The Unintended Consequences of Media Coverage of Mass Shooters
(and What We Can Do About Them)

IRE 2018 Tipsheet

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The Consequences

Of course, healthy people do not commit mass shootings based on the news they consume; only an extremely small fraction of the population is influenced to do so.

Unfortunately, when someone is desperate for fame or attention, committing a high-profile mass killing is one of the only guaranteed ways to get it. In many cases, winning a Super Bowl or Academy Award garners less media attention than committing one of these crimes.

The evidence that media coverage of mass shooters has resulted in the consequences listed below is essentially indisputable, because it comes from the statements of many attackers themselves.

1. The Coverage Encourages Attention-Seekers to Attack
2. The Coverage Encourages Attention-Seekers to Kill As Many Victims as Possible
3. The Coverage Inspires Contagion and Copycat Effects

This is also consistent with large bodies of empirical research on the effects of agenda setting and free publicity, as well as behavioral analysis research on commonly imitated behavior.

At least 11 of the 20 deadliest public mass shootings in the United States since 1998 were committed by attention-seekers or copycats. This is a conservative estimate based on an extremely high standard of evidence: perpetrators’ own statements or their direct contact with the news media. It does not include additional cases for which there is strong circumstantial evidence.

Examples of attention-seekers (this is only a partial list):

• 1999 Columbine shooters: “Isn’t it fun to get the respect that we’re going to deserve?...Directors will be fighting over this story.”
• 2007 Virginia Tech shooter: sent video and manifesto to NBC News.
• 2007 Nebraska mall shooter: “Just think tho, I’m gonna be fuckin famous.”
• 2011 Tucson shooter: “I’ll see you on National T.V.!”
• 2012 Aurora movie theater shooter: told psychiatrist he “felt he couldn’t make [his] mark on the world with science, but could become famous by blowing up people.”
• 2012 Sandy Hook shooter: “just look at how many fans you can find for all different types of mass murderers.”
• 2014 Isla Vista shooter: “Infamy is better than total obscurity…I never knew how to gain positive attention, only negative.”
• 2015 Roanoke shooter: sent his suicide note to ABC News.
• 2016 Orlando nightclub shooter: called News 13 during his attack and then checked online to see if he had “gone viral.”
• 2017 Weis Market shooter: “I’ll make the news headlines…I’ve always desired to be famous.”
• 2017 Sutherland Springs church shooter: Coworker recalled “He would say ‘Isn’t it cool? Did you watch the news?’ He would say he wished he had the nerve to do it.”
• 2018 Parkland shooter: “when you see me on the news, you’ll all know who I am.”
• 2018 Santa Fe shooter: explained he wanted to “have his story told.”

Examples of attention-seekers who wanted to kill large numbers of victims to receive lots of attention (this is only a partial list):

• 1999 Columbine shooters: “The most deaths in U.S. history…We’re hoping, We’re hoping.”
• Follman & Andrews (2015) found 13 cases of plotters who hoped to surpass Columbine’s death toll.
• 2012 Sandy Hook shooter: praised Norway attacker for becoming new record holder for victims killed, and closely studied famous mass shooters before his own attack.
• 2015 UCC shooter: “Seems the more people you kill, the more you’re in the limelight.”
• 2016 Townville shooter: “I HAVE TO BEAT [the Sandy Hook shooter]…I think I’ll probably most likely kill around 50 or 60.”
• 2018 Parkland shooter: “My goal is at least 20 people…”

During their attack months, some perpetrators have received more media attention in dollar value than some of the most famous American celebrities, including Kim Kardashian, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Johnny Depp, and Jennifer Aniston.

The result = celebrity worship of mass shooters. Examples:

• “The Columbine Shooters, the Girls Who Love Them, and Me”
• “Over 200 Love Letters, Other Fan Mail Sent to [Parkland] Florida Shooting Suspect”

A related result = contagious and copycat attack behavior. Examples:

• After Columbine: at least 32 copycat shooters and 53 thwarted plotters.
  
  • Traceable Sequence of Inspiration:
    Columbine → Virginia Tech → Roanoke → UCC
  
• After Virginia Tech: at least 8 copycat shooters.
• After Parkland: over 300% increase in violent threats and incidents at schools compared to previous months.
Can We Solve This Problem? Of Course.

But we need to overcome psychological barriers to change, including:

- Denial/avoidance of the problem
- Rationalizations
- Conflict of interest/fear of financial losses in a competitive marketplace
- Diffusion of responsibility
- Fatalism/cynicism
- Lack of moral courage

Once we agree on the problem and need for change, there are many potential solutions.

- Shared goal: responsible news coverage with fewer unintended consequences.

  - “balance the public’s need for information against potential harms”
  - “avoid pandering to lurid curiosity”

Ask yourself:

Q: How often does the public need to read/hear a mass shooter’s name in the news?
Q: How often do they need to see a mass shooter’s face in the news?

- Never?
- Once (when it is new information)?
- Only when they want/seek that information?
- Repeatedly for weeks, months, and years in the breaking news coverage of the incident, the continued coverage of the investigation, and the coverage of social and political responses, trials, subsequent mass shootings, and more? This is current practice by many outlets.

Important Reminders

- News organizations already limit their own coverage in many ways. For example, they typically do not publish profanity, slurs, epithets, and other offensive language; images that contain nudity, sexually explicit material, graphic violence, or corpses of the recently deceased; and names or photos of victims of sexual harassment or sexual assault (even in high-profile cases that dominate the news headlines), unless the victims consent to being identified.

- Media companies have already proven that some things are higher priorities than financial profits. For example, ABC canceled “Roseanne” after the lead actress posted a series of offensive tweets, even though the show was #1 in the ratings. If media companies will sacrifice profits to avoid offending people, why wouldn’t they take a principled stance to help save lives? Is it because ABC would bear 100% of the responsibility for continuing to air “Roseanne,” but bears only a fraction of the responsibility for airing the names and photos of mass shooters because other media companies do as well?
• Reporting the important details about a mass shooting, including the details of who committed the attack (age, sex, race, religion, background, mental health, criminal record, behavior, etc.) does not actually require publishing the perpetrator’s name or face.

• The news media have already demonstrated that they can report on a mass shooting without using the perpetrator’s name and face. As just one example, after the 2018 Kentucky school shooting at Marshall County High, the offenders’ name was withheld for several weeks because he was only 15 years old. That didn’t limit the depth or quality of coverage: some outlets even ran video footage of his arrest (in which his face was blurred out) and interviews of classmates who described his personality and behavior in detail.

• If news organizations stop or greatly reduce their publication of perpetrators’ names and photos, these attackers’ identities will still be a matter of legal record, used in law enforcement and media investigations, and known by many people, including witnesses, families, local community members, and people who post or seek this information on forums or social media online. However, denying mass shooters de facto celebrity status and widespread fame does not require keeping their names completely confidential.

• The decision to do the ethical thing (in accordance with the SPJ’s Code) should never be dependent on whether other journalists or media organizations are also behaving ethically. Similarly, dangerous coverage from some outlets does not justify dangerous coverage from others.

• Making media coverage more responsible in small ways is insufficient if the coverage still contributes to the mass shooting problem in bigger ways.

• In most news stories, replacing the perpetrator’s name with a phrase like “the 2018 Parkland shooter” would alter the total words by less than 2% and the substance not at all.

• There is no evidence that mass shooters can be identified in advance based on their looks, so publishing their photos would seem to have no preventative value.

• Consumption is not the same as demand. Just because people consume what you put in front of them (as measured by ratings or clicks), that does not mean it is what they actively need or want, or that they would object to something else being put in front of them instead.

• Social standards often change, and people adjust accordingly. For example, cigarettes were advertised on television for years but are not anymore, which has become the “new normal.”

**Implementation**

In news stories where perpetrators’ names or photos are not used, it can help to remind the public that you are strategically not identifying the offender because the FBI (or criminologists or “No Notoriety”) has recommended that you not do so. You could even note that there are other ways information about the suspect's identity can be found by members of the public who really want it. Another option would be to have a single page on your website where perpetrator’s names are listed in a bland and straightforward manner, and include that webpage’s URL in the rest of your coverage (in which the perpetrator’s name is not being used).