

Media Coverage of Mass Murders

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees that the freedom of the press may not be abridged. Some stories in the press, however, may cause great harm. It has been argued, for example, that media coverage of the perpetrators of mass killings may instigate copycat killings.

When investigators examined the belongings of Adam Lanza, who killed 20 children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School, they discovered that he had been obsessed with the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School. According to the report released by the investigators, Lanza had “hundreds of documents, images, videos pertaining to the Columbine H.S. massacre.”¹

Lanza was not the only mass killer interested in Columbine. Seung-Hui Cho, who killed 32 people at Virginia Tech University, compared himself to the Columbine killers. Professor Ralph W. Larkin of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York studied school rampages in the eight years following Columbine. He found that eight out of 12 shooters “directly referred to Columbine.” Larkin also found that prior to Columbine, the only country other than the U.S. to experience a rampage shooting at a school was Canada. Since Columbine, there have been mass shootings at several schools around the world. Six of 11 shooters outside the U.S. also specifically referred to Columbine.²

Recently, *Rolling Stone* magazine angered many readers when it featured Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev on its cover in a way that some people thought made him look glamorous. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino wrote a letter to *Rolling Stone's* publisher saying that the cover sends a “terrible message that destruction gains fame for killers and their ‘causes.’”³

Study questions:

1. Should the freedom of the press to cover mass killings be protected if it can be shown that such coverage may lead to more killings?
2. Even if the media are legally permitted to publish stories about mass murders, what are their moral obligations with regards to how they report on these sorts of stories?
3. If it turned out to be the case that media coverage of mass killings did not cause copycat killings, are certain kinds of press coverage of mass killers nevertheless morally wrong? Should magazines be legally allowed to “glamorize” mass murderers?

¹<http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-anza-columbine-20131127,0,5187796.story#ixzz2qFZU36P8>

² *ibid.*

³<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/07/17/dzhokhar-tsarnaev-boston-marathon-bombing-rolling-stone/2523891/>

