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**“Martyrizing Our Killers:**

**Is The News Media Incentivizing Mass Murder?”**

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"Rolling Stone,

Wanna see my picture on the cover

Stone... wanna buy five copies for my mother

Stone... wanna see my smilin' face,

on the cover of The Rolling Stone"

-Shel Silverstien

Ever since the song “Cover of the Rolling Stone” peaked at number six on the US pop charts in 1971, the lyrics have served as a microcosm of the broad American dream shared by of millions of young, creative-minded people all over the world. The cover of the immensely popular music magazine has long served as an indicator of the most influential and popular people in the world at the time of publication. Legendary musicians, artists, actors, and politicians the likes of the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Barack Obama, and Andy Warhol have all graced the magazine’s influential cover, and several of the photographs used by the magazine have gone on to become iconic representations of the celebrities they depict. Many view the cover as a vessel of cultural iconography, capable of single-handedly defining and depicting the status level of any person lucky or talented enough to qualify for selection.

Perhaps this is why so many people were outraged when they went to pick up a copy of the magazine on August 1st and found the face of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, one of the two brothers responsible for the Boston Marathon bombing on the influential cover. Tsarnaev was featured on the magazine just a few months after two homemade bombs exploded at the finish line of the marathon killing 3, injuring an estimated 264 others, and sending the entire nation into a complete panic. Many Americans were outraged that a person who had helped commit such a horrific crime was being featured on the cover of a magazine in a spot commonly reserved for rock stars and celebrities.

Unfortunately, this type of treatment of mass murderers by the media is not necessarily uncommon. While it may not always be as blatant as the *Rolling Stone* example, it is often the case that mainstream news media outlets have a tendency to oversaturate coverage of national tragedies like mass shootings with a disproportionate focus on the perpetrator, while neglecting coverage of both the victims, and the larger implications to society. This type of coverage is tremendously harmful to our society in that it incentivizes future instances of similar crimes. In his 2007 paper, “Media Spectacle and the “Massacre at Virginia Tech” Douglas Kellner states,

In an arena of intense competition with 24/7 cable TV networks, talk radio, Internet sites and blogs…competition for attention is ever more intense leading the media to go to sensationalistic tabloidized stories which they construct in the forms of media spectacle that attempt to attract maximum audiences for as much time as possible (2007, p.1).

This type of sensationalistic journalism manufactures the idea that all someone has to do in order have their image, their message, and their “sacrifice” conveniently broadcasted across the entire spectrum of media, reaching millions upon millions all over the world, is to murder a large number of innocent people in a public place.

The most prominent problem with this particular paradigm of sensationalized media coverage is that it glorifies and martyrizes mass murderers by plastering their image all over television stations, magazine covers, and newspapers. This also opens the door for questions of whether or not the media coverage incentivizes future crimes. In her article, “On Media and Massacres,” Australian Psychologist Lyn Bender states that, “many experts [agree](http://www.nytimes.com/1982/10/30/us/experts-theorize-about-copycat-syndrome.html) that dramatic, hysterical publicizing of the perpetrator and his crime can feed the so called copycat compulsion” (Bender, 2012). It’s no secret that humans have long held a love affair with fame and publicity. Since the invention of the camera, humans have blatantly admired the depictions of themselves on film. You don’t have to look very hard to see the inherent desire we have to see our own faces on the big screen or in the paper. Just watch the face of a child light up at a sports event when they see themselves on the video scoreboard. Look at all the people lined up at the windows of the Times Square studios of *Good Morning America,* hoping to get a just a second of airtime. Anytime a high school athlete is featured in the local newspaper, the family rushes out to pick up as many copies as they can, but now it is much easer for anybody to be spotlighted by media outlets. These days, all an attention deprived, troubled, young person has to do to be given more attention than they could ever dream of, is go out and shoot up a school or a theater. Their name and face will be displayed all over major media outlets, often next to a graphic depicting the body count of their crime. Analysis will soon follow comparing this killer to the other mass murderers that came before them. This type of body-count journalism perfectly exemplifies the glorification of mass killers, and it would be foolish to assume that the killers don’t fully recognize this. In a video made by the Columbine shooters shortly before the massacre, Eric Harris lifts up a shotgun and remarks, “Isn’t it fun to get the respect that we’re going to deserve?” He was fully aware that the second they had finished their “mission” their message would dominate the news media for the next several months and then live on in infamy forever.

Proponents of the current media paradigm may defend this style of coverage by claiming that news consumers actively seek out as much information as they can about the suspect immediately following heinous crimes like school shootings. By providing this information, journalists may claim that media outlets are simply doing their journalistic duty to seek the truth and report it. They believe they are providing a public service by delivering the information the public seeks, thereby appeasing their “right to know”.

While it is in the journalist’s code of ethics to “seek the truth and report it”, the caveat that immediately follows this standard urges journalists to “minimize harm.” Harm is defined by American political and ethical theorist Joel Feinberg as, “an act or state that sets back the interest of someone else” (Plaisance, 2009, p. 111). Accordingly, I believe it is extremely harmful, according to this definition, for the media to martyrize mass killers in that it sets back the interests of the both the victims of the current crime, and society as a whole, as it poses the threat of similar future crimes. I concede the fact that audiences do have a basic desire to know more about the type of person that would commit such a heinous act, and it could very well be seen as a violation of the public’s “right to know” to deny them of such information, however, I believe that this ‘right’ to information does not always equate to a need for the information. On privacy, Patrick Plaisance states, “Rather than emphasizing a ‘right’ to know, journalists are on more solid ethical ground by assessing whether personal information would serve a ‘need’ to know” (2009, p. 181). Additionally, I believe that the it is possible to inform the public without completely overloading them. He goes on to say that, “Too often, the degree of personal information we see in the media is driven by a sensationalistic attitude about what the public ‘wants’ to know and thus delivering what it wants as a matter of business” (2009, p. 181).

Another major flaw present in this type of “body-count coverage” is the fact that that it provides the mass murderer with a platform from which to broadcast their message or cause. In fact, it gives them the largest, most effective platform known to man. Over the years, journalists and mass communication experts have strived to find the most effective and simple ways to deliver content to the general public. We are now allowing extremists, terrorists, and murderers to use this tool that we have so perfectly developed to broadcast their own personal message or cause.

In his *Wall Street Journal* article titled, “What Mass Killers Want -- And How to Stop Them,” Ari Schulman, the executive editor of *The New Atlantis*, quotes a 2004 study, which defines rampage shootings as a situation in which,

The shooter, almost always a young man, enters an area filled with many people.

He is heavily armed. He may begin by targeting a few specific victims, but he soon moves on to ‘indiscriminate killings where just killing people is the prime aim.’ He typically has no plan for escape and kills himself or is killed by police (Schulman 2013).

This definition raises a glaring question in my mind, why don’t the killers try to escape? The answer that seems most obvious to me is that they know perfectly well that, in their minds, their death will not be in vein. They have full confidence that their sacrifice will lead directly to them attaining the status of a martyr for their cause. This status elevation is brought directly to the public by the hands of the news media as it broadcasts the killer’s message to the masses. Shulman goes on to suggest that, “mass shootings are a kind of theater” stating that,

Mass shooters aim to tell a story through their actions. They create a narrative about how the world has forced them to act, and then must persuade themselves to believe it. The final step is crafting the story for others and telling it through spoken warnings beforehand, taunting words to victims or manifestos created for public airing… The typical consummation of the act in suicide denies the course of justice, giving the shooter ultimate and final control (Schulman, 2013).

The mentality of the American rampage shooter is similar to that of Islamic suicide bombers in that they believe that their cause is larger than the lives of the innocent people they kill, and even larger than their own life. In a 2012 op-ed column in the *New York Times*, Adam Lankford, an assistant professor of criminal justice at the University of Alabama, argued that suicide bombers and rampage shooters, “have far more in common than has been recognized.” Lankford states that through his research, he has found that, “Most suicide terrorists believe they will be honored and celebrated as “martyrs” after their deaths.... Similarly, rampage shooters have often been captivated by the idea that they will become posthumously famous” (Lankford, 2012). I believe that the main reason that these killers believe that they will become famous is that they have seen the way the media has covered past instances of mass, public violence.

Many may argue that by reporting, discussing, and dissecting the message and intent of the type of person who could commit such violent, public crimes provides the public with a better understanding of the mind of these killers. They may argue that this will allow us as a society to be better prepared to predict and stop similar crimes in the future. While this theory seems quite reasonable initially, I would argue that it is flawed in two main ways. First, I believe that the analysis of such information is better left to professional psychologists or criminologists. They would be able to examine the data, preform studies, and document results that can then be shared with the public. I do not see any benefit in broadcasting intentions and causes of the killer immediately following the massacres. Perhaps there may be a common thread, and the recognition of these threads may very well prove to be beneficial to preventing future crimes, however, I believe the time to examine such aspects could be done further down the road. Broadcasting the names, photographs, messages, and beliefs of these murderers so soon, and in such excess does not provide the benefits previously discussed any more effectively than if these things were examined later on, with less frequency. In his *New York Times* article, Ari Schulman outlines his idea of what the media should do to discourage violent crimes. Among the items in his lists are, never publish a shooters propaganda, hide their names and faces, don’t report on biography or speculate on motive, minimize specifics and gory details, restrict photos or videos of the event, decrease saturation, and tell a different story (2013, p 4-5). In addition, I believe that members of our modern society are already well aware of the common signs that have been found amongst most of these murderers and have been for some time. Even when we detect signs of a problem, people rarely take any action. Doing so could lead to a witch-hunt style attack on anyone with a personality disorder.

A few of these concepts lead me to another major flaw in the current media coverage paradigm, harm and disrespect. The way we showcase these criminals is not only blatantly disrespectful and harmful to the victims and their families, but it is also harmful to society as a whole. When we spend so much time on the suspect, we inherently neglect the victims and their families. Also, we neglect all of the broader impacts that crimes like these have on the community. German Enlightenment theorist Immanuel Kant argued that we, as moral agents, are obligated to respect our fellow man in order to respect the broader concept of human dignity (Plaisance, 2009, p. 105). I believe that the way the news media covers mass murder is obscenely insensitive to the people who have had their lives altered at the hands of the person that is now being martyrized. According to the Kantian framework, this coverage disrespects their human dignity. A 2011 study on the effects of media presence in the aftermath of a shooting conducted by Haravuori et al stated that their results, “suggest that being approached by journalists and especially being interviewed had a significant effect on posttraumatic distress in traumatized adolescents” (Haravuori et al, 2011). This evidence proves that the current media model is both harmful and disrespectful to people surrounding the crimes. Furthermore, There is also an innate threat of harm posed to the public because of the reliance they have on the news media. In their essay, “School Shootings, The Media, and Public Fear: Ingredients for a moral panic” Ronald Burns and Charles Crawford state that, “Because the public rarely has enough information to form opinions independently on many issues, people are often at the mercy of the media, not only for information, but also for interpretation” (Burns & Crawford, 2000, p. 12).

The journalists contributing to the sensationalized coverage may argue that many victims or families of victims often don’t want to be featured or spotlighted by the media, and that journalists are respecting their privacy by focusing more on the suspect. I would fully agree to the point that victim’s privacy should be respected. So much so that I have a major problem with the way that some journalists stake out victims houses waiting for a quick quote to fill their stories with. This is a very valid point that I believe needs to be discussed, however, the fact that victims of these tragedies may not want to be featured on news broadcasts certainly does not mean that they want the killer to be so heavily focused on. I believe there are other things that could be focused on that involve neither the saturation of coverage of the suspect or privacy violations of the victims and their families.

Finally, I would like to address the proponents of the current media paradigm who may argue that this argument is just a repackaging of the old accusations that media forms like violent movies, video games, and song lyrics contribute to violent crimes. Such arguments are often dismissed as erroneous or far-fetched, and accordingly, I believe that simply lumping the legitimate effects of news media into this category would be misguided. In an Op-ed column in the *New York Times*, famed movie critic Roger Ebert states, “I’m not sure there is an easy link between movies and gun violence. I think the link is between the violence and the publicity” (Ebert, 2012). While extreme gun violence is often ubiquitous amongst violent video games, movies, and songs, none of these mediums specifically mix such graphic images with the extremely specified messages, real-life murder scenes, and actual victims that are broadcasted ad nauseam by the news media. It allows for an unprecedented level of interaction and emotional human relation with the crime that vastly transcends the fictional violence depicted in movies, songs or video games. It is a drastic oversight to simply categorize the extreme psychological effects the current news media paradigm can have on its viewers with individual situations or anecdotes like the group of parents of students involved in the Columbine shooting who blamed Marylyn Manson for the massacre.

As a Journalism student, and a keen observer of the news coverage of both the Columbine massacre and the recent Aurora Theater shooting, both of which took place in my home state; it is quite obvious to me that the current news media paradigm with regards to the coverage of national tragedies is greatly flawed. How many times must we see the same horrific, tragic events unfold, and then be forced to sit through the same reports, images, and analysis on the 24-hour television news stations? The fact is that these things keep happening year after year, and to me, it is clear that the way the news media promotes, glorifies, and martyrizes the people who commit these senseless acts by saturating and sensationalizing their coverage of the events makes them guilty of accessory to each of these crimes. The media provides the killer with everything he wants, it plays his message on repeat for the rest of the world to hear over and over, they put him on the cover of their pop culture magazines in photographs that make him look just like the rock stars they idolize, they place his name and image in the homes and in the hearts of every citizen of this country until we can’t stand it anymore and we just tune out. We forget the victims, we forget all of their names, but none of us will ever forget the names Dylan Klebold, Eric Harris, James Holmes, Adam Lanza, Seung-Hui Cho, or Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. And you can blame the news media for that.

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