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CHAPTER 10

MEDIA PARTICIPATION OF SCHOOL SHOOTERS AND THEIR FANS: NAVIGATING BETWEEN SELF-DISTINCTION AND IMITATION TO ACHIEVE INDIVIDUATION¹

Nathalie E. Paton

ABSTRACT

Purpose _ This study examines perpetrators and their fans media participation for the purpose of investigating whether new media produce school shootings anew.

Method _ We first analyze the narrative structure of eight school shooters' 75 self-produced videos (1999_2011), then conduct thematic and content analysis of this material. Then, based upon a three-year ethnographic investigation of a subculture on YouTube (2007_2010), from which a sample of 81 users, 142 videos, and screenshots of natural conversation was taken, we analyze the style and ritual practices, fan attachment, and online regulation of the subculture.

Findings _ The mirroring of the school shooters' videos and their fans' media practices highlights a trait of contemporary society: a need for distinction and intrinsic individuality directly linked to a modern era in which autonomy and self-production have become well-praised norms, and media a support for individuation.

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Social implications _ *We observe some of the pitfalls of contemporary social injunctions and how the media interplay into this dynamic. This research also emphasizes the role of regulation in an online subculture: opposition encountered tends to contribute to the individualization of positions rather than the reproduction of violence.*

Keywords: *School shooting; individuation; media participation; self-produced videos; YouTube; subculture; online regulation*

INTRODUCTION

Following the media hype surrounding a string of school shootings, also referred to as rampage (e.g. Newman et al. 2004; Muschert 2007; Larkin 2009) or amok shootings (e.g. Kellner 2008), these acts are established at the end of the 90s as a new form of youth violence (Muschert 2007). Shortly thereafter they lose some of their novelty and generation specifics when related to previous cases of school violence (e.g. Kimmel & Mahler 2003) and similar acts committed by adult offenders (notably mass murders (e.g. Sullivan 2002)). This shift in the framing of school shootings is shortly followed in the early 2000s by their geographical redefinition: from a typically American phenomenon (e.g. Muschert 2007) and a national problem (e.g. Muschert 2009; Birkland & Lawrence 2009), they are configured as a transnational form of violence in the limelight of new cases abroad (e.g. Larkin 2009; Newman & Fox 2010). School shootings thus become a global form of violence, interpreted as a spreading phenomenon, threatening schools' safety at random and raising public concern about youth's outbursts of violence. This evolving definition stems from ways in which actors from the public sphere – i.e. politicians, journalists, civil society organizations, perpetrators – intervene in public debates to coproduce its material and semiotic boundaries, within the scope of systemized global media events. As such, school shootings are the product of social relations and can be understood as a given set of cultural references.

The framing of school shootings as a contagious and spreading phenomenon in public debates is linked to the media's influence. If media were under inspection as a contributing factor as early as the 90's (e.g. Webber 2003; Newman et al. 2004), the premediatized nature of school shootings and the discovery of active online fan groups change the shift of focus (e.g. Serazio 2010; Sumiala & Tikka 2010; Kiilakoski & Oksanen 2011). Rather than top-bottom effects, implying that specific cultural products leave imprints on young minds, the mediums themselves are at fault. The perverse effects of participatory culture and the lack of control of Internet are pinpointed... with reason. A small portion of the offenders uses media in a communicative strategy, taking advantage of participatory media to frame their acts via self-produced videos. They post them online to potential interested parties or address them to media outlets. In doing so, they not only instrumentalize traditional media through self-staged performances in the midst of an already co-produced global media event, they also ensure their views are aired and their identity recognized. This becomes possible in an era in which such material can circulate on the web. The reconfiguration of the public sphere with the introduction of Internet implies less censorship. Media thereby facilitates the airing of the shooters' views, allowing scholars to now access the offenders' interpretation of their offense.

Questioning the media's role does not stop there. If only a small portion of offenders use self-produced videos, a larger amount have been known for their online participation in fan-based forums (e.g. Auvinen, Saari, Kazimierczak) or deadly warnings posted on their profiles (e.g. Harris, Coon, Gill). Such participation in online networks shakes pre-existing conceptions that depict the shooters as isolated loners with few social ties (e.g. McGee & DeBernardo 2002; Meloy et al. 2001). More importantly, the existence of such groups raise questions as to the nature and role they may play in hosting future killers, considering the general public's preconception that their peers support their intentions. Such networking is facilitated once again by Internet as this medium allows people to connect worldwide, providing access to additional feedback as to why school shootings are so attractive to some.

Beyond doubt, new technologies have become a key component of school shootings for the shooters as well as for their audiences. Two overlapping tendencies have emerged – one concerning exclusively the shooters with their use of self-produced videos during the premeditation phase, and the second concerning potential future killers more accurately defined as online fans – both pointing towards the need for a better understanding of how new media produce violence. Additionally, new material concerning what shooters and their fans have to say is revealed.

Observing that participatory media allows shooters and their audiences to negotiate identification, appropriation and protest via their definitions, it seems appropriate to investigate the ways in which media, as a form of specific mediation, codetermine the web of inter-textual, visual and sound references related to school shootings. The ways in which perpetrators and their fans frame the phenomenon should be examined. The formation of new modalities of association should also be investigated to highlight the media's contribution to engendering violence anew.

This chapter will tackle these issues via two distinct studies. The first one discusses the shooters' self-produced videos. The second study will examine whether Internet is indeed out of control and harvests extremist groups, while encouraging violent behaviors. Both these analyses will lead to the questioning of how media interplay with individual structuration in the midst of a contemporary disinstitutionalized setting (e.g. Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994; Beck 1996). In this chapter we argue that school shootings prove to be a symptom of contemporary injunctions of autonomy and self-production, and media practices a support for individuation.

METHOD

As of April 2007, an online ethnographic study was pursued to identify the forms of sociability within fan networks, understand fans' interest in school shootings and determine if participation could lead to deadly outcomes. This investigation resulted in the gathering of material created by perpetrators – videos, suicide notes, dairy excerpts, school productions, etc. – within fans' communications or during the unfolding of school shootings (Auvinen, Saari, Kretschmer²). In turn, we distinguished another study on shooters' media participation, notably through self-produced videos, in order to determine the perpetrators' interpretation of their acts and highpoint their use of new media.

This chapter first discusses nine shooters' self-produced videos from a sampling of 75 videos produced between 1999 and 2011. The number of videos in our database must be put into relationship with the different operations of configuration introduced by various intermediates. For example, operations of configuration can be carried out by various distributors – e.g. public authorities, journalists, online amateurs. They can edit the original material to censure or highlight an aspect. In short, before publicizing and/or publishing the videos online, the perpetrators' original productions can be cut, rearranged or mashed-up into one or several videos. Consequently, the number of videos does not necessarily reflect the number of videos originally produced. Pekka-Eric Auvinen's prolific production weighs heavily as he produced 59 videos of our sampling. Analysis of the participation format of the perpetrators' videos aims at identifying the main repertoires

² Ultimately Kretschmer's publications will be identified as fakes.

mobilized to shape their messages and the underlying patterns of participation. In order to distinguish these formats of participation, we focused on the narrative structures, i.e. the main threads that organize the significant elements of the semiotic material. Afterwards, thematic analysis of the visual and discursive level of the videos is conducted. This allows spotting identifiable themes and patterns in order to lend a comprehensive view of offenders' self-presentations. Finally, content analysis of the shooters' discourse will outline the meaning they associate with their acts.

We adopted online ethnography for the purpose of studying fans. Online ethnography can be considered a variant of ethnography, as it mobilizes qualitative methods to examine how meaning is constructed online while maintaining the values of traditional ethnography. Its specificity relies on the adaptation of methodological tools to the Internet environment in regards to the blurry boundaries of space and an evolving database. As several fan websites exist on it (e.g. dylanklebold.net or staydifferent.st.ohost.de), YouTube was chosen as an observatory. Investigating deviant groups and pursuing online ethnography requires tackling ethical issues, which in turn orient methodical outcomes. We decided to keep a low profile by neither stating our status as a researcher, nor creating a fake identity to partake in the online activities. One of the major advantages of this posture is the non-influential aspect of the research protocol: responses were not induced and identities were not formatted. Deep immersion was nonetheless conducted during three years of fieldwork via activity monitoring and specific phases of increased attention (during periods of one to three months). During phases of immersion, time was spent scrutinizing profiles, reading hundreds of discussion threads, watching just as many videos, following connections between Internet users on the basis of their visible exchanges online. These phases aimed at journaling online activities and gathering audiovisual productions, profile pages, and "natural conversations" held about the videos, in discussion forums and within profiles. We continuously monitored participants' activity via several subscriptions – to specific accounts and to keywords such as "school shooting", Columbine, etc. – and regular screenshots – e.g. of updated profiles and new conversations. Eighty-one Internet users were ultimately chosen. Users were selected based on their videos: the video corpus of 142 videos is meant to be representative of not only what was observed but also of the most popular content (according to YouTube's ranking system). Description of the space inhabited by the observed population first aims at replicating the feeling of co-presence experienced online when observing this network. This description is supported by analysis of the ways in which such a group was internally and externally distinguished via discursive and visual procedures. The analysis of fans' participation formats distinguishes patterns of self-presentation and deepens the knowledge of this group's particularities. Content and thematic analyses were then conducted on the samples videos, profiles and exchanges to understand forms of attachment. Ultimately, observations of the networks' exchanges and content analysis of profiles tackle the issue of peer influence by discussing the regulation procedures encountered.

SHOOTERS' SELF-PRODUCED VIDEOS: WHEN SELF-DISTINCTION AND IMITATION LEAD TO NEW IDENTITIES

That the shooters can now attract an audience for their opinions and staged identities in a premediated communication strategy foreshadows their limelight appearance to denote their

difference and contributes to shaping the “school shooting” phenomenon under their terms. If they indeed emphasize their intrinsic individuality, what marks their productions is their clearly imitative register. To demonstrate this, we shall begin by examining the different formats of participation. These formats reveal individualities subordinated to a social game of self-presentation. In publicizing their views, background or intentions, the killers forge an image to show what type of person they are and which social position they hold (Goffman 1959). In this manner, the audiovisual performances produce social identities. This performative dimension is centered on expressions of individuality permitted by the juxtaposition of texts as well as visual and/or sound effects.

Self-distinction via audiovisual performances

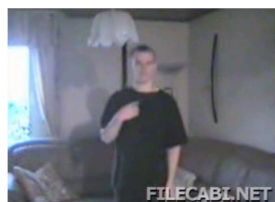
It is possible to distinguish three formats of participation related specifically to self-produced videos: explanatory narrative, training to kill and voicing opinions. Hereafter, table 1 summarizes each format of participation per perpetrator.

TABLE 1

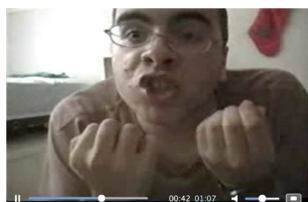
Summary of selected self-produced videos by format of participation

Format of participation	Perpetrator	Location/ Date	N° of videos
Explanatory Narrative	Alvaro Castillo	08/30/06 Orange High School NC, USA	4
	Bastian Bosse	11/20/06 Emsdetten Germany	1
	Seung-Hui Cho	04/16/07 Virginia Tech Institute Blacksburg, VA, USA	1
	Wellington Oliveira	04/07/11 Tasso da Silveira Municipal School Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	3
Training to kill	Eric Harris & Dylan Klebold	04/20/99 Columbine High School CO, USA	1
	Bastian Bosse	11/20/06 Geschwister Scholl School Emsdetten, Germany	1
	Pekka-Eric Auvinen	11/07/07 Jokela High school, Jokela, Finland	1
	Matti Saari	09/23/08 Seinäjäki University, Kauhajoki, Finland	4
Voicing opinions	Pekka-Eric Auvinen	11/07/07 Jokela High school, Jokela, Finland	59

Among the eight shooters studied in our sampling of 13 published videos, four represent themselves through the first format of participation (see table 1). This type of video is similar to a vlog in which the author, facing the camera, records a monologue to voice an opinion or disclose a personal experience, as illustrated below.



Bastian Bosse
Frame 1



Alvaro Castillo
Frame 2



Seung-Hui Cho
Frame 3



Wellington Oliveira
Frame 4

The first particularity of this format is that the video is structured around discourse, thus limiting semantic wanderings inherent to the visual register. The narrative quality of the image is limited to the person appearing on the video and some clues regarding his environment. The second particularity has to do with the contents. They are “explanatory narratives” in which the shooters give reasons justifying their acts. This narration is developed in two manners: the camera is used either to formulate a public declaration (Bosse, Oliveira and Cho) or to relate elements, which progressively lead towards the idea of a school shooting (Castillo). Similar to a suicide letter, recourse to this format enables the person to state his motives and keep interpretation within the confines inherent to any discourse. The only difference is that, thanks to its audiovisual nature, the message can be broadcast on a large scale.

The second format studied corresponds to the shooters’ training in a wooded environment or at a shooting range, whether an audiovisual remix (Bosse) or a short, filmed sequence (the others). Among our sampling, we have seven videos of this sort, produced by five shooters (see table 1). The first particularity is linked to the predominant use of visual signs. The prominent image and quasi-absence of speech impacts the interpretative polysemy, even if the absence of language barriers is also implied. The second particularity of these videos concerns the contents: the shooters are placed center stage through staged scenes and refined post-production editing. Auvinen, for example, introduces a form of suspense, using close-ups that progressively widen into a large shot (Frames 5 to 7); the spectator discovers the smiling author of the video only in the last frame (Frame 8).



Frame 5



Frame 6



Frame 7



Frame 8

With Bosse, editing is articulated around scenes completed with props (e.g. long black trench coat). The song *Die MF Die* underscores a sequence filmed outdoors, in which he walks towards the camera with a gun in his hand, backlight outlining his body (Frame 9). In the next frames, his pseudonym *ResistantX* is engraved in a still image (Frame 10), and he points his gun at the camera (Frame 11). The post-production work is centered on self-consecration.



Frame 9



Frame 10



Frame 11

In one of Saari's four videos, the same attention to self-presentation is tangible. The video shows a close-up of his face taken from a low angle, highlighting his superiority over the viewer. He addresses the spectator via a pointed finger and an infamous formula: "You will die next." (Frame 12). Afterwards, he shoots at the camera lens (Frame 13).



Frame 12



Frame 13

All these staged performances/self-presentations contribute to building the shooters' identity from two complementary angles. Firstly, the authors are emphasizing, with pictures for proof, the premeditation of their act. With the exception of Klebold and Harris, whose filmed sequence shows them learning to use firearms, these videos illustrate the shooters' skill in mastering firearms and therefore their ability to kill their potential targets. Secondly, this type of video shows them as masculine figures, rejecting any image of themselves as weak or "sissies", corresponding to a previously well-established image of school shooters (e.g. Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Newman et al. 2004; Kellner 2008).

The last format is specific to Auvinen, and therefore will be hereafter set aside. Through remixes, the author reorganizes, edits, and adds sound to pre-existing contents drawn from popular culture. The distinctive features of Auvinen's videos are the absence of any human face and a musical repertoire serving as the central axis (e.g. Kiilakoski and Oksanen). These trademarks are blatantly absent from only three of his videos, *Shooting*, the video that was just described, an *Introductory Video* and a video in which he recites a poem. This format is considered "voicing opinions", in that

the unity of this video corpus is derived from the proclamation of an individual stand, based mainly on the rejection of “Others” and insubordination to predominant ideologies.

These three formats share a same rationale, that of a hero-worshipping ideal. By self-staging violent identities (format 2), proclaiming free thought (format 3) or exposing reasons behind their crimes (format 1), the offenders stress their differences through superiority. This characteristic is inherent to the cultural script of school shootings depicting a lone rather virile anti-hero (e.g.). Thereby, through their videos, shooters prolong the performative script of rampage shootings as described by Muschert and Ragnedda (2009). The most striking feature of these formats is the function of distinction: the offenders stress their difference and by doing so their intrinsic individuality. Yet, the paradox is that of similitude. Conformity is already apparent in their use of the same format of participation. Likewise, they adopt a well-known cultural script. If we extend the scope of observation, these visual communications, notably the first format, fit the format of other instigators of contemporary violence, such as terrorism related to religious issues. Conformity does not stop there. Saari, Auvinen and Bosse use English even though it is not their native tongue. Couldry notes that in an era of globalization, individuals homogenize the ways in which they express their differences (2000). So it seems.

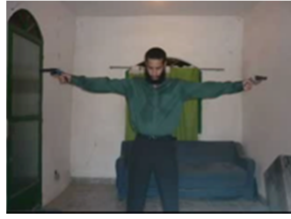
Imitation of staged performances

A closer look at the sampling contents furthers understanding of the signification behind the authors’ messages. The ambivalence noted before persists: the killers do not seem to produce but rather reproduce pre-existing textual, visual and sound references, thus substantializing the copycat hypothesis (e.g. Fox & Levin 2003; Webber 2003; Larkin 2007). Their videos draw upon pre-existing inter-textual references and the boys weave, intentionally or not, threads associating them to the phenomenon.

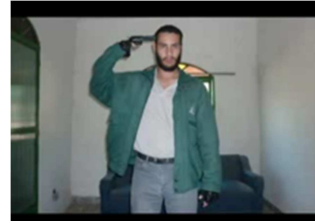
The mimicry dimension seems convincingly apparent when comparing the visual register of multimedia packets and self-produced videos of various killers. Cho and Oliveira both produced a series of self-portraits holding firearms (see below Frames 14 to 19), in which the exact same postures are adopted frame by frame by the two boys. To better illustrate this similitude, the images have been placed one above another. In the first picture, the gun is pointed in the obvious direction a shot is normally fired (Frames 14 & 17), yet the direction of the gun indicates the shooters’ intended target: the viewer. In the following, reference is clearly made to action films, as Kellner observed in regards to Cho (Frames 15 & 18) (2007). Such a posture could imply the shooter aims extremely well even if he is not looking in the direction of his target. In the last two frames, by pointing a gun at his head rather than at a potential spectator, the two boys switch registers, going from murder to suicide, thus emphasizing the thin borderline between the two, death being the ultimate link (Frames 16 & 19).



Frame 14



Frame 15



Frame 16



Frame 17



Frame 18



Frame 19

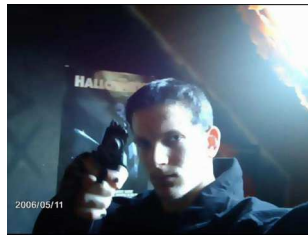
These staged performances reflect those illustrated in self-produced videos and multimedia packets in that the shooter points his gun at the lens. This seems to be a systematic practice (Frames 20 to 22) and not exclusive to our sampling, as proven by the picture of Kimveer Gill below (Frame 23).



Saari
Frame 20



Auvinen
Frame 21

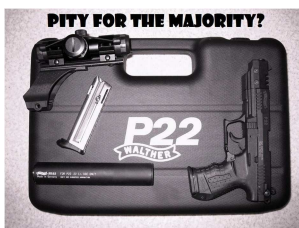


Bosse
Frame 22



Kimveer Gill
Frame 23

These images emphasize not only recognition of potential spectators, indicating hope for fame, but also an aggressive note towards all potential spectators. The most complete representation is in Saari's video, *You will die next*. The formula "you will die next" rings out like a threat aimed at instilling fear: not only does he shoot towards the camera but the potential spectator is designated by the use of generic term "you", meaning, everyone and anyone. To these threatening pictures are added those in which the boys display their arsenal (Frames 24 – 26).



"No pity for the majority!"
Saari



Auvinen
Frame 25



Cho
Frame 26

Frame 24

More than a simple resemblance, the adoption of similar postures and the over-representation of firearms accentuate the imitative nature of these two formats, pictures and videos. The orientation of these visuals reinforces the hypothesis of their need to build a virile identity. This aspect of their publications leads us to believe they draw from a “culture of violence” linked to cultural industry products, and thereby that the boys are imitating popular movie heroes (e.g. Kellner 2008).

Mimicry continues through other symbols. Saari says “Goodbye” while waving at the camera (Frame 27). When shooting in the woods, Auvinen ends the short sequence with a gesture towards the camera, without any discursive connotation. The gesture can be interpreted as an introductory or closing formula (Frame 29). Bosse ends his remixed video on a similar note; on the image we can read: “say ‘goodbye humanity’” (Frame 28).



Saari
Frame 27



Bosse
Frame 28



Auvinen
Frame 29

In a less spectacular manner, Castillo concludes his last video with a long tirade to say farewell and finishes by uttering the words “good-bye” before switching off the camera. Supposedly Harris and Klebold also say “good-bye” in their final video according to Jefferson County reports (2000). This exit from the social scene tolls like recognition of the suicidal act as a fundamental ingredient to the shooting as much as a murder threat. The predominance of the suicidal register awakens theories portraying their acts as suicides by cops (Hutson et al. 1998). The stake of the shooting becomes the outcome as much as an adopted virile posture on the social game board.

If the convergence of visual productions allows little doubt as to mimicry, examination of stated identifications support this idea. School shooters explicitly name or represent one another. Oliveira refers to Cho as a brother in arms; Castillo points out that his cultural tastes are like those of “Eric and Dylan”; Auvinen uses images from the Columbine shooting surveillance camera and devotes several videos to the Columbine killers. This aspect underlines the fact that the boys actively take part in associating themselves to a group. Such statements act as signs of recognition that work toward creating a group rationale. Whether this group exists beyond these signs of recognition is immaterial; they nonetheless shape the contours of a specific affiliated group.

It seems important to point out that these boys are actors of their imitations rather than simple copycats. In itself, the re-appropriation of cultural references used by other shooters gives them the means to shape their association, by establishing a sufficient number of common cultural references. By doing so, the perpetrators ensure, intentionally or not, the attribution of meaning to

their acts rather than taking the risk of having their acts interpreted as senseless violence. Through their videos, the issue becomes one of conforming, via imitation, to this signification system in which shooters find their place, thereby substantiating the notion of a political act (Larkin 2009). However, they are thereby entwined in a paradox whose outlines they have woven, caught between their need to be singled out and the necessity of adopting a pre-existing model.

Discursive arrangements: reversing roles and redefining identities

If we examine the discursive register of the narrative in the videos, this double trend is also present. Explanations are rooted in the manner in which the boys present themselves: victims, martyrs or losers, then supermen or living gods. In the first version, they forge the basis for their marginality, seeing themselves at the bottom of the social ladder. Beyond their adherence to a standard concept of social position, a second connotation can be attributed to such an assessment: they perceive themselves as dominated individuals in a position of weakness. In the second version, even though the boys proclaim their supremacy with misanthropic standpoints, their status of outcast is one they have chosen. The two extremes relate to domination: instead of being subjected to domination they act upon it and dominate in return. The shooting is what allows them to reverse roles and redefine their identities (Newman et al. 2004).

These two aspects seem directly linked to opposed views: one retrospective, the other linked to the imminence of the shooting. In the first case, self-presentation is founded on experiences of inflicted violence, whether physical (via corporal punishment meted out by a parent or bullying, for example) or symbolic (via peer rejection, ostracism, lack of respect). These experiences are interpreted as weakness. Perception of this violence in terms of trampled values justifies the outcome in their minds. Lack of respect is regularly cited, notably by Oliveira and Castillo. Their self-representation as outcasts is determined by certain standards, founded on democratic ideals and expectations concerning peer treatment. For them, the violence to which they are victim is unfair. The material existence of physical harm or verbal abuse is not the issue; such justifications constitute interpretations upon which shooters perceive their existence and their acts. Their murderous intentions seemingly stem from revenge even though they reverse the paradigm of the illegitimacy of their acts by defining them as justice.

In the second case, they highlight what makes them different, while proclaiming themselves as determined and responsible for their acts. Their rejection is all-encompassing but contains standard targets: the majority, school, peer groups. Unlike in their first identity, the boys become actors of their lives, setting the terms of their discrimination, thereby extracting themselves from a position of weakness. Violence appears to be related to a process of subjectivization: in choosing violence, the person denies weakness and becomes the subject of his own life (Wieviorka 2009).

This first study illustrates how school shooters stage their murderous acts. They tend to produce a common narrative, the terms of which demonstrate an attachment to a limited number of signifiers. The use of language, visual materialization and signs of self-recognition lends legitimacy to

certain aspects of the signification system. The narratives converge into a common story, the repetition of which, from one killer to another, strengthens the contours of a “school shooting” category.

Such videos should be put into relationship to a community of interpretation as meaning emerges with an audience. This will now be done in our second study focusing on fans.

FANS’ MEDIA PARTICIPATION: WHEN AN ONLINE SUBCULTURE LEADS TOWARDS INDIVIDUATION

Outlines of a subculture linked by school shootings

We shall begin by discovering the space that progressively became the reference for the network of interpretative communities, structured around YouTube in the late-2000s. Under the impulsion of public debates, regulatory practices, and recognition by peer groups on other sites, actors outside the group progressively implanted the notion that a territory dedicated to this social network existed. Recognition also stemmed from participants: signs of belonging and performative statements such as “we are from all over the world” or “in this ‘community’” contributed to producing a collective entity.

If this group occupied a place, their identity is related to a distinctive semiotic arsenal serving as social markers. The most represented items are extracts from the school shooting repertoire: shooters’ self-produced videos, sequences taken from surveillance cameras, class pictures of their “hero”, movie extracts about the phenomenon (*Zero Hour* or *Bang Bang You’re dead*), killers’ favorite music, etc. Used repeatedly in videos and from one profile to another, the selected cultural products become an integral part of the “school shootings culture” (so named by one Internet user). In this regard, they adhere to a distinct social group through imitation of certain signifiers. As such, the cultural references become codes that must be mastered to ensure one’s adherence to the peer group. They also serve as signs of resistance to the dominant representations of this phenomenon.

The style of the deviant group is blatantly revealed in self-produced videos and personal pages. In the collection of 142 videos accessed, over two-thirds commemorate a/several shooter(s) or adopt a position in favor of the boys’ acts via remixes. Three other video formats overlap and contribute to a group rationale. One can be classified under what Aufderheide and Jaszsi name “Archiving of Vulnerable or Revealing Materials”, that is, “revealing”, “scandalous” data or videos published online as “an act of rescue”. The users believe the unavailability of such material is “an act of censorship” or “simply wrong” (2008, 13). The shooters’ videos analyzed above fall within this category, as do other videos: those of Jefferson County on Columbine, the Alvaro Castillo trial, or the police interrogation of Kipland Kinkel. The second format resembles fan fictions: narratives based on the school shooting universe and the killers. Wads’ video game sequences appear more anecdotal but nevertheless show a link with the shooters’ use of the media. Such a distinct style is maintained within self-presentation on profile pages. Self-presentation is built around the same semiotic arsenal via users’ icons, pseudonyms, backgrounds, cultural tastes displayed or repeated key phrases.

Specific aesthetics come into play with the use of recurring symbols (Frames 30 to 34), which draw on the “school shooting culture”. The most common pseudonyms displace the killers’ first names or create associations to the phenomenon, as the examples hereafter underline: *shootersareus*, *potentialnextshooter*, *trenchcoatmafia*, *Ismailax416*, *ericharris1990* or *REB420*.



These pages reveal a vocabulary reserved for this network, ranging from the shooters’ nicknames – such as Reb & VoDKa for respectively Harris and Klebold – to several key phrases that have become federating slogans – such as *Peek a boo*, *Ignorance is bliss*, *Si vis pacem para bellum*, NPFTM = No Pity For the Masses. Forums on personal pages give us the opportunity to discover collective ritual practices. For instance, several weeks before the anniversary of the Columbine massacre, a buzz associates profiles with talk of an upcoming potential resurgence. Fans constantly remain on the lookout for upcoming shootings, commenting on the time elapsed since the last one and the probability of another. Once a shooting takes place, they exchange information to compare it to the precedent and give their assessment.

The semiotic material mobilized and the ritualistic activities pursued forge networks of interpretative communities, the overlapping of which leads to the existence of a fan group. The central element of this community is the interest shown in the shooters and/or their murderous acts, whether it be, according to the Internet users themselves, a real “fascination”, an “obsession”, the “subject of an investigation” or a simple misfortunate association. It is first defined as a transgressive position, resulting from public debate configurations of the phenomenon over the last two decades. In this form, they are characteristic of a subculture (e.g. Gelder 2007; Hebdige 1979). As a heuristic tool, it is relevant to characterize them as such. Yet, we should keep in mind that the line is not as homogenous or autonomous as it first seems.

Attachment to a form of violence: support for individuation

In examining the hold of this form of violence translating into fan attachment, we find that Columbine is a key ingredient in this subculture. An overrepresentation of videos inspired by this particular shooting tends to reduce the phenomenon to the two instigators, Harris and Klebold. As such, they embody leaders of a political movement. At the very least, they represent enunciators to whom identification is possible. A user explains:

For quite a while now I've been doing as much research as I possibly could on Columbine because these two boys and the school, remind me so much of something in my past. MY friends, MY high school, and MYSELF.

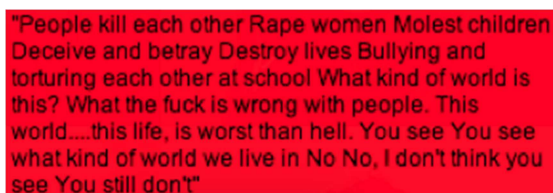
This identification relies upon interpretation of Harris and Klebold's experiences of bullying, questions on the meaning of existence, and their stand on domination in becoming actors of their lives rather than mere followers.

Another level of attachment is the construction of a critical stance regarding failure of institutions, first and foremost school, followed closely by the media as a system corrupted by hegemonic thought. Other institutions are occasionally singled out, such as religion or matrimony. The educational institution nevertheless holds a special place in this selective process with a majority of publications on bullying. In the videos, school shooters become the emblem of a moral crusade against the instigators of school bullying.

they stood up for all of us on that wonderful day... FUCK THE JOCKS... They stood up for all the people who got picked on in our lives, all the times when we knew we were right and no one listened to us...

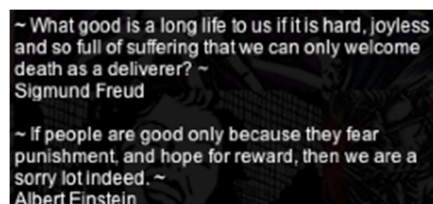
When this feature becomes the main trait of school shootings, the school is castigated as an oppressive system maintaining in its midst a dominant social order – classically favoring jocks. Schools flagrantly disregard the democratic precepts that molded the institution: freedom of the people and thereby the right to be different, but also equality for all underpinned by mutual respect. From this standpoint, users show sympathy for perpetrators, an attitude leading them to undermine the human and social consequences of their actions.

Many references in the videos and on the profile walls divulge that violence is a form of attachment. It is an object of curiosity that leads to questioning the meaning of life when faced with the image of death. The taboo of death is shattered by exposing the killers' dead bodies (e.g. Asa Coon, Oliveira, Harris & Klebold), or through fictional visual representations of the murdered victims. The counterpart of this participation is an outlook on life underlining its absurdity and the suffering inherent to the human condition, as excerpts below from profiles illustrate (Frames 35 & 36):



"People kill each other Rape women Molest children
Deceive and betray Destroy lives Bullying and
torturing each other at school What kind of world is
this? What the fuck is wrong with people. This
world....this life, is worst than hell. You see You see
what kind of world we live in No No, I don't think you
see You still don't"

Frame 35



~ What good is a long life to us if it is hard, joyless
and so full of suffering that we can only welcome
death as a deliverer? ~
Sigmund Freud

~ If people are good only because they fear
punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a
sorry lot Indeed. ~
Albert Einstein

Frame 36

This form of violence supports the scaffolding of various themes derived from violence, such as depression and contemplation of suicide, or its role in the history of mankind (e.g. world wars or

serial killers). Reflexive stances emerge from such concerns. The shooters feel they develop a sense of hyper-lucidity that accounts for their marginality. For this subculture, such feelings become a hallmark for normality, as illustrated by the following remark in a video posted on YouTube:

The ability to transcend the values of society; freedom from restriction of thought; seeing through the façade of modern society; self-awareness is a wonderful thing but it can also be a burden; it can be frustrating to live with awareness of the human condition among so many who are clueless; (...) how could so many be duped into a superficial existence? Because they don't think! (...) Of course, if you question the way we live or are saddened by its irrationality, then there is something wrong with you! You might be depressed or have a "personality disorder", society's solution – Depending on your personality you'll experience some of the following: feelings of inferiority/superiority, hostility, aggression, frustration, depression, self-hatred/ hatred toward other people, suicidal/ homicidal thought etc.... And that is normal.

School shootings become a message for people on the sidelines or pushed aside by social competition because of their differences. Adhesion to this subculture is a way to resist categorization as social outcasts and rebel against the social construction of normality.

Fans question society's moral foundations and put them into perspective, appropriating philosophers such as Nietzsche. This can become an open door to immoral standpoints, similar to those developed by a number of killers, defending Darwinist Social theories. Underlying such stances is a perception of the social structure in terms of opposition between the weak and strong, winners and losers, outcasts and the majority. On the fringes of this tendency, the most subversive stances plea for killing inferior minds in order to let the superior race of humans rule, meaning those who are known to be different because of their superior intelligence and refusal to follow mainstream ways. These stances are usually melded with neo-Nazi beliefs.

The popularity of this form of violence often stems from teenage quests for social models when questioning the meaning of life and social institutions. For these fans, offenders, notably Harris and Klebold, set an example in the midst a deinstitutionalized setting: they embrace marginality as a sign of a superior mind, and wear it as an emblem of themselves rather than becoming alienated from the masses. Through identification with such models, they shape their identity. By stating who they are, they express who they are not and what they reject and exclude when defining themselves. Taking part in such a subculture provides the opportunity "to live in and through a set of symbols that are expressive of one's aspirations rather than 'reality'" (Jenkins in Harris 1998: 6). In this manner school shootings appear to be a support for individualization (Beck, & Beck-Gernsheim 2001) accomplished through media. The pitfall of such aspirations is the avocation of individualism, which in itself is a form of alienation (Arnett 1996).

At this stage, this subculture can potentially be understood as encouraging violence in that it obviously supports the shooters and their acts. One might also be inclined to portray such spaces as inductive to spreading violence. Yet, more often than not, publications lead to conflictive interaction opposing members of the group, as our following analysis demonstrates.

Falling back in line: challenging radical publications via regulation

Regulation is the norm. Internal regulation is not only based upon conflicts amongst group members but is self-regulatory. External intervention provides additional constraint. Regulation encourages thought and challenges participants to think above and beyond radical impulses, leading to the complexification and construction of new mind frames, without removing the benefits of group adherence.

This community is not an isolated pocket unaware of the subversive positions taken. In their profile, fans justify their center of interest with synthetic sentences like: "I want to understand"; "look for the real causes of a tragedy like Columbine, rather than heap blame on a scapegoat such as the media". The publicizing of their justifications is reinforced by explicit comments such as: "I DO NOT WHATSOEVER condone Eric and Dylan's actions by FAR". Occasionally, one stumbles upon more partial proclamations with formulas like "Eric and Dylan are my heroes." Most often, they are careful to avoid pitfalls in asserting their right to interpretative singularity. The Internet user hereafter uses a legal frame of reference:

"I post this under the rights granted to me under the 1st Amendment. After showing the hanging of Saddam Hussein and countless other violence, YouTube should have no problem with this Tribute...."

Over and above self-monitoring publications, they reflect on their practices. Their resemblance with those committing the massacres, as well as their interest in this phenomenon, can surprise or frighten them. For example:

"I know so much about the subject... sometimes I scare myself."

"I thought I was crazy at first started developing an interest in the subject."

The peer group does not agree on the acceptable degree of commitment. Although interest in and even obsession for the phenomenon are tolerated, declarations considered too subversive are denounced. Warning signals are issued:

"To all of you "Reb and Vodka" worshippers out there, you guys are PATHETIC."

Radical and light positions produce conflicts within networks, differentiating the "wannabes" from the vast majority of fans, acting to delete a user's account or issuing threats to the targeted

person. Sometimes, internal regulation within the group constitutes horizontal pressure so that they reiterate the behavior they want to disavow, as a fan points out: “Get over yourself... You sound like a jock pointing fingers.” These forms of direct regulation are intertwined with the realism of certain discourses. For instance, they do not hesitate to remind those who “worship” the shooters that “they probably would’ve capped you down if you were there anyways” or to recall what happened to previous school shooters: “Not a good famous to be a famous murderer. I read that one of the Jonesboro kids got locked up as an adult and got ‘messed with’, I’ll assume not just beatings but rape.”

These various debates do not eliminate the possibility of hosting future candidates, as fans acknowledge, but as an Internet user points out: “for every auvinen we get one kazimierczak” meaning for every school shooter who fits the mold there is the one who does not. This horizontal production of social standards usually defies stereotypes and tests the most radical positions by pushing the Internet users to complexify their approach. This fan discussion testifies:

“What do you think is the best way to deal with the Columbine fanboys? Keep in mind TheAmazingAtheist helped shatter my already faltering worship of Eric and Dylan into pieces. (...) his videos made me admit something like Columbine is wrong.”

Their views are not only questioned or censored within the network, outsiders also oppose them. These interpretive communities do not interact in a territory outside the public sphere. Consequently, they are subject to the flagging system that allows YouTube’s users to report inappropriate contents.

Fans gained notoriety with each school shooting. This development led to strong regulation that was accentuated during our study. Internet users also observe this.

“after kauhajoki, ‘the censoring of YT has begun’; i’m sure YT will be deleting a huge chunk of Columbine related videos once again”

The risk of deviant practices was exclusion from YouTube, which took place as shootings recurred between 2007 and 2008, and thereafter, leading to their dispersion and finally disappearance. Under the attentive eye of users and site administrators, under attack in public debates, and internally regulated by its members, fans saw limits drawn as to the immorality of their utterances and declarations openly promoting violence. The opposition encountered online tends to contribute to the individualization of positions rather than the reproduction of violence.

CONCLUSION

With the support of participatory media, instigators of violence, in the present case school shooters, use new communication strategies. The role of their videos is pivotal: it shows their intrinsic individuality, while portraying a violent identity, based on a hyper-normative stereotype of masculinity. In their minds, they become anti-heroic icons of modern times, thus redefining their identity and reversing roles of domination. Although the shooters search for individuality through videos, strong signs of imitation prevail. By drawing upon pre-existing inter-textual references and emphasizing the existence of a “group”, they find their place within a particular signification system and cement the main signifiers of such a category of violence. Thereby, they are caught up in a paradox, as their attempt at self-distinction tends to merge into a common narrative. Tension between a need to be singled out and reproduction of a cultural script underlies such media practices.

On the Internet, fans remix the school shooters’ videos and integrate semiotic material extracted from the school-shooting repertoire into their profiles. As a subculture, this network of interpretative communities reflects the teenage quest for social models and questioning of social structures. It can thereby be perceived as part of the recipe that influences school shootings. However, if this platform allows the expression of deviant opinions, existential concerns or traumatic experiences, acting out is not encouraged. Regulation of this media arena challenges transgressive standpoints and creates moral boundaries pushing them back into line. As the fans themselves acknowledge, a future school shooter may be amongst them, but the issue is not the media so much as the tensions underlying this form of violence.

Attachment to this form of violence has revealed what is at stake in fans’ participation: not so much promotion of violence but support for aspirations of individuality and defense of reversed roles on society’s side lines. Such attachments arise in a contemporary setting lacking role models due to the decline of institutions. Media practices thus become a support for individuation and the media arena a public stage on which new forms of socialization are deployed between peers. Yet, the trap of such aspirations is the avocation of individualism, which in itself is a form of alienation. The tension previously described in regards to the shooters finds echoes amongst fans. This need for self-distinction can be directly linked to a modern era in which autonomy and self-production have become well-praised norms. Here, we have observed some of the pitfalls of such injunctions. From this perspective, school shootings prove to be a symptom and media practices a support for individuation.

Today, the observed network no longer exists notably because censorship has progressively led to its dispersion. Other participants have renounced defending their views while some have outgrown this center of interest. The social control operated on YouTube can be perceived as a positive outcome. It also implies that a space to vent frustrations and existentialist doubts has disappeared, driving participants to haunt more estranged and less visible places farther from the laws of regulation. Yet, no recent shooter has been known for his online participation, indicating online participation is no longer the path for positive reinforcement.

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