

CENSORSHIP CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING CABLE-ACCESS SHOWS UNEARTHED DURING PANEL DISCUSSION

FOR A SELF-PROCLAIMED CONTENT-NEUTRAL CHANNEL, WIMPEG
REPRESSES STUDENT CREATIVITY

BY DANIELLE KUEHNEL

Tensions were high as Susan Wickstrom, Western's Student Media adviser, played a clip from the now-retired *Nan and Nelson Show* at a panel discussing First Amendment rights on Wednesday, March 1.

A group of about 50 Western community members and six panelists watched the big screen as one of the show's stars, Nan Miller, did a scene in which he screams "Hee-haw," followed by beating up a bystander.

In 2002, the show was moved from its normal 10 p.m. time slot on public-access Western Monmouth Independence-Public Educational Government (WIMPEG) 17 to air at midnight, with the former WIMPEG programmer citing that the show had "objectionable content."

However, WIMPEG's board claims that they are content-neutral, or that they do not censor what the show features.

Beverly Davis, longtime Monmouth resident, member of WIMPEG's advisory board and a featured panel member, said that when WIMPEG says they are "content-neutral," this refers to "original programming."

"Once [a show] has been on the air," she said, "it is no longer content-neutral.... We are not trying to restrict content. They have, absolutely, the right to put what they wanted on [the station]."

On the other hand, Gerry Blakney, Western student-body president and panel member, said that, "Moving it to midnight, in my interpretation of what content-neutral would be, would then be making a decision on content."

But the controversy does not necessarily begin or end with the actual show. Western community members who attended the discussion expressed discontent with the supposed censorship imposed by WIMPEG.

"If you start changing [program times] to midnight or 1 or 2 in the morning, you're limiting more free speech," said one concerned attendee.

"It was midnight, and I was awake, I watched it and I was offended," one Western student said of the *Nan and Nelson Show*, "but I support their right to offend me, because I can change the channel."

WIMPEG has recently adopted the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) standards for television ratings. FCC regulation dictates that adult content may only be shown between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.

In the case of the *Nan and Nelson Show*, evidently 10 p.m. was not late enough, as WIMPEG board members heard complaints from the surrounding community.

"The board is made up of people who do not necessarily have the channel," said Davis, "so they are only going by word of mouth. The board then made the decision."

However, this year's student television production, *We're not Canadian*, has encountered similar scheduling issues. The show spent several months airing twice daily,

at 10 p.m. and midnight. Recently, though, because of the show's TV-14 rating set by the show's producer, its daily airing was changed to 11 p.m. and midnight.

"People in the past have tried to regulate the show on personal opinion," said Curt Neill, 21, Western Student Television (WSTV) station manager and star of *We're not Canadian*. "One person complains, and then they think the show should be off the air."

Neill isn't discouraged by the WSTV and WIMPEG conflict, though. "The show always ends up playing," he said.

And perhaps this is all that students need to keep happy: simply the fact that they will be allowed to be represented to the Monmouth-Independence community via public-access WIMPEG.

As Blakney put it at the close of the First Amendment panel discussion, "If you don't like the *Nan and Nelson Show*, don't watch the *Nan and Nelson Show*. It all comes down to personal responsibility."

* *We're not Canadian* airs daily on WIMPEG 17 at 11 p.m. and midnight. For more information about WIMPEG and its scheduling policies, go to www.wimpeg.org.