

Former Virginia news reporter kills one-time colleagues on live television, then shoots himself

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Another tragic multiple killing took place in the US Tuesday, this one broadcast live.

At 6:45 am, news reporter Alison Parker, 24, and photojournalist Adam Ward, 27, from WDBJ, a CBS-affiliated television station in Roanoke, Virginia, were gunned down while conducting an interview on local tourism in the small town of Moneta, Virginia. The subject of the interview, Vicki Gardner of the Smith Mountain Lake Regional Chamber of Commerce, was injured in the attack, but survived.

The assailant was confirmed as Vester Lee Flanagan, a former WDBJ news reporter, known professionally as Bryce Williams.

A video of the incident, originally seen live by the WDBJ viewing audience, shows Parker in the midst of conducting the interview, when numerous shots are fired, followed by the two women screaming. Ward's camera falls to the ground, along with the cameraman himself, and it briefly captures a frightening image of the assailant holding a handgun. The broadcast then returns to WDBJ anchorwoman Kimberly McBroom, obviously stunned by what has just happened.

Even more horrific is the minute-long video of the incident taken by Flanagan's own cell phone, uploaded to his social media accounts several hours after the shooting. From the assailant's perspective, we see him approach Parker and Ward, both unaware of his presence. He points his gun, which is visible in the video, at the pair for a moment, and mutters, "Bitch." He lowers the gun, apparently looks around, then trains it on his targets again and opens fire, first at Parker. She attempts to flee.

Police and federal officials launched a regional manhunt for Flanagan, placing schools in the region on

lockdown before locating the shooter later in the day driving a rental car in the Washington, DC suburb of Fauquier County, Virginia, three hours north of Roanoke. After fleeing an attempt by a Virginia state trooper to stop him, Flanagan was pursued by police. His auto eventually swerved off the road less than two miles farther on. The 41-year-old was found in the car with self-inflicted gunshot wounds.

Flanagan, a black man who identified as a homosexual, alleged in statements made on his Twitter and Facebook accounts that Parker and Ward had discriminated against him while they worked together. Flanagan made similar allegations after being fired from a television station in Tallahassee, Florida where he was employed in 1999-2000.

A great deal of evidence points to Flanagan's mental instability. According to WDBJ General Manager Jeffrey Marks, Flanagan had been an "unhappy man" who had "quickly become known for...being difficult to work with," while working for the station. Marks asserted that Flanagan had always seemed to be "looking out for people to say things he could take offense to" and that after "many incidents of his anger coming to the fore" he was dismissed by WDBJ and escorted off the property by police in 2013. "He did not take that well," said Marks, adding, "we did understand that he was still living in the area." Flanagan apparently made threats at the time of his firing.

Speaking of the two victims, Marks said, "You know, you send people into war zones, you send people into dangerous situations and into riots, and you worry that they are going to get hurt. You send somebody out to do a story on tourism and—how can you expect something like this to happen?" He added, "Our hearts

are broken... We have people walking around here in tears.”

In addition to uploading graphic images of the killing and commentary to social media, Flanagan faxed a 23-page letter to ABC News headquarters in New York City on Wednesday describing his motivations for the acts. The gunman claimed that the June 17 shooting at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina by a white supremacist had influenced his decision. “What sent me over the top was the church shooting,” he says, adding “but my anger has been building steadily... I’ve been a human powder keg for a while...just waiting to go BOOM!!!!”

In the letter, Flanagan references the 21-year-old gunman in the Charleston shootings by name, saying “As for Dylann Roof? You [expletive]! You want a race war [deleted]? BRING IT THEN YOU WHITE...[expletive]!!!” Flanagan also expressed admiration for Seung-Hui Cho, the gunman who killed more than 30 people at Virginia Tech University in 2007. (The university, in Blacksburg, is some 60 miles from the location of Wednesday’s shooting.) In addition, Flanagan praised the perpetrators of the 1999 Columbine High School mass shooting.

Franklin County Sheriff Bill Overton stated that while police could not determine a definite motive for the shooting, it appeared that Flanagan was “disturbed in some way” and his life was “spiraling out of control.” Other posts to Flanagan’s social media accounts indicate that he had been attempting to file for workers compensation in the days immediately prior to the shooting.

Flanagan’s actions were clearly depraved. The ability to take human lives in this cold-blooded manner indicates an intense, psychotic state of alienation. However, only self-deluded or deliberately dishonest commentators can argue this is purely an individual matter, much less an expression of “pure evil.” As Flanagan’s own reference points—Charleston, Blacksburg and Columbine—reveal, mass killings have become a part of contemporary American life in the past two decades.

There is something especially and horribly revealing about the mix of delusional self-promotion and homicidal violence in this case. Flanagan chose to “make a name for himself” by carrying out a crime on live television and, at the same time, filmed it for

uploading to his Facebook page.

The rising tide of militarism abroad and unrestrained police brutality at home, a lurid fixation on celebrity culture, as well as the ongoing attempts by the political establishment and media to divide the US population along racial lines, seem to have worked on the mentally vulnerable Flanagan/Williams to produce something particularly toxic.

Predictably, the political and media establishment refuses to address the social sources of the mass killings that occur regularly in the United States.

In perfunctory comments, White House press secretary Josh Earnest told reporters that “this is another example of gun violence that is becoming all too common in communities,” while calling on Congress to pass gun control laws that would give the federal government the right to scan the backgrounds of gun applicants. Earnest did not explain how such legislation would have forestalled the tragedy in Moneta on Wednesday, as Flanagan had no prior brushes with the law.



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