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## **Pain and Public Deliberation: Citizens, Victims, Advocates, Activists**

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During the Columbine High School shootings on April 4, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot and killed twelve students and one teacher. The shootings ended when the two adolescents shot one another in their school's library. The Columbine High School shootings came to the forefront of America's national consciousness following the extensive news media attention the tragedy garnered. This paper revisits the limits and possibilities for the ideals of participatory democracy in the contemporary United States by examining news media coverage of the Columbine High School shootings. Following a description of news media framings of those who spoke before the news media in response to the tragedy, this paper concludes that people hold tenuous regard for the notion of shared interests. In particular, victims of the shootings suggested that their painful experiences legitimized their role as gun control advocates. By focusing on victims' feelings of pain and remorse, the news media inhibited public deliberation about social measures that might prevent future instances of such violence. While individuals interviewed by the news media indicate that they believe that people may converge as members of a public to deliberate about issues of common concern, they also suggest that public policies to prevent high school violence should be motivated primarily by personal concerns and experiences of pain, loss, and remorse. This emphasis on personal experiences undermines the legitimacy of the public sphere because it suggests that people who have experienced personal trauma are the only credible spokespeople for social change.

### **A Limited Public in Contemporary Society**

Because most people learned about the shootings not through personal experience but through news media coverage, that coverage was the only means of facilitating any public deliberation about mass shootings. Coverage also provided a site, however limited, for individuals to express their thoughts and opinions about the tragedy to widespread groups of people. Consequently, people learned about how others made sense of the shootings primarily by listening to news programs and reading newspapers. While the news media provide a site for deliberation about mass violence, they also select particular points of view for news media audiences to accept as a foundation for further deliberation. Scholars of public argument might look to news media coverage of mass violence to understand the possibilities and limitations for public deliberation in the mass media.

### News Media Coverage and the Public Sphere

By reading and viewing reports and interviews about events through the news media, newspaper audiences presume that the issues being covered are of widespread, or public, interest or concern. Just as newspapers and news programs draw individual attention to matters of "public" interest, the shootings themselves also addressed issues of public concern. Directed at no one in particular within a public high school, the shootings implicitly targeted "the public," a wider group of individuals drawn together through shared interests by their presence at an institution of public education. The public-centered nature of the attack suggests that the public sphere is both a conflicted site and a notion that carries ambivalent meanings in contemporary society

"The public" is a central term for those interested in opportunities extant for public deliberation. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jurgen Habermas describes the public sphere as realm in which individuals participate in politics by deliberating with people they do not know intimately about common affairs. Habermas laments that class struggle and competing interest groups in society undermined opportunities for reasoned public debate about the common good in the centuries following the Enlightenment that corresponded with the rise of industrial capitalism. For instance, as publishers began to direct editorial writing to conform to the interests of their advertisers, the public sphere became a vehicle for political and economic propaganda. Consequently, the mass media can be understood as framing controversies in terms of competition between private interests. Due to the omnipresence of advertising within the mass media, the concept of the audience as consumers has replaced the notion of citizenship.

Critics of Habermas' notion of the public sphere necessarily highlight the exclusions that have been embedded within the public sphere as it has operated throughout history; nevertheless, Habermas' original project of examining the limits and the possibilities for achieving a democratic society merits reconsideration. Talking together about the causes of social problems may be the only way to resolve social conflicts without resorting to physical coercion or violence. Striving to attain Habermas' ideal may also enable us to uncover social policies and practices that exclude others from meeting their basic human needs. Since a democratic public sphere cannot exist without a broad social commitment to creating such a sphere, we must determine how people currently conceptualize "the public" and their relationship to that public.

### A Community of Victims

News media coverage of the Columbine High School shootings suggests that most people have little faith in the existence of commonly shared interests that provide a foundation for the public sphere. Instead of acknowledging public interests that compelled people to talk about the shootings, news media coverage of the shootings foregrounded the feelings of grief and remorse experienced by survivors and murder victims families. The news media also conveyed widespread expressions of empathy and support for those who were injured or lost loved ones in the tragedy. During a benefit concert for the victims of the shootings, Celine Dion stated that the victims "'pain and suffering

was felt around the world” (Hughes). Newspapers’ references to grief and empathy for these victims reiterated themes of consolation typical of epideictic, or ceremonial address. Recurrent messages of grief and remorse for the shooting victims encouraged news media audiences across the nation to follow coverage of the tragedy as a consequence of their sympathy to those directly wounded or who lost loved ones.

### **Gun Control Advocacy in the Wake of Columbine: A Social Movement of Victims**

As news media framings of the shootings in terms of widespread remorse continued during the two years proceeding the tragedy, news media coverage of gun control advocacy appeared in terms of the grief and anxiety felt by people who lost loved ones in the tragedy. In January 2000, Sane Alternatives to the Firearms Epidemic (SAFE) hired Thomas Mauser, whose son Daniel died in the shootings, to act as the group’s political spokesperson. According to the *Denver Post*, Mauser responded to questions about his official, paid position in the organization by stating, “I think it’s important for people to hear from victims. . . . It really drives home the point that violence can speak to anyone. Victims are not just black and white photos in the newspaper” (Callahan). By highlighting Mauser’s role in SAFE, the news media encourage audiences to identify with victims of mass violence and empathize with the concerns and feelings that emerge following experiences of tragedy. In addition to quoting Mauser, the *Denver Post* quoted gun control advocates who directly witnessed the shootings at Columbine High School. Reporters continually quoted advocates’ personal experiences with trauma and loss prior to their calls for gun control legislation. Thus, the advocates suggest that such personal experiences legitimized their calls for broader social change and that their experiences of loss legitimize their role as activists.

Just as these individuals suggest that their experiences of loss legitimizes their activism, the news media intimated that involvement in the movement provided them with the therapy they needed to heal their feelings of remorse. During his visit to Columbine High School, President Clinton suggested that social activism might heal people traumatized by the shootings. “What happened to you has pierced the soul of America. . . . You can help America heal. And in so doing, you will speed the process of healing for yourselves” (Obmascik & Callahan). In addition to valuing activism for its therapeutic function for activists, Clinton’s speech suggested that activism would console a wounded nation.

The prevalence of epideictic rhetoric throughout the news media coverage of the gun control movement inhibited public deliberation about social measures that might prevent future instances of such violence. Clinton’s speech did not specify what actions Columbine High School students might take to heal themselves and the rest of the nation. The notion of healing, the most salient feature in Clinton’s speeches following the shootings, suggests that it doesn’t matter how we resolve our feelings of grief and pain as long as such feelings are resolved.

Dana Cloud (1998) argues that references to consolation and therapy have emerged to blunt criticisms that have been leveled at predominant sociopolitical institutions. Therapeutic discourse encourages audiences “to focus

on themselves and the elaboration of their private lives rather than to address and attempt to reform systems of social power in which they are embedded" (p. xiv). News media coverage of the gun control movement that emerged following the Columbine High School shootings suggests that therapeutic rhetoric following social conflict is such a pervading theme in national news media discourse that appeals to personal needs for therapy and social support may now legitimate social activism. Instead of valuing the structural changes that may emerge following social movement activism, people support social activism for the consolation it may bring to the movements' advocates.

News media references to "activists" not directly affected by the shootings provide further evidence that gun control legislation garnered widespread attention primarily for its therapeutic function. Gun control advocates directly traumatized by the shootings strove to avoid being labeled as activists by the news media. Patti Nielson, a teacher who was shot and witnessed the murders of several students on the day of the shootings, told the *Denver Post* that she decided to advocate gun control legislation even though she "has not become an activist," because she "wanted to see something good emerge from the shootings" (McAllister). By focusing on individuals who witnessed gun violence directly or lost family members due to gun violence, this newspaper coverage suggests that people who experience personal trauma may be considered sincere advocates for social change.

As the news media indicated that political activism enabled murder victims' families to heal their wounded psyches, the news media also suggested that activism ought to be regarded with suspicion when it had no therapeutic function. Several newspaper and magazine writers referenced the skepticism many victims expressed toward activists who have not personally experienced loss. These gun control advocates frequently described gun control opponents as "special interests," "activists," and "lobbyists": Mauser told a writer for *Rosie* magazine that "'pro-gun activists" in the National Rifle Association "'began a vigorous and heated campaign to defeat any bill that would limit absolute freedom for gun purchases and gun owners"' and that gun-rights advocates are motivated by financial gain and oppose the values of ordinary, concerned citizens.

SAFE contributes a valuable critique of the role that financial incentives to politicians play in instituting public policy. These incentives undermine the efforts of poorer individuals who organize for social change. Unfortunately, SAFE also undermines the potential for individuals to organize for social change as they conflate activists with lobbyists. By pitting lobbyists and activists against "concerned citizens," these newspaper quotes suggest that concerned citizens cannot be activists. Instead, SAFE leaders suggest that financial gain motivates all political activists. By differentiating themselves from political activists through by their traumatic experiences, they suggest that pain is the only legitimate motivation for political activism.

Although SAFE leaders insinuate that activists prior to the Columbine High School shootings might not have had legitimate reasons for engaging in political activism, they suggest that people ought to support gun control advocates out of sympathy for victims of gun violence. Complementing the notion that gun control advocacy enables shooting victims to heal psychic wounds, state leaders and gun control advocates quoted in the *Denver Post*

indicate that objections to policies advocated by victims demonstrates callous disregard for the loss and anxiety victims experienced following the tragedy.

### **Limitations of Consolatory Rhetoric for Social Change**

Measures to prevent high school shootings geared toward limiting individual access to weapons constituted a superficial response to high school shootings because they failed to respond to the systemic problems in high schools that provoke students to bring firearms to class. While SAFE's emphasis on the need for personal healing generated broad support for gun control legislation within the state of Colorado, the gun control movement limited efforts to prevent school violence by other means. Consolatory discourse distracted audiences from considering the motivations that provoked the shootings. As the news media emphasized victims' needs for therapy, their coverage of the shooters' motivations had to remain consonant with the rhetoric that lent support to the victims. As people deliberated about the factors that provoked the shooters, they could not insinuate the culpability of the victims of the tragedy. Consequently, the news media predominantly examined the killers' family backgrounds and inherently evil dispositions to the neglect of analyses of social relationships and policies that may have provoked the shooters. The emphasis the news media placed on individual psychoses and private life obscured the shooters' claims that athletes in their high school consistently bullied them and that the school's faculty overlooked school bullies who terrorized the shooters prior to their attack (see Hoerl, in press). By failing to address this problem, news media coverage discouraged audiences from considering whether gun control measures would reduce incidents of high school violence. Since gun control would not prevent physical violence that occurs without the use of firearms, it would not reduce the violence that prompts some students to use firearms to retaliate against bullies. Nor would gun control alleviate the frustrations felt by victims of high school bullies.

In addition to fostering an inadequate response to high school violence, the consolatory language that laid the foundation for SAFE's appeals for gun control reflects the decline of the public sphere in contemporary social life. The growing presence of therapeutic rhetoric in news media coverage of violent tragedies may be the consequence of a society that accords little legitimacy to the concept of public welfare. The presence of wounded minds and bodies loom preeminently in the news media that can no longer expect audiences to converge around issues of "common concern." Instead of converging around issues of widespread interest, people today gather around images of exposed and vulnerable bodies that stand in for the opening of minds through dialogue that the public sphere once represented. As advertising and public relations industries have limited access to the public sphere through the mass media, news media coverage of individuals who express skepticism toward notions of common interest and who valorize personal trauma as the only acceptable motive for advocating social change has impaired the legitimacy of the public sphere. In the absence of any belief that we may talk to one another about interests that we share collectively, we now converge around the open and exposed bodies of others in an attempt to find some sense of collective experience among us.

Conceptions of publicly shared interests are as wounded as the bodies that currently bring news media audiences together. By basing their campaign upon the feelings of grief and remorse that centered around wounded and murdered adolescents, SAFE leaders indicate that no one sets aside his or her own personal interests when advocating for social change. Conversely, the speeches they presented before large audiences and news media reporters suggest that people such as SAFE activists strive to influence the lives of people they don't know personally.

Given the public sphere's disregard for women, minorities, and the poor, there are good reasons to condemn notions that the public sphere provides equal access to all individuals and groups; however, the consolatory social sphere that currently substitutes for the public does little to resolve problems such as gun violence that harm people throughout the United States. In the absence of any belief that they might resolve conflict through communication, people converged following the Columbine High School shootings to commemorate lost lives. SAFE's consolatory language curtailed discussion about the motivations that provoke mass shootings and discouraged audiences from questioning whether gun control would prevent these shootings. Consolatory news media coverage promoted shallow public policy goals that might stench the flow of blood emanating from America's high schools. As the recent shootings in San Diego suggest, such measures have failed to apprehend the factors that provoke these traumatic events. We have become members of a wounded public sphere who commemorate our wounded but fail to deliberate about the problems that incite the violence that unites us.

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