School Shootings: Mediatized Violence in a Global Age

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Editors

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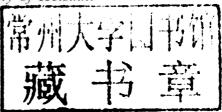
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PREFACE

In November 2009, scholars from different parts of the world converged on Helsinki for the Conference on Social Violence in the Network Society. Among those who participated were scholars in a variety of fields who have examined the media/communications dynamic of school shootings. This volume is the outgrowth of those discussions begun in that venue.[1] Three years later, while the contributors to this volume were drafting their chapters, there was a 3 week period in late-March/early-April 2012 in which three events relevant to the topic of this volume occurred in three divergent settings. Case 1: in Toulouse, France a male serial killer murders three children at the Jewish Ozar Hatorah secondary school. The police besiege the killer and kill him after a violent standoff. The case makes news all over Europe, and beyond. Case 2: the Finnish news media tell the story of a young man who attacks a high school in the small town of Orivesi, Western Finland. Nobody is killed in the shooting, but the local community is shocked. The police catch the perpetrator, who claims his motive was to violate his ex-girlfriend, a student at the high school. Case 3: International news breaks about another school shooting at Oikos University in Oakland, California. The perpetrator, a former student of the school, kills seven people and injures several. The police later catch him, and when interviewed he claims he was bullied at school. Are these cases part of a unified phenomenon, or is their coincidence random?

One can't help but wonder, in the face of so many events showing up on our doorsteps in the headlines of the daily newspaper (or appearing on our monitors and mobile devices), whether something is afoot, indeed something larger than any of these individual events. Such musings are the underlying motivation for this volume: to examine the connections between school shootings and media, while examining the presence and effects of these events and dynamics in contemporary life.

Perhaps we implicitly understand that media logic pervades contemporary life; however, we often struggle to understand precisely what that means, and the ways in which such developments are manifest. When shocking cases of crisis reach us via media, and when we as members of the audience are given pause, we cannot deny the relevancy of such events (both as they happen in real life, but also as media events). The study of the media aspects

of school shootings offers a way to understand these developments, one which transcends national and cultural boundaries. While the studies in this volume highlight the importance of media processes for understanding and responding to school-related violence, they also have relevance for how we understand broader phenomena such as how trauma is symbolized, how meanings are constructed, dynamics of collective representation, the processes of public mourning, and the conceptualization of mass violence. Our colleagues in this volume contribute to the contemporary understanding of mediatization vis-à-vis media violence, and indeed to the social consequences of media saturation *ut vita vixit*.

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NOTE

INTRODUCTION: SCHOOL SHOOTINGS AS MEDIATIZED VIOLENCE

In recent years, school-related shootings have garnered considerable public concern in the media and academia, as sociologists, psychologists and media scholars have written intensively about the topic (e.g., see Altheide, 2002; Burns & Crawford, 1999; Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Fast, 2003; Grider, 2007; Kellner, 2008; Larkin, 2007; Muschert, 2007; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Newman, 2004; Sumiala, 2011; and Sumiala & Tikka, 2011). According to Douglas Kellner (2008, p. 14), one of the contributors in this volume, school shootings should be perceived as acts of societal violence that embody a number of interrelated social issues: a crisis of Western masculinity, an out-of-control gun culture, and globalized commercial media that project normative images of violent masculinity and make celebrities out of murderers (see also Larkin, 2007; Muschert, 2007; Sumiala, 2011b).

In public parlance, school shootings have come to indicate many types of violence taking place in and around schools. As a global (media) cultural phenomenon, school shootings have increased specifically in the 1990s developing into a cultural phenomenon (Muschert & Carr, 2006; Newman, 2004, p. 49; Sumiala & Tikka, 2011). Internationally, the most widely publicized shootings have taken place in the United States (Columbine and Virginia Tech), Germany (Erfurt and Winnenden), Finland (Jokela and Kauhajoki), and Canada (the Montreal Massacre and Dawson College). However, the list of countries that have witnessed school rampages is much longer, including countries like Yemen, Brazil, Argentina, Australia, and China.

In the academic manner of speaking, Katherine Newman (2004, p. 50) provides the following definition for school shootings: to be categorized as a school shooting (or 'rampage shooting' as Newman calls it) the attack must:

1. take place on a school-related public stage before an audience;
2. involve multiple victims, some of whom are shot simply for their symbolic significance or at random;

3. involve one or more shooters who are students or former students of the
   school. As a global (media) cultural phenomenon, school shootings have
   increased specifically in the 1990s developing almost into an epidemic
   (Newman, 2004, p. 49).

It is the nature of many school shootings that they capture the public
attention via media, and that they have become a global cultural pheno-
menon. Hence, school shootings are highly mediated international events,
and therefore this aspect of the phenomenon deserves close attention, which
is, ostensibly, the focus of this volume.

MEDIATIZATION AS A CONCEPTUAL BASIS
FOR THE VOLUME

This book contributes to the current academic discussion on school shoot-
ings by analysing this contemporary phenomenon in a broader context of
media saturation in contemporary social and cultural life. We argue that
in order to understand school shootings as a cultural and sociological
phenomenon, we need to analyse this type of public violence from a variety
of academic perspectives. By drawing on a range of empirical analyses of
different school shooting incidents in the United States, Germany, Finland,
and Canada, the authors in this volume demonstrate the diverse ways in
which the media and school shootings are connected in contemporary
society. Numerous frameworks are applied in these original analyses,
including media violence, journalism, visual culture, and social networking.
Our shared goal is to understand the complex interplay between media,
society and school shootings, and certainly how this interaction is carried
out in a range of cultural and societal contexts and settings.

In this section we identify two primary frameworks, or perspectives,
that are particularly relevant in our analysis: i.e., the cultural and the
sociological. As a cultural phenomenon school shootings have high
symbolic value. Although carried out in relatively small numbers, school
shootings images and meanings are widely spread around the world, and
thus have potential to nurture the collective imagination of destruction
and fear much beyond their physical power. The fact that the perpetrators
are typically young people intensifies the symbolic meanings associated
with the shootings, and these youth (often males) do not project harmony
and hope, but rather threaten the sense of security and increase feelings of
desperation. Despite the low risk of actual school shootings, the subjective

perception at times is that no one can be entirely free from fear in such institutions as schools. The fact that the victims are in many cases randomly chosen – they are young, classmates or peers – only reinforces the arbitrary sense of such cases.

To undertake a school rampage attack is to make a symbolic statement, one meant to illustrate a broader message or refer beyond the immediate target (school and/or victims). It is about a struggle grander than meets they eye. The message conveyed goes beyond the point of attack and is beyond its immediate purpose. Rather, it is about attacking organized society: the school and its authorities and their symbolic power, which is rooted in its community. In short, following Juergensmeyer's insight, these dramatic events performed at school are intended to impress for their symbolic significance, well beyond physical casualties (Juergensmeyer, 2003, pp. 125, 126). The deeper the symbolic destruction, the more profound the repair work needed to overcome the damage to the social fabric resulting from such tragedies.

In the contemporary world, modern mass media and the Internet have become key sites of and for symbolic performance of school shootings. Media are part of school shootings and school shootings are part of the media. Anthropologist of media Mark Peterson (2008, p. 18) argues that today's media are in its full variation (ranging from TV, radio, newspapers and print media to the Internet and social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube or Twitter), and therefore that it functions as a form (and forum) of expressive culture. The media plays a critical role in public displays of symbolism or enactment of symbolic action for performative effects. From this perspective, there is an explicit connection between school shootings as performative violence (see Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010 for a discussion) and the media as expressive culture – i.e., as a public display of symbolic communication. As objects in the cultural and social fields, both school shootings and the media are well adapted to each other's logic.

School shootings make and break news, and as the victims bleed the news stories lead. It is exactly the performative and theatrical nature of violence in school shootings that makes them suited to the present-day media and its ongoing battle to retain audience attention. School rampages offer dramatic visual material, sometimes produced by the killers themselves (!), vivid eye-witness descriptions and innocent youthful victims to mourn over and to identify with. In the media coverage of school shootings the informative and ritual functions overlap – to use Carrey's (1989) classical formulation – and the media become a key stage for public drama. But, we should acknowledge that today it is not only the mainstream (and largely

corporate) news media TV, newspapers and radio and professional journalists who set the agenda for the media. Rather, the Internet and social networking sites also offer increasing potential for public performance related to school shootings and similar violence.

A debate on mediatization suggests closer examination of the interplay between media and society (e.g., Hjarvard, 2008), thus useful in our sociological interpretation. In a nutshell, the concept of mediatization refers to the idea that social and cultural life has become heavily influenced and shaped by the media on all levels: private, public, social, and even international. The media impacts our everyday lives, shapes work and leisure, affects the formation and maintenance of social relations, the establishment of groups, the construction of individual and collective identities, and the functioning of organizations and institutions on varying levels: private, public, political, and economic (see also Krotz, 2009, p. 24). This development has consequences for social formations and interactions not to mention its influence on institutional power. In the new media logic, the individual learns, experiences, and becomes part of the world around them through and via variegated layers of communication devices including mobile phones, iPads, TV, and online news outlets. Through modern communication technology, the issues of time, place, and participation are being renegotiated as new and disparate persons participate simultaneously in emergent virtual realities, increasingly in different spatial locations and times. Consequently, the media in all its variety has become a central force of contemporary social life.

According to Krotz (2009, p. 27), mediatization is a process that has several preconditions, intimately related to other meta (or should we say mega!) processes such as globalization, individualization, urbanization, and commercialization (see also Giddens, 1990). So mediatization is a historically contingent concept, relevant specifically for the analysis of contemporary media-related social and cultural practices. In this book, mediatized violence refers to the idea that we experience violence (as in the case of school shootings) increasingly via and in the media. The logic of mediatized communication – media logic – has the power to influence individuals communicating about the violence, and thereby vicariously experiencing the violence as victimizers, victims, witnesses or bystanders (see, e.g., Lundby, 2009b). The dynamics of mediatization also shape social and cultural practices activated during or following the violent conditions, such as rituals of mourning (see, e.g., Pantti & Sumiala, 2009).

Eventually, mediatization may have the leverage to influence official institutions and non-governmental organizations to adjust and accommodate their responses to be congruent with media logic, even as these

organizations undertake the management of mass violence (see, e.g., Cottle, 2005, 2006, 2009; McQuail, 2006). In this sense, mediatization can make a significant difference to the outcome of events during or after school rampages, and at some point may potentially change the course of the public violence (Lundby, 2009b, p. 298).

Moreover, if we want to understand the processes and techniques of mediatization in the case of public violence such as school shootings, then we need to begin with an analysis of media logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Lundby, 2009a, 2009c). Media logic in the case of mediatization of school shootings has several characteristics: One aspect is that when school shootings occur, the media adopts a specific logic of communication – we call it the "disaster marathon," which means that media organizations reorganize themselves to full alert mode. On news desks, everyday media routines are displaced by the disaster mode of reporting, and teams are reorganized; extra staff is recruited; special issues and extra newscasts are disseminated as the story develops (see also Liebes & Blonheim, 2005).

Previous studies discussing mediatized violence have underlined the role and importance of TV as the key medium for the disaster marathon (see, e.g., Liebes & Blonheim, 2005). With recent developments in digital communications, the role of the Internet and social networking sites has become more central. We argue that the web has shaped mediatization of school shootings as public violence in at least three ways: first, the web has challenged the role of time and space in reporting on violence; second, the web has challenged the role of mass communication as the centre of communication of public violence; and third, the web has questioned the profound cultural and social dualisms structuring the communication of public violence such as the real and the virtual, truth and fiction, the authentic and the fabricated, technology and nature, and representation and reality (see, e.g., Hine, 2003, p. 5).

Another aspect of mediatization of public violence in the digital era is that it also demands re-evaluation of the relationships between different media. School shootings in many cases represent a shift from deadline to online mediatization. Among the distinctive features of this type of mediatization online are continuous updating and a blurring of the boundaries between the different media covering the shootings. To give an example, in the Finnish school shootings in Jokela (2007) and Kauhajoki (2008), the role of the audience was highlighted, as "grassroots journalists" produced online material on the disasters and non-professional images taken by camera phones were widely published in different media as evidence of the crisis (see, e.g., Gillmor, 2006). The boundaries between producer, message, and receiver were reshaped and redefined in the process of mediatization

of these violent acts (Hakala, 2009; Raittila et al., 2008, 2009; Sumiala & Tikka, 2010).

Yet another aspect in the mediatization of school shootings as public violence is the rise in mediatization of mourning and grief (see, e.g., Pantti & Sumiala, 2009). It is not only information flows that matter in the mediatization of the social performance of public violence, but the role of emotions is also important. Following both the Jokela and Kauhajoki shootings, various mourning groups were activated on the Internet. Groups commemorating the victims were established after both incidents in IRC Gallery and Facebook. In the Kauhajoki case, the first Facebook group was founded on the day of the shooting. Our interpretation is that it was compassion for the victims of the school shootings and their families that served as a social adhesive in the mediatization of the mourning communities (see also Sumiala & Tikka, 2010).

In summary, the core arguments of this volume concerning mediatization of school shootings can be listed in the following manner: (1) that media processes are intimately related to the existence of- and aetiology of school shootings, because they (a) may be related to the causes of media violence via a copycat effect, and (b) the media influences the public understanding of school rampages; (2) that journalists are an important subject of study in the mediatization of violence, because (a) they influence the moral decision-making process of audiences, and (b) that new realities are being created as journalists react to ethical challenges and evolutions in the nature of news production; and (3) that mediatized nature of school shootings is creating something new for those who witness/consume media about these attacks, because (a) new sub-cultures and affinity groups are possible via the use of new media technologies, which (b) expands the scope and impact of these events well beyond those who directly experience such attacks to include those who vicariously participate via traditional and new media forms. Indeed, when viewed together, these studies suggest that something new is afoot, something beyond the macabre and seemingly narrow topic of school rampage shootings, as the topic of this volume has broad implications to the new mediatization of society in this age of liquid globalization.

ORGANIZATION OF THE VOLUME

In this volume, the contributors representing a range of different disciplinary backgrounds are grappling with the dynamics and logic of mediatized violence, though each discusses it in context of their own empirical study. As in any project of this scope, there are sub-divisions among the chapters,

which indicate divergences in the approach/focus of chapters, but which also reveal convergences and synergies. The chapters have thus been divided into three parts, all of which bring light to the issue of school shootings as mediatized violence, although via slightly different prisms.

In the first section, entitled 'Framing the Event: Societal and (Media) Cultural Perspectives', the contributors of the chapters examine the broad implications of how media is related to the incidence and socio-moral understanding of school rampage attacks. In the second section, 'Covering the Events: Perspectives of and for Journalistic Practice', the contributors examine specific concerns facing the journalists who cover school shootings, including their ethical and moral decision-making, and their influence on public discourse about school shootings. In the third section, 'Witnessing and Consuming School Shooting Events', the contributors study ways in which school shootings are experienced by those who consume media of various types related to school amok attacks. Finally, the volume concludes with two afterword pieces, one by a journalist and the other by a social scientist.

Section 1: Framing the Event: Societal and (Media)Cultural Perspectives

The first section focuses on social and cultural perspectives of media in school shootings. What ties together the five chapters is that each looks at the symbolic representation/understanding of school shootings, bringing insight on various aspects of the media's characterization of school shootings, and how this may have important effects on media violence and physical violence. Indeed these chapters raise many red flags for scholars of media violence, including the integration of violence within contemporary media forms, and the effects that such media violence may have both in the media and physical spheres.

In Chapter 1, entitled 'School Shootings and Cultivation Analysis: On Confrontational Media Rhetoric and the History of Research on the Politics of Media Violence', media scholar Andy Ruddock introduces the well-established communications approach of cultivation analysis to examine school shootings as media events. He situates the modus operandi of the typical school shooter within the logic of message systems, meaning that the school shooter wishes to convey a political message about male power via expressive violence. He argues that these messages are integrated into the contemporary media reportage of school shootings.

In Chapter 2, entitled 'Media Dynamics in School Shootings: A Socialization Theory Perspective', violence scholars Nils Böckler, Thorsten

Seeger, and Peter Sitzer examine the media dynamics that may contribute to school shootings. They argue that much of the discussion in this topic has been atheoretical, and they address this by introducing socialization theory as a way of gaining traction to explain the international spread of the image of the school shooter, and ultimately school shooting events.

In Chapter 3, entitled 'A Futile Game: On the Prevalence and Causes of Misguided Speculation about Role of Violent Video Games in Mass School Shootings', psychology and communications scholars Christopher J. Ferguson and James D. Ivory assess the commonly cited claim that school shootings are caused by violent video games. In short, they argue that it is impossible to establish scientific evidence that violent video games cause mass violence at school (as may often be claimed in public media discourse). Thus, they argue that such concern about the perceived dangers of video gaming obscures responses to other verifiable causes.

In Chapter 4, entitled 'Media Consumption in German School Shooters', psychologists Rebecca Bondü and Herbert Scheithauer examine the media habits of the seven youth who carried out school attacks in Germany between 1999 and 2006. The findings were mixed, as in the time prior to their attack most showed an increasing interest in violent media; however, there were a couple of outliers who showed little or no interest in violent media. They find that while an imitation effect (i.e., copycat effect) may be at work, such an effect is a possible contributing aspect of school shootings, not a necessary aspect.

In Chapter 5, entitled 'Making Headlines: A Quarter Century of the Media's Characterization of Canadian School Shootings', sociologist Stephanie Howells examines the framing of Canadian school shootings between 1975 and 2010. This sweeping look at an under-studied group of school shootings determines that the media's extensive focus on school-related shootings, though the events themselves are rare, contributes to an inflated sense of the frequency of such attacks. This is particularly the case, as the media focuses disproportionately on the shootings with the highest body counts, and this contributes to the sense that school shootings are rampant in Canada.

Section 2: Covering the Events: Perspectives of and for
Journalistic Practice

The second section focuses on journalistic practice involved in covering tragedies such as mass school violence. What ties the chapters together is that

each examines the process of journalistic practice, whether involving the way in which journalists create visual representations of school shootings, whether it involves journalists' attribution of blame and responsibility for school shootings, or examining the stress involved in covering such events. Together, these chapters help the reader to understand what it is like to report on such traumatic events, and indeed they help us to understand that media studies relate not only to the content and consumption of media artifacts, but also to the production of those artefacts (and their latent socio-moral meanings) as well.

In Chapter 6, 'Analyzing Visual Media Coverage of Amok School Shootings – A Novel Iconographic Approach', visual communications scholars Marion G. Müller, Ognyan Seizov and Florian Wiencek examine the graphic representations of rampage shootings. Despite the increasingly visual/iconic nature of contemporary society, this is the first study to examine the graphic representations of such tragedies and their aftermath. In their study, they concentrate on three German cases taking place in 2009 and 2010, and they examine the iconic similarities among these cases, finally exploring the similarities between the depiction of real-life violence in the media and cinematic representations. Ultimately, they suggest a fact/fiction linkage between visual amok and amok in film.

In Chapter 7, 'U.S. and Finnish Journalists: A Comparative Study of Roles, Responsibilities and Emotional Reactions to School Shootings', Klas Backholm, Marguerite Moritz and Kaj Björkqvist explore the ethical behaviour of journalists working to cover school rampages. Examining both U.S. and Finnish cases, and joining the scholarly perspectives of developmental psychology (Backholm and Björkqvist) and journalism studies (Moritz), these scholars reveal that there are differences across cases/nations; however, their study reveals that many ethical issues for journalists, public criticism, and post-crisis reactions are rather similar. Of course, journalists face many stresses and ethical dilemmas in reporting on tragedy, and over time journalists as professionals change their procedures in response to public criticism.

In Chapter 8, 'Vital Explanations or Harmful Gossip? Finnish Journalists' Reflections on Reporting the Interpretations of Two School Shootings', journalism researchers Jari Väliverronen, Kari Koljonen, and Pentti Raittila examine the important role played by journalists in clarifying the meaning of tragedy in today's heavily mass-mediated societies. However, this role becomes problematic once journalists attempt to answer questions bordering on the existential, such as why tragedy and suffering take place. Through an analysis of news stories and interviews with Finnish journalists