Abstract:

This paper explores media coverage of shootings, especially school shootings, which often concentrates on the shooter making him the center of the story. Many shooters prepare personal news releases, manifestos and videos before they murder others, to be distributed to the public via the media after their crime. There has been growing concern that this encourages copycats and other potential shooters to duplicate the same behavior in hopes of attaining the same attention.

In the world of professional journalism there is an ethical debate as to whether the media has become an accomplice in these shootings by providing the shooter with a built in audience and 24/7 coverage of their actions, therefore provoking the copycat effect.

There I explore the copycat effect from an historical and contemporary perspective and looks at the facts, origins and concerns regarding shootings in contemporary America. It considers what role the media plays in these events and what journalistic policies, if any, can be implemented to reduce the copycat effect.

DOES MASS MEDIA ENCOURAGE COPYCAT CRIMES AND FAME? WHAT IS JOURNALISM'S ROLE? DO WE NEED AN ETHICAL POLICY?

Shannon Devereaux Sanford

Random public shootings, especially school shootings, in the United States have increased in the past years since the massacre shooting by two classmates at Columbine High School in Colorado which killed 13 people, wounded 21 and ended with the suicide of the shooters. When these incidents happen, they receive attention from society and from the mass media. They are habitually followed by news outlets spending weeks discussing the shooter's

life and a probable motive. Although motives vary, and over half of the shooters had more than one motive, close to a quarter of the shooters examined in a study were looking for attention and recognition for their actions as a way of forcing others to take notice of them. A major issue of concern is that the continual, non-stop media coverage the shooter gets may also encourage 'copycat' shooters who desire to obtain the same public attention.

Empirical research into mass shootings points to four probable contributing causes: mental illness, a culture of violence, access to weapons and social or family distress. There are both similarities and differences among the perpetrators and although most had no history of criminal behavior before the attack, 59% demonstrated interest in violence through video games, movies, books, or other media. Media fame alone may not be enough of a reason to incite a shooting; however our culture serves as a general backdrop for school shooting incidents, even if direct causality has not been established. There is a connection between mass media and social problems. Social scientists have examined the media framing of school shooting incidents, recognizing that media coverage plays a fundamental role in the public opinion of school shootings as a social problem.

Copycat killing may be a force behind the spread of school shooting in the past 10 years. Media driven copycat behavior has been well-documented in suicides. This paper looks at the history and empirical research regarding suicides and copycat behavior while chapter two looks at media's role and its

connection between copycat suicides and mass shootings. Suicide with hostile intent includes approaches of self-killing by methods that can harm others, which generally follows a spree-killing raid. This media attention could be sparking copycat crimes as it feeds the desire to be acknowledged hence triggering the copycat effect, resulting in another mass shooting. In a recent thwarted school shooting attempt, a teenager admitted to idolizing and studying the actions of the shooters at Columbine High School and wanting to copy them, according to a statement of probable cause.

While the media is not deliberately encouraging or initiating this result, it has been identified as an accomplice by many including journalist Dave Cullen, who has studied mass shootings and is the author of *Columbine*, a book about the school shooting in Colorado in 1999. "I think we in the media have to look at our own role in this," Cullen said. "Because the fact that we cover these things, we put them on stage, we make -- you can call him hero, anti-hero, something -- we give them a starring role in this."

Media attention and fame are no longer reserved for those who have achieved a meaningful accomplishment: we have blurred the lines. It has become difficult to distinguish the smiling face of a celebrity promoting a movie, a proud doctor with a life-saving medical breakthrough or a killer grinning at us on the evening news, the internet or the front page of a major publication. There is little discriminating difference as to who is a celebrity and who is a killer; all have been validated with the same journalistic reward of

fame. There is no question that journalism plays an essential role in society. However, there needs to be a balance between what the public needs to know and public safety, and we need to find that balance without compromising quality journalism and reporting. This debate between how much the public needs to know and accurate reporting is discussed later in this paper. Many in this debate acknowledge that our massive media industry influences society and that journalism should be practiced in a responsible way that does not encourage crime.

Perhaps this motive of recognition and fame could be eliminated, or at the very least reduced, if journalists and public officials adopt a new policy that avoids using the gunman's name or photo. Chapter four in the following position paper will examine the reward of media attention as a motive for shooters and will advocate for a journalistic ethical policy which would disallow the media from publicizing the personal name of a shooter, in order to eliminate the incentive of fame as one of the possible motivations to commit these acts

Suicide and The Copycat Effect

Copycat behavior, often called The Copycat Effect, is not a new phenomenon. The original phrase was called 'The Werther Effect' and was studied by David P. Phillips, a sociologist at the University of California at San

Diego, in 1974. The name refers to a popular novel written in 1774, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* ,by Johann Wofgang von Goethe. In the novel Werther kills himself when he realizes the woman he loves is in love with someone else. After the novel was published a number of young men committed 'copycat' suicide while dressed in the same colorful combination of clothes as the novel's main character Werther wore when he killed himself and sitting at their desk with an open copy of the book, just the way the character was found dead in the novel. Being that the distinctive evidence made it clear that the book incited suicides by young men mimicking the main character, the book was then banned in Italy, Germany and Denmark in order to prevent any further copycat suicides.

The Werther effect, or copycat suicide, is an emulation of another suicide that the person knows about either from local knowledge or from the description of the original suicide, viewed on television or in other media. Phillips spent a great deal of time researching this phenomenon by conducting formal studies which found that copycat crimes are instigated by viewing or reading about suicides or crimes, then learning about the perpetrator's character, motives and actions which leads to mimicking them. Dr. Phillips also found that there was a significant rise in suicides after highly publicized cases and it was the greatest among teen-agers, because teens are highly imitative, influenced by fads and fashions in general and hearing about a suicide seems to make those who are vulnerable feel they have permission to do it. French sociologist Emile Durkheim recognized in 1897 that imitation

may marginally affect suicide, though he believed that it only hastened a suicide that would have occurred regardless, which further acknowledges that vulnerability may need to be present to trigger the copycat effect.

Evidence of the significant impact of media coverage on suicide continues to be supported with research consistently finding a strong relationship between reports of suicide in newspapers or on television and subsequent increases in the suicide rate. The existence of suicide contagion should no longer be questioned with teen copycat suicides. There is ample evidence from the literature on suicide clusters and the impact of the media to support the argument that suicide is contagious. One of the most publicized cases, The Bergenfield Four, became well-known when four teenagers in suburban Bergen County, New Jersey, made a suicide pact, then purposely died of carbon monoxide poisoning, leaving a note saying they wanted to be buried together. Suicides pacts among teenagers then became popular in the United States among those who were then categorized as burnout kids. Plano Texas also became known for its staggering number of suicides in 1982 when the teen suicide rate was the second highest in the nation with 28 suicides reported among teens. A local family therapist acknowledged that publicity played a part in these suicides after he worked with a group of local teens who said “if the first suicide hadn’t occurred the others wouldn’t have either.”

Teenagers are more vulnerable to the copycat effect than other groups possibly because of teenage peer pressure, parental arguments and other

general teen angst. While we cannot attribute every teen suicide to one specific motive, social learning plays a large part as some teens may be more susceptible to suggestion and this can trigger a copycat suicide brought out in part by exposure to another suicide, then imitating that behavior. When this occurs in groups they are categorized as “clusters of suicides,” and occur mostly among teens and younger adults. Suicide clusters are defined by larger groups that spread through a community, a school system or nationally if the suicide was highly publicized or committed by someone with celebrity status. They account for approximately one to five percent of all suicides of that age group.

There are different types of suicide clusters: point clusters and mass clusters. Point clusters are local and occur in confined geographical areas or closed institutions such as hospitals, schools or the military and could be the result of social or other types of behavioral contagion. Mass clusters are defined by a more widespread area and are the result of media reporting or a depiction of suicide. Mass clusters are usually found when there is a high-profile or celebrity suicide. Analyses have shown that national suicide rates rise immediately after the suicides of entertainment celebrities, and to lesser extent political figures. A nationally publicized suicide increases the suicide rate over the following month by about two percent on average, an additional fifty-eight cases, and about seven percent among teen-agers. This ‘social contagion’ occurs when members of a group adapt the way they think and behave, to be more like other members of that group. Contagion can be spread by personal

communication, through various forms of media, or with the widespread influence of the internet.

These teenage suicide clusters continued throughout suburban America in the 1980s and beyond, with a rash of exposed clusters in Minnesota, Massachusetts, Wyoming, Idaho and Westchester, New York. After the fifth suicide from the small high school in Mankato, Minnesota, police and high school officials refused to talk about it publically saying that they "believed that publicity might prompt other suicides."

There is enough evidence on suicide clusters and the impact of the media to support the contention that suicide is "contagious" and considerable evidence that suicide stories in the mass media are followed by a significant increase in the number of suicides showing the copycat effect of suicide. In 1999 the Surgeon General's report said that there was evidence to support that suicide can be facilitated in vulnerable teens by exposure to real or fictional accounts of suicide. However, in a later study Steven Stack found that though there is a strong association between media coverage of suicide and heightened suicidal behavior, the research on the role of the media in copycat suicides had inconsistencies and concluded that, "summaries of the research have not produced objective, quantified statistical data to support their subjective positions."

The suicide copycat effect doesn't just happen among teens. Research suggests that the celebrity stories that most affect the national suicide rate are

those concerning entertainers and political officials in all different age groups. In a study, “The Werther Effect of Two Celebrity Suicides: an Entertainer and a Politician” the authors looked at the increased suicides in Korea and examined if extensive media exposure of an entertainer or politician’s suicide induces copycat behavior, generating more suicides. They found that the risk of suicide deaths rose markedly after both types of celebrity suicides (entertainer and politician) were publicized. They also determined that the use of the same suicide method was a prominent risk factor after both celebrity suicides. The difference was that the copycat effect lasted longer for the entertainer at six weeks than for the politician which was four weeks. Their results confirm the presence of copied suicide behaviors from the effect of media reports in these two types of celebrity stories. Findings based on the impact of entertainment and political celebrities’ suicides on real world suicide were significantly more likely to report an imitative effect. In a comprehensive review of the suicide suggestion literature, Stack estimates that about one-third of suicide cases in the United States involve suicidal behavior following the distribution of a suicidal model in the media. The more publicized and famous the person is who commits suicide, the more imitation suicides occur. A well-documented copycat suicide cluster was incited by the death of the movie star Marilyn Monroe when during the month of her suicide in August, 1962, there were an additional 303 suicides, an increase of 12% suggesting that a vulnerable suicidal person may reason, “If a Marilyn Monroe with all her fame and fortune cannot endure life, why should I?”

Shootings and The Copycat Effect

The same copycat effect that has been found to exist in suicides may be one of the reasons behind the spread of school, and other shootings, in the United States in the past years. There are now workplace shootings, mass killings and random shootings in various populated areas such as movie theaters, malls and schools and many of these shootings happen in clusters, suggesting that the copycat effect is spreading into different places and types of crimes and has crossed over into all forms of observed media violence acted out in many different settings.

In the world of studying copycat crimes, school shootings began replacing the copycat suicide pacts in the 1990s. They seemed to grow in numbers, especially as the media concentrated on reporting and comparing the male shooters, inadvertently glorifying them. This paved the way for those looking to garner the same wide-spread media attention and commit a similar shooting crime in order to obtain it.

Some school shootings, as in the one in Moses Lake, Washington, in 1996, can be directly linked to the Werther effect and also set the pattern for what followed in the coming years: a student, not an outsider, killing other students and teachers. The 14-year-old shooter in Moses Lake killed two classmates and injured others as he recited a line from *Rage,* a Stephen King novel. When the police visited his home they found the book by his bedside

open to the page where the shooter in the story went to his class and killed students, repeating this same line from the novel that the shooter did. Stephen King has said that 'he regretted publishing this book given its connection to this and other school shootings' and then requested the book be taken out of print. The shooting in Moses Lake became a national model for future school rampages, starting a week later in Palo Alto, California, and continued for years to follow. In one alarming high school shooting that took place in 1997 in Kentucky and killed three students and injured five more, the police found a copy of Stephen King's book *Rage* in the killer's locker after the attack.

Suicide with hostile intent is when the person who commits suicide first kills other people, which is often the case in many mass shootings. In the instances of suicide with hostile intent, revenge is taken by the shooter in order to get a social reaction, typically via the media in modern times, against those individuals who the public believes have caused his suicide. The intention is to express rage toward those who are seen as the source of the shooter's misery and bring attention to his anger, showing there is a link between aggressiveness, suicidal thoughts and intent to gain revenge. Recent episodes of school shootings, in which the perpetrator recorded a message saying revenge was the reason for the planned attack and then disseminated it through the Internet, indicates that school shooting perpetrators want people to understand their reasons. However, in some cases the shooter left a message that was not clear, leaving doubt as to their motive.

After the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999, a study investigating imitative behaviors found strong evidence of a copycat effect. In the four weeks immediately after the Columbine incident, up to 350 students were arrested in the United States on charges of having raised some kind of threat against a school. Columbine is still a key ingredient in this subculture of shooters as they identify with the Columbine killers and have "fan attachment" learning all they can from websites devoted to them and copying their actions from videos shooters leave behind. With each school shooting, fans gain notoriety. Some copycat crimes have an element of competition where the perpetrator feels a need to outdo the original offender's offense by committing a similar crime, only larger or more intensified. Shootings are mostly committed by young males.

Studies of school shootings have concluded that there is no way to predict a shooter, and that no reliable profile of a shooter exists. Mimicking the killing behavior of another has been proposed as a motive in the spreading of school shooting in recent years, and there is some evidence of this when copycat crimes were reported following violent episodes that received mass coverage in the media, or when the perpetrator copies the exact behavior of a previous shooter. As a society we focus on mass homicide shooting incidents, wanting to identify the reason, but investigators do not always know the motive of the perpetrator.

Although massacre type shootings get more media attention, many incidents are not mass random shootings: they are targeted shootings and the motive is easily identifiable as drug related, gang related or a personal dispute, not copycat crimes. These targeted shootings don't receive the same kind of media attention that infrequent mass homicide shootings do. In the years between 1990 and 2012, 215 fatal school shooting incidents resulted in 363 deaths and only 25 of these (11.6%) were "random" or "rampage" shootings, resulting in 135 deaths. Despite the high amount of media attention massacre types of school shootings receive; they are still rare events - only about 1 in 2,000,000 school-age youth will die from homicide at school each year. However, when they do happen, they have a major impact on the community and there are concerns about the chance of sensational publicity causing an increase in similar behavior.

Overview of The Media's Role

As the details continued to emerge about the deadly shooting at Virginia Tech University in April 2007, Fox News reported 1.8 million viewers

watching the breaking story unfold, CNN reported 1.4 million viewers and MSNBC.com reported 108.8 million website page views, all looking for information about the largest mass school shooting this country had then ever witnessed. Mass shootings, especially school shootings involving children, generate high levels of media coverage and are now habitually followed by the typical media frenzy that fills up TV and Internet screens worldwide (Muschert, 2009). The 24-hour media coverage and the resulting news conversation about the scene of the shooting, the shooter and his motives often seem endless in an attempt to understand the social implications and deeper meaning of such events.

This is expected and understandable. Professional journalism's basic tenets are vital to society and the job of the news media is to be the carriers of those facts to the public. Society relies on the profession to assemble and verify facts of a situation then present the details so that people can learn about events and how it affects each one's life individually. Journalism creates a map for citizens to be able to navigate society.

Media coverage of each shooting is intense, thus becoming the nation's most watched and talked about tragedy for days, weeks and months, and the audience's understanding of these issues is affected by the media's portrayal of them. This feverish style of news coverage that happens when a breaking tragedy occurs has forced news outlets to compete for the most memorable bit of information, which has for many become a modern form of

entertainment. On-air conversations turn into debates by experts on crime, psychology, gun control and other related topics. The shooter is identified with his picture being shown on many media outlets while the media discusses his motives and his life. This practice was clearly demonstrated when *Rolling Stone Magazine* published a stylish cover photograph of one of the Boston bombers which provoked a storm of fury from angry Americans, saying that he was portrayed like an adored rock star rather than a killer. The mechanics of contemporary media practices have made fame the dominant currency of modern social capital, as the shooter is given popular, personalized media attention. With the constant publicizing of the shooter's name and photo in media discussions, the more intense and significant the news surrounding the crime becomes, leading to its higher importance in media coveted air time, thus providing more incentive for the copycat effect to thrive. Through visual media broadcasts, an 'allegedly alienated' individual can commit a crime in order to rise above his station in life and attain fame.

As is established in copycat suicides, the increase in suicides is proportional to the amount of media coverage given and there are similarities between suicide and mass shootings suggesting that the media does play a role in school shootings. This is suicide that also deliberately injures others first, known as suicide with hostile intent, and is a way of self-killing that follows the killing of others. This is seen in many of these shootings as most shooters commit suicide. This form of suicide is more than a self-killing; it is often a massacre and for that reason covered by the media with spotlight intensity

which could be sparking copycat crimes. There was a sudden jump in school violence after Columbine in 1999, when news outlets reported it as a pattern with a typical profile of a young, white male, boy-next-door student, which changed the look of school shootings. An interesting fact in looking at the media and the copycat effect is that after the 9/11 terrorists attacks, there was a media moratorium on reporting school and workplace shooting rampages as the media was focused on terrorism and war. At that time, 2001 – 2004, the number of school shooting incidents dropped slightly, suggesting the reduced amount of press focusing on them resulted in fewer copycat shootings.

Messages from mass media have a significant effect on peoples' fear and worry about crime, though generally crime has not risen in the United States. The violent crime rate rose in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, but then fell sharply in the 1990s and 2000s in the nation as a whole. There is some evidence that copycat crime works mostly by influencing criminals' choices of crime techniques rather than by motivating people who never had any intention to commit a criminal act. Thus, according to this study by Richard Lawrence and David Mueller the media only influences those who already have committed a criminal act, not necessarily those who are not criminals.

Up to the year 2012, more school shootings have occurred in the United States than all other countries combined. Columbine was a highly reported media event, and in the four weeks following Columbine there were up to 350 students arrested because of their threats against schools and the

copycat effect could be behind these incidents. There were copycat incidents directly connected to Columbine such as the incident in Conyers, Ga. where a student opened fire exactly one month to the day after the Columbine shooting, making a statement about how he was "going to do it differently and saying how cool the Columbine shooting was." Similar school shootings that garnered mass media attention only started happening in other countries on any regular basis at the end of the 1990s when international attention was paid to the Columbine shooters and future perpetrators wanted to continue their actions once they were aware of the global media attention the Columbine shooters received.

There is no research that has identified traits and characteristics that can reliably distinguish school shooters from other students. The role of journalism is to report these and all events in a way so that people can understand the issues at hand, filling in the gaps when the facts don't tell all. However, regardless of the time the media spends reviewing the shooters past and attempting to identify clues after a violent shooting has happened, even the signs that appear to help interpret past events should not be taken as predictors of similar events in the future. The mass media can often fill the gap with facts that are more profit motivated which can lead to perceptions of public problems that are oversimplified and distorted, therefore undermining what should be a factual and somber analysis. This, in part, stems from ways in which those in the public sphere, such as journalists and politicians, intervene in and extend public debates within the media atmosphere that

surrounds these incidents. The media sets the discussion agenda, which often reflects society's ongoing thoughts, values and conflicts while also satisfying the public's right to know.

Commentators, journalists and politicians can often be heard arguing over the single cause of mass shootings but empirical research shows that it is a confluence of factors, not any one particular reason. Though school shootings are extensively covered in the media, the information available in news reports is not necessarily complete, accurate, or balanced, leading to a number of widespread but wrong impressions such as the assumption that school violence is an epidemic and violent video games are to blame. The effects of violence that are depicted in our culture through video games and movies can trigger aggressive behavior in a laboratory setting, but whether this explains a reason for mass shootings is still indefinite, and cannot be used with certainty to explain shooting violence no matter how sure anyone who talks about it in the media believes they are. Some shooters admit that violent media played a role in their behavior. In a CNN (2013) interview with a young man who killed his parents the shooter said that "Violent video games were an incentive and had an impact on me," he also said that 'Columbine killers were my heroes' (CNN, 2013).

The focus on other school shooting incidents and the individual shooters, along with a high interest in other general publicized acts of violence, is a trait that has been exhibited by many shooters. The shooter may declare

his admiration for those who committed these acts, criticize them for their incompetence for not killing enough people or openly expressing a desire to commit a similar act possibly to attain a perceived "justice." These all indicate the copycat effect.

Media's Indirect Role

The media plays a fundamental role in the public's perception of the situation and how the events unfold. Sometimes the news story is a larger event than the actual event itself. While the reporting of an event makes it socially significant, it can also create a larger societal perception of a problem that does not yet exist. The perception of risk and or danger to the public can be unrelated to the event itself, and more from the visibility given to the incident by journalists and the media. The more journalists talk about the incident and look for similar stories on which to report, the more it gives the impression of a growing problem whether in fact there actually is one or not. We therefore have an increase of violence that we experience uniquely via the media, which has the power to influence individuals to communicate about the violence as they experience it vicariously as victims or victimizers. This makes it more real and important than it would be without media depiction. This kind of media exaggerates violent crime and incites widespread and irrational fears about the potential for victimization. While reporting on school shootings are a

high priority in the media, they are still rare events with only about 1 in 2,000,000 students' deaths each year from homicide at school.

What is sometimes reported as an epidemic, often does not reach epidemic proportions, but the reporting of it has raised fear in the population (Coleman, 2004). Information is disseminated across a variety of reporting styles, which in turn is received and processed differently among news consumers. This effect, called mediatization, refers to society's dependency on the media in constructing our understanding of what is reality and logic. Mediatization illustrates society's reliance on the media in creating our understanding of what we know, and how we view it in our daily world. The way a shooting or any dramatic event is depicted in the media reporting also contributes to mediatization. The media's role in these events is central as the incident becomes a highly mediatized happening that captures the public's attention on an ongoing basis. The increased attention on media events leads to the events taking on 'a life of their own,' and essentially what is presented in the media can become more real than the real-life events. This effect can intensify the perpetrator's role in the eyes of the public as the media draws attention to him and his impact on society, making his actions and personal life appear to have more societal influence and be more important than it actually is. This importance can be a desirable factor in the copycat effect.

News companies are businesses and have a stake in how the news is delivered and consumed by their customers. As a business they have the

ability to dictate what stories are considered newsworthy and once a story is deemed newsworthy the focus is then on making sure that the audience's attention is kept on the story, in order to keep ratings up. Media framing is the way in which information is presented to its audiences (Muschert, 2009) and the way in which the news is framed can keep the audience more engrossed. Framing organizes the structure into social meanings, helping to make sense of complex information which suggests that how something is presented to an audience influences the choices people make. Framing is a quality of communication that leads viewers and readers to accept one meaning over another (Twente, 2012). Thus the media can determine reality by how much attention they pay to any particular issue, as in turn people rely most on information that is continuously made accessible to them in the news media (Lecheler, & Vreese, 2013).

News framing can influence the public's perceived reality by changing the frames of the news coverage during an event to focus on different features and phases of a particular news story that the media selects as important. Frames stress certain aspects of reality and push others into the background, as they have a selective function making a particular approach to a story, like a school shooting or any sensationalized crime, more newsworthy by emphasizing its different aspects. This can keep the story alive with new content so that the high ratings continue. Journalists rely on media frames to decide what to include in a story and what to leave out. What is left in will be the most sensational, producing the highest viewer and or reader ratings and

then shown repeatedly, making the most sensational story also become the most significant or newsworthy to the public.

Journalism is a profit industry and the need to sensationalize the news and maintain an ethical standard in the business can be conflicting. In journalism the motto is 'if it bleeds it leads:' the worse the news is, the more important it is. Bad news sells and good news doesn't. The more sensational or unpleasant the news, the better the ratings are, which in turn equals more revenue. News is a business where death and disaster sell. The news industry is a business that strives to make daily events interesting and relevant while keeping the audience continually engaged and it does not look to be an accomplice in copycat crimes or any crime, although this may unintentionally be happening.

Continually broadcasting disaster situations holds the attention of the public, as they are eye-catching even as news stories and many people have come to accept this as normal. Journalism routinely overemphasizes the negative and downplays the positive, for reasons previously stated. It may be that by devoting this continual, non-stop coverage to shooting events as a business model, the news media encourages copycat mass shootings, which would be an unfortunate but nonetheless a probable side-effect of the business. There is a tendency to copy others who are being seen as 'successful' because they are getting more attention and more air time. The agenda setting theory of media shows that what the media concentrates on is what becomes

the news and ultimately what we see and hear, as we rely on media professionals to tell us what is important in the dissemination of the news. The constant airing of the same story suggests that there is something worthy here, making it more attractive for people to copy inappropriate actions, as long as they are associated with otherwise prestigious or successful result. If viewing the news cultivates perceptions of social reality, then it is possible that exposure to mass media breeds a tendency to value fame for its own sake.

The shootings at Columbine High School have acquired more public attention and interest because of the many social aspects it brings attention to and its impact on society. The initial focus of the media coverage was about the events that happened at Columbine, but soon the public was more interested in the societal impact of this event, and the news coverage reflected that. School shootings and other violent incidents that receive such intense media attention can generate threats of copycat behavior which is common after a shooting has occurred, but this recent form of adolescent violence is in fact quite rare. Adolescent violence, especially homicides, have decreased since l993, though that fact has been overlooked by the understandable distress over school shootings because they are sudden, shocking and scary to everyone, consequently getting more attention than the less startling acts of violence that happen in schools every week.

Media's Direct Role

The link to shootings, especially school shootings, and the media's participation is more direct when a shooter purposely uses a media outlet as their communication instrument to get a personalized message out with the assistance and wide-reaching influence of the mass media. While the media functions as tools of the tragedy, the tools are used by the killers themselves as much as by professional broadcasters. In the shooters' quest for notoriety, media broadcasters are as much a channel to air the shooter's angry feelings as are his victims. Some of these shooters post their message online, others send it to media outlets directly or leave their message at the scene of their crime to ensure their views are publicly aired, their identity recognized and their feelings documented. Regardless of which way they get it out there, the media assists the perpetrator when they air the shooters' self-produced videos or read the manifesto the shooter left behind. Whether it is aired with the killer directly talking to the public or by the media telling us about the killer, their direct message can have a perverse effect in our participatory culture. Media therefore enables, albeit sometimes inadvertently, the airing of the shooters' measured media message allowing access to the shooters' personal doctrine and interpretation of their premeditated reasoning for killing.

These videos made by the killer are those which show them expressing their message for proof of the planning of their act, and are broadcast repeatedly by various media outlets. The killer is using the traditional media

through self-staged performances in the midst of what by then has become a media event, so he can get his message out to the world with the help of the media. These presentations produce audio-visual social identities allowing the shooter to premeditatedly attract an audience for their anger and feelings in a strategy they know will give them a limelight appearance in their terms.

In Nathalie Paton's (2012) study and content analysis of the perpetrators' videos she looked at the significance behind the authors' messages, noting that the "killers do not seem to produce but rather reproduce pre-existing textual, visual and sound references, thus substantializing the copycat hypothesis… as they weave, intentionally or not, threads associating them to the phenomenon" (p. 9).

Different forms of media, primarily the Internet, also play a role in "hosting future killers" by providing fan based websites that allow prospective shooters to be a fan of previous school shooters and learn more about their actions and motives. Many have been known to participate in online shooter fan-based forums or to post deadly warnings on their personal profiles which raises the question as to whether they are hosting 'future killers' by providing access to ongoing discussions about premeditation and why school shootings are so attractive to them. Columbine is a key ingredient in this form of online violence chat culture that translates into fan attachment subculture, as the shooters there emerge as the most famous and most mimicked. Here they acknowledge that shooters have become famous, some encouraging it and

others not so much as one fan stated that it is “not a good famous to be a famous murderer.”

Rather than a top-down effect, implying that the media leaves imprints on young minds, the mediums themselves are at fault especially unregulated forms of media like the Internet. Some offenders can easily take advantage of this hands-on unregulated media to frame their acts via self-produced videos which gets their message directly out to their intended audience not needing the help of mainstream media. When shooters record their message on a video and disseminate it to the public via the Internet before the shootings or expect it to be viewed after the shootings, it indicates a desire that is supported by a recurring pattern in which the shooter believes his behavior is justified. It is easy to see why shooters use these direct media links as it gives them access to an audience, but it is also easy to see how many media outlets are accomplices to the shooters agenda and should be studied as an obvious link to copycat shootings.

Debates and Role of Journalism Ethics

The debate surrounding media's role and copycat crimes is ongoing. It centers on whether journalism has an ethical responsibility as an accomplice when crimes are committed if it seems that the perpetrator learned about a similar crime from the media's coverage, then copied it to get comparable media attention, or as those who oppose that position point out regardless of what one views in the media the only responsibility journalism has is to report the news fully and accurately as it happens. While there is much discussion over this, there are also inconsistent findings when it comes to copycat crimes and shootings. The preponderance of research and evidence is concentrated on how media coverage of suicides incites copycat suicides. There is consistent and reliable evidence to suggest an association does exist between media reporting of nonfictional suicides and imitative suicide actions and there are similarities in copycat shootings including, but not limited to, the fact that most shooters do commit suicide directly after shooting others.

The debate of how much responsibility journalism has was specifically prominent in 2007 when the Virginia Tech shooter sent a package to NBC News before he shot 33 fellow students and staff members, with the intention of having the network broadcast the contents of his package which contained about 1800 words of text, several home videos and 43 photos of him with a gun. NBC did air the videos saying they were only aired after careful consideration, however there was much controversy and outrage by community members both here in the United States and in Canada where two out of the three major networks also aired the videos stating that it was not their job to

make a judgment whether it was bad or good: rather it was their job to present newsworthy material. The one major Canadian network that did not air the tapes said they did not want to broadcast any coverage that could be interpreted as glorifying the act of violence that had been committed.

This brings attention to the fact that the debate also centers on how much social responsibility journalists, news networks and publishers have to society and what effects their actions can have individually and societally. Journalism has the power to make events visible to the public determining the social significance of a story since stories, events and videos that are not reported or aired have little or no impact as it is only in the airing or telling of an event that gives it any meaning. Most people decide what issues are important after they have learned about them from the media, as the media is the communal source of world news. The overall influence and power that the media has in its distribution of information, ideas and actions can at times be a challenge to societal ethics.

On one side of the debate it is argued that journalists have a job to report the news as it is happening and the statements, pictures, and videos left behind by a shooter are an essential part of the story. These bits of valuable information may help to clarify the story and explain the reasons behind the shooter's actions, which the public regularly wants to know. These upsetting events are such big news and many feel that any withholding of information is not a justifiable or discretionary choice for the profession of

journalism and that showing the shooters' videos are important because it allows the public to evaluate the situation for their safety. Others also said they wanted to be aware of the work of their local police, who often receive a tip days before a shooting.

In opposition, these shootings often become a highly visual media spectacle played out on a large stage that follows the 'shooter's script' and not necessarily that of responsible journalism. This media display is usually the perpetrators' self-directed attempt to successfully achieve the sought after publicity for his message and should not be aired to satisfy his post-mortem request.

Although the profession of journalism has begun to pay more attention to its role in this scenario, which can be viewed as an indication of increased ethical examination, it is hard to hold journalists or the profession wholly accountable. With the Internet and other forms of self-publishing, journalism now cannot always prevent nor have a say in whether the shooter's message goes public. Shooters looking for attention have learned to bypass the mainstream media and go right to the Internet to self-publish their videos and manifestos. In 1999 when the Columbine shooters wanted their message out to the public they left tapes behind in hope that the media would air them, in 2007 the Virginia Tech shooter sent his message directly to a major network to bypass the police or any interference and in 2008 the shooters in a similar incident in Finland put their message on the Internet before they did the

shooting bypassing both the police and the media, getting their message directly to the public.

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) has a Code of Ethics which is a voluntarily guide for ethical behavior and decision making. One of the largest ethical challenges in journalism is reporting on a crisis or disaster. According to the SPJ (spj.org) journalists should remember the following principles:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort.
- Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention.
- Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
- Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

While it is ideal to be fair-minded and ethically conscious as the guidelines above suggest, professionally ethical considerations in journalism have traditionally been based on the deontological idea that it is the basic duty of journalism to disseminate information as effectively and truthfully as possible with not much concern or responsibility for the unseen consequences. However, the publicity-seeking behavior of shootings has become a cause for concern since it is now the perpetrator who supplies the news, compelling journalists to look at the consequences and what affect their reporting inadvertently can have on society. The damage though may already be done.

When the networks and other media outlets do agree to publish the shooters messages, that in and of itself has an effect because the shooters achieve their goal of getting the media to broadcast their message, and in return receive maximum publicity, possibly encouraging other shooters to do the same.

Regardless of which side one takes in the debate, it is always important to keep in mind that there is a large amount of unjustified attention to school shootings, making them seem more prevalent than they are. This is also part of the debate, as the sensationalism that surrounds these events tends to hijack the news thus giving shooting events more press than other disasters, furthering the belief that schools are unsafe.

According to The Bureau of Justice Statistics, the homicide rate has gone down through the years, including school homicides, which moved in the same downward direction as the overall national homicide rate. Sensational journalism has become louder than the facts.

Over-played and overstated sensational journalism, not just the reporting of news, is what many say is the origin of copycat crimes as the ongoing coverage of violence is evidence of the media's power to persuade. This scenario is a challenge to journalism and journalistic ethics since the reporting of copycat crimes occurs following intense media coverage of sensational news.

While many say mass media’s news coverage and often dramatic interpretation incites copycat crime, there has been relatively little research examining how news stories of aggressive events directly affects behavior, or if

it even does. There are long term studies that say that aggression in young adults is a causal effect of watching all types of violent media, though media-violence exposure is only one risk factor underlying aggression and violence in young adults. However, it is acknowledged as a significant risk. The research clearly demonstrates that exposure to media violence heightens the chances that a youth will have aggressive thoughts and behave aggressively, and the more frequently youth are exposed to media violence, the greater is the likelihood they will also behave aggressively. There is evidence that since children and young adults learn from others; violent behavior is increased when the viewer identifies with the person performing the violent behavior, and when that behavior is followed by rewarding results of acknowledgement. These rewards would include having his picture and profile on TV which can make it attractive to emulate his actions that produced these results.

One of the most prevalent discussions in this debate is whether concealing the photo and name of the shooter, along with any videos or manifestos, averts the incentive for copycat crimes. Since we know that the publicity-seeking perpetrator in many shootings has put journalists at unease many journalists and media outlets feel that, "With the possible exception of an at-large shooter, concealing their identities will remove much of the motivation for infamy."

Some journalists and lawyers argue that a ban amounts to prior restraint and if lawmakers prohibit the media from making one fact public,

this open the door to more official censorship. Michael Gartner, once the president of NBC News said, “We are in the business of disseminating news, not suppressing it. Names and facts are news and they add credibility to stories.” Many journalists say that the demand for stories, photos and live pictures from disaster sites has increased and so has the speed of reporting especially with the rise of online news sites. The need to personalize stories with all the facts along with the demands of increased competition makes it more necessary to publish all the details and events.

Journalists in Finland witnessed the copycat effect when a second school shooting happened quickly after a first. As a result, the second shooter’s online self-published material was generally reported with more caution than that of the first incident. One of the regional papers refrained completely from publishing the shooter’s picture and his online material, saying that “Our mission is not to disseminate his misanthropic messages or make him an icon by publishing his pictures.” Conversely another Finnish national paper was less adamant and decided not to publish the shooter’s videos, but used still photos of the shooter instead. As a result, the second shooter did receive less media attention than his predecessor but regardless the circulation of the shooter’s online Internet material was still viewed and quoted.

Both sides in this debate agree that the media does not in and of itself actually cause violence. There are other factors at play besides the role of journalism when violent actions occur that are directly or indirectly attributed

to the media. The question is whether there are ways to minimize any of the known risks of media-related violence through responsible media and professional journalism.

Policy Statement

In the United States the First Amendment to the federal Constitution protects the right to free speech and to a free press. The overseeing agency, the Federal Communications Commission known as the FCC, regulates communication rules and law and sets policies by analyzing facts and current situations that arise. Print journalism, the original free press, gets the most protection under the First Amendment and the Internet gets pretty much the same. Broadcasters are more regulated than the print media in that they need to obtain a license and are required to operate 'in the public interest,' as a result receiving less First Amendment protection because of the 'intrusive nature of broadcasting.' The FCC does not regulate broadcast content and their role in overseeing any programing is very limited, though there are general guidelines that have to be followed. Broadcast stations and networks are responsible for their selection of aired material and any disputes that arise are resolved by the courts.

So how do we as a nation of basic laws set policies which would regulate the content of broadcasting if there is any indication that it could be harmful to any aspect of society? In general, the First Amendment does not agree to censoring speech *before* it is distributed as that would be unconstitutional, though there are some pre-broadcasting/publishing limitations put on false advertising, copyright violations and military secrets. On most anything else, public communicators may very well be found liable for disseminating dangerous, false, defamatory, obscene or damaging content, however it would be *after* the communication has been broadcast or published, and it would be done thru the court system not the FCC. This means that any specific policies that are set as a 'rule to follow' before publishing or broadcasting, are suggested by the journalism profession and then followed voluntarily by those in the industry.

This voluntary practice of setting ethical guidelines before publishing or broadcasting has occurred within the journalism industry and has been customarily adhered to in two separate voluntary policies. In the early 1970s rape centers began approaching media outlets asking that the names of victims not be disclosed in the media explaining that if victims name are published, other victims will be less likely to come forward. Today the majority of all mainstream media organizations have internal policies prohibiting publicizing the names of rape victims. It is not a state or federal law; it is a journalistic policy that is observed within the profession for the benefit of others in society. A second and similar voluntary policy has been in place with

the reporting of suicides in the media as the mass media rarely reports on suicides, particularly when it comes to teen suicides. When there is coverage on suicides it is discreet, as it follows the guidelines for reporting on suicides endorsed by World Health Organization, The Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Mental Health. The media carefully and voluntarily avoids sensationalizing suicide deaths among teenagers and methods of suicide are rarely mentioned. Suicide pacts are generally not reported in the news.

This position paper proposes a similar voluntary journalistic policy to be practiced by the mainstream media with the goal of discouraging future shooters by depriving them of the audience and recognition they often explicitly seek. While there is no intent to stop the reporting or analysis of shooting incidents, a suggested voluntary policy that may prevent some copycat behavior could be achieved by the mainstream media not publicizing the shooter's names and photos, or their self-made videos and manifestos. This policy proposal attempts to take away the personalized public notoriety and recognition of the shooter and his custom-made message, with the possibly of it resulting in less shootings, especially those that may be motivated by previous incidents.

Many shooters are attracted to the powerful image of other shooters as they become part of the media story, thus reinforcing the idea that in death they can achieve the power which eluded them in life as there is a need for feeling significant and to be recognized by parents, peers and society.

When this need is not acknowledged, it can result in a "wicked rage for recognition," which is a neurotic craving for celebrity or fame that takes form in negative and frequently destructive or even violent acts. There is a primal need for power, and in some cases violence is implemented to feel more powerful, which is what one shooter directly alluded to in his manifesto. In such cases, the disempowered victim strikes back, becoming the powerful victimizer. Viewing or reading about the shooter's motives and the details of the violent crime in the media can extend the ideas of the same actions along to others who are vulnerable to this type of behavior.

The idea of media self-censorship has been advocated by some psychologists, who think that media coverage spurs copycat killers. Forensic psychiatrist Dr. Park Dietz believes the media should reduce or eliminate biographical information about the shooters. He states "if you don't want to propagate more mass murders don't have photographs of the killer. Don't make this 24/7 coverage. Do not to make the killer some kind of anti-hero, because every time we have intense saturation coverage of a mass murder, we expect to see one or two more within a week."

Others say it is too simplistic to draw such a hard line between news reporting and homicidal acts and question how much of an effect censoring the names of rampage killers would have since many of the shooters would probably be on the same path even if you were somehow able to remove all of the news coverage, since exposure to violent media is not sufficient to

explain violent behavior in individuals. Censoring the gunman's name might not change the number of shootings, but it could possibly decrease the number of those killed, because the killer might put less effort into making it a sensational killing that attempts to match or outnumber previous incidents.

The second precedent to this type of voluntary journalistic policy in reporting suicide is known to work for the reason that media influences are more easily modifiable than some of the other factors that contribute to suicide. Knowing that media depictions may play an important role in influencing vulnerable people to attempt suicide, considerable attention has been focused on news reporting of suicides in the media in order to minimize suicidal copycat behavior. Media coverage of suicide has been associated with a significant rise of additional suicides, and the risk increases when the story explicitly describes the suicide method, uses graphic headlines or images along with repeated or extensive coverage that sensationalizes the death. Suicide is a public health issue and the below media guidelines from The World Health Organization (WHO, 2008) are recommended to be applied by journalists.

- ✓ Exercise caution in using photographs or video footage
- ✓ Avoid prominent placement and undue repetition of stories about suicide
- ✓ Avoid providing detailed information about the site of a suicide
- ✓ Avoid language which sensationalizes or normalizes suicide,
- ✓ Avoid explicit description of the method used
- ✓ Word headlines carefully
- ✓ Take particular care in reporting celebrity suicides
- ✓ Take the opportunity to educate the public about suicide
- ✓ Show due consideration for people bereaved by suicide
- ✓ Provide information about where to seek help

Studies have identified a decrease in suicides due to the successful implementation of these media guidelines. A study conducted by Etzersdorfer (WHO, 2008) put the theory to the test when it looked at the introduction of media guidelines regarding a number of suicides that broke out on the subway system in Vienna after it was determined that sensational reporting was inadvertently glorifying suicides. The researchers persuaded local media to change their coverage by minimizing details and photos, avoiding romantic language and simplistic explanations of motives, moving the stories from the front page and keeping the word "suicide" out of the headlines. With these guidelines, the subway suicides promptly dropped by 75% (WHO, 2008) This positive impact was more pronounced in regions with strong media collaboration and was largely maintained over time.

Similar guidelines could be implemented for the copycat shooter effect. Social policies in relation to the free press have evolved as our media has grown and changed. The above mentioned examples of media restrictions show that even with our commitment to a free and open press, journalists and oftentimes the courts, recognize there can be an overriding public interest in protecting society that takes precedent. There is an ethical obligation on media professionals to exercise caution in reporting suicide, and to balance responsibilities like the public's right to know against the risk of causing harm, and those same obligations could extend to the copycat shooter effect. There are many situations and ideas that media outlets restrict from

publishing or broadcasting if it is not in the best interest of society, as overall safety can often trump the public's right to know.

This paper's journalistic policy for ethical media guidelines when covering shooting incidents proposes a communal corporate policy for all media outlets to not publish or broadcast the shooter/perpetrator's name or photo (unless the gunman is at-large) and not publish or broadcast the shooter/perpetrator's videos, manifestos or personal propaganda. If the name of the shooter is broadcast then it should only be so for the first week of coverage and then afterwards be referred to as the shooter or gunman. I also think that as in the journalistic suicide guidelines, journalists should not use encouraging words to describe the incident such as "The Shooter 'Succeeded' in Killing…"

These policy suggestions would not stop the reporting or media analysis of the incident or the shooter; it would just leave out his name, photo and his personal messages so that he is deprived of any public demonstration or personal recognition of his emotional state, as that may be one of the factors motivating his actions.

There have been front-line decisions made and other changes happening in the last few years in the world of journalism regarding this issue. A recent upsurge of citizens, led by parents who have lost children in school shootings, have come forward asking the news and entertainment media to 'act responsibly' and not to use the name or photos of the accused shooter over and

over (unless shooter is at-large), so as to minimize the chance of triggering a copycat response.

Also within the last two years some network anchors have personally broadcast their position against saying the shooter's name on-air, making it the policy that they publically follow. Megyn Kelly, a television host and political commentator on the Fox News Channel refused to say the name of the shooter on April 2, 2014, when a gunman in Fort Hood Texas killed three people and injured sixteen others before he committed suicide. Although the shooter's name had previously been broadcast on the Fox News network before she came on-air, she said that she had decided not to name mass killers as a policy on her show and added that, "Too often it is infamy that they seek, and we decline to help." Anderson Cooper of CNN also said on his broadcast that he thought it was wrong to name the shooter on-air, saying he would adopt the policy of not publicizing a shooter's name during his program and that he would instead replace the shooter's name with the word suspect.

The personal positions that these journalists individually took were neither the network's policy nor an overall journalistic policy. Both anchors received just as much praise for their stance as they did negative comments from viewers and other professionals in the journalistic community (Wemple, 2014). I understand that the job of a journalist is to report the news completely and with clarity, however these actions demonstrate that these new guidelines can be implemented by broadcast networks and corporate media

outlets without compromising quality journalism. It can be a slippery slope to not report the facts in their entirety, but because there are often blurred lines between news and notoriety, it is possible that new recommendations can effectively be set.

Recently a Canadian news network did set policy guidelines for their journalists. In June of 2014, a Canadian gunman killed three and injured two others. After a massive manhunt, he was captured. A Canadian news outlet, Sun News, broadcast the accused name and photo while he was at-large, but after his capture they chose not to broadcast details about the shooter, not his name, not his photo, or any personal details saying they question whether "we are contributing to another mass shooting by making this person infamous." A Sun News spokesperson said that it is necessary for the "press to take an honest look in the mirror to determine if, in fact, we are contributing to this very disturbing phenomenon." They also admitted that "it's a dilemma. [As a news outlet] we have an obligation to tell the public what's going on, that's our job, to inform. And of course as a network we care about ratings."

These grassroots movements to lessen the personalized reporting of these incidents by not broadcasting the shooter's name or photo are groundbreaking, though often difficult decisions for news professionals. However they could help to get rid of the contemporary shooter's 'score sheet' and diminish what has become a ready-made, free-floating template (Shulman,

2013) for shooters to resolve their anger in a grandstanding public rage of killing.

Media fame alone may not be enough of a reason to incite a shooting, but there is evidence of a connection between mass media and social problems and media coverage plays a fundamental role. Crime is not up and shootings are not new: however, the evidence does show that there has been a trend to sensationalized news and copycat shootings. All newsworthy incidents will get news coverage, we know and expect that. The intent is to withhold the spotlight placed on the shooter so he does not have the leading role in front of a large audience that will provide him with the recognition he seeks.

There is a continuing struggle to control the line between complete reporting and journalists' ethical responsibility to society. We need to balance the public's interest in learning about these incidents with the public's interest in reducing copycat crime. I believe that a journalistic communal corporate policy of withholding the names, photos and self-serving videos of shooters would not compromise or alter the facts and information that the public needs to know, while helping to solve the copycat problem. I have not included any shooter's name in this position paper and I don't believe that it made the facts any less understandable or relevant. In the dissemination and analysis of the news there could still be discussion of pertinent details, including personal facts such as basic background, age and looking into the shooters profile for a possible motive without using the shooter's name, photo

or giving his ranting a center stage platform. Undoubtedly the name would be attainable on the Internet, but not constantly giving out that information in the mainstream media could help in taking away one probable incentive for these actions.