

"Don't name them" – Criminologist asks journalists to help stop mass shootings



Memorials left at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. (Walter/Flickr. Used under CC-BY-2.0 license.)

By *David Trilling*



It's too familiar in America: Breaking news, another mass shooting, old pictures of the suspects, their names splashed across cable news.

Instant celebrities.

In an article this year for the journal *American Behavioral Scientist*, [Adam Lankford](#), a criminal justice professor at the University of Alabama, and a colleague argue that journalists should not report the names or picture the faces of mass shooting suspects. Journalists should, however, continue to report every other detail so the public gains a better understanding about these tragedies.

Lankford has found many examples of perpetrators – both shooters and suicide bombers – who admit they want fame. In 1999, the Columbine High School shooters were influenced by the amount of attention that the 1995 Oklahoma City bomber received, he has written. “More recently, the Orlando nightclub shooter admitted that he was inspired by the [2013] Boston Marathon bombers. This was only possible due to the amount of media coverage the Boston bombers received,” he told Journalist’s Resource. In a forthcoming study, Lankford found the younger of the two brothers responsible for the Boston Marathon bombing received “nearly \$10 million in free publicity during the month of his attack, which was more than almost any other American celebrity during that time.”

There are precedents that give weight to Lankford’s case: Journalists rarely publish names of sexual assault victims.

Lankford spoke with Journalist’s Resource about his recent work. This interview has been lightly edited for length.

You’ve shown that mass shootings are getting worse in America. Does the media play a role?

In our [research](#), Eric Madfis and I have identified three major consequences of the media coverage. One, it creates a kind of competition for mass shooters to maximize the number of victims they kill. The second is that it’s rewarding these offenders with fame and attention, which is often what they want – it serves to give them a legacy. Even if they die, they may be remembered, according to their distorted views, as someone who mattered, as a somebody rather than a nobody. [...]

Apart from that, the media advertises the behavior. So regardless what kind of behavior it is, if you want to increase it, the best way is to advertise it. When it comes to mass shooters, that advertising produces what’s known as both contagion and copycat effects. Contagion essentially means that the ideas about committing this type of attack spread through society and permeate the minds of at-risk individuals. And copycat effects have been documented among many offenders who have specifically identified previous mass shooters as role models.

Do you see anything in common between American-bred mass shooters and foreign-raised suicide bombers? How do their motives differ?

We have some shooters who claim to have an ideological motive and some who claim to be attacking for personal reasons. But there is more overlap than is commonly assumed. Certainly we have shooters like the Ft. Hood Army base shooter in 2009 or the [2016 Orlando nightclub shooter](#) who claimed to be motivated by Islamic extremism. But if we actually look at it, the Columbine shooters, the Virginia Tech shooter, other shooters who didn’t actually affiliate with a clear cause also claimed to be ideologically motivated as well. The Columbine shooters expressed desires to engage in eugenics; the Virginia Tech shooter claimed to be motivated by serving Jesus Christ and Christianity. So, I wouldn’t put too much stake into what the attackers claim their motives are; underneath it all, they often have a lot of similar psychological issues, including, often, mental health problems. Often they have suicidal motives and also these desires for attention and fame. Just like the Columbine shooters talked about having movies made about them and becoming famous, the Orlando nightclub shooter called a news station in the midst of his attack and checked social media to see if he was going viral.

If we look at this globally, there certainly are suicide bombers who are different, some suicide bombers who are really acting only because of the influence of their organization. ISIS has kidnapped and coerced people into becoming suicide bombers. Boko Haram has done the same. No one coerces anyone into committing a mass shooting. So I guess that's a long way of saying that various types of mass shooters, whether they have white skin or brown skin, are religious or not, often have a lot in common.

How could your proposal not to name them help?

There have been calls for the media to do a tremendous number of different things including, essentially, not cover or not give as much attention to the behavior of the shooters. And as a researcher, I find that problematic. It is important to report the details of the attacker's behavior because those details can be important for understanding warning signs. It is important to understand them and it's important that the media reports on them.

Our proposal is for media to keep reporting all the details about these crimes and these criminals that they would report anyways, but to make two small changes: Stop publishing the name of the perpetrator and stop publishing the photos or likenesses with the face of the perpetrator.

If we said, "the 2016 Orlando shooter," rather than name him, we can still report all the details of that story without any problem. And in terms of the photo, I don't think anyone really thinks that the photo itself is important as a newsworthy item. No one sees the photo of a mass shooter and thinks, "Aha, now that I have that information, I know how to stop mass shootings." The photo is purely pandering to the public's lurid curiosity and that's specifically one of the things that the Society of Professional Journalists' media ethics [guidelines](#) suggest should not be done.

With American media so tribal and atomized these days, do you think having guidelines is possible? How would you spread the word? In the age of blogs, does it even matter anymore what major media organizations do or agree upon?

This seems to be largely an apolitical issue. In terms of the multifaceted nature of the media, I would emphasize that we aren't under any sort of false delusions that the names of these offenders would be kept completely confidential. We recognize that law enforcement will have to use these names during their investigations, and that media members will know these names as part of their investigations and attempts to delve into these stories. Witnesses will know these names, as will family and community members. But the key is to deny these offenders the type of fame and type of advertising that is so destructive. And that is the front-page news, prime-time cable news, prominent online news and things like that.

Are you seeing successes?

We are building support. We have a [letter](#) that's been signed by 149 experts calling for the media to implement these changes. I think the members of the media I've spoken to one-on-one are all very receptive to this. It's not that people have objections to the proposal, but more a matter of it feeling daunting to change society. But with any sort of social change, I think the idea that 'it's a marathon, not a sprint' is helpful to remember.

Do you see any precedents? There are other types of names and details that we in the press do withhold.

Yes, one of the cases I point to that seems to open a lot of eyes because it's undeniable is the fact that sexual assault victims' names are withheld as a matter of policy by major media outlets unless those victims consent to having their names released. This is not only in local cases, but also in cases that are widely covered, such as *Rolling Stone's "A Rape on Campus"* story. [...]

The media also monitors its own behavior and limits what it publishes in a variety of other ways, including profanities.

Have you met any specific resistance?

[...] It's a tricky thing to ask the media to police themselves, given that no one's intention is to inspire copycat killers. No one's intention is to reward fame-seeking mass shooters. And so – when people's intentions are good and then they're confronted with the idea that what they're doing could be leading to deaths – it's hard to get past that stage of denial.

But I would point, for example, to things like cigarette advertisements. For a long time, newspapers and magazines and television ran cigarette advertisements. Now they don't, but nobody focuses on media organizations from previous decades and says they were evil because of that. Now that we have more evidence on the subject, we simply focus on the best policy to protect the public.


Below is a selected bibliography of academic studies on contagion compiled by Nicole Dahmen, a professor of journalism at the University of Oregon.

- Dahmen, Nicole; et al. "Covering Mass Shootings: Journalists' Perceptions of Coverage and Factors Influencing Attitudes." *Journalism Practice*, 2017. DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2017.1326832.
- Kissner, Jason. "Are Active Shootings Temporally Contagious? An Empirical Assessment." *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 2016. DOI: 10.1007/s11896-015-9163-8.
- Lankford, Adam. "A Comparative Analysis of Suicide Terrorists and Rampage, Workplace, and School Shooters in the United States from 1990 to 2010." *Homicide Studies*, 2013. DOI: 10.1177/1088767912462033.
- Lankford, Adam. "Précis of the Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 2014. DOI: 10.1017/S0140525X13001581.
- Lankford, Adam. "Are America's Public Mass Shooters Unique? A Comparative Analysis of Offenders in the United States and Other Countries." *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 2016. DOI: 10.1080/01924036.2015.1105144.
- Lankford, Adam. "Detecting Mental Health Problems and Suicidal Motives Among Terrorists and Mass Shooters." *Criminal Behavior and Mental Health*, 2016. DOI: 10.1002/cbm.2020.

- Lankford, Adam; Hakim, Nayab. "From Columbine to Palestine: A Comparative Analysis of Rampage Shooters in the United States and Volunteer Suicide Bombers in the Middle East." *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2011. DOI: 10.1016/j.avb.2010.12.006.
- Lankford, Adam; Tomek, Sara. "Mass Killings in the United States from 2006 to 2013: Social Contagion or Random Clusters?" *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 2017. DOI: 1111/sltb.12366.
- Lankford, Adam. "Fame-Seeking Rampage Shooters: Initial Findings and Empirical Predictions." *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, DOI: 10.1016/j.avb.2016.02.002.
- Lankford, Adam. "Public Mass Shooters and Firearms: A Cross-National Study of 171 Countries." *Violence and Victims*, 2016. DOI: 10.1891/0886-6708.VV-D-15-00093.
- Lankford, Adam; Madfis, Eric. "Don't Name Them, Don't Show Them, But Report Everything Else: A Pragmatic Proposal for Denying Mass Shooters the Attention They Seek and Deterring Future Offenders." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2017. DOI: 10.1177/0002764217730854.
- Schildkraut, Jaclyn; Muschert, Glenn W. "Media Salience and the Framing of Mass Murder in Schools: A Comparison of the Columbine and Sandy Hook Massacres." *Homicide Studies*, 2014. DOI: 10.1177/1088767913511458.
- Towers, Sherry; et al. "Contagion in Mass Killings and School Shootings." *PLoS ONE*, 2015. DOI: 1371/journal.pone.0117259.

Last updated: December 20, 2017

 **We welcome feedback. Please contact us [here](#).**

 [Ads](#), [Public Opinion](#), [Criminal Justice](#), [Health Care](#), [Public Health](#), [Security](#), [Military](#), [Society](#) 
[criminology](#), [guns](#), [mass shootings](#), [shootings](#), [terrorism](#), [violence](#)

A project of the Harvard Kennedy School's [Shorenstein Center](#) and the [Carnegie-Knight Initiative](#), Journalist's Resource is an open-access site that curates scholarly studies and reports.


 Robert Wood Johnson
 Foundation


 Carnegie
 CORPORATION
 OF NEW YORK
 Knight Foundation

[Home](#) | [About](#) | [Contact](#) | [RSS](#)



Unless otherwise noted, this site and its contents – with the exception of photographs – are licensed under a [Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](#) license.