



Dear Members of the UTGSU:

As supporters of the Free Press, the UTGSU Executive Committee have made ongoing efforts to participate in the reporting done by the Varsity as we view media a vital part of democracy and student engagement. Today, the UTGSU Executive Committee are compelled to write this letter to express our concern and disappointment due to the scale of misrepresentation in the Varsity's reporting and the documented unethical actions of Varsity reporters regarding the recent coverage of UTGSU General Council/Board-of-Directors meetings and Annual General Meeting (AGM) by The Varsity (a University of Toronto student-run media organization).

As per a referendum held between February 28th and March 3rd of 2018, University of Toronto graduate students voted 65 (51.2%) to 60 (47.2%) with 2 abstentions to become Members of the Varsity. As indicated in the referendum question, part of the motivation put forth by the Varsity for graduate students to join the organization was "the opportunity to ensure accurate and adequate coverage of graduate affairs". As representatives of the University of Toronto graduate student population, and Members of the Varsity, we feel obligated to hold the Varsity accountable for the quality of their graduate affairs coverage, and to hold them to a higher standard of journalistic integrity. As a result of the actions and events detailed in the remainder of this letter, and given our belief, and that of the Varsity, that accountability to membership plays an integral role in any student organisation, we have come to question how the Varsity expects to hold student organizations accountable if it continues to knowingly publish demonstrably incorrect information and to violate consented upon agreements made in good faith.

To begin, as part of the Varsity's coverage of graduate student affairs, Varsity journalist Andy Takagi attended the UTGSU's General Council/Board-of-Directors' meeting on November 20th, 2018. As Takagi is not a Member of the Board, the Board motioned and passed a vote to seat him as a guest of the meeting. On behalf of the journalist, the Board's Chair also asked the Board if they would consent to Takagi taking photographs, which the Board consented to under the understanding that any individuals who did not want their image to be used by the Varsity could communicate this to the Varsity journalist and have their wishes respected. This was reiterated and confirmed by the Varsity journalist himself, as noted in the meeting minutes. At that time, the UTGSU's External Commissioner communicated to the journalist, vocally and in front of the Board, that they did not want their image to be used in any Varsity publications. This communication was acknowledged by Varsity journalist Andy Takagi, and the communication exchange is also recorded in the official minutes of the meeting.

The following week, at the General Council/Board-of-Directors meeting on November 26th, 2018, Takagi was again seated as a journalist representing the Varsity at the discretion of the Board's Chair, at which point no opposition from the Board was noted. The Varsity was again granted rights to take photographs under the understanding that individuals could opt out of the process upon request. The UTGSU's External Commissioner once again communicated to the Varsity journalist to not have their image used by the Varsity, which was once again acknowledged.



On December 2nd, 2018, the Varsity published an online article which included a photo explicitly containing the External Commissioner's image, irrespective of the External Commissioner twice requesting to not have their image used in Varsity publications. This same photo also contained the image of the UTGSU's Finance Commissioner, and was captioned with a statement that the UTGSU Finance Commissioner "moved the motion to vacate the Internal Commissioner position". To be clear, the motion here accredited to the Finance Commissioner in this photograph was an Executive Motion not motioned by the UTGSU's Finance Commissioner. This is a factual inaccuracy recorded in the agenda and minutes of the meeting, and which was communicated along with additional sets of factual information in response to several questions Takagi emailed to the UTGSU on November 28th, 2018.

As a result of the issues pertaining to the Varsity's December 2nd, 2018 article, the UTGSU Finance Commissioner reached out to Takagi, several Varsity Editors, and the Varsity's Editor-in-Chief, Jack Denton, two hours after the Varsity published the article online. In their email, the UTGSU Finance Commissioner flagged that the External Commissioner had requested not to have their image used in Varsity publications, that the article in question contained several factual errors (aforementioned), and also requested that the Finance Commissioner's image not be used in the online or later printed version of the article since it constitutes a representation of an individual, not the meeting event. Regardless of this request, the Varsity printed the article in question with an altered version of the photo which consisted of a magnification of the Finance Commissioner's image and a complete cropping of the Finance Commissioner's image from the photo background, making the Finance Commissioner's image the sole content of the photo and isolating them from the context of the November 26th, 2018 meeting altogether. It is in our opinion that this is in violation of the original agreement between the Varsity journalist and the UTGSU Board since the photo, as cropped, is completely decontextualized from the meeting and cannot be considered representative of the meeting events as a whole.

Following the publication, the Varsity's Managing Editor Reut Cohen sent two responses addressing the Finance Commissioner's concerns. In this response the Managing Editor stated that neither the External Commissioner or Finance Commissioner informed Varsity journalist Takagi that they had raised issues with their images being used in Varsity publications; and that the offer to opt-out of having your image included in Varsity publications was intended for "regular members who don't wish to have their photos taken, not for elected officials". This statement was made regardless of the fact that the UTGSU's Finance Commissioner and External Commissioner, like all graduate students, are equally paying Members of the Varsity.

Notwithstanding these events, prior to the December 3rd, 2018 Annual General Meeting (AGM), Takagi and another Varsity journalist, Ann Marie Elpa, asked the AGM Chair for permission to 'live-tweet' the meeting, which was denied by the Chair. The Chair then suggested that the two Varsity journalists prepare a statement to the UTGSU Board explaining why live-tweeting was important to their role as media representatives for consideration at a future time. The two reporters consented to not live-tweet the meeting, an action recorded in the AGM's minutes. Varsity journalists Takagi and Elpa were then seated at the discretion of the Chair at the UTGSU's



AGM with no vote or voiced opposition by any UTGSU members, despite the Varsity tweeting that “there has been strong opposition against the Varsity’s presence” during the meeting. Following the adjournment of the AGM and the start of the immediately subsequent UTGSU General Council/Board-of-Directors meeting, it was discovered and announced to the Board by a UTGSU Executive Member that the two journalists had violated the previous understanding, by which they were seated, by live-tweeting the events of the AGM. The two reporters admitted vocally that they had live-tweeted the AGM at the direction of their Editor, and were subsequently asked by the Chair to leave the room as a result of their failure to comply to the conditions of their seating at the AGM. In direct response to these events, the Board motioned and voted in favour to direct the UTGSU’s Executive Committee to prepare recommendations for News Media access at future UTGSU meetings.

In addition to this violation of a publicly stated agreement, the Varsity have also misrepresented our efforts to participate in their reporting. In an article published on December 4th, 2018, the Varsity reports that the Executive Committee did not comment on the events of the AGM. The inclusion of this statement misrepresents the UTGSU Executive Committee’s commitments to its participation in student media given that the Varsity’s request for comment was received by the UTGSU’s Finance Commissioner and Executive Director after work hours and exactly 15 minutes before the publication of the article. We feel that it is entirely unreasonable to expect Executives to respond in this short and inconvenient timeline, and that the Varsity’s statement that the UTGSU had not commented is therefore misrepresentative of our participation with student media. The UTGSU Executive Committee feels that we have made every attempt to engage in the journalism by responding to requests for comments and/or clarification, and also providing access to official minutes of UTGSU meetings. Regardless, the Varsity has routinely published demonstrably false information and has misrepresented events.

We feel that student led media can, and should, increase transparency in order to maintain the accountability of student organizations and their leaders. The role that journalism fills in democracy is irreplaceable, and we are disappointed that our genuine attempts at participation in the Varsity has been misconstrued at an attempt to silence them. Rather, the ongoing factual errors and repeated violations of agreements by the Varsity represent poor journalistic practices and do not serve to increase the transparency of information. To quote an op-ed written by UTGSU Members and published by the Varsity on December 5th, 2018: “This type of blatant disregard for the will of UTGSU members fosters an atmosphere of distrust between members and The Varsity.”

The UTGSU Executive Committee believes that graduate students, as paying members of the Varsity, deserve a higher standard of factual reporting and professional conduct than that which has been presented. We deserve better. It’s not an issue of criticism; it’s just bad journalism.

Sincerely,
The UTGSU Executive Committee