

SFWA President Endorses Politically Correct Bulletin Censorship

by Dave Truesdale

Steven Gould, President of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, is about to institute a policy of censorship based on political correctness in the organization's public publication, the magazine available for purchase by the general public, the *SFWA Bulletin*.

As a former *Bulletin* editor serving at the pleasure of two SFWA Presidents (Paul Levinson and Norman Spinrad) I was shocked when I visited the page at the SFWA website where the call for a new *Bulletin* editor listed the new job guidelines and requirements.

The search for a new *Bulletin* editor followed the Summer 2013 resignation (under pressure) of the then (lady) editor (for the use of an "inappropriate" cover among other alleged crimes), and the brouhaha involving two long-time and well respected *Bulletin* columnists whose use of the words "lady editors," "beautiful," and a few other innocuous descriptive words led, for the first time in the history of the *Bulletin*, to its suspension (as of this writing no editor has been selected and the *Bulletin* remains in limbo). A link to the SFWA webpage with the duties and requirements for new *Bulletin* editor is given below. Please read it carefully, noting especially the three quotes listed below the link.

<http://www.sfwaworld.com/2013/12/32393/>

"Solicit topics and columnists that fit within vision of the Bulletin" (sic)

"Choose cover art for each issue that is line with SFWA standards" (sic)

"Participate in proofing and review process with select volunteer and board members"

The second quote concerning the selection of cover art "that is in line with SFWA standards" is, on the surface, seemingly harmless. Unless, that is, you are aware of the context in regard to the alleged "offensive" and "sexist" cover that was part of the current *Bulletin* flap. I don't imagine anyone would sanction nudity or a sexual act making it to the cover of the *Bulletin*. In that respect "SFWA standards" would appear more than reasonable. But along with "vision," "SFWA standards" don't mean what they are commonly taken to mean. These words need to be explained with specificity given the current circumstances. What exactly *is* SFWA's new vision and what exactly *are* the new SFWA standards? How are these otherwise goal-worthy, albeit standard, expected and now cliché words to be interpreted? This remains to be seen.

It is the third quote, however, that made me sit up and rub my eyes to make sure I was seeing what I was reading. The new *Bulletin* editor must "participate" (*participate?*) in the "proofing and review process with select volunteer and board members." Say *what?* As editor I did all of my own

proofing of rough and final copy and was most certainly not subject to any “review process” with “volunteer and board members” looking over my shoulder. Who the hell is editor under this new vetting process anyway, the editor or some board (and ultimately the President) giving or rejecting its (or his) stamp of approval for text and cover art according to their personal whims or political agendas? What sort of nonsense is *this*, I asked myself.

The essence of the situation is that a writers’ organization, of all groups, should not be establishing a committee to determine what is “unacceptable” or “inappropriate” or “offensive” in some contribution to one of its publications. SFWA should be the front line of defense for First Amendment issues, and not make itself part of the problem. There is a great tradition in this country of freedom of the press, and the following quote is exemplary of this principle:

Andrew Hamilton (c. 1676 – August 4, 1741) was a Scottish lawyer in the Thirteen Colonies, where he finally settled in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was best known for his legal victory on behalf of the printer and newspaper publisher John Peter Zenger. This 1735 decision in New York helped to establish that truth is a defense to an accusation of libel. His eloquent defense concluded with saying that the press has "a liberty both of exposing and opposing tyrannical power by speaking and writing truth.”

The heart of the matter is that SFWA is on the verge of committing a serious offense against freedom of the press — its own press! — through voluntary self-censorship.

So I took, as it were, pen in hand and wrote to SFWA President Steven Gould voicing my concerns. The complete series of emails, in chronological order, are given below.

[Email to SFWA President Steven Gould, January 15, 2014]

“Hi, Steven,

Someone who wasn't aware I'd already served as Bulletin editor sent me the link to the page where you've listed the job requirements for a new editor. (Don't worry, I'm not applying. :-))

After reading through the job requirements for editor, I had a few questions I hope you can answer. It appears to me that there will be some sort of informal group of people looking over the editor's shoulder to make sure everything printed is "acceptable." If so, will the editor be passing on to this group all printed material for their approval?

Will the Bulletin be screening all of its ads to make sure they are acceptable as well? What are the advertising rules when it comes to ads sporting a book cover SFWA may not feel is now appropriate? Since fantasy is a major part of the SF/F genre and many of its covers have women in various kinds of fantasy garb, what is now acceptable to take on as an ad in the Bulletin?

What are the new guidelines for cover art for the Bulletin? And what "overseer" person or group or board will be making these decisions, and upon what criteria will they be based?

Sincerely,

Dave Truesdale”

I received no immediate reply and was not concerned. I waited a week before sending along the following email.

[2nd email to SFWA President Steven Gould, January 22, 2014]

“Hi, Steven,

Last Wednesday, January 15th, I sent you an email (copied below) asking several questions concerning new Bulletin guidelines. I realize how busy you must be and getting around to all of the emails you receive must take up a fair amount of your time. Therefore I am writing again in hopes you'll now have the time to answer, in some specificity, my queries. I know those who perhaps will want to send articles to the Bulletin would be more prone to do so if they were made aware of what specifically the Bulletin now deems inappropriate (language, terminology, points of view now deemed unacceptable, etc.), the guiding philosophy behind these decisions, and what person or persons will now be in charge of granting their approval for any articles.

Sincerely,

Dave Truesdale

[Copy of original email query below]:

Hi, Steven,

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After reading through the job requirements for editor, I had a few questions I hope you can answer. It appears to me that there will be some sort of informal group of people looking over the editor's shoulder to make sure everything printed is "acceptable." If so, will the editor be passing on to this group all printed material for their approval?

Will the Bulletin be screening all of its ads to make sure they are acceptable as well? What are the advertising rules when it comes to ads sporting a book cover SFWA may not feel is now appropriate? Since fantasy is a major part of the SF/F genre and many of its covers have women in various kinds of fantasy garb, what is now acceptable to take on as an ad in the Bulletin?

What are the new guidelines for cover art for the Bulletin? And what "overseer" person or group or board will be making these decisions, and upon what criteria will they be based?

Sincerely,

Dave Truesdale”

[SFWA President Steven Gould replies, January 22, 2014]

“Dave,

I apologise for not getting back to you sooner. I am desperately trying to finish a book and that is taking most of my attention.

There will be no "informal" group overseeing the editor's selection. There may be an advisory board, but that is yet to be determined. Under the structure of SFWA (both old and new bylaws), the president is responsible for publications.

We don't have guidelines for "acceptable" articles, art, and ads other than content needs to serve the needs of the organization. Chief among those are our 5 core mission areas: to inform, support, promote, defend and advocate for professional writers.

So, to answer your question specifically, I would urge contributors to ask themselves what needs of professional writers are they meeting with their articles? I guarantee this is a question the editor will be asking themselves.

This doesn't have to be satisfying the needs of =all= professional writers; we have many different sub-genres, modes of publishing, and lengths, as well as different opinions on how to be a professional writer.

However, when content alienates portions of our membership it is =not= meeting the needs of our members or our organization and this is part of the equation the editor will be considering that when they look at articles, illustrations, and ads.

Best,

Steven Gould

President

Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America”

[My reply to the above email, same day, January 22, 2014]

“Steven,

Thank you for getting back to me on this. I've read several of your "Jumper" novels and have liked (and reviewed) them quite favorably, so I understand why work on your new book is taking most of

your time and attention.

That said, I still must ask a followup question. I quote from your reply:

"However, when content alienates portions of our membership it is =not= meeting the needs of our members or our organization and this is part of the equation the editor will be considering that when they look at articles, illustrations, and ads."

Since there are numerous subsets, or "portions of [SFWA] membership," are you saying that when anyone from these various factions is "offended" or upset that this will be deemed as "=not= meeting the needs of our members"? This would seem to be an impossible task given the various politically correct views held by many of the current membership. Is it serving the entire membership when a small faction, or percentage, or group, can dictate what may be offensive to the remainder of the organization? There must be something more concrete or definite than simply relenting every time some member feels offended by this or that. When these decisions are left up to vagaries and interpretations -- or decisions are based on who might be "offended", then I'm afraid it looks like the Bulletin (with SFWA's blessing and endorsement), is restricting itself to one set of "correct" values and speech, and denying that of others on a most capricious basis. In short, it gives the distinct impression of intolerance of any opposing views on any of several hot-topic subjects, the way language may be used, and the views expressed if not in line with the perceived interest of the membership. How do you get around this perception that the Bulletin is naught but a politically correct mouthpiece controlled by any number of various factions who are forever offended at the slightest variation from whatever political agenda they may espouse? This is the great fear I have, and I know others do as well.

Whenever I hear phrases like "for the good of the membership" or "for the good of the people" coming from any voice of authority, I immediately take a step back and wonder who decides what is good and what is to be deemed "not acceptable"? Most of the time words like the above come from political dictators afraid of any media spouting anything contrary to party line, and thus squelching freedom of speech. I hope this won't be the case with the new Bulletin guidelines, and hope you might be more specific in what will be deemed "proper" for the Bulletin so that all of the membership and its many opinions will have equal opportunity to express themselves in its pages. Not everyone (thank goodness) is like Vox Day, but merely express themselves differently than what might be considered politically correct by SFWA and/or the Bulletin.

Please assure me, if you can, that the Bulletin will not be a repository for only what SFWA deems politically correct, and that all viewpoints on all subjects will be welcome, and not have to be "approved" by some entity or entities before publication. This sounds far too much like a fascistic approach to freedom of speech couched in the usual language of "for the good of the people." Your

email says there will be an "advisory board," to determine an acceptability threshold for Bulletin material. This sounds uncomfortably ominous to me as I'm sure it does to others. Just what, specifically, will this advisory board be looking for? Proper usage of male and female pronouns perhaps, and determined by whom and why? This is but one example I can think of. Would articles espousing different views on racism, sexism, diversity, the environment, and the like be welcomed if they differed from those of some SFWA member who may be "offended" by a different point of view (save for the extremely rare and unsettling cases like that of Vox Day)? Or will all opinions and viewpoints be given equal opportunity in the Bulletin, if presented in a reasonable fashion? All of these questions bother me because of their implications. "Advisory boards" and "for the good of the membership" just smacks too strongly of the type of language used by those whose only desire is to restrict free speech, and I hope it doesn't come to that with the Bulletin.

Sincerely,
Dave Truesdale”

[Reply to above email by Steven Gould, same day, January 22, 2014]

“Dave,

I appreciate the work you did for SFWA back where you used to be a member, but your email is not a question. It's a polemic which confuses "free speech" with the legitimate needs and aims of an organization's publications. Not only are we not obligated to pursue your notions of "free speech" but as a 501(c)3 corporation it would be grossly irresponsible of us to put such ahead of the business and goals of the organization.

You may, of course, air your views on this in whatever venues you control. You may even rejoin SFWA and make your points in our member discussion forums or The Forum.

sincerely,
Steve
Steven Gould
President
Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America”

It's obvious from the above that I was being brushed off, invited to take a hike, and that President Gould had no intention of being specific in answering my questions. It was the expected polite

dodge. While he may not have been obligated to pursue my notions of free speech (free speech is free speech aside from yelling-fire-in-a-crowded-theater scenarios) he also felt my notion of free speech was at odds with “the legitimate needs and aims of [the] organization's publications” as well as “irresponsible.” Hmm. Free speech is incompatible with SFWA’s needs and aims? I’d like to hear the explanation for that presumptive and most...unusual viewpoint. President Gould also advises that I might express my “notions of free speech” in a venue I control. I’ve obviously taken that advice here, in a venue I control (*Tangent Online*, a lowly fanzine), but I find his choice of words rather telling. Does he believe *he* “controls” SFWA as its President? Does he believe he “controls” what goes into the *Bulletin*? He, like all other Presidents before him, is ultimately *responsible* for the *Bulletin*, but does he believe this demands he must police and *control* the contents, oversee and micro-manage every word, phrase, and viewpoint? If so, this is a dangerous precedent (I recall my experiences working for two Presidents as *Bulletin* editor where freedom of speech was of the utmost importance, and compare them with Gould’s “advisory board,” “review process,” and his word choice of “control”). Taken separately these quoted words are one thing, but place them side-by side, together, and they begin to form an entirely different and emerging portrait of President Gould’s mindset and his notion of “free speech” when it comes to the *Bulletin*—the public face of SFWA.

The cover of the 200th issue of the *Bulletin* was part and parcel of the furor that has led to its suspension. Cries of “sexism,” portraying women as “sex objects,” and other like phrases reached the ears of the President and will now become part of the “review process” overseen by the new editor, “volunteers and an advisory board” and the President himself. Covers like the one shown here are not new. They have graced the covers of countless magazine and book covers for many decades. So have magazine and book covers featuring handsome, ripped and rugged males in various stages of dress, depending on the story and what the publisher hopes will appeal to his readership in order to advance sales. Yet there are those who object strenuously to a sexy female (scantily clad or otherwise) on the cover of anything, and always somewhere in the mix of reasons, primary among them is that women are being portrayed as sex objects and that such covers are blatantly sexist and therefore are to be avoided, or removed, or are otherwise to be castigated and held up to ridicule and scorn.

Or are never to be seen on a *SFWA Bulletin* cover again. Ever.

Who exactly is so up-in-arms offended from viewing a sexy (or sexily portrayed) man or woman on the cover of a magazine? The cover under discussion is rather bland and generic, actually, and nowhere as sexually provocative as any number of such illustrations on many a book and magazine cover today, and for decades. Obviously those feminists, or rather those who ascribe to the feminist viewpoint *on this particular issue*, for not every person (male or female) who count themselves as

sympathetic to the feminist cause agree on every plank of the feminist platform.

For instance, straight women who might otherwise count themselves as feminists, think nothing of going to a night club or establishment when the Chippendale's are in town. Just like any group, political or otherwise, it is not a unified ideological block down party lines, but has, among its members, those who hold differing beliefs on individual issues. It then occurred to me that those objecting to the use of women as sex objects (on the cover of the *Bulletin*, in this case) were primarily leveling this accusation against straight males. But what of the GLBT community? SFWA prides itself on being all-inclusive and a strong promoter of diversity, which I believe is a good thing. But if straight males are the object of all the heat being given them for treating/viewing women as sex objects, then wouldn't this same accusation hold true for gay men who like ogling the male form on a purely sexual basis? Gay men frequent gay bars for sex, don't they? They are sexually attracted to other men and enjoy looking at the male form in person or in gay magazines or on the internet, just as straight men (and women) frequent clubs and bars and the internet for possible sexual liaisons—or merely to look. The same would hold true for the lesbian community. There are certain bars and clubs where lesbians feel comfortable among those of their specific sexual orientation, who, among other reasons, go for possible sexual liaisons. They are attracted sexually to the female form...as a sex object. Same thing applies for those of a bi-sexual orientation. These folks like looking at both men and women for possible sexual liaisons; they are attracted by sexy looking members of both sexes...and therefore as sex objects. That's the way they're wired and there's nothing wrong with it. Straight men and women and members of the GLBT community are all wired differently, are all sexual creatures, and each according to his fashion delights in ogling the objects of their desire. So why are straight men held up as the only objects of feminist anger, as those who see women only as sex objects, when all sexual persuasions use whichever sex they're aiming for, for exactly the same reason? Is the question really that easily and clearly defined, and is there obvious hypocrisy at work here, letting members of the GLBT community off the hook by the feminists whose apparent selective anger at straight men cause them to turn the other way in their campaign to banish attractive, sexy women (fully or partially clothed in a traditional SF or Fantasy setting) from all future covers of the *Bulletin*?

I wanted to know, so I asked a friend of mine (who happens to be a black lesbian) what he thought of the questions I posed above (I use the male pronoun "he" because this is what my friend identifies as and prefers). He is whip-smart and keenly aware and knowledgeable on the issues relating to gender politics. He explained to me that there are issues between the traditional cultural relationship between straight men and women that have led feminists to their present position surrounding their complaint against men thinking of women as "sex objects," and these issues—whether one agrees with them or not—are where they are coming from. When I asked him

if there was a double standard at work when it came to the (straight, female) feminists and the GLBT community, that all sexual persuasions are guilty of seeing or using the other sex as a sex object, he replied (and I quote with permission):

“Sure. As a lesbian, I don't have issues with other women ogling or hustling me. Find it flattering, frankly, and am not afraid to decline any unwanted advances. Straight women, on the other hand, have been raised with different expectations due to their sex.”

He went on to explain:

“They're straight, see, so they don't give a rat's ass about what the gays and lesbians are doing because it doesn't concern *them*. The straight guys who are coming on to *them* are a concern. The gay guys who are hustling and ogling *other gay guys* don't matter. In other words, they only care about the things that are happening *to them*.”

I then took the plunge and asked my friend if he, as a lesbian, was offended by the above *Bulletin* cover, and if he even perhaps liked it. He replied:

“Short answer: “Offensive?” No. Boring? Absolutely. Very much ‘been there, done that.’ And it's not about being a woman or a lesbian. :-)”

This indicates to me that there are others besides many straight men who did not find the cover offensive in the least, that there are other segments of SFWA's membership who are not on the President's radar when making decisions affecting the entire membership, and that at worst the cover might have been boring (“been there, done that”), because the depiction of a scantily clad female warrior in fantasy has become something of a cliché, having been used on covers and interior art for more than half a century. It's an iconic image, like it or not, and there are many in SFWA (male and female) who do not find it offensive. What about them? Wherefore SFWA's forward-thinking and oft-touted policy of inclusiveness and diversity, when one group's opinion and view on any given subject—with the President's blessing and endorsement—denies by fiat the rights of many others to view art, or read text more in line with *their* taste? Are worthy ideals now but lip service under President Gould, as he favors one group's philosophy of “offensiveness” over that of the rest of the membership?

Speaking of inclusiveness and diversity, I think there is another group ignored or not taken into account very much when SFWA decisions are discussed and made: those members of religious faith of any kind. While I am an agnostic (not enough information) and not bound by the views of any religion, I find the basic tenets of most of the major religions worthwhile in a general sense. Religion crosses all ethnic, racial, political, economic, and gender boundaries. There are SFWA members who identify with any or all of the above. Yet, whenever religion (particularly Christianity) is portrayed in our fiction it more often than not is mocked or satirized or given as the province of the uneducated. Religious folk are stereotyped as not among the self-proclaimed

“enlightened.”

Under President Gould’s interpretation of the First Amendment, that dealing with free speech and the very cornerstone of our democratic principles, would his “advisory board” pass on to him for final approval an article dealing with how to write SF or Fantasy written from a religious perspective if it offended members of the PC faction in SFWA?

Under current SFWA President Steven Gould SFWA members might not have options when it comes to what articles are “acceptable” (and acceptably written to politically correct dictates) in the very near future. He clearly represents but a single, yet highly vocal voting block who seek to exclude any others who do not share their viewpoint of what, and in what manner, various subjects can be discussed. Period. He and other SFWA members who feel the same may pay lip service to diversity and inclusiveness, but their actions put the lie to their lofty, seductive rhetoric. A rhetoric of lies and deceit. Lies hidden beneath their velvet tongues where you can’t see them. *1984* had its Ministry of Truth, which Winston Smith found to be just the opposite, a Ministry of Lies. Don’t be fooled by rhetoric that *sounds* good and right and proper, that just *feels* right. *Think* about what this “good for the membership” pablum really means and how it should manifest itself in the real world.

Does “good for the membership” in your worldview mean Steven Gould’s speech police overseeing the *Bulletin* editor with “volunteers and an advisory board” and then being given his personal stamp of approval, to an intimidated editor’s each and every selection of material he thinks is “fit” for the *Bulletin* and its members?

What honest editor could work for long in such a stifling, repressive environment, being second-guessed at every turn...unless he was a hand-picked ideological sock puppet for the administration? How in a sane world does Steven Gould’s idea of “free speech” include a “review process” and an “advisory board” to baptise all art and text they, in their holier-than-thou arrogance deem fit for the unenlightened and morally backward masses to view? Does this hypocrisy know no bounds? How can the current SFWA President claim and shout to the mountain top that he is looking out for the good of the SFWA membership as a whole, when in reality he is himself nothing but a sock puppet for a vocal voting block, said voting block—through their influence on the President—is now, if allowed to do so, about to institute a policy designed to favor one segment of the organization’s membership at the expense of all the others. Is this free speech, or naught but a perfect example writ large of what I call Progressive Puritanism?

I want to emphasize that I am not trying to shut people up who hold deep feelings about their views on sexism (or any other topic). What I object to and find odious is that certain folks, in their self-righteousness, want their views to override all others, silencing them, and now they have a President in their hip pocket who is willing and able to do their bidding. Their views should be open for discussion—and print in the *Bulletin*—just like the views others hold on any variety of

important subjects, but not to the exclusion of any opposing (and just as deeply felt) view or mode of expression from anyone else. *That* approach is the inclusivity and diversity you're looking for.

SFWA members don't pay their \$90 annual dues to be told what to think or how they should express themselves in the pages of the *Bulletin*, nor do they want their own thoughts (through their articles or columns) to be deemed "acceptable" or "right thinking," or adhering to some jumped-up (always subject to change at whim) PC style manual by some hootenanny "advisory board" of boot lickers.

This effort to stifle free speech (and thought) comes softly, and slowly, by increments. Hardly noticeable unless one ends up finding he is the target one fine and sunny day. Certain words like "lady editors" and "beautiful" have been deemed offensive in the *Bulletin*, so proclaimeth the feminist faction and the President. What words will next be deemed contrary or offensive down the road? A word here, and a word there, perhaps, according to those who are continually rewriting the feminist code? This slow creep and erosion of freedom of speech is inevitable if Steven Gould is allowed to push through his new speech (and cover art) guidelines for the *Bulletin*. I exhort SFWA members who hold the concept of free speech dear to wake up and smell the roses. Read the fine print to see what SFWA President Steven Gould has put forth as duties and requirements for the new *Bulletin* editor. Far from an editor, this person will be nothing more than a slave, dragging his bundle of copy to the mansion from the field, where the "review process," and some proposed "volunteer and advisory board," and the President himself will be making the real "editing" decisions. You gather the cotton, we'll spin it into what we think looks good for *us*.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the issue here is most decidedly *not* one of Left vs. Right. The *only* issue here is a First Amendment issue that both those on the political Left and Right should without hesitation embrace as one, and as tightly as possible. What may happen to the *Bulletin* and SFWA as a viable organization if the current PCSFWA President has his way is unthinkable.

One thing the *Bulletin* *should* do is provide an outlet (its Letters column) for anyone to express his like or dislike with anything printed within its pages. *This* is the true essence of free speech.

"Political correctness is tyranny with manners."

— Charlton Heston, (early civil rights activist who marched with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King.)

We the undersigned agree with the sentiments expressed above and hope others will add their names to this call for SFWA President Steven Gould to kill any proposed "advisory board" or any other method designed to censor or infringe on any SFWA member's First Amendment right to

freedom of speech in the pages of the *SFWA Bulletin*. Active or Associate SFWA members wishing to support this effort may send email directly to SFWA President Steven Gould at: president@sfw.org. Active or Associate SFWA members wishing to add your name to those below, send email to Dave Truesdale at: tangent.dt1@gmail.com.

Signed by

Gregory Benford

Robert Silverberg

Barry N. Malzberg

Mike Resnick

Nancy Kress

Gene Wolfe

Jack Dann

Norman Spinrad

Sheila Finch