Farewell Editorial

*The Anvil*, April 11, 1975

*(This was Virginia’s “parting shot” as Editor-in-Chief of the contentious Rockford College student newspaper. The paper had made itself notorious by weighing in during an ideological purge of faculty members—dismissed without due process—by the President of the college. The Anvil not only offered incisive, acerbic editorials on the President’s actions, but conducted no-holds-barred in-depth interviews with a number of the dismissed professors. This gained Virginia the dubious distinction of being the only student in the history of Rockford College to be denounced by name by the President in front of a mandatory all-college faculty meeting.)*

Traditionally, each editor of the student newspaper at the end of his/her term of office, writes a farewell editorial to express whatever thoughts or personal insights may have been gained during the year. On a more pragmatic level, it can be used as an opportunity to exit with a few parting shots at the opposition—and for the incurable idealists among us, maybe a little speech on journalistic integrity and the function of the media at Rockford College.

A statement was made in the editorial of our last issue, that “students are very rarely even required to think.” A faculty member came forward after reading the editorial, and asked in a letter if we had any basic solutions to this problem. Although I did not personally write the editorial—a Board member did—I do have some thoughts on this subject that are not altogether unrelated to the position of the media on campus.

Of all the student organizations on campus, including student government, I believe it is the media that exists in the position of most painful conflict. This is
because the media organizations attempt to express opinion on behalf of the student interest, and to publicize those events and policy decisions which most affect students.

Of course, the Rockford College Student Government expresses student opinion also— but its formalized methods and diplomatic working out of solutions is so different from the workings of the media, that the organizations cannot even be compared. Student Government, to exist, and remain viable, must compromise. The media, to survive with its purpose intact, must not compromise. If a student newspaper compromises its stand on any issue to make itself more acceptable, then it has betrayed its most important purpose.

Now it is obvious that unless you are going to poll every student on every possible issue— and scrupulously take the side of the majority— you are going to have a group of students making up an organization (such as the Board of Editors of The ANVIL) who will use their own judgement and independent thought in writing news stories and expressing student opinion.

Because the Editor-in-Chief or the General Manager, as the case may be, is the most visible person in the organization— to a great degree it will depend upon how much pressure he or she is personally willing to take, as to what editorial opinions and stories will ultimately appear in the paper or on the air.

But even though the student newspaper is dedicated to expressing and promoting the interests of the students, an inevitable alienation comes about. Unless you are going to have the opinion of the majority rule— regardless of the worth or depth of that opinion— the media organization must decide editorial
policy and news coverage with reference to some higher principle. That “high principle” could variously be called “the truth” or “the good”.

The media must interpret that higher “good” with regard to the interests of the students---that is, what is the truest and highest good for the students. But at this point, painful conflict is inevitable. The administration must necessarily conceive of their own highest good: when their interpretation of the good does not agree with that of the students, conflict arises.

I do not personally believe that this conflict is a bad thing. If the editorial opinions are well-reasoned and the news stories factually accurate, such input could be invaluable and could contribute greatly to the growing direction of an institution.

But at Rockford College conflict of opinion is viewed as an unfortunate occurrence. Whatever independent thought may be contained in the student newspaper, has almost a fugitive status and exists in a kind of limbo. Independent thought on important issues is not encouraged by the administration.

So as part of the answer to the faculty member who asked what the solutions were to the fact that students are not required to think here and thus rarely do: if the administration would stop badgering the few students who do try to think, maybe more real independent thinkers would step forward and make their opinions known.

However, the situation is even more complex than this. When I first became editor in May 1974, I wished to create a newspaper at Rockford College that would reflect the fact that it was published for college students, not high school students. Necessarily involved in that concept, was the commitment to pursue
controversial issues on the students’ behalf. At the same time, the newspaper
would encourage cultural events and would attempt to form a more thoughtful and
intellectual atmosphere at Rockford College.

I wanted a newspaper that would be respected for the depth and variety of
its subject matter; I also wanted to raise the general level of writing in the
publication. My major purpose was an attempt to raise the quality of the student
newspaper, in an effort to elevate the status of the student as a thinking and feeling
human being on this campus. My logic, as I recall, was that if the students had a
more articulate tool of expression, it would be more likely that they would be
listened to by the administration. Of course, this did not come about for a variety
of reasons. However, paramount among those reasons, was the response of the
students themselves to the new format.

In my year as editor, I would say that my attitude toward Rockford College
students has in general been modified. I think that a newspaper of relatively high
quality will probably always be in the position of some unpopularity on this campus,
for the simple reason that it does not attempt to serve the lowest common
denominator. Indeed its very attempt to raise the general level of values and ideas
among the student, will probably be received with some hostility.

It becomes obvious that in seeking that higher “good” for the students, the
newspaper sometimes not only displeases the administration but also the student
body itself. Yet going back to the question of the faculty member, what is the
solution to the lack of independent thought on the part of the student— I would say
that independent thought is never easy because it never pleases the majority. So if a
student does speak out, chances are that he will not please the administration, but neither will he please or receive support from the majority of his peers.

If all this seems negative, I suppose it is. But actually the only real source of optimism that exists in this world, is the capacity for constructive change. Change necessarily involves some element of negation, some awareness that the past was not ideal and that wrong may have been done.

Unfortunately, the intellectual and educational decisions and policies of Rockford College are made without regard for the views of the student. Rockford College could help students to think; as an institution, it could encourage literary, journalistic and other pursuits. Articulate exchange of opinion could conceivably occur between the administration and students. I believe a student newspaper could play a part in that exchange; but until the administration comes to encourage active, independent thought on the part of the students—*I am not personally optimistic.*