“No name, no face, no nothing”: How Colorado journalists talk about mass shooters

By Anna Haynes

When I heard the first gunshots, I thought they were fireworks.

I was in my apartment living room eating a bagel and checking my emails. When the noise continued, I absentmindedly decided to get up from my recliner and peek through the window blinds. Instead of seeing someone setting off fireworks or maybe a car backfiring, I saw a man with a machine gun.

My apartment was across the street from a King Soopers supermarket. The man with the gun ran up one of the ramps leading to the store entrance, stumbling to aim behind him and firing repeatedly at a spot on the ground. I couldn’t see what he was shooting at, but I could guess.

My worst fears were confirmed when I noticed a man lying face-down in the middle of the parking lot, unmoving. I already knew he was dead. And the shooter was now inside the store.

I stayed glued to my window, watching helplessly as people fled from the store in terror and police cars and SWAT teams appeared in droves. Within one hour, the shooter killed ten people, including a police officer.

Just hours later, journalists from all over the country set up camp on the lawn in front of my apartment. As a witness, I stepped outside and offered to recount what I saw to one of the local anchors.

In the hours following the shooting, journalists scrambled to figure out any information they could about the shooter. Because I knew what he looked like, my appearance on a local news station was, within hours, trumped by on-air interviews with anchors from CNN, MSNBC, NBC, the BBC and others, all eager to feature my vague physical description of him. Interview requests abruptly ceased when journalists got a hold of a blurry photograph of the shooter being escorted out of the store by policemen, wearing only underwear and with blood running down his leg from a gunshot wound.

I spent the following weeks in a daze, reeling from the surreal experience. As a journalist, I understood why the reporters from around the country and the globe wanted as much information as they could get—from me and any other witness—in the hours before there were any official statements. But as a person who saw the horrific event, I was left with some serious questions about why and how journalists cover mass shootings.

Colorado—specifically the Greater Denver Area—is home to several high-profile mass shootings, including the most recent being the King Soopers shooting in Boulder that I

witnessed just over a year ago on March 22, 2021. Before that was the Aurora movie theater shooting in July 2012, where a gunman killed 12 people during a midnight showing of *The Dark Knight Rises.* Before that, in April 1999, two Columbine High School students became killers when they murdered 13 people at their Littleton school before killing themselves.

In 2019, *The Denver Post* found that Colorado had the fifth-highest rate of mass shootings and the 10th-highest rate of school shootings per million people compared to other U.S. states. The Denver metropolitan area had more school shootings than the 24 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S. since 1999, as well as the third-most mass shootings overall.

While there isn't one factor that can be tied to the prevalence of mass shootings in Colorado, experts have cited easy access to firearms as contributors. According to a 2016 USA Today article, Colorado is the fourth-easiest state to buy a gun since it doesn't require a license, registration or permit for all firearms.

Experts also point to a "contagion effect" originating with Columbine. The contagion effect refers to the phenomenon of a mass shooting being followed immediately by a spike in additional mass shootings, and the notoriety of the Columbine shooting has made Colorado something of a focal point for other potential shooters.

And unfortunately, many journalists in Colorado have had to cover at least one mass shooting.

"It's not a highlight of any journalist's career to be able to say that they've covered multiple mass shootings," said Ann Trujillo, a news anchor who has worked for Denver7 since 1984 and covered several mass shootings since Columbine. "It's a horrible thing."

While most journalists are sobered by the experience of covering mass shootings, Trujillo has heard some speak as if "they're almost proud of how many mass shootings they have covered."

"It's not a point of pride," Trujillo continued. "It's one of the toughest things I've ever had to cover."

Following the Boulder shooting, *The New York Times* published an article outlining its protocol for covering mass shootings. The *Times* publishes the names and sometimes the photos of perpetrators, but it does not publish photos in which the perpetrator is holding a weapon, nor does it publish or quote any manifestoes that the perpetrator may have written explaining their motives.

"There's considerable research that shows that those who commit mass shootings thoroughly research past mass shootings," Marc Lacey, an editor for the *Times*, said in the

article. “These young men become obsessed with looking at all the coverage and images of previous gunmen, and want to seek similar, in their minds, glory, by committing their own heinous acts.”

These protocols don’t exist in a vacuum. In recent years, groups like Don’t Name Them and No Notoriety have been formed to encourage journalists to limit sharing information about the perpetrators of mass shootings, claiming that doing so could bolster the contagion effect or further traumatize communities.

But what does this look like in actual newsrooms? How do Colorado journalists, who are all too familiar with mass shootings, talk about the perpetrators?

The contagion effect

The Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colo., in 1999 was the first mass shooting that many journalists covered in their careers. One would be hard-pressed to find someone who doesn’t know the name of at least one of the two shooters and not so hard-pressed to find someone who idolized them.

According to a report by *Mother Jones*, there have been at least 74 known “copycat” cases of mass attacks or threats of mass attacks in which the perpetrator cited the shooting as inspiration, resulting in a phenomenon commonly referred to as “the Columbine effect.” The Columbine effect is reflective of what groups like Don’t Name Them and No Notoriety call the contagion effect.

No Notoriety was founded by Tom and Caren Teves after their son, Alex, was killed in the Aurora theater shooting in 2012. No Notoriety emphasizes the importance of balancing the tasks of informing the public and minimizing harm – both of which are tenets of the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics. No Notoriety’s media protocol advises journalists to limit the use of the name and likeness of mass shooters and avoid publishing “self-serving statements, photos, videos and/or manifestos made by the individual.”

Tom and Caren Teves spoke to *The Guardian* about how they “spent the hours and the days after the shooting watching lurid photographs of the shooter constantly on the news, even as Tom Teves pushed news anchors to focus instead on the bravery of the victims, survivors and first responders.”

Don’t Name Them is a similar campaign coordinated by the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) Center at Texas State University, the I Love U Guys Foundation and the FBI. Don’t Name Them’s website advises public officials and journalists not to “sensationalize the names of the shooters in briefings — or in reporting about active attack events.”

J. Pete Blair is the director of the ALERRT Center and a founder of Don't Name Them. Blair became a professor in the School of Criminal Justice at TSU in 2007 and began conducting research with the ALERRT Center. He eventually became a director of research before becoming the director of the program.

Compared to Don't Name Them, Blair said, No Notoriety was more "hardcore" and "aggressive" when it was founded.

"Our approach was always to say, 'hey, here's why we don't think you should be doing this. I'm going to educate you about it. And then you're going to make your own choices about what you're going to do,'" Blair said.

The goal of Don't Name Them wasn't to render perpetrators "unnameable like Voldemort," Blair said, but to focus on the affected communities, what people can do to protect themselves, and warning signs.

Blair likened shooters' incentives of notoriety to convenience store robberies in the 1980s. Robbers used to make thousands of dollars by robbing a convenience store on a weekend night, resulting in the murders of store clerks. Now, convenience stores often have drop safes with a maximum amount of cash on hand.

"You could still rob that store," Blair said, "but you're not going to get the thousands of dollars that you used to get."

Like robbers, Blair said, many mass shooters do what they do with the expectation of a reward — in this case, notoriety. If the news media decreases the amount of notoriety a shooter receives by talking about them less, others will be less motivated to carry out shootings.

Blair pointed to a study led by statistician Sherry Towers which used statistical probability to show a pattern of the contagion effect. After mass shootings with four or more people killed, Towers found that there is a temporary increase in the probability of another mass shooting for 13 days, during which "each incident incites at least 0.3 new incidents." The researchers posited that the lower numbers of fatalities compared to other shootings "reduces their relative sensationalism, and thus reduces their contagiousness."

Towers theorized that media attention may have to do with the phenomenon, although the correlation between media coverage and additional shootings immediately following a mass shooting has since been challenged by other studies.

"Obviously, any data like that is tough to get real, hard, definitive proof of something," Blair said. "But certainly you can point at least anecdotally to many of the attackers pointing back to previous attackers and saying they idolize those attackers." For Blair and Don't Name

Them, these anecdotes are enough to indicate that journalists need to approach reporting on perpetrators differently.

One month after the Columbine High School shooting, a gunman opened fire at Heritage High School in Georgia, wounding six students. He told a psychiatrist after the shooting that "he was thinking about Columbine, and how much media coverage the incident received, and about how much attention he might win if he followed suit," according to a 2016 study on " fame-seeking rampage shooters" written by Adam Lankford, a criminology professor at the University of Alabama.

"The Columbine kids get referred to all the time, for example, still to this day," Blair added. "So definitely you see that kind of thing occurring. And if we can lessen that, then that's obviously good."

Part of why journalists continue to report at length on perpetrators, Blair believes, is profit.

"I think that you have a conflict in journalism right now, where yes, part of your job is to inform the public. But another part of your job now is to generate clicks. And that's how revenue is being generated now," Blair said. With engagement being tied to revenue for news organizations in the U.S., he thinks the pressure to get engagement on stories can lead to journalists sensationalizing stories by feeding the public's curiosity about the killers.

"I understand that you feel you have a duty to inform and then you also have this pressure of trying to generate revenue. But is it worth doing that if you may be costing people lives?"

Rep. Tom Sullivan, the State House representative for Arapahoe County, found the notion that mass shooters are motivated to carry out shootings by their predecessors more dubious. Sullivan ran for office after his son, Alex, was killed in the Aurora Theater shooting in 2012.

Sullivan said that mass shooters, such as the man who killed 32 people at Virginia Tech in 2007, have learned how to more efficiently carry out shootings by observing what previous shooters did. They may also aim to get "higher totals" of people killed than their predecessors.

"But I don't think that comes from seeing what somebody else did," Sullivan said. "They've already got that mindset long before these actions have happened."

"Where's the line?"

The Don't Name Them website states that using the names and likenesses of shooters to apprehend them is important.

“However,” the website continues, “once they are captured, it’s really no longer a part of the story, other than to create a call to action for a like-minded killer to take their plans and thoughts and make them into deeds.”

Avoiding names and likenesses, though, can become complicated when shooters don’t die at the scene of the shooting, which inevitably means that charges will be brought against them and that journalists will report on legal proceedings.

While the Boulder King Soopers shooter was ruled incompetent for trial in December 2021 the case against him may proceed soon. The *Daily Camera*, Boulder’s local daily newspaper, has covered developments regarding the trial at length.

Julie Vossler-Henderson is the senior editor for the *Daily Camera* and the *Longmont Times-Call.*

“Any time there's a story about where his legal issues are, we wind up naming him because it's about him,” Vossler-Henderson said about the Boulder King Soopers shooter. “We name him and we use his mugshot or a picture of him in court with those stories.”

The *Daily Camera* receives complaints from readers both for naming the shooter and for using photos of him. Vossler-Henderson questioned why mass shooters shouldn’t be identified, but perpetrators of other crimes are.

“Where's the line?” she asked. “Every bad crime that we write about in the *Camera* negatively affected someone.”

Mitchell Byars has reported for the Daily Camera since 2011 and covers breaking news and crime. Not only are photos and names part of the “transparency aspect” of journalism, Byars said, but avoiding direct references to a shooter can “mythicize” mass shootings when they happen, which can contribute to giving shooters a sense of notoriety.

“It’s not a name, but people hear about this thing and they don’t hear the court proceedings and maybe some of the consequences that follow. I think that can maybe mythicize it in a sense,” he said.

Sullivan chooses not to say the name of the man who killed his son in the Aurora theater shooting.

“It does give me kind of a little bit of a jolt, but I’ll allow others to talk about him how they want to,” he said.

When it comes to showing a perpetrator’s likeness, Sullivan said that a perpetrator’s photo doesn’t need to be shown excessively, but that their photo is also effective in that it “gets you to look up from whatever it is you're doing when the news is on.”

"That's why they try to use that kind of a picture in a newspaper story … to get you to read that story as opposed to just flipping through and reading the headlines and not reading the full story," he added.

Not showing photos, Sullivan continued, could also grant perpetrators undeserved anonymity.

In November of 2021, a boy shot and killed four students at his school, Oxford High School, in Michigan. The boy's parents were charged with involuntary manslaughter for providing him with the gun and failing to interfere when he showed clear signs of mental distress.

"We should see the pictures of those two parents. Those are the people who were really a part of making this happen," Sullivan said. "They shouldn't be able to live anonymously the rest of their lives."

When No Notoriety was founded, television news station Denver7 adjusted its approach to talking about mass shooters in response to an increasing public push for more anonymity. But this became complicated when the trial of the Aurora theater shooter began.

"For a while, we were like, 'no name, no face, no nothing,'" Denver7 Assistant News Director Kirsten Boyd said. "And then by the time the trial came around, it was like, 'how do we do this trial without saying the name?'"

Boyd said that Denver7 was mindful of how it used the shooter's name and photograph in its coverage. For example, the station avoided using photos of the shooter, such as his mugshot, as "wallpaper video" — an image used as a placeholder in broadcast news. But part of the journalists' role, she added, is to report on the reasoning behind why the shooter did what they did. Choosing not to cover these reasons is "withholding information."

"I think that's where the 'do no harm' thing is a little outdated," she continued. "You have instances where somebody says, 'I don't want this story out there at all.' And we might hurt that family by putting that story out there. But then we might have somebody else who says, 'I want this story out there because it could change a life. It could save a life, maybe, by knowing more.'"

This is also the case, Boyd said, with the King Soopers shooting.

"We're almost a year out now. And we still don't really know why this person came into a grocery store with a gun and just started shooting at people at random," she said. "As much as we don't want to talk about him and we don't want to lift him up, it's also like, well, what happened? Why? Not that you could ever really, rationally explain why, but people want to know."

Trujillo said that timing is also a factor in sharing more information about a shooter's motives.

"We will tell those stories, but it doesn't always have to be immediate because those answers aren't necessarily that clear right away," she said. "It generally takes time because, obviously, these people who want to commit these crimes, their lives are very complicated. It's not that easy sometimes to filter through."

While motives may vary, many patterns in perpetrators leading up to mass shootings are similar. By reporting these patterns, journalists aren't unveiling a "new pathway to violence," Blair said.

"It's pretty clear that the process that tends to happen is that this is a person who has trouble fitting in and adapting well. If they get angry, they're not good at relieving that anger the way other people might do it. So they become angrier and angrier. They start to plan. They start to get the stuff they need to launch the attack. Oftentimes, they're leaking during that time — telling people, making threats, posting things on social media. And then they launch the attack," Blair said, citing a 2014 study of active shooter incidents from the FBI.

"Certainly, that information getting out and becoming public is one part of taking action against the school district and others who maybe should have done something and didn't. But that would have come out during discovery from attorneys doing their work as well, in addition to journalists doing it," Blair added.

No Notoriety advises that journalists limit saying the name of a shooter to "once per piece" and never include their name in the headline. But it also provides guidelines on how to speak about a shooter's "mindset, demographic and motivational profile," advising that journalists do so "without adding complimentary color to the individual or their actions."

Following the Boulder shooting, *The Denver Post* published an article with testimony from those who knew the shooter. Against No Notoriety's protocol, the article names the shooter 29 times, including in the headline.

The article included red flags that classmates identified in the shooter, recounting that he was violent, easily angered, paranoid and "kind of scary to be around." It also included, however, what No Notoriety may classify as "complimentary color." Some recalled him as being "so joyful and so nice," "a good guy," "super cool and super funny."

"People are complex," said Shelly Bradbury, a court reporter for the Denver Post and one of the authors of the article on the King Soopers shooter. "One of the basic tenets of journalism ... is to try to tell the truth as best as we know it and as wholly as we know it. And if I have

people telling me things (that are) positive about a shooter, then that needs to be included in the story just as much as the negative things."

"They leave but we're still here"

Following the Columbine shooting, reporters from all over the world flocked to the scene of the tragedy, setting up camp in Clement Park next to the school.

"Columbine was really the first mass shooting… that our country had seen where that many people were killed inside a high school by their fellow students," 9News anchor Kim Christiansen said of the tragedy, which attracted "media coverage like no one has ever seen before."

Christiansen, a lifelong Coloradoan and nine-time Emmy winner, covered the Columbine shooting. When she went to the Catholic church near the school, she recalled seeing satellite trucks for "literally miles."

"I've never seen anything like that in my life," Christiansen said. "I was out there reporting live and all of a sudden I turned around and Katie Couric was standing there."

Within the next couple of weeks, Christiansen said, national and international journalists left Littleton.

"They packed up and moved on to the next event and the next big breaking news story," Christiansen said. "They leave but we're still here."

Christiansen recalled how, following the shooting, the students at Columbine retaliated against local news media who showed up to events at the school in the weeks and months after the tragedy: screaming, throwing things and even slashing the tires of their cars.

"They felt like their school, in many cases, was being labeled as this horrible, painful place because of two individuals," she said.

"That was directed to us, and we're the ones in the community, right? We live here," she continued. "I think it made us realize how important it was for us to build relationships with people there."

Since Columbine, journalists have continued to receive backlash for their approaches to news coverage of mass shootings. The *Daily Camera* received several complaints regarding its coverage of the King Soopers shooting.

"Every time we have a story on the *Camera* about the shooter, we hear about it," Vossler-Henderson said. "Or even about the shooting, sometimes we hear about it."

Amidst the criticism that journalists receive, Sullivan does his best to "set them at ease" when they have "trepidations about how to ask or what to say."

"There's not a question you're going to ask me that I haven't heard," he said. "I've already heard the worst thing I'm ever going to hear in my life."

Oftentimes, community feedback on news coverage can be a positive thing, leading to improvements in how journalists interact with those impacted by mass shootings. When journalists at 9News considered how to tell the story of the five years since the Aurora theater shooting, Christiansen recalled how one reporter came up with the idea of inviting families of victims and survivors to a dinner at the station where they could provide feedback on how to approach coverage.

"We got an earful, and believe me, there was still a lot that we were not doing right and they let us know in no uncertain terms," she said. While journalists need to stay true to their duty to inform the public, it is important not to retraumatize or alienate those in the community closest to the tragedy.

One of Christiansen's takeaways from the dinner was to refrain from using the term "anniversary" to describe the five years that had passed since the Aurora shooting.

"I've stuck with that," she said. "When anybody says 'anniversary' in a script for me, I take it out, change it."

"That's a habit that you just have to break," she continued, "but it was an important one, and I think we learned that by talking to the people that have gone through something like this."

Sullivan recalled that his family's interaction with the news media following the Aurora shooting has "by and large been a positive."

"I've talked to families from Columbine," Sullivan said. "In the 13 years since then leading up to the theater massacre, things changed quite a bit. I mean, I'm just floored to hear some of the ways that they interacted with those victims."

Christiansen recounted her experience following Sean, a 15-year-old freshman at Columbine High School who was shot in the leg, through his recovery.

His doctors "weren't 100% sure he was going to walk again," she recalled. "He worked so hard that… at his high school graduation from Columbine, he was able to get to the stage and lose the crutch and walk to get his diploma."

Christiansen said that Sean's interaction with 20/20, a primetime television news program, was less than ideal.

"Everybody was writing all these different things about the people that were injured. There was so much information out there. And one thing was that he really loved to cook," she said.

When Christiansen asked Sean about his love for cooking, he told her that he didn't actually like to cook very much.

"It's just that I've had 20/20 here for like two weeks showing up trying to do all this different stuff with me, but I don't really care that much about it," Sean told her. "I just had to do something with them and they asked me to cook."

Christiansen, on the other hand, is still in contact with Sean, calling him "an extraordinary man."

Boyd pointed to how the approach is different when "people living in your community who shop with you, who go to church with you, who drive the same roads as you" cover local mass shootings.

"We internalize it a lot more," Boyd said. "And I hope that that comes across in the coverage."

"Journalists definitely deserve some grace"

Part of internalizing the tragedies in their communities that they cover can expose journalists to significant stress and trauma, even if they appear neutral in their reporting.

According to [The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](), research suggests that over 80% of journalists have been exposed to a traumatic event through their work. In one study, 92% of journalists said that they had experienced at least four traumatic events.

"Journalists definitely deserve some grace," Vossler-Henderson said. "When they're covering mass shootings, it's definitely when they deserve a little bit of grace."

Boyd said that because journalists are told to be impartial, they can sometimes be perceived as unemotional. While on the job, journalists often feel the need to suppress their emotional responses to tragedies.

Among the print and broadcast journalists I spoke with, the broadcast journalists more readily offered recounts of the emotional distress of covering tragedies like mass shootings. A news anchor has to speak face-to-face with an audience, which can make an appearance of neutrality more difficult to maintain.

Boyd said she didn't cry about the Aurora theater shooting until five years after the tragedy while writing a script with the names of all of the victims who were killed.

"I stopped writing and I just had to get up and walk down the hallway. And I just sobbed for like 10 minutes," she said. "You feel such a mission and such a purpose to inform the community that you don't often deal with it yourself."

Trujillo recalled how reporting on Columbine, her first "major, major event," affected her emotionally.

"I remember getting off the set late at night going home and crying at home because that was about the time that I finally could really let it all sink in and think about what I'd heard," Trujillo said, "because I felt like when I was sitting on the news set and having to relay information, that's when you have to keep it together."

But television news stations are learning that audiences don't want "the heartless anchor person behind the desk, just giving out facts and information like they don't care," Boyd said.

"We can't act like being impartial means that we're just going to report news and information in a vacuum like we aren't affected by the things we see or hear," she continued.

Trujillo added that some journalists leave the industry because of their exposure to traumatic events. Following the Marshall Wildfire in Boulder County in December, Denver7 made mental health experts available to its staff.

"You don't have to be directly affected or know one of the victims to know that it could have been you, it could have been your family member," she said. "And, really, are you much of a human being if you don't feel that?"

"I think it's healthy for anybody to be able to seek help if they need it because there's just a lot going on in the world these days," Trujillo added. "It's important that we all take care of ourselves."

No right answer

During the year that has passed since the Boulder King Soopers shooting, my perspective on journalism has shifted drastically.

I began to develop a pessimistic view towards reporters who cover such tragedies, despite writing about traumatic events as a student reporter myself. In spite of myself and of the respect with which my interviewers treated me, I started to believe that many journalists really are motivated by spectacle above all else.

My brief experience on the other side left me paranoid. Did any of those who interviewed me actually care about my trauma? Or did they just use me to get the first scoop on the perpetrator?

But talking to journalists who have had to report on mass shootings about their own experiences has reminded me that journalists are just as human as everyone else. They may have to suppress their emotional response to tragedies in order to do their job, but that doesn't mean that they're indifferent to what happens in their own communities.

Being human, I've learned, also means that you are inevitably going to hurt people, whether you want to or not. Journalists often don't cover tragedies like mass shootings in the right way — not because they choose not to, but because there is no right way.

"We can debate this issue to the end of time. I don't think we will ever come to a consensus on this," Byars said.

The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics tells journalists to minimize harm, not to take on the impossible task of avoiding it altogether. Whether someone will be inspired by a story about a mass shooter to carry out their own shooting, no matter how the story is reported, is ultimately impossible to determine.

"No one will ever be able to say, 'if you cover a story this way, no one will ever copy it,'" Byars said. "Every person is different and every story is different. Every situation is different."

"I just don't think there is a right or wrong answer," he continued. "There's just… trying your best to limit the harm in each case where you can while still being accountable and transparent."

Despite efforts by groups like No Notoriety to implement rules to apply to every mass shooting, many journalists agree that decisions largely need to be made on a case-by-case basis.

Blair encouraged journalists to simply ask themselves, "is there a way we can do this and still be responsible and reduce risk to people?"

"There's not one of those easy one-size-fits-all answers," he added.

I used to feel like I was being used as a pawn in the news media's game to get to the real heart of the story — the shooter — but I realize now that they were only doing their job in the best way that they believed they could.

"You're never going to come up with a perfect solution," Boyd said. "Because at the end of the day, what we do isn't ever going to make everybody happy. That's partly our job — not to harm people. But, I mean, we hold people accountable. And the only way you can do that is by lighting some fires."