

## **Mass shootings and the mass media: Does media coverage of mass shootings inspire copycat crimes?**

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Piece written for International Human Press, available at:

<http://ithp.org/articles/mediacopycatshootings.html>

In December 2012, twenty elementary school children and six adult staff members were shot and killed by a single individual at a school in Connecticut. Although this horrific event was met with widespread shock, Americans are sadly all too familiar with such mass shootings. From Columbine in 1999, to Virginia Tech in 2007, to the Colorado cinema shootings earlier in 2012, mass shootings seem to occur with alarming regularity. And although they appear to afflict the United States more than most other countries, they are by no means a uniquely American phenomenon. In 1996 sixteen kindergarten children were shot and killed in Dunblane, Scotland, and in 2011 69 teenagers were killed on an island retreat in Norway.

Mass shootings such as these are now invariably followed by a media frenzy, particularly since the emergence of 24-hour rolling news channels seeking to fill their airtime. Commentators can often be heard arguing over *the* single cause of mass shootings: the availability of guns, mental illness, violent movies and video games, poor parenting, high school bullying, and so on.

Despite the confidence of many of these commentators in their views, empirical research into mass shootings is far less conclusive, and points to a confluence of factors [1]. The availability of guns surely plays a role, as indicated by the sudden drop in mass shootings in Australia following a ban on semi-automatic shotguns

and rifles [2]. But while the availability of guns is necessary, it is surely not sufficient. Some perpetrators may suffer from some form of mental illness such as antisocial personality disorder, but the frequency of psychosis or severe mental illness amongst mass shooters is surprisingly rare [3]. The effects of violence in movies, television and video games continues to be studied and debated: violent video games can trigger aggressive behaviour in a laboratory setting [4], but whether this extends to real-life cases of mass shootings is uncertain.

One potential cause of mass shootings that receives little attention in the mass media, however, is the mass media themselves. It may be that, simply by devoting continual, non-stop coverage to these events, the media may be encouraging 'copycat' mass shootings.

Media-driven 'copycat' effects have been documented in a different, but related, behaviour: suicides that do not involve homicides (which excludes many of the mass shootings mentioned above, where the perpetrator often commits suicide at the end of the shooting spree). Over the past several decades sociologists have shown that national suicide rates rise immediately after the suicides of famous celebrities have been highly publicised in the mass media [5]. This increase is proportional to the amount of media coverage given to the celebrity suicide, such as the number of column inches devoted to the suicide or the number of television networks covering the suicide. In one case in the mid-1980s, a spate of suicides on the Viennese subway declined dramatically following the introduction of strict media guidelines on the reporting of suicides [6]. While suicide is undoubtedly a complex phenomenon with multiple causes (just like mass shootings), all of this evidence suggests that the media can play a role in triggering copycat suicides in certain vulnerable individuals.

Unlike suicides, mass shootings are too rare to be able to determine statistically whether a copycat effect is operating. However, there is anecdotal evidence to link seven mass shootings that are strikingly similar to each other [7], when a shooting in Melbourne, Australia in 1987 was followed over a period of 9 years by six more

similar shootings across the UK and New Zealand. While far from conclusive, this should at least warrant serious discussion of the role of the media in mass shootings.

Why might people be susceptible to such copycat effects? Recent research in the evolutionary behavioural sciences suggests that media-driven copycat effects might be an unfortunate but predictable side-effect of our evolved, adaptive psychology. Humans, compared to other species, are far more likely to rely on other individuals' expertise and knowledge when learning how to solve problems or acquire new skills [8]. Think about how you learned a novel skill, such as how to swim, drive, do trigonometry, play the piano, change a plug, cook chilli, build a house, etc. While there may have been a bit of individual experimentation, most likely you learned such skills in large part from a more knowledgeable teacher or parent, or found out how to do them in a book or an internet article written by an expert you've never met.

Recent experimental research has shown just how powerful this tendency to copy more-knowledgeable others is. Both adults [9] and children [10] spontaneously choose to copy people who they have previously seen succeed at a task, and ignore unsuccessful people. Moreover, the cues that people use to decide from whom to copy can be quite minimal. Adults [11] and children [12] both prefer to copy people who are looked at by other people for longer. 'Being looked at' turns out to be a surprisingly powerful marker of prestige or social status.

Many of these effects are seen cross-culturally [13], suggesting that this tendency to copy others, particularly those people who are perceived as successful or prestigious, is an intrinsic feature of human psychology. Indeed, this success- or prestige-biased copying is likely to be evolutionarily adaptive. It would have allowed our ancestors to acquire complex technical know-how, such as how to make stone handaxes or bow-and-arrows that are necessary to hunt for food, or how to build perfectly-proportioned shelters that can withstand the elements. Even technology that we think of as 'simple', such as the stone handaxes used by our hominin

ancestors over two million years ago, take decades to learn how to make well, as modern flint-knappers can testify. Copying a more knowledgeable person is a quick and easy way of acquiring such skills and knowledge.

Yet this tendency to copy successful and prestigious people can go wrong, particularly in modern society. In experiments, it is all too easy to get people to copy irrelevant actions as long as they are associated with otherwise prestigious or successful individuals [14,15]. Amongst our ancestors living in small, close-knit, mutually-dependent groups this likely wouldn't have been a major problem. But in the modern world of the mass media and mass communication, where we are constantly bombarded with information from a range of sources, it can leave us too gullible, too easily influenced. Advertisers take advantage of this gullibility when, for example, Pepsi pays David Beckham to advertise their cola. People copy David Beckham because he is generally prestigious and successful, and so also copy his apparent choice of cola. They do this even though drinking Pepsi most likely contributed nothing to David Beckham's sporting success.

Copycat media effects, including copycat suicides, may be another example of this [16]. When the media devote excessive attention to prominent celebrity suicides, it may confer prestige on to the suicide victim, simply because our celebrity-obsessed society equates prestige with media attention. Some already-vulnerable individuals may then copy the suicidal behaviour of the newly-prestigious suicide victim.

The same may be occurring with mass shootings. In simply devoting so much time and attention to mass killers, the mass media may be - unintentionally - conferring prestige and success onto them. For certain individuals, this may trigger a copycat effect and result in another mass shooting. A simple and originally adaptive rule-of-thumb - copy whatever prestigious, successful people are doing - can have tragic consequences in the novel environment of the mass media.

We know that restrictions on the reporting of suicides in the media can reduce copycat suicides [6]. Although it is not known for certain whether mass shootings

also show a media-driven copycat effect, it might be prudent to impose similar restrictions on the reporting of mass shootings. Minimal airtime should be devoted to profiling or discussing the shooter, avoiding descriptors such as 'loner', 'outsider' or 'troubled', which to certain people might be seen as markers of prestige. Phrases such as 'the successful shooter' or 'the shooter achieved their goals' should also be avoided, as this links the shooter with success and achievement. Detailed discussion of the methods used by the shooter, how they acted or what they wore should be avoided, to prevent others from imitating those methods, actions and clothing. And finally, the media should avoid simplifying mass shootings by ascribing them single causes. As noted above, mass shootings are complex events with numerous causes, including possibly the mass media themselves.

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