

IDEAS KILL: SCIENCE SHINES A LIGHT ON PORT ARTHUR DEATHS

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A few months before the Port Arthur Massacre, a glamorous current affairs presenter showed Australia how easy it was to get the guns used in massacres. She demonstrated every step, emphasising that she knew nothing about guns and had never held a licence. She filmed the guns lying on the street and cut in similar scenes from after massacres. An activist showed her (and us) how to load and shoot the guns. She showed us how these guns 'designed for killing people' are easy to use, then blew apart a target like the head of a victim.

"I bought these guns from classified ads in just three hours, and I certainly never had a gun licence." © Nine Network



"I never even held a gun before, but...!" © Nine Network



Then a gun control activist offered a key to worldwide infamy: "We are going to have a massacre in Tasmania like those elsewhere!" He sold the massacre in Tasmania as certainty, almost destiny.

They Showed the way to Death

After seeing this show, Allen Burrows travelled from Victoria to Tasmania, bought a gun as he had been shown by the presenter, and killed himself. Coroner Ian Matterson found he acted on a script provided by that current affairs segment.

In the study of suicide, media reporting has been shown to cause extra suicides and even murder-suicides. Even in self-destruction people copy other similar people.

It was shown as early as 1980 that car and aircraft fatal accidents rose after publicity for suicides. Some drivers and pilots were influenced enough to take others with them in death (Phillips 1980). Many lives have since been saved because reporters changed the way we report suicide.

As for Suicide, So for Other Violence

But what about other dramatic acts of violence? Airline hostage crises, Aboriginal deaths in custody; car chases, home invasions, terror bombings, arson, family murder-suicides, and mass shootings - these stories come in waves then fade away.

The string of mass killings was partly caused by the way our media culture sends the script to the killers. Review the evidence:

- News and current affairs reporting gives powerful rewards for horror crimes – worldwide name recognition and repeating of the killers’ words.
- The reporting style that causes suicide contagion is normal for mass shootings.
- The crimes are tightly clustered in time, a new one while the last one is still echoing around the current affairs shows.
- The crimes follow a very few story lines; postal worker kills after dismissal; trench-coat mafia kills at school; lonely obsessed oddball kills in a crowded place.
- Only the first killer in the Australian series, Knight, had a prior history of serious violence; the subsequent ones have a prior history of excessive passivity (Cantor 2001).
- Mass killers keep media reports of earlier massacres, and go out of their way to get the same weapons and act the same way.

Not A Virus – A Script

Stephen Pinker in ‘How the Mind Works’ addresses the Port Arthur massacre as following a script that cuts across cultures: the ‘amok’, a male who revenges his lack of status in a suicidal murder spree. Forensic psychiatrist Professor Paul Mullen of Monash University has worked with mass killers, and says they are following a taught cultural script. Professor Mullen made it clear that Bryant wanted to be the very worst mass killer: “He asked me: “Have I got the record?””

So what is the script Bryant read? The world’s media lavished coverage on massacres from around the world and his own country. Both TV and newspaper reporting over and over gave prominence to the names and words of mass killers and said how easy it would be to happen here.

A few months after the current affairs program that led to Allen Burrows suicide, Thomas Hamilton murdered a group of children in Dunblane. The media went berserk. They showed the script Thomas Hamilton followed; they emphasised his name, the guns he used, the planning, his lost social standing and the everyday innocence of the location. They rounded up the usual activists again to tell us how it would surely happen here next.

As the frenzy started to die down Martin Bryant drove to Port Arthur and launched his own killing spree.

At the time, commentators emphasised the ‘mysteriousness’ of why these killings happen. They posited dark forces in our society and violence at the root of human nature. If the idea is true that a culturally taught script caused the massacres, it should throw light on the ‘mystery’.

Why Tasmania, not Queensland which had even easier gun laws? Significantly, there was a difference in the media scripts in 1995-96. Anti-gun activism had a high profile in Tasmania. Activist media rhetoric repeatedly emphasised the concept 'we are going to have a massacre in Tasmania'. To the wrong person this scripts the possibility and frames it as destiny.

"Designed for killing people?" "Designed for killing people." © Nine Network



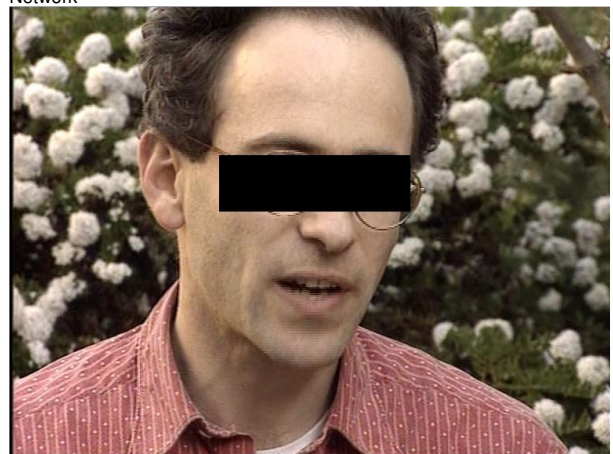
What makes a person choose to do such a thing? Rewards and guidance. These killers were nobodies until their massacres. Media reports reward the killers with name recognition, repeat their words and highlight their insignificant lives. And the reports show how to get the guns and use them, none more explicitly than our gorgeous presenter.

Why did the mass shootings stop? Many authorities believed that there would be more massacres despite the new laws, because we thought the availability of guns was the cause and only some would be eliminated. Martin Bryant was captured alive. According to the script theory, this inhibits copycats because they see the perpetrator face the consequences.

"Tasmania at the moment is our weakest link." © Nine Network



"We are going to have a massacre in Tasmania!" © Nine Network



The script model says that faced with uncertainty, a person looks to another similar person as a guide. Bryant, deciding whether to plead guilty, asked what Julian Knight, the perpetrator of the Hoddle Street massacre, pleaded.

The innocent victims of Martin Bryant, scripted not to resist, hid under tables and held still while he killed them.

Now consider the 2002 Monash University killings. A foreign student was afraid to account to his family for failing his course. He was mentally ill, and he saw a form of escape in the amok script. Weeks of media coverage of the Washington snipers showed the way. He killed two people, but heroic bystanders prevented him from killing others or himself. The message was reinforced - the massacre script was not working anymore.

The cultural script idea makes sense of acts that once seemed senseless.

The Danger Was Known

Was this danger known in 1995? Yes. Phillips' research on suicide from 1980 onward roused heavy controversy in media and public health circles. Cramer in 1993 detailed how Time and Newsweek articles were kept and followed by American mass killers. Guidelines to prevent contagion and copycat violence were hotly debated in the early 1990s, and the ideas were well known in the news business. To this day individual newspapers enforce guidelines on suicide reporting but the Australian Press Council guidelines merely acknowledge the possibility of some impact.

This single media story did not alone cause the Port Arthur massacre, but the evidence is persuasive that it was part of the cause. The news culture probably caused not just one, but a string of massacres. Our broadcast and print journalists, with their activist sources, gave Martin Bryant the idea, showed him how and offered huge rewards - incentive to murder 35 innocent people.

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