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Paper 4 (Final Draft)

**An open letter to Mr. Jeffery Zucker, President of CNN Worldwide:**

Dear Mr. Zucker,

As the acting president of CNN Worldwide, I am certain that you are quite aware of the catastrophic effects mass shootings have had on our society in the past couple decades. I am also quite aware of the reaction you, and anyone else reading this, likely had to that opening line. Annoyance, exhaustion, and even hopelessness are too often the emotions evoked by this discussion. Mass shootings have provided our society with an issue that has been discussed, dissected, and debated ad nauseam. But amongst all of this back and fourth, I do not believe we have properly gotten to the heart of the problem. Even today, as we approach the one-year anniversary of the massacre that took place at Sandy Hook Elementary, in which a man fatally shot twenty children and seven adults, including his own mother, there are still some perspectives of this issue that I feel have not yet been adequately addressed.

Although you have only recently taken the position you currently hold with CNN, you have a great deal of experience working in the broadcast news industry, and you have witnessed countless horrific tragedies that seemingly only get more disturbing each time they resurface. Mass shootings like those at Sandy Hook, Columbine, West Virginia, and The Century Theater in Aurora Colorado devastated not only the communities in which they happened, but also our Nation as a whole.

In the wake of such tragedies, it is quite common for the public to seek out and assign blame wherever they see fit. Television broadcast news perpetuates this phenomenon by utilizing a format that “mimics television or movie narratives, relying on predictable characters, dramatic events and the emotions of their audiences to tell their stories” (Filak and Pritchard, 2007). The public may initially strive to uncover the identity of the shooter, but once this wave of shock and curiosity fades, we often seek out larger societal causes. We strive to know what exactly led the suspect to commit such an unthinkable act. Over the years, it has become popular to place blame on things like excessive violence in mainstream movies or video games, violent lyrics in popular music, or a lack of traditional family values in our society (Scharrer, Weidman, & Bissell, 2003). Additionally, more and more people have begun to shift their focus to broader political issues, engaging in polarized, bipartisan gun-control debates that lead only to more hatred and disdain amongst our population.

But I am writing to you specifically because I personally believe that while all of these things could potentially play a role in mass killings, there is a common thread amongst these tragedies that is too often over looked. It is something that you and your counterparts in broadcast media have both a direct control over, and also a journalistic obligation to consider.

I believe that when broadcast media outlets like yours saturate the coverage of mass shootings with a disproportionate focus on the killer, it both incentivizes the act, and also martyrizes the murderers by giving them the exposure that they crave. I am therefore urging you, as an individual in a position, which allows you a massive amount of influence, to shift CNN’s current paradigm of the coverage of mass shootings away from the killer, and towards the victims and social impacts surrounding the tragedy. I urge you to limit the amount of coverage your station gives the murderers who commit these horrific acts; to get their faces, their names, and their causes out of our homes; and, in doing so, to stop incentivizing these mass shootings.

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*, outlines his idea of what the media should do to discourage violent crimes. His list includes such suggestions as 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 strive to tell a different story (Schulman, 2013, p 4-5).

As the president of one of the most prominent twenty-four hour news stations in the world, you are one of the few people in our society that have the distinct ability to change the way mass killers are covered by television news. Along with this ability comes a distinct journalistic duty to serve the public as best you can. In accordance with this, you must ask yourself what good you are serving by spotlighting these criminals to such an extent. Who are you catering to with this style of coverage, the public, or the criminal?

You, and your colleagues may be compelled to disregard this argument, claiming that it is only a repackaging of previous claims, which place a majority of the blame for these killings on the entertainment industry. I would caution you against this, however, as I feel that simply lumping the legitimate effects of news media into this category would be greatly misguided. While extreme gun violence is often ubiquitous amongst 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 broadcast in such excess by news media following mass shootings. It allows for an unprecedented level of interaction and emotional human relation with the crime that vastly transcends the fictional violence depicted in other forms of media. It is a drastic oversight to simply categorize the extreme psychological effects the current television news paradigm can have on its viewers with individual situations or anecdotes. 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).

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 cable television. This then opens the door for questions concerning whether or not the media coverage incentivizes future instances of these types of crimes. In her article, *On Media and Massacres*, Australian Psychologist Lyn Bender states, “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. Just watch the face of a child light up at a sports event when they see themselves on the video scoreboard. These days it is much easer for everyday citizens to find the spotlight of broadcast media outlets. Essentially 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 stations like yours perpetuate, and it would be foolish to assume that these killers don’t fully recognize this. In the so-called “Basement Tapes,” a series of videos made by the Columbine shooters in the months leading up to the massacre, an eighteen-year-old Eric Harris lifts up a shotgun and remarks, “Isn’t it fun to get the respect that we’re going to deserve?” It is painfully obvious that both of the boys were 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. Although they would die, their message would not. In the *Time* article, *The Columbine Tapes*, the authors, Nancy Gibbs and Timothy Roche ask, “Why, if their motive was rage at the athletes who taunted them, didn't [Harris and Klebold] take their guns and bombs to the locker room? Because retaliation against specific people was not the point. Because this may have been about celebrity as much as cruelty (Gibbs & Roche 1999).” When researching the Columbine shooting, it quickly becomes apparent that these two young killers wanted desperately to have their message distributed to the masses.

This leads me to another major flaw present in this type of body-count coverage, the fact that that it provides the mass murderer with an extremely effective 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 agenda.

In his *Wall Street Journal* article, Ari Schulman quotes a 2004 study, which defines rampage shootings as a situation in which, “[The shooter] typically has no plan for escape and kills himself or is killed by police” (Schulman 2013). This definition raises a glaring question, 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 vain. 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.

In this way, the mentality of the American rampage shooter is quite 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, your media, has covered past instances of mass, public violence. You are making martyrs out of these killers by allowing their ideals to live on long after their death.

You may argue that by reporting, discussing, and dissecting the message and intent of the type of person who could commit such a violent, public crime, you are providing the public with a better understanding of the mind of these killers. You 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 in order to minimize harm to victims and their families. 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 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, as doing so could lead to a witch-hunt style attack on anyone with a personality disorder.

Finally, I would suggest that you strive to shift this paradigm becauseit is quite simply the morally and ethically responsible thing to do. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued the importance of always striving to consider what we *ought* to do as virtuous moral beings. Even when presented with difficult decisions and pressures, it is imperative to act ethically in the journalistic community. 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” (Kellner, 2007, p.1). As a journalism student, I understand the intense competition and stressful nature of your work environment; however, I also understand the importance of acting ethically in a journalistic sense. Competition and stress are not valid excuses to act unethically, nor are they excuses to stand by idly as the moral fiber of your medium rapidly deteriorates. Under the current paradigm, there is 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). These audiences are at the mercy of the content you choose to display to them. If you show that you are making a commitment to serve the interests of this audience, you will in turn gain the respect of these people. Additionally, being in the position you are in as president of the one of the most prominent cable news outlets, you have the opportunity set a standard so morally admirable and respectable, that your competitors will have no choice but to follow you down this path less followed. This will provide even greater benefit to this public that you are obligated to serve.

It may be said that the news consumers who make up your audience actively seek out as much information as they can about the suspect immediately following heinous crimes like school shootings. You may argue that by providing this information, media outlets are simply doing their journalistic duty to seek the truth and report it; that by delivering the information the public seeks, you are appeasing your audience’s “right to know”. I would remind you, however, that while the fist declaration of the journalist’s code of ethics is to “seek the truth and report it”, the caveat that immediately follows this standard urges the journalist 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, when considering this definition, for the media to martyrize mass killers and incentivize their crimes 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 so-called ‘*right*’ to information does not always equate to a *need* for information. Patrick Plaisance, a media ethics professor at Colorado State University, 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” (Plaisance, 2009, p. 181). Additionally, I believe that it is possible to inform the public without completely overloading them. Plaisance 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” (Plaisance, 2009, p. 181).

As both 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 horrifically tragic events unfold, only to then be fed the same sensationalized reports, images, and analysis on the Twenty-four hour television news stations? How much longer must we be provided only with over-saturated and sensationalized coverage of these murderers in the wake of mass shootings?

The fact is, these tragedies keep happening year after year, and to me, it is quite evident that the coverage provided by news media outlets, like yours, serves only to promote, glorify, and martyrize the people who commit these senseless acts. I am, therefore, compelled to wonder how this makes you and your colleagues anything short of guilty of accessory to these horrific crimes? You provide the killer with everything he wants, you play his message on repeat for the rest of the world to hear over and over long after he is dead, you place his face and his name 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, or Adam Lanza. And as things currently stand, you can blame yourself for that.

Mr. Zucker, you alone have the power, the influence, and the social responsibility to change the way these killers are glorified. I cannot guarantee that your action will completely stop mass shootings. It would be naïve to believe that it would. Nor can I promise that you will see any appreciable financial gain from such a change. But I can say with confidence that by shifting your coverage away from the perpetrator, you would be eliminating one major incentive for any future mass killer, and if that saves even one life, would it not then be completely justified?

Sincerely,

Michael Clements,

Journalism & Technical Communications Major, Colorado State University

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