

“Don’t You Dare Say...It’s Too Soon”: School Shootings and the Limits of National Unity

Phil Scepanski, Marist College

Following the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting, media coverage enacted a familiar script. Television news sent helicopters and broke into regular programming to place viewers “at the scene.” Federal politicians quickly chimed in to express a sense of national solidarity. Lester Holt framed the event with further reference to a national collective, noting that “the nation once again witnessed the awful images of students hands raised fleeing from an American school along with the emotional reunions of children with their anguished parents.”

Nationalistic media rituals following mediated trauma are familiar. Not to be confused with Nick Couldry’s “media rituals,” which describes media’s self-legitimation, I take these examples as indicative of television and other media’s ability to constitute our sense of nation.¹ These are ritualistic in one sense in that they are familiar, compulsory, and somewhat rote. Following Emile Durkheim and Benedict Anderson, they also serve as ways to offer a sense of coherency to national identity, reinforcing a sense of collectivism in their offering simultaneous group witness and evoking similar emotions.² Durkheim points to rituals like rites of passage that signify and reinforce a sense of community. Religious ceremonies like Eucharist and Bar and Bat Mitzvahs denote membership in a community, reinforcing the overall coherency of that community. Benedict Anderson and Jürgen Habermas apply similar ideas to more complex, mediated communities.³ And although their work speaks more directly to print, there is little question that television and internet media serve similar functions in contemporary American society.

Updating his thoughts from 1992’s *Media Events*, Daniel Katz, along with Tamar Liebes, argue that television’s increasing ability and corresponding tendency to broadcast disasters, terrorism, and war create a more “disintegrative” media environment.⁴ However, the nationalistic discourses noted above suggests that even if they mark breakdowns in larger social orders, media coverage continues to rely on ritualistically unifying discourses. However, I do not dismiss Katz and Liebes entirely and I think we can expand on their observations to note how not only have the pro-televisual events

¹ Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New Edition (New York: Verso, 2006); Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1915).

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New Edition (New York: Verso, 2006); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, ed. Thomas Burger and Fredrick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

⁴ Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes, “‘No More Peace!’: How Disaster, Terror and War Have Upstaged Media Events,” *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007): 157–66.

that garner coverage represent disintegration over integration, responses to such events have grown more agonistic over the last few decades. At the same time, the cultural forum and public sphere models suggest that engaging in debate, while atomizing in one regard, is itself a ritual of social cohesion at least in a liberal democratic understanding.⁵

There is little evidence of political argumentation occurring after earlier post-war mass shootings like at the University of Texas in 1966. By the time of Columbine in 1999 and into the Bush presidency, dominant discourses remained largely unifying even if outlying media figures like Rosie O'Donnell and Michael Moore attacked the NRA in the wake of Columbine and others like Rush Limbaugh stoked fears of Clinton overreach in other cases. Television scholars rely heavily on a metanarrative of television changing in response to increased narrowcasting. Here too, although the odd *Meet the Press* guest might have expressed outlying opinions to score political points in earlier periods, the movement of right-wing radio figures to Fox News and the left-leaning counterprogramming on MSNBC have brought more fractious discourses further into the mainstream. And while news satire and parody have been present on American television at least since 1960s, *Politically Incorrect* and the post-Operation Iraqi Freedom *Daily Show* ushered in an age of heightened political conflict on late-night comedy. Besides notable alums like Bee and Oliver, network television now hosts Colbert as well as Seth Meyers and Jimmy Kimmell who, like David Letterman, grew more politically barbed over time.

Of course, the 2016 campaign and elections have accelerated the antagonism of these discourses in earnest journalism as well as comedy shows. We arrive then at a moment when, following events that include not only shootings in Las Vegas and Parkland, but national traumas like those emanating from Charleston, news anchors and comedians alike vacillate between discourses of national unification and those of political partisanship. Colbert and Fallon were off the week of Parkland, but speaking the night of, Kimmell first played a video of Trump's unifying rhetoric, "We are all joined together as one American family and your suffering is our burden also." Among a longer, forceful attack on Trump and other Republicans, Kimmell admonished, "Force these allegedly Christian men and women who stuff their pockets with money from the NRA year after year after year to do something...And don't you dare say it's too soon to be talking about it because...children are being murdered."

To conclude with some questions for discussion:

- Are these trends necessarily good or bad for politics, culture, and/or society?
- Are these trends destined to continue or do emerging media formations, generational shifts, future elections, or any other factors suggest otherwise?

⁵ Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum," in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb, 5th Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 503–15.