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Project report

BCM390, “Media, war and peace”

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University of Wollongong

The project report assignment had two parts. For details of the assignment see
http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/BCM390_14outline.pdf

Erik Cassella prepared

(1) an information pack in the form of a slide show: prezi.com/mghce2cpxvnn/the-act-or-an-instance-of-killing-a-number-of-usually-help/

(2) a fictional dialogue on doing the project: see following pages.

- The link to this document is from http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/mwp_tops.html.

Steven Mooring (pseudonym)
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Ian Miles
BCM Final Project Report
Information Pack can be found at
http://prezi.com/mghce2cpxvnn/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy&rc=ex0share

Dialogue

The following is a fictional dialogue between the writer of this report and a friend.

Jess: Hey, I heard about your camper Chase; I am so sorry. I also heard you're writing a report on massacres now in light of the Sandy Hook Shootings?

Steven: Yeah it's been pretty tough. It's so strange to hang out with a kid for a whole summer and then hear news that he's been killed in one of the worst school massacres in history...

Jess: I'm so sorry, I don't mean to sound insensitive, but can you remind me what happened?

Steven: No worries, I understand. Basically, a kid our age stole his mom's assault rifle and a couple pistols and killed her in their house. Then, he drove to the local elementary school in my town where he took 26 lives and then his own (CNN 2014). As you know, one of the children, Chase Kowalski, went to a summer camp I was a counselor at.

Jess: So then why write a report about such a terrible memory?

Steven: Well, I find myself asking why a lot. I ask why it had to be children, I ask why it had to happen in my town, but mostly I ask why a person would do such a thing. So I began researching online and there are actually a lot of sources that have explanations that resonated with me. The research, along with growing up in the town it occurred compelled me to write about it and bring awareness to the issue... for Chase, for all of the other victims, and for my community.

Jess: Well I hope your report gets a lot of attention. What are you going to put in it?

Steven: I'm making an information pack to inform the general public about what a massacre is and how the media perpetuates these massacres. I'll use Sandy Hook as my case study and explain two theories surrounding massacres. Hopefully with enough public support I can get the attention of the mass media; who knows...

Jess: That's exciting. Have you given any thought to how you'll format it?

Steven: Yeah I wanted to go with something online so that it can circulate fast through social media so I'm making a Prezi.

Jess: Well, I hope you have gotten some feedback on what you have so far; that information pack is going to be quite the challenge.

Steven: I did actually reach out to a few friends; I even showed a few older people walking around campus an early version of my information pack. They did say that it was pretty wordy... they said I need to make my

argument more concise and to the point.

Jess: Anything else?

Steven: Yeah I originally wanted to explain how the mass media perpetuates massacres in the beginning. I was going to explain the relevant theories... then I was going to explain massacres and what happened at Sandy Hook and how those theories apply. But one guy specifically said that I should first explain what I mean by the term "massacre" and then talk about Sandy Hook and the theories surrounding the issue. He said that would give context to my argument and would make the information pack easier to understand. So that's what I'm working on now.

Jess: That sounds like a better order. What theories are you going to apply?

Steven: Well, at first I was only interested in one: the "copycat theory". It blames the mainstream media for sensational reporting on mass shootings. The media makes these sickos seem like super-villains; they tell you about the clothes they wore, the video games they played, the things they would do on weekdays, etcetera (Barber Ph.D. 2012). Look, you didn't know how many people died at Sandy Hook but I bet you know at least the name of the shooter.

Jess: Adam Lanza or something right? I remember the news talking about him wearing camouflage and using a wheeled backpack in high school.

Steven: Yes, exactly my point. And by telling you every detail about the assailant with little regard for the victims, the mainstream media rewards mass shooters by making them famous (Mesoudi 2013)!

Jess: Wait a minute. Just because someone suicidal wants to be famous doesn't mean they're going to kill people, I don't buy it.

Steven: No, you're right; the vast majority of people would never think to commit this kind of act. But with a perfect mix of insanity, anger, and impressionableness, the mainstream media can influence people to commit such acts. According to Nigel Barber Ph.D. in reference to the spate of theatre shootings following the Aurora, CO massacre, there have been many shootings linked as copycats across the U.S. (Barber Ph.D. 2012). They relate things like weapons, methods of the massacre and things alike to link past and present shootings. Gabriel Tarde once said "epidemics of crime follow the telegraph," and although the telegraph is obsolete, the saying still holds true (Perritano 2013).

Jess: Makes sense... you implied you had another theory earlier?

Steven: Yeah, I wasn't expecting to find another theory, but I stumbled across another one in my research. It's called "depersonalization theory" and it basically says that by glorifying the assailant in mass shootings and giving intimate details about them, the mainstream media creates a persona of a killer (Barber Ph.D. 2012). Individuals can then use this persona as a sort-of alter ego.

Jess: Oh, I see! So people can actually detach themselves from reality to

rationalize mass murders in their own heads... Is it sort of like a video game character?

Steven: Exactly right.

Jess: I never really thought about it like that. I mean we are all contributing to the mass media's ratings so obviously they'll continue this kind of reporting. But surely the mass media alone can't be blamed?

Steven: Of course not, and that is one of the weaknesses I found with my theories. The mass media alone is in no way the main culprit. Mental health, gun laws, our societal structure and many other factors play a role in massacres (Vasilogambros). My argument is simply that the mass media has a role to play, however small that may be.

Jess: Well, if the media have a role to play, it must be for good reason. Do you know what you will recommend?

Steven: I'll basically take an ethics approach to reporting in mass media. I'm going to base it off of the guidelines for reporting on teenage suicides that came out in the 70's.

Jess: I never heard of those guidelines, what do you mean?

Steven: Prior to the 1970's, teenage suicides gained popularity through the mass media (Caruso). They were romanticizing suicide in a way that triggered depressed teens to commit suicide, much like what is happening today with mass shootings (Caruso). The mainstream media gave these

kids a morbidly attractive idea (Mesoudi 2013). Heaps of media outlets got together and made guidelines on the reporting of teenage suicide that most channels of media follow today (Caruso).

Jess: What kind of guidelines?

Stephen: According to suicide.org, mass media should not begin a television newscast with a suicide story or put it on a cover of a magazine or newspaper (Caruso). They should never say that a suicide “ended pain” or “ended suffering” (Caruso). They must be careful about describing the methods used without going into great detail (Caruso).

Jess: Those sound effective.

Steven: Exactly, and in fact, after a campaign in Vienna to implement these guidelines, suicides and attempted suicides dropped by over 80% after only six months (Caruso)! Because these guidelines were so effective, I figured why not translate them to reporting on massacres?

Jess: What are you recommending then?

Steven: I have three recommendations so far: firstly, the mass media should not go into detail about how a massacre took place. They should sum up what happened, but shouldn’t allow the public to relive the event with immense details. Second, the mass media should not release any unnecessary information about the assailant. Lastly, families of victims should not be interviewed.

Jess: These all seem fair and they definitely establish a standard of ethics for the mass media. But, doesn't the mass media have a "right to know" clause (Hulnick 2001)?

Steven: Yes, well the mass media definitely has the right to report whatever they want, and the public certainly has a right to be informed. I'm trying to say that massacres nowadays are similar to teenage suicides in the 70's; it's becoming a trend. They had no obligation to follow guidelines then, but they chose to in order to save lives. They still have no obligation; however, we need to ask the media to trade ratings in for lives as it did in the 1970's. They saw a need for it before, why don't they now?

Steven: Look, if you're still not sold, check out this quote by James Fox, a famous criminologist: "It is perfectly reasonable to shed light on the tragic event without a media spotlight on the alleged assailant. It is shameless, if not dangerous, to transform an obscure nobody into an infamous somebody who may be revered and admired" (Perritano 2013)

Jess: It sounds like something has got to change. Where to now?

Steven: I wouldn't be surprised if psychologists began to investigate this, to try and figure out how big of a role mass media plays in this trend. It also wouldn't surprise me if a new set of guidelines came out about reporting on massacres.

References:

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