No laughing matter

Times New Roman ordered to take down Web site

By

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The university's student-run humor publication, The Northeastern Times New Roman (TNR), received an order from university administration to shut down its Web site last Tuesday, limiting its readership and calling into question its ability to print freely on campus.

The shutdown was a result of content deemed to be offensive and in breach of the Appropriate Internet Use Policy (AUP), as well as complications arising from the publication linking their site to unauthorized domains outside the Northeastern server.

Two articles from the publication's Summer 2005 orientation issue were flagged as breaching the AUP, said university Information Technology Security Manager Glenn Hill, who manages digital security and oversees all matters pertaining to the AUP.

One article contained subject matter about the epidemics SARS, AIDS and Ebola, while another was a take on an account of a UFO sighting that included language labeled offensive.

According to Section 21 of the AUP, Web site material "which in the sole judgment of the university is offensive, violent, pornographic, annoying or harassing" is at risk of sanction, though Hill said he does not enforce the policy unless material is brought to his attention.

The TNR editor, or "King" Ben Bullock said the AUP was overapplied.
"We believe having something like the AUP in place is important for security at the school," Bullock said. "But it was never intended to be a watchdog for student media. The vagueness leaves a lot of room for interpretation."

The issue arose when Hill and Director of Student Activities Gail Olyha found The TNR had redirected a domain name to the school's www.neu.edu server, which hosts their Web site.

Bullock said the publication purchased the domain names as an advertising technique to make their Web site address more memorable to readers.

Since no outside Web hosting company has authorization to redirect their site to an neu.edu address, Olyha said, the issue was brought to Information Security.

Upon hearing of this information, Hill said he read The TNR and took issue with the content.
"I had never had a chance to read it before," Hill said. "After I answered the inquiry, I read the content and it struck me that some of it was in violation of the Appropriate Use Policy."

Though Hill is not in a position to order the Web site taken down, he made a recommendation to the Student Media Board that, along with the issue of unauthorized redirection, resulted in the Web site shutting down.

"If the Web site is to be housed on NU's computer resources, it needs to be in compliance with all of our regulations," Olyha said. "If it were moved off campus, then it would need to comply with [the outside domain's] regulations."
Hill said he had no knowledge of the site's shutdown or any actions after he made his recommendation.

"I would've never made a recommendation for removal. My goal certainly isn't to shut things down," Hill said.

Bullock said he has been involved in "unofficial discussions" with university administration this week. He said TNR had made no decision on where to host their Web site yet, but that keeping their content the same would be a major consideration.

"As long as our archives stay intact, we don't care if we're on or off campus," he said.

Until a decision is reached, the screen at www.nutimesnewroman.neu.edu and www.nutnr.com currently states the site is "experiencing technical difficulties."

While TNR has opposed the decision, there is little action they can legally take against the university.

Visiting professor of media law Dan Kennedy said despite free speech regulations afforded to every citizen by the First Amendment, Northeastern controls the rights to all student media publications because it is a private university.

"If anything on the university's Web site was found to be in breach of the law, the university is technically liable because they are the publisher," Kennedy said, outlining the extensive nature of the AUP. "It sounds like the university has covered itself."

If the TNR were to acquire a domain name outside www.neu.edu, they would still be bound by the AUP, Bullock said.

Chad Cooper, who is involved in another campus humor group, NU and Improv'd, as well as NUTV, said the shutdown was "risky business" for the university to be involved in.

"Times New Roman's Web site isn't a security risk to the institution, and the information technology security manager should play no role in stunting the success and growth of a very popular student publication," he said.

Bullock said popularity was part of the reason for the controversy.

"We've generally come under the assumption that the more popular we became with students, the less popular we'd become with the administration," he said. "Two years ago, I don't think we would have been an issue."

Still, Hill said his job was not to judge anything outside of compliance with the AUP and the security of the university's online realm. He called the idea of protected speech at a university a "gnarly" issue.

"Whether it be e-speech or printed speech, [the IS department] is not looking to censor anyone," he said. "Universities have to be so sensitive to a wide variety of interests concerning what gets said at the university, and a lot of times these interests are looking at what gets said a lot more closely than anyone else."