

Editorial

AP: Apathetic Publishers

As of Aug 9, Benjamin Vanderford has shocked a nation with his digital cameral, a dirty lens filter and one of a thousand red-dye-corn-syrup recipes for fake blood readily available online. By that Saturday afternoon, the media blitz declared the Associated Press, Reuters and various affiliates duped by the elaborate Vanderford stunt.

Upon examination it becomes clear that this is no trickery worthy of either smoke or mirrors.

The media provided the necessary arcana by which the uncorroborated murder of Vanderford by "a group linked to al Qaeda ally Abu Musab al-Zarqawi" (not pictured in the video) became globally published fact. One would expect the most reputable of news services to fact check before printing any story, right?

Unfortunately, the AP and Reuters stories did not bear any of the hallmark caveats that classically accompany other unsubstantiated media releases. They boldly declared the death of Vanderford without even Google-ing the guy's name.

A simple Google search of "Benjamin Vanderford" today yields about 8,000 links to news stories and angry weblogs decrying last Saturday's media uproar.

However, the same search, as of that Friday would have linked the identity of the "beheaded" to a San Francisco video game designer running for Supervisor of District 5. One could even have secured Vanderford's cell phone number and address within a few clicks.

Yet, it was the media that was duped so skillfully by the unlikely Vanderford.

Commentaries

Press Freedom Under Attack

The following editorial appeared in The Orange County Register on Thursday, Aug. 12, 2004:

The First Amendment is Americans' precious protection of the rights to freedom of press, assembly, speech, petition and religion. But government ever is testing the boundaries of what it can restrict, as is evident in the federal investigation into who in the Bush administration in 2003 revealed to members of the media that Valerie Plame was a CIA agent. She is the wife of Joseph Wilson, the former ambassador to Niger.

On Monday, U.S. District Court Chief Judge Thomas F. Hogan held Time magazine re-

porter Matthew Cooper in contempt of court "for failing to reveal sources who disclosed that Plame was an undercover CIA officer," reported Editor & Publisher magazine. "In addition, Walter Pincus, a reporter for The Washington Post, received a subpoena Monday ordering him to testify in the investigation. ... Other newspaper reporters are expected to receive subpoenas soon."

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The case of journalists in the Plame situation probably "will go the U.S. Supreme Court" for a decision, Terry Francke told us; he's the former general counsel of the California First Amendment Coalition and head of Californians Aware, a new open-government organization.

"Based on everything I've seen," Mr. Francke said, "I doubt that the Supreme Court is going to modify its approach from the last time around. When a journalist is a witness to a crime, or has evidence, the First Amendment is not a protection to a journalist having to give testimony before a grand jury,

Even FBI spokesperson LaRae Quy said agents are currently working with local law enforcement on possible criminal charges against Vanderford.

So what makes Vanderford the guilty in this situation? How can we vilify him?

Fine, arrest him for bad taste. Crucify him for entertaining press interviews in his undies. Lock him up for basing his home decor upon his inflatable mattress, computer equipment and daintily strewn Diet Coke cans.

But we dare not suggest that Vanderford is to be arrested for exercising his freedom of speech, though some may find it offensive.

Aside from guaranteeing Vanderford's rights to expression, the emphasis in this case should be placed upon thanking his unusually wry, video-phillic state for presenting a circumstance in which an unsung truth about the media may emerge.

The media would have the world believe that this incident is only a fluke, a rarity at best. But, it's hard to believe.

Dare we blame the messenger for exposing how easily globally prominent news sources boldly misrepresent the "facts?"

Robert Martin, one of the video's three producers, told reporters "If you look closely at the video, you see the supposed beheading is done with a dull vegetable knife and we used the wrong side." And he's right.

Perhaps it's time for people to pose this frightening question: If Vanderford could so easily rope the media, who else has been?

as shown in a couple of cases in the 1970s. I would not be optimistic that this court would be more flexible than was the court in the 1970s."

Editors most often agree to withhold a name when the value of what the source has to say is extremely important, and the source's livelihood, or even life, would be in jeopardy if the source were named. It is an agreement not lightly made. The Register, for instance, rarely uses unnamed sources and has explicit standards for determining when it might be appropriate.

We believe that the words beginning the First Amendment, "Congress shall make no law ..." should be taken literally with regard to the press and other freedoms there enumerated. Even though it seems unlikely, we still hope the Supreme Court reverses its action in the 1970s and restores to journalists the right to keep secret those sources that are promised anonymity. And Congress should pass a federal shield law.

This isn't just a parochial matter for those in our industry. If sources cannot be kept confidential, those sources will clam up in the future and government will be able to be even more secretive. An open society demands that any balance between openness and government investigatory power must be decided in favor of openness.

For an alternative, one need only look at Russia in recent years, where the formerly wild and open press of the Yeltsin era has been muzzled under the regime of Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer.

As Thomas Jefferson so wisely wrote, "Our liberty cannot be guarded but by the freedom of the press, nor that be limited without danger of losing it."

2025 Prospectus

The following editorial appeared in the Dallas Morning News on Friday, Aug. 13, 2004.

Beware the ides of 2025? We've read enough reports to figure that the year 2025 isn't going to be a lot of fun. Seemingly everyone - from cities to think tanks - has picked 2025 as a gloomy deadline for some sort of calamity.

By 2025, two-thirds of arable land in Africa will disappear, along with one-third of Asia's and one-fifth of South America's. So says the United Nations.

Dallas will have a water crisis on its hands if it doesn't find another source before ... guess when? That's right, 2025.

And don't make us think about Social Security, Medicare, global AIDS and local air quality by then. It makes our head hurt.

The danger of such forecasting is that 2025 sounds like a time so far away that it will never come. It's hard, therefore, to



Letter to the Editor

Music, Dance: CSUH Treasures

Dear Editor,

The Department of Music is probably the most outstanding department on the campus. Since September 1968 I have attended hundreds of 1) undergraduate, senior and graduate recitals, 2) choral and instrumental ensemble concerts, 3) opera workshops, 4) women's music concerts, 5) faculty recitals, 6) vocal, choral and instrumental ensembles composed of private and public school students nominated by their teachers; and 7) juried competitions

of the same rated by professors from outside CSUH. What other department has year after year brought so many students, professors, and parents together on campus to create such community outreach?

I know the Department of Theatre and Dance less well, but I have attended scores of its performances the 1) wood frame playhouse that stood where the Kampus Korner and the Orient Express are, 2) the Meiklejohn Hall Courtyard, 3) the Physical

Education Building dance classroom, 4) Robertson Hall Court-yard and nearby lawn, 5) the Main Theatre and 6) the Studio Theatre.

They are each university treasures. In the face of adversity, they continue to be the two best community advertisements for CSU Hayward. The University Administration should be giving them maximum rather than minimum support. They repay it many times over in cultural and educational public relations.

Commentary

Faster, Further... Higher

When people see these games in person or watch them on television, they have a reasonable right to expect an athletic contest that is clean, not one whose outcome is fixed by chemicals.

the head of the World Anti-Doping Agency, argues that "those who cheat have fewer places to hide and more likelihood of exposure than ever before."

Still, a few are willing to take the risk. U.S. sprinter Terri Edwards tested positive for a banned stimulant at a track meet in Martinique in April and has been banned from competition for two years.

At the Olympics, young men and women from around the world will gather to compete

against each other and on behalf of their respective homelands. As many as 5.3 million people will see the games in Athens, and NBC is planning 1,210 hours of television coverage.

If there is such a thing as the Olympic spirit in Athens, it is closely connected to notions of fair play and playing by the rules. When people see these games in person or watch them on television, they have a reasonable right to expect an athletic contest that is clean, not one whose outcome is fixed by chemicals.

The Olympic Games began in Athens in 776 B.C. The first modern Olympics were held there in 1896. A lot of medals have been handed out since; a lot of triumphs and defeats have been recorded. But the biggest victory in the long history of the Olympics - if it can be reached - would be a triumph over this form of chemical pollution. It can't happen too soon.

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