

American Reporting of School Violence and ‘People Like Us’: A Comparison of Newspaper Coverage of the Columbine and Red Lake School Shootings

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Abstract

The 1999 shootings at Columbine High School received saturation coverage by the American media. How did newspaper reporting of the 2005 Red Lake Indian Reservation School shootings, the largest school killing since Columbine, compare with the press’s representations of Columbine? In this article we perform a qualitative content analysis of three newspapers (*The New York Times* as the national paper of record, and local papers in the communities in which the events occurred) over a two-week period following each event. We found that the reporting of Columbine and Red Lake differed in terms of quantity, content, and form. Columbine was immediately marked with social significance and became a national story while Red Lake received significantly less coverage, mostly local. Red Lake reporting was explicitly raced and classed while the prominent role of race and gender in the Columbine killings was largely ignored by local and national media.

Keywords

collective memory, Columbine shootings, journalism, Red Lake shootings, school violence

Introduction

As you may recall, when the Columbine High School shootings occurred in April 1999 there seemed to be no other news story (even despite major bombings in Kosovo that same day). Journalists seemed to make certain that Columbine quickly captured the public’s imagination by signifying its historic ‘turning-point’ quality with leads like ‘Massacre at Columbine’ and ‘Terror in the Rockies’, covering the story on a 24-hour news loop referred to as ‘saturation coverage’, and filling newspapers with Columbine stories (and related stories). It was

therefore surprising that when the 2005 Red Lake school shooting occurred, the largest school shooting after Columbine, it seemed to receive very little national coverage. As the public learns about major events from journalists (their significance, consequences, political implications, ascribed social meanings, and so forth) it is important to comparatively examine the reporting of these two similar American events. In order to understand and situate news reporting of these events such reporting needs to be explored in the context of journalists' role in the construction of national collective memory.

Newspaper reporting is a part of collective memory practices in the modern era. For example, events reported as historically significant may become a part of public consciousness and a light-post in the nation's view of its own past. As newspaper reporting is a part of this larger cultural process we are working from a collective memory framework and begin with a brief review of the literature.

Collective Memory and Newspaper Reporting of 'Traumatic' Events

All societies engage in culturally and historically specific practices of collective memory. These are normal interpretive practices through which a society gives meaning to current events while negotiating national identity. Due to ritualized collective memory efforts every society also has cultural memories of national events. These memories become materialized through the representations, which also help construct them, and are later active in recollection and remembrance (Leavy, 2007a). A collective or national memory is not 'natural' or existent only in the minds of some individuals, but is rather the result of social processes that result in material forms outside of the human subject. Schudson (1992: 3) defines collective memory as: 'social memory, referring to the ways in which group, institutional, and cultural recollections of the past shape people's actions in the present.'

Collective memory is socially important because it influences how people use the past in the present to make sense of current events. Collective memory practices result in a repository of shared cultural images, narratives, and ideas about the past. The term 'shared' does not imply consensus because national collective memory is a site of contradictions, resistance, and social struggles over meaning (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994; Sturken, 1997, 2002). Particular collective memories can be 'activated' by interested parties for their own political purposes making initial memory construction integral to the political appropriation of events (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994; Leavy, 2007a, 2007b). Moreover, practices of collective memory may also play an active role in shaping the larger socio-political context with respect to historically specific conceptions of race, class, gender, and national identity. In this regard Amy Fried (2006) defines the term collective memory as follows:

By collective memory, I mean group understandings of the past and activities that support such conceptions ... Collective memories are politically consequential because they provide a key source of identity and meaning and do so in a way that privileges certain values and ideologies and legitimizes particular political positions (2006: 388).

It was during print culture that history became intertwined with collective memory (Hutton, 1993). Technologies of print culture, such as the printing press, allowed for the creation of 'records' of current events that could be reproduced and disseminated to the masses. This resulted in a temporally ordered form of knowledge about the past; a chronology of what happened. One of the most common 'records' of events became newspapers with journalists, editors, and publishers at the forefront of collective memory practices. Print culture textualized memory but it also contextualized it through chronological 'records' available and *intended* for future reference (Hutton, 1993). The historicizing of collective memory also transformed history into a product. The news was to be packaged as all other commodities. Newsmakers became integral to the packaging and selling of collective memory. In contemporary American society collective memory practices often begin with the press and result in a repository of widely consumed images and narratives. Bellah et al. (1985) explain that the press has a significant role in creating 'communities of memory.' In this context the press often use events as focal points for memory practices because events present a historical point through which a society can represent and interpret itself (Schudson, 1992). Journalists often have a more significant role in shaping images of the past than historians (Zerubavel, 1995: 5).

When deciding which events will become the focal point for journalistic memory practices 'hot moments' or 'critical incidents' are sought (Zelizer, 1992: 4) for their perceived journalistic and commercial value (Zelizer, 1992). These are events that are perceived or constructed as socially significant (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994) and may even represent a 'turning-point' for the society. Neal (1998) explains that events easily labeled as 'national traumas' are likely subjects for this kind of memory work. These events (such as September 11th or the Oklahoma City Bombing) are social disruptions and therefore their 'newsworthiness' seems natural and is likely to go unquestioned. This becomes important when we consider, for example, the apparent naturalness of covering the Columbine school shootings on a 24-hour news loop while the Kosovo bombings that day received minimal coverage in runners at the bottom of television screens. As we will see, by defining an event like Columbine as a national trauma of historic significance, this kind of 'choice' appears to be natural. Collective memory scholarship, however, makes a compelling argument that there is nothing natural about the labeling of events as 'traumatic'. In his work about cultural trauma and collective identity Alexander (2003: 86) posits trauma is constructed by society. He writes that the experience of trauma 'can be understood as a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences' (2003: 103). Based on the research presented in this article we argue that Columbine was constructed as a national trauma and Red Lake was not, and we present a range of factors that suggest this distinction is not a result of the 'inherent' quality of either event.

Additionally, the social historical context in which an event occurs influences the extent to which a particular event will be focused on. When analyzing interpretations of the 1912 sinking of the *Titanic* Biel (1997) explains it is necessary to look at 'simultaneity' or 'synchronicity.' In other words, what else is going on when the event occurs? What news stories override the current event, or, are placed on the backburner as a result of the

event? For example, both the Columbine and Red Lake shootings occurred during a war (Kosovo and Iraq respectively) which warrants consideration. Furthermore, how does the immediate historical context impact the event's potential value as a political platform for organized special interest groups?

In order to understand the selection of 'traumatic' events and subsequent narrative forms used it is necessary to look at the institutional backdrop against which American journalists operate. Journalists are trained to disavow feelings of human compassion and avoid 'becoming' the story through self-identification (Brooks et al., 1996). Furthermore, the questions that journalists pursue provide a framework for their stories, but such lines of inquiry already hold built-in assumptions about how stories are supposed to be narrated (Manoff and Schudson, 1986). Journalists are trained to write in a particular format and that unfolding disaster stories may be *'the story'* of the time because they have prolonged audience interest and can be written and rewritten from many angles including 'human interest' pieces that may accompany larger 'substantive' pieces (Brooks et al., 1996). Giving a story a 'human face' is critical in the media age because it engages people on an emotional level (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994). Part of the course in a commercial enterprise the press are trained to 'hook' readers and this demands going beyond the 'who, what, where and when'. Finally, while reporters are often publicly held accountable for the content of their stories, they operate behind a line of editors and a publisher who greatly influences what will make the news, what the top stories will be, and what the form and content of any particular narrative will be.

Journalists appropriate certain frames to make their stories convincing – to capture the public's imagination (Binder, 1993). Beyond commercial considerations, which are generally made by editors and publishers, journalists have a vested interest in whether or not the public buys their version of social reality as they use world events to legitimize their authority as the major interpretive community within the society (Zelizer, 1992). Journalists authenticate themselves and their profession through the canonization of significant moments in American history (Zelizer, 1992). In fact, despite professional notions of objectivity half of all journalists openly maintain that their interpretive role is significant (Winfield et al., 2002). In order to create and sustain their 'journalistic authority', journalists produce compelling event narratives for mass consumption.

Event reporting is a narrative process. As any other type of storytelling, journalism has its own assumptions and standard practices (Manoff and Schudson, 1986). The press constructs a narrative about particular events in order to report, explain and contextualize what is happening:

narratives are stories about the unfolding of events ... they reveal something about the motivations and reactions of the parties sometimes explicitly and sometimes indirectly ... narratives make emotionally significant connections across time periods through the culturally significant images and metaphors they invoke (Ross, 2002: 304).

Narrative is the technique by which collective memory is initially created and meaning is conveyed within the press (Brockmeier, 2002). '[M]emory and history are concepts,

while objects and narratives are forms for expressing or distilling concepts.’ (Peacock, 2002: 961) Not just any narrative form will necessarily capture the public’s interest so considerations are made. In the end, journalists concerned with commercial value, institutional constraints, and self-legitimizing their profession ultimately aim to tell a story that resonates with cultural beliefs and assumptions (Leavy, 2007a, 2007b; Schudson, 1992). In order to make the story meaningful to citizens, key characters are also an important part of the narrative and so a ‘human face’ is critical.

Given the conditions under which journalists operate we are interested in how ‘like events’ have been represented at both the national and local level.

Research Methodology

For this project we examined newspaper coverage of the Columbine shootings and the Red Lake shootings for two weeks following each event in three newspapers: *The New York Times* (as the national paper of record), *The Denver Post* (as the major Colorado newspaper local to Columbine), and the *Star Tribune* (as the major Minnesota newspaper local to Red Lake). The newspapers were also analyzed on the day before each event in order to get a sense of the top news stories, and the print news landscape in general, immediately prior to the event. A qualitative content analysis of the newspaper coverage was conducted, allowing code categories to develop inductively during analysis.

First we examined each newspaper in its entirety in order to assess the amount of overall coverage and placement of articles (including non-related articles they were juxtaposed to). Next we determined our unit of analysis to be individual articles and collected all of the articles about the events. We define an article about the event as an article that mentions it, even once. Cartoons and illustrations representing the events were included and coded. The primary author coded all of the Columbine newspaper coverage and the second author coded the Red Lake newspaper coverage. As the code categories developed inductively each researcher created her own code list and the two were later compared (and were found to be almost identical in terms of thematic coverage). Our analysis reflects a comparison of how the different newspapers covered the most prevalent themes.

Prior to beginning the coding process we discussed our expectations. Our main hypotheses were:

- (1) The Columbine High School shooting would receive more national coverage than Red Lake.
- (2) The Red Lake and Columbine High School shootings would be portrayed differently in the three newspapers (*The New York Times*, *Star Tribune*, *Denver Post*).
- (3) There would be more of an explicit focus on race and social class in the Red Lake reporting than in the Columbine reporting.
- (4) There would be similar themes conveyed in the Columbine and Red Lake reporting, but the Columbine coverage would be more directly infused with political agendas than would Red Lake representations.

Overall, we wanted to determine the major themes in the reporting of each event and comparisons within themes across events (similarities and differences). Furthermore, we added a dimension of local versus national coverage in relation to the aforementioned goals, particularly because national coverage is an indicator that an event is viewed as nationally significant.

Analysis shows that there are two dimensions to the reporting of these events. The first is the initial press coverage, which may or may not mark the event with social significance. As we suspected, initial press coverage did mark Columbine with historic significance but did not mark Red Lake in the same manner. The second involves the social and political themes embedded within reports which bore similarities and differences in our study. Accordingly, we present our analysis in two sections with sub-categories as appropriate.

Event Timeline

On 20 April 1999, the anniversary of Adolph Hitler's birthday, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris each arrived at Columbine High School at 11:10am. They told one student to leave because they liked him (<http://www.portalofdallas.com/columbine/Columbine%20Time%20Line.htm>). After 11:14 Harris and Klebold brought two duffel bags of explosives into the school and left them next to two lunch tables in the Cafeteria just before the first lunch was scheduled to begin. They set timers to 11:17, a time when the maximum number of students would be localized there. The two gunmen returned to their cars and waited for the explosions, which failed.

At 11:19 a local caller reported an explosion to the Jefferson County Dispatch office. This explosion was later determined to be a diversion. The sheriff and fire department were called into action.

Between 11:19 and 11:23 Harris and Klebold began their assault on the school from the top of a west side staircase (the highest point on the school grounds). The two gunmen killed one student and wounded another. At 11:23, the first 911 call was made from Columbine.

The shooters continued shooting students while throwing explosive devices up onto the roof. Harris and Klebold entered the school on the west side and shot at a student and a teacher, both ultimately survived. One police officer arrived at Columbine at 11:24 and exchanged gunfire with Harris. At 11:26, Harris and Klebold continued through the school shooting students and then entered the library hallway. They continued throwing pipe bombs. Between 11:29 and 11:36 Harris and Klebold entered the library and began to shoot students. In their racialized attack one African-American student was called 'nigger' and fatally shot. During this time, 10 people were killed and 12 were wounded.

Between 11:36 and 11:44 the two gunmen returned to the hall and traveled towards the science hallway. They again placed pipe bombs around the halls. The pair then went down to the cafeteria at 11:44. While in the cafeteria, the two unsuccessfully attempted to explode the bombs they had placed there earlier. They moved after two minutes and some of the bombs partially detonated.

At 11:47, Denver's KMGH-TV Channel 7 announced that there had been gunshots reported at Columbine High School. The gunmen moved back towards the kitchen. At 11:59 they left this area and it was sometime after 11:59 that Harris and Klebold turned the guns on themselves. In total, 15 people were killed (including the two gunmen) and 23 were wounded (http://www.columbine-angels.com/School_Violence_Stats.htm). Their diaries later confirmed that the attack was planned for the anniversary of Hitler's birthday to pay homage to Hitler, whom they admired.

On 21 March 2005 before 2:55pm, Jeff Weise traveled to his grandfather Daryl Lussier's home, who was also a Red Lake police officer. He killed both Lussier and Michelle Sigana (Lussier's girlfriend). Weise reportedly then stole guns, ammunition, a vest, and Lussier's police car, and traveled to Red Lake High School. Before 2:55, Weise killed an unarmed security guard outside of the school and at 2:55 911 was notified about the unfolding events. Once inside the school, Weise chased a number of students through the halls, shooting. He followed some students and a teacher into a classroom. He killed the teacher and five students and wounded several others. After leaving the classroom, Weise traveled down the halls and shot at doors until he encountered a police officer, who returned his fire. Weise then returned to the first classroom and shot himself. At that point, seven students were taken to hospitals (Friedman and Thomas, 2005). In total, ten people were killed and five were injured (http://www.columbine-angels.com/School_Violence_Stats.htm)

Initial Press Coverage

The press ultimately constructed Columbine as a significant event and did not do so in the case of Red Lake. Furthermore, Columbine was an ever-present national story while Red Lake was primarily a local story with minimal national coverage. In order to understand this disparity it is imperative to look at several facets of the initial press coverage in addition to overall themes in reporting.

At 11:47am on 20 April 1999, the first news-station learned of the events unfolding at Columbine. Soon after, a barrage of news cameras and reporters traveled to the school to capture the deadliest school shooting in America's history (up to that point). From 11:47am on the day of the event, and for many days after, Columbine received saturation coverage via a loop of images depicting the scene of the shootings. The abundance of early Columbine images is integral to how that event was constructed as a trauma in Alexander's (2003) terms, also being important to the public's shared memory of the event as during times labeled national crises the first images stick (Leavy, 2007a). The two most infamous images include students running outside of the building with their hands on their heads and a bloody boy dangling from a broken window (Leavy, 2007a). These iconic images came to represent not only Columbine but school violence in the USA (Leavy, 2007a). However, in the aftermath of the Red Lake Indian Reservation shooting, there were no cameras, no live images, no news anchors. In fact, we have no real-time moving images from the deadly scene at this high school shooting. As a result

Red Lake did not produce the iconic images that are central to the construction of collective memory. The saturation coverage Columbine received itself marked the event with social significance. This kind of incessant coverage affords the event a 'turning point' quality which signifies social change (Dayan and Katz, 1992; Leavy, 2007a) and suggests a process of 'periodization' is occurring, where national memory is marked with the idea of 'before and after' the event (Leavy, 2007b; Zerubavel, 1995).

Some attribute the difference in coverage to the distance of Red Lake from any major city, the restrictions placed on the media by the officials of the Reservation, and the relative lack of interest in school shootings at the time. One reporter supported these claims as follows: 'Compared with Columbine, Red Lake took longer to reach, granted less access to reporters, produced weaker video images, suffered fewer casualties and occurred after the horror of school shootings has become more common.' (Black, 2005: 18A.)

When analyzing differential reporting consider that two major differences between the Columbine shooting and the Red Lake shooting are race and social class, two categories that played a large role in the reporting of both events (and in the event itself in the case of Columbine). While Klebold and Harris were both white males, from a middle-upper class suburb, Jeff Weise was a Native American, from a poverty-stricken Indian reservation. In fact, the same reporter who noted the distance as a factor for the disparity in media coverage, also illuminated the differences in race and socioeconomic status, stating that Littleton 'is full of what we call PLU, "People Like Us"' (Black, 2005: 18A). We believe one reason why the Red Lake School shooting received less live coverage, produced no moving images, and was relatively unknown by the larger society, is because it occurred in a non-white, low income community, which, as such, is not classified as a 'PLU' community. This of course implies that the news is reported with white, middle and upper class American citizens as the target audience, a deeply disturbing prospect. We suggest that our study indicates there is implicit racism and classism in American journalistic practice. Although this claim in and of itself is not surprising, our linkage to collective memory highlights an often hidden dimension of collective memory. Media scholars/activists Sut Jhally and Jackson Katz (1999) argue that dominant categories such as white, middle class, and male are often ignored by journalists thus rendering members of the dominant group invisible. As our research is grounded in collective memory research, and within that context we argue journalistic practice is an integral part of establishing a national memory – a constituent component of national identity – the implicit racism, classism, and sexism evidenced in our research has implications for how majority groups are positioned with respect to the collective memory dimension of nation-building.

There was a stark difference in total national newspaper coverage of Columbine and Red Lake. After the Columbine School shooting, the *New York Times* ran eight front page stories in the first four days following the event (Black, 2005). However, after the Red Lake shooting, there were only three front-page articles in the *New York Times* in total during the first 30 days after the shooting. Such a disparity conveys that Red Lake was seen as a local story, rather than a national event like Columbine. The reports on the Red Lake shooting also convey the large impact Columbine had on the nation, as four different articles from the *New York Times* and six articles from local newspapers

made specific comparisons to, and many more referenced, Columbine while discussing the events at Red Lake. Columbine thus became a lens or historical comparison through which Red Lake was reported. While these articles noted the similarities between the two deadly shootings, they also were quick to disclose the apparent differences between the two communities in which the events unfolded, again reinforcing the role 'community' type had on the press's narrative.

In addition to the breadth of coverage Columbine received, the press also employed superlatives in order to mark the event with significance which is a key aspect of the shaping of the event as a national trauma, thus subjecting it to elongated collective memory practices. For example, Columbine was uniformly labeled a 'massacre'. The television press dubbed Columbine a massacre immediately and the term appeared in numerous newspaper headlines and stories. Columbine was also referred to as an act of terror and the phrase 'Terror in the Rockies' appeared in much of the press's coverage. Journalists were also quick to claim that Columbine was the worst act of school violence in US history allowing them to also claim Columbine was history-making and would 'forever change the country'. This kind of language, coupled with the saturation coverage, served to mark Columbine with a turning-point quality. Red Lake was not labeled with this kind of language. In fact, the only time the press approached this kind of historic talk was when reporting that Red Lake was the largest school shooting since Columbine. With minimal coverage and in the absence of press claims of importance, the event largely escaped the attention of the public.

Finally, the narrative frame employed by the press differed greatly in Columbine and Red Lake reporting. Columbine reporting centered on a narrative plot that involved villains (the gunmen), heroes (the coach who helped others and died), and martyrs (Cassie who said she believed in god and was killed) (Leavy, 2007a). The press narrated Columbine as a tale of heroism and sacrifice and this drew citizens into the story. This also enabled the ongoing writing of Columbine human interest pieces such as profiles of the dead (and the television media broadcast of several of the funerals). The press gave Columbine a face, the 'all-American' face, and this captured the public's interest. In other words, the 'key players' in the Columbine story were individualized. On the other hand, the victims of the Red Lake shootings received significantly less press coverage and the story journalists told did not resonate with citizens because it was a villain story alone centering on the killer and his 'troubled' past. Victims were portrayed as a group and not individualized, failing to produce an emotional connection between citizens and the event. Dichotomous hero-villain narratives are a standard storytelling device in American culture, and are therefore more likely to resonate with the public (Boorstin, 1964; Leavy, 2007a). Moreover, cultural narratives with both heroic and anti-heroic figures create tension and are more compelling than stories focusing on only one character type (Alexander, 2003: 110).

Race, Social Class and Gender

Race and social class were prominent themes throughout the coverage of the Red Lake shooting. In telling this story the media consistently mentioned the devastating poverty

and violent history of the Indian reservation. For example, nationally, the *New York Times* reported that 40% of Red Lake's population is living in poverty (Wilgoren, 2005). The reservation was also referred to on more than one occasion as an 'economically depressed American Indian Reservation' (Simpson, 2005: A1) in the *Denver Post*. Red Lake is a low socioeconomic area. The Red Lake American Indian Reservation is located in both Beltrami and Clearwater counties. In 1999 the median household income was \$33,392 in Beltrami county and \$30,517 in Clearwater county. This is significantly lower than the reported median household income for the state of Minnesota which was \$47,111. Further, 17.6% of the people in Beltrami county were listed below the poverty line as well as 15.1% in Clearwater county. These numbers far exceed the overall poverty level in Minnesota which was 7.9%. These numbers alone tell us that Red Lake is an economically struggling area but these numbers do not speak to the economic status of the American Indians in particular. According to US census data the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians reported a median household income of \$25,583 in 1999 illustrating how economically disadvantaged these people were in relation to average Minnesota citizens (US Census Bureau, 2000).

Despite providing poverty as the context for this event the press did not relate racism and social class as interlocking systems of oppression. For example, journalists did not provide a historical context for understanding Native American reservations. In terms of Columbine, the press downplayed the possible role social class played in the killings except to paint a picture of middle-class kids 'that could be anywhere in the US' which frequently appeared in Columbine stories. The press constructed an image of 'the kids next door' (both the shooters and victims). Before addressing the racialized aspect of this characterization it is important to note that Littleton is not middle-of-the-road but actually an economically advantaged city. In 1999 the median household income in Littleton was \$50,583 which places Littleton above the overall median for Colorado which was \$47,203.

Race also played a role in the coverage, as information about the reservation's population came into the story. Particularly, in the national coverage, the *New York Times* made the distinction that 27 out of 28 school shooters have been white, something that was not turned into a major story before a non-white perpetrator at Red Lake (Wilgoren, 2005). This is significant given the press's failure to talk about white masculinity after Columbine, which we return to shortly. Race became a quick theme in the coverage of the Red Lake shooting, and soon assumptions were drawn about the Indian reservation as a whole in what the media began to report. On the local scale, the *Tribune* pointed out the violent nature of the reservation population noting that riots and death have permeated the reservation for years, particularly in 1979 when a group of dissidents tried to overrun their government (Schmickle et al., 2005). Furthermore, it was also reported that the youth population of the reservation is not in good mental health as about 20% of all Red Lake boys have attempted suicide, while only 7% of Minnesota boys have attempted the same (Schmickle et al., 2005). Such information clearly portrays the Red Lake community as a poor and violent place to live, which leads the reader to believe that this is a place that could breed so called 'senseless' violence.

The idea of 'senseless' violence promoted by the press also arguably masks the gendered and racialized aspects of these incidents. Starting with the former, scholars Jhally and Katz, drawing on feminist scholarship, asserted that media and political analysts had 'missed the mark' when talking about Columbine as 'kids killing kids' when in fact all of the 39 cases of school violence in the proceeding two years were 'boys killing boys and boys killing girls'. Jhally reports that Jackson Katz called Columbine a 'teachable moment in the US' that the media ignored. In fact, the gender-neutral language the media chose to use to frame the event rendered invisible one of the main issues to flow from these events – the social construction of masculinity in the USA and how it may promote male violence. On 2 May 1999 a story titled 'The National Conversation in the Wake of Littleton is Missing the Mark' appeared in *The Boston Globe*.

[T]he way in which we neuter these discussions makes it hard to frame such questions, for there is a wrong way and a right way of asking them. The wrong way: 'Did the media (video games, Marilyn Manson, 'The Basketball Diaries') make them do it?' One of the few things that we know for certain after 50 years of sustained research on these issues is that behavior is too complex a phenomenon to pin down to exposure to individual and isolated media messages. The evidence strongly supports that behavior is linked to attitudes and attitudes are formed in a much more complex cultural environment. The right way to ask the question is: 'How does the cultural environment, including media images, contribute to definitions of manhood that are picked up by adolescents?' Or, 'How does repeated exposure to violent masculinity normalize and naturalize this violence?' (Katz and Jhally, 1999).

The press also 'missed the mark' when explicitly racializing the Red Lake killings because the perpetrator was not white and yet ignoring the role of race in the Columbine shootings despite the killers' use of racial slurs during the shootings as well as executing the attack on the anniversary of Hitler's birthday. Furthermore, Littleton has a very high concentration of white residents. In 2000 Colorado was 82.8% white but Littleton was 91.8% white. Again, dominant categories were rendered invisible by these journalistic practices, resulting in a collective memory of the incidents that was raced and sexed from the outset.

Attacks on Goth Culture and Popular Entertainment

The role of 'desensitizing' popular culture (video games, movies, and music) in the events of Columbine was the *most represented storyline* to emerge from newspaper reporting (Leavy, 2007a). This was true in all three newspapers where entertainment-related stories outnumbered stories on any other major theme. This was also a prominent theme in Red Lake reporting though not nearly to the same extent as with Columbine.

In both Columbine and Red Lake, the media linked the shooters' violent behavior to the entertainment industry, and 'Goth culture' more specifically. In all three newspapers, heavy metal or Marilyn Manson's music were cited as possible sources for instigating the

three shooters' violence. This was a consistent theme in Columbine reporting. Soon after the Columbine shootings, this quote appeared in the *Tribune*: 'Manson whose angst-filled lyrics some have loosely linked to last week's school shootings in Littleton, Colorado, has cancelled an upcoming Friday night show near Denver' (Brown, 1999: 4B). Rather than addressing the social causes from which school violence flows, the media was quick to blame Manson and his music, pressuring him to cancel a show and not play in Denver for years to come. Red Lake articles also targeted Manson's music, by claiming that Weise was a fan (Wilgoren, 2005).

Music was not the only form of popular culture targeted after the Columbine and Red Lake shootings; films and other sources of entertainment also served as scapegoats. After Red Lake, the film by Gus Van Sant entitled *Elephant* (2003) which depicted a reconstruction of a 'Columbine-like' school shooting was called into question as reports came in that Weise had watched the film days before his shooting spree (Von Sternberg, 2005). In fact, one acquaintance of Weise stated that he had been there while Weise was watching the movie, and reported, Weise 'skipped ahead to the part where two teens plan and carry out a school shooting' (Von Sternberg and Collins, 2005: 1A). By referencing this movie journalists associated Weise's violence with the film he watched days before, implying that without the film, the shootings may not have occurred. This media scapegoating phenomenon was also prevalent in the press's interpretation of Columbine. After Columbine there were many people not only blaming Marilyn Manson, but also the producers of the film *The Matrix*, and the makers of the video game *Mortal Kombat*. It is noteworthy that none of the press's reports about violent media made connections to the wars occurring at the time of each shooting. Furthermore, journalists failed to address media violence as a gendered phenomenon perhaps more aptly categorized as male violence, rendering the killers' gender invisible.

Harris, Klebold, and Weise were all reportedly interested in Goth culture, and belonged to groups that were shut out of high school society because of it (or perhaps vice versa). As a result, Goth culture quickly became a scapegoat. The three newspapers interviewed people who knew Weise and they all reported that he 'dressed in a Goth style with a long black coat, black boots and at times, red hair spiked into devil's horns' (Haga, 2005: 14A). The mention of the 'long black coat' is reminiscent of the outsider clique 'the Trench Coat Mafia', of which Harris and Klebold were members. These press narratives fostered the idea that Goth culture breeds violence, though the killers' association to Gothic subculture is largely speculative and Goth culture is used as an umbrella category to encompass a range of styles, interests, and beliefs.

Political Issues: Gun Control

Examining the linkage between journalistic practice and political collective memory scholarship is vital if we are to better understand collective memory appropriation. Some events, designated as nationally significant by established 'communities of memory' (such as the press or government), come to serve as vehicles through which political groups

circulate their ideologies and advance their agendas. In other words, some events are 'used' or appropriated for political purposes (Leavy, 2007a, 2007b). When this occurs, a group with a political agenda activates a particular repository of collective memory in order to create what Irwin-Zarecka (1994) labels a 'memory project' (Leavy, 2007a). The press however has an active role within this process (Leavy, 2007a, 2007b). Before a repository of memory can be activated an abundance of representations, which constitute the repository, must be produced and widely distributed. This in turn, in addition to the specific nature of the representations, marks the event as a 'turning point' or 'wake up call' as reviewed earlier with respect to Columbine. Once the event is recognized in this way, it can be an effective public platform for the execution of numerous political agendas (Leavy, 2007a). In this vein, Edkins (2003) wonders if some political communities sustain themselves by scripting events as emergencies (for which they can 'uncover' causes and propose 'solutions'). This section reviews two expressly political 'memory projects' to emerge during Columbine reporting, which never fully materialized in response to Red Lake.

To address how some political groups did or did not use these events, and the manner in which journalists politicized the events, requires first reviewing the initial response to each event from local politicians which arguably sets the tone for others. The day after Columbine, political leaders at the Statehouse gave the victims and the community a moment of silence after morning prayers and also cancelled their workday out of respect for the victims and their families (Doyle, 1999: 18A).

The day following Red Lake elicited a different reaction from local political leaders:

Minnesota political leaders took part in an emotional ceremony on the steps of the state capitol to pray for the victims of the school shooting on the Red Lake Indian Reservation. When the prayers were over, they went back to the Capitol and cut millions from a plan to build a new school for Red Lake. (Coleman, 2005: 2B)

The millions were cut from a plan to build a new middle school on the Red Lake Reservation, which was a 24 million dollar project, and was meant to replace the 'unhealthy and moldy' school currently in place (Coleman, 2005: 2B). The article reported that:

Most legislators expected that after the traumatic events of the previous 24 hours, everyone would approve full funding for a new school. So they were stunned when the lead Republican negotiator, state Rep. Dan Dorman of Albert Lea, announced a new plan that included just \$14 million short of the estimated costs, and \$6 million short of their previous position. (Coleman, 2005: 2B).

The disparity between the initial responses to Columbine and Red Lake was never explored by local or national newspaper journalists reporting on Red Lake.

Gun control was the major political issue that surrounded Columbine which was referred to only marginally after Red Lake. This can be conceptualized as a 'memory project' where Columbine was co-opted as a vehicle that could be 'used' towards advancing

pro-gun control and anti-gun control agendas. In the aftermath of Columbine, there was a frenzy of strict gun control legislation which aimed to create higher standards to procure a weapon. Three weeks after Columbine President Clinton proposed a legislative package which included: 'raising the age of handgun ownership to 21, requiring background checks for buyers at gun shows and holding parents criminally responsible for allowing a child access to a gun that is later used in a shooting' (Westphal and Hamburger, 1999: 1A).

The discussion of gun control after Red Lake was purely surface with scant articles reporting: a call for 'Strict and enforceable laws on storing guns' (Greene, 2005: 10A) and we 'Need better gun control' (Shriver, 2005: 11A). Suggested policy changes did not emerge from these reports. Moreover, there were no articles outlining gun legislation. Ultimately Red Lake failed to promote greater gun control legislation or even public discourse around the issue of gun control which journalists have a strong hand in shaping.

Furthermore, the only argument that was presented in the press was the right-wing idea of arming teachers. Some journalists noticed and exposed the disjuncture in gun-related discourse post Columbine versus Red Lake. The following appeared in *The New York Times* article only weeks after Red Lake:

[After Columbine,] Those shootings inspired gun-control proposals in Congress and in state legislatures, and forced gun advocates to retreat from legislation they hoped to pass, including a Colorado bill to allow concealed hand-guns ... By contrast, after the recent shootings in Red Lake, N.R.A. officials proposed arming teachers. (Zernike, 2005: 25A)

The major difference in the gun discourse seems to underscore the underlying message that the people on the Red Lake Indian Reservation are dangerous, and precautions need to be taken to ensure the safety of those working within the community (such as teachers). This racialized worldview permeates the newspaper reporting of Red Lake. Local newspapers were equally complicit. The *Star Tribune* ran an article which quoted NRA incoming president Sandra Froman saying (unsurprisingly) that the Red Lake 'incident' should spark discussion on 'arming teachers' instead of instigating new gun control laws (Diaz, 2005). We suggest that this indicates that politicians perhaps did not regard Red Lake victims and survivors as 'People Like Us' and most importantly for this analysis, journalists rarely took issue with this. It is important to consider that it was not simply that political groups co-opted Columbine for the gun debate, but also that journalists made gun control a major post-Columbine story which normalized and ignited continued political discourse (whether from the left or the right).

Political Issues: Surveillance

Surveillance became a hot political topic after Columbine and reporters at all three newspapers covered the issue extensively. There were many stories about new town curfews nationwide, increased surveillance at schools, and commodities like clear backpacks. In the *Star Tribune*, shortly after Columbine, an article appeared which

praised companies such as Tactical Alliance (which employs professionals trained in SWAT) for creating methods that better protect American schools. It was reported that local Minnesota schools were contemplating putting this company's services to work, with services that include: 'Digital photography, of schools, taken by experts who enter as snipers would, to pinpoint weak spots. The company would request school floor plans and details of crawl spaces so that police would have them available, perhaps on computer discs or training manuals.' (Powell, 1999: 1B) This is one of many national and local stories that reviews the measures taken around the USA after the shootings at Columbine (much of which was controversial and arguably limited citizens' personal freedom making the press sponsored public discourse all the more important).

Increases in security and surveillance were top priority after Columbine, but this was not the case after the Red Lake tragedy. In fact, though a Minnesota newspaper covered the possible use of SWAT surveillance in local schools, when Red Lake High School in Minnesota was ground zero for a school shooting, none of the same security issues were reported on. While many newspapers touted school surveillance as necessary after Columbine, journalists again took a very different position with Red Lake. "But you know, how far do you go ... If a kid comes in – at Red Lake there was a guard at the door and he was shot first. It's ridiculous. Who would ever think a kid would come in and do that? You can't prevent everything." (Hanson, 2005: 1N)

Political Issues: The Family

After Columbine and Red Lake there was an increase in the amount of stories reporting problems with American families, and this was especially true in Red Lake reporting. Post-Columbine, many stories came out about the purported lack of involvement of parents within the lives of their teens including a cartoon in *The Denver Post* that stated 'Parental Apathy' as a reason for the Columbine killings. The coverage tended to remain closely tied to the apathetic nature of parents. The Red Lake coverage was decidedly more pointed in this regard; it was an outright attack on the American Indian family. The focal point of all of the 'family' articles was the supposed failure of American Indian families. The following is a representative quote about Weise's parents which appeared in a *New York Times* article only days after the shooting:

In July 1997, Mr. Weise's father Daryl Lussier Jr., killed himself in a standoff with the police on the Red Lake reservation ... In March 1999, his mother, Joanne, suffered a brain injury when the car she was riding in struck a tractor-trailer on a highway in Minneapolis ... The driver, a cousin of his mother, had been drinking and was killed. (Davey and Wilgoren, 2005: 1A)

In follow-up articles in *The New York Times* journalists further connected Weise's 'broken' home with American Indian life in general implying that all American Indian families

are dysfunctional: 'The broken family of the teenager, Jeff Weise, 16 ... is typical among Indians.' (Kershaw, 2005: 14A) This journalist goes on to support this claim by citing the following statistics: 'According to the latest federal statistics, nearly 10,000 Indian and Alaska Native children, or about 1.2%, are in foster care, living with relatives or others' (Kershaw, 2005: 14A).

Clearly 1.2% does not qualify as 'typical' and this kind of reporting is grossly exaggerated and implies that non-traditional families are the only families to rear teens that would commit mass shootings like Columbine or Red Lake. It becomes clear, after sifting through newspapers, that the main message embedded within them is that 'broken homes' breed killers and that American Indian homes are 'typically' more un-traditional and thus 'broken'. This is in stark contrast to Columbine reporting that categorized the event as shocking and 'senseless' violence committed by the 'boys next door', which too is race and class biased.

Conclusion

Our study confirmed our hypotheses and also provided clues into the way that the press constructs some events as historically important and others as forgettable. As we predicted Columbine did receive significantly more coverage, particularly at the national level, than did Red Lake. Journalists constructed Columbine's social significance through saturation coverage, superlatives, and human interest stories. In this vein we also discovered that a focus on victims and survivors (labeled heroes) allowed Columbine to be repeatedly interpreted and thus remain in the public spotlight for longer. These reporting decisions have political implications with respect to *which* events become viewed as viable political platforms through which to address the American public. In this vein our research expands existing collective memory literature by suggesting that the press not only helps determine which events will be viewed as significant/memorable moments in the history of the nation, but also how these selected events will then remain in political culture as they are reinterpreted by the press and other groups with competing interests.

This study also confirmed our hypothesis that race and class would receive more explicit coverage when the killer was a minority person from a low socioeconomic neighborhood. The press disproportionately focused on race and class in the case of Red Lake while these themes were relatively absent from Columbine reporting although the normalization of the killers' race and class was itself both racially and class biased. This study therefore contributes to our understanding of the process by which national memory incorporates dominant conceptions of race, class, and gender resulting in a memory repository of representations that continue to normalize whiteness, maleness, and the middle-class.

Finally, our hypothesis that similar themes would be conveyed in the narrating of each event was also confirmed, as was our hypothesis that Columbine coverage would be more infused with political messages. With respect to national versus local reporting, this research suggests extensive national coverage is a key component in making an event a nationally significant event, and thus a marker in the collective memory of the nation.

Our research contributes, empirically, to the research on collective memory and events indicating that 'national events' are scripted largely by the press, meaning, the press determines which events will become staples in the collective memory of the nation. Our research further indicates that this process is imbued with racial, class, and gendered assumptions that result in events centering on people in dominant categories as extraordinary and de-emphasizing events that involve members of non-dominant groups.

Given the disparities between Columbine and Red Lake reporting it is important to consider the extent to which the media was simply responding to a trend in 1999 while Red Lake was an anomaly. This turns out not to be the case. In 1998 there were 35 homicides in US schools (National School Safety Center, 2005). Despite Columbine that number decreased dramatically in 1999 as there were 25 homicides (http://www.columbine-angels.com/School_Violence_Stats.htm, 2005). The rates stayed down until 2003 and then spiked in 2004 and 2005. In other words, school violence was a greater national problem in 2005 when Red Lake occurred than in 1999 when Columbine occurred. In fact, from 1992 through 2005, 1999 saw the second lowest number of homicides in US schools (second to 1997 when there were only 23 homicides) (National School Safety Center, 2005). What this reveals is that the moral panic about the safety of schools perpetuated by the press after Columbine was not directly linked to the actual amount of violence experienced in US schools. If the press was making one of the events into a major news story in response to an overall trend then Red Lake would have been a bigger story than Columbine.

What our research does not directly address is how, if at all, the debate over Columbine reporting impacted later Red Lake reporting. Specifically, there was a dialogue after Columbine regarding the sensationalistic nature of the coverage which could have fostered a more reserved approach to Red Lake reporting. We do not believe this debate explains the difference in reporting in light of the extensive, sensational, and arguably invasive coverage of the more recent 2007 Virginia Tech killings. The incessant coverage of Virginia Tech, including the controversial airing of the killer's video 'manifesto', and reprinting of related pictures on the front page of newspapers across the country, illustrate that journalists have not significantly altered their sensationalistic approach to these kinds of events post-Columbine. Again, this only raises more questions regarding the minimal and depersonalized coverage of Red Lake. Furthermore, the race of the Virginia Tech killer, an Asian American male, was explored by the news media with reporters asking 'experts' if something in the killer's 'ethnic background' could have contributed to this violent incident. This is reminiscent of Red Lake reporting and in stark contrast to the normalization of whiteness that occurred after Columbine. Moreover, although the Virginia Tech killer had a history of stalking and harassing women, his 'maleness' (the consistent status characteristic across all three incidents) was never raised by the media; that the killers were all male, failed to produce any meaningful public discourse about masculinity and its possible connections to violence. As is clear from labels such as 'the Barbie Bandits' recently used to describe two young female bank robbers, when the perpetrators are female there is much made by the press about 'the state of femininity' in the culture.

What our research fails to address, however, is the extent to which the larger social context has influenced the reporting of these events. For example, Columbine occurred before the attacks of September 11th while Red Lake occurred afterward. There is no way of knowing whether or not Columbine would have been marked with the same degree of social significance if it had occurred in a post 9/11 USA. Furthermore, there is no way of knowing the role the Iraq War has had on the minimal reporting of Red Lake, which, given the numbers of American soldiers dying may be viewed as less important. With this said, the extensive reporting of Virginia Tech indicates the social context alone does not explain the difference in reporting.

In conclusion, the overarching message from the newspapers studied was that a white, upper-middle class teen needs the media to get the idea to shoot his fellow classmates, while a non-white, poor teen only needs access to weapons to come up with the same idea. The press's narrative implies that violence in poor minority communities is not socially significant and that when white middle-class people/communities, 'people like us', are involved in the killing, the event is by nature extraordinary.

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Dedication

We would like to dedicate this article to the victims of the Columbine and Red Lake shootings as well as their families.

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