

Libel Discussion/List

The *Collegian* publishes an article quoting local social worker Dusty Springfield saying that landlord Amy Winehouse charges "outrageous rents for rat-infested hovels." Springfield says Winehouse is "exploiting and robbing hundreds of students." The reporter does not attempt to contact Winehouse, but prints the allegations. Winehouse sues for libel. The reporter is not worried because he quoted Springfield's charges accurately. Might this be libelous? Will accurately reporting Springfield's comments protect the reporter?

Lou Reed, owner of a local bar, is ordered by the city fire department to install a fire alarm system and escape doors within 30 days. The *Collegian* prints a story on the order, and Reed sues, saying that the paper has libeled him. He says the editor has it in for him because "I kicked him out the other night, and he'd love to put me out of business." Is that evidence of malice? What defense would apply here?

Collegian columnist Tom Petty criticizes a group of 12 bikers who call themselves Alice in Chains and meet regularly at a bar in town. "A few of these low-lives carry guns and are a menace to women and other decent citizens," Petty writes. Three members of the group sue for libel. Petty tells his attorney he's not worried because he hasn't identified them. Is he right?

An art critic visits Joan Osborne's gallery and denounces her current show as "two-bit trash hardly deserving mention, much less purchase." After that, attendance at the show drops drastically. Osborne sues the newspaper for libel, saying that the critic's comments hurt her income. What will the paper argue?

A book critic notes about Richard Starkey's new novel: "His plot line is unconvincing--maybe because of his inability to work due to drug addiction." When Starkey sues, the critic laughs because he knows he has the defense of fair comment. Will that defense work for him?

Used car dealer Grace Slick runs an ad on local television stations showing a customer fainting when he hears about the car deal he's about to be offered. The customer sues the station for libel, saying he had posed for the video because he thought it was a gag--not a commercial. His neighbors, he says, are now making fun of him. Could this be libelous?

Two years after Mayor Sheryl Crow leaves office, two former welfare recipients tell the newspaper that during her term, they were forced to pay her kickbacks to stay on welfare. While the two are named, the reporter says in this story that five other anonymous sources told her similar stories. Crow sues for libel. The newspaper then discovers that one of the two named sources has been found guilty of falsifying income tax returns and the other did not live in town at the time. What will be the former mayor's burden of proof in court? Is she likely to be successful? What is a judge likely to demand of the reporter? How will that play out?

At a meeting of the city's school board, the board approves giving each teacher in the district two hours per week to work on professional development. That idea had been suggested by one of the district's principals, Bonnie Raitt. The *Collegian* reporter covering the meeting includes public reaction to the proposal, which he gets through telephone interviews the following day. PTO President Ronnie Wood objects to the idea because he says Raitt will just use the two hours to sleep with all of the male teachers on her staff like she did in her previous job, from which she was fired. Raitt was unavailable for comment. Because the paper was on deadline and because the reporter says he is covered by privilege, the editor runs the piece with Wood's comments. Problems here?