

4463395/ Lauren Patetta
Professor Susca
COMM-409
April 9, 2019

Reflection #5: *Columbine*

When I was in sixth grade, my tiny Catholic elementary-and-middle school was evacuated due to a bomb threat. At the time, I had no idea what was going on, I was merely thrilled that I would be missing religion class.

Almost immediately after evacuating, the rumors started. Everyone wanted to know why we were taken out of our classes, why police cars were pulling up to our school, and why we saw one of the eighth graders with said police. All of my teachers were frantic, the looks on their faces varying from concern to fear, but my class of 11-year-olds didn't understand why.

It wasn't until later that day, after we had been shepherded into the cafeteria for lunch that a teacher finally gave us some semblance of an answer. At that point, nearly every rumor possible had been spread, but they were all just baseless theories concocted by bored middle schoolers. Presumably sick of listening to the gossip, our frantic English teacher decided to tell us the truth: that one of the eighth graders told our history teacher that he had a bomb, and would blow up the school. Our history teacher called the police, who determined that there was no bomb, it was just an empty threat, but the we had to wait in the chapel for a while to be safe.

What was our immediate reaction to learning this bit of heavy information? Start laughing, of course. Our history teacher was a notorious worrier, so to us, his decision to call the police and evacuate the entire school seemed like a major overreaction, although admittedly, perfectly in-character.

The reality that there may have been an actual bomb never crossed our minds. We just cracked jokes about our overbearing history teacher who felt threatened by what we thought was a harmless student. Only now, after reading *Columbine* and reflecting on this day did I realize why my teacher called the police, why my other teachers were so concerned about getting us out of that building.

I don't remember *Columbine* – how could I? I was a few months old at the time. The first mass shooting I remember was Virginia Tech, and even that is barely a memory, nothing more than a fleeting headline on the morning news. I grew up in a very sheltered school, where we dealt with major news events by being reminded to pray for something we didn't fully understand. Since then, I have followed news stories of gun violence, grown increasingly paranoid whenever I heard a loud noise in high school, but I didn't think about my own sixth-grade experiences until reading Dave Cullen's book. I wish now that I could apologize to my history teacher for laughing.

It's impossible not to feel disheartened while reading *Columbine*, especially in light of the suicides of Parkland survivors a year after the tragedy (Rozsa). It's also hard not to feel disheartened by America's lack of response, given that New Zealand banned semi-automatic weapons and assault rifles a mere 72 hours after a mosque attack (Sidhu). But Cullen's book was an incredible piece of journalism, one that shows commendable dedication to research. It also highlights Cullen's own devotion to the ethics of journalism; by seeking to right the wrongs of media coverage of the event, he truly embodied the "seek truth and report it" part of the Society of Professional Journalists' ethics code.

Columbine was more than just a recount of everything that happened leading up to, during and after Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold attacked Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. It was an in-depth examination of the shooters, the victims, the survivors, the community response and the media coverage. By switching between the stories of the perpetrators and the victims, Cullen gives readers insight into what actually happened to all involved parties, information that was often contrary to initial reporting. The book has been described as “a searing indictment of almost all the reporters and editors involved in the coverage,” and though I don’t believe it goes that far, it was clear that Cullen set out to correct the mistakes his own profession made (Weinberg).

According to Cullen, the Columbine shooting was the first to occur in the age of technology — something that spawned a plethora of myths. Because students were able to call news agencies from their cell phones, reporters received varying accounts of the events inside the school (this happens to a much higher degree today, with the ubiquity of social media). Although students *should* have an outlet to tell their stories, the mass confusion started some of the most omnipresent rumors that exist to this day (even though Cullen tried to expel them with his book). One of such rumors was the “Trench Coat Mafia,” a myth that the media absolutely ran away with as soon as some students started mentioning that the shooters wore trench coats. According to Steve Weinberg, the media “filtered every new development through that lens” of the Trench Coat Mafia, starting the idea that the shooters were gothic, trench coat-wearing nonconformists who were on a mission to take down the “jocks” of the school — none of which was actually true.

Cullen asserts that there was no rhyme or reason to the killings, no specific targets for “jocks” or bullies, because, according to Cullen, Harris was merely a psychopath. Cullen scoured through the pairs’ notebooks and videos — called the “Basement Tapes” — and talked to Special Agent Dwayne Fuselier to definitively prove that Harris and Klebold had no clear target. Cullen’s criticism of his own work, along with that of his colleagues, proves his dedication to a higher ethical code than many hold themselves to. Upon learning all that the media got wrong, he sought to find the truth — highlighting the notion of “seek truth and report it.” More than that, Cullen acted independently of outside pressures and accounts of the story, doing all of this research himself and dedicating 10 years of his life to covering the real story of Columbine.

Cullen’s critique of the media, though not the entire point of the book, definitely emphasizes the larger issues of the media’s coverage of mass shootings. In a piece for *Columbia Journalism Review*, Pete Vernon argues that “coverage of [school shootings] followed a now-familiar pattern, with cable news shots of students being evacuated, and somber contributors speaking with anchors who seemed resigned to covering these sort of tragedies on a regular basis” (Vernon). Erica Goode, a communications professor at Syracuse University, talked about this pattern nonchalantly, saying “you do the day story, and then you do the victim stories, and then you profile the shooter” when writing about the tragedies (qtd. in Harris). It sounds as if the way journalists handle tragedy is a mere formula, as commonplace as stories on political party bickering or routine breaking news. But this has led to criticism, and not just in the case of Columbine.

One of the largest issues with media coverage of mass shootings is how the coverage itself motivates other mass shooters. Known as both the media contagion effect and the copycat

effect, studies have shown that coverage of events can inspire other people to commit similar crimes (Pew). According to a 2015 study, after every mass shooting, there was an increased chance of another occurring within the next 13 days (Pew). Additionally, the study found that “the more media attention a shooter gets, the more likely the event will inspire a future mass shooter” (Pew). This was seen in the case of Columbine: Cullen reported that Harris quoted the Oklahoma city bombing as inspiration, and in the month that followed Columbine, “400 related events were reported across the country” (Pew). University of Alabama criminologist Adam Lankford attributes this copycat phenomenon to the fact that most of the shooters in these cases are looking for fame, and the celebrity-level treatment that shooters get from the media gives them just that (qtd. in Pane). Lankford argues that it’s necessary for the media to strike a careful balance between giving the public the facts without sensationalizing perpetrator stories (qtd. in Pane). That balance can be hard to find, especially when journalists are competing at all times to get the “best” story, or to be the first with information. However, Adam Harris with the Atlantic has noticed that the balance *can* be achieved. The “shooter profile” stories that Erica Goode noted are starting to go away in the aftermath of Parkland (Harris). Anderson Cooper no longer uses the names of the gunmen in his reports (Pane). Other movements have cropped up that encourage the media as a whole to avoid using the shooter’s names and not include “irrelevant” details about them in the stories.

Not only does the media contagion effect increase the likelihood of another mass shooting, but it often harms the survivors and the victims’ families even more. Coni Sanders, daughter of Columbine victim Dave Sanders, recalls seeing her father’s shooters on the front cover of a newspaper shortly after the shooting occurred (Pane). Sanders laments the fact that

“everyone knew the names and the tiniest details about the attackers who carried out the carnage” but “few people knew much about her father, who saved countless lives” (Pane). For families that are already reeling from the loss of a loved one, publicizing stories of the shooters adds undue trauma. In my opinion, the media also goes too far in trying to humanize the shooters. In the case of the Rolling Stone’s decision to publish a celebrity-like photo of the Boston Marathon bomber, it added an unnecessary level of humanity during a time that stories should have been focused on survivors. This is the one thing that bothered me about *Columbine* — it seemed too heavily focused on the shooters. Although I understand the focus was necessary to dispel myths, I still don’t believe they deserved as much attention as they received.

There’s also an issue in how the media determines what shootings to cover. In an interview with NPR, author and Miami Herald columnist Carl Hiaasen argues that every single shooter should be covered, in a way to force the government into action (or other people into simply caring). After his brother died in a shooting that received no media coverage, Hiaasen went on air to ask “what makes on killing less newsworthy than another?” (qtd. in Cornish). He believes that the news reports should not be regulated to only stories with body counts in the double digits, or stories that affect white children, especially when minority communities are often the biggest unseen victims of violence. Similarly, Amy Goldberg, head surgeon at Temple University Hospital, sees about 450 gun victims each year in the trauma unit, most of whom are low-income black residents of North Philadelphia (Green). Disheartened by the lack of gun reform in the country, she states, “nobody gives two shits about the black people in North Philadelphia if nobody gives two craps about the white kids in Sandy Hook” (qtd. in Fagone).

Perhaps if the media covered gun violence more evenly, then people would start to care about *all* victims of gun violence, and see the magnitude of the problem (wishful thinking, I know).

Jason Fagone, who wrote the story on Goldberg and her work in the trauma unit as a way to depict the effects of gun violence, has noticed his own issue with how the media handles mass shootings. He wrote his piece, “What bullets do to bodies,” as a way to combat this issue, even though he acknowledges that his single story will not change anything (though it *did* inspire me to study journalism). In his research, he found that coverage of the Sandy Hook shooting “very quickly devolved into these extremely specific, abstruse arguments about the caliber of the bullet, or statistics about risk, or the fine points of the Second Amendment” (qtd. in Green). According to Fagone, this way of presenting the information is “just a ridiculous set of ways to not deal with what’s happening” and “a way to erase what’s happening — erasure that’s disguised as sophistication” (qtd. in Green). By focusing on these intellectual debates about gun reform and bullets, Fagone believes that the media ignores the human element inherent to all gun stories. Only by returning to the more concrete stories and moving away from what Fagone dubs “wonk shit” can the media start to make a difference.

Fagone is not the only one who wants to bring the debate back down to the level of humanity. Goldberg agrees with him, and takes it to a more drastic route that seems contrary to everything we have been taught about covering tragedy in journalism ethics. She believes that “if people had been shown the autopsy photos of the [Sandy Hook] kids, the gun debate would have been transformed” (Fagone). Though this seems awful, many students are on board with the idea. The #MyLastShot campaign was started recently by Columbine students, and “calls for citizens to put a sticker on their ID or cell phone that asks for photos of their body to be publicized in the

event they are victims of gun violence” (Pascus). The idea behind this is that the horror will shock people into caring about the issue, and there is a precedence to the theory. Photos of Emmett Till sparked the Civil Rights movement, the famous photograph of the “Napalm Girl” started anti-Vietnam War campaigns, and more recently, the picture of Alan Kurdi showed people the realities of the refugee crisis. The students are putting hope in the media to raise awareness for an issue, because it has worked in the past. I’m not sure what decision I would make as a photojournalist, but I do see the point being raised. Sometimes people need to be reminded of the violence that exists around them in order to care about it.

These issues all place pressure on journalists, especially in terms of ethics. It’s hard to know what to publish and how to do so. For younger journalists, who grew up with this fear, it’s hard for many to imagine *not* being able to advocate for something they’re passionate about (Hernandez). But I think that Dave Cullen provides a strong model for handling these issues. He remained dedicated to the SPJ Code throughout the book, and though he discussed the shooters in-depth, he did not publish any photographs of them, something he says he explicitly chose to avoid doing.

I feel odd saying I loved *Columbine*, given the subject matter and the fact that I cried my way through half of it, but I am genuinely happy that I read it. The story and the lessons it teaches are important, especially for young journalists. Many of us will need models like Cullen to look up to one day, and I believe he is an admirable journalist. I think it’s important for journalism students to recognize that the media makes a lot of mistakes, but to also see that there are journalists acknowledging and trying to fix that.

Two years after I graduated eighth grade, I went back to my elementary school to pick up my younger brother. Though it had only been two years, the school itself looked very different — what used to be the main entrance was sealed off, replaced with a much safer main entry that had security cameras and an actual front desk (beforehand literally anyone could walk into the school and be immediately in front of the first grade classroom). The other doors are no longer left unlocked at all times, and I even needed to sign in at the front.

I remembered my mother telling me that these changes were implemented after I graduated, a desperately-needed renovation rushed into action immediately following the Sandy Hook shooting. Most of the younger students didn't fully understand why the school could afford a major structural overhaul but not air conditioning, but my 10-year-old brother did, because today, the media is attracting more and more people, and stories about school shootings are reaching newer, younger audiences (granted, he also had two passionate older siblings). Although journalists aren't meant to be advocates, I do hope that our reporting one day can spur some sort of change in this issue, because it feels like the only hope I have left.

Length: 2730 words (I am so sorry)

Works Cited

- Cornish, Audie. "Opinion: How should media decide which mass shootings to cover?" *NPR*. January 2019. Web.
<https://www.npr.org/2019/01/29/689760904/opinion-how-should-media-decide-which-mass-shootings-to-cover>
- Cullen, Dave. *Columbine*. Hachette Book Group, Inc. New York. 2009. Print.
- Fagone, Jason. "What Bullets Do To Bodies." *Huffington Post Highline*. April 2017. Web.
<https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/gun-violence/>
- Green, Elon. "Behind the story: What Bullets Do To Bodies by Jason Fagone." *Columbia Journalism Review*. May 2017. Web.
https://www.cjr.org/the_feature/jason-fagone-bullets-huffington-post-highline.php
- Harris, Adam. "The media's week-long attention span for a mass shooting." *The Atlantic*. November 2018. Web.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/11/how-long-does-media-cover-mass-shootings/575926/>
- Hernandez, Christina. "Young Journalists' Concerns About the VTech Story." *Columbia Journalism Review*. April 2007. Web.
https://archives.cjr.org/behind_the_news/young_journalists_concerns_abo.php
- Pane, Lisa Marie. "Should media avoid naming the gunmen in mass shootings?" *Denver Post*. March 2019. Web.
<https://www.denverpost.com/2019/03/17/media-using-gunmen-names-mass-shootings/>
- Pascus, Brian. "Columbine students want images of their deaths publicized if they're victims of

gun violence.” *CBS News*. April 2019. Web.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/columbine-students-mylastshot-photo-campaign-ends-to-turn-the-tide-of-gun-violence/>

Pew, Alex, Lauren Goldbeck and Caroline Halsted. “Does Media Coverage Inspire Copy Cat Mass Shootings?” *National Center for Health Research*. Web.

<http://www.center4research.org/copy-cats-kill/>

Rozsa, Lori, Kayla Epstein, Katie Mettler and Lindsey Bever. “Parkland community shocked after student’s suicide — the second in a week, officials say.” *Washington Post*. March 2019. Web.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/03/24/parkland-student-dies-apparent-suicide-police-say/?utm_term=.6cf8062fa042

Sidhu, Sandi and Helen Regan. “Assault rifles to be banned in New Zealand in aftermath of massacre, Prime Minister announces.” *CNN*. March 2019. Web.

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/20/asia/new-zealand-christchurch-gun-ban-intl/index.html>

Vernon, Pete. “The media today: ‘No words’ following school shooting in Florida.” *Columbia Journalism Review*. February 2018. Web.

https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/florida-school-shooting-coverage.php

Weinberg, Steve. “Anatomy of a Murder.” *Columbia Journalism Review*. April 2009. Web.

https://archives.cjr.org/critical_eye/anatomy_of_a_murder.php