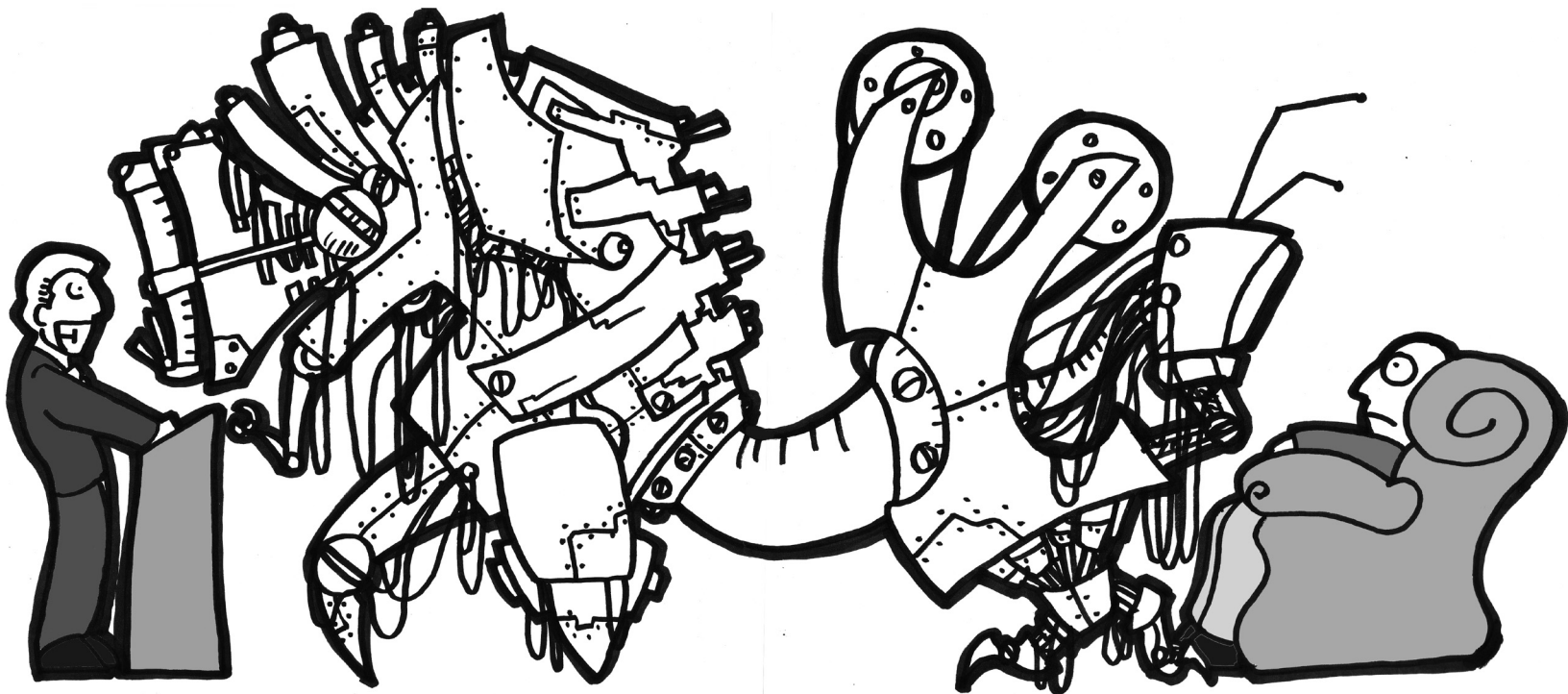


# The Media Democracy Issue

# Failed Experiments?



TREVOR WOLF GRAPHIC/THE UBSYSEY

## voter FUnDed Media

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There is a contest on campus that awards money to students for blogging on issues that are relevant to our campus. And, chances are, you've never heard about it.

Voter Funded Media, or voter-media.org, is a contest invented by Mark Latham, a former professor at the University of California, Berkeley. It's supported by the AMS's VFM Committee with Matthew Naylor, Kyle Warwick and Bruce Krayenhoff as chairs. The contest awards \$200 weekly to media outlets based on the votes they receive from students. This monetary factor is meant to encourage UBC's media to provide the best and most prolific content possible.

"This has been an ongoing experiment for two years," Latham said, "and it brought about a pretty popular means of discussing AMS issues."

*UBC Insiders* is a blog that has served the UBC community since the January 2007 AMS elections. It was created to compete in the VFM contest. It has since become a popular read, with as many as 50 or more comments per story being posted—until recently.

In the past, students such as Maayan Kreitzman, Gina Eom and Tim Louman-Gardiner administered *UBC Insiders*, but the site is now in the hands of Blake Frederick and Maria Jogova.

The new coordinators for the blog haven't emulated their predecessors. If you were to visit *UBC Insiders* (ubcinsiders.blogspot.com) you'd only find three entries for the month of October. September, on the other hand, was a content-heavy month, with 11 entries that bore relevance to issues UBC students care about, but entries have dropped off dramatically since.

Blake Frederick argues that the drop-off has been due to a decreased number of bloggers for the site. "We're also right now in the stages of changing the vision of *UBC*

*Insiders*. We want to focus on expanding the readership of the blog to be more inclusive of students who are not insiders. This will take advertising. Now that we have the money in the bank, we're ready to launch an advertising campaign."

This is the blog that has been winning the weekly VFM contests since they restarted on September 25, 2008. It has earned \$305 thus far, and while that may not seem like a large sum of money, this contest is expected to keep running until at least February 2009.

At the rate things are going, you can expect *UBC Insiders* to collect well over \$1000 for running a blog that does not consistently provide students with important information about campus issues.

When asked what he thought about *UBC Insiders* receiving the money, Mark Latham, the administrator and sponsor of the competition, stated, "I don't think I can give much of an answer to that. I would have to take a look at the blog myself."

On the contest website (www.votermidia.org/ubc), students can see the four contestants and the amount of money awarded to each on a weekly basis. There is a link to

a list of which UBC students voted, and when they did so. When you click on the link, you can expect to find the names of 36 voters in the contest, and an allocation of one point to each person for each day that they vote.

Thirty-six students is 0.0008 per cent of UBC's total student population. For the last voting period, only 11 out of 36 eligible voters did so.

"This is largely my fault," says Matthew Naylor, chair of the VFM Committee for 2008-09. "We need to be doing more promotion, but I got more involved in other things. I didn't anticipate how low the level of engagement would be. The committee has not laid down anything concrete to deal with the matter as of yet."

And no wonder. According to Naylor, the VFM committee met once over the summer, and has given Latham a "direction" following the VFM motion proposed by AMS council back in spring 2008. Since then, it has mainly been Latham's jurisdiction.

"Under the new circumstances we have set, the entire administration and money from the contest is being handled by Mark Latham," Naylor said.

"Marketing is not my strength," admits Latham. "There are several bloggers who are competing in the contest, and I guess I have left it up to them to promote it. I suppose people could put up posters, but my main resource is the prize money awarded to the bloggers."

Frederick, who is also associate vice-president, external for the AMS, argues that greater awareness is needed for the contest to be successful. "I think that in order for VFM to operate more effectively, the AMS needs to take some initiative in promoting the contest," he said.

Voter Funded Media at UBC is a contest that is run with the intention of letting voters have control over some information funding for the media outlets. In order for this to happen, however, someone must step up to the challenge of promoting the contest and make it easily accessible to students who have an interest in participating in it.

"It's an ongoing, open thing," Latham said. "The ball is in my court. You can promote your heart out, but if your voters have trouble on the website and casting their votes, they're not going to come back." ☹

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