

## **They'll say anything**

Recent events have forced into sharp relief the troubled status of communication in and about York University. In conflicting informational universes, official stories parade past press and public while alternative versions circulate chaotically through email. Our administration is performing an uncanny imitation of the White House, calculatingly engineering press and public to establish assertions as facts. For those concerned about these events, each attempt to stimulate broader discussion has served to highlight the dispiriting lack of access to any shared "public space" for scrutiny and discussion of these rumours of truth.

Such discussions suggest that whether or not students are permitted to assemble in Vari Hall, whether or not their presence is "violent," whether or not there is evidence that they are guilty of criminal charges against them, are issues in a larger context: the increasingly centralized management of power and communication in the university, recently expressed in the intent to disenfranchise Senate in the suddenly necessary "confidential" search for a new President. Judging from what issues from the university's "communications" office, neither truth nor judicial process is part of York management strategy. Truth and process are not unconnected; both are key to the transformation of university management.

The administration's growing hunger for the right to administer without faculty input suggests that we are time-traveling backwards, reinstating centralized governance strategies that the C.A.U.T. *Report on University Government in Canada* (1966) set out to reform. Authors Duff and Berdahl pointed to the failure of university management to balance fiscal priorities of the Board with academic priorities represented by Senate, the Board's failure to represent diverse professions and social standings, the excessive centralization of powers in the President's office, and the lack of direct communication between diverse groups comprising the university community. Despite intervening miracles in and expenditures on communication technology, recent changes in university management have generated and relied on further decline in consultation and transparency while revoking the "elite" scholarly ideals that once justified bureaucratic stolidity.

This realization inspired me to look up the term "corporate managerialism." My interest was not to demarcate contemporary management from some golden age when universities were autonomous and thought was free, but to clarify how global economic and social changes were reflected in changing university governance and what might be required now to defend the still useful ideal of a community of scholars. Corporate managerialism refers to a set of bureaucratic arrangements that emphasize inputs and outputs, rather than, in previous bureaucracies, correct processes and the enforcement of established procedures. OECD defines corporate managerialism as "performance-oriented" and notes that it emphasizes "results and efficiency and effectiveness, decentralized management environments, flexibility to explore alternatives to public provision of services, establishment of productivity targets; and a competitive environment between public sector organizations, along with the strengthening of

strategic capacities at the centre of the organization.” (OECD 1995). Educational policies began to advocate corporate managerialism in the 1980s, precipitating a “*muscular imposition of systemic objectives*” that has contributed to the elevation of “efficient site management” over participation and process (Taylor et al, *Educational Policy and the Politics of Change*, 1997). This is substantiated in York’s insistence (e.g. Nancy White’s letter to the *Star*, Feb 17) that the Vari Hall arrests were unrelated to freedom of speech issues but concerned the failure of students to apply for a permit (though PR manager White is not obligated to mention that current regulation prohibits the granting of one).

Rather than seeking to enhance collegial input, administrators’ managerial thinking leads (as York illustrates) to a sizeable increase in the percentage of university budgets spent on advertising. Focused on branding, market niche and public relations, university communication pursues efficient management of resources rather enhancement of civic responsibilities. (Thus the coincidence of York communications receiving a marketing prize and a Senate rebuke on the same day.) President Marsden’s claim that police actions were unfortunate but “had nothing to do with us” could only occur in a context wherein dialogue is replaced by spin. Like the process of justice to which students are ostensibly entitled, the process of consultation with academic staff is disappearing from university affairs.

Since this is happening all over, it is fair to ask about the degree to which devolution of authority from government (budget cutbacks) increases pressure for “efficient site management” and creates conditions for a more managerial approach to academic administration. Eager to comply with pressures for greater productivity, our pragmatic colleagues acknowledge that universities rely increasingly on corporate funds and that faculty and students are becoming entrepreneurs engaged in the production and exchange of marketable commodities. As a university, we have to decide where limits to such pragmatism fall. One such site is the evident absence of shame in this administration. Rather than addressing thorny issues directly they hire public relations experts and lawyers who work long hours at great expense to polish the university’s image. Whether re-branding the university, policing its buildings, or creating statements for the press, they demonstrate little respect for the university community and no compunction about accountability to it. It is efficiency, not ethics, that defines their mandate: lies are perfectly compatible with this.

The faculty should not remain complicit with this arrangement, however much we “know” that public relations bear no relation to truth. It provides a cynical model of intellectual accountability and civic responsibility and confirms the university’s status as a willing instrument of corporate managerialism. If all communication is instrumental and all spin legitimate, we cannot speak or act against plagiarism or lies. Is this what “teaching and research” implies? These events are catalysing renewed interest in knowledge and balance of power within the university. Appointment of a senior administrator entrusted with the protection of faculty and academic concerns; a public review of administrative priorities, agendas and regulations; a renewed empowerment of

Senate; and access to public, freely accessible communication between and among the academic communities of York would be a good start.