



BOOK REVIEWS:

Change the journalism script to minimize mass killings

Greensmith, G. (2026). *Mass Shootings, Media and Motive. How Changing Coverage Can Save Lives*. Routledge Publisher. ISBN: 9781032874296. Hardback: \$190; Paperback, \$57.99; E-book, \$45.59. 296 pages.

Reviewed by Catherine Strong

This fascinating and informative book is a must-read for every journalism educator in these times of ever-changing ethics.

Mass killings are news, and often students use the scripting formula of writing active tense – focus on the doer of the action -- and highlight who, how, why.

This book urges journalists to change the script.

It explores how the media contributed to the plethora of mass killings worldwide by highlighting the killer and thereby perpetrating the copycat contagion effect.

But the book also explores how the media can help stem this by focusing on the victims instead of the culprit. Much research indicates mass shooters tend to be under-achieving loners who strive for fame that would put them on the front page, albeit posthumously. They try to outdo the horrors of previous mass shooting in order to get front page treatment.

The book urges the media to interrupt the script of how we traditionally report this type of news, in favour of leading with the victims' stories. We know it is easier to use the police report on the killer to quickly form the news angle, but using leg work to find out about the victims is more humanitarian in the long run.

The author Glynn Greensmith was a broadcast journalist for 18 years, and he is now on the faculty of Curtin University in Australia. He has studied mass shootings for more than a decade and has helped form

media guidelines for what is reported, but also how to support staff who are involved in the myriad of death knocks following a mass shooting.

The book was released on the 30th anniversary of Australia's deadliest massacre in recent history, where a lone gunman killed 35 people at Port Arthur. The government immediately implemented gun controls, which did, in fact, stem mass killings somewhat.

Greensmith says that controlling guns is only one part of the solution, controlling the motivation is the part media can play.

He cites the New Zealand case of the gunman who attacked mosques, killing 51 people and injuring 89. The 28-year-old white supremacist live-videoed the killings and earlier spread his manifesto onto social media. Then-national leader Jacinda Ardern immediately called for gun restrictions and banned legacy and social media from sharing his video. In turn, the news media agreed to minimize the photo, voice and manifesto of the killer, who is now in prison.

After this book was published, the New Zealand killer appealed his life conviction, but it was dismissed as devoid of foundation, and the Federation of Islamic Association feared the terrorist was simply using the appeal to garner further media attention. Most local and foreign news media continued to downplay his name and photo—exceptions included the country's

largest daily newspaper The Herald and global Arab media Al Jazeera, who both ran his photo large and headlined his name.

The book could have been titled “mass killings” rather than “mass shootings” as Greensmith confirms that Vehicle Ramming Attacks (VRA) as a form of random mass killings is on the rise.

Greensmith’s final message is that for 60 years the media has been using the same script formula to cover the modern random mass shootings. His plea is the change the script.

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Well, he told some of it

Clark, R.P. (2023). *Tell It Like It Is: A Guide to Clear and Honest Writing*. Little Brown Spark.
ISBN: 978-0316317238. Hardback: \$28; Paperback: \$19.99.
320 pages.

Reviewed by Jen Wilson

In *Tell It Like It Is: A Guide to Clear and Honest Writing*, Poynter senior scholar and everybody’s favorite writing coach Roy Peter Clark, purports to expand his useful and quick-reading toolbox approach to “public writing.” At last, I thought. Credible, clear guidance for content creators and nonprofit comms writers who often distribute as much civic education as the local news.

But he doesn’t. Prompted by the pandemic and social unrest, Clark writes with urgency about the importance of clear communications by public servants and others—researchers, scholars, speech writers, advocates, even novelists, scriptwriters, poets, and movie-makers. That’s where the lengthy list ends for this dive into the concept and execution of “civic clarity,” defined as deliberately crafted writing that uses purposeful storytelling to help readers understand the world and act in their self-interest.

So, the book doesn’t do the work it could have for journalism departments seeking to instill craft and values in a shapeshifting field.

The first half of *Tell It Like It Is* describes strategies for achieving civic clarity—useful for writing students whose work will surely range beyond traditional newsrooms. For example, he annotates the clear instructions all the world was thankful for—how to use BinaxNOW’s Covid tests. Another handy concept is his Circles of Complexity, which helps writers strategize how much background a reader requires in a story—Circle 1 containing new readers who need everything explained, Circle 4 being a specialized audience with prior knowledge. Of course, the circles move to infinity—helpful for technical writers.

The second half of the book is dedicated to broad-

er storytelling tactics. He champions the not-used-enough trick of the great analogy—and lets us know that he’s not mad, he’s just disappointed that everybody’s still using the length of a football field to measure stuff. He also reinforces his greatest hits—the difference between a story and report (p. 117), using the Q&A format for complicated issues (p. 30), and slowing down at points of complexity (p. 24). Aptly, in politically divisive world, Clark offers tools to avoid the fallacy of a single cause in a story (p. 145) and the value of making the important interesting (p. 142).

The book is Clark as we know and embrace him, and I’m already testing a few chapters in media editing class. So maybe I’m the one who’s just disappointed that his definition of ‘public writer’ wasn’t. It’s not enough to just let the content creation world clandestinely peek inside. Talk to us all. Raise the tide.

Because we consume a lot of brand content—think health tips from Mayo Clinic, home advice from State Farm, pet-training videos from Chewy, and likely even those Covid test instructions. Legacy magazine editors I talk to say that branded content is part of their editorial workflow, though none offer consistent definitions of the difference between the two for students.

Clark has hit outside his journalistic comfort zone in his previous six books. He just chose not to here, and that’s a real miss. Unless future editions include fields beyond the historically blessed, it’s a book to assign sections of, rather than required reading.

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