

Media Can Stop Killers From Having Notoriety

Mona Charen

December 7, 2007

I still remember where I was when I heard that the student who committed the Virginia Tech massacre had released a press packet including a video, a manifesto and photos of himself holding various weapons. I was just leaving a TV studio (having spoken about something else). Bursting with anger, I asked one of the producers if I could use his computer and posted on the web an urgent plea to NBC News (the organization that had first received the packet): “Don’t publish it!”

They did, of course. And so did every other news outlet. The killer’s picture, his disordered thoughts and his resentments were aired for days and weeks.

The same dangerous pattern has been repeated again and again. The disturbed man who took hostages at Sen. Clinton’s headquarters in New Hampshire told loved ones to “watch the news tonight.” The shooter who terrorized an Omaha shopping mall by mowing down total strangers has achieved his goal (and I will not add to the problem by publishing his name). He left a suicide note in which he predicted “at least now I’ll be famous.” His picture is featured in every newspaper and is flashed on television hourly. His miseries are being dissected and analyzed. An unhappy and rejected young man is finally getting, posthumously, the attention he clearly sought but could not secure in life. And other disturbed people are watching and taking note.

No one can be sure what motivates the borderline people in our society to take guns to schools, shopping malls and office buildings and blow away innocent people. The shortage of mental health treatment is perhaps part of the story. The celebration of violence, particularly gun violence, in entertainment may play a role. The disintegration of the family may be a causal factor. We should certainly be cautious about assuming that we fully understand the phenomenon. Other countries have equally violent entertainment, but nothing like our rate of shootings. And other nations have even more family breakdown yet lower levels of violence.

Still, there does seem to be one factor at work in most of the cases that make headlines. From the Columbine killers to the Virginia Tech slayer, from the Finnish murderer to Delaware State, all of the destroyers seem to have one thing in common. All seek fame. They may know they are going to die. They may plan to kill themselves at the end of a murderous spree or hope to be gunned down by police. But they also know that their names, their faces and in some cases (like the Unabomber and the Virginia Tech killer) their causes will become world famous.

Americans worship fame as some ancient cultures once worshipped idols. People will do and say nearly anything to get on television. Whole genres of TV programming — the misnamed “reality TV” shows — are based on this lust for fame among otherwise sane Americans. And the distinction between fame and infamy becomes more eroded with each passing day. For disturbed and mentally unstable people, fame must seem to be success. They cannot achieve anything else, but they can be famous.

What can be done? This is not a job for the state. This is a matter for the press. What is desperately needed is just a modicum of public spiritedness by television, radio and print journalists. In Washington, D.C., radio talk show host Chris Core has

publicly pleaded with broadcasters to simply refrain from using the names or faces of killers. He is so right.

Would it be that difficult? There is no law currently forbidding newspapers and television stations from publishing the identities of alleged rape victims. This is a journalistic convention, nothing more. (And by the way, it might be a good idea to withhold the identities of accused rapists as well until after a verdict of guilty.) If there is a shooting at a school or whatever, by all means report it. Simply omit the name of the alleged killer, omit the interviews with his neighbors (“he seemed quiet, kept to himself”), and by all means leave his philosophy, religious ideas, Goth clothing style and all other personal details on the cutting room floor.

Perhaps then we will deny oxygen to this terrible fire.

The Ted K Archive

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<realclearpolitics.com/articles/2007/12/press_can_stop_killers_from_ha.html>
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