

# Public enemy No. 1 the media

## Columbine myth an example of lazy news reading



The heavily armed gunman stalks the hallways in his black trench coat. He reaches the library and nudges open the door.

Out of the corner of his eye he glimpses a young girl trying desperately to hide under a table. He snarls and raises his gun.

"Do you believe in God?" he asks.

"Yes!" says the girl.

The man in the black trench coat pulls the trigger.

You've all heard this inspiring story of faith and courage in the face of death. Young Cassie Bernall, recently converted to Christianity after a rebellious youth, proclaims her faith in God to the man about to kill her.

It never happened.

That's right, the Cassie Bernall story is a myth. Further investigation revealed in October that Cassie Bernall was never asked about her belief in God before being killed.

"We strongly doubt that conversation ever occurred," said Steve Davis, spokesman for the sheriff's office that investigated the Columbine shootings (Newark Star Ledger, October 31, 1999).

The Cassie Bernall myth actually stems from an encounter between her classmate Valeen Schnurr and one of the gunmen. The gunman shot Valeen and then asked her, "Do you believe in God?"

She said "yes," and then the gunman asked why.

"Because I believe and because my parents brought me up that way," she responded.

The gunman then reloaded and walked away to find more prey. Valeen was hospitalized but lived.

In effect, the exact opposite of the Cassie Bernall myth is what actually took place. Some of the people who had faith lived. Some who had faith died. God, if he exists, wasn't being picky on April 20, 1999.

The truth hasn't slowed the fervent effort to make Cassie a modern-day Joan of Arc, however. "She Said Yes," a book about Cassie by her mother, made No. 8 on the New York Times Bestseller List as a "nonfiction" book. Thousands of churches and youth groups around the country invoke Cassie as an example of someone with true faith.

And it never even happened.

But this is about more than the exploitation of a dead girl by desperate Christians to bolster their faith. It's about how the media work.

Far too often we're treated to articles premised on "Sources say..." "According to police..." and "Witnesses report..." What sources? Which witnesses?

But it's not really the journalists' fault. The focus today is shifting to entertainment.

Gene Roberts, the Pulitzer Prize-winning editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer, told a meeting of journalists that "the news industry is shirking its duty and committing industrial suicide by providing less news coverage and more 'infotainment' in its papers."

Jeremy Patrick is a first-year law student and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

Newspapers are increasingly being purchased by multinational, multimedia corporations that view newspapers as just another tool in the money-making kit.

When reporters work for huge conglomerates (such as Rupert Murdoch's company, which owns TV Guide, the Fox Broadcasting network, and several newspapers), they can become frightened of covering stories or writing columns that might offend affiliated companies, major advertisers or their corporate owners.

In-depth investigation and double- or triple-checking facts is expensive. It takes resources and rarely yields big profits. Newspapers have to compete for a smaller share of the news pie with television, magazines and the emerging Internet.

Even independently owned newspapers have to think of the bottom line.

There's a reason why the Cassie Bernall story made the front page around the country, while the true story, once revealed, was

## Ignorance of masses leads to incorrectly laid blame



In the past five years, the public has hung a new "Wanted: Dead Or Alive" poster up in mailrooms across America. The reward? It's incredibly high - the adoration of people across the nation. Sounds pretty good, huh? Who do you have to bring in to become the nation's greatest hero?

"Wanted: Public Enemy #1 - The Media. Dead or alive, same reward for either. Wanted for: Crimes against humanity and civilization."

Take a good look at yourself, people, because this is what you wanted.

For the past half-decade, I can't mention I'm working in the media without people staring at me in that same way they once did if I told them I was a lawyer. What was once a noble profession has been sullied and tarnished, and you attempt to shame the media right out of existence.

And it's your own fault.

We tell you what happened and, as it has been for millennia, you have turned on the messenger for the contents of the message. You can't put your finger on what's wrong with society, so you blame us, your favorite little scapegoat.

Part of this problem resides in the concept that being in the media is an easy job. Anyone can do it, right? Wrong.

Millions of people across the world think they can understand exactly how the media works because they've seen movies like "All the President's Men" and "Broadcast News." Should I be able to go in and operate on people because I've watched "ER" and "Chicago Hope?" Are you mad?

Another common myth is that newspapers are controlled by their owners. This is, generally, an asinine assertion.

Picture this, will you? Somewhere in New York, in a penthouse office, some 85 floors above street level... "OK boys, what's going to be the front page for the Washington Post today?"

"I don't know, sir. What's happening there?"

"Ah, who cares? Whatever's the most scandalous, put that at the top."

"Yes sir."

Cliff Hicks is a senior news-editorial and English major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

Do you BELIEVE IN THE MEDIA?!

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