Editorial: Desensitization to tragedy

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Editorial: Desensitization to tragedy

Amidst the midterm elections, the never-ending battle between the president and the press, and the raging wildfires in California, the tragedy that repeatedly strikes our nation has found its way back into our headlines once again. Mass shootings at the Pittsburg synagogue, Florida yoga studio and Thousand Oaks all happened in the span of 11 days. Despite the horrific levels of these tragedies, the cycle remains the same: they occur, we talk about them for a week and we then all move on.

In the time between those three events, there were eleven other shootings in Minneapolis; Springfield, Missouri; El Dorado, Arkansas; Memphis, Tennessee; Detroit; Watertown, New York; Los Angeles; Vallejo; Long Beach; and Riverside, California. In each of these instances at least four individuals were shot, injured or killed—but we heard little to no information about them.

Just since Oct. 27, when 11 people were killed in a Pittsburgh synagogue, 79 others have died in mass shootings. In 2018, there have been 311 mass shootings, where 314 people have been killed and 1,270 have been wounded. Beyond mass shootings, there have been 49,372 gun related incidents in 2018, according to the Gun Violence Archive, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing impartial gun-related statistics. The same organizations states that 12,588 gun-related deaths have occurred in 2018, and 24,424 people have been injured. There have been 576 children, 2,449 teens and 253 police officers wounded or killed in 2018 because of guns.

These tragedies amongst the headlines no longer stand out and hit the exposed nerves of our nation as they used to. We have become desensitized as the act of coping with the murders of our fellow Americans becomes a normalized process. News notifications that pop up on phone screens are glanced at and swiped away, the channel is changed on the television after a few minutes of on-the-scene broadcast coverage and members of the nation go about their days.

This editorial, in the paragraphs above, just stated the number of mass shootings that have occurred in 2018, the number of shootings that have happened just since the synagogue shooting, and the total number of gun related incidents in the United States. Yet many who have just glazed over those numbers have already forgotten the quantities as they quickly moved on to the next paragraph. This same process happens nationwide. We may remember the name of the city, the motive behind the shooting or the name of the shooter, but after a week or two of circulating headlines, the nation moves on and we forget. We get caught up in other news and feel secure in the fact that our tweets of “calls to action” are enough and are able to shake off the guilt of these recurring deaths.

After each mass shooting, there are increased interest in the gun control debate. During this time both sides of the argument utilize the event either to promote stricter gun control or to call out gun control for limiting bystanders ability to have guns that could have stopped the perpetrator. Leaders of our nation may send out tweets or appear on a news talk show, but in the end, they remain deadlocked in political partisanship. Instead of focusing on the problem at hand and definitively deciding on either cracking down on guns or making it easier for citizens to obtain them, we blame hatred or mental illness and remove the spotlight from the real problem.
The Pittsburg synagogue shooter shouted anti-Semitic slurs as he attacked the 11 individuals who lost their lives. The Thousand Oaks shooter had a history of PTSD from his time deployed for the U.S. Marines. The Tallahassee yoga studio shooter previously posted misogynistic and racist videos, and was known for being easily angered when women turned down his advances. While all of these three shooters had deep seated hatred or struggled with mental illness, another, stronger, common denominator that ties the three together was access to a deadly weapon that they choose to use maliciously.

Recent uncoverings of the social media accounts of the Thousand Oaks shooter revealed that the shooter himself admitted there was no real reason he decided to end others’ lives. The shooter posted on his Instagram while he was at the bar, and the first post read: “It’s too bad I won’t get to see all the illogical and pathetic reasons people will put in my mouth as to why I did it. Fact is I had no reason to do it, and I just thought … [expletive], life is boring, so why not?”

Attempting to shift blame away from guns and delegitimizing the horrors of a mass shooting by chalking it up to mental illness or extreme rage only proliferates our nation’s ability to direct our attention away when tragedy strikes.

The fact that many reputable news sources, such as Time, NPR, Vox and The New York Times have published articles on the topic of widespread violence show our nation’s tendency to avoid thinking about it. Some articles include: “Here’s why you can cut out the shock of a mass shooting” from Time; “The psychological explanation for why we become desensitized to mass shootings” from The Cut; “What is a constant cycle of violent news doing to us?” from The New York Times. They all, generally, say the same thing: that our brains shut down overwhelming negative information that would drastically impact our mental health if we were to process it.

This reasoning, paired with the increasingly proliferating violent acts of mass shootings in our nation, are normalizing gun related deaths. In 2018, the amount of mass shootings that have occurred equal out to almost one mass shooting per day. With each passing incident, the news moves on to other topics and the nation moves on with them. It’s time for us to slow down, force ourselves to process what is happening far too often and demand a break in the political deadlock that is causing more people from to lose their lives to a gun.
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