Since 1871, the Bowdoin Orient, Bowdoin College’s student newspaper, has sought to fulfill four democratic purposes of the American press: to inform, to scrutinize, to debate, and to represent. Certain conditions particular to a college setting, however, such as the Orient’s complex connections to administrative authority as well as staff members’ tendency to editorialize in their stories have complicated (if not undermined) its goal of responsible news reporting. Still, the newspaper has historically achieved a degree of competence in all four of these areas.

The 1962 Orient editorial staff, from left to right: S. Beale, A. Ryan, F. Drigotas, J. Halperin, D. Walker, D. Wollstadt, and J. Martin. This staff ran controversial articles that challenged Bowdoin’s administrative policies and redefined the Orient’s role as an agent of the free press.

In this letter to Athern Daggett, P.K. Niven of the Brunswick Record (the Orient’s printer) indicated his concern with the content of a poem printed in the College newspaper. His letter reveals the restrictions that Orient staff members rarely but occasionally confronted in their editorial work.

“Blessings On You Little Gan” was the poem mentioned in P.K. Niven’s letter to Athern Daggett, which allegedly caused Niven’s printing staff “distress” based on its potentially “libelous” content.

How did the Orient serve as an “institution of democracy” in a manner similar to mainstream newspapers between 1950 to 1965? First, the Orient informed readers of important events in the Bowdoin community on a weekly basis, receiving little pressure from College officials regarding what (and what not) to print. Second, the newspaper’s staff frequently succeeded in offering readers a close examination of sensitive concerns related to College affairs. Third, the paper served as a community space through which many controversial issues were rigorously debated. Fourth, the publication, through its editorial page, provided a means through which student opinion was relayed to College authorities (although with occasional confusion over whose voice was actually represented). Finally, the Orient played an important educational role at Bowdoin, offering students interested in journalism an opportunity report on newsworthy stories.