

Starting a Newspaper War (of Sorts) in a University Town



Greg Sailor for The New York Times

Wayne T. Lewis has founded U Weekly and other papers in college towns.

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Journalism students at Ohio State University expected to get a real-world lesson in competition this school year, courtesy of two media entrepreneurs who see national business potential in taking on student-run campus newspapers. But with the rollout of the new paper called U Weekly, they are getting a lesson in campus politics as well.

When classes resumed in Columbus, Ohio, on Sept. 21, the university's 124-year-old student daily, The Lantern, had a professional rival in U Weekly, a 20,000-circulation, full-color tabloid laden with entertainment articles. The Lantern, a mostly black-and-white small broadsheet offers a more usual mixture of campus and national news stories.

For Wayne T. Lewis, 34, chief executive of the privately owned University Media Group, and his partner, Clark Gaines, U Weekly is their biggest bet so far that there is an underserved niche market on college campuses, with enough beer, bar and bookstore advertising to support a rollout near other public colleges next fall.

But what had seemed to be an amicable relationship with Ohio State went sour days before the start-up of U Weekly, Mr. Lewis said in an interview. By his account, the university reneged on an agreement to allow him to distribute the paper at 150 indoor locations on campus, reducing the number of racks to 63.

Ray Catalino, the manager since 1989 of The Lantern, minimized the matter. "I don't think there was any cutback from the university," he said.

Mr. Lewis responded to the reduced distribution with what he called "garish black boxes" at 25 outside locations, on public property, and hired students to give out the paper.

"We're getting into students' hands, but it's costing more," he said. The two sides continue to talk, he said, adding that he expected an amicable resolution soon.

Despite the chilly welcome, Mr. Lewis and Mr. Gaines, who is 29, said they saw national potential in marketing to 18-to-26-year-olds, as distinct from the wider 18-to-34-year-old group that alternative weeklies commonly seek.

"Major media companies are screaming to get young readers," Mr. Lewis said, but 18-year-olds and 30-year-olds often have markedly different interests. "We feel that the young audience wants that young content."

The two of them are scouting other public universities for an expansion next fall, provided they can raise enough capital. For that, they are being advised by a consultant, Henry K. Wurzer, a former Hearst and [Tribune Company](#) executive.

"In my career, I've read countless business plans," Mr. Wurzer said, "and this is one of the most dynamic yet realistic plans that I've read."

The Lantern, written and edited by students with a weekday circulation of 28,000 (Ohio State has 51,000 students), is supported with advertising and has been profitable in 6 of the last 10 years, Mr. Catalino said. It is an important part of the university communications department curriculum, with students required to write for it, without pay, for one quarter. Student editors at The Lantern are paid and autonomous, and free to reject the class work for publication.

This required course work, though, has raised the question of whether students in the Lantern news-writing class can work for U Weekly. Sonya Humes, a communications department faculty member who advises The Lantern, cited existing conflict-of-interest guidelines that effectively prohibit such overlap. Nonetheless, she said in an interview, the university is trying to devise alternatives for students who choose to remain on U Weekly's staff.

In an e-mail message to students, Ms. Humes called U Weekly "a very aggressive push by an outside corporation." She maintained that her only goal was to protect "student editorial control" at The Lantern while adding, "Competition in journalism is good because it raises the bar and gets folks thinking about how to differentiate publications from others."

Columbus is a far more competitive market than Mr. Lewis faced in 1997 when he founded Tiger Weekly at his alma mater, Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. There, his now-established 17,000-circulation paper is the only alternative weekly. In 2004, he and Mr. Gaines started Wildcat Weekly at the University of Kentucky in Lexington.

Columbus already had two alternative weeklies providing lively arts and music coverage to both students and older readers. The Other Paper prints 53,000 copies, while the money-losing 45,000-circulation Columbus Alive is being acquired by the city's daily newspaper, The Columbus Dispatch.

"There's only so much money here and the market is pretty tight," Mr. Catalino of The Lantern said.

Mr. Lewis said U Weekly's return rate was a low 6 percent, and it had found enough advertisers to support a 40-page paper, including national beer brands, bars and video stores.

One is the Frog Bear and Wild Boar bar. "The layout is very nice," said Randy Haffey, the bar's marketing director, "and there's not a porn section in the back."

The bar also advertises in The Lantern, but Mr. Haffey said the college paper "has not changed, it has not updated itself, it hasn't done anything new in the last couple years," adding "it's very expensive," with a full-page ad running not quite double the cost of one in U Weekly.

Mr. Catalino replied that for his advertisers, The Lantern was a better deal. "For what you are getting," he said, "we are not at all expensive."