

# Weathering the Storm

## Editor reflects on internet backlash from her survey



**Madi McVan** Copy Editor

Hello. My name is Madi McVan, and I'm a senior, graduating a year early. In addition to working 25 hours a week and taking four AP classes, I copy edit the newspaper.

And according to an article on infowars.com, I am guilty of forcing students to turn over their parents' personal information, selling that information to the government, breaking families apart and beginning the Communist takeover of America—all because of a survey that I gave to collect statistics for a newspaper story.

To collect data about Hendrickson students and their relationships with guns, I wrote and handed out a survey to about 120 students, looking for connections between political affiliation, gun experience and gun ownership. I didn't expect there to be any opposition, considering it was given to a relatively small number of students, names were optional, and I made sure that the questions were as unbiased as possible.

But when a student sent a photo of the survey to their parent, the photo was immediately spread online, initially on social media like Facebook, and then on small news websites and a local radio show.

As soon as it was posted online, people assumed that the school handed out the survey in order to report to the government who owns guns, with the purpose of taking them away.

The most bizarre part of the situation to me was how widespread the belief is that the government is out to take away everyone's rights. Dozens of comments online compared the government (and myself) to Big Brother from 1984 and German Nazis, using children to report their parents and conspiring to turn the masses into mindless sheep.

The experience was not only bizarre, but terrifying; I was scared that somehow my name would be linked to the survey and all of the anger in the articles and comments would make their way into my daily life. I imagined an angry gun owner finding out where I work or live, and confronting me about the survey.

But at the same time, I learned so much from the way the story spread online. As a journalist, it was educational to see how easy it is to twist words and quotes in order to create something that is completely misleading, but taken by readers to be the truth. For example, instead of stating that the survey was given by journalism students, an article said it was given to journalism students. By changing one small word, the entire meaning of the article changed.

As a reader of news, I became aware of how articles that seem to be true can actually be completely false. Now,



**Shane Anders** Cartoonist

I fact-check the stories I read online, and pay attention to the quotes in the article—are they from a credible source? In the story about my survey, quotes were pulled from Facebook comments rather than school or district officials, but used in a way that suggested that the Facebook commenters had some sort of authority or inside knowledge.

While the survey brought about (false) bad publicity for the school, I am proud of the stories that came from the data gathered in the surveys. It's not easy being called the next Hitler, but in the end the lessons I took away from seeing my own work twisted and changed online outweighed the fear and criticism.