# CHAPTER 11

# THE REMOTE IS CONTROLLED BY THE MONSTER: ISSUES OF MEDIATIZED VIOLENCE AND SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

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## ABSTRACT

Purpose – *The Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings have presented new challenges in how the media covers school shootings. These events have transformed Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, and Seung-Hui Cho not only from disgruntled youth to school killers, but also into actors, writers, and directors of their own narrative.*

Methodology/approach – *This article focuses on the role of the masculine identity and underlying messages in the communicative process of the shooters. Further examination looks at what particular messages the shooters are communicating through the media. This includes an analysis into their journals, internet postings, and videos that were left behind as archives of the performative scripts. Finally, reflection is presented in terms of which parts of the shooters' messages are or are not communicated and why.*

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Findings – *This article considers the differences in the Columbine and Virginia Tech cases in terms of who is controlling the information that gets released to the public. In the case of Columbine, information was or was not released by the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, whereas in the case of Virginia Tech, nearly all decisions regarding material release was made by the media (particularly NBC News).*

Originality/value of paper – *This article applies Muschert and Ragnedda's (2010) examination of cultural scripts to two benchmark cases, examining the mediatization of the shooters' own words.*

**Keywords:** Columbine High School; Virginia Tech; school shootings; Basement Tapes; manifesto; Dylan Klebold; Eric Harris; Seung-Hui Cho; media; expressive violence

## INTRODUCTION

"We're going to kick start a revolution" (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). These words from Columbine High shooter Eric Harris have been echoed in articles and news stories alike following the 1999 shooting (see, e.g., BBC, 1999; Janofsky, 1999; Seibert, 1999; Siemaszko, 1999). Though Harris and his co-conspirator Dylan Klebold had spent nearly two years meticulously planning and plotting to wipe out their school, the "revolution" they desired did not go according to plan (Larkin, 2009). However, a transformation in how school shootings would be viewed did emerge. After the April 20 attack, Columbine became the standard to which all other future school shootings would be compared, both as a primary cultural reference and as a model for the quintessential school shooting (Altheide, 2009; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Larkin, 2009; Muschert, 2007; Muschert & Larkin, 2007).

In the weeks and months following the attack, the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office (JCSO) collected a large amount of critical evidence from the killers' homes and other locations. This included both Klebold and Harris' personal journals, school essays, video documents, and internet postings. Each piece of evidence provided new and tragic clues as to who these killers really were. By 2007, over 20,000 pages of documents were released, as the public demand for information and answers overruled the need for caution and suppression (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office [JCSO], 2009). The media was instrumental in conveying these messages.

Each time a new batch of evidence was released to the public, news conglomerates splashed it across television screens, newspaper headlines, and web pages. Columbine was no longer just a tragic 46-minute event. It was now a phenomenon, and the killers had an even larger voice in death than they had in life.

Eight years later, viewers were once again jolted by news of a major school shooting. On April 16, 2007 on the picturesque Virginia Tech campus, Seung-Hui Cho carried out what remains the largest mass casualty shooting in U.S. history. This time, Cho claimed the lives of 32 students and faculty before turning the gun on himself. However, unlike Harris and Klebold who had speculated whether Spielberg or Tarantino would tell their story (Gibbs & Roche, 1999), Cho was unwilling to leave his story up to Hollywood producers. Instead, he constructed his own reality, and used the news media directly to his advantage to spread his story. It was a move that was as calculated as the massacre, and the results were beyond what Cho probably could have imagined.

It would seem only natural that when a social phenomenon, such as school shootings, is introduced into the mix that the impact of the media should also be considered. When news breaks of a shooting at a school, viewers around the nation and in some cases worldwide turn to the media as a source of information. At the same time, people may use social media sites to reach out to potential victims of the tragedy, and these communications can be fed up to the media and rebroadcast. News media outlets may also reach out to their viewers for information, videos, or photographs to supplement their material. It was then only a matter of time until a school shooter could also directly affect how their story is told in the media.

This chapter seeks to examine the evolution of school shooters' media savvy nature from news subject to news creators. First, I examine school shootings as expressive violence, probing the shooters' actions as dramatic performances acted out in real life. Next, I investigate how the shooters of both Columbine and Virginia Tech expressed their rage and violent ideologies prior to the shootings and what modes of communication were used. Finally, I observe what portions of the shooters' narratives reached and were broadcast by the media and which were not, and why, in an effort to understand how these seemingly opposite entities converge to bring these dramatic stories to millions of news consumers. In this examination, the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings have been selected based on their levels of notoriety. The Columbine High School shooting has been noted in previous research (e.g., Altheide, 2009; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Larkin, 2009; Muschert, 2007; Muschert & Larkin, 2007) to be the

archetypal case for school shootings to which most other acts are compared. Kellner (2008) further classifies the Virginia Tech event as a "mega-spectacle," a nod to the idea that certain events can come to be defining of their era (p. 6).

## EXPRESSIVE VIOLENCE AND CULTURAL SCRIPTS

In examining Columbine and other school shootings in terms of a discourse of fear, Altheide (2009) notes that we must look at "how social actors make sense of their lived experience" (p. 1355). The concept of social actors is not limited to just one person or group. Rather, the communicative process of school shootings involves three different groups of participants – the shooters, the media, and the public audience (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010). Similarly, in examining the phenomena of media spectacles, Kellner (2008) builds on the idea of the public audience as both spectators and consumers in a cycle of commodification and production fueled by the media. In fact, even Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, and Roth's (2004) definition of school shootings – "an institutional attack [that] takes place on a *public stage* before an *audience*, is committed by a member or former member of the institution, and involves multiple victims, some chosen for their symbolic significance or at random" (p. 231, italics added) – alludes to these events as expressive processes. Each group conveys their messages and points of view at different times to one another, a process which keeps the content equally as dynamic.

Such expressive violence typically manifests itself through acting out a cultural or performative script (Carvalho, 2010; Larkin, 2009; Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010; Newman et al., 2004; Tonso, 2009). These scripts are essentially "prescriptions for behavior" that involve resolving a dilemma through acts of violence (Newman et al., 2004, p. 230). Newman and colleagues (2004) further note, that "the script provides an image of what the shooters want to become and a template that links the method to the goal" (p. 230). The culture of the media, which places emphasis on masculinity, also helps to propel these scripts (Kellner, 2008). In later years, Columbine would become its own cultural script, a template known as "The Columbine Effect" for future shooters to follow (Cloud, 1999; Larkin, 2009).

One of the most noteworthy elements of Muschert and Ragnedda's (2010) discussion on communications in school shootings is their presentation of expressive violence as a method for school shooters to convey an

intended message. Lethal violence may be used "to exact retribution for past injustices, regain their sense of masculine dominance, or simply experience excitement" (Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010, p. 348). It may also be used for retaliation (Larkin, 2009) or to reclaim a position in the social hierarchy that the shooter believes they have been cast out of (Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010). In both the cases of the Columbine High School and Virginia Tech shootings, the shooters appeared to have an estrangement from their social environment and their peers, a message which was acted out through their respective performative scripts.

The school shooter's ultimate revenge is attainment of a higher social status, usually which comes at the expense of their victims (Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010). This social status is elevated through the media. The media tends to concentrate more attention on school shootings in comparison to other types of shootings, such as gang-ralated or drug-related shootings (Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010). Not only do the media act as a channel for information when an attack occurs, but school shooters are becoming increasingly more technologically savvy and are learning ways in which to make the media work for them, branding them seemingly household names (Kellner, 2008; Larkin, 2009; Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010). This shift has also required the media to adapt as well, creating new frames in which to cover the shootings (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert, 2002, 2009).

The regaining of masculine dominance is also a potential expression delivered through these violent acts (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Kellner, 2008; Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010; Newman et al., 2004; Tonso, 2009). Kellner (2008) for instance notes that a "crisis of masculinity" can be presented as a dichotomy between actual masculinity and a tough guy persona, which can ultimately be expressed through outbreaks of violence, rage, and even murder (p. 14). Newman and colleagues (2004) suggest this crisis is a result of feelings of failure not only at popularity, but also at manhood. Carrying out these acts allows the shooters to regain their manhood by fighting back and not letting others push them around (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Newman et al., 2004). Tonso (2009) further posits that this crisis can be grounded in the battle between humiliation, ostracism, and a desire for retribution.

A final consideration of the performative script is that there may be no true underlying message, or that the message gets muddied through the violence. It is in essence a case of "violence for violence's sake." Muschert and Ragnedda (2010) suggest that a disregard for the value of human life may be an underlying consideration for rampage shootings. This idea in

itself can create a potential social panic. School shootings are actually extremely rare events and school violence in general has been on the decline (Best, 2006; Burns & Crawford, 1999). However, these shootings are often seen as a source of high public concern due to receiving a significant amount of exposure through the media (Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010; Newman, 2006).

In many cases, school shootings are disgruntled students' revenge against those who wronged them and potentially against an institution that facilitated the ostracism. The cultural or performative script, however, has allowed a model by which to understand the messages conveyed by school shooters. Played out for the world, these scripts chronicle the journey of the shooters from perceivably mild and meek to reclaiming their manhood through power and control. Based on Muschert and Ragnedda's (2010) model, I examine how Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, and Seung-Hui Cho communicated their ideals of expressive violence and how they used the media as the stage for their final act.[1] AU:2

## WHAT THE MEDIA DID (OR DIDN'T) SHOW

The media play a critical role in defining the problem of school shootings. When word of a school shooting breaks, the rush to disseminate information presents a daunting challenge for the media. Not only is there a need to put forth accurate news, as the media is typically the primary source of information for those directly and indirectly affected by the event, but there is also a rush to put up news the fastest to be the winner in the war of network ratings. Columbine was a new breed of shooting event, one that the media was not prepared for. Initially, Denver affiliate stations covered reporting of the event, though anchors from the major networks were in Littleton by the next morning to cover the case (Muschert, 2002). When the Virginia Tech shooting broke, the media was more prepared. Within hours, major players from all of the networks had descended on Blacksburg.

Columbine and Virginia Tech were immediate news-making successes. In 1999, Columbine was not only the biggest news story in the week of the shooting, but also topped the charts as the most closely followed news story of the year and was one of the highest followed stories of the entire decade (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1999). Eight years later, the Virginia Tech shooting also took the leading position for

coverage in a week where other important news included the war in Iraq and the Supreme Court's ruling on abortion (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2007). On the day of the shooting, 1.8 million viewers tuned into Fox News and an additional 1.4 million viewers turned to CNN for up-to-the-minute coverage (Garofoli, 2007). In the year prior to the shooting, these networks averaged 900,000 and 450,000 daily viewers, respectively (Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006). MSNBC.com reported 108.8 million page views on their website (Garofoli, 2007). On average, the site typically has just over 400,000 page views each day (TheWebStats.com, 2011).

A major contributor to these ratings is the public's fascination with this rare phenomenon, and shocking images and graphic details fuel this interest. In an effort to capture a viewer's attention, and keep it, news channels broadcast images repeatedly. Newly released details not only keep content fresh, but also strengthen the hold the media has on its consumers. In the cases of Columbine and Virginia Tech, the most poignant images and details would come directly from the shooters themselves.

Muschert and Ragnedda (2010) note that performative scripts of violent masculinities of the shooters may be produced through writings or other media content of the shooters. Following the attacks, the mass media will report this content, thus playing the scripts for a larger audience (Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010). In both cases, the shooters left a significant amount of content that contributed to their performative scripts. This included school assignments, personal journals or manifestos, and video diaries. A look into what viewers did or didn't see in the cases of the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings provides an interesting insight into how the media captivates its audience... or leaves it wanting more.

## *Columbine High School*

Though appearing to last much longer, the massacre at Columbine High School lasted approximately 46 minutes (Columbine Review Commission, 2001). Initially, there were little facts that surfaced in the minutes and hours following the rampage. There were, however, a few defining images that looped repeatedly across nearly every news station. Among these were pictures of armed police officers, later identified as SWAT teams, ascending upon the school and then groups of students fleeing for cover. The most dramatic image to surface was that of Patrick Ireland's daring escape from the library as he fell into the waiting arms of SWAT team members.

A few on-camera interviews with terrified students were eventually incorporated into the loop, as were countless statements made by the JCSO's public information officer. As the day progressed, statements by Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone, Colorado Governor Bill Owens, and President Bill Clinton were also integrated. Layer upon layer to this growing story was added as the day wore on, yet none of these layers seemed to answer the increasing demand for the "why?" behind the massacre.

A year passed before the media and the public had access to more images and documents that could potentially answer this question. On May 15, 2000, the Columbine Review Commission released their official report on the attacks. Though the report chronicled the timeline of events and provided recommendations for future events, it did little in the way of answering *why* Klebold and Harris had carried out their act. Nearly a month later, on June 7, 2000, the JCSO released cafeteria surveillance footage from the day of the shooting (JCSO, 2009). This footage was the first glimpse the public had into the day of the shooting. One of the most dramatic moments of the footage is Dave Sanders, the only teacher to be killed in the attack, running in and urging students to flee to safety. Immediately, panic and chaos ensued as students rush in every direction trying to get out of the cafeteria.

Later segments of the footage show both Harris and Klebold entering on several occasions. Dressed in military pants and boots with their weapons visible (Harris' carbine and Klebold's Tec-9), they appeared like soldiers in a warzone, attempting to maximize collateral damage. They sought out potential victims, surveyed the damage, and attempted to detonate the 20-pound propane tank bombs that failed to explode at 11:17 am. This footage was looped repeatedly across news stations, as well as still frames used in newspaper articles and on covers of magazines (see, for instance, *Time Magazine's* December 1999 issue).

The cafeteria surveillance footage was the first portrait the public would have into Harris and Klebold's performative script. Their actions on the tape, and subsequently throughout the shooting, showed two formerly alienated youth who were now in a position of power. Students that had once been their tormentors now cowered under tables, praying for their lives. Harris and Klebold were now the alpha-males of Columbine, and their newfound dominance over their school reigned in these images. The retribution that Harris and Klebold had been seeking for years was now a reality, both for them *and* a worldwide audience.

In late 2003, additional video footage of Harris and Klebold was released at the urging of the community and the Open Records Task

Force, a group organized to get information about the shooting released to the public. On October 21, "Rampart Range" footage was released (JCSO, 2009). The most graphic and violent material yet, the video recording shows the killers firing weapons (some of which were determined by law enforcement to have been used in the massacre) into the wilderness mountain range. One of the most poignant moments shows Eric Harris, having just used a bowling pin for target practice, running up to the camera and gleefully exclaiming "Entry ... exit" while spinning the pin around to show the bullet holes. He alluded to potential wounds he would soon inflict on his victims, once again flexing his masculinity for all to see.

Five months later, additional videos made by Harris and Klebold, including the "Hitmen for Hire" video, were released into the public domain. "Hitmen for Hire" was made in conjunction with a December 1998 business proposal submitted by Harris for a class project. In the business plan, Harris wrote of how they would offer hitman and protection services, where their weapons would be stored, and how much they would charge for their services (JCSO, 1999b). The video, however, showed a much more detailed version of the plan.

In the video version of "Hitmen for Hire," Harris and Klebold both don their trench coats (and hyper-masculine personas) and roam the halls of Columbine as though they are the authority of the school. The premise of the video is a bullied student has hired them to kill the jock that has been tormenting him (Larkin, 2009). They yell into the camera at those who have bullied their clients. They also act out killing scenes with homemade prop weapons that bore a striking resemblance to the sawed off shotguns used in the massacre. The video, a performative script in itself, is eerily foreshadowing of the events of April 20.

There is, however, one noteworthy piece of evidence in the Columbine case has yet to be revealed in the media, much to the discontent of both the public and media outlets. The "Basement Tapes" are the most notorious Harris and Klebold production and also their final words. These tapes are considered the only source that is able to explain *why* the shooters carried out their plan (Larkin, 2009). The five tapes, portions of which were viewed only by a few people prior to being sealed in late 1999, are extremely graphic and chronicle the weeks leading up to the shooting.

In the one of the tapes, Harris and Klebold sat at Klebold's house, openly surrounded by a number of pipe bombs (JCSO, 1999a). They interacted with their guns, their IEDs, and each other. They mocked class assignments, the upcoming prom, and a gun dealer who sold the double-barreled shotgun to Robyn Anderson, claiming they knew it was for them.

In a later segment of the tapes, Harris, alone in his car, states, "It is a weird feeling knowing you're going to be dead in 2½ weeks" (JCSO, 1999a, p. 10,375). The other segments were much of the same – Harris and Klebold discussed which Hollywood producer would tell their story (Tarantino or Spielberg), how many people they wanted to kill, and continued to feed off each other's anger, building up more and more rage (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). The tapes concluded on the morning of the shooting with the boys saying their good-byes and showing the only sign of remorse ever to be seen as they contemplate how their impending actions will affect their parents. All the while, pieces of the Columbine puzzle lay openly around.

The "Basement Tapes" have yet to be released by the JCSO and will not be unsealed before 2026. In a 2006 statement released by Sheriff Ted Mink,[2] he notes that the content of the films could influence other attacks. He stated that the videos are a call to arms for other potential school shooters and an instruction manual for how to plan and implement an attack, and this determination is the prime reason for not releasing the footage (Mink, 2006). This decision came in part after both the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit and the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime reviewed the tapes (*Fleming v. Stone*, 2006).

The demand for the release of this material has been as controversial as the tapes themselves. In December 2001, *The Denver Post* sent a letter to the JCSO requesting that documents collected from the homes of Klebold and Harris be released to the public (*Fleming v. Stone*, 2006). The JCSO denied the request, citing that it was not within the public's best interest for the materials to be released. The following month, *The Denver Post* filed a motion in the District Court of Jefferson County requesting the courts to intervene and overturn the JCSO's decision. The District Court sided with the JCSO, and the case was eventually appealed all the way up to the Colorado Supreme Court. The Supreme Court overturned the decision of the District Court, but included a provision that allowed the Sheriff to determine whether or not *The Denver Post* could inspect the documents based on the use of a balancing test. Though Sheriff Mink did release over 900 pages of documents seized from the Harris and Klebold homes in lieu of releasing the Basement Tapes, the public inquiry into these videos lingers on.

Included in the documents released in 2006 were Harris and Klebold's personal journals. Klebold's journal showed a confused adolescent who was struggling with his own inner turmoil. In some entries, he would talk about love and a girl he admired from afar (Columbine Review

Commission, 2001). In others, he would write about his wish to take his own life, or worse, the lives of others. The most chilling entries were detailed plans for the day of the attack, which included drawings of how he would be suited up, lists of tasks to do and items to collect, and even a timeline for April 20:

> Walk in, set bombs at 11:09, for 11:17
>
> Leave, ~~set car bombs.~~
>
> Drive to clemete Park. Gearup.
>
> Get back by 11:15
>
> Park cars. set car bombs for 11:18
>
> get out, go to outside hill, wait.
>
> when first bombs go off, attack.
>
> have fun! (JCSO, 1999b, p. 26,490)[3]

Though similarities appeared in both journals, such as the diagrams for how weapons should be carried on the day of the attacks and lists of materials they would need, Harris' journal was even more distressing than his partner's. Unlike Dylan, who appeared to be trapped on an emotional rollercoaster, Eric appeared to have a much more constricted focus – death and destruction. He likened himself to God, stated that he should be able to choose who lives and who dies, and was fascinated by the idea of natural selection (JCSO, 1999b), a phrase that appeared across his shirt on the day of the murders (Larkin, 2007, 2009). Entry after entry detailed Harris' hate for different types of people and why he felt they should be killed:

> NATURAL SELECTION. Kill all retards, people with brain fuck ups.... Geeeawd! People spend millions of dollars on saving the lives of retards, and why? I don't buy that shit like 'oh, he's my son, though!' so the fuck what, he ain't normal, kill him. Put him out of his misery. He is only a waste of time and money. (JCSO, 1999b, p. 26,004)[4]

Much like Hitler's desire for the perfect German society composed of only pure Germans, Harris echoed a similar desire throughout his writings. He despised Blacks, homosexuals, and the wealthy kids at Columbine. His hatred ran rampant in an effort to maintain a sense of masculinity and control he felt that he had lost from his identity. Yet the most disturbing entries in his journal were those explicitly related to the April 20 attacks,

even dating as far back as five months prior to the attack such as this excerpt from November 12, 1998:

> as of this date I have enough explosives to kill about 100 people, and then if I get a couple bayonetts, swords, axes, whatever I'll be able to kill at least 10 more. and that just isnt enough! GUNS! I need guns! Give me some fucking firearms! (JCSO, 1999b, p. 26014–26015)

An entry just 10 days later confirms the full effect of the plan, as Harris and Klebold were finally able to acquire the firearms that would later be used in the attacks:

> Well folks, today was a very important day in the history of R. Today along with Vodka and someone else who I wont name, we went downtown and purchased the following; a double barrel 12ga. shotgun, a pump action 12ga. shotgun, a 9mm carbine, 250 9mm rounds, 15 12ga slugs, 40 shotgun shells, 2 switch blade knives, and total of 4–10 round clips for the carbine. we……. have…. GUNS! (JCSO, 1999b, p. 26016)

The journals were not the only outlets for their vendettas against society. The disturbing and graphic writings carried over to school projects. Harris wrote several papers on Nazi culture for various classes and even wrote an essay in December 1997 about guns in schools and school shootings, arguing that metal detectors and increased law enforcement presence on campuses could facilitate safer schools (JCSO, 1999b). Another assignment from 1998 suggests that Harris had already figured out the loopholes in the Brady bill for the control of gun sales, pointing out that "the biggest gaping hole is that background checks are only required for licensed dealers…not private dealers…private dealers can sell shotguns and rifles to anyone who is 18 or older" (JCSO, 1999b, p. 26,538). However, it was a class paper submitted by Klebold approximately two months prior to the shooting that caught the eye of his teacher, who in turn alerted his parents. In the paper, Klebold wrote as if he was an observer of a Columbine-like attack. The graphic story, eerily brought to life just a few short months later, stunned his teacher as she wrote, "You are an excellent story teller, but I have some problems with this one" (JCSO, 1999b, p. 26,523).

The writings and videos of Columbine shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold contained a number of themes that could be extracted to help understand why the shootings happened. They also provide an archive of the boys' performative script, documenting the months and years of anger and hate that fueled the massacre. In an effort to regain a sense of power and control that had been compromised (or had never been there), Harris and Klebold used their anger and rage to foreshadow the largest mass shooting in a U.S. high school, though their plans had been more grandiose.

Unlike other school shootings that may be an instance of violence for violence's sake (Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010), the Columbine High School shooting was a cultural script fixated upon masculinity in an athlete-dominated culture.

### *Virginia Tech*

For the media, the Virginia Tech Massacre provided a very different challenge from its Columbine counterpart. As virtually no materials were recovered by law enforcement at either scene or from shooter Seung-Hui Cho's dorm room, the initial decision as to what material was released to the public seemed to fall into the hands of the media. As the second round of shootings lasted just over 10 minutes (as compared to 46 minutes at Columbine), there was no time for the media to set up to broadcast live from the scene of the shooting. Therefore, with the exception of a few images of wounded students being rushed to waiting ambulances after SWAT teams had secured the perimeter of Norris Hall, the main footage that would be shared from April 16 would come from a graduate student and the killer himself.

As Seung-Hui Cho wove in and out of the classrooms on the second floor of Norris Hall, shooting everyone in his path, graduate student Jamal Albarghouti was oblivious that he was walking toward the fire as he went to meet an advisor in Patton Hall, just one building over (CNN, 2007). All but 200 feet from the shootings in Norris Hall, Albarghouti heard a man screaming to take cover and then saw police closing in on the scene. As he dropped to the ground, he began capturing video of the event on his cell phone. In this video, police can be seen moving toward the building with their guns drawn. However, it is the audio that provides the most chilling account of that fateful day. In the background, the sounds of multiple gunshots ring out, with some so loud it sounds as though the shooter was aiming right at the camera from just a few feet away as he fired. Albarghouti later submitted the video to CNN via their online feature "I-Report," and by the evening of April 16, the clip had registered 1.8 million web hits (Stanley, 2007).

Cho himself made a conscious contribution to the media spectacle of Virginia Tech through his multimedia manifesto sent to NBC News on the day of the shootings. The package was received in the morning hours two days after the shooting, but the news station waited until the evening news to air portions of the material after consulting with law enforcement.

Included in the package were images of Cho, pointing the Glock 19 and Walther P22 pistols (used in the shootings) directly at the camera. These photos glorified his self-imposed sense of power and masculinity, synonymous with the performative script of expressive violence. Photos of him pointing the pistols at his own head and with a hunting knife up to his throat showed a lack of fear that is needed to carry out such a massacre. Photos of Cho also wielding a hammer had a similar impact.

Both Kellner (2008) and Serazio (2010) have posited that these photos emulated the movie "Oldboy," a popular South Korean film. The film's most famous scene is also said to have inspired Cho. In less than three minutes, a formerly imprisoned man exacts revenge on his supposed captors who are crammed in a hallway, using a hammer to carry out his retribution (Hendrix, 2007). Re-enacting this performative script allowed Cho to gain a sense of power and masculinity he had never had. As Michael Welner, a forensic psychiatrist and news consultant noted, "This is not him. These videos do not help us understand him. They distort him. He was meek. He was quiet. This is a PR tape of him trying to turn himself into a Quentin Tarantino character" (in ABC News, 2007a).

The most dramatic excerpts of Cho's performative script were expressed in his 1,800-word diatribe, portions of which he read in his video recordings (Johnson, 2007; VTRP, 2007) and which were later rebroadcast by the networks. In his manifesto, Cho expressed his disdain for wealthy kids and hedonism. In one excerpt, he stated:

> You had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today... But you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off... Your Mercedes wasn't enough, you brats. ... Your golden necklaces weren't enough, you snobs. Your trust funds wasn't enough. Your vodka and cognac wasn't enough. All your debaucheries weren't enough. Those weren't enough to fulfill your hedonistic needs. You had everything. (ABC News, 2007b)[5]

In another video clip, Cho alluded to school shootings as a sacrificial or religious experience. He brands the Columbine killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as martyrs (Johnson, 2007; Kellner, 2008; Serazio, 2010), and even goes so far as to anoint himself a symbol for those who need to revolt against their tormentors:

> You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul and torched my conscience... You thought it was one pathetic boy's life you were extinguishing. Thanks to you, I die like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and the defenseless people. (ABC News, 2007b)

1 In total, NBC News received 25 minutes of video in Cho's package (Associated Press, 2007; Kellner, 2008). They also received 43 photographs 3 and 23 pages of written material, which included the 1,800-word tirade (Associated Press, 2007; Kellner, 2008). The network executives had a 5 tough decision – how much, if any, should be shared with the public? The massacre was still fresh on people's minds, and many people were grieving 7 while also searching for answers. NBC News President Steve Capus eventually elected to air two minutes of video, seven photographs, and 37 sen-9 tences of written material.

It is a decision Capus and *Nightly News* anchor Brian Williams 11 defended on the Oprah Winfrey Show just six days after the material was aired. A strong backlash came from both competing networks as well as 13 from the public, who felt that the wallpapering of Cho's image across television screens was simply too much (Associated Press, 2007) and that the 15 network was insensitive for showing the material (Carter, 2007). Capus, who had worked his way up the network's corporate ladder but was typi-17 cally found behind the scenes, noted that he felt an immense amount of pressure when deciding whether or not to air portions of the manifesto. 19 "Sometimes good journalism is bad public relations," Capus stated during the interview (in Associated Press, 2007). He went on to assert:

21

> It's not every day we get a story like this. We went over it for seven and a half hours. We didn't rush it on the air. We weren't promoting it. We weren't trumpeting it all 23 day. It was extraordinary, and that's how we treated it. (in Carter, 2007)

25 Williams also defended the network's decision, noting that information pertaining to the massacre was too valuable not to air. Though the jour-27 nalistic decision may have been responsible, it did not come without criticism. Family members of the victims and survivors of the tragedy shared 29 mixed reactions to the airing of the materials. Some felt that it took away from the victims' memories. Others felt it gave them a place to put their 31 anger and their grief. Matt Lauer, a morning anchor on the "Today" show (a NBC program), seemed to share a different viewpoint from his network, 33 saying, "Let's be honest, there are some big differences of opinion right within this news division as to whether we should be airing this stuff at all, 35 whether we're taking the right course of action" (in Carter, 2007). However, as Kellner (2008) astutely notes, "as the media spectacle unfolded, it 37 was generally overlooked that the massacre could be seen as an attempt by Cho to act out some of his violent fantasies and create a media spectacle 39 in which he appears as producer, director, and star" (p. 37).

Dissention also occurred between the networks themselves (Kellner, 2008). Despite the fact that NBC had shared images from the package, and the fair use doctrine enabled the other networks to copy and air the video and photos, ABC claimed that it was an unfair advantage for the receiving network. In the ever-popular ratings game, ABC's *World News* had taken over the top spot in network news broadcasts during the February 2007 Sweeps, a position they had been trying to reclaim since the loss of Peter Jennings from the show. However, during the week of the Virginia Tech Massacre, NBC's *Nightly News* edged out ABC for the top spot by nearly 300,000 viewers (Butche, 2007). NBC also captured the lead share of viewers aged 25–54.

Though the package was initially sent to NBC News, who then broadcast the material both on NBC and its 24-hour news channel MSNBC, under the doctrine of fair use other networks were also able to copy and air the material, though the NBC logo was branded on all material. Initially the images of Cho and his guns and his unintelligible ramblings permeated news broadcasts and websites. However, after a day of holding a seemingly permanent grasp on the news lineups, backlash from the public and journalistic ethics took their toll. ABC, CBS, and Fox all pulled the video from their news rotations in just over 24 hours (Pérez-Peña, 2007). NBC designated to limited coverage of the shooting to just 10% of news broadcast time.

Findings of the Virginia Tech Review Panel (VTRP), more specifically a theoretical profile by forensic behavioral scientist Roger Depue, examined Cho's performative script through the actions and events leading up to the shootings. Cho's life had been marred by mediocrity and rejection. He suffered from extreme anxiety that prevented him from having a social life, and subsequently he not only had no friends, but also shied away from others as much as possible (VTRP, 2007). In later years, Cho developed resentment toward his more affluent classmates (VTRP, 2007), a hatred that resurfaced in his manifesto. Rejection continued to plague Cho as his first book proposal was turned away by publishers. As Depue noted, "Cho's dream was slipping away because of people – people who could not see and appreciate his desperate need to be recognized as somebody of importance" (VTRP, 2007, p. N-4).

Cho's performative script of expressive violence was centered on anger, hate, and retaliation. He had felt the world had rejected him and wanted to get revenge on people who had not met his needs for power (VTRP, 2007). He was unable to be a normal student with a typical male identity, so instead, he positioned himself as an "alpha dog" with an "ultramacho

identity" (Kellner, 2008, p. 40). Cho had idolized Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold – yet he would do them one better (Serazio, 2010). He decided to plan "the greatest school massacre ever," a revenge killing that would "go down in history" (VTRP, 2007, p. N-4). The greatest reward to come from the massacre would be that Cho, once ostracized and rejected himself, would be remembered as "the savior of the oppressed, the downtrodden, the poor, and the rejected" (VTRP, 2007, p. N-5).

# DISCUSSION

For many, the question of *why* these attacks took place still remains. Larkin (2007) suggested that for Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the shooting was a vehicle to gain notoriety. FBI agent Mark Holstlaw (in Gibbs & Roche, 1999) agreed, noting, "They wanted to be famous. And they are. They're infamous." Similar sentiments have been echoed about Virginia Tech's killer, Seung-Hui Cho (see Kellner, 2008; Serazio, 2010). Producing acts of horror and violence in an era of media spectacle is a surefire way of guaranteeing media coverage and achieving such notoriety (Kellner, 2008).

A number of importance considerations have arisen from these events. Directly related to the shooters, understanding the role of the cultural or performative script is the first step in attempting to answer why they have committed such violent acts. These scripts focus on the violent and masculine personas the shooters assume, and how these façades translate into expressive violence before and during the shootings. These scripts, typically authored well in advance, provide precise choreography for public retribution (Larkin, 2009; Serazio, 2010; Tonso, 2009). They are the final acts and last words of the killers. These masculine self-portrayals leave a final impression that contradicts everything they were in life, which is the ultimate goal of expressive violence. More importantly, they give the audience the opportunity to see the events through the eyes of the shooters (Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010).

The cultural script centered on masculinity and dominance is a prevalent problem in today's schools. Many adolescents face bullying and ostracism (Tonso, 2009), though very few choose to engage in such horrific acts. However, when word of a school shooting breaks, these are the first buzzwords to circulate.[6] Research has shown that students at Columbine were bullied by a group Larkin calls "The Predators," the jocks (primarily members of the football and wrestling teams) at the top of the social

hierarchy who consistently picked on members of the out-group (2007, p. 85). He also suggests that this torment led Harris and Klebold to bully students they perceived to be more inferior to themselves (Larkin, 2007). Though Cho showed signs of being ostracized from the Virginia Tech community, there has been research (Kellner, 2008; VTRP, 2007) that suggests this was self-imposed. Therefore, the question remains – were these attacks really based on a script centered on bullying, or was in fact, as research (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Kellner, 2008; Larkin, 2007, 2009; Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010; Newman et al., 2004; Tonso, 2009) has suggested, the motive behind the attacks to make a statement and regain an identity of male dominance?

Another equally important consideration in how the shooters' messages are communicated via the media relates to who is controlling the information. Though Harris, Klebold, and Cho all left behind graphic writings, photos, and videos, the responsibility for concealing or sharing these fell to different agencies. For Columbine, the JCSO was instrumental in controlling what material was or was not released to the public (Kellner, 2008). Material that has been made available to the public has come either from several releases made by the JCSO or leaks of information that came from trials related to the incident (Kellner, 2008). Key pieces of evidence, such as The Basement Tapes, that could potentially quench the public's need to understand why the shootings occurred have not yet been released by the JCSO out of fear of retaliatory acts (Mink, 2006).

In the case of Virginia Tech, however, the determination of what material was released to the public was not left to law enforcement. Rather, the media have been the primary decision makers in determining what portions of Cho's material has been shared. NBC News elected to air portions of Cho's manifesto, and Kellner (2008) indicated that Cho knew this would happen. Muschert and Ragnedda (2010) note that this decision also falls in line with the shooter's communicative process of school shootings, whereby the shooter may connect with the media before and during their attacks. Additionally, unlike Columbine where over 20,000 pages of material and hours of video were recovered, the material tied to Virginia Tech was extremely limited. Other than Cho's manifesto and the Virginia Tech Review Panel report, the only other information released to date came in 2009 as Cho's earlier mental health records became public (Richmond Times-Dispatch, 2009).

There are several important points to contemplate. First, what does each of these organizations have to gain from sharing or withholding the information? For law enforcement, the benefits would be policy oriented.

By sharing the information, departments in other locales would be able to implement new practices for active shooter situations. These practices can also be passed on to educational institutions that would be the first line of defense for school shootings. However, the decision to withhold information from the public can also lead to increased attention and a desire for more news, which leads me to my considerations about the gains or losses for the media. For the media, the benefit of sharing the information is simple – ratings. As many people will never experience school shootings or most violent crimes personally, the media becomes the only outlet for information on such cases. Ratings give networks a competitive edge over one another, which can in turn increase revenue from network sponsors. To date, there has been little discussion on culpability surrounding the media's rush to disseminate such information, and this would warrant further research.

The second point of contemplation is whether the rewards outweigh the risks, or more specifically, can what we as a public learn from these shooters' own words be worth more than any potential repercussions of sharing the material? This requires a more thorough consideration of whether sharing the information would inspire potential copycats. For law enforcement (e.g., the JCSO), the concern for copycat acts has been a major worry. After all, Columbine became the standard to which all other school shootings are compared (e.g., Altheide, 2009; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Larkin, 2009; Muschert, 2007; Muschert & Larkin, 2007). Larkin (2009) found that in 12 school rampage shootings within the United States following Columbine, nearly 60% of the shooters studied, referenced, or imitated the Columbine shootings. For international school shootings examined, 55% referenced Columbine in some way (Larkin, 2009). The slogan "pulling a Columbine" became a mantra for disgruntled youth who sought revenge. Virginia Tech had a similar impact, especially because of the high body count. Cho set a record for the largest mass casualty shooting in U.S. history,[7] and potential copycat shooters sought to dethrone him from the title, as he had done with Harris and Klebold. Within days of the Virginia Tech shootings, a web post was made threatening to kill 50 San Diego State University students and an entire school district in California was shut down after another man threatened to "dwarf" Cho's attack (Hoffman, 2007).

A final consideration for future school shootings is how the release of materials (or lack thereof) contributes to social panics. Though school shootings and violence in such institutions has been on the decline (Best, 2006; Burns & Crawford, 1999), the amount of exposure these events

receive may cultivate the idea that they are more prevalent than they actually are, a perception which in turn can amplify the public's fear for school safety (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010; Newman, 2006; Serazio, 2010). Burns and Crawford (1999), for instance, note that violence plays a significant role in social panics in that it suggests a collapse in social order, thus increasing fear and apprehension in many. The media can heighten this panic by over-reporting on the events, exaggerating the statistics, and pitting good versus evil (Burns & Crawford, 1999). This not only increases ratings, but also generates a need for members of society to push the "juvenile crime panic button" (Burns & Crawford, 1999, p. 158).

The media serves an instrumental role in both informing and educating the public about school shootings. As such, research must continue to examine how the media covers these events, especially as the shooters themselves are increasingly showing a strong sense of media awareness (Larkin, 2007, 2009). A shift from the traditional paper and pen diaries and suicide notes to blogs, web pages, and YouTube videos also provides challenges in mediating the message of these shooters (Serazio, 2010). Eric Harris may not have started the revolution he had hoped for in planning the Columbine attack. However, the shootings at both Columbine and Virginia Tech revolutionized the way in which school shootings are portrayed in the media.

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## NOTES

1. Timelines for each of the shootings were compiled using the respective review panel reports (see Columbine Review Commission, 2001 and Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007): for the Columbine shootings using information from the Jefferson County Sheriff Office's (2009) webpage, and or Virginia Tech, a list of documents

related to the case including police reports, mental health records, and university emails retrieved from the Richmond Times-Dispatch (2009). Where possible, documents released directly by the police agencies, such as documents released directly by the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office including statements from Sheriff Ted Mink, were utilized. In events where such information was unavailable, a search of the Lexis-Nexis database was used to identify information and news stories pertaining to key components of each case (e.g., The Basement Tapes, Hitmen for Hire, Rampart Range, Cho's Manifesto).

2. Sheriff Ted Mink is the successor of Sheriff John Stone, who was the Sheriff of Jefferson County on the day of the attacks.

3. The timeline excerpt from Dylan Klebold's journal is printed exactly as it was written in his journal.

4. Any journal excerpts included for Eric Harris are printed exactly as written in his journal. This includes misspellings, incorrect grammar, and incorrect punctuation.

5. Any excerpts from Seung-Hui Cho's manifesto are as originally written and/or transcribed. This includes misspellings, incorrect grammar, and incorrect punctuation.

6. For instance, in the minutes following the February 27, 2012 shooting at Chardon High School in Ohio, news headlines and stories immediately speculated that the shooting was a result of bullying (CBS News, 2012). However, later accounts (see Caniglia, 2012 or Thomas, 2012, for example) indicated that shooter T. J. Lane was well-liked, had a group of close friends, and was never victimized or bullied at school.

7. The 1927 attack on a school in Bath, Michigan was in fact a deadlier event, claimed the lives of 45 people; however, the main weapon used was explosives and thus is not considered a "school shooting."

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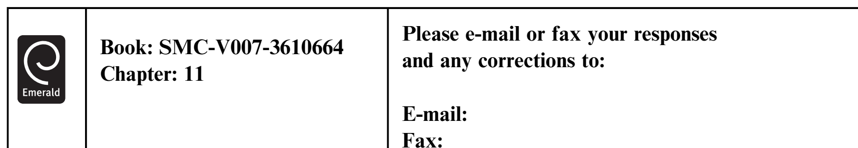

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