DNISSUES A weekly look at a topic important to us

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Columbine myth an example of lazy news reading

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Public

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

She said "yes," and then the gunman asked

ents brought me up that way," she responded.

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

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 conglomer-

ates (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

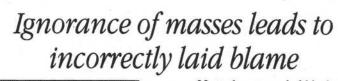
In-depth investigation and double- or triple-checking facts is expensive. It takes resources and rarely yields big profits. Newspapers have to compete for a smaller share of the news pie with television, magazines and the emerging Internet.

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





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 civi-

lization."

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

> For the past halfdecade, 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 scape-

> goat. Part of this problem resides in the con-

Not to burst your bubble, but I somehow don't think so. Just because a newspaper has a big corporate owner doesn't mean the owner affects the daily running of the paper.

media

Sure, there are occasions where the bigwigs try to come down and assert their power. Then the bigwigs usually get themselves into some fight over news integrity and, more often than not, realize they don't know a damn thing about how to run a newspaper. That's why the newspapers have editors.

Not every newspaper is a sterling example of virtue. Everyone's allowed to make a few mistakes here and there, but when a columnist writes something against the grain of the corporate owners, there isn't usually a memo sent down from up on high firing the columnist for

It's that damned freedom of speech thing at work again.

All of this isn't to say the media isn't changing, and this is another big complaint of people: There's too much "entertainment news," too much is focused on celebrities and too little is focused on real-world events.

But that's what you want. That's what you read. And aren't we here to give you what you want?

We still try to force-feed the populace as much news as possible, but to do that, we have to find out what you actually want to read and

America's turned into a voyeuristic society. We want to know every inch of our stars' lives, every meaningless detail of every tragedy.

But you can't know every inch of every story. Until there's a camera in every corner of the world, we in the media have to base what we relay to you on what people tell us.

If a shooting goes on in a McDonald's and the witness tells us an account, we relay it to you as he or she told us and give you what other facts we have. If that witness lies, how are we supposed to know? Were we in there? Were you?

The reason the Cassie Bernall myth was trumpeted across America was that it was fresh and inspirational to some people. By the time the truth came out, many people were tired of hearing of Columbine, so most newspapers still printed the story, but did not give it high priori-

A few days after the tragedy, anything Columbine-related was page one. But more than six months later, there is bigger and more important news.

It's a matter of timeliness. Something six months old just isn't that



Delan Lonowski/DN

where

asked her, "Do you believe in God?"

"Because I believe and because my par-

In effect, the exact opposite of the Cassie r u n

Bernall myth is what actually took place. Some someof 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."

around page 14, if at all. Simply put, "She said 'yes!"" sells a lot more papers than 'Actually, she didn't say 'yes.""

The only thing we can do is be skeptical of what we read. Look for evidence, not assertions. Follow up on stories. Get your information from a variety of sources.

Simply reading two different newspapers each day will quickly demonstrate how a paper's political leanings affect more than the editorial page.

And just because she never said "yes" doesn't mean we should forget about Cassie Bernall. She was one of the thousands of Americans victimized by violent crime last

But if we truly want to solve the problem of violent crime, we have to stop praying and start acting.

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cept 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."

important any more. The reason it made front pages the first time was because the tragedy was fresh in people's minds, and they were still interested.

As time passes, people want to distance themselves from the tragedy as much as possible. They want to try to forget.

No matter what the religious right hears in the way of facts, it has already made a martyr out of Cassie Bernall. You could yell the truth at members of the religious right until you were blue in the face - they believe the story, and for them, that overwhelms the truth.

The religious right has its own truth it clings to, as false as it may be.

And when it boils down to it, anyone with a rational mind should be getting his or her news from more than one source. No news source. can be entirely objective - everyone in the media tries to be objective, but total objectivity is fictitious.

No matter how the media handle any tragedy, someone is going to be upset, but that's our job. We're destined to be hated, the messengers killed for their role in enlightening America.

You're welcome, folks. Now keep hating us for it.

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