

# “Web First” to Death

## *The Media Logic of the School Shootings in the Era of Uncertainty*

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### **Abstract**

The article discusses the most recent Finnish school shootings in Jokela (2007) and in Kauhajoki (2008) as communicative events, proclaimed to be media disasters. These events are described as media disasters following the media logic of the network society. The media performance of the school shootings is analysed from the three different, yet interconnected perspectives: transmission, ritual and dissemination models of communication. The special focus is on the analysis of web based communication; its patterns, functions and logic. The authors argue that the most prevalent media logic of school shooting communication is the circulation of violent messages. Finally the authors suggest that the Jokela and the Kauhajoki school shootings should be considered as articulations of the culture of fear.

**Keywords:** school shooting, media disaster, communication, circulation, culture of fear

### **Introduction: School Shooting as a Media Disaster**

In his book *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, John Durham Peters (2000) claims that the ultimate purpose of communication is to unite community and organize common life. Etymologically of the word derives from the Latin verb “to share”. The aim of communication thus is to bridge the gap between self and other, private and public, the internal and the external world. A disaster rips the gap open. Once the common, shared world breaks down, the order changes, creating a need to communicate, a desire to create and organize the common life anew. (cf. Alexander & Jacobs 1998; Rothenbuhler 1998.) In this article we analyse the most recent Finnish school shootings in Jokela (2007) and in Kauhajoki (2008) as communicative events. We examine *how* the media in their various communicative practices organized and re-organized the (media) cultural order disrupted by the shootings. The connection between school shootings and media has been studied widely (see e.g. Muschert 2007; Muschert & Carr 2006; Burns & Crawford 1999; Chyi & McCombs 2004), but the emphasis in international research has largely been on analysing news reporting on the incidents. Studies on the communicative dynamic of the school shootings on the Internet has, instead, been rather scarce (see Muschert 2007; Kellner 2008; Burns & Crawford 1999.) There is moreover a lack of studies interested in larger (media) cultural impacts on school violence. This article is one attempt at a more profound media cultural analysis of the school shootings.

Our research is based on the qualitative media analysis of web-based communication on school shootings. The empirical media material collected as part of the Crisis and Communication research project<sup>1</sup> (see also Hakala 2009). The online material was collected primarily from eleven web sites in the period between November 2007 and February 2009 using various qualitative sampling methods<sup>2</sup>. Sources included the IRC-Gallery (Finnish website/social network frequented by approx. half a million users), MuroBBS website (Finnish discussion forum frequented by computer enthusiasts/Finnish hardware discussion forum) and YouTube and the websites *murha.info* (trans. *murder.info*), *spreerkillers.org*, *respectance.com*, *mahalo.com* and *facebook.com*. Material was also collected from the websites of the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle), MTV 3 Finland and Channel Four Finland, and the online editions of the *Iltaalehti*, *Ilta-Sanomat* (the two Finnish tabloids) and *Helsingin Sanomat* (the largest daily in Finland) newspapers from the first days of the Jokela and Kauhajoki school shootings, 7-8 November, 2007 and 23-24 September 2008. The material also covers compilations on the *yle.fi*, *mtv3.fi*, *nelonen.fi*, *hs.fi*, *iltalehti.fi* and *iltasanomat.fi* websites.

In recent years *mediatization* has become one of the key concepts among media scholars when trying to characterize the communication logic of the contemporary era (see e.g. Hjarvard 2009; Lundby 2009; Livingstone 2009; Couldry 2008). We hear, read and discuss events in and through the media. The media have become overreaching in a society, powerful enough to shape other institutions in the society. This is to say that not only do we experience the world more and more through and in the media, the logic of mediated communication – the media logic – also have the power to influence other institutions such as political, economic, educational, cultural and even religious institutions. With recent developments in digital communication technology and social media, the boundaries between the different media and between the media and other actors have become even more blurred. The Internet has become an increasingly significant source and driver of mediatized communication flows (see e.g. Castells 2009). This was also the case with the Jokela and Kauhajoki shootings. Viewer rating, reader ratings and clicks on the Internet momentarily skyrocketed when news of the school shootings started to travel on the web (Raittila et al. 2008; Hakala 2009; Raittila et al. 2009; Tikka 2009). The Internet offered audiences new opportunities for involvement in the event. News was continuously updated on several online sites and extra radio and TV broadcasts were aired, the mainstream media also invited people to send in material on the event. Internet users sought out material on websites like YouTube, where they also produced their own material, such as sympathy messages. Various network communities (e.g. YouTube) and chat forums (e.g. MuroBBS) were highly activated as a result of the shootings.

The disasters of a media society can justly be termed *media* disasters. The term refers to the central significance and role of media in mediating and thus shaping tragic events. It is the media, as a form and mediator of communication on the one hand and as a communicative space and location on the other that build an event into a disaster. A media disaster invites the audience to follow the media marathon of the disaster coverage (See Liebes 1998; Liebes & Blondheim 2005; Katz & Liebes 2007; Cottle 2006). Previous studies on media disasters have underlined the role and importance of television as a centre of the disasters. However, in the Jokela and Kauhajoki school shootings the disaster was constructed first and foremost through social media on discussion forums such as MuroBBS and IRC-Gallery. Soon after that the first news reports on the shoot-

ings were released on the websites of the mainstream national media, in the *Helsingin Sanomat* daily, in YLE broadcasting company and in the *Ilta-Sanomat* tabloid from where the news reports travelled on, updated into news reports on TV newscasts and in printed form.

News reporting on the Finnish school shootings strongly represents a shift from deadline journalism to online journalism. Among the distinctive features of online journalism are continuous updating and a blurring of the boundaries between the different reporting media. In the heat of the news race, the role of the audience was also highlighted, as “grassroots journalists” produced online material on the disaster or as vernacular images taken by camera phones were widely published in different media as evidence of the event (see e.g. Gillmor 2006; Pantti & Bakker 2009). The boundaries between producer, message and receiver were reshaped and redefined in the school shootings media disasters. (Raittila et al. 2008; Raittila et al. 2009.)

A media disaster is thus constructed in and through mediatised communication. Its key elements are: Mediated message (school shooting); producer of message (shooter, journalist, private individual, authority); technology (means through which the message is produced and received, especially the Web); receiver of the message (viewer, reader, audience); the media industry, which regulates the boundary conditions of producing and sending messages (mainstream media, social media); and of course the context where the disaster occurs (Finnish society, the Web). (cf. Croteau & Hoynes 2003, 25.)

### **Three Perspectives on Communication**

When analysing the communication logic of the school shootings in more detail one can draw on various theoretical traditions. In our article we analyse the school shootings through the classic tripartite transmission of information, constructing a ritual, and dissemination the message, i.e. circulation (Carey 1989; Peters 2000; Pietilä 1997; Hakala & Sumiala-Seppänen 2003; Huhtala & Hakala 2007; Sumiala 2009). When someone sends a message into cyberspace, we are looking at communication as a transmission of information or messages. In the transmission view of communication, the important thing is to send the message as fast and effectively as possible in a space, such as, for example, the Internet (Carey 1989). There are however more aspects to the media disaster than mere transmission or mediation of information.

A media disaster always involves ritual communication, where the purpose is to connect the viewers or readers together. In a time of crisis the need for a community to unite grows. The phenomenon is also recognizable from other disasters that have occurred in the past decade. In Finland attention has been paid to ritual communication in connection, for example, to analyses of the M/S Estonia maritime disaster, the Asian Tsunami and the Konginkangas bus accident, where 23 people were killed (see e.g. Raittila 1996; Huhtala & Hakala 2007; Pantti & Sumiala 2009). The 9/11 disaster in New York and the bombings in London have also given rise to highly visible ritual communication (see e.g. Kitch 2003; Mitchell 2007). According to James Carey, ritual communication is distinctively about uniting, sharing and maintaining a community (Carey 1989). Rather than mediating and disseminating messages in a space, ritual communication in Careyan terms focuses on maintaining a community in time – not through transmission of information but through confirmation of shared beliefs (see also Pietilä 1997,

288). Emotions, especially, or to use Michael Maffesoli's (1995) expression, affective contagions, are of key importance in ritual communication (see also Pantti & Sumiala 2009). However, ritual communication can also have destructive potential, especially in crises, when conflicting communication rituals are activated among various types of communities (see e.g. Sumiala-Seppänen & Stocchetti 2007).

The third view of communication is the so-called dissemination model. Dissemination focuses on communication as a dispersing and spreading of messages in different communication networks. The dissemination is not sender or community oriented communication – instead, attention is paid to processes of promulgating messages and “the soil” in which the message is cultivated (see e.g. Huhtala & Hakala 2007, 33). The father of this line of thinking, John Durham Peters (2000), proposes that, rather than looking at the senders and receivers of the messages, we should examine the different contexts of interpretation where messages are disseminated and received. In the school shootings, the Internet presented itself as the primary context of communication. Messages and images of the school shootings were rarely mediated in one-way communication from sender to recipient. Instead, the messages circulated from one Internet user to another. *Reply* and *Forward* commands called upon users to tell the news to their friends, continue the chain of messages and to invite new users as recipients of messages. Concurrently, the messages of the school shootings were continuously transformed and subject to variation.

Each of the three models explores communication through a certain, delineated point of view. The emphasis may be on the actual sending of the message, as in the transmission model; on the tasks and community impacts of the communication, as in the ritual model; or on the dispersion of the messages, as in the dissemination model. If the aim is to understand media disasters as communicative events, one perspective is not enough. One must seek out a synthesis, endeavour to understand communication by combining the different models. Only then is it possible to try to gain an overall view on *how* a media disaster was constructed in the school shootings, or how different mediated communication environments and spaces shaped, and continue to reshape, the media disaster constructed in communication.

### **School Shooting Messages Mediated Online**

When online communication on the Jokela and Kauhajoki shootings is viewed through the transmission model, attention is drawn to a) the senders of the messages; b) the conditions and frameworks of sending the messages; and c) the messages themselves, in other words, what is communicated about the shootings. As a mediator of messages the Internet opens up entirely new opportunities for the senders of messages in a situation where a single click can reach a vast number of visitors almost in real time, in theory, at least. New communication technologies have more clearly than ever freed the sender from the restrictions of time and place. On the Internet, the messenger reaches the audience wirelessly practically anywhere, anytime. Thus the Internet molds the conception of the sender – who can send messages on a school shooting. The aspect of the sender is important, since it links to a question of the content of the message, which is essential in communicating information. Who sends what messages? Or which sender's message can be trusted at a time of a disaster? (See also McNair 2006).

A distinctive feature of communication on the Jokela and Kauhajoki school shootings was that both shooters were active senders of messages themselves, specifically on the Internet. According to the diary entries of the Jokela shooter, he started to plan the shooting by the latest in March 2007, six months before he carried it out. Around that time, he registered with various online communities under the usernames *Sturmgeist* and *NaturalSelceter89*. The shooter voiced his political and ideological opinions in the IRC-Gallery's *Eric Harris & Dylan Klebold* chat community named after the shooters in the Columbine school massacre and produced various videos for YouTube. Right before setting out for school on 7 November 2007 the shooter downloaded a video entitled *Jokela High School Massacre* into YouTube and included a link to a package containing extra material. He also posted a message "Today history is made" in IRC-Gallery. After sending these messages, he switched his computer off on November 7<sup>th</sup> at 11.28 a.m. and set for the school to shoot the headmaster, nurse, six students and himself (National Bureau of Investigation (KRP) 2008).

The online history of the Kauhajoki shooter shows that he used, for example, the usernames *Wumpscut86* and *Mr. Saari*. He registered with IRC-Gallery in December 2004 and with YouTube in mid-March 2008. In the course of 2008, the images of the young man smiling at the camera changed into profile photos taken at a shooting range and eventually into a video where the man shoots at the camera. The shooter posted the first photos hinting at the shooting in IRC-Gallery in August 2008. Ten days after the first posting, the shooter downloaded a picture of his weapon into IRC-Gallery, entitled *Pity for majority?* At the end of August pictures appeared in IRC-Gallery featuring the man firing his weapon at a shooting range and posing for the camera with his weapon. On Wednesday 17 September 2008 he again added two more gunman photos of himself into his gallery. During September the Kauhajoki shooter downloaded four shooting videos into YouTube, the last ones on 18 September 2008, on the Thursday of the week before the shooting. The videos feature the man firing his weapon in a place that looks like a shooting range. On the day of the shooting, Tuesday, 23 September 2008, the Kauhajoki shooter logged on to IRC-Gallery and posted three more photos in which he points the weapon at the camera. At 10.15 a.m. he included a link to his *Massacre in Kauhajoki* file package which contained the videos *You will die next*, *Goodbye* and *Me and my Walther* as well as an aerial shot of the school complex and photos of him aiming the weapon at the viewer. He began shooting in the school complex at around 10.46. The emergency response centre was notified of a fire and the shooting at 10.47. The killer shot altogether 10 people, students and one teacher. Finally he shot himself and died of his injuries on the evening of that day at 17.40. Even though the actual shootings took place in the schools in Jokela and Kauhajoki, it must be acknowledged that both shooters started their actions on the Internet already before the actual events took place – by communicating messages of their plans. The way in which the shooters communicated online is not unique. A number of international studies on school shootings have shown that for many of the studied shooters the Internet played an important role in preparing for the shootings (see e.g. Kellner 2008).

Alongside the shooters, the users of social media are also active mediators of communication on the shootings. By social media we refer to various practices and contents connected to the Internet that are produced by the users. Social media cover, for example, (1) content production and publishing (blogs, podcasts); (2) content sharing (YouTube,

Filecabi.net); (3) social community services (Facebook, IRC-Gallery); (4) collaboratively produced online services (Wikipedia, Wiktionary, Wikinews); (5) virtual worlds (Habbo Hotel, WOW); and (6) various social media add-ons, such as Slide and Friends for Sale. (Lietsala & Sirkkunen 2008, 17-18; Seeck et al. 2008; Hakala 2009.)

The course of the school shooting messages can be depicted as follows:

Events in Jokela 7 November 2007	Events in Kauhajoki 23 September 2008
11.13-11.23 Pekka-Eric Auvinen sends his last messages online and edits the suicide note for his family.	10.13-10.15 Shooter downloads three photos into IRC-Gallery in which he aims a weapon at the camera. Shooter posts a link in IRC-Gallery to a file package on a Rapidshare server.
11.28 Auvinen turns off his computer and cycles to the Jokela School Center	Approx. 10.30 Shooter arrives in the Kauhajoki School of Hospitality, armed and wearing a ski mask.
11.42 Auvinen shoots his first victim.	10.40 Shooter opens fire in a classroom where the students are doing an exam.
11.43 The first call is made to the regional emergency response centre on the shooting.	10.43 The first call is made to the regional emergency response center.
11.53 First message in the MuroBBS chat forum on the shooting.	11.13 Reference to shooting in the MuroBBS chat forum.
12.29 Shooter's last message in IRC-Gallery was associated with the shooting.	11.17 Reference to shooting in Murha.info chat room.
13.04 Three photos of the Jokela shooter were linked to chats in MuroBBS.	11.24 The YouTube videos by username Wumpscut86 are associated with the Kauhajoki shooter in the MuroBBS chat forum.

In the major Finnish media houses, YLE (Finnish Public Broadcasting Company), MTV 3 (the largest commercial broadcasting company), Helsingin Sanomat (the largest daily of the country), Ilta-Sanomat and Iltalehti (the two tabloid papers in Finland), the media disaster was also constructed largely online. The news spreading on the Internet and from the Internet to other media was: who killed, where, and how many people? Information was updated minute by minute. The urgency also led to errors in the reporting. With the Jokela school shooting, the first report was published by the Helsingin Sanomat newspaper on its website at 12.16 p.m., 23 minutes after MuroBBS. The Jokela school was mistakenly located in the Vantaa area. The next to report the shooting was the Ilta-Sanomat tabloid at 12.21. The first reports from Kauhajoki came from YLE and Ilta-Sanomat on their websites at 11.19 a.m. A telegram from the Finnish News Agency (STT) reported on 23 September 2008 that "Users are already guessing at the identity of the Kauhava shooter". The mistake was passed on in the Internet, four minutes later the name of the town Kauhajoki changed into Kauhava, also in a Helsingin Sanomat news release from the Finnish News Agency.

When the Jokela and Kauhajoki school shootings are viewed from the perspective of transmission of messages, attention falls on Laswell's classic formulation of the communication process, i.e. who says what to whom in what channel with what effect (see also Pietilä 1997, 163). Messages of the Jokela and Kauhajoki school shootings were

transmitted and mediated online through various paths, where they cruised and were updated. The direction of transmission was from social media to the online versions of the mainstream media. Serving as senders on the Internet were the shooters, anonymous users, professional journalists and authorities alike. The question was what sources to rely on. Especially in the Jokela case the key source of information was the shooter himself. The material he produced was voluminous. He had downloaded numbers of videos on his websites in which he fantasized about the shooting. The material was skillfully realized and the format itself well suited for presentation in different media. It seemed as if it had been written as part of the script of a media disaster (Hakala 2009).

## **Communities Communicate**

In order to understand the construction of the media disaster, it is important to examine how the messages were transmitted and who the sender/s was/were. An analysis of the transmission of a message is not enough. To be able to close a gap, organize social life and build a new connection in a broken reality, messages have to be alive and influential. They have to awaken emotions and reactions in the audience, create community. When we view communication on the school shootings through the ritual model, we come to analyse what kind of communality the school shootings gave rise to online and what kind of ritual communication these communities involved.

Howard Rheingold (1993), one of the pioneers of research on online communities has defined virtual community as follows: “virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human emotion, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” (Rheingold 1993, 5). In Charles Taylor’s (2004) terms, virtual communities can in fact be regarded as modern social imaginaries. They cannot be physically perceived, but they have social momentum (see also Fornäs 1999, 46-47; Matikainen 2006, 117). The shooters in Kauhajoki and Jokela were both members of various virtual communities themselves. They had registered with, for example, YouTube, IRC-gallery, Suomi24 (Finland’s largest online community) and Battlefield 2. In these imaginary communities the users appear as residents rather than visitors (cf. for example Prensky 2001). The shooters built up their online identity and participation, sought out contact with likeminded users and engaged in social relationships in the virtual communities (cf. Turkle 1995; Rheingold 2003).

Communities that idealize school shootings and the shooters are commonly called hate communities or hate groups. The terms refer to a variety of virtual communities that share a common hatred or anger regarding a given phenomenon or issue. The cause of hatred is often race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender (Duffy 2003, 292). The attitudes towards the objects of hatred that are revealed in the representation vary in the communities, ranging from ironic comments to insults bordering on libel. The *Eric Harris & Dylan Klebold* community, named after the Columbine shooters, gained publicity as a hate community when the online history of the Jokela shooter was investigated. The hostility of the *Harris & Klebold* community is not directed at the shooters but at the surrounding world, which the shooters regarded with aggressive arrogance. The community’s cohesive force is identification with the Columbine shooters and their actions. Another example of a school shooting community, which is not categorized a

hate community per se, is a website called *Competitive Spree Killers Organization*. The Kauhajoki shooter was ranked 36<sup>th</sup> on this site soon after the shooting. The site ranks mass killers in an order based on number of victims and provides links to English-language Wikipedia articles on related events. The list can be seen as a kind of “hall of fame” of spree killers. It iconizes shooters and joins them in a chain of past killers.

With the school shootings, not only anger but also grief and shock created social bonds and communality. Following both the Jokela and the Kauhajoki shootings, various grieving groups were activated on the Internet. Groups commemorating the victims were established after both incidents in IRC-Gallery and Facebook. In the Kauhajoki case, the first Facebook group was already set up on the day of the shooting at 12.48 (ITViikko 23 September 2008). The group was called *Light a candle for the victims of Kauhajoki school massacre*, and five months after the incident it still had 46000 members. There has been close to 30 similar groups on Facebook, but they have considerably fewer members than the first group (Facebook, viewed 19 January 2009). *Respectance.com* also hosts the sites *Tuusula Victims Tribute* and *Finland School Shooting*, where users can post their condolences regarding the Jokela and Kauhajoki shootings.

Our interpretation is that it was compassion for the victims of the school shootings and their families that served as a binding glue in the grief communities. The Internet provides opportunities to share the experience in many ways. A number of different virtual pilgrimage sites were, for example, created where anyone could leave their condolences, light a candle or sign a condolence letter. Memorial videos could be made for YouTube. Pilgrimage sites also sprang up at the physical locations of the shootings, outside the Jokela school, in the Tuusula churchyard and outside the Kauhajoki school complex. Pictures of seas of candles, flowers, stuffed animals and obituaries spread in the broadcasts and on the pages of mainstream media. In a media disaster the rituals of mourning are transferred and dispersed from one medium to the other containing and following a logic that is very consistent with, for example, that observed in the Columbine school shooting (see e.g. Grider 2007; Fast 2003).

Users of the Internet have a need also to share their thoughts and feelings provoked by an incident in discussion. Various online discussion forums, such as Suomi24, offered room and a space for these expressions. This type of communication could be characterized as therapeutic. Therapeutic virtual communication also has ritual functions that hold the community together. It is about culturally shared expression where individuals (users) are invited to open up and share their personal problems (depression and confusion caused by the shootings) with others so that they can cope with life after the tragedy. (cf. White 1992; Furedi 2004; Sumiala-Seppänen 2007). Online crisis support for young people could also be characterized as therapeutic communication. In chat rooms young people were able to discuss issues with trained moderators and each other. Following both Finnish school shootings, the *Save the Children Finland (Pelastaa lapset)* organization set up crisis chat rooms in cooperation with IRC-Gallery and Suomi24. Before these, chat rooms had also been set up in connection with the Konginkangas bus accident and the Asian Tsunami (Huhtala & Hakala 2007).

Emerging as the fourth manifestation of virtual communication were, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the web editions of the conventional newspapers and electronic media (hs.fi, MTV3.fi, yle.fi). These websites also invited users to participate in the reconstruction of the event, post comments and send in material, such as photos and messages.



This type of interactive communication between traditional media and Internet users can also be analysed from the perspective of ritual communication. The community that is at stake here are the media themselves. We propose that in this type of activity the primary objective is to strengthen the bond between the media and their consumers. The media are transformed from the role of mediator into being the very hub of events. At stake is a dynamics tightly linked to the media society. Media sociologist Nick Couldry (2003) calls this type of activity the construction of a myth of a centre. The myth speaks of a functional logic in which the media through their different practices reinforce the notion of their own significance as a centre of events.

The school shootings activated ritual communication on the Internet on a very diverse scale. Communitality, social bonds and the sense of togetherness were constructed on the basis of identifying with the victims and sharing a common feeling of grief and shock, or in some cases, through an admiration for the shooters and their actions. The sharing of grief and shock was often channelled into symbolic action, which could be termed media ritualistic behaviour (cf. Couldry 2003; Cottle 2006). In hate communities identification with the killers and hatred towards the surrounding society are the adhesive glue. The members can connect with others who share their views and find support for their ideas among the likeminded members of the community. In hate communities, too, symbols, such as photos of and writing on past school shooters have a decisive role in constructing and maintaining the community. The third form of ritual communication, therapeutic communication, was produced not only by individuals engaging in online discussion but also by different non-governmental actors, such as the *Save the Children Finland* organization, which invited young people to express their feelings in interaction with adults. The principal objective of crisis support for young people is to strengthen a sense of security in a frightening situation. What all these manifestations of ritual communication connected with the school shootings have in common is that they were born of and held together by a need to mediate and share emotions (see also Pantti & Sumiala 2009).

When studying the media disaster's communal functions on the Internet, it is important to note that the produced communitality is very heterogeneous and complex. Many different social forces may be at work within one and the same virtual community. The force that may keep one group together can be felt as a threat by another. The level of communitality also varies between the different communities. Some virtual communities born around the school shootings were closer and more permanent than others, in some the communitality was decidedly temporary. New virtual communities are born and die all the time. It is difficult to predict what kind of social imaginaries the virtual communities created and strengthened by a disaster will produce, do they stimulate violence or mourning, identification with the killers or with the victims. It is even more difficult foresee what kind of impacts the virtual communities have locally – for example in Jokela or Kauhajoki – or nationally – in Finland – not to mention the global impacts of the events. Do the communities by their very existence increase cultural models that idealize school shootings and shooters, or are they more likely to produce opposition to violence, which, when called upon, is activated in online communities as collective action? It is our firm conviction that the school shootings de facto create communal action both online and in the physical world, locally, nationally and globally. What kind social bonds in terms of type and level of attachment they strengthen and maintain is a question for which there are many answers, not one.

## Messages Circulate

The messages disseminated online spread principally through circulation (Appadurai 2006; Lee & LiPuma 2002; Sumiala 2008). The school shooting messages gained new significance as they were related to previous school shootings and discussions on them (see also Spitulnik 1997, 161). At the same time, they shaped and continue to shape interpretations of future events. The photos and material of the Kauhajoki shooter were quickly connected on the Internet to material on the Jokela school shooter, and mirrored against it. The photos of the Jokela shooter, in turn, were compared to the gun-wielding photos of the shooter at Virginia Tech. The photos of the shooters were circulated alongside one another. And this is hardly a thing of the past. A fresh example of the circulation effect can be found in news reporting on the school shooting in Winnenden, Germany on 11 March 2009. The Jokela and Kauhajoki cases were immediately referred to in news reporting on the Winnenden shooting<sup>3</sup>. The shootings in Finland have also fallen into a hierarchical relationship with each other. The material left behind by the Jokela shooter was much more abundant, in both image and text, than that of the Kauhajoki shooter. Consequently, the Kauhajoki school shooting was compared on the Internet (and in other media, such as the first news broadcasts by YLE and MTV3) to the Jokela school shooting in numerous respects. Common features described included the killer's gender, appearance, style of clothing, hairstyle, past, calibre of the weapon, place where the weapon was purchased, mode of operation, media package posted on the Internet, videos, idealistic misanthropy, and style of music.

## Media Disaster in a Culture of Fear

To summarize, it is the endless circulation of texts and images on the Internet that distinguishes the school shootings as communicative events – as Finnish media disasters of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is difficult to determine a clear beginning or end to the events. The killers began to circulate messages long before the actual shootings. The messages which have been removed from the Internet keep reappearing there. Despite the fact that servers have closed down the online profiles and pages of the shooters, they can still be tracked and traced on the Internet. Active members of online communities and online media had enough time to download and save the shooters' online material before it was removed. Screenshots of the shooters' profiles in IRC-Gallery and YouTube accounts as well as their videos and photos are still in circulation on the Internet. The circulating online material on the shootings still offers abundant basis for, for example, creating new videos on school shootings, disseminating them and further modifying them. The material is commented on, reworked and displayed in various contexts. While in the era of television media disasters could be approached linearly, with a perceived beginning, middle and end, the media disasters of the network society are characterized by cyclicity and endless circulation (see e.g. Liebes 1998).

Dissemination, and circulation as its specific form, seems on the basis of our data to be the most prevailing logic of communication with the Jokela and Kauhajoki school shootings. One can surmise that the circulation subsumes, as a kind of meta-level, the two other formerly described forms of communication. Messages are mediated and ritualized in communities expressly due to and as a result of circulation. Although the news peak has passed and the mainstream media stir has subsided, the Finnish school shoot-

ings still continue a life of their own on the Internet. Communication is not innocent, let alone inconsequential. Continuous circulation and repetition model the school shootings as cultural phenomena. By copying, repeating and “recycling” the shooting material it is possible to carry out new school shootings anywhere in the world. Hate communities invite idealization of death, since the circulation and remakes of the shooters’ photos and videos offer them unprecedented immortality. The promise of post mortem fame is very much alive on the Internet.

At the beginning of the article we made reference to John Durham Peters (2000, 2) and his idea that there is always more to understanding communication. By analysing the school shootings as a communicative event, we find ourselves at the same time analysing the construction of the event itself. The Jokela and Kauhajoki school shootings were communicative events at the core of which were the circulation of messages on the Internet. Out of this dynamic a media disaster was born in the both cases. Also, we are inclined to believe that the never-ending circulation of material on the shootings will feed fear and insecurity in its environment. According to the sociologist Frank Furedi (2006) a characteristic of the culture of fear is that, instead of hope, the cultural imagination today is increasingly shaped and accelerated by different representations of fear and hatred circulating in the media. It is a question of a shared imaginary threat, a feeling of insecurity and fear that culminates in into media disasters. There is no defence against it, nor escape from it, because it cannot be directly confronted – it mostly appears only in mediated form, in the media. For Furedi and many other cultural and social analysts, today’s culture of fear is an expression of misanthropy that alienates people from one another. (Furedi 2006, xiv-xxi; see e.g. Altheide 2002; Bauman 2006; Appadurai 2006; Furedi 2006, Butler 2003; Žižek 2008). The school shootings could, or should we say should, be interpreted as a part of this culture as an articulation of its aversions and anxieties.

## Notes

1. The authors are members of the Crisis and Communication research project. It is a two-year (2007-2009) study of the greatest crises that Finland has faced in recent times: the Asian tsunami, the Jokela and Kauhajoki school shootings, and a water contamination crisis in the town of Nokia. The project is carried out by the Communication Research Center at the Department of Communication of the University of Helsinki. The article aims to shed light on the development of the theoretical themes of the research project, especially in the context of the Internet.
2. These sites were visited at least once during data collection.
3. <http://www.mtv3.fi/uutiset/arkisto.shtml/arkistot/kotimaa/2009/03/836349>. Viewed 2 April 2009.

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