

SCHOOLS UNDER FIRE? SCHOOL SHOOTINGS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A  
CULTURAL DISCOURSE OF EMERGENCY

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KEYWORDS

school shootings, moral panics, media spectacle, excessive violence, trust

PUBLICATION DATE

Issue 1, May 30, 2016

HOW TO CITE

Silke Braselmann. "Schools under Fire? School Shootings and the Construction of a Cultural Discourse of Emergency." *On\_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* Issue 1 (2016). <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2016/12055/>>.

Permalink URL: <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2016/12055/>>

URN: <urn:nbn:de:hebis:26-opus-120558>



# Schools under Fire? School Shootings and the Construction of a Cultural Discourse of Emergency

## **Abstract**

Contrary to popular belief, rampage violence at suburban and rural schools occurred before the infamous Columbine High School shooting in April 1999. While school shootings — before Columbine gained international media attention — were treated as a local rather than a national or even international problem, they are now seen as an emergent phenomenon that has to be addressed with appropriate urgency.

In this paper, I want to examine whether school shootings are in fact increasing and address the medial construction of the discourse of emergency that has evolved around these acts of excessive violence. I argue that the public perception of school shootings is inseparably intertwined with the media dynamics in the aftermath of these incidents. In these discursive dynamics, I argue, it can be seen that these acts of violence lay open society's underlying fears. School shootings, as this paper shows, are closely linked to contemporary media logic and can be understood as examples of the contemporary dynamics of cultural discourses of emergency.

## **1 Approaching the Dynamics of the School Shooting Discourse**

In the 1990s, America was faced with a new form of excessive violence. The hitherto unknown brutality of school shootings — indiscriminate mass killings committed by adolescents at schools — shocked suburban communities and, from the late 90s onwards, received growing regional, national, and even international attention. Quickly, the impression arose that contemporary Western societies were in fact faced with an emergent phenomenon of excessive violence. Public, medial, and political reactions to school shootings not only underlined this perception of a phenomenon *on the rise*, but also actively created an atmosphere of emergency: the installations of metal detectors at schools, various political rallies — either pro-gun or pro-gun control — and general outcries for tighter security measures at high schools quickly dominated the medial discourse about the incidents and generated the impression that a new threat to society had evolved.

In the various reactions to school shootings, the close interrelation of public perception and the media dynamics behind phenomena of excessive violence become obvious: rampage violence at educational institutions are 'media spectacles,' "technologically constructed media events that are produced and disseminated through so-called mass media, ranging from the radio and television through the Internet and the latest wireless gadgets."<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I want to ask how the public perception of school shootings as an emergent phenomenon is in fact medially constructed and indebted to

underlying media dynamics. Also, I want to approach the cultural discourse of emergency that has evolved around the school shooting phenomenon, and ask how the discursive dynamics and the prevalent narratives that have been constructed around school shootings serve as a means to reassure society of its self-perception as non-violent.

Here, school shootings are understood as a media spectacle; so the first task will be to partially deconstruct the spectacle and ask how school shootings are defined in the discourse. In doing so, the focus will be on the question of whether school shootings are in fact an emergent phenomenon and a new threat to contemporary Western schools. After this has been done, I want to investigate the societal perception of school shootings as a threat in terms of a ‘moral panic,’ as Stanley Cohen has suggested.<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon Cohen’s notions, the second part of this paper comments on cultural discourses of emergency in the context of school shootings.

In a recent publication on school shootings, Kathryn E. Linder states that “[t]hroughout the 1990s, it would not be overly dramatic to claim that the future of America was threatened by the phenomenon of suburban and rural school shootings, which challenged contemporary perceptions of American youth.”<sup>3</sup> If an extremely rare phenomenon, such as a school shooting, can be perceived as a threat to an entire society, as Linder suggest, it becomes clear that school shootings have developed an impact that clearly transcends the actual event. School shootings, rather than just being another form of violence, have turned into a *cultural phenomenon*; the discourse about school shootings has become a cultural discourse of emergency, in which school shootings as a ‘phenomenon of radical terror’<sup>4</sup> have the potential to lay open underlying cultural fears and insecurities. Naturally, the school shooting discourse is extremely complex and touches upon many social dynamics — it has its roots not only in inter- and intrapersonal conflicts and struggles, but also in institutional, medial, and political policies. While the scope of this paper requires these factors to go unexamined, questions regarding the school shooting discourse as a discourse of emergency can be approached. Therefore, in the second section, I focus on the — strictly medially constructed — *sense of emergency* that this form of excessive violence generates. School shootings address deep societal fears about the instability of peacefulness and trust, thereby questioning the very core of our modern orders of society, as pointed out by Jan Philipp Reemtsma.<sup>5</sup> Such questions evoke a feeling of fragility and emergency, as

immediate reactions such as the above mentioned security measures or the medial condemnation of these deeds are needed to restore the societal agreements and stability. I ask how certain media logics construct a sense of emergency and how the discourse simultaneously reacts by creating narratives of causality. The last section is a brief comment on the role of narratives within the school shooting discourse and asks how narratives of these events can both fuel an already heated debate about school shootings as a threat to society, and serve as means to reintegrate these events into societal self-understanding.

## **2\_School Shootings on the Rise? Media Dynamics and Moral Panics**

When homepages such as [everytownresearch.org](http://everytownresearch.org) claim that at least 166 school shootings have happened in the United States since 2013, these incidents appear to be a great threat to American schools as safe places for children.<sup>6</sup> However, the problem with these numbers is that the term ‘school shooting’ suggests a rampage shooting or killing spree at a school. All-too-vivid memories of events such as the Columbine massacre, the Virginia Tech massacre, or, more recent, the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, where adolescents went to their schools and indiscriminately killed peers and school staff, come to mind. When taking a closer look, however, it becomes clear that [everytownresearch.org](http://everytownresearch.org) also subsumes other forms of shootings on school properties, including suicides and gunfire with no injuries, under the term ‘school shooting.’ Due to different uses of the term, numbers about school shootings vary greatly. Already in 2002, David J. Harding and his colleagues at Harvard University wrote about the ‘case definition problem’ that researchers are confronted with when they want to analyze school shootings. The case definition problem focuses on the question: “What factors distinguish a rampage school shooting from other types of shootings?”<sup>7</sup> Naturally, finding an answer to this question has “a significant impact not only on our assessment of how rare the event actually is but also on the substance of the theory that is subsequently developed to explain the phenomenon.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, numbers on the actual frequency of the phenomenon vary greatly, depending on the criteria that have been used for analysis: the age of the perpetrator, his affiliation to the institution where the shooting took place, or the number of the victims killed or injured in the shooting.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most commonly used definitions of school shootings was developed by Katherine S. Newman and her colleagues. According to this definition, the incidents must take place at a school or a school-related place,<sup>10</sup> involve multiple victims, who can either be chosen arbitrarily or for a definite or symbolic reason, and must involve one or more shooters who still go, or at least went to, the targeted institution. However useful this quite widely accepted definition may be, it also shows that definitions of school shootings always require alterations: Adam Lanza, who murdered 26 people at Sandy Hook Elementary School, had no affiliation to the school at all. Yet, Lanza's deed was clearly understood and discussed as a school shooting, and understandably so: not only in the dynamics of the discourse, but also on the level of the actual offense — in terms of severity, planning, and choice of victims — his deed fit the label of a school shooting in the tradition of Jonesboro, Columbine, or the Virginia Tech Massacre. The term 'school shooting,' as this example shows, can only be understood as an artificial classification that needs to be altered *a posteriori* and depends on medial and public discourse more than on statistics and modalities of the crime. "[T]he idea of rampage," Jörn Ahrens writes, "is essentially a phenomenon of perception,"<sup>11</sup> and the label depends greatly on the social discourse that evolves around the actual incident. As a result, "[f]ar from every incident of extreme violence, even in the public realm, is perceived as an act of rampage."<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the classification of a crime as a school shooting, as Ferguson and Ivory rightfully criticize, issues of race and class have also proven to be highly problematic in school shooting research. When shootings at urban schools with lower socioeconomic status, "where crime might be 'expected' due to difficult social environments surrounding these schools or stereotypical expectations applied to these schools' populations"<sup>13</sup> are not classified as school shootings, but are more likely to be discussed as issues of gang violence or 'regular' youth violence. This already touches upon one of the specific dynamics of the school shooting discourse: the medial and public search for "scapegoats for white youth violence."<sup>14</sup> "Books, video games, and films found in the possession of school shooters were frequently analyzed by law enforcement and labeled as partially culpable for school violence," especially before Columbine.<sup>15</sup> In this scapegoating of popular culture, some of the underlying presumptions about school shootings that actually influence definitions and, consequently, shape statistics about

the frequency of school shootings, are laid open, as Ferguson and Ivory argue in the context of video games:

The tendency for people to look to violent video games as a cause for high-profile crimes committed by middle-class white youth despite the disproportionately greater prevalence of video games among non-white youth may be a result of some people's stereotypical association between racial minorities and violent crime.<sup>16</sup>

In more drastic words, when a minority youth goes on a shooting spree at a school with a low socioeconomic background, outcries for banning video games from supermarket aisles would, most likely, be less audible. When white middle-class youths shoot their classmates in their suburban high schools, interestingly, it was most likely the fault of a film they saw or a game they played.<sup>17</sup> This observation is especially notable when one wants to define what school shootings are, since the specific discursive dynamics of these events only apply rather selectively to violent crimes committed by white shooters in suburban or rural schools.

In light of the problems with defining school shootings, one has to keep in mind that the phenomenon cannot be understood separately from the dynamics of its medial and public discourse. While researchers have still not agreed upon one definition of these incidents, the public and medial discourse has very clear ideas about the phenomenon. What is considered to be a school shooting or what is still 'regular' youth violence has a — sometimes rather unsettling — underbelly of presuppositions and understandings of cultural dynamics, youth culture, and social hierarchies. Once an incident has been labeled an act of rampage, however, the discursive dynamics follow similar rules of media logic. School shooting incidents can therefore be defined solely through their particular discursive dynamics. Ahrens describes the recurring specifics of the media discourse as follows:

[A]ny media coverage following such incidents starts with two attempts of reconstruction: first, the chronological reconstruction of the incident itself; second, the reconstruction of the offender as a person with a history, an intention and, if possible, a serious problem or psychological disorder that made him act in such a shockingly violent way.<sup>18</sup>

Based on a carefully conducted statistical analysis by Nils Böckler and colleagues, based on a definition that this article shares, it can be said that school shootings may be an increasing, yet still extremely rare phenomenon<sup>19</sup>: With an international prevalence of 1.1 to 5.7 cases per year between the 1980s and the 2000s, “[d]ramatic media

reporting suggesting an epidemic of school rampage violence is not confirmed by the actual figures,” as Böckler et al. point out.<sup>20</sup> Yet, especially throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, and then after every newly occurring incident, school shootings have been debated as a serious threat to children, and to society as such. This feeling of a threat to society evolves mainly from the fact that schools possess great symbolic value in Western societies, as a “public stage with strong connections to the entire community,”<sup>21</sup> representing certain social arrangements and hierarchies within the community.<sup>22</sup> In the suburban or rural small towns where school shootings usually take place, the shock and horror that a shooting evokes might be much more intense than in more anonymous urban areas — one of the many explanations for the disproportionate attention that these incidents receive.

What occurs in these small towns could be described as a ‘moral panic’. While Glenn W. Muschert writes that “[f]ollowing an apparent spate of incidents occurring between 1997 and 2001, it seemed as if the USA was *on the brink* of a moral panic concerning delinquency and nihilistic youth culture,”<sup>23</sup> Cohen himself applies his term to school shootings in the third edition of his book:

In the late nineties, when these events were still rare, each new case was already described as ‘an all-too-familiar story’. The slide towards moral panic rhetoric depends less on the sheer volume of cases, than a cognitive shift from ‘how could it happen in a place like this?’ to ‘it could happen anyplace’. In the USA, at least, the Columbine Massacre signaled this shift.<sup>24</sup>

A ‘moral panic’ describes the ability and tendency of societies to construct panics over different phenomena. While problems such as youth violence or delinquency on school premises or bullying are known to the public but mostly treated as normal, these issues are unlikely to cause moral panic. For a full moral panic to unfold, an especially dramatic and spectacular incident needs to inflame public interest. Once the moral panic has begun, however, Cohen observes recurring patterns in its dynamics:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode or group of person emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other

times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way that society conceives itself.<sup>25</sup>

As Cohen himself stresses, it is highly important to note that “[c]alling something a ‘moral panic’ does not imply that this something does not exist or happened at all and that reaction is based on fantasy, hysteria, delusion and illusion or being duped by the powerful.”<sup>26</sup> School shootings are a very real and gruesome phenomenon that has horrendous effects on children, families, and entire communities, even if “the high level of attention given to school shootings, compared to other forms of victimization in schools, is potentially misleading,”<sup>27</sup> in that it portrays school shooting incidents as a much more pressing issue than the actual prevalence of the crime suggests. The notions of moral panic and media spectacle can help to approach the media logic behind the sense of emergency that school shootings bring about. The next section employs these concepts to examine the dynamics of the school shooting discourse, attempting to shed light on why school shootings are perceived as a national or cultural ‘emergency.’

### **3\_School Shootings and Cultural Discourses of Emergency**

The media’s role in the school shooting discourse is highly complex and multi-layered. Ahrens points out that on the one hand the media “decisively negotiate[s] public concerns, such as which acts of violence are to be regarded as absolutely intolerable,”<sup>28</sup> when on the other hand, it is frequently blamed for those acts of violence. The extensive media portrayals of the shooters are said to have created new heroes for the outcasts, and the idea of the “superstar killer”<sup>29</sup> is blamed for copycat-crimes. The alleged emergence of a ‘cultural script for school shootings’ — that is, established out of narratives and images of previous shootings — is also frequently invoked as a template for troubled youths who look for a spectacular and masculine way out of their perceived misery.<sup>30</sup> On all these points, both journalism and fictional media have been strongly criticized, and — in many cases — rightfully so: some cultural artifacts glorify hypermasculine ideas that connect manhood to violence, and media coverage has often fallen short of presenting balanced and empathetic accounts of the incidents.<sup>31</sup>

On the contrary, media coverage of school shootings has mostly focused on the ‘spectacular’ nature of the event, the ‘sensational’ metamorphosis of a ‘normal’ young



boy — as almost all school shooters are boys<sup>32</sup> — into a “juvenile superpredator.”<sup>33</sup> And, considering the rules of corporate media, understandably so: “[s]chool shootings make and break news, and as the victims bleed the stories lead. It is exactly the performative and theatrical nature of violence in school shootings that makes them suited to the present-day media and its ongoing battle to retain audience attention.”<sup>34</sup> While the level of media influence on school shooters, and the school shooting phenomenon as such, must be neglected within the scope of this paper,<sup>35</sup> the dynamics of media coverage are of great interest here. Therefore, this section asks how school shootings generate a ‘sense of emergency’ that exceeds the actual incident and has an impact on school politics and cultural perceptions of schools as such. To do so, the perception of school shootings as an emergency will first be described in an effort to understand the dynamics of these forms of excessive violence. Societal agreements about schools and education will then be approached with the help of the notions of moral panic and media spectacle.

The sense of emergency that this article observes is a reaction to school shootings as “deep psychic blows [...] in the collective sentiment”<sup>36</sup> and can be observed in the school shooting discourse. Cohen has pointed out that moral panics sometimes have “serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way that society conceives itself.”<sup>37</sup> These changes can be seen in developments in school policies over the last 15 years. In June 2013, still in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting in December 2012, the White House released the “Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Security Plans.” The fact sheet that accompanied the release begins by stating that “[s]chools, IHEs, and houses of worship need comprehensive guidance on how to effectively plan and prepare for emergencies,” and puts special emphasis on school shootings or, more broadly, “Active Shooter Situations”, observing: “The recent tragedies [...] have raised the level of concern among Americans whether schools, IHEs or houses of worship are doing everything they can to keep students, staff and congregants safe from gun violence.”<sup>38</sup>

Ever since Columbine, some communities have taken drastic measures against the threat that school shootings seem to pose: metal detectors, regular locker searches, security staff, and even police officers are being installed at rural and urban schools, and after every school shooting the outcries for stricter security measures, along with either

stricter or loser gun control, get louder. However, these measures have themselves caused heated public debates. The presence of police officers at schools gained particular national attention when, in October 2015, a police officer at Spring Valley High School violently removed a girl of color from the classroom, for no apparent reason.<sup>39</sup> Under the hashtag #AssaultAtSpringHigh, the incident was debated across social media, and a video was shown on almost all major news websites in the US. Not surprisingly, the possibility of a school shooting was used as one of the main arguments in favor of a greater presence of police officers at schools. Here, the way that school shooting incidents have been instrumentalized beyond their actual impact can be seen quite clearly: while the possibility of a school shooting is extremely low, it is still used to justify certain measures — especially in terms of security and surveillance — that frequently do more harm than good. As a result of having more police officers at schools, students who disobey their teachers, cause trouble, or get in fights not only face disciplinary actions by their schools, but most likely criminal charges as well. Naturally, methods for prevention need to be developed, just as school shootings or the leaking of plans that hint towards an adolescent's desire to kill his peers need to be taken seriously and responded to with adequate urgency. However, it must be asked *why* school shootings are clearly seen as an actual risk at schools and whether measures like these do not actually heighten the notion of school shootings as a threat.

The extremely disproportionate media coverage that school shootings have received is the main reason for the perception of shootings as a constant threat to Western schools.<sup>40</sup> The recurring images of schools as crime scenes, paramedics carrying lifeless bodies from school premises, or the constantly remediated imagery of two juvenile gunmen who randomly shoot their peers in a suburban school cafeteria have generated the feeling that “it could happen anywhere.”<sup>41</sup> In the face of a possible emergency that derives from the feeling of being threatened by a new form of violence, the real risk of victimization, as Muschert and Ragnedda argue, loses importance:

The mass media contribute to a culture of fear, by continually returning to and emphasizing the motif of school violence, creating a discrepancy between public fear and the real risks of victimization, fusing the perception of fear with the real event, and soliciting an emotional response divorced from its context.<sup>42</sup>

These media dynamics have been witnessed ever since Columbine, which is frequently understood to have been a prototypical school shooting, or a “problem-defining” event.<sup>43</sup> With massive media coverage and the transmission of live footage from the

crime scene during the shooting, the events of Columbine — despite major political issues — became one of the biggest news events of 1999 and was one of the biggest news events of the entire decade.<sup>44</sup> Shootings before Columbine had received less media coverage, and today, still, some school shootings in the US provoke less salient media coverage than others. However, events such as the Sandy Hook Massacre remain the focus of national, and even international, media attention for weeks, and are brought to mind even years later, after similar events or when certain political agendas need a spectacular story to back them up.<sup>45</sup> The enormous media attention that some of the school shootings have received has generated a feeling of participation. “Mass-mediated reports of Columbine,” as Linder argues, “expanded the group of people who ‘experienced’ the event as news media coverage or the shooting brought the terror of school violence into American living rooms across the country.”<sup>46</sup> Despite the fact that, luckily, only very few individuals and communities have had to deal with the aftermath of a school shooting, the media has managed to create the impression that school shootings are a general problem that affects the entire nation.

By now, images of school shootings can be reactivated easily after each new incident — and the media makes use of it. Almost no report about a school shooting event ceases to refer back to media spectacles like Columbine, Virginia Tech, or Sandy Hook. As a result, “school shooting images and meanings are widely spread around the world, and thus have potential to nurture the collective imagination of destruction and fear much beyond their physical power,” as Muschert writes.<sup>47</sup>

Naturally, this symbolic value is closely linked to the notion of schools — especially rural or suburban ones — as safe havens, as places for education, where children are raised to be responsible adults and citizens and where committed teachers have a positive influence on young lives. With their acts of extreme violence that indiscriminately attack the school as such, school shooters question this symbolic value. They do not attack an individual, but rather an institution that stands for society’s good future. Moreover, their victims are children, who embody societal hopes for the future, and teachers, who stand for the communication of social values and norms. With their gruesome actions, school shooters communicate their radical refusal of these societal values and shared norms. As a result, the effect of the attack is shocking, as it violates not only individual lives and communities’ peace, but the very idea of social trust.<sup>48</sup>

Every society consists of zones — “*areas, in which it prohibits, permits, or mandates violence, alone or in combination,*” as Reemtsma defines them.<sup>49</sup> Social trust, Reemtsma states, “*rests on the stability of these zones.*”<sup>50</sup> Schools are one of the zones in which violence is clearly prohibited — at least when it exceeds a socially accepted amount or quality. While bullying, even in its most cruel forms, is frequently ignored or normalized,<sup>51</sup> the general perception of peacefulness and safety needs to be maintained. Certain forms of violence must remain in zones where they are, to a certain extent, legitimate — for extreme forms of violence, these zones must be highly specific and are frequently renegotiated, as the limits and boundaries of violence are by no means a stable set of rules. Schools, too, used to be places where violence was clearly permitted — “where in the not-so-distant-past teachers could paddle, cane, or beat recalcitrant pupils with impunity.”<sup>52</sup> In contemporary society, however, schools have been re-coded as non-violent, purely educational zones. The violation must therefore be perceived as an emergency and labeled an exception and illegitimate transgression.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, in the aftermath of a school shooting, society needs to reassure itself of its overarching agreement of peacefulness and of the stability of its zones, which all too often leads to moral panic.<sup>54</sup>

The dynamics of moral panic are the *result* of this process of delegitimation of violence at schools, and, at the same time, serve as a *means* to delegitimize: the outrage about school shootings is not only an understandable reaction to the shocking nature of the incident. It also serves to reassure society of the existing agreement that these acts of violence are in no way acceptable. Here, the media is the crucial factor, as news coverage vigorously focuses on the processes of creating explanations and causalities that either frame the attack as the deed of a forlorn individual who has fallen over the rim of societal control, or pathologize the perpetrator, to much the same end. All these explanations, like the shootings themselves, are orchestrated as media spectacles that constantly communicate new pieces of information to the nation’s living rooms. “As these stories unfold,” Cohen writes, “experts such as sociologists, psychologists and criminologists are wheeled in to comment, react and supply a causal narrative.”<sup>55</sup> In the aftermath of highly-mediatized school shootings, certain narratives of causality that mostly focus on the motives and reasons for the shootings, have been constructed within the cultural discourse of emergency that has evolved around school shootings. These socially important narratives, as the last section of this paper shows, have been

established to such an extent that they can be invoked in the medial and public discourse after every new school shooting.

#### **4\_Unwind: Narratives of Causality**

“The world around us is chaotic,” writes Mieke Bal in her introduction to *On Meaning-Making*. “In order to live in that world, we must find ways to grasp it, establish some sort of order in it.”<sup>56</sup> Through interacting with others and signs such as language, humans establish order, create causality, and help each other grasp events that seem to lack meaning.

School shootings, as events that seem to lack any meaning, causality, or rationale, have proven to challenge these mechanisms of meaning-making, of ordering and understanding. They defy the causality that society usually ascribes to acts of violence. In many cases of violent behavior, the motive of the perpetrator already presents the public with some sort of explanation. School shootings, however, are too arbitrary, too sudden, and too indiscriminate in their choice of time, space, and victims — the gruesome logic of violent behavior that the public has gotten used to does not apply here. A school shooter, as Joseph Vogl writes, directs his violence at everyone — therefore, a shooting can happen to anyone at any time or place.<sup>57</sup> The excessiveness of the violence exists in no relation to the trivial nature of what is communicated as a motive by the shooters: bullying, heartache, the feeling of being marginalized, a broken home. School shootings are frequently staged as revenge-plots against peers, teachers, and society,<sup>58</sup> with the perpetrators going to great lengths to explain their actions to the public: The Columbine perpetrators shot extensive video footage in which they discussed their plans and filmed fictionalized versions of their later shooting — which now seem like gruesome dress rehearsals. German school shooter Bastian Bosse uploaded a video with an explanation for his plans on YouTube, and the Virginia Tech killer even sent an entire media package to broadcasting stations. Yet, while all of the shooters have had subjective motives for what they did, none of their explanations can truly serve as an answer to the public’s need for justification. Mary Ellen O’Toole describes the difference between motive and justification as follows:

Justification is what the public want to know in order to make sense of the crime. They want to be able say, ‘Ok, I understand now why someone would go into a school and shoot and kill ten people.’ There will never be a reasonable justification for [school shootings]. However, the motive for a crime is entirely different. The motive is the offender’s emotional and psychological reasons for committing

the crime, which can be either conscious or subconscious. We may not understand these motives, agree with them, or believe them. We most likely will find them to be repulsive or offensive. But the point is that motives are the offender's unique reasons for his or her behavior. It has nothing to do with our ability to be able to reconcile their behavior.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the fact that there can be no reasonable justification for a school shooting, the constant need to construct these justifications can be observed in the medial discourse's attempt to create a causal narrative. This narrative, as Jörn Ahrens writes, serves to (re-)integrate the event "into both an individual biography that eventually leads to mass murder and the continuity of social life and normality which has been severely disrupted by this phenomenon."<sup>60</sup> Not only does causality serve as a means to stabilize the social self-perception as non-violent, but making a school shooting understandable also suggests that it is in fact *avoidable*. Finding modes and measures for prevention of further school shootings relies on finding explanations and 'reasons' for previous ones, the media and researchers suggest.

Therefore, narratives that construct causality and produce easy answers can be found in all medial representations of school shootings, in newspapers and television, as well as in literature and film. Considering the latter, Linder states that "fictional spectacles of youth violence serve as a welcome distraction for audiences who are seeking easy-to-digest answers for why youth violence occurs and easy-to-identify scapegoats that can be caught before innocent children are harmed."<sup>61</sup>

It can be stated that this notion is not only true for fictional accounts of youth violence, but for the entire media spectacle of school shootings, which has frequently focused on easy answers, instead of considering multicausal explanations or thematizing the fact that violence could be understood as an integral elements of contemporary society. While more differentiated medial representations and debates about school shootings that take into account the complexity and multicausality of the phenomenon would be worthwhile, this would confront society with several problems.

As this paper has shown, school shootings can only be defined with due regard to the highly complex media dynamics that follow these events: The classification of an incident of excessive violence at a school is constructed primarily *a posteriori* by the media. The prevalent perception of school shootings as an emergent phenomenon that poses an actual threat to schools is also mainly medially constructed. Once the notion that a school shooting could happen anyplace and anytime has been disseminated and

the imagery of school shootings has found its way into collective memory, societies need to believe in the possibility of prevention and in ways to redefine schools as violent-free zones. The highly constructed understanding of school shootings as an emergent phenomenon and the sense of emergency that derives from this is accompanied by an outrage about the violation of societal norms and values. This outrage helps to rebuild a sense of stability and trust in social arrangements. Out of this need for restoring stability and trust, the school shooting discourse, therefore, focuses on causal narratives that help to make sense of the past event and, ideally, even suggest a causality and predictability of school shootings.

The media dynamics of the school shooting discourse frequently follow the logic of moral panic and media spectacle, rather than presenting differentiated accounts that consider the various societal dynamics behind these acts of violence. While this often results in the instrumentalization of the phenomenon for political and ideological causes<sup>62</sup> and in all-too-rash and generalized reactions, as some of the examples in this paper may have shown, these social narratives serve the necessary purpose of reassuring society that it is ‘violence-free.’

School shootings, as this paper has shown, are an emergent phenomenon and exists in a close interdependency to its discourse and the discursive dynamics that have evolved around it. Due to the dynamics of moral panic and media spectacle, the school shooting discourse is characterized by a sense of emergency that appears to be disproportionate to the actual prevalence of the phenomenon. As a result, narratives of causality that attempt to explain these events predominate. While Linder talks about certain “audiences” that seek “easy-to-digest answers,” the narratives of causality that are constructed in the aftermath of a school shooting can also be understood to serve as a necessary means to reintegrate phenomena of excessive violence into societal self-understanding, and to maintain the normality of a self-proclaimed (partial) absence of violence.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Guys and Guns Amok: Domestic Terrorism and School Shootings from the Oklahoma City Bombing to the Virginia Tech Massacre* (London: Boulder, 2008), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers*. 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002 [1972]), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn E. Linder, *Rampage Violence Narratives: What Fictional Accounts of School Shootings Say About The Future of America's Youth* (Lanham/Boulder/New York: Lexington, 2014), xiii.

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- <sup>4</sup> Cf. Jörn Ahrens, “Anthropologie als Störfall: Gesellschaftliche Bearbeitung von Gewalt,” in *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaft* 2 (2011), 73–83, here: 75.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Jan Philipp Reemtsma, *Trust and Violence: An Essay on a Modern Relationship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2012: 14ff).
- <sup>6</sup> Everytownresearch.org is a website by a pro gun-control network. For their statistics on school shootings see: [http://everytownresearch.org/school-shootings/?source=etno\\_ETHP&utm\\_source=et\\_n\\_&utm\\_medium=o&utm\\_campaign=ETHP](http://everytownresearch.org/school-shootings/?source=etno_ETHP&utm_source=et_n_&utm_medium=o&utm_campaign=ETHP) , accessed May 3, 2016.
- <sup>7</sup> David J. Harding, Cybelle Fox, and Jal D. Mehta, “Studying Rare Events Through Qualitative Case Studies: Lessons from a Study of Rampage School Shootings,” in *Sociological Methods & Research* 31 (2002), 174–217, here: 177.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid. (cf. note 7).
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Nils Böckler et al., “School Shootings: Conceptual Framework and International Empirical Trends,” in *School Shootings: International Research, Case Studies and Concepts for Prevention*, ed. Nils Böckler et al. (New York: Springer, 2013), 1–26, here: 3ff. For a criticism of the reliability of statistics about school shootings, see an article by Drew Desilver for Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center provides statistics and numbers about current issues in American society on the Internet, and also provides numbers of school shootings and comments on the question whether or not school shootings are on the rise, but state that “the available data don’t offer clear evidence, due to issues of timeliness, reliability or both.” (Drew Desilver, “Why timely, reliable data on mass killings is hard to find,” *Pew Research Center*, June 17, 2014, accessed May 3, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/17/why-timely-reliable-data-on-mass-killings-is-hard-to-find/>).
- <sup>10</sup> In this definition, Newman and colleagues speak of schools and thereby exclude institutions of higher education, which are sometimes referred to as *College Rampage Shootings* (cf. Katherine S. Newman and Cybelle Fox, “Repeat Tragedy: Rampage Shootings in American High School and College Settings, 2002–2008,” in *American Behavioral Scientist* 52/9 (2009), 286–308) or IHE shootings (cf. Rebecca Bondü and Sophia Beier, “Two of a Kind? Differences and Similarities of Attacks in Schools and in Institutes of Higher Education,” in *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 30.2 (2015), 253–271). While the phenomena are similar in some respects, there are significant differences in others, which is why the usage of different terms makes sense.
- <sup>11</sup> Jörn Ahrens, “German Rampage: Social Discourse and the Emergence of a Disturbing Phenomenon,” in *Framing Excessive Violence: Discourse and Dynamics*, eds. Daniel Ziegler, Marco Gerster, and Steffen Krämer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 137–159, here: 151.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid. (cf. note 11).
- <sup>13</sup> Christopher J. Ferguson and James D. Ivory, “A Futile Game: On the Prevalence and Causes of Misguided Speculation About the Role of Violent Video Games in Mass School Shootings,” in *School Shootings: Mediatized Violence in a Global Age*, eds. Glenn W. Muschert and Johanna Sumiala (Bingley: Emerald, 2012) 47–68, here: 50.
- <sup>14</sup> Linder, *Rampage Narratives* (cf. note 3), xvi.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. (cf. note 3).
- <sup>16</sup> Ferguson and Ivory, “Futile Game” (cf. note 13), 57.
- <sup>17</sup> Nils Böckler, Thorsten Seeger, and Peter Sitzer, “Media Dynamics in School Shootings: A Socialization Theory Perspective,” in *School Shootings: Mediatized Violence in a Global Age*. eds. Glenn W. Muschert and Johanna Sumiala (Bingley: Emerald, 2012), 25–46, here: 27ff.



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- 18 Ahrens, “German Rampage” (cf. note 11), 151.
- 19 Considering these dynamics, the question remains whether school shootings are an emergent phenomenon that justifies these medially constructed reactions. In an article on *Modes of Emergence*, Wolfgang Iser points out that “[e]mergence designates the coming into being of hitherto non-existent phenomena. The term tells us nothing about how, why, or from where these phenomena arise, or what direction they are going to take.” (Wolfgang Iser, “Modes of Emergence,” in *Aesthetic Transgressions: Modernity, Liberalism and the Function of Literature*, eds. Thomas Claviez, Ulla Hasselstein, and Sieglinde Lemke (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006), 19–38, here: 19). While school shootings have emerged as a contemporary phenomenon of violence that exists in close interdependency to the modes of contemporary society, it does not bare references to similar forms of excessive violence. Quite on the contrary, school shootings are a form of excessive violence that has its roots in a long tradition of rampage violence. While rampage violence can be traced back to 15th century Malaysia, school shootings as we know them today is a specific form of rampage violence that is still being shaped by the incidents themselves and by the media dynamics that have evolved around them. Therefore, referring to school shootings as an ‘emergent phenomenon’ makes sense only in the more colloquial usage of the term emergent — as something new and still developing, but not necessarily on the rise. For detailed analyzes of the phenomenon of the ancient rampage phenomenon of Amok see Lothar Adler, *Amok: Eine Studie* (München: Belleville, 2000) or Jonathan Spores, *Running Amok: A Historical Inquiry* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1988).
- 20 Böckler et al., “Conceptual Frameworks” (cf. note 9), 9.
- 21 Newman and Fox, “Repeat Tragedy” (cf. note 10), 152f.
- 22 Cf. Glenn W. Muschert and Massimo Ragnedda, “Media and Control of Violence: Communication in School Shootings,” in *Control of Violence*, ed. Wilhelm Heitmeyer et al. (New York: Springer, 2011), 345–361, here: 355.
- 23 Glenn W. Muschert, “Research in School Shootings,” in *Sociology Compass* 1 (2007), 60–80, here: 60. My emphasis.
- 24 Cohen, *Moral Panics* (cf. note 2), xiii.
- 25 Ibid. (cf. note 2).
- 26 Cohen, *Moral Panics* (cf. note 2), vii.
- 27 Muschert, “Research” (cf. note 23), 60.
- 28 Ahrens, “German Rampage” (cf. note 11), 158.
- 29 Frank J. Robertz, *School shootings: Über die Relevanz der Phantasie für die Begehung von Mehrfachtötungen durch Jugendliche* (Frankfurt (Main): Verlag für Polizeiwissenschaft, 2004), 183.
- 30 Cf. Katherine S. Newman et al., *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 247ff.
- 31 While examining the role of media as a scapegoat reaches far beyond the scope of this paper, it can be said that the frequent blame that is put on cultural artifacts fits Cohen’s concept of the *folk devil*: Moral panics frequently result in — or better: generate — a moral repugnance toward certain ‘folk devils’. In the school shooting discourse, such folk devils could be video games or other artifacts and aspects of popular cultures, such as Goth culture or certain films. For further analysis of these dynamics see: Ferguson and Ivory, “Futile Game” (cf. note 13), 59ff., Tomi Kiilakoski and Atte Oksanen, “Soundtrack of the School Shootings: Cultural Script, Music and Male Rage,” in *Young* 19/3 (2011), 247–269.
- 32 Cf. Newman et al., *Rampage* (cf. note 30), 267f.

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- 33 Glenn W. Muschert, “The Columbine Victims and the Myth of the Juvenile Superpredator,” in *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 5.4 (2007), 351–366, here: 351.
- 34 Glenn W. Muschert and Johanna Sumiala, “Introduction: School Shootings as Mediatized Violence,” in *Mediatized Violence* (cf. note 17), xv–xxix, here: xvii.
- 35 For a brief overview on the debate about media violence in the school shooting discourse, see Silke Braselmann, “We Need to Talk About School Shootings: Funktionen von School Shooting-Literatur am Beispiel von L. Shrivvers *We Need to Talk About Kevin*,” in *Amok und Schulmassaker: Kultur- und medienwissenschaftliche Annäherungen*, eds. Ralf Junkerjürgen and Isabella v. Treskow (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), 189–210.
- 36 Jaclyn Schildkraut and Glenn W. Muschert, “Media Salience and the Framing of Mass Murder in Schools: A Comparison of the Columbine and Sandy Hook Massacres,” in *Homicide Studies* 18.1 (2014), 23–43, here: 24.
- 37 Cohen, *Moral Panics* (cf. note 2), 1.
- 38 Taken from the Fact Sheet for the “Guide for Developing High Quality School Emergency Operation Plans” that was released by the US government and which can be downloaded via: [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/rem\\_s\\_k-12\\_guide\\_508.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/rem_s_k-12_guide_508.pdf), accessed May 10, 2016.
- 39 For the full video, see: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/27/us/south-carolina-school-arrest-video/>, accessed May 3, 2016.
- 40 For a discussion of the media discourse about school shootings in Germany, see: Ahrens, “German Rampage” (cf. note 11).
- 41 Cohen, *Moral Panics* (cf. note 2), xiv.
- 42 Glenn W. Muschert and Massimo Ragnedda, “Media and Control of Violence: Communication in School Shootings,” in *Control of Violence*, ed. Wilhelm Heitmeyer et al. (New York: Springer, 2011), 345–361, here: 346
- 43 Muschert, “Superpredator” (cf. note 33), 351.
- 44 Cf. Schildkraut and Muschert, “Media Salience” (cf. note 36), 24.
- 45 Ibid. (cf. note 36).
- 46 Linder, *Rampage Narratives* (cf. note 3), xv.
- 47 Muschert and Sumiala, “Introduction” (cf. note 34), xvi.
- 48 For a definition of social trust, a comprehensive discussion of the concept and its importance for modern societies and societal practices of trust, see Reemtsma, *Trust and Violence*, (cf. note 5), 12ff.
- 49 Reemtsma, *Trust and Violence*, (cf. note 5), 103f., emphasis in original.
- 50 Reemtsma, *Trust and Violence*, (cf. note 5), 104, emphasis in original.
- 51 Cf. Cohen, *Moral Panics* (cf. note 2), xiii.
- 52 Cf. Cohen, *Moral Panics* (cf. note 2), 106.
- 53 While there are indeed forms of violence that are seen as legitimate, these forms are mostly ignored in public discourse.
- 54 The notion of social trust and violent free zones is of great interest when it comes to highly mediatized events of excessive violence in other contexts, such as the so-called Charleston Church Massacre. While this article only discusses rampage violence in institutions of education, the media dynamics of school shootings and excessive violence within other violent free zones clearly follows the same rules. For a comment on the relevance for the Charleston Church massacre for the debate

about excessive violence, see the introduction to the forthcoming volume by eds. Silke Braselmann and Jörn Ahrens, *Vermittlungskulturen des Amoklaufs: Zur medialen Präsenz spektakulärer Gewalt* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, forthcoming).

- <sup>55</sup> Cohen, *Moral Panics* (cf. note 2), xiv.
- <sup>56</sup> Mieke Bal, *On Meaning-Making: Essays in Semiotics* (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1994), 5.
- <sup>57</sup> Joseph Vogl, “Beliebige Feindschaft: Zur Epoche des Amok,” in *Feindschaft*, eds. Medardus Brehl and Kristin Platt (München: Fink, 2004), 211–225, here: 223.
- <sup>58</sup> Cf. Nils Böckler and Thorsten Seeger, *Schulamokläufer: Eine Analyse medialer Täter-Eigendarstellungen und deren Aneignung durch jugendliche Rezipienten* (Weinheim: Juventa, 2010), 102ff.
- <sup>59</sup> Mary Ellen O’Toole, “Jeffrey Weise and the Shooting at Red Lake Minnesota High School: A Behavioral Perspective,” in *International Research* (cf. note 9), 177–188, here: 185.
- <sup>60</sup> Ahrens, “German Rampage” (cf. note 11), 153.
- <sup>61</sup> Linder, *Rampage Narratives* (cf. note 3), xviii.
- <sup>62</sup> Cf. Kellner, *Guys and Guns Amok* (cf. note 1), 33ff.
- <sup>63</sup> Ahrens, “Anthropologie als Störfall” (cf. note 4), 73f.