

The Kids Are All Right

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#IfIDieInASchoolShooting.

The hashtag appeared in late May of 2018, shortly after ten high school students were killed in Santa Fe, Texas, in the latest iteration of the American school shooting. Students around the country posted to their Twitter feeds; #IfIDieInASchoolShooting was used more than 50,000 times in a single day as teens and tweens described the 18-year-old who started the hashtag told one magazine that he remembered being 12 years old, watching President Barack Obama address the country after the Sandy Hook shooting. He remembered watching as nothing happened in response: no new legislation, no significant political action. The hashtag, at least, offered an outlet for a collective frustration.

Two generations of American students have grown up under the thumb of school shootings. The script following these tragedies has remained largely the same since the 1999 Columbine shooting. This is true not only of the ‘thoughts and prayers’ cliché offered by politicians and the subsequent (relatively short) political debates regarding gun control, but also of the way that school shootings are covered by the media. There is an initial flurry of coverage followed by a steady decline—a decline that now begins early on following the event, as the 24-hour news cycle moves on to other topics. Given that media attention can drive, or at the very least inform, political agendas and action, this slumping and stagnation makes it more likely for the nation as a whole to move on without truly accounting for the shooting.

A new script emerged following the February 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., one that has since been used after other school shootings. The Florida shooting, which left 17 people dead, was in the news cycle far longer than expected, wrenching coverage away from President Donald Trump’s administration and focusing the media’s lenses on Parkland. This focus was almost entirely due to the Parkland students themselves, as the survivors set the tone for coverage through their social media posts. They did not rely entirely on the traditional media to tell their stories and craft an overall narrative; rather, they actively took on a role of gatekeeper. While traditional media interviewed and included survivors in its reporting, the impact of these quoted statements was not as profound as that of the direct statements via social media.

The Parkland students tweeted about living through the horror of the shooting itself. They tweeted memorials to their friends. They tweeted to politicians, to reporters, and to other users, dispelling misinformation directly and quickly. They shot back at National Rifle Association lobbyists. They started the #NeverAgain hashtag and organized a nationwide march. Collectively, these actions helped the shooting stay in the media

cycle, particularly the TV cycle. Three months later, the Santa Fe students embarked on a similar, though less widespread, social media campaign. (It is important to note that most of these students were majority-white and relatively well-off. It is unclear whether social media would have been as effective at setting the traditional media agenda had that not been the case.)

The direct engagement of students with fellow social media users served as a reminder that they were not simply characters in a far-off drama playing out for media audiences, but rather real people with real stakes in the issue. A similar, though smaller-scale phenomenon occurred following Sandy Hook, as parents whose children had been killed began to use social media. But the narrative appeared different when guided by peer survivors and in particular by 'native' social media users—students who had never known a life without the Internet and knew how best to use its platforms. The students were no longer subject to a wearied school shooting narrative; they could write their own. #NeverAgain. #IfIDieInASchoolShooting. These new voices provided a jolt to the script.

The jolt also served as a reminder that news organizations typically do not cover teens on their own terms, or for that matter at all. What other issues are traditional media overlooking or ignoring as a result? Would the news agenda be different if non-traditional groups were offered voices? In order for the media to continue evolving in the digital age, it is important to consider these questions. News would be all the richer for it.