle swears his protégés are not filled with misogyny or racial animus — about half of the 25 or so staff members are women, and a handful are Asian- or Mexican-American. Their motives are pragmatic, he said: They want experience with a media outlet. Many of the staff members told me they aspire to work for television, an online magazine or media start-up.

They said that when they first read *The Koala*, they were relieved to find others with a similar sensibility. “I found people who share my sick sense of humor,” Mr. Etchart said. He calls it “dark satire.” The no-holds-barred approach also appealed to Emmilly Nguyen, a freshman journalism major. Around *Koala* staff members, she said, “I could be myself.” Mr. Luchsinger plays up the bond that staff members share. While reputed to be hard-partying renegades, he said, a surprising number have a hard time finding places to fit in. “There is this constant insider joke that we are basically a group of misfits who are awkward and weird,” he said.

I asked Lisa Wade, chairwoman of the sociology department at Occidental College, who studies campus culture, why young people might see humor in the hurtful. Dr. Wade noted that most college students have been reared on unvarnished satire, much of it untidy and cruel. “*Family Guy*” and comedians like Sarah Silverman and Sacha Baron Cohen have plumbed domestic violence, AIDS victims and children with special needs for comedic material. “Generation X sort of started it,” Dr. Wade said. “But these guys have really grown up on it.”

Mordechai Gordon, a professor of education at Quinnipiac University who developed a course titled “The Philosophy of Humor and Laughter,” sees the desire to rebel and poke at taboo topics. “When kids go to college, they feel like it is their time to say whatever they want and do whatever they want.” He cites the superiority theory of humor, dating back to Plato. “Making fun of racial stereotypes has a long history — maybe it’s more in your face now. You don’t even have to believe that Irish people like to get drunk or Poles aren’t smart to think the jokes are funny. We feel superior.”

While The Koala has considerable enemies, it also has surprising allies, like Kevin Torres, a Mexican-American business major, who says he appreciates the way it makes light of stereotypes that can have hints of truth to them. He found the Koala takedown of Mexican house cleaners particularly entertaining. “I think it’s pretty hilarious,” he said, folding over with laughter. “When you’re Mexican, it’s very hard to get offended. You have to have humor. Yes, my mother cleans houses.”

The Koala is not the only publication to mine edgy terrain. A subgroup of campus publications — The Quinnipiac Barnacle, The Medium at Rutgers and The Texas Travesty at the University of Texas, Austin — delight in routinely touching humor’s third rail.

Take The Medium. Last year, it was criticized for likening a sorority with dwindling membership to a gaggle of farm animals. The motto: “Ugliness Acceptable.” So loud was the outcry that staff members posted a speedy apology on their Facebook page. In 2012, officials released a statement condemning The Medium for a column defending Hitler that it falsely attributed to a Jewish activist on campus.

Ronald Miskoff, then faculty adviser, is not a fan of administrative intervention. He thinks students should be given the space to figure out where the line between funny and cruel is, even if that means allowing them to make bad calls. “Otherwise you have censorship,” he said, “and what’s the next stop on that bus?”

Staff members at The Brown Noser, founded in 2006 at Brown University, set their own limits. “We don’t write anything that feels classist or racist,” said Louisa Kellogg, an editor. Also on the no-go list: gross stuff, juvenile humor, and headlines that resemble ones in The Onion. At The Colonel, the University of Kentucky’s satire broadsheet, public officials are fair game, private citizens not so much. “Usually what we tell staff members is: If you Google them and their name comes up all over the place, they’re game,” said Nicole Schladt, an editor.

But what of publications that don’t monitor themselves? Dr. Choi believes that’s when universities ought to step in. Administrators have a responsibility, he said, to “uphold not just legal behavior but ethical behavior as well, and some common sense about what is and isn’t funny.” He added: “When administrators don’t take a stand, it is almost as if they are supporting what these people are

saying.”

Mr. Freeman interprets the university’s silence differently. “If we were able to ban any speech we didn’t like, we’d have very little debate,” he said. “For me, this is a teachable moment about the consequences and burdens of living in a democracy.”

Kyle Spencer’s last article for Education Life was about the Muslim fraternity Alpha Lambda Mu.

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