The ‘Active Shooter’ Is Never Far Away

First Words

By CHARLES HOMANS  JUNE 20, 2016

Thirty-two hours after Omar Mateen began murdering people with a Sig Sauer MCX rifle at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Fla. — the deadliest mass shooting in modern American history — an entrepreneur named Jeffrey Isquith arrived at the Merchandise Mart in Chicago, a cavernous Art Deco building overlooking the Chicago River, for the NeoCon trade show, which bills itself as “North America’s most important design exposition and conference for commercial interiors.” The show would bring the official debut of a product that his company, Ballistic Furniture Systems, had been developing for five years: bullet-resistant panels that could be fitted inside chairs, cubicles and doors.

That morning, several manufacturers of commercial furniture — the kind you find in hospital waiting rooms, offices and hotel lobbies — were rolling out models using the new technology. When I reached Isquith on his cellphone, on the convention floor, he said that for furniture makers, “security is the big new frontier, if you will. It’s kind of sad to say that, but it’s true.” In a news release that morning, he noted that the kind of “violence and terror” seen in Orlando was “not going away anytime soon.” His product, the release said, offered “a 21st-century solution to saving lives and reducing injuries to innocent people in public spaces during an active-shooter event.”

There are some cultural milestones that you don’t even know exist until you trip over them: the moment, for instance, when an “active shooter” becomes the kind of
thing a furniture manufacturer might factor into its product design in the same way it considers ergonomics or biodegradability. The migration of the term “active shooter” from law-enforcement training manuals into the world of cable-news chyrons, Twitter rumors and uploaded cellphone videos is itself an indicator of how a once-anomalous tragedy has become just another event to prepare for, like the Fourth of July or a tornado. Among the many contractors that now offer active-shooter training is G4S, the global security firm that employed one Omar Mateen.

The concept of the active shooter has its origins on the morning of April 20, 1999, when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold arrived at the west exit of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., armed with an arsenal of sawed-off shotguns, semiautomatics and homemade explosives. If not for their incompetence as bomb makers, we might not remember the Columbine massacre as principally a shooting at all; the plotters had intended a spectacular explosion, courtesy of two large bombs with timers planted in the cafeteria, after which they would shoot the survivors spilling out into the parking lot before presumably dying in a hail of SWAT-team bullets themselves. It was only after the bombs failed to detonate that Harris and Klebold advanced on the school.

In an interview with The Denver Post a few days later, Larry Glick, then the executive director of the National Tactical Officers Association, described the attack as involving “active shooters” — phrasing that acknowledged a new philosophy among law-enforcement agencies on how to handle armed standoffs. Previously, SWAT teams’ preparation for Columbine-style episodes “was very ad hoc,” says Stuart Cameron, the chief of the Suffolk County Police Department in New York and an authority on active shooters. And it largely failed to account for the possibility of an assailant who simply wanted to kill as many people as possible as quickly as possible.

If the idea of the active shooter was new for law enforcement, it was even more so for everyone else. Columbine was far from the first mass shooting in America, but it was the first that a national audience experienced as a protracted, televised live event. This was even true for many Columbine students: As they hid in classrooms equipped with TVs, they watched coverage of the chaos unfolding around them, and the stories they told sheriff’s deputies and reporters in furtive phone calls to the
outside world were informed by the stories they had heard reporters tell already. This was one factor in the fog of confusion that prolonged the standoff into an hourslong, mostly imaginary siege; Harris and Klebold had, in fact, committed suicide in the school library less than an hour after their rampage began. But students and teachers were inhabiting a media narrative as much as an actual one, the line between event and perception blurred beyond definition.

Even after Columbine, it took several years for “active shooter” to fully shed its quotation marks and explanatory parentheticals and take its place in the national lexicon. That it has done so — less than an hour after the Pulse attack began, Twitter users had identified it as an “active shooter” situation — says something not just about the proliferation of mass shootings in America but also about the way technology has transformed our experience of them.

In 1999, social media as we now know it did not exist and 24-7 news was a niche commodity. When Harris was plotting the Columbine massacre, he thought of his project in what now seem like antiquated Hollywood terms, recording in videos that he wanted “a lot of foreshadowing and dramatic irony” and debating with Klebold whether Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino would better handle their story. Contrast that with Vester Lee Flanagan II, the troubled TV reporter who fatally shot two former colleagues, a reporter and a cameraman, in Virginia during a live broadcast last August. After the shooting, Flanagan detailed his motives on Twitter and uploaded a video of the murders, which he had filmed with his phone as he committed them, before killing himself.

On YouTube, you can find a split-screen video syncing Flanagan’s phone footage with the cameraman’s live feed, allowing the viewer to witness the moment simultaneously through the eyes of both the murderer and the murdered. That diptych is the apotheosis of the postmodern real-time violence introduced at Columbine, macabre evidence that terror is as easily packaged and consumed as any other form of content. In a country containing hundreds of millions of guns and smartphones, all of us are potential victims or digital bystanders in waiting — or both, in the case of Amanda Alvear, who Snapchatted some of the first shots fired at Pulse before she, too, was killed.
The active shooter has always seemed a particularly — if not exclusively — American menace, a dark confluence of the country’s mania for guns, self-definition, reinvention and fame. This is part of what makes the shooting rampage’s belated adoption by self-styled Islamic State martyrs — even American-born wannabes with limited or nonexistent links to the aspirant caliphate — more jarring, in its own way, than any suicide bombing or airplane hijacking. As Adam Lankford, a University of Alabama criminal-justice professor who studies mass shooters and suicide bombers, points out, this development may be simple pragmatism: This is a country, after all, in which an AR-15 can be bought in some states in a matter of minutes by virtually anyone with valid identification, but a bulk order of ammonium-nitrate-based fertilizer may well produce a visit from the F.B.I.

But it’s also true that the propaganda that the Islamic State addresses to the West — the beheading videos, the martyrs’ testimonies, the social-media exhortations to potential lone wolves — has always owed less to the world-historical ambition of Sept. 11 than it does to the awful intimacy of Columbine, an act of killing that fell far short of its architects’ ambitions but haunts us all the more for having bound us to it as distant witnesses. The active shooter is never far away here; there are too many guns in America for us to ever delude ourselves into thinking otherwise. And the footage is always streaming, optimized for our many platforms.

The writer William S. Burroughs — who, having drunkenly killed his wife with a pistol, knew of which he spoke — once observed that “no one owns life, but anyone who can pick up a frying pan owns death.” The active shooter owns something that, in a distraction-addled world, is perhaps even more coveted: our attention. This is certainly what Mateen wanted. In the final moments of his life, he reportedly stopped shooting long enough to search Facebook for responses to his own performance.

Charles Homans is the politics editor for the magazine. He recently wrote about the politics of the American middle class.

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