Chapter 12
School Shootings as Mediatized Violence

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Scholars have noticed that school shootings in general, and especially the media dynamics surrounding them, have made a significant mark on social discourse about youth social problems in contemporary society. The perpetrators of these noted attacks seem to act according to a cultural script (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011; Muschert and Ragnedda 2010), that features the use of the spectacle of violence (Frymer 2009) as transmitted via mass media. Others have referred to the image of the school shooter as being an example of a trope of violent masculinity (Tonso 2009), as a socioculturally encoded image for how to carry out a school shooting, or of a performative script (Muschert and Ragnedda 2010) which school shooters enact. In both ways of conceiving the cultural development of school shootings, it is clear that early school shootings established a precedent for subsequent attacks (see Larkin 2009 for an exploration).

The general performative script (Muschert and Ragnedda 2010) of the archetypical rampage school shooting involves the use of extreme violence in school settings by young males to exact revenge and/or to convey a message. Victims are typically selected at random or for symbolic reasons, such as being members of high-status groups within the school environment. The attacks take place on a public stage (most frequently media), and often shooters seem to imply that they are undertaking their attacks as a mean of communicating their displeasure with their perceived unjust subordination within the school social hierarchy.

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While the clarification of the performative script (or trope) may help us to understand school shootings more generally, we must look to the media logic of contemporary society to understand aspects of this social problem's international diffusion. Larkin (2009) states that the unfortunate "legacy of Columbine" is that school attacks are not merely revenge for perceived victimization and bullying, but have become a public ritual. Not only have subsequent shooters emulated earlier, famous attacks like Columbine, but as Larkin also points out there have been many averted rampages in which the would-be perpetrators also sought to imitate infamous school shooters. While school shootings are fortunately very rare, the images of the school shooter are widely available and easily imitated. Thus, school shootings are no longer unfamiliar as a part of the cultural repertoire. Sadly, given that they have happened in various countries on multiple continents across the previous 15 years, it is clear that these are somehow connected, undoubtedly via media processes.

This chapter explores the idea that rampage school shootings are highly mediatized phenomena, in that both the events themselves and the public perception of them are intimately tied to media logic. Fortunately, the vast majority of people have no direct exposure to school shootings, nor do they have indirect experience via contact with those with direct exposure. Despite this, most people know something about school shootings, and the ubiquity of the school shooter trope obliquely implies the mediatized nature of contemporary society and its problems.

Of course there have been numerous academic studies of the mediated aspects of school shootings, and these are interesting in themselves. However, they also offer a point of departure for broader academic discussion of the integral ties between mass media processes and crucial aspects of social crisis, whether caused by extreme violence, natural disaster, terrorism, or various forms of accidents.

This chapter offers an overview of the interplay between media and the school shootings phenomenon, situated within the contemporary condition of media saturation.[1] The discussion starts with a description of school shootings as ideal cases for the examination of mediatization, and proceeds in more concrete terms to explore the specific ways in which media logic articulates itself in this case. In particular, the argument examines the content of news media in discussing school rampages,

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[1] The use of overlapping terms in this field can be confusing. Muschert (2007a) defines school shootings broadly as gun violence against persons taking place at schools, but also defines a number of subtypes: rampage/amok attacks, school invasions/mass murders taking place at schools, targeted attacks, terror attacks, and government attacks. Though targeted attacks where shooters specifically target one or more victims are among the most common, they receive less attention than rampage-type and school invasion-type attacks (which attract great attention). In most cases, the term "school shooting" refers to rampage attacks and mass murders, though there are exceptions. Since both the research and media coverage of school shootings focus on rampage and school invasion attacks, this chapter uses the term "school shootings" to refer to those attacks which appear more dominantly in media and research discourses, namely rampage and school invasions.

ultimately focusing on the frames that are evoked. The highlighting of certain frames necessarily casts others in shadow, thereby suppressing those alternative aspects of discourse. The chapter concludes with some critical reflections on the effects and continued relevancy of understanding school shootings as strongly mediatized events, not only for understanding the rhetorical importance of these high profile events, but also for understanding the concrete, real-world consequences of the media logic which show themselves in behavioral and policy developments.

12.1   Mediatization and School Shootings

Both the ability to make one's actions intelligible and the intelligibility of the actions of others are strongly influenced by media logic in this age of information. This section explores an emerging understanding of mass-mediated social relations and their appearance in the apt example of school shooting events. The concept of mediatization suggests that media forms have become integrated into dominant social institutions, and vice versa. In cases of exceedingly rare catastrophes which capture the collective sociological imagination (often in anxious and/or existential ways), the public relies strongly on media to understand the meanings, details, and effects of such tragedies. School shootings are among the superlative examples of mediatized violence, in which the discourse about the phenomena is dominated by mass media processes.[2]

The term *mediatization* has entered into the academic discourse about new forms of media logic, particularly concerning the intersections between "real world" events and the media representations of such events (Couldry 2008; Hjarvard 2008). Thus, in a heavily mediatized information society, media strongly affect core social relations, including government, family, educational, and legal institutions. Given that school shootings are high-profile events that sit at the juncture of social processes concerning education, community, security, justice, and the socialization of youth, the importance of such tragic events is not surprising. However, what may be less obvious at times is that media processes, as key to the contemporary age, also play crucial roles in school shooting phenomena.

Given the dominance of media in social relations, media processes and institutions emerge as increasingly independent of the social relations which they purport to convey. Thus, the independent media logic exerts its own hegemony in that actors in previously independent institutions (e.g., youth cultures, justice systems, education), must conform their behaviors to the new media logic. Simultaneously, media processes become integrated into the very institutional forms on which they report, and therefore become inseparable from other essential forms of social relations

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[2] There are, of course, other examples of highly mediatized events, including terror attacks and many acts of war. Similarly, though the destruction may be interpreted less as the effect of malice aforethought, there are similar mediatized qualities to the destruction conveyed in news accounts of large-scale transportation accidents, industrial accidents, and natural disasters.

(Hjarvard 2008). This occurs both as social life increasingly takes place within mass-mediated forms (e.g., social networking, online learning, entertainment media, and electronic communications) and as individuals conform their behaviors to digital logics in order to make their words and actions intelligible to others in the information society (Couldry 2008). In effect, the ability to make sense of others' behaviors and to make one's own behaviors intelligible are in direct proportion to—and dependent upon—their conformity to contemporary modalities of communication.

School shootings are a widely recognized form of violence and victimization, and one almost exclusively conveyed to audiences via media forms (Muschert and Ragnedda 2010). While these incidents are often quite horrific in their effects, they are also exceedingly rare, particularly when compared with more common forms of violence in schools, such as physical bullying and simple assault (Muschert 2007a). Nonetheless, school shootings occupy a strongly leveraged position in the public consciousness and the general understanding of the social problem of youth violence. In some cultural contexts and historical periods, in fact, school rampages may come to dominate the problem awareness of school violence, or even youth violence more broadly. Thus, the school rampage shooters (most commonly outcast youth) often become the unfortunate poster children for school violence, youth violence more generally, or even youth disaffection and social problems as a whole (Muschert 2007b).

So, what social factors contribute to the public conceptions concerning school shootings, given their exceedingly rare actual occurrence, and how have these events (and their participants) come to typify more general categories of youth violence and social problems? Even in countries that have experienced multiple school shootings (Canada, Finland, Germany, and the United States), the overwhelming majority of the population has not witnessed a school shooting directly in their community, and exceedingly few people personally know someone who has directly experienced such a tragedy.[3] The mediatized quality of school shootings becomes clear here, as the vast majority of the population has learned about school shootings via mass media. In the case of school shootings, this mediatized quality may be especially strong, as a number of aspects of these events are mediatized. For example, the shooters often are motivated by a desire to convey one or more messages, or by a desire for self-aggrandizement. In fact, many shooters have been quite media-savvy (Muschert and Ragnedda 2010), and have consciously used media to convey messages (Schildkraut 2012). School shooters are quite certain that they are acting on a public stage, and in fact intend to seize this mediatized stage. While other forms of violence are certainly also heavily mediatized (particularly terror attacks), school shootings stand among the dominant examples of mediatized violence, as nearly all socially recognized aspects

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[3] School shootings are an extremely rare form of violence and heavily mediated. There are other forms which may also share similarities. For example, serial killings, mass murders, terror attacks, and cannibalism may be similar in their mediatized qualities. Thus, there is a potential "ideal type" of phenomena which are exceedingly rare but also capture intense media attention. This suggests a rich area for potential future scholarly exploration.

of the school shooting problem (and responses to it) have emerged via an interaction between the public and mass media forms.

Of course, media personnel have direct and/or indirect contact with the participants of the events about which they report, and therefore serve the useful role of conveying information to audiences. However, in the case of exceedingly rare and catastrophic events (such as school shootings and airline crashes), the role of the media is particularly significant, because the public has very little experiential basis for processing the veracity of the mass mediated images and characterizations. In cases of more common tragic events (such as natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, and droughts) which may be experienced by broad segments of the population of various regions of the world, the public is less reliant on media messages to understand their meaning. Simply stated, they have lived through such events, and therefore have an experiential basis for comparing the media images with those in lived experience, and therefore provide a baseline for understanding that the media may at times offer only a partial view.[4]

This overwhelmingly mass-mediated quality of school shootings makes them an ideal case for the academic exploration of mediatized violence. Therefore, studies of the media dynamics of school shootings are particularly useful in understanding the emergence of school shootings as a social problem, and in informing scholars about how the public understanding of violence and other social phenomena may be intimately affected by contemporary media logic.[5] A more concrete exploration of the last decade's scholarship of the media coverage of school shootings will illustrate this point.

12.2   Scholarship on the Media Aspects of School Rampages

Scholars in a variety of fields have examined school shootings, particularly the rampage/amok type, and their media dynamics. While journalists have studied the ethical and stress factors related to covering such events (Shepard 1999, 2003; Simpson and Coté 2006), scholars in sociology and media studies have primarily examined

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[4] Of course, natural disasters (e.g., tsunami, earthquakes, floods, etc.) may also be experienced in a mass-mediatized fashion, especially so when they happen somewhere else. For example, people in California clearly have an experiential basis for understanding earthquakes but may not have experienced hurricanes, which typically happen elsewhere. The point here is to convey that the populace is almost entirely dependent upon mass media forms for information about school shootings, but relatively less so for other events which are more broadly experienced.

[5] It is worth point out, however, that the field of communication in crisis situations (as distinct from "crisis communication") is a nascent one which is developing ad hoc in a variety of directions and concerning a variety of topics. Thus, the emergent discussion lacks a unifying theory or conceptual point of view. Studies in this emergent area draw on research related to societies of risk (Giddens 1990; Beck 1997; Bauman 2006; Furedi 2006), networked societies (Castells 2009; Urry 2007; Burgess and Green 2009), and the darker side of modern life with its qualities of mediated performance (Cottle 2009). See also the series "Global Crises and the Media" published by Peter Lang.

media content, both in itself and for its antecedent qualities or effects. The focus on the antecedents to media discourse is useful because media content offers research- ers the ability to trace the content backwards, in an exploration of how the content came to take its form. Such an approach affords an indirect glimpse of the moral judgments, professional conventions, and social problem frames applied in the pro- cess of production. Alternately, researchers can trace the subsequent effects of the content, by examining the influences media content have on social processes. This post hoc approach affords a glimpse into social dynamics related to the meaning of tragedy, public mourning, and more concrete iterations of enforcement and preven- tion that ensue. The following subsections discuss the three foci of media studies of school shootings: the content itself, its antecedents, and in the following section, the effects of such content are examined.

12.2.1   Studying Content

Study of media and school shootings necessarily involve more than a descriptive endeavor of examining content, and often such an effort yields a concise account- ing of what is contained in the media discourse. Such studies convey in orderly fashion the various images and themes that emerge when school shootings appear in media, typically by describing the thematic coverage in news media outlets, with a noted lack of emphasis among the social sciences on school shootings in traditional forms of entertainment media such as film, novels, and theater. Recently, some scholars have examined school shootings in new media forms, such as internet discussions and videos (Lindgren 2011; Muschert and Sumiala 2012). These studies reveal that the media processes observed in school shoot- ings are reciprocal, in that the shooters (as producers of new media content) often post text and/or videos prior to their attacks. However, shooters (as consumers of new media content) often view and/or participate in blog posts and web videos, often shrines or tribute sites erected to discuss the most infamous school shooters of the past.

Despite the richness of these new areas of study, the overwhelming majority of social science studies have focused on the news media, perhaps due to its ubiquity and dramatic content. Overwhelmingly, studies focus on the most infamous shoot- ings, which are often those with the highest death tolls in a country. Also, studies have tended to focus on the news dynamic within a single country. To date, most of the social science studies of school shootings examined the Columbine and Virginia Tech cases in the United States, with studies of less prominent cases being somewhat rare. As school shootings have increasingly occurred in other nations, we also have seen studies focusing on Canadian cases (Eglin and Hester 2003; Howells 2012), German cases (Müller et al. 2012), and Finnish cases (Sumiala and Tikka 2010, 2011). Although scholarship on media dynamics has developed in various countries, as yet there has been scant comparative international

research examining the media effects in different sociopolitical and cultural contexts. One noted exception is a study by Sumiala and Tikka (2011) which examines YouTube videos associated with famous U.S. and Finnish cases, and concludes that a common culture of horror and tragedy is currently developing among networked social discourses, and indeed transcending national and cultural boundaries. While research is just scratching the surface regarding possible avenues for examining international aspects, scholars have laid a foundation by exploring the emergence of school shootings as a sociological phenomenon (as opposed to isolated events) in national contexts. For example, Muschert (2009), in a study of 683 U.S. national-market daily newspaper and broadcast news articles about the Columbine event, tracked the thematic content of the Columbine story, with particular attention to whether stories focused on local, regional, national, or international frames. Although the findings are perhaps skewed by the selection of national-level sources, one key finding is that the reporting tends to focus more narrowly on the event and community in the days immediately following a shooting, but over time widens in its scope to discuss the relevancy to regional, national, or international levels. Just such a pattern of coverage appeared in the coverage of Columbine, and has been replicated in the coverage of numerous other shootings, although often on a lesser scale.

In the early days following a school shootings (the day of the attack and the next 3 days), the media concentrate on establishing the facts of the case, including the identities of the victims/perpetrators, and describing the attack in detail. In the next week (roughly between 4 and 10 days after the attack), the focus is on continuing responses, specifically on public grieving and trauma, including informal memorials, such as vigils, and formal memorials, including funerals for victims and public gatherings. Public figures, such as celebrities, politicians, and religious leaders often appear at such gatherings.[6] In addition, the continuing police investigation into the crime also emerges as an important theme.

Finally, in the subsequent week (between 7 and 14 days after the shooting) the discussion of specifics related to the case wanes, and the coverage moves to a broader search for meaning, including why such events happen (i.e., the causes), and what might be done to prevent future cases. It is within this broader focus in the later days of coverage that the impact and effects of the shooting for other, distant places and schools are discussed; this final application of the shootings to other locales is important because it tends to make the events relevant broadly, rather than keeping them as unfortunate, isolated events. Past the 2-week point, news coverage of school shootings declines precipitously, as the media tend to pursue new stories, and in a hyper-mediated world, another newer event will always emerge to supersede stale news events.

Compared to the issue-attention cycle of social scientists, the life course of media discussion of school shootings seems rather short; however, in the world of media

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[6] Given the tragic nature of school shootings and the emotions evoked, such events may present opportunities for public figures. Of course, these figures also use such appearances as opportunities to engage in public relations and/or for personal or political gain.

producers and consumers, a week or two is a rather long arc. Perhaps the most persistent issue examined by news sources, and indeed one of the few that re-emerges in almost every subsequent school shooting story, is the discussion of the causes. Researchers have identified some factors that contribute to school shootings (see Muschert 2007a, 2010 for a detailed discussion), although these are not always the factors implicated in media reporting.

Focusing on the media discourse about causes, a number of causes are suggested nearly every time a school rampage takes place. Most prominent among these factors are gun availability (Lawrence and Birkland 2004); a wider culture of violence (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001); bullying (Klein 2006); and mass media effects, including a copy-cat effect (Sullivan and Guerette 2003) or exposure to increasing media violence (Webber 2003). Lawrence and Birkland's research (2004) suggests that politicians identify the mass media as contributing to the problem via intense coverage that inspires other youth to carry out similar attacks, but Scharrer et al. (2003) found that the news media (in their own discourse) tend to disavow their contribution to this dynamic. Other factors are noted as being missing or understated in media discourse, including gender dynamics (Klein 2005), aspects related to community climate (Larkin 2007), and school-level variables (Fox and Harding 2005).

The dominance of certain factors cited as causal in the news discourse (as well as the absence of others) contrasts with the variety and complexity of causes identified by social scientists. In fact, journalists commonly cite a small number of causes (often just one) as being behind school shootings, while social scientists have shown that school shootings arise out of a complex combination of multiple factors that actors often differ from one case to the next (see Muschert 2007a, pp. 65–71; 2010, pp. 79–82 for reviews). The social science research suggests that each shooting emerges from a perfect storm of factors present at various sociological levels, including individual factors (e.g., mental illness of the shooter, problems in personal relations, family abuse, and accessibility of guns); community contexts (e.g., conflict among youth peer groups, problems in the school, and conflict/intolerance in the community); and macro-level social contexts (e.g., presence of a culture that glorifies violence, certain political contexts, and the existence of cultural crises in education and masculinity). Although there appear to be explanations emerging from a number of levels simultaneously, journalists tend to cite a narrow range of causes, most often at the micro (individual) and macro (cultural levels). Muschert and Ragnedda (2010) point out that this can suppress discourse about and practical responses to meso-level (i.e., community and school-level) variables that may strongly contribute to many school rampages. Clearly, the content of media discourse about school shootings diverges from the academic discourse about the topic, but given a broader social need to search for the meaning of such attacks, one dominant thread in the discourse has been the discussion of culpability.

Given that the causes of school shootings are contested in the discourse, it is not surprising that it is difficult to ascribe blame. School shooters are typically described as being in the emotional state of rage, or suffering from severe mental

duress.[7] Key to the complexity of assigning culpability is that the youthfulness of offenders often serves as a mitigating factor, softening their moral responsibility.[8] Clearly, adolescents who act out horrific attacks are far from innocent children unaware of the consequences of their actions, but at the same time it may be difficult to label the school shooters as natural born killers or super-predators (Spencer and Muschert 2009; Spencer 2011). Indeed, it is not as simple as it to assign blame to youthful offenders, even in the most horrible of cases seems (Spencer 2005). Still, the news media's selection of (in part) individual causal factors in their coverage suggests that their attribution of blame lies at least partially on the individual plane, as opposed to the more abstract, sociological levels.

If the discussion of the moral responsibility of the shooters remains somewhat ambiguous, it is in the coverage of the victims that moral sensibility of journalists (and presumably their audience) is fully expressed. There is a dramatic quality to the coverage of school shootings, and as a theatrical schema would suggest, there is a need to identify a cast of characters.[9] For purposes of the narrative of school shootings, the victims are identified as protagonists and the shooters as antagonists. The virtues of the victims are emphasized, and the contrasting malevolence of the shooters emerges as an underlying motivation for their actions (Muschert 2007b). Although victims are generally underemphasized in the coverage as a whole, discussion of them dominates in the coverage of memorials. Thus, victims become a focal point at funerals, formal memorial services, and impromptu memorials, thereby serving as a focal point for broader portrayals and activities of grieving individual and shared experiences of trauma. It is in such periods of intense emotion that moral sentiments are activated.

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[7] For example, a May 24, 1998, article in the *New York Times* described the Springfield, Oregon, shooter as having a mixture of psychological troubles and unbridled rage: "Kip Kinkel's parents had worried about his temper since he was a little boy. They sent him to a psychiatrist and taught him at home for a time. In recent months, they thought that their work and concern were making a difference and that Kip, at 15, was turning around. But the teen-ager, who is accused of killing his parents and two of his schoolmates in Springfield, Ore., never made a secret of his angry heart."

[8] However, perhaps in the case of victims the opposite is true. That is, the youthfulness of most victims in school rampages serves as a marker of their innocence, and therefore absolves them from any potential allegations that they may have in some way contributed to the underlying grievances which may have motivated the attack. This is in contrast to the direct statements made by many school shooters that they had been treated unfairly in the past.

[9] School shooters deliberately undertake their attacks on a public stage, with a dramatic schema that requires a cast and setting. The shooters and their victims play the lead roles in the drama, and the setting is the school. As journalists relate the stories of school shootings, they may rely on dramaturgical allusions (Goffman 1956; Harrington et al. 2011). Thus, the suggestion that school shootings carry dramatic overtones is apt in both senses of the word in that dramatic specifies both things which are sudden and striking, but also those things which pertain to theater and performance.

12.2.2   Studying Frames

Another variety of media studies has examined the second-order aspects of media coverage of school shootings, not so much by examining the content of the reporting itself, but rather by more abstractly studying the frames utilized in it. Often applied to media content, framing studies examine interpretive frameworks for understanding, with a long history in sociological research, most notably influenced by Goffman (1974). A media frame is a "central organizing idea for news content that supplies context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration" (Tankard 2001, pp. 100–101). Such studies reveal the evolution of foci within and between media events. In the case of studies of school shootings, most have also focused overwhelmingly on famous cases, as mentioned earlier.

The examination of the spatial framing has been an important aspect, and such studies tend to look at the problem framing conveyed in the media. By characterizing events as individual, community, regional, national, or international, news media can help to define the scope of a problem, and the members of society for whom such events are a threat (see Chyi and McCombs 2004; Muschert and Carr 2006, for discussions of spatial framing of shootings in the United States). Events limited to local impacts will not cause widespread outcry, because it is possible for people outside the affected locality to disassociate from their risks (Muschert and Peguero 2010; Muschert et al. 2013). However, when a problem is portrayed as either national or international in scope, then it is difficult for people to disavow the relevancy of such events, even if they take place in other regions of their own country, or abroad. Thus, the real impact of the broad, national-level problem framing applied to most school shooting cases is that these mediatized events, although exceedingly rare, have the ability to spark increased fear among broad segments of national populations (Burns and Crawford 1999; Altheide 2002).

When school shooting events began to take place with some frequency, they appeared to be a novel form, and therefore journalists were unable to describe them in terms of previous events. Regina Lawrence, in a study of media and school shootings (2001), examined the role that school shooting events in the late 1990s played in establishing journalistic conventions for how to cover such events. The important point is that the journalists covering the early cases (e.g., Jonesboro, Arkansas; Paducah, Kentucky; Pearl, Mississippi; and Springfield, Oregon) established the now-dominant conventions for covering school shootings in news. The result is that journalists now follow a relatively routinized way of conveying the facts and opinions about rampages. While the events themselves are far from the more routine types of violent events which journalists cover, the stories about rampages have nonetheless become more routinized, especially for national-level journalists covering a crime beat.

Aside from the coverage of the events themselves (as described in the previous section), when discourse is examined across multiple school shooting events, it reveals an ongoing discourse about youth social problems. Indeed, the term

Columbine, when evoked in the current context, only obliquely refers to the historical events of 1999, and has instead come to signify a complicated set of sentiments about youth problems in contemporary society (Muschert 2007b). While it seems that anxiety about current cohorts of youth (and the gloomy future they portend) has been a facet of many modern societies, what is new about the present anxiety about potential Columbine-type events is that it has come to typify the issues of youth disaffection more generally.[10]

The discourse of youth violence is not immutable; rather it revolves over time. In *The Paradox of Youth Violence*, J. William Spencer (2011) explores this evolution in the United States from the 1980s to the present. In the 1980s, the problem of youth violence was conceived as an urban problem, which centered mostly around minority youth gangs. In the mid-1990s, this frame evolved into more focused fears about particularly bad cases of urban youth offenders known as super-predators, youth who engaged in violence for its own sake and who had no respect for human life. When a series of school shootings occurred in the late 1990s, the discourse evolved to suggest that the super-predators of primary concern were no longer those in urban areas, but rather those who, heretofore undetected, had been attending high schools across America. In this way, the public concern about youth violence migrated from urban criminal gangs to schools, making the sense of anxiety about youth violence more focused in schools. In particular, the noteworthy school shootings taking place in the last two decades have been crucial for the migration of fear from urban environments to schools in general, and more particularly suburban schools.[11]

Thus, the problem frames surrounding school shootings are strongly situated in related discourses of place (i.e., youth violence as taking place in urban vs. suburban locations), race (i.e., youth violence as associated with minority vs. white youth), and social class (i.e., youth violence as part of the lower class/underclass environment vs. the middle class milieu). The contemporary discourse about school shootings, which is taking place in various nations, is ultimately an

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[10] The discrepancy between the low probability of school shootings and a comparatively noteworthy fear of such attacks is often discussed (Muschert 2007a). In the North American context, this imbalance has manifested itself in the form of accelerated institution of punitive policies, which at times may be ineffective or inappropriate to the verifiable threats observed in school environments (Muschert et al. 2013; Muschert and Peguero 2010).

[11] The issue of spatial framing discussed at the outset of this subsection is distinct from the problem definition mentioned here. The former (Muschert and Carr 2006) refers to the application of a spatial media frame which focuses the discourse at a certain geographic scope of concern, whether individual, community, regional, national, or international. The latter refers to the problem frame applied, which is a way to understand how the problem may be typically seen. In this case, Spencer (2011) argues that school violence was previously construed as an urban problem, while in the recent decades the problem frame has migrated to the suburbs, regardless of which spatial frame may be applied in news media reportage of specific cases.

extended discussion about youth social problems and how to respond to them.[12] However, the discussion (and social control responses emerging from it) may be misaligned to the problem, in that the original framing of the problem applied to youth offenders living in socially disorganized circumstances which were highly criminogenic. Today's school shooter is hardly a troubled youth struggling to survive on the urban streets, but perhaps more a middle class of "disposable youth" (Giroux 2009) disavowed by the very society in which they were raised.

12.3   The Effects of Mediatization of School Shootings: Framing, Solutions, and the Columbine Effect

While the discursive studies described in the previous section are of inherent interest to interpretive scholars, such approaches might leave more positivistic or policy-minded readers wanting more. Indeed, there is a need to understand the pervasive mediatization of these events, and the role this process plays in determining both ideological and practical responses where communities face the unlikely but real possibility of such attacks. As mentioned earlier, the discrepancy between the empirically verified causes of school shooting incidents and the more commonly held narrow set of causes may lead to confusion, and can therefore skew the suitability of prevention, intervention, and responses. In addition, the emotionality evoked by collective trauma of school attacks can further cloud the issue. Therefore, it is important to explore some concrete effects of mediatization in this case (Muschert 2007a, 2010).

The primary effect of mediatization of school shootings involves the relationship between the framing of the problem and the apparent solutions which emerge, which are often skewed toward the punitive.[13] It is axiomatic in social constructionist sociology that the conception of the problem itself implies solutions, as the framing of the problem specifies not only where the problem lies, but by natural extension also where its solutions must lie. For example, a statement that school shootings represent a failure of society to meet the mental health needs of youth, would imply by extension the need to enhance mental health services for youth. Thus, both the problem domains evoked and the descriptions of problems are rhetorically tied with potential solutions to the problems of school shootings. Unfortunately, the discussion of school shootings tends to identify a narrow set of problems, and in so doing ultimately limits

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[12] As mentioned earlier, the emergence of cross-national findings related to discourse about school shootings is a relatively untapped area. Most studies have focused on set of shootings within individual countries, notably the U.S. cases (Muschert 2007b, 2009), Canadian cases (Eglin and Hester 2003; Howells 2012), German cases (Müller et al. 2012), and Finnish cases (e.g., Sumiala and Tikka 2011). It is only recently that scholars have begun social scientifically to investigate some international distinctions, although this area of the field is rich for breaking new ground. Much of this international work has involved researchers in Finland and the United States (e.g., see Sumiala and Tikka 2011; Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011).

[13] Especially in the North American contexts.

the range of solutions which may appear available and appropriate. The heavilymediatized discourse about school shootings thus has very real effects in that it defines the general understanding of the problem itself, and therefore serves to strongly limit the variety measures available for prevention, intervention, and posttragedy response. In the case of school shootings, this dynamic is particularly acute, as little or no knowledge is available about such events, except what is available in mediated sources (Muschert and Peguero 2010; Muschert and Sumiala 2012).

This limiting factor emerging from the mediatized aspect of school shootings operates on a variety of levels. For example, the suppression of potentially valuable aspects of the shooter's intended messages expressing dissatisfaction with the social hierarchy in their schools may focus attention away from community- and school-level factors which might be important in such cases (Muschert and Ragnedda 2010).[14] This potentially exposes schools and those who attend them to risks that could otherwise be mitigated given a broader discourse on sociological aspects within communities and school environments. On a more macro level, Birkland and Lawrence (2009) note that Columbine prompted more discourse than any other school violence episode before it, yet its influence on public policy was comparatively limited. The main effect of the coverage, they argue, was the subsequent increased pace at which existing policies of security and control (primarily punitive in nature) were implemented in schools. This tendency has been described elsewhere as the "Columbine Effect," which describes the tendency for rare but horrible events to drive punitive antiviolence policies in schools (Muschert and Peguero 2010; Muschert et al. 2013).

In a contemporary culture that values emotion and spectacle over reasoned responses, extreme events such as school rampages exert perhaps greater leverage than they should on public conceptions of social problems, but also less influence on policy responses. Thus, these extreme cases seem to drive antiviolence policy to soften the blow of the most severe of cases, while ignoring more common threats, and damaging social capital could act as a protective factor, including quality student–teacher relationships, productive school climate, and primary pedagogical goals in schools.

In *Homeroom Security*, Kupchik (2010) examines trends in school discipline in the United States and the frequently unintended consequences of school security practices. In the name of security, today's youth are increasingly exposed to punitive disciplinary practices, as police, surveillance, and zero-tolerance policies have become more commonplace in schools. Ironically, this has taken place in a wider context of declining rates of violence in schools. In a further ironic turn, punitive security practices seem also to undermine students' recognition of the school's authority, which in a large part relies on their tacit assent that disciplinary regimes are reasonable and appropriate. In school, young people learn about civic participation and develop patterns for lifelong behaviors within their communities, and to the extent that they are disengaged from the governance of their school environment, they are also likely to remain disconnected from civic institutions when they become adults.

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[14] Note that the community- and school-level factors mentioned here refer to the levels of causes which may contribute to school shootings (see Muschert 2007a; Henry 2000, for discussion), which are distinct from the spatial frames or problem frames which might appear in the discourse (discussed earlier).

The dominance of punitive methods of security may lead to numerous problems, and the application of security measures in schools may undermine the very institutions they intend to secure (Muschert and Peguero 2010). School security practices (particularly in the United States) are inappropriately geared toward prevention of the most horrible eventualities, like school shootings, despite the fact that such attacks are exceedingly rare. The problem framing of school shootings (as discussed in the previous section), has led to the general conception that youth problems are centered in schools, and therefore schools have become the focus of efforts to mitigate youth problems. By focusing security efforts in schools, and via the expansion of a punitive regime of punishment, the underlying sources of youth misbehavior are too easily ignored. Students are increasingly exposed to punitive control practices, such as police and electronic surveillance, and the effect of attending school in airport-like security zones may be that youth are increasingly accustomed to the presence of control measures in their daily lives.[15] An unintended consequence may be the maturation of generations of youth who fail to see the legitimacy of disciplinary procedures within traditional institutions such as schools, but who are compliant to the directives of state security.

12.4   Conclusion

Though perhaps far removed from the concrete discussion of media discourse and framing in earlier sections, the social constructionist sociology of school shootings in media society helps to clarify issues of violence and youth (as well as their convergence) as socially constructed and deriving from the social discourse about these topics, much of it heavily mass mediated. The chapter explored school shootings as ideal cases of mediatization, and then went on to discuss concrete strains of social science knowledge related to the field, including content studies of framing of school shootings, and their possible effects on problem conception and policy responses.

Examining the underlying interplay between school shootings and the contemporary media logic, this chapter has explored not only the content but also the deeper meanings and implications of our heavily mediatized cases. Just as the selection of certain problem domains enables some discourses while suppressing others, the varieties of discourse which appear possible also limit the variety of solutions which seem possible. It is likely on some levels that contemporary youth implicitly understand their tenuous position as they navigate within the contemporary school with its characteristic neoliberal regime of punitive control.

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[15] One can assume that the security industry benefits financially from the problem framing we observe in the discourse about school violence. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, a rich area for future investigation involves clarifying the relationship between media frames and financial interests. In short, the question is whether media reportage of extreme cases makes for good promotion of security goods and services.

Among the significant effects of the mediatized quality of school shootings, there are some that stand out. For example, we have observed the development and transmission across national and cultural borders or the cultural image of the school shooter, whether conceptualized as a cultural script for performance (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011; Muschert and Ragnedda 2010), as violent spectacle (Frymer 2009), or as aggressive masculine trope (Tonso 2009). As Larkin (2009) argues, it is clear that school shootings and the media frenzy they often evoke have an effect in the world, as the image of the school shooter circulates broadly and across cultural boundaries.

The mediatized quality of school rampages means that the media logic is intimately bound up with the recognition of the problem, its discussion, and the types of policies which are instituted to deal with the challenges presented. As suggested by their leveraging of media images, many school shooters have understood that their use of shocking violence will capture a public stage. Although it is unlikely that the messages the school shooters wish to convey fall upon sympathetic ears (see Muschert and Ragnedda 2010, for a discussion), the actions of school shooters have contributed to heavily mediatized rituals of public mourning. Although the events themselves are extremely uncommon, the images of the shooters, victims, and mourners are widely accessible and are cultural resources available to those living in an age of media saturation and serial crisis.

Rampage school shootings are mediatized events, and media processes are involved in the causes and responses. In the end, the discussion of mediatization and school shootings also suggests something of the relationship between media logic and social problems more broadly. Taken together, the various scholarly studies of media and school shootings serve not just as resources to understand the concrete subject of how media operates in relation to school shootings, but more generally contribute to a broader understanding of how media affects how social problems are understood.

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