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Broadcasting a killer: The Virginia Tech shooting and the effects of mass communication

When the rampant killer responsible for the shootings at the Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg, Virginia, Cho Seung-Hui, sent a package containing about 1800 words of text, several Quicktime home videos and 43 photos to the news-network giant NBC on the day of the shooting, 16 April 2007, a debate was immediately sparked in the global media about whether it should have been aired or not.

NBC coined the term “multimedia manifesto” to describe Cho’s riveting and macabre ranting on film, which was immediately shown to millions around the globe. The network aired the footage, prompting TIME magazine to muse that the “technology for recording horror has advanced, even if the technology for inflicting it has not...Cho’s final testament was like a deranged MySpace parody” (Poniewozik, 2007). The package shows Cho brandishing hammers? and guns in defiant poses and the text reveals much about the young killer’s state of mind.

NBC president Steve Capus argued that the video and audio was only aired after “ careful consideration” and that NBC first alerted the police and the FBI before airing the video. Most importantly, Capus said that they did not air all the documents, but “chose certain limited passages to release”. Capus also argued that seven and a half hours passed before the tape was aired. “The same decision to run this video was reached by virtually every news organization in the world, as evidenced by their coverage on television, on websites and in newspapers. The pain suffered by the Virginia Tech community and indeed the country is real and will last forever. I believe our coverage to date has been handled with great sensitivity. We are committed to nothing less, ” he said, according to <http://www.poynter.org>. When the public’s indignation at the broadcasting became known, NBC retaliated and pulled the clip off the air.

By critically analysing relevant media effect theories, one can approach a conclusion on questions whether, and to what extent, the airing of the Cho footage could have influenced the broader society. Extensive research has been conducted in the past to prove or dispel hypotheses that adolescents are negatively affected by eg. violent television programs. However, to establish the underlying effects of the media remain difficult and only highlights the fact that one does not ingest media in isolation, but that it is a constant process influenced by many external factors.

One can argue that the Cho footage had a cognitive effect on the American nation’s opinions about gun control, and maybe also about the state of the country’s mental health care. The Cho footage can be defined as short-term message exposure with both unintended and intended effects.

In terms of short term media effects, the two-step flow theory and the uses and gratifications theory can be applied to this case study.

The two step flow theory argues that media users selectively expose themselves to media on the basis of several factors, such as their own knowledge, experience, background, culture

and expectations. The group in which the media user is situated can filter, and in effect act as a buffer against, these media messages by helping the user make sense of what he/ she just saw or read. Opinion leaders in societies, such as parents, teachers and politicians, represent a further filter for users to develop their opinions about what they have experienced. This theory thus concludes that media communication contributes to behavioral change and reinforces existing behavior, and acknowledges that mass media users are not passive isolated individuals, but members of a structured society to which they belong, and whose members can influence them in return. The influence of the media is thus put in the people's hands, and not vice versa.

In light of this case study, one can argue that the broadcasting of the Cho footage was filtered by society. Jack Shafer of Slate magazine argued in a column titled "The Cho Show" that NBC News needn't apologize to anybody for originally airing the Cho videos and pictures. "The Virginia Tech slaughter is an ugly story, but the five W's of journalism – who, what, where, when, and why – demand that journalists ask the question "why?" even if they can't adequately answer it. If you're interested in knowing why Cho did what he did, you want to see the videos and photos and read from the transcripts. If you're not interested, you should feel free to avert your eyes" (<http://www.slate.com/id/2164717/nav/tap1/>).

One can argue that media consumers could selectively choose to view the footage, and are thus not total powerless victims of the effects of the media, as the hypodermic needle theory will attest. Even after NBC retracted the footage from its news slot, one is still at liberty to watch it instantly on a plethora of websites. Opinion leaders, in the form of clergymen, journalists and psychiatric specialists, were at hand in the era of globalised technology to help people make sense of the footage on television. Interestingly, from a Web 2.0 perspective, the user comment boxes at the end of video clips on video websites and blogs like YouTube also act as opinion leaders and an ad hoc filtration device. After one has finished watching the footage, you can engage with other people about the content, and thus in a way make sense of it. The reaction to the Cho footage, from the perspective of this theory, highlights the nature of our globalised community and how our structured societies determine, to a certain extent, how we respond to media messages.

The uses and gratifications theory proceeds from "the needs of users and the probable gratifications that they derive from media use". (Fourie, 2001: 297). This theory draws the conclusion that the media is consumed to act as diversion, gratifies the need for personal relations, adjust and explore personal identity and gratifies the need for information about the worlds around us.

For many the macabre footage of a crazy gunman served many of these above mentioned purposes. In terms of diversion, the footage may have an effect of diverting people's attention from their normal mundane lives, making them an active audience in a tragedy and a breaking news event that was unfolding before their eyes. The way in which major news networks present their news, with constant headlines, streams of opinions and a sense of urgency, supports the argument in favour of diversion.

The argument in favour of personal relations can also be utilized. The "conversations around the water cooler" analogy (reference/source?), of media messages having the effect that people use it to build and sustain relations with others, can definitely be applied to the Cho footage. People started interacting with each other about the shooting, and the footage further prompted this need to discuss the major news event.

People identified with the Virginia Tech's 32 victims and their families. The footage shown strengthened people's revulsion in the horrible events of the day, and helped people to further identify with the situations and values of the people in that tragic position. Seeing photos of the killer and hearing his voice on film made the killing spree a tangible reality to many.

One of the most important conclusions drawn from the uses and gratifications theory is the notion of surveillance. The footage gratified the need for people to know what is happening in the world around them. One can argue that the school shooting affected people around the world directly and indirectly. Gun control is going to be a cardinal point of debate during the upcoming US presidential elections, and the effects of the shooting was also felt diplomatically, for example in South Korea, where vigils were held for the victims (Cho was of South Korean descent). On a diplomatic level, countries around the world condemned the acts. People thus have a desire to survey the root of this issue, in the form of the footage.

According to Fourie (1993:298) the "underlying assumption of long-term cognitive theories is that the media do not have an immediate impact on behaviour...but can affect it over a longer period of exposure to media content". If one assumes that the Cho footage was shown multiple times over several days, and is still readily available on the internet, one can critically analyse some long term theories which can be applied to this case study.

The coverage of the shooting is a form of accumulation, since the footage and its accompanying topics were reported on for a long period of time, thus leading to a growing comprehension which develops in society about the topic, and leading to modified attitudes, meanings and beliefs about the issue.

The Cho footage may ultimately alter people's ideas about issues like xenophobia (Cho was a second generation Korean immigrant), gun control, violence, security on university campuses etc.

A theory that is very applicable to this case study is modelling. This theory argues that in some cases media users can adopt the depictions of other people in the media. People thus adopt media-portrayed behaviour as a model for how they themselves act. The media user encounters a person portraying a certain role (in this case Cho, wielding guns and rambling about Jesus and wealthy people), identifies with the model, imitates the model and performs a reproduced activity in search of positive enforcement.

One of the reasons NBC stopped broadcasting the clip apparently was to further prevent copycat threats which surged?? through the country following the massacre. Many people could?thus modelled themselves on the killer, which raises interesting ethical questions about the broadcast. In a fascinating meta-theory spin off, Cho (by his own admission) modelled himself on the Columbine school shooters and as a "Jesus-like martyr". Many experts and analysts said in the wake of the broadcast that modelling is one of the main effects the broadcast can have. Dr Jerald Key, chair of the American Psychiatric Association, said on ABC News that "the critical issue is balancing the public's need to know against the potential danger of provoking copycat behavior".

"The power of the Columbine tragedy was evident in Cho's writing. There appears to be more evidence of copycat behavior in incidents such as the one at Virginia Tech than that of suicide contagion, which refers to the potential influence of reporting suicide in evoking similar experiences in others. It would be wise, therefore, not to repeatedly air the video tapes

that NBC received. The potential gains are clearly outweighed by the potential dangers”, said Key." (<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/VATech/story?id=3057966&page=1>).

The Cho broadcast also raised questions of agenda setting, whereby the media creates a specific image of reality. Agenda-setting focuses on what topics the media represent to an audience and how the information on the selected topics are presented. NBC chose to present the information on the Virginia Tech shootings in the most blatant manner possible, thus showing the dynamics of what they regarded as important news. NBC evidently regarded the story of a tragic school shooting as so important that they risked criticism by airing the most explicit footage as possible. This theory can be linked to framing, whereby one can perceive the influence of news angles on the public.

The stereotypes the footage highlighted can also affect the way people see the world. The killer was shown as an isolated individual of Asian descent, juxtaposed against the free Western world of civilized America. The broadcast of the footage further showed a mentally stable individual. After the footage was shown on NBC, Cho's parents received police protection as they feared for their lives. One may argue that the footage strengthened stereotypes of American immigrants not being true citizens etc. and the broadcast may have the effect of instigating violence against eg. Korean immigrants or isolated and introverted students. A TIME magazine article following the NBC manifesto debate conceded that “there are some scoops it might be better never to have gotten”. Maybe the broadcast of the clip's effect will become more evident in years to come.

Since the effect model is not grounded in theory and only substantiated by blunt reasoning, only time will tell what the effects of these visual assaults will be on a society already jaded by realistic images of violence.

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