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Dr. Jack Thomas
President
Western Illinois University
Sherman Hall 409
Macomb, IL 61455
Jan. 29, 2015

Dear President Thomas,

I am writing on behalf of the Society of Professional Journalists to show our support for Western Illinois University student Nicholas Stewart and to urge you to reinstate him immediately – without penalty – as editor-in-chief of the university’s student newspaper, the *Western Courier*.

SPJ is the nation’s most broad-based journalism organization, dedicated to encouraging the free practice of journalism and stimulating high standards of ethical behavior. SPJ promotes the free flow of information vital to a well-informed citizenry through the daily work of our approximately 7,500 members nationwide -- 1,800 of whom are student journalists.

We have been following the situation at WIU regarding video taken by Stewart during the events of Dec. 12. Because Stewart is a part-time employee who is paid for about 18 hours of work per week, the university does not have claim to his evenings or outside activities, especially while the university is closed for break and the student newspaper is on hiatus. Stewart should have been allowed to work as a freelancer during this time. The First Amendment gives him the right to record a news event with his own equipment and post it or sell it as a freelance journalist. It is our understanding that a precedent had already been set for Stewart to use his own equipment to cover and post news stories for the student newspaper. He was only conducting himself in the manner he thought was acceptable by the university.

The university’s policies are unclear regarding freelance work, so Stewart should be given the benefit of the doubt. We don’t believe Stewart’s actions were unprofessional or were a “threat” to the operations of the university in any way. Rather, it was more likely a case of a student journalist covering a breaking news story the way he had been trained, and which had been acceptable to the university numerous times before, including posting video to his own webpage for use by the student newspaper later. He should be celebrated for seeing a breaking news story and covering it. He should be commended for taking the initiative to do journalism. It would have actually been unethical for him, as a journalist, to see this breaking news story and not cover it and publish it via whatever means available.

The threat Stewart is facing – suspension or expulsion from the university – is exceedingly harsh in this case. Even if he used the university’s watermark without

permission (which still appears to be unclear), it would hardly be grounds to threaten a student with suspension from the university and label him a “threat.” The watermark does not make the video more valuable, nor does it dilute the value of the *Western Courier* to have its video receive national media exposure.

Stewart was not using the university’s cameras, computer, editing equipment nor Internet connections at the time. Therefore, we believe he was not acting in his capacity as *Western Courier* editor. We believe the university should not be entitled to seize any compensation Stewart earned. He was acting as a professional journalist covered by the freedom of speech, which is granted to all Americans in the First Amendment, and should be treated as such.

Unfortunately, this matter has taken attention away from what is most important at this stage in Stewart’s career and education – honing his skills and obtaining his degree. It sends the message that student journalists must now fear suspension for publishing news of which the university does not approve, and that the First Amendment is only looked upon favorably when it benefits the university. No one is benefitting from the situation as it stands. Not Stewart. Not WIU. Not the *Western Courier*. Not journalism as a whole.

We would be happy to discuss this matter with you further, if you are interested, either with an informal phone call or a more formal meeting.

Again, we urge you to reinstate Stewart without penalty to his position as editor-in-chief, and allow him to focus once again on his education and preparing for his career.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dana E. Neuts".

Dana E. Neuts
President, Society of Professional Journalists
SPJDana@gmail.com