

Tuesday, June 22, 2004

EDITORIAL

Media should not publish photos of decapitation

Whoever said the mainstream media are full of vultures thirsting for lurid front-page gore ought to reconsider their stance. Al-Qaida terrorists have paraded photographs and videos of the decapitations of Americans Nick Berg and Paul M. Johnson, Jr. for the world to see, but the media, for the most part, have not played their game. They've shown restraint. They haven't put grotesque photographs that will nauseate adults on page one and they've refrained from putting horrifying video that will haunt children's nightmares on the 6 p.m. news. To their credit, they've told us the news of these horrible deeds without offending our sensibilities.

Simply put, there is no good reason to publish a photo of a decapitated human in a newspaper. In no reasonable case would a photograph like that add to a reader's understanding of a story; instead, it would only repulse them.

Some might argue that people need to see these images to keep the tragedy of these situations from sinking into unconsciousness.

Consider this: What about those who already understand the seriousness of the issue, the terrible nature of these inhuman crimes? They turn the page and are forced to see something most people find offensive. Readers can stop reading a story anytime, but nobody can 'unsee' a photo found to be disturbing.

Moreover, there is nothing trivializing about seeing a photograph of a living person moments before he's decapitated. In some ways, it might even be more powerful. All readers will use their imaginations, and probably feel outrage at these terrorists' crimes and deep sympathy for the families of the victims.

The Emerald Editorial Board supports completely the right of any news organization to run a photo of a severed head. That's freedom of speech and restrictions would constitute censorship, plain and simple. But we don't think newspapers and television should show these images.

That is where the Internet comes in. These images are available for those with morbid curiosities or twisted senses of humor. Many Web sites, including the Drudge Report, have placed disclaimers and links in front of this material so that discerning surfers can see or ignore it at will, and little Johnny doesn't stumble across it while looking for <http://www.sesamestreet.com>. This is the way it should be.

Maybe media vultures have consciences, or maybe they realize dinner lies on a busy eight-lane freeway and touching it means a hail storm of angry phone calls and subscription cancellations. Either way, they've shown restraint and responsibility.

EDITORIAL POLICY

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses can be sent to letters@dailyemerald.com. Letters to the editor and guest commentaries are encouraged. Letters are limited to 250 words and guest commentaries to 550 words. Authors are limited to one submission per calendar month. Submission must include phone number and address for verification. The Emerald reserves the right to edit for space, grammar and style.

NEWS BRIEF

Emerald sports changes, begins twice-weekly publication

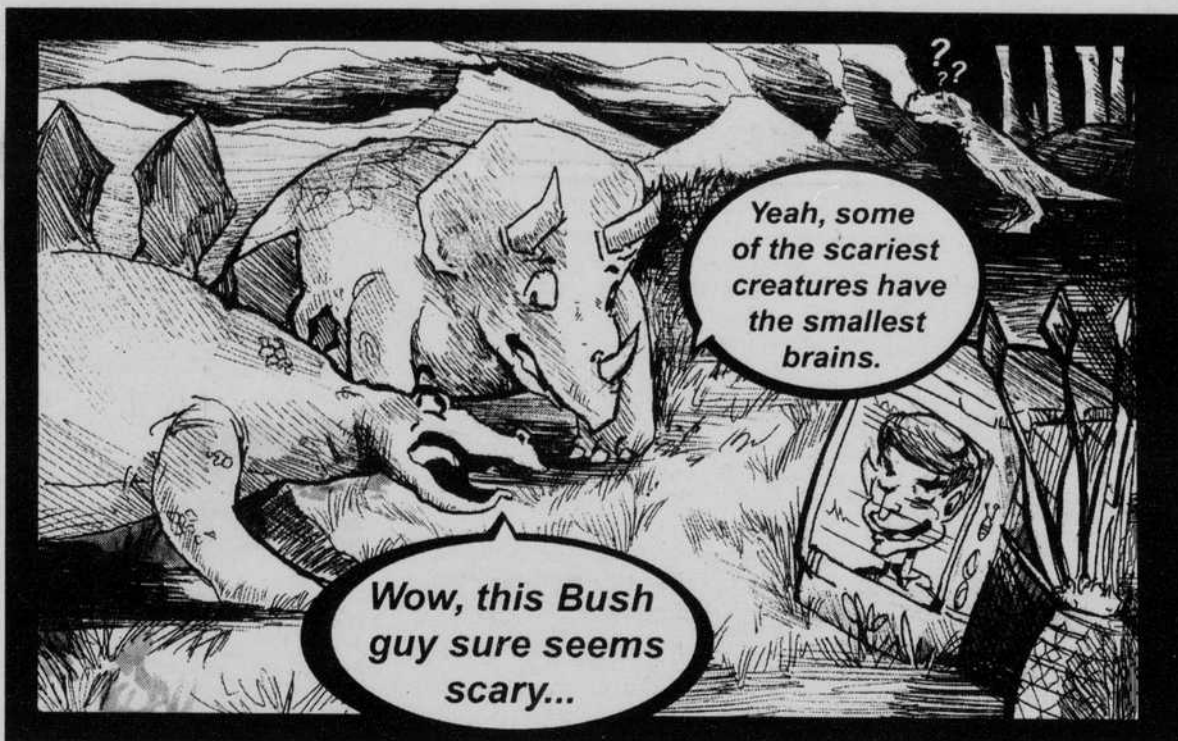
The Emerald is continually changing to serve its readers better. Today's issue, the first of the summer, is the next step in that evolution.

We're rolling out a cleaner, updated design that includes new fonts, centered headlines and new mug shot boxes, to name a few of the more noticeable changes. Also, we've removed the strip across the bottom of the front page that included the weather, contents and "Next issue" box, leaving more space for news stories. This will provide readers with more options when window shopping on the newsstands.

This summer the Emerald will publish every Tuesday and Thursday, from June 22 to Aug. 12, and conclude regular summer publication with the Aug. 18 Law School edition. Look for special Game Day issues the day before home football games against Indiana (Sept. 11) and Idaho (Sept. 25), as well as our six-section September 20 "Back to the Books" issue.

We hope to hear from you this summer. Feel free to contact the Emerald with news tips, letters to the editor, questions or concerns by calling the office at (541) 346-5511, stopping by EMU Suite 300 or by e-mailing Editor in Chief Jared Paben at editor@dailyemerald.com.

— Jared Paben



Aaron Sullivan Illustration

BIG MAC ATTACK

J. TOBIAS MONTRY
COLUMNIST

I love Big Macs. I think nice, juicy Big Macs are the best thing to happen since Internet porn. In my genius hierarchy, which is arguably jaded and flawed, it goes Albert Einstein, Hunter S. Thompson, and then the man who brought us the untouchable Santa Claus of cheeseburgers, the McDonald's Big Mac.

But my obsession is no accident. After all, through these veins runs an invigorating stream of a Angus steak eatin', fast car drivin', foreign country invadin', red-blooded tragedy of the American culture. For instance, I know for a fact that Big Macs are unhealthy, heart-attack inducing mounds of lard, but I just don't care. I also know that continued consumption of the Godfather of greaseburgers will inevitably result in my poor health.

Still, I reserve the right in the rest of this column to be a complete hypocrite in that I will declare my love for the cheeseburger but decry legislation that would ultimately protect it from lawsuits. Let me explain:

In March, the Republican-dominated U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a disastrous piece of legislation called HR 339, the so-called "Cheeseburger Bill," which would effectively ban lawsuits blaming the food industry for expanding waists and causing health problems.

House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., told CBS News shortly after the bill's passage that, "Trial lawyers need to stop encouraging consumers to blame others for the consequences of their actions just so they can profit from frivolous lawsuits against restaurants." The problem with this line of reasoning is that this country sadly includes consumers who honestly don't know that certain products are bad for them: Ever wonder why bottles of Drano



J. TOBIAS MONTRY
STOP BREEDING

have warning labels saying, "Not suitable for Miller Time"?

These same people are probably also first in line at the cigarette counter, but at least with tobacco products they get some fair warning: a label saying the product may lead to debilitating diseases. The surgeon general has yet to put a warning label on the Big Mac, however, and clearly when somebody decides to get that next pack of smokes, he or she is ignoring government-sanctioned warnings and decades of anti-smoking publicity.

But fatty, generally unhealthy foods? Where is the fair warning? Given that overeating is on the fast track to becoming the No. 1 preventable cause of death — poor diet and lack of physical activity resulted in 400,000 deaths in 2000, according to CBS — chances are much of the American public doesn't know the horrible secret: Some foods from some places are so obscenely unhealthy that, as was demonstrated in the recent documentary "Super Size Me," they can quickly lead to miserably poor health.

Supporters of the bill say it will protect small businesses (i.e. places where food comes to you more than three minutes after you order it) from frivolous lawsuits that point a finger for obesity and subsequent poor health. However, Americans have been eating at "mom and pop" restaurants for generations, and the obesity and health problems have never before reached such

epic proportions (no pun intended). So it's clear that fast food shops are probably the problem and that smaller restaurants are safe from such lawsuits anyway. Thus, the justification seems like a ploy to protect the corporate food industry.

Speaking of which, did I mention that Congressman Ric Keller, the Florida Republican who sponsored the bill, received \$22,200 from agribusiness during his 2004 race for Congress, according to <http://www.opensecrets.org>? Yep, contributions poured in from Darden Restaurants (which represents several restaurants such as the Olive Garden and Red Lobster), Outback Steakhouse, Wal-Mart, Pizza Hut and — wait for it — the National Restaurant Association! This is probably why the bill is written to include protection for ANY food distribution, not just fast food.

Keller may not be all bad, however. For the sake of full disclosure, he also received a sizable chunk of money from lawyers — not exactly the kind of people who are set to benefit from such a bill.

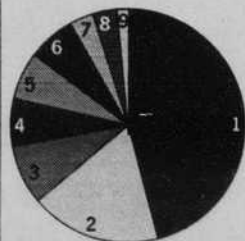
The moral of the story is that here in the good ol' U.S. of A., it doesn't sit right when the federal government decides that certain lawsuits are frivolous even before a judge or jury can see them. In a letter of dissent of the legislation, several lawmakers wrote that "It is inappropriate for the Majority to deny harmed parties their rights in the complete absence of any evidence that the courts are not processing the cases before them in a just and equitable manner."

The bill has yet to hit the U.S. Senate. Until then, I'll be eating a Big Mac and feeling sorry for the poor sucker sitting behind me who doesn't know fast food is going to kill him. Soon, he won't have any chance at retribution, anyway.

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ONLINE POLL

THIS WEEK'S POLL RESULTS



What was the biggest story covered by the Emerald this year? (61 votes)

1. Multnomah county issues same-sex marriage licenses 45.9 percent
2. Squirrel fishing 18.0 percent
3. DPS officer committed misconduct 8.2 percent
4. Alleged assault by ASUO Vice President Eddy Morales 6.6 percent

5. Sports arena put on hold 6.6 percent
6. Weiden workshop 6.6 percent
7. Goldschmidt sex scandal 3.3 percent
8. Los Angeles Times Editor John Carroll lecture 3.3 percent
9. Diversity provost coverage 1.6 percent

NEXT WEEK'S QUESTION

Should media organizations show the graphic photos of the beheaded corpse of U.S. hostage Paul Johnson? Visit www.dailyemerald.com to vote.

- Yes — The images make the violence more real and understandable
- Yes — It's the media's job to inform the public, regardless of how graphic
- No — The images are distasteful
- No — It brings publicity to the murderers