

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 editor (for the use of an "inappropriate" cover among other alleged offenses), 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.sfwaweb.org/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 expected 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.

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, is 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]:

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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”

In light of the preceding correspondence we, the undersigned, object to the new SFWA requirements for editor of the SFWA *Bulletin*, as set forth on the SFWA website. Specifically, we have the following objections: A "review board" implies a group of persons, as yet unnamed, who can veto content submitted by members if the board deems it "offensive" to a sub-group of SFWA. This opens the door to censorship of opinions that do not jibe with the personal beliefs of those on the review board, whereas SFWA should be open to the airing of many varieties of

opinions, especially on such sensitive subjects as sexism, racism, religion, and politics. The proposed requirements are so vague that they leave many critical questions unaddressed. Several among them: Given that it is our strong belief that there should be no “advisory” or “review” board, who would hypothetically sit on this board and how would they be chosen? Would advertising copy (book or magazine covers) be subject to review as well, especially in the high dollar advertising rates the *Bulletin* charges for its special Nebula issue? The editor of the *Bulletin* should have discretion over its contents; that is why he or she is chosen as editor. There should be no advisory or review board. In view of these considerations, we ask that SFWA (1) withdraw this slate of requirements for the *Bulletin* and (2) open a discussion where all viewpoints can be considered on this matter before drafting any further sets of guidelines for SFWA publications.

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. What may happen to the *Bulletin* and SFWA as a viable organization if the current SFWA President has his way is unthinkable, especially as an organization of *writers*.

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

It is our 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 their 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 their names to this petition may do so by sending an email to Dave Truesdale at: tangent.dt1@gmail.com. Signatories will be added to the list below.

Signed by

Cyd Athens

Gregory Benford – Nebula winner

David Brin – Nebula winner, Past SFWA Secretary

Amy Sterling Casil

C. J. Cherryh

Lillian Csernica

Jack Dann – Nebula winner, former *Bulletin* Managing & Asst. Editor, past member of the Publicity Bureau, Nebula Rules Committee, and Grievance Committee; current member of the Anthology Committee

Harlan Ellison – Nebula winner, SFWA Grand Master, past SFWA V.P.

Sheila Finch – Nebula winner, past SFWA V.P, and Western Regional Director

David Gerrold – Nebula winner

Nancy Kress – Nebula winner

Mercedes Lackey

Dr. Paul Levinson – Past SFWA President

Barry N. Malzberg – Five time Nebula finalist, appearances in six of the annual Nebula volumes, editor of the *Bulletin* in 1969, Eastern Regional Director for two years in the late 70s and Grievance Committee 1980-1984.

Jack McDevitt – Nebula winner

Larry Niven – Nebula winner

Dr. Jerry Pournelle – Past SFWA President

Mike Resnick – Nebula winner, past SFWA ConAlert (8 yrs.) and Anthology Chairman (6 yrs.)

Chuck Rothman – Past SFWA Treasurer

Susan Schwartz – Five-time Nebula nominee, member of Nebula Jury (2 years); on committee exploring reinstatement of film Nebula

Robert Silverberg – Nebula winner, SFWA Grand Master, Past SFWA President

Norman Spinrad – Past SFWA President (twice)

Allen Steele – Three time Nebula nominee, Past Eastern Regional Director

Brad R. Torgersen – Nebula nominee

Harry Turtledove – Double Nebula nominee, Past SFWA Treasurer

Gene Wolfe – Nebula winner, SFWA Grand Master