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Don't Name Them, Don't Show Them, But Report Everything Else: A Pragmatic Proposal for Denying Mass Killers the Attention They Seek and Deterring Future Offenders

Adam Lankford[1] and Eric Madfis[2]

Abstract

Prior research has shown that many mass shooters have explicitly admitted they want fame and have directly reached out to media organizations to get it. These fame-seeking offenders are particularly dangerous because they kill and wound significantly more victims than other active shooters, they often compete for attention by attempting to maximize victim fatalities, and they can inspire contagion and copycat effects. However, if the media changes how they cover mass shooters, they may be able to deny many offenders the attention they seek and deter some future perpetrators from attacking. We propose that media organizations should no longer publish the names or photos of mass shooters (except during ongoing searches for escaped suspects), but report everything else about these crimes in as much detail as desired. In this article, we (1) review the consequences of media coverage of mass shooters, (2) outline our proposal, (3) show that its implementation is realistic and has precedent, (4) discuss anticipated challenges, and (5) recommend future steps for consensus building and implementation.

Keywords

mass shootings, mass killings, media coverage, contagion, copycat effects, fame seeking

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Introduction

While mass shootings remain extremely rare events, these incidents warrant serious concern because when they do occur, they not only cause multiple casualties and devastate communities, but they also leave some survivors, bystanders, and reporters with posttraumatic stress (Backholm, Moritz, & Björkqvist, 2012; Schwarz & Kowalski, 1991) and create extensive fear among the larger public (Altheide, 2009; Madfis, 2016). Unfortunately, after more than 50 years of high-profile mass shootings, the United States has not made even small strides toward reducing the prevalence of these attacks. In fact, the three deadliest public mass shootings in United States history have occurred since 2007, culminating in the 2016 Orlando nightclub attack that left 49 victims dead and 53 wounded (Keller, Mykhyalyshyn, Pearce, & Watkins, 2016). And the frequency of some types of mass shootings may also be growing. The Congressional Research Service found that the annual number of public mass shootings in the 1970s nearly quadrupled by the 1990s (Krouse & Richardson, 2015), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2008) found a strong "increasing trend" in active shooting incidents from 2000 to 2015 (Blair & Schweit, 2014; Date, Thomas, & Levine, 2016).

Although previous research suggests that mass shootings may be reduced if guns could be kept from those who would commit such crimes (Klarevas, 2016; Lankford, 2016c; Lemieux, 2014), in the United States, significant progress on firearms does not seem politically feasible. Americans appear dramatically split on the subject of gun control. For example, a recent Washington Post-ABC News (2015) poll found that when asked which should be the higher priority—"enacting new laws to try to reduce gun violence" or "protecting the right to own guns"—46% of respondents advocated for the former, while 47% selected the latter. Approximately 95% of these respondents stated that they felt "strongly" about their position (Washington Post-ABC News, 2015). This appears consistent with other national and political indicators that suggest a major compromise on gun control is unlikely anytime soon (Pew Research Center, 2014).

A mental health approach to reducing mass shootings would be less politically controversial, but remains difficult to successfully implement. Previous research suggests that many public mass shooters struggle with mental health problems and suicidal tendencies (Fox & Levin, 1994; Langman, 2015; Lankford, 2015; Lankford & Hakim, 2011; Mullen, 2004; Newman & Fox, 2009; Newman, Fox, Roth, Mehta, & Harding, 2004; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002), but from a risk assessment perspective, this information is not nearly precise enough to identify future attackers. After all, the vast majority of mentally ill people are not violent and pose no threat to anyone (Metzl & MacLeish, 2013). Furthermore, although some progress has been made in mental health treatment in recent decades, many mentally ill people rarely visit a doctor who could potentially diagnose them, and even if they do, they are often not properly diagnosed (Lankford, 2016a). Overall, suicide rates in the United States have actually increased over the past 30 years (Tavernise, 2016). Until these broader social problems are successfully addressed, it may be difficult to significantly improve a mental health approach to mass shootings.

However, one area in which major progress appears possible involves the media coverage of these offenders. As will be discussed in more detail, publishing offenders' names and images gives many of them what they want, encourages future fame-seeking offenders, and appears to increase the likelihood of contagion and copycat effects. If we can change how the media cover mass shooters, we may be able to deny many offenders the attention they seek and deter some future perpetrators from attacking.

In the following sections, we will (1) review the consequences of media coverage of mass shooters, (2) outline our proposal, (3) show that its implementation is realistic and has precedent, (4) discuss anticipated challenges, and (5) recommend future steps for consensus building and implementation.

Consequences of Media Coverage of Mass Shooters

Consequence 1: Media Coverage of Mass Shooters Gives Them What They Want

Media coverage of mass shooters rewards them by making them famous, and provides a clear incentive for future offenders to attack. Many of these at-risk individuals recognize that murdering large numbers of men, women, or children will guarantee them fame. They believe their names and faces will adorn newspapers, television, magazines, and the Internet—and unfortunately, they are right (Langman, 2015; Lankford, 2016b; Lankford & Hakim, 2011; Larkin, 2009; Levin & Madfis, 2009; Newman et al., 2004; O'Toole, 2014).

Because many attackers explicitly admit that they want fame and directly reach out to media organizations to get it, it has become essentially indisputable that as a society, we have been helping them achieve their goals. Lankford (2016b) documents 24 examples of offenders who clearly exhibited this motive, and cites many additional cases for whom there is strong circumstantial evidence. For example, the Columbine shooters fantasized about the attention they would receive and believed that movies would be made about their lives, which turned out to be true. The 2007 Nebraska mall shooter left behind a suicide note in which he wrote, "Just think tho, I'm gonna be fuckin famous," and he soon was. The 2011 Tucson shooter posted online "I'll see you on National T.V.!" and he eventually appeared there (Lankford, 2016b, p. 126). The 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter was obsessed with movies about mass shooters, wrote about "my catalog of mass murderers," participated in online debates about which was the "the most famous school shooting," and posted "just look at how many fans you can find for all different types of mass murderers" (Lankford, 2016b, p. 126). Regrettably, this mass killer of children has now inspired his own fans (Langman, 2017).

Likewise, the 2007 Virginia Tech shooter sent his martyrdom video and manifesto to *NBC News*, the 2015 Roanoke shooter sent his suicide note to *ABC News*, and the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooter called *News 13* for more attention in the midst of his own attack, and then checked social media to see if he had "gone viral" (Lankford, 2016b; "Local Orlando News," 2016; Nicks, 2016). Each one of these offenders were granted the fame they wanted and more.

The notion that this is all okay, because we are giving mass shooters negative attention, not positive attention, no longer appears credible. After all, the basic premise that "there is no such thing as bad publicity" has been around for more than a century, and throughout American culture, the distinction between fame and infamy seems to be disappearing (Levin, Fox, & Mazaik, 2005; Levin & Madfis, 2008; Pinsky & Young, 2008; Reagan, 2007). In fact, during his 2016 campaign, the 45th president of the United States asserted that "all press is good press"—a message that was seemingly evidenced by his subsequent victory, despite many incidents which brought negative attention (Kruse, 2016).

Some past offenders have even spoken to this issue: as the 2014 Isla Vista mass killer explained in his manifesto, "Infamy is better than total obscurity . . . I never knew how to gain positive attention, only negative" ("The Manifesto of Elliot Rodger," 2014). This suggests that condemning the actions of mass shooters with harsh adjectives does little to reverse the damage of rewarding them with fame in the first place.

Consequence 2: Media Coverage of Mass Shooters Increases Their Competition to Maximize Victim Fatalities

Mass shooters who seek fame tend to be the deadliest offenders, such as the Columbine shooters, the Virginia Tech shooter, and the Orlando nightclub shooter, all of whom explicitly sought fame and/or directly contacted the media to promote their attacks. Lankford (2016b) found that on average, fame-seeking offenders kill and wound more than twice as many victims as other active shooters.

This appears directly attributable to the amounts of media coverage they receive. Many fame-seeking offenders deliberately kill and wound high numbers of victims because they know it will help them garner more media attention. As the 2015 Umpqua Community College shooter summarized, "Seems the more people you kill, the more you're in the limelight" (Lankford, 2016b, p. 126). Many of his predecessors appear to have made similar calculations. For example, The Columbine shooters expressed their desire to cause "The most deaths in U.S. history. . . . We're hoping. We're hoping," the Tucson shooter wrote "I HAVE THIS HUGE GOAL AT THE END OF MY LIFE: 165 rounds fired in a minute!" and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter posted online about the competition for attention between mass killers for who receives the most fame, and why (Lankford, 2016b, p. 126).

Unfortunately, the offenders who kill more victims to get more publicity appear to be accurately exploiting predictable patterns in media behavior. As Duwe (2004) found, mass murderers from 1976 to 1999 who killed and wounded more victims were significantly more likely to be featured in *The New York Times* than offenders who caused less bloodshed. Other scholars have similarly found strong statistical associations between the number of victims offenders killed and the amount of attention they received (Lankford & Tomek, 2017; Maguire, Weatherby, & Mathers, 2002; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2017). These offenders are not only being rewarded for committing mass killings, but they are also getting a strong incentive to kill as many victims as possible.

Consequence 3: Media Coverage of Mass Shooters Leads to Contagion and Copycat Effects

In the context of behavioral analysis, both contagion and copycat effects refer to the ways that some people who are exposed to a given behavior may become more likely to behave similarly themselves. Copycat effects are more straightforward, and typically refer to peoples' imitation of an original actor's modeled behavior (Helfgott, 2015; Lankford, 2016b; Meindl & Ivy, 2017). Contagion, on the other hand, is based on the notion that behaviors can "go viral" and spread through society like diseases, with increased likelihood of their occurrence either in the short term or long term (Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003; Kissner, 2016; Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi, & Castillo-Chavez, 2015). Although social contagion can include copycat effects as one way that behaviors spread, it can also be less direct. As with diseases, not everyone who is exposed to a given behavior becomes afflicted; some may be "carriers" who transmit information about that behavior to others, who then have an increased risk of exhibiting the behavior themselves.

A great deal of prior research has found evidence of contagion and copycat effects in various types of aggressive behavior, violent crime, mass killings, and terrorism (Berkowitz & Macaulay, 1971; Dugan, LaFree, & Piquero, 2005; Kissner, 2016; Langman, 2017; Nacos, 2009; Schmidtke, Schaller, & Miller, 2002; Towers et al., 2015). But perhaps the most well-known example of media-induced contagion is the finding that when suicides are highly publicized by the media, that can lead to a temporary increase in suicide rates (Abrutyn & Mueller, 2014; Gould et al., 2003; Gould, Kleinman, Lake, Forman, & Midle, 2014; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010; Phillips, 1974; Wasserman, 1984). Although the possibility that media coverage of suicides could produce contagion and copycat effects was once doubted by many media members, it is now largely accepted as an established fact (Gould et al., 2003). The World Health Organization, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Poynter Institute, and Society of Professional Journalists have all published warnings that media coverage of suicide can increase the risks of subsequent suicides, and therefore must be handled with extreme care to minimize potential consequences.

These findings about media coverage of high-profile suicides are directly relevant to many mass killers, because these offenders are often suicidal as well. Nearly 50% of active shooters in the United States commit suicide or refuse to surrender and are killed by police, which often constitutes "suicide by cop" (Lankford, 2015). Additionally, those offenders who survive often intended or expected to die, but changed their minds after attacking or failed to complete their suicide attempts (Lankford, 2015; Mullen, 2004; Newman et al., 2004).

When mass shooters receive a tremendous amount of media attention, that can turn them into role models and de facto celebrities for other impressionable individuals, who then may be more likely to commit mass shootings of their own (Helfgott, 2015; Kissner, 2016; Langman, 2017; Lankford, 2016b; Larkin, 2009; Meindl & Ivy, 2017; Murray, 2017; Towers et al., 2015). These imitators are not always fame-seekers: Some may empathize with the original attackers' claims that violence is a justifiable

response to their feelings of mistreatment and marginalization (Muschert, 2012; Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010), and thus have an urge to emulate them. Others may be attracted to the sensationalized, dramatic, or powerful ways the original attackers were portrayed by media outlets, and therefore commit attacks of their own (Helfgott, 2015; Langman, 2017; Lankford, 2016b; Murray, 2017).

Using advanced mathematical models, some scholars have found that active shootings, school shootings, and other mass killings are now so "contagious" that a single incident increases the risk of subsequent attacks for the next 2 weeks (Kissner, 2016; Towers et al., 2015). Other researchers have documented longer term copycat effects, for which the evidence is even clearer (Lankford & Tomek, 2017). For example, Follman and Andrews (2015) found that the Columbine school shooters inspired at least 21 copycat shootings and 53 thwarted plots in the United States over a 15-year period. In turn, Langman (2017) found at least 32 attackers who identified the Columbine shooters as role models, and at least 8 attackers who considered the Virginia Tech shooter to be a role model.

A clear example of contagion and copycat effects occurred over the span of less than 5 months in 2015. The June 2015 Charleston church shooter, who made national headlines, was cited by the August 2015 Roanoke television shooter, who also made national headlines, who was then cited by the October 2015 Umpqua Community College shooter, who also made national headlines (Thomas, Cloherty, Date, & Levine, 2015; Zavadski & Nestel, 2015). This is a clear illustration of one mass shooter becoming famous and influencing a second offender, who then became famous and influenced a third, and so on. And at least two additional mass killing plots—a July 2015 movie theater shooting in Louisiana that left two dead and nine wounded, and a thwarted 2017 synagogue attack in South Carolina—were also inspired by the Charleston church shooter (Collins, 2017; LaFraniere & Palmer, 2016).

It appears that many copycat killers are not simply emulating criminal behavior: they are emulating the famous criminals themselves (Murray, 2017). For comparison, teenagers did not only copy Michael Jordan's basketball skills, they actually appeared to want to "Be Like Mike" on a much more personal level. This is the type of power and influence that fame can convey. As one of the Columbine shooters accurately predicted, "I know we're gonna have followers" (Lankford, 2016b, p. 126). One of their eventual followers was the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter, who closely studied the personalities and biographies of prior attackers, and then posted online "Everyone knows that mass murderers are the cool kids" (Langman, 2017, p. 2). And at least three subsequent killers have already cited the Sandy Hook shooter as a role model of their own (Langman, 2017).

The Proposal

Our proposal contains four clear guidelines for media organizations:

1. Do not name the perpetrator.
2. Do not use photos or likenesses of the perpetrator.
3. Stop using the names, photos, or likenesses of past perpetrators.
4. Report everything else about these crimes in as much detail as desired.

These guidelines are simple, but the potential benefits are many. For starters, by no longer publishing the names or images of mass killers, the media would stop giving them the attention they often seek, and likely deter some future perpetrators from attacking. Past research has shown that the deterrence of undesirable behaviors is possible for anyone capable of responding to incentives and disincentives, even if their actions are not purely rational (Levitt, 2002)—and mass shooters clearly fit this description (Larkin, 2009; Levin & Madfis, 2009; Newman et al., 2004). Additionally, it is well established that one of the most powerful behavioral motives is the expectation that the actor will get credit for what he or she has done (Harsanyi, 1980; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996). Many actors, authors, composers, inventors, musicians, reporters, and journalists would be far less motivated—and might simply give up and try something else—if they knew that no matter what they did, no one would ever know their names. So under similar constraints, how many prospective mass shooters would give up their attack plans and do something else instead? It may be impossible to forecast an exact number, but even a small reduction in mass killings would make a big difference to the victims who avoid tragic deaths, and their friends and families.

Deterring anyone from engaging in violence would be worthwhile, but if the media adopts a "Don't Name Them, Don't Show Them" policy, it could disproportionately affect the worst mass shooters (Lankford, 2016b; Murray, 2017). Instead of providing a clear incentive for offenders to maximize victim fatalities, the media could freeze this deadly competition in its place and ensure that all offenders receive the same amount of personal fame: none.

If the media stops publicly identifying these offenders, contagion and copycat effects may also begin to fade. Mass shooters would no longer receive the widespread attention that transforms them into role models and de facto celebrities. In turn, the impressionable individuals who are inspired by such killers may be more likely to look for other role models instead.

Finally, the widespread implementation of our proposal could also help the media improve their own image in the eyes of the public. While many factors affect public perceptions of the media, one of the most common critiques is that the media are too heavily influenced by "the profit motive" (Emery, Emery, & Roberts, 2000; Ladd, 2011; Muschert & Madfis, 2013). Many people believe that the media operate on the principle that "if it bleeds, it leads" and see violent crimes as an opportunity to make money. However, if major media outlets refuse to publish the photos and images of mass shooters, that could help restore confidence in their institution at a time when public perceptions are quite negative. Instead of grabbing ratings or readers at any cost, the media would be clearly demonstrating that their top priority is the public's welfare.

All of these benefits could be reaped without giving up much that really matters. The particular sequence of letters that make up offenders' names, and the particular configuration of bones, cartilage, and flesh that make up offenders' faces are among the least newsworthy details about them. That information itself tells us nothing, and has no inherent value. However, by reporting everything else about these crimes in as much detail as desired, the media can continue to fulfill their responsibility to the public. This should largely assuage concerns from reporters and journalists about

censorship that would prevent them from doing their jobs. It also represents a pragmatic compromise that makes the widespread adoption of our proposal realistic.

Our assertion that the media can report everything else about these crimes is an important difference between our proposal and some previous public attempts to deny mass shooters fame. For example, two of the popular campaigns that have helped bring valuable attention to this issue are "Don't Name Them," which is hosted by the ALERRT Center at Texas State University, and "No Notoriety," which was founded by Tom and Caren Teves, the parents of a mass shooting victim in Aurora, Colorado. Both have made significant contributions in this area, and both deserve credit for inspiring our proposal.

At the same time, they may also have been too ambitious in their attempts to limit coverage of mass shooters. For example, "Don't Name Them" (2015) explains that "The focus of the public campaign is to shift the media focus from the suspects who commit these acts to the victims, survivors and heroes who stop them." Similarly, "No Notoriety" (2015) suggests the media should "Elevate the names and likenesses of all victims killed and/or injured to send the message their lives are more important than the killer's actions." However, although stories about victims and heroes clearly have an important place in the coverage of these incidents, the details of mass shooters' lives, motives, and behavior are also an essential topic of the media's reporting.

In fact, without this information, scientific studies of mass shooters—which often rely on open source data (Huff-Corzine, McCutcheon, Corzine, Weller, & Landon, 2014)—would be significantly inhibited. We would know even less than we currently do about the behavioral patterns among these offenders and the evidence-based strategies for stopping them. In addition, details about the experiences and actions of individual mass shooters—including their personal beliefs, writings, statements, and struggles—may help educate the public about the key warning signs for those at risk of committing future crimes. Family and friends are one of the most important lines of defense against mass shootings, and many thwarted attacks have been prevented because these people saw something, and then said something (Madfis, 2014a, 2014b; Pollack, Modzeleski, & Rooney, 2008; Vossekuil et al., 2002). Without media coverage of the details of offenders' lives, those around them may be less likely to recognize similar warning signs and report them.

Is Implementation Realistic?

Even if they agree with the basic tenets of our proposal, skeptics might naturally wonder whether its implementation is actually realistic. After all, with any problem, it is far easier to conceive of potential solutions than to put them into practice. In this case, however, the media have already demonstrated through their own behavior that they could successfully adopt a "Don't Name Them, Don't Show Them" policy.

Precedent 1: Media Coverage of Fans Who Run on the Field

For example, it is already well established as both policy and practice that television networks do not show unruly fans who run on the field during professional baseball or

football games. This is not because the networks are worried about hurting their ratings or because viewers would be uninterested—the sight of a fan running around the field while being chased by police can actually be quite entertaining. In fact, an online convenience poll by the New England Sports Network (2012) found that more than 70% of respondents would like TV networks to show fans running on the field.

However, the media adopted these policies because they have taken a principled and pragmatic position: they do not want to be complicit in giving fame-seekers the attention they want, and they hope to deter copycats. As ESPN Sports producer Tim Corrigan explains, "We're not looking to glorify someone running onto the field"—and NBC Sports producer Fred Gaudelli concurs: "Why give them what they're looking for?" (Osgood, 2016). Similarly, as former president of CBS Sports Neal Pilson summarizes, "The decisions are made individually by the TV carriers but all seem to have come to the same conclusion: Don't show it" (Osgood, 2016).

Precedent 2: Media Coverage of Sexual Assault Victims

The media also take principled stances to assist national crime reduction efforts: for instance, they generally do not publish the names of sexual assault victims. This is the standard operating procedure for both media organizations and other popular sources of information, such as Wikipedia. Overall, as Oglesby (2003) summarizes,

> The media, legal experts say, are free to print those names. The U.S. Constitution guarantees the press that right. Media outlets choose not to exercise it. And legal, psychological, and journalism experts say the media have made the right choice.

The rationale is that by not naming sexual assault victims without their consent, the media make it easier for these individuals to come forward and report their own victimization, which increases the ability of the criminal justice system to combat these crimes (National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, 2016).

The media have not only adhered to this policy in low profile cases, where public interest in the victim's identity may have been minimal. For example, the rape charges against Los Angeles Lakers basketball star Kobe Bryant were among the biggest news stories of 2003, and yet mainstream news outlets never published the accuser's name (Oglesby, 2003). Similarly, the real name of the woman who claimed in a 2015 *Rolling Stone* article to be gang-raped at the University of Virginia was not published by major media sources, despite widespread curiosity about her identity and growing evidence that her story may have been fabricated (Crocker, 2016).

Precedent 3: Media Coverage of Mass Shooters in Other Nations

Some other nations, such as Finland and Canada, have already demonstrated that alternative approaches to covering mass shooters are possible. Väliverronen, Koljonen, and Raittila (2012, p. 170) found that, in the wake of the school massacre at Kauhajoki which occurred less than a year after a prior rampage attack in Jokela,

Finnish journalists gathered information in a much more considerate manner and "were keener to set limits" in how much of the shooter's manifesto, videos, and other personal material were discussed in news coverage, due to concerns about copycat effects. In fact, many Finnish media outlets refused to publish the Kauhajoki shooter's name (Raittila, Koljonen, & Väliverronen, 2010). While Finnish and American news outlets vary substantially in terms of professional standards, industry regulations, level of emphasis on commercial interests, and broader cultural differences (Backholm et al., 2012), the Finnish case provides a helpful example of how alternative approaches are possible.

Another notable international example is the way in which a "Don't Name Them, Don't Show Them, But Report Everything Else" policy already appears to be the standard operating procedure for media covering underage mass shooters in Canada. The January 2016 shootings in La Loche, Saskatchewan, which left four victims dead and seven wounded, provide a clear example. Despite the high-profile nature of this attack, the fact that many people knew the offender, and the physical presence of the offender in court after his arrest–his name and image were not publicized. As *The New York Times* straightforwardly reported in its coverage of the incident, "The police said the suspect, whose identity cannot be disclosed because of his age, faced four charges of first-degree murder, seven charges of attempted murder and a weapons charge" (Austen, 2016).

At the same time, many other details about the shooting were closely reported. For example, the Canadian newspaper *National Post* published a moment-by-moment reconstruction of the incident titled "Inside The Deadly School Shooting That Shattered La Loche." This included information from fellow students, witnesses, victims, and people who knew the offender. For example,

> The 17-year-old shooting suspect is said to have suffered in his own way; he was bullied relentlessly and teased about his large ears. Despite the ribbing, he was not known to lash out, says Perry Herman, who knew the shooter . . . "He just bottled it up." (Quan, 2016)

The newspaper also published the shooter's own social media message to other students: "im done with life . . . just killed 2 ppl. bout to shoot up the school" (Quan, 2016).

Ultimately, the details that were omitted were those that matter the least, but which may have the most damaging long-term consequences: his name and his face. The rationale for not publicizing juvenile offenders' identities in Canada may have more to do with protecting them than with protecting society from future offenders. However, if major media outlets can effectively cover school shootings by 17-year-olds in Canada without publishing their names or images, this same approach could be applied to offenders of all ages in the United States and beyond.

Anticipated Challenges

Even if our proposal is eventually adopted as policy and practice nationwide, several challenges will still exist.

Challenge 1: Information Leaks and Offender Self-Promotion

The names and images of future mass shooters are unlikely to be kept fully confidential. There will always be some members of the public who want to see the names and pictures of these offenders, and it may be impossible to completely keep that information from ever being leaked. For comparison's sake, although major news organizations refused to publish the names of either the woman who accused basketball star Kobe Bryant of rape or the woman who claimed to be gang-raped in *Rolling Stone*, that information was released by several less respected outlets and can be found online. Given the multifaceted nature of 21st-century media, it seems likely that the names and images of some mass shooters would surface on blogs, Internet forums, or comment boards, no matter what policies are adopted by major media organizations.

The mass shooters themselves can also make it difficult to keep their identities confidential. In the past, many have had social media accounts that members of the public could directly access, on sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. And some of these offenders have used social media to draw attention to themselves and their crimes. For example, the aforementioned 2016 La Loche shooter posted an online message after killing his first two victims, and the 2015 Roanoke shooter filmed his fatal attack and then tweeted, "I filmed the shooting see Facebook" (Lankford, 2016b, p. 126). If the media refuse to publish offenders' names and images, some attackers will likely try to thwart these efforts by publicizing themselves. Social media companies could assist our effort by quickly disabling these offenders' accounts—as they have in some past cases (King, 2015)—but a complete information blackout may not always be possible.

Ultimately, however, it is important to remember that these fame-seeking offenders typically have far-reaching delusions of grandeur that would not be satisfied by merely receiving social media attention or comment board posts. They typically want capital "F" fame: to have their names and faces featured everywhere and known by everyone (Langman, 2015; Lankford, 2016b; Lankford & Hakim, 2011; Larkin, 2009; Levin & Madfis, 2009; Newman et al., 2004; O'Toole, 2014; Rocque, 2012; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). As the 2015 Umpqua Community College shooter summarized prior to his attack,

> when they spill a little blood, the whole world knows who they are. . . . A man who was known by no one, is now known by everyone. His face splashed across every screen, his name across the lips of every person on the planet, all in the course of one day. (Lankford, 2016b)

For these offenders, getting attention from major media outlets may also serve as validation that they successfully reached the highest levels of social status. This is the type of fame they often seek, and this is the type of fame they should be denied.

Challenge 2: Exceptional Cases: Escaped Suspects and Newsworthy Images

In exceptional cases, there may be an important reason to publicize the offender's name or image. In the following scenarios, we would have no objection to the media taking that step.

The most obvious need would be if the offender has escaped the crime scene and law enforcement needs public assistance in finding him or her. That rarely happens following public mass shootings, but it is somewhat more common after terrorist attacks and other unconventional crimes (Lankford, 2015). For example, the 2002 Washington, D.C., area snipers evaded the authorities for more than 3 weeks, and were not arrested until after the police and media broadcast the suspects' names, photos, and vehicle information. More recently, authorities asked for public help in locating escaped suspects from the 2013 Boston Bombings, the 2015 Paris attacks, and the 2016 Berlin truck attack. Of course, in such cases, publishing the suspects' names and photos is completely justified. Once the manhunt concludes, however, the media should immediately revert back to a "Don't Name Them, Don't Show Them" policy in their subsequent coverage of the incident and offender.

In rare occasions, there may also be photos or videos that show the offender and have significant newsworthy value. For instance, offenders sometimes take photos or videos of themselves that reveal elements of their behavior or psychology that may be helpful for scholars and the public to see firsthand. In other cases, witnesses may capture important recordings of the offenders' actions. In accordance with our proposal that the media should not show the names or images of these offenders but report everything else as they see fit, we would support the publication of such material as long as the offenders' identities are completely obscured. This could be accomplished by digitally blurring the face of the offender, in the same way that television networks regularly obscure other explicit parts of photos or videos prior to release.

Challenge 3: Media Resistance to Change

Another potential challenge is that some media organizations may be resistant to change. For instance, some may fear that if they no longer publish the names and images of offenders, it will cost them ratings, readers, and revenue. At least in the short term, being willing to change will require moral courage on the part of whichever media organizations act first. In the long run, however, this concern should be partially alleviated by the simple calculus that if all major outlets eventually adopt the same policy, it should affect them equally without altering the competitive landscape. Furthermore, they can still report everything else about these crimes in as much detail as desired. If they choose to report salacious or sensational details about the offenders in an effort to draw a bigger audience, that is their prerogative. Doing so may be tasteless, but it would probably be less dangerous.

Other media organizations may feel as though adopting a "Don't Name Them, Don't Show Them" policy is equivalent to admitting guilt or wrongdoing regarding their past coverage of these offenders. And there certainly is evidence that past media coverage of mass shooters may have contributed to the current threat (Helfgott, 2015; Lankford, 2016b; Murray, 2017; Zarembo, 2016), much like decades of television and radio advertisements for cigarettes appear to have contributed to the public health problem of smoking. However, there will always be things we could have done better in hindsight. For a long time, the media simply did not have the evidence or

understanding necessary to justify a significant alteration of its coverage of mass shooters. But now, we hope that this article and other scholarly contributions will increase media awareness so that real changes will finally be made.

The Next Steps

It would be very unfortunate if the media continues to publish articles and broadcast news stories that give mass shooters the attention they want. It would also be unfortunate if, as members of a democracy, we continue to encourage the media's behavior through our morbid curiosity and consumption habits, or continue to condone it through our silence and inaction. Ignorance is no longer a defense.

And a consensus is building. Many government and law enforcement officials have already expressed their desire to deny mass shooters fame. As former Federal Bureau of Investigation director James Comey explained after the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting,

> You will notice that I'm not using the killer's name and I will try not to do that. Part of what motivates sick people to do this kind of thing is some twisted notion of fame or glory. And I don't want to be part of that for the sake of the victims and their families. And so that other twisted minds don't think that this is a path to fame and recognition. (Gurman, 2016)

Former U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch shared a similar view:

> we don't want to glorify people who are so clearly seeking attention, because we don't want to let others who may be thinking about this think, "Oh, gee, even if I'm killed in a hail of bullets, my name will live forever." (Gurman, 2016)

Many other leaders have taken a similar approach. The International Association of Chiefs of Police and the International Police Association have both endorsed a "No Notoriety" approach. In turn, Colorado governor John Hickenlooper refused to name the Aurora, Colorado shooter, and Oregon Sheriff John Hanlin refused to name the Umpqua Community College shooter. As Hanlin explained, "I will not name the shooter. I will not give him the credit he probably sought. You will never hear me mention his name" ("Oregon Sheriff," 2015). An online convenience poll found that more than 92% of respondents agreed with his decision ("Oregon Sheriff," 2015).

There are also a growing number of media members who support this approach as well. They include CNN television anchor Anderson Cooper, MSNBC television host Lawrence O'Donnell, former Fox News television host (now with NBC News) Megyn Kelly, and former governor and Fox News television host Mike Huckabee. For instance, after the Orlando shooting, Cooper stated on air that "There's one name you will not hear in the broadcast, one picture of a person you won't see. We will not say the gunman's name or show his photograph" (Wilstein, 2016). Similarly, O'Donnell tweeted, "Last night @TheLastWord I never mentioned the shooter's name or showed

his picture. It can be done. No viewer complained" (O'Donnell, 2016). Back in 2013, Kelly explained "I really think I'm at the point where I no longer want to utter the names of these people at all. I think we should all do it"—and then she subsequently implemented this approach (Wilstein, 2013). And Huckabee has refused to name mass shooters for years. As he explained after the Umpqua Community College shooting,

> I won't post his photo on my website and I can guarantee I'll go to my grave having never uttered his cursed name in public. If he did this to be famous, then the appropriate response is to deny him that victory . . . I'm glad to see the idea finally catching on. (Kaczynski, 2015)

More broadly, articles on the benefits of not naming mass shooters have been published by a wide range of media outlets, from *The Wall Street Journal* to *Mother Jones*. The fact that the support for these efforts appears to be bipartisan and cuts across political lines is another promising sign that progress is possible.

Looking ahead, we recommend a classic "carrot and stick" approach to encouraging change. Any media organizations that insist on continuing to give mass shooters the fame they want should face public censure unless and until they change their ways. In the past, most criticism on this subject has been framed in general terms instead of focusing on specific organizations. For example, a recent *Los Angeles Times* article asked "Are the media complicit in mass shootings?" and quoted scholar Jack Levin, who explained "The problem is the way the news gets reported. . . . We make celebrities out of monsters" (Zarembo, 2016). In the future, however, the criticism should become much more pointed, calling out specific organizations for their complicity in this social problem, and identifying exactly who is continuing to make celebrities out of monsters—and exactly when, where, and why.

Past experience shows that this type of negative publicity can have a real impact. For instance, after *Rolling Stone* published a cover photo that glamorized one of the Boston bombers, the magazine faced widespread outrage with serious consequences. The Boston mayor openly criticized the use of the image because it "re-affirms a terrible message that destruction gains fame for killers and their causes" ("Rolling Stone Defends," 2013). A Facebook page was quickly created with a call to "Boycott Rolling Stone Magazine for Their Latest Cover" (2013) and it received "likes" from more than 150,000 people online. And many retailers refused to sell the issue, including 7-Eleven, Rite-Aid, CVS Pharmacy, Walgreens, Stop & Stop, and Tedeschi Food Shops (Cannold, Cuevas, & Sterling, 2013; "Rolling Stone Defends," 2013). Overall, this backlash was in response to a single poor decision by the magazine's editors. If other media organizations repeatedly engage in similarly reckless behavior in the future, the public outcry and financial consequences could grow much stronger.

By contrast, media organizations that adopt policies for more responsible coverage of these offenders should be praised and credited for doing so. Public lists of these organizations should be posted online for everyone to see, with examples of best practices in action. The organizations themselves might also include a small "Don't Name Them, Don't Show Them" banner or caption in their coverage to signal to their

viewers and readers that they are taking a principled stand to deny mass shooters the attention they seek. This would highlight the glaring difference between media organizations that prioritize saving lives and those with other priorities instead.

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