

Mass media effect on promoting copycat mass murders media essay



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This research paper highlights on the ways that the mass media has encouraged the copycat murders. The copycat effect is used in reference to the situation for which a sensational publicity about the violent acts of murders or suicides causes the tendency to result in more of similar effects through imitation.

The Media influence or media effects are terms used in media studies, in psychology, communication theory and in sociology in reference to the theories concerning the ways in which the mass media affect the way in which the audiences think or behave. The critiques of the influences of media suggested that media can weaken or delimit an individual's capacity in acting autonomously by connecting the world to the individuals and reproducing of self-images of the society, this characteristic of media is ascribed as an influence which is reminiscent of the telescreens, These include all the kinds of media namely; the newspapers, TV, Radio, Internet and the Books.

. The media generates information in a networked setup, it then publishes the information using the articles, videos, and the photos to the consumers, this influences the individual's ability to interpret the delivered information while at the same time it potentially influences the unrelated cultural and the personal beliefs, basing on the propaganda model. The Mass media content which is created for the newsworthy events and the untold stories have consequences on the consumer's and culture can also be influenced.

The media has a strong social and cultural impact upon the society. This is due to its ability to reach a wider audience with strong and influential

messages. The Television broadcasts have a lot of control over the content delivered to the society depending on the number watching and the times in which the same content is viewed. The internet creates the space for diverse political opinions, social and the cultural viewpoints and a higher level of consumer participation.

The process of agenda-setting is almost the unavoidable section of news gathering in the large organizations which are stakeholders of the mass media. The media is not a crude agent of propaganda, but it organizes the public understandings by providing the overall interpretations that are preferred by, and in most cases it is least challenging especially to those with the economic power. News coverage of violent crimes serves the public interest, depending on how much coverage is necessary if it is necessary to cover every violent crime and the level of detail. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)

The coverage of crimes in the society can be a valuable tool in decision making. If the Individuals are properly informed, they can make rational decisions basing on their personal safety. In case the population has been misled, may it be intentionally or not, depending on the nature of the crimes, and the rarity or commonality of the said crimes. When the coverage is an endless repetition of the apparently meaningless tragedies, then it causes a numbing effect on the population.

The public interest may be the justification for the coverage of the mass murders, but in reality profit is the real motivation, since the mass media are in the business of making money and therefore the mass media cannot ignore mass murders.

The allegations the mass media unintentionally promotes the mass murder is a serious one. Hence the mass media determine the appropriate level of coverage and it is necessary to cover every such crime. There is need for the media to devise the methods for discouraging the “shoot your way to temporary fame” which encourages copycat murders. It is evident that this problem has not been adequately addressed in the existing works on the media ethics.

Literature Review

A review on a number of the recent works in this field have suggested a trend the general problems of psychological and economic harm caused by inaccurate or unethical mass media reporting has been considered in great depths, However the very severe form of harm which is the unintentional encouragement of copycat murders has not been specifically discussed. A Noted author and the cultural behaviorist Loren Coleman explores how the media's over-saturated the coverage of the murders, suicides, and the deadly tragedies made an impact on the society. This is The Copycat Effect- the phenomenon in which violent events spawn violence of the same type. He recognizes the emerging patterns of the Copycat Effect, how to deal with and counteract the associated consequences as individuals and as the culture. Loren Coleman translates the academic research on the copycat effects an understandable form in which He brings the imitation of violence to reality through the detailed case studies and the person-centered examples, such as the sensationalized reporting on suicide, sniper sprees, suicide via the airplane, suicidal cults, the post-office killings, and the teenage suicide. The media is largely in a state of denial on how its coverage

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on the death incidents contributes to the violence and destruction of lives in the society. Loren Coleman's in "The Copycat Effect" examined the major news events, which were encouraged and promoted by the mass media, and those which get repeated in lesser-known incidents which were covered primarily by the local news.

Klaidman & Beauchamp (1987, pp. 93-123, pp. 201-7)) discussed the issues on journalistic-induced harm, but only with respect to the damaged reputations and the business losses. Pointed to the problems of the news organizations which created the news events, including the problems international terrorism, they did examine the possibility that the journalist's efforts can play a part in causing a specific murder. Lambeth (1986) provides a thorough theoretical model in addressing the ethical issues on journalism, However, he fails to address the problem of media-induced harm.

Hulteng (1981, pp. 71-86) sampled out the ethical codes of a number of the American newspapers; he reprinted the complete text of codes of the ethics for the Associated Press Managing Editors, the American Society of the Newspaper Editors, and the Society of the Professional Journalists. All these ethical codes address the issue of harm and balance in a very general way but do not directly discuss how the coverage of a particular criminal act can lead to the copycat crimes.

The news media is supposed to satisfy both the obligation of accurately informing the public about the nature of the society's murder problems, and the obligation of the stockholders to keep the circulation up. The inevitable

public boredom with the coverage of the meaningless “ little” murders makes this an impossible act to balance.

The media coverage on some murders in the sensational manner has been customized in many events. The editors justify this time-honored tradition basing on the economic considerations and in light of the major roles. The editors need to figure out the many innocent lives that will be sacrificed in order to boost the circulation, or promote the political agendas.

These mass media studies suggest that that there is need for standardized means in which a kind of crime violence should be given the attention proportionate to its size, in relation to the its magnitude, and base on the importance of its victims. The Violent crimes of all types should be highlighted, in a relative way to other causes of suffering, which are proportionate to the social costs.

Meyer (1987, pp. 155-156) points to the problem of the unbalanced reporting of the health and safety issues in the mass media causes the wild and inaccurate notions on the relative risks of various causes of death. He gives an example where a surveyed group of the greatly underestimated deaths caused by the emphysema, relates to the deaths by homicide. Meyer described one of the studies carried out by researchers at the University of Oregon, in which it was found that the pictures formed inside the heads of the people who were interviewed tended to be influenced by the spooky, violent world of the newspaper content as compared to the real world.

It is important that the studies recognizes how the misleading portrayal of the real world can become an artifact of the popular morbid curiosity, that <https://assignbuster.com/mass-media-effect-on-promoting-copycat-mass-murders-media-essay/>

the newspapers must satisfy or lose in their circulation, this reflects what Meyer terms as, " The Distorting Effects of the Perceptual Models." In brief, the journalists through the mass media enhance certain assumptions in their work. They make use of the facts which do not fit into the journalist's perceptual model that tends to be downgraded in its importance or ignored. This study bases on the facts which include the statistical analysis, even at the most basic level, but the primary liberal arts orientation given to the journalists comes to the forefront takes the precedence. (Meyer, 1987, pp. 48-50)

David Lester's (1989) study titled, " Media Violence and Suicide and Homicide Rates." He summarized the two reports extracted from the National Coalition on the TV Violence. The first report asserts that there exists a negative correlation between the suicides and violent, media related issues, and a positive correlation in relation to the homicide at the same time. The second report asserts somehow similar, which does not statistically signify the relationships between the best-attended films, suicide and the homicide. Lester's shows that the National Coalition on the TV violence is not an objective source, Lester did not attempt to analyze the methods used, or critically evaluate the significance of these reports. There are serious problems that prove or disprove the causal relationships that exist between the television entertainment and the violent behavior; therefore there is no reason to assume that the television news provides the easier opportunity for such research.

Methodology

This research employed a web based survey in gathering data on the Media influences and promotion of the copycat murders. I analyzed news coverage of the mass murders in Time and the Newsweek for the period ranging 1984-91 for the evidence of the disproportionate, coverage of certain categories of mass murder in a manner that influenced the occurrence of the subsequent incidents. I used this design in order to trace the root of copycat murders and at the same time justify the hypothesis which assumes that copycat murders are accelerated by media influences.. The instrument was divided into two parts;

The “ Descriptive Analysis”, which describes the influences of media in the individual’s ability to commit a crime as a result of the interests developed from the media highlights..

The “ Critical Analysis”, which assesses the extent to which the American based print media, perpetuates the copycat murders. This involved the analysis of two main Newspapers, the Times and the Newsweek based on their modes of reporting the violent criminal incidences.

Sample description and selection the copycat murder cases

In this research work the random sampling procedure was used in the process of data collection on the copycat murders, this was due to the nature of the topic which required many sources of information concerning the influences of mass media on copycat murders.

The contexts for the study were based on the distinctive nature of the internet. Data was collected in the process of evaluation of the influences of the mass media and the mode in which the copycat crimes.

Results

Table 1 shows the data gathered on the different types of murder, it is clear that the arson mass murderers and the knife mass murderers received relatively very little attention from the Time and the Newsweek. The data shows that, there is a very large discrepancy between the amount of coverage that given to the arson mass murders, and the mass murderers involving the guns exclusively. The fire arms leads with a factor of almost nine times as much coverage as seen from the comparison between the coverage given to the exclusive firearms mass murderers and to the arson mass murderers.

Murderer

Month/Year

Dead

Newsweek sq. in.

Newsweek Sq. Inches/Dead

James Huberty

Jul-84

22

157. 50

7. 16

Sylvia Seegrist

Nov-85

2

0. 00

0. 00

William Bryan Cruse

Apr-87

6

0. 00

0. 00

David Burke

Dec-87

43

57. 75

1. 34

Robert Dreesman

Dec-87

7

0. 00

0. 00

Ronald Gene Simmons

Dec-87

16

78. 75

4. 92

Richard Wade Farley

Feb-88

7

0. 00

0. 00

Laurie Wasserman Dann

May-88

2

54. 00

27. 00

Patrick Purdy

Jan-89

6

370. 34

61. 72

Joseph T. Wesbecker

Sep-89

8

52. 50

6. 56

James E. Pough

Jun-90

9

0. 00

0. 00

George Hennard

Oct-91

24

78. 75

3. 28

Firearms Murders

152

849. 59

5. 59

There is a large discrepancy that exists; however, this is because of the many articles which mentioned Patrick Purdy's crime. But even with the exclusion of all coverage of Patrick Purdy's crimes (there is still a very charitable assumption on the data by the Time and Newsweek, in consideration of the centrality to the Wesbecker's actions of the Time's coverage), the square inches per dead body for the firearms mass murderers is still more than 5 times the coverage when it comes to the arson mass murderers. This dramatic difference was shown by Plotting the square inches per dead body mass media coverage on the selected murderers incidents as shown below.

Plotting of the firearms mass murder coverage against time also showed some interesting results, as shown in Figure 2. In this case, the mass murder coverage rose dramatically with the crimes committed by Laurie Wasserman

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Dann and Patrick Purdy There is a sudden dived back from high to very low levels especially during the pre-Dann levels with the Wesbecker incident. The Time newspaper which is more prone to the coverage of the firearms mass murders before Dann and Purdy, was the noticeably restrained of the two magazines as seen in its coverage of the mass murders from Wesbecker and onwards. There is a unique relationship pertaining the Time seen from the connection between their coverage of the Purdy, and the Wesbecker's bloody rampage?

Discussion

The cases analyzed included the following;

On January 17, 1989, a homosexual prostitute who was also a drug addict with a very long history of the criminal offenses and mental disturbance, Patrick Purdy, directly to the Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California. He firebombed his car, entered a playground during the recess time carrying a Chinese gun, a semiautomatic version of the full automatic AK-47), he shot to death five children, wounded 29 other children and the teacher, then shot himself in the head using a 9mm handgun.

The Initial coverage of the Purdy's crime was relatively restrained, where only the essential details were reported. The Time paper gave Purdy just part of a page in the first issue after the crime titled (" Slaughter in a School Yard", 1989). The Newsweek gave a single page titled " Death on the Playground," and pointed to the four prior attacks on the school children, it started with the Laurie Dann. The Newsweek included Purdy's photograph in its article. Newsweek's article (Baker, Joseph, and Cerio, 1989) quoted the <https://assignbuster.com/mass-media-effect-on-promoting-copycat-mass-murders-media-essay/>

authors of a book with the content on mass murder: “ There’s a copycat element that cannot be denied.”

A week later, Patrick Purdy’s name had received a lot of attention, and consequently his fame increased. At one point the front cover of the Time openly showed the AK-47 and the AR-15 which were crossed, beneath the outline of the U. S. which was stylized into a jawless skull, and titled, “ Armed America.” Inside, the George Church’s “ The Other Arms Race,” (1989) this occupied almost 6½ pages, opening with Patrick Purdy’s name.

Consequently the articles referencing Purdy or his criminal act continued to appear in Newsweek and Time for several months.

Within the same year, On September 14, 1989, Joseph Wesbecker who was a disabled employee of the Standard Gravure Co. in the Kentucky entered into the printing plant similarly carrying the AKS and a 9mm handgun. A reminiscence of Purdy’s scenario, the Wesbecker’s actions were shortly detailed by the UPI wire service stories, particularly the William H. Inman’s which was titled “ Wesbecker’s rampage is boon to gun dealers” (1989a): The most important fact is how the news coverage of the Purdy’s crime influenced Wesbecker’s actions, and eve the identification of the weapon of choice for such an act of savagery. (Inman, 1989)

The police investigated this incident and at Wesbecker’s residence, they found the manuals on weapons and an article published on February 6 issue of Time magazine devoted to the mass killers, including the one on Robert Sherrill, who slaughtered 14 people in the Oklahoma post office three years ago, and another one on Patrick Purdy, who killed five children with the AK-

47 assault rifle in the Stockton, Calif, in January 1989. The same AK-47 was the main weapon used by Wesbecker.

It is obvious that Joseph Wesbecker was not a healthy and well-adjusted person driven to commit his crime as a result of the sensational news coverage. The Time newspaper might have been responsible for having indirectly caused the horrible crime; this temptation could have been avoided. The editors of the Time might have foreseen the high probability for this kind of coverage promoting the “ copycat” crimes.

In analyzing of the data, this research paper based on two related issues:

The level of the coverage that was given by the print media, the Time and Newsweek where certain crimes appeared to encourage the unbalanced people, who were seeking a lasting fame, by copying these crimes as we seen in Joseph Wesbecker’s 1989 homicidal rampage.

The analysis of the quantity of the press coverage which was given to the mass murder as in the case of the Newsweek and especially the Time which gave the undue attention to the particular type of mass murder, hence to the detriment of the public safety.

Conclusion

There are some positive effects from the mass media portrayals of the violence murders, according to a study the print and television have significant effects on the copycat murders some news reports have the major effects of promoting the copy cat violence and the killings. Therefore study conclude that the reporters are in need of some kind of guide on how the <https://assignbuster.com/mass-media-effect-on-promoting-copycat-mass-murders-media-essay/>

violence murder should be reported so as to avoid the potential negative effects that emanates from the mode of reporting to the public. There is the need to develop a journalistic style guide to determine the type of information which is recommended due to the potential positive or the negative effects. (Cairns, 1990, Price, Merrill, & Clause, 1992, Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991)

The mode coverage of crime incidences in the society forms a very valuable tool in an individual decision making. The properly informed Individuals, can make rational decisions basing on their personal safety. If the population has been misled, be it intentional or not, it depends on the nature of the crimes, and the rarity or commonality of the said crimes. If the coverage involves an endless repetition of the apparently meaningless tragedies, it can cause a numbing effect on the population.

The mass media generates information in a network, then the collected information is published using the articles, videos, and the photos to the consumers, this has the influences the individual's ability to digest the delivered information while at the same time it potentially influences the unrelated cultural and the personal beliefs, basing on the propaganda models. The Mass media content is created from the events and the untold stories which have effects on the consumer's and their cultural orientation.