Understanding Copycat Crimes

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Here we are once again bearing the heavy angst of another mass shooting asking the same questions, feeling the same sadness and anxiety wondering why these horrific actions happen so frequently now. A few years ago school shootings were more frequent than terrorists’ attacks and now we seem to be more aware of acts of terror committed by groups associated with ISIS or those attempting to look like them.

When you understand copycat crimes you will realize that is no surprise. After Columbine in 1999 school shootings became an unfortunate trend that occurred way too many times with some shooters admitting they pathetically admired the Columbine killers and saying they wanted to ‘outdo’ them. Since ISIS videos have surfaced on the Internet, we have seen beheadings in our country and now shootings that resemble organized terrorist attacks.

What is the reward seen by the sick and twisted minds of these killers? Fame and power on a big stage. The rise of technology has greatly increased copycat crimes. By definition copycat crimes are motivated by an incentive to ‘copy’ what one has already seen. The motivation is either to emulate the crime or to exceed what has already been done in order to outdo the previous offense. Within our current world of 24/7 news, streaming media and accessible Internet, the opportunity to view all sorts of offenses is constantly present whether one intentionally searches for it or not.  One known component of copycat crimes is to acquire attention, consciously or not, and viewing others who have committed crimes which have subsequently achieved recognition, is an incentivizing trigger.

Even though it may be seen as negative attention to the average person, to the copycat offender who is angry, negative attention is better than no attention at all. Our society’s breadth of media coverage consequently confirms the bigger the crime the more attention it will warrant. While copycat crimes have been happening for years, long before television and the Internet, they do occur now with more consistency for these reasons.

Media is our window on the world; it is where we learn of what is happening. It is also our social capital. If you want to be acknowledged there is no better way than to get on television. In our world where media is king, being on television can make one feel acknowledged by society. This is not a crime nor should it be, but when someone wants their anger expressed on a large stage it is one way to guarantee they will get heard. Copying what has distortedly become a ‘successful’ attack allows the shooter to show he is in a ‘pact’ with those before him.

What can we do? Give these attacks less attention? Yes, maybe, but journalism’s job is to provide their readers & viewers with accurate information and many want to know what is happening in their world.  The media, and all journalists, serve as a watchdog in a democratic society. There is also a moral obligation that goes along with this. If we know that giving too much personalized media attention to the individual who has committed a crime could consequently hurt others, then the moral obligation is to report the accurate news without personalized details. Reporters can give all details such as age, gender, location, socioeconomic conditions and other pertinent information that is essential to the story without showing the victim’s picture or giving out the name. Leaving out the name and picture of the perpetrator does not change the details of the story, but it does take out the incentive of fame. If that can save lives while not changing the facts, journalist outlets should consider it as a policy. It is not enough, but it is a start.

The bigger picture is that what we as a society put out there in all varieties of media including movies, television shows, video games and on the Internet will come back to us in real life. Trends, including bad ones, become popular and acceptable when we see them over and over. It is not just desensitization, there is a subtle message that gives permission when others do it successfully. Thankfully most of us know right from wrong, but all we need is a small number of angry, vulnerable people that copy others and we have a problem. We are seeing it now, over and over again. Maybe we should figure out a way to not give it so much attention.

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