

Media Discourses: The Cultural Forum of School Shootings

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As the questions addressed in this roundtable highlight, media undoubtedly play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of social problems such as school shootings. As audiences become more fragmented and politics more polarized, it often feels almost impossible to have productive and constructive dialogue about the roots of gun violence, particularly when society can't even agree that there is a problem. I would like to suggest three talking points that address some of the questions raised in this roundtable's initial call: 1) timing, 2) neoliberalism and the tendency to individualize problems, and 3) media literacy and youth activism.

To the first, timing: we know that capitalistic 24-hour news cycles and the quick pace of social media provide little space for deep reflection regarding ongoing debates, school shootings being no exception. It seems that the only time news media or people on social media discuss gun violence or gun control is in the wake of a school shooting. Of course, emotions are running high and people on every side of the conversation are often reticent to politicize a tragedy, even though we know the event is always-already inherently imbued in cultural politics. If in the wake of a tragedy is deemed an "inappropriate" time to discuss the root cause of the tragedy, how then do we continue conversations about gun violence and control apart from cycles of mass shootings? How might journalists invite and create more sustainable dialogue? One suggestion I'd like to discuss is thinking about how journalists and social media users alike can discuss gun violence and gun control in stories other than school/mass shootings, such as in stories about homicides, suicides, and police shootings. Guns make the news frequently, but it seems that conversations about gun violence tend to coincide most commonly with school/mass shootings. What might the discourse look like if these conversations and think pieces were more common in all stories about gun violence?

To address another question raised in the initial call for responses – what are the distinctions between fictional representations of mass shootings and news coverage? I find that both are quite similar and problematically so: both tend to individualize the problem rather than discuss larger structural conditions that give rise to school shootings. In fictional narratives, such as "afterschool specials" in teen TV (a favorite genre of mine!), a teen boy brings a gun to school as a result of bullying or as an act of revenge. Although the "cause" of the problem might be presented as bullying, discursively the shooter himself is often framed as an individual problem to be solved rather than the complex hierarchies of high school and cultural intolerances that lead to bullying, harassment, and violence. Within news media, we are all familiar with the "lone wolf" narrative that frames the shooter as a "bad apple." Although mental health and bullying/harassment are likely linked to gun violence in some circumstances, the ways in which they are mediated and represented often serve to responsabilize (or excuse)

individuals rather than cultivate conversations about larger structural problems, such as the roots of mental illness and harassment.

Third, I'd like for our conversation to discuss what literacies are necessary to participate in a media landscape that is increasingly difficult to navigate. We are only beginning to understand the ways the "alt-right" has used networked spaces to their advantage and one point of discussion should be unpacking their strategies: what can journalists and activists learn about the ways they have used commercially-operated participatory spaces such as YouTube to influence discourse? The teen-organized and teen-led #NeverAgain movement has demonstrated that young people are able to navigate online spaces to their advantage while also demanding attention from and shaping discourse in traditional mass media. In many ways, they have successfully forced a nation to talk about gun violence and school shootings long after the news cycle would have otherwise faded. They have been able to mobilize people and put pressure on elected officials. Many people seem to have been surprised by young people's activism, and as such, I think it's important to discuss the ways media are framing young activists such as Emma Gonzalez, who in many ways, has become the face of the gun control movement. How do the ways in which media frame young (female) activists further shape discourse and attitudes about school shootings? Media platforms, journalists, and narrative fiction play different roles in constructing ideologies, but all are tied up into larger questions about what ethical, appropriate, and effective mediation looks like in a capitalist media ecology saturated with "fake news", polarization, and fragmentation.