

Racial Incident Forces Adelphi to Confront Issues of Discrimination

BY DANIELLE MCDUGALL

On November 16, several social media posts and a Snapchat video of students from Pi Lambda Phi and Sigma Delta Tau began to spread across the Adelphi community. These posts captured two students using the n-word in a derogatory fashion. Needless to say, the posts quickly began to spark outrage amidst the community, resulting in both faculty and students calling for a response from administration to the incidents, and some indication that said incidents would be investigated.

of by Najee Hunt, a sophomore psychology major and vice president of BSU. The signs paid homage to the title of the 2016 documentary about civil rights activist James Baldwin, "I am Not Your Negro." The objective of the demonstration was to "remind the administration of Adelphi that the diverse population...they foster is demanding an inclusive environment. Diversity without inclusivity is unacceptable," according to an e-mail that BSU sent to invite students to the demonstration.

After speaking with multiple



Wensley Sarkar Bynoe demonstrates with students. Photos by Heidi Pena Ortiz.

One such response came the next day in a letter from President Christine Riordan addressed to the community entitled "Taking a Stand Against Racism and Bigotry." In it, she assured everyone that Pi Lambda Phi, the organization featured most prominently in the offending posts, was being investigated by the administration and had its activities suspended during that investigation period. The final lines of her letter stated that, "We've worked hard to improve equity and inclusion at Adelphi, but there is much more to do."

Part of this work is being done by students who have elected to demonstrate in the wake of the incidents. Students from organizations like Black Students United (BSU) and the Latino Students Association (LSA) convened for a demonstration in front of the University Center on November 27 from 11 am to 1 pm in response to these events coming to light. Participants wore all black and held signs that began with the phrase, "I am not your ___," and ended with various slurs and stereotypes that the demonstrators have had directed at them in their time at Adelphi.

The signs' format was conceived

people involved in the event, it became clear that, to many marginalized students on campus, these recent events with Greek organizations are representative of a far more pervasive and long-standing culture of discrimination that affects both Adelphi and the United States at large.

"This demonstration is collective upsetness. There is a large reported and unreported pool of incidents [on campus]. ..[and although] progress is being made... this is an American institutional issue," said Heidi Pena Ortiz, president of LSA and a senior psychology major.

In an interview with *The Delphian*, Perry Greene, Adelphi's vice president for diversity and inclusion, echoed Ortiz's observations about the prevalence of racism in and outside of the campus.

"Adelphi is a part of the world, and we are at times a microcosm of the world we live and vulnerable to certain socio-political elements found in that world of which we are a part," he said. "As an institution, we reject racism and racist sentiments expressed by any members of our community, regardless of their affiliations.

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Student Journalists in Jeopardy of Exploitation by Crowdsourcing Media Platforms

BY GABRIELLE DEONATH

In recent years, crowdsourcing media platforms like the Odyssey and Her Campus have been increasingly present on college campuses all around the United States. An Odyssey "community," as the company has named it, and a Her Campus chapter, have both been established at Adelphi University, but they are not regulated by the Center for Student Involvement (CSI) or by any other department within the university. In 2017, there were reports to faculty from Odyssey writers and editors-in-chief at Adelphi who were unhappy with the stunted communication between their community and Odyssey management, as well as a lack of response during times of need. This has raised concerns among some faculty that students are unwittingly being taken advantage of in their pursuit of earning a byline for their resumes. Further, to date there is no mechanism on campus to guide them.

How They Work

According to Stephanie Pohl, the editor-in-chief of the Odyssey community at Adelphi from early 2017 to August and an Adelphi alumnus who graduated in May, there was a set system of communication with the editorial staff at Odyssey headquarters in New York City. In addition to email conversations, once a week, the editor-in-chief of the community would be able to set up a Google Hangout with their assigned assistant managing editor, through which the editor-in-chief would receive feedback about his or her writers and the content produced and be able to seek guidance. These Google Hangouts were then opened to the entire Odyssey community in April of this year, but then were phased out in July.

In her time as editor-in-chief, Pohl managed 15 to 16 active writers and worked an average of 15 hours per week, as each Odyssey team must reach a quota of 12 articles in a seven-day period. She said she also felt at times that she had different goals than those at Odyssey headquarters.

"They wanted me to get a certain amount of views for the whole community, but I was more concerned with the consistency of writers producing content," Pohl said. "I told them views are not important because we don't have consistency. Maybe once we have consistency, we can get somewhere"

This push for viral content and

quantity over quality altered the meaning of the Odyssey for writers and, eventually, pushed them away.

Noor Meer, one of the more successful writers in Adelphi's Odyssey community in the 2015-'16 year, said: "I really liked it at first. We had control in the sense that we were able to upload [our articles] to the Odyssey site ourselves. We couldn't publish them, but we could format them any way we wanted. We had a lot of control; we wrote about whatever we wanted, and it was kind of like a therapy. The \$20 incentive for the most shares that week in our community was also really appealing. What a lot of us ended up doing was trying to write articles that we knew would get shared instead of what we wanted to write."

The Challenges for Students

It was when the first major shift in the Odyssey's agenda was implemented and new incentives made it impossible for writers to receive compensation unless their articles went viral, that many of the Adelphi Odyssey writers and the editor-in-chief at the time decided to walk away.

A former assistant managing editor for the Odyssey, who wished to remain anonymous, told *The Delphian*, "While they are thinking on this greater scale, it's hard to be authentic in that space because the rigor of the numbers that you need to hit is not conducive for what a media environment is."

For Adelphi alumnus and former Odyssey writer Emily Elefonte, the purpose of joining the Odyssey was to expand her portfolio. When applying for jobs in the spring semester of her senior year, she mentioned her Odyssey work in her cover letters. However, the Odyssey was updating their site at the time, and many of Elefonte's pieces disappeared entirely.

"It took me weeks to get my content back," she said. "I was really angry that I spent all this time trying to build a portfolio, and when I went to this interview, it was all gone."

This was not the first time that Elefonte had experienced technical difficulties with the company, and our employee source confirmed that the Odyssey's IT teams were not equipped to handle many of the problems that arose.

"They did have [a tech team], but they were not rigorous or ambitious in the sense of what it is they needed to fix and the timeliness of when they needed to fix it," the former employee said. "A big part

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of that is that the New York team worked in editorial, but there was a separate Indiana office, and that is where tech was centered from. The disconnect of distance also became a very apparent disconnect that users could feel when they went to the site because tech was not as fast as New York was running.”

A Company in Disarray

In three months this year, Pohl and her team went through three different managers, due to changing of hands, layoffs and promotions. Then, following the trend of frequent changes with little warning, the Odyssey altered their management system over this past summer. The assistant managing editor position was done away with completely, according to Pohl. In the past two years, there have also been two sets of major layoffs, resulting in the firing of over half of the staff at Odyssey headquarters.

“I lost a manager, and that was my whole support system,” said Pohl. “That freaked me out. I basically became the advisor without any tools to do that. I was like ‘What am I supposed to do?’ Everyone told me to leave, but I felt terrible about leaving them.”

The former Odyssey employee attributed these constant shifts within the Odyssey to various factors. She said that because the Odyssey is a start-up and heavily relies on venture capital and investment dollars, they are not generating enough profit to cover their overhead costs on their own. At their prime, they were hiring journalists from established media companies like The Guardian and Hearst. However, they were not able to afford these experienced journalists over time and also could not sustain their business model. The Odyssey was also pushing to incorporate video content, which was an effort that our source classified as a failure that caused loss of revenue.

“They had a really great model with what they initially wanted to do, but creating growth within that model was really hard,” the former Odyssey employee said. “When it became inauthentic is when the real change occurred, because if you have people who are calling people and saying, ‘Hey, join an Odyssey commu-

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nity’ because that person needs to reach their quota, and they get an editor-in-chief who they give a quota too, and that person needs to reach their quota of writers and content, it becomes disingenuous.”

Since Pohl’s departure, the Odyssey at Adelphi has not recovered. There is no current editor-in-chief, and though the Adelphi Odyssey profile says there are 16 contributors, only one of them has been writing consistently for the past several months.

Adelphi’s Her Campus Chapter

Meer now writes for the Adelphi chapter of Her Campus, which she describes as much more relaxed and a friendlier environment. One major factor that contributes to this “laid back” setting, she noted, is that Her Campus has a quota of six articles per week, half of the Odyssey’s expectations. Her Campus also has two student leadership positions — president and editor-in-chief. With this structure, the major responsibilities are split in two, and current president Amanda Opromolla estimated that she and editor-in-chief Alexis Blecher work no more than five hours per week on Her Campus tasks. Opromolla also reported being pleased with the management structure at Her Campus headquarters and felt that everyone was very involved and responsive.

However, Her Campus owns all content published on their site, which Opromolla and Meer both were not aware of, and similarly, former writers at the Odyssey remain unclear about whether they own their content. According to the former employee of the Odyssey, the company owned all content up until the time she was laid off, but she is no longer aware of their current rules. Attempts to contact the Odyssey headquarters were made, but no response to the complaints and clarification of rules were provided at time of publication.

For some Adelphi faculty, this has been increasingly concerning, especially within the Communications Department.

“My main concern is that I’m not sure students fully understand the implications of writing for organizations that do not necessarily have students’ best interests as their primary focus,” said Peggy Cassidy, department chair. “Students are so eager to get their work published that I think they are vulnerable to exploitation. In the short term, students might not see a problem with signing their work away to these organizations, but this can come back to haunt them later when they want to access or use that work again, only to find it no longer belongs to them.”

Oversight Needed

Though Cassidy said that she does not think there is one effective way that these chapters on campus should be supervised, she made it clear that some advisement or regulation is needed in order to protect students. This type of regulation at Adelphi usually comes from CSI, as it does for this publication.

At the formation of the Odyssey at Adelphi, it was a decision made by the editor-in-chief and the writers not to apply to become a CSI-regulated club. According to Pohl, the writers felt that if they decided to write anything about the university, they would be restricted if they applied to be an official campus club. CSI provides its committee-approved clubs with financial support, the ability to hold events and meetings on campus and requires the club to have a faculty advisor on campus who can provide help and guidance when necessary.

Lauren Purcaro, associate director of CSI at Adelphi, said, “Nobody steps in and says, ‘Oh, you’re writing about that.’ If you’re unhappy with something or you’re covering something that is happening on campus, no one is going to tell you what to write or not write.”

“No Adelphi student should be left on their own to figure out a company’s practices that put them at a disadvantage.”

Purcaro also said that CSI has many clubs that are a part of a national organization, and the center operates as support for them on campus, making sure that all regulations of the national organization are being met, and to advocate for the students when their needs are not being met.

As for Her Campus, the chapter was denied official club status, having been found by CSI to be exclusive. Purcaro mentioned that the committee’s decisions are based on the mission and content of a potential club. By law, she also said, a club must follow three guidelines before moving past the first stage of the approval process.

“It needs to be able to not be discriminatory in any way, whether that’s with a person with disabilities, a certain culture or gender, and they have to follow the no-hazing policy,” she said. “These are the laws that we have to make sure are being followed.”

Opromolla said that though she would be pleased if the Her Campus chapter became a CSI-recognized campus organization, she also admitted that she doesn’t feel that their chapter is lacking in any way. Though not part of the team that attempted to gain that recognition, Opromolla was confident that the committee was mistaken in their findings. She emphasized that Her Campus is about simply empowering women with no intent to exclude those that identify as otherwise.

“We decided against reapplying because we are not going to change the name of our organization,” she said. “They said it excluded men. Men can write for Her Campus. We’ve done profiles on guys.

Our articles are not all girl-focused. We cover a range of topics. I think that’s an absurd statement.”

Advice for Student Writers

With no clear resolution in sight, Cassidy suggested that students who want to partake in these platforms strategize what they submit. If it is not likely for there to be any benefit in publishing their writing in more competitive publications or to maintain ownership of the content, only then, she advised, should they proceed.

“I have to think that prospective employers see these organizations for what they are and will be looking in applicants’ portfolios for work that has made it through a more demanding submission process,” she said. “That’s what I want to focus on with our students—helping them publish their work in venues that will make them competitive as they launch their careers.”

The majority of the Odyssey and Her Campus articles, at least on Adelphi’s campus, are listicles, personal essays, opinion pieces or articles that are not supported by quotes from sources or adhere to AP style, lacking general journalistic requirements. The former employee of the Odyssey clarified that the Odyssey is not meant for people who already have been published previously, either in their university’s newspaper or through other media outlets.

“I think that if you’re just starting out, and this is your first writing experience, the Odyssey is a great place to turn to because, at least, while I was there, it was a place that teaches young writers how to break into this field and how to write,” she said.

With professional journalistic practices questioned by even the President of the United States, these platforms could potentially redefine the meaning of journalism itself. However, it is the vulnerability of students influenced by the instant gratification of online publishing and the number of likes on an article that remains a concern for Adelphi’s faculty.

Said Liza Burby, a senior adjunct communications professor and faculty advisor to *The Delphian*: “Students who want to get a bylined article—necessary for any potential communications job—need to know that there are other options on campus, like this one, for which not only will they get an opportunity to practice interviewing skills with sources willing to be quoted, they’ll also get the support of a skilled staff who will help them edit their work and provide them with guidance that will translate to their future careers.

“No Adelphi student should be left on their own to figure out a company’s practices that put them at a disadvantage,” Burby added. “Anyone who would like to get support or guidance about online platforms or other potential freelance opportunities can speak to me or any other professor in the Communications Department.”