

Apathy and a process unhinged: an inside look

A student journalist is elected to an arts position on UBC's student council. The problem? He's a science student

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VANCOUVER (CUP) -- Call it the student unions' paradox: they care so much about what their students think, no matter how little their students care about them.

Watching the representatives to the University of British Columbia's student union hurl words across their expansive circular table every other Wednesday night, you could hear the paradox in action. Arts representative Scott Price wanted to go back and talk to her students before she voted on anything. "We have to get some kind of consensus from our constituents," Price said.

Sure, only three and a half per cent of arts students voted, but their representatives still make a go of it. It's an amazing idealism that transcends the democratic process; in any other system, leaders would need votes, terms and public scrutiny to fire them up and rein them in.

I smiled a little when I heard Price speak; only a week before, I could have sat right beside him as an arts representative myself. Only I would have been one appointed in desperation after a botched byelection attracted only two students to run for four positions to represent UBC's largest faculty -- and attracted only 40 students to vote out of 10,661 eligible voters.

That astonishing apathy -- a turnout of 0.4 per cent -- let me, an undercover journalist, walk onto student council as an arts representative for two and a half weeks. That fact alone isn't a big deal; the student union, or Alma Mater Society, makes a point of welcoming new faces, and in the absence of a real electoral test, trusts its appointees on faith.

Except that I had no business

representing arts. I'm a science student.

The absurdity began last March when the Arts Undergraduate Society had an election and no one came. That society elects seven representatives to sit on the UBC student union proper, but they could only find three candidates. Only 375 votes were cast.

Then, it got worse. Four appointees filled empty spaces in the summer and of those, only two students remained to run in the September byelection. That's when, during a rushed and poorly advertised campaign, only 40 students voted. One of the winning candidates, political science student Joel McLaughlin, was approved by a margin of one vote -- 20 for, 19 against -- and said even he didn't cast a ballot.

The bar was lowering; the arts society had to depend on faith more than ever. It was early October and the third round of elections to fill the remaining spots was being held. This apathy was too much. I decided to throw my hat into the ring.

That Monday meeting, there was finally a race: three serious candidates vying for two positions. I and another arts student, Stephanie Ryan, won and the results were ratified immediately by the 15 people present, instead of the minimum number, 22, needed according to arts society code to make a decision count.

I was suddenly a representative to the Alma Mater Society, with the same voting power as the student union's president. No one asked which faculty I was in or checked my student number against the registrar's list. If I, a science student, could get into the student union as an arts representative, anyone could. Student apathy had left the door swinging wide -- and I had walked straight through.

Within a week, I was appointed to a committee the UBC administration trusts to see in detail how it spends its tuition dollars. Then I watched the planning of top-secret legal proceedings freely. And that's when I got worried.

It wasn't just apathy anymore. Instead of being an investigative journalist looking to prove a point, I could have been someone with intent to damage the student union. UBC needs to be able to trust the student union,

and when it's plotting court action, the student union needs to trust itself.

But it wasn't my job to stop. It was their job to stop me, and at the next meeting, I ran for another position: arts society archivist, the lord of the filing cabinet.

The woman I ran against began her speech with, "I love colour-coding, and I'm a stickler for detail." She was perfect for the job and I was soundly defeated. Given a choice, the arts society had picked the right candidate. I left thinking at last there was some hope for the system.

One week later, things turned completely around. Acting on tips from several people, including one of my roommates, arts society president Lianne McLean asked that I sign a form stating unequivocally that I was arts student. I could not. She checked my student number, found that I was in science, realized my appointment broke their rules and requested my resignation.

On Wednesday, Oct. 13 at 5 p.m., my two and a half weeks in student politics were over.

The ethics: Was it wrong?

It was easy for an ineligible (and potentially destructive) candidate to take advantage of apathy's taint to put himself on the inside. But the decision to infiltrate the arts society and student union wasn't.

The *Ulyssey* turned it over in our minds during meetings. Did the ends justify the means? How far should I go? And when it was done, who should write the story?

Newspapers thrive on objectivity and truth. In this story, I compromised both -- the first in writing about myself

and the second in never mentioning to the subjects of my stories what I was doing. My posts were abandoned and the society's time will be wasted with yet another set of appointments -- the fourth this year.

It's a basic rule of journalism for journalists to identify themselves, said UBC school of journalism professor Mary Lynn Young. "You didn't lie, but you weren't explicit and there is a problem," she said.

But journalists often misrepresent themselves to get a story, and can never be guilty of "making news," she said. *Globe and Mail* reporter Jan Wong boarded an airplane with a box cutter to expose the flaws in airport security after 9/11, embarrassing Transport Canada and causing a media firestorm -- a precedent to consider.

"Does what you're doing benefit the public more than the harm you're causing? That's the moral calculus you have to use," said Young.

I may have unhinged the democratic process, but it wasn't working anyway. When Jan Wong was attacked over her stunt, she said this: "Ignore the reporter. Pay attention to the problem."

Hey, what is the problem, anyway?

McLean has promised to close the loophole I slipped through. All candidates will have to sign the form that ferreted me out, and any candidate -- appointed or not -- will have to put up a minimum of 30 posters. "The more people that put up posters, the more exposure there is, the more people that talk about it," she said. She's also considering going back to paper elections with voting booths so students can see there's an election going on.

Chain of accountability

For all the whinging that student unions don't do anything, the arts society seems to do plenty, including the largest student-run concert in Canada, Arts County Fair.

UBC's arts representatives care about student issues and the arts society happily welcomed me despite my background in the student press. The councillors I met exhibited an informed, wry feel for the absurdity of thinking large but operating within the student union's small universe.

And losing me, someone who they thought would care, be active and struggle against the incredible inertia of apathy on campus hurt them more than I'd intended. It means another open seat, another appointment and another search through the elusive population of students who don't go to the university just to go to school.

Voter apathy is widespread across the campus and the country. Laughably low poll turnouts reflect not only on student unions but also on students themselves. Accountability survives and languishes not only according to the commitment and diligence of student politicians but also the active participation of students. The outcome of student politics -- the apathy and the accomplishments -- is a dance of responsibility.

There is an empty seat on student council right now, open to an arts student. What would you do with it?

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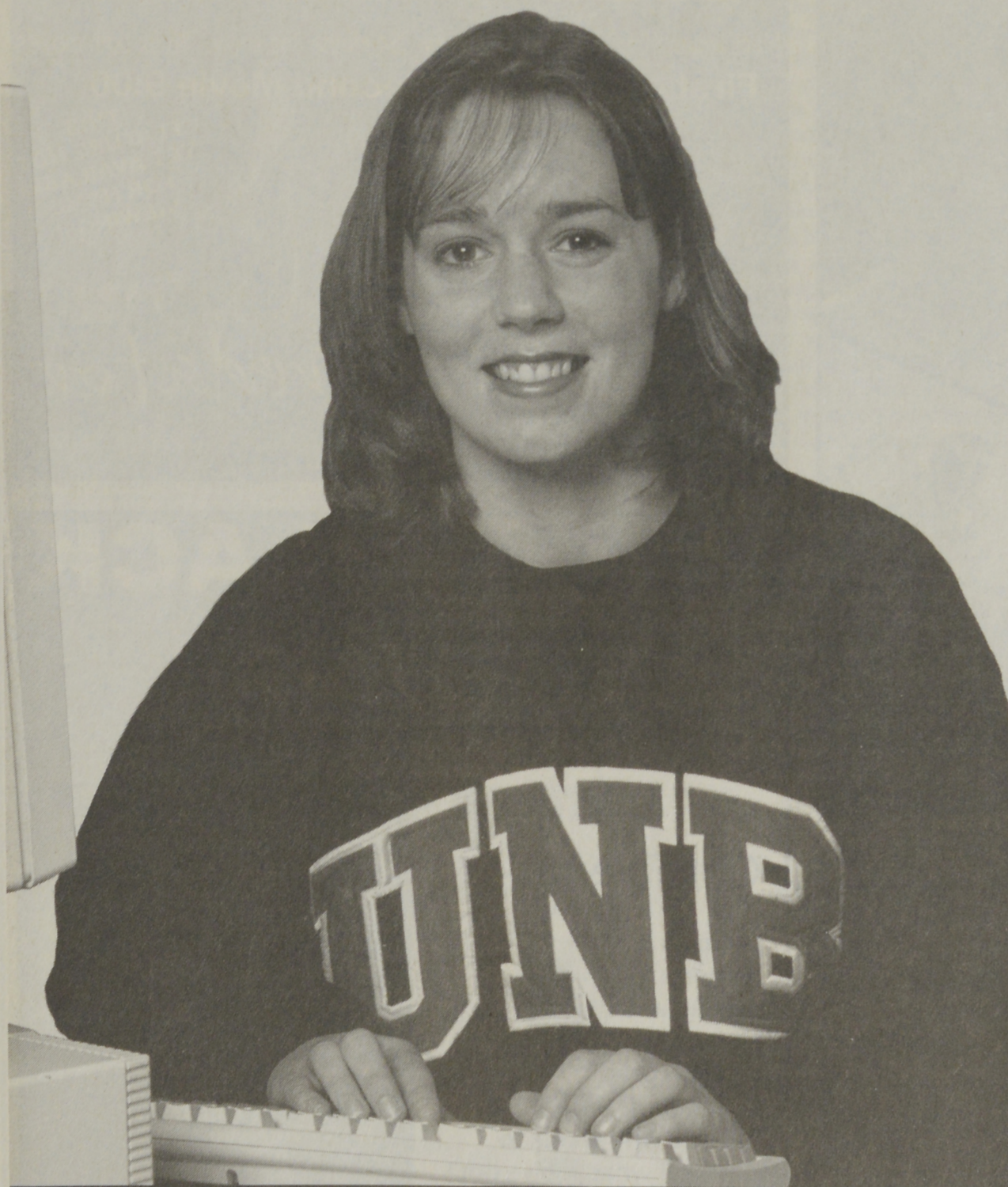
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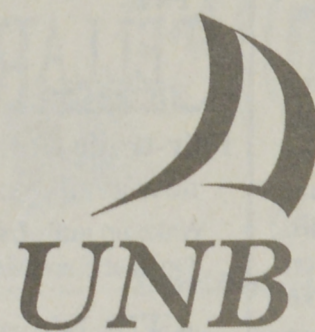


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