

# School shootings, the media, and the spatialities of dark belonging

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This article discusses how news reports attendant to crisis events are used by the media to construct the logic of inclusion and exclusion. The focus of the paper is on rampage school shootings, which represent an illustrative example of how emotions and socio-politics become entwined in a spatial manner. The article also discusses how parties involved in the shooting event – the perpetrator, victims and the bereaved – are profiled in news reports as narrative characters through which the logic of inclusion and exclusion is constructed and conveyed, in different ways, and various spatial scales. This article illustrates how the media narratives of school shootings engage readers with the logic of belonging, offering normative understandings of how belonging and non-belonging should be comprehended. This paper contributes to both the geographical studies of belonging and media research.

Keywords: school shooting, media, belonging, emotion, narrative

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## Introduction

In recent geographical studies the concept of belonging has been under relatively extensive debate, perceived through various theoretical viewpoints, within numerous, sometimes overlapping thematic contexts. Belonging refers to “a dynamic emotional attachment that relates individuals to the material and social worlds that they inhabit and experience” (Wood & Waite 2011, 201). The most extensive work on the concept of belonging has been carried out within the framework of migration and citizenship (e.g. Secor 2004; Ervine 2008; Gilmartin 2008; Bugg 2013; McConnell 2013), partly tangential

with the equally thoroughly studied topic of nation-state belonging (e.g. Anderson & Taylor 2005; Mills 2006). Belonging has also been one of the key concepts within the studies of minority identities, for example, within the context of gender (e.g. Fenster 2005; Waitt & Gorman-Murray 2007; Gibson-Graham 2011) and ethnicity (e.g. Caluya 2011; Wright *et al.* 2012; Coombes *et al.* 2013; Ridanpää 2019a). All these studies are combined by understanding belonging as a socially and politically determined opposite of exclusion.

The sense of belonging is a communal and emotional process, in where several social institutions, such as media, play their own major role. Media functions as a route through which the emotional aspects of belonging become materialised and shaped. One strongly 'emotionally charged' media narrative is school shootings, a regrettably familiar form of crisis event, that puts the variety of an emotional engagement into work in a dark manner, at various spatial scales. The interaction between the media, the public, and politicians has a unique role in terms of how school shootings – a form of breakdown in the social order – spread moral panic (Burns & Crawford 1999; Aitken & Marchant 2003). This moral panic refers to how:

in an age of exaggeration, where the mass media regularly converge on a single anxiety-creating issue and exploit it for all it's worth, the utility of a negating, deflationary riposte is perfectly apparent. (Garland 2008, 9)

School shootings are an illustrative example of crisis events that both confirm and contest group affiliation, and are narrated across the globe by the mass media, turning wider national interest to the social life of small communities, their individual members and their emotions. The media reports of school shootings mobilise wider social processes in which other forms of shared togetherness, such as nationalism and youth citizenship, are put into action.

In human geography, belonging is often studied within the context of social problems, but still, the concept itself is strongly positively charged and associated with warm feelings characteristic to the senses of 'being at home' (Antonsich 2010; Tomaney 2015). On the other hand, this article underscores how the sense of belonging can also be grounded on frightful and dark feelings in the form of an emotional response to crisis events. This is conceptualised here as 'dark belonging'. This article discusses how school shooting narratives are used by the media, often in a dark manner, to engage people with 'the logic of belonging'. The focus is on how parties involved in the shooting event – the perpetrator, victims, the bereaved and other social and political actors – are profiled in news reports as narrative characters through which the logic of inclusion and exclusion is constructed and conveyed, in different ways and in various spatial scales. The main purpose of the article is to illustrate how the media narratives of school shootings engage readers with the logic of belonging, offering normative understandings of how belonging and non-belonging should be comprehended. The article contributes both to the geographical studies of belonging and to the cross-disciplinary studies of crisis and media.

## Politics of belonging

In the case of school shootings, victims and shooters alike, are typically represented by local, national and global media as 'community members', people whose 'degree of belonging' is constantly under debate. As social relations have emotional content, emotions are an intensely political issue (Anderson & Smith 2001). 'Politics of belonging' is a theoretical conceptualisation, which, according to Yuval-Davis (2006), needs to be studied on the levels of social locations, emotional attachments, and ethical and political values. As Davidson and Milligan (2004, 524) argue, "our sense of who and what we are is continually (re)shaped by how we feel. Similarly, the imagined or projected substance of our future experience will alter in relation to our current emotional state". The sense of belonging also defines our identities, 'who we are', but belonging is not just 'be-ing', but also longing or yearning (Wood & Waite 2011), an important factor when dissecting how crisis events impact we-feelings as emotions. Although many disciplines define belonging and identity as synonyms without making a detailed difference between the concepts (Antonsich 2010), there is also a vast theoretical debate over how the concepts should be separated. In this article belonging is understood as an emotional

basis on which people and places attain their identities. Whereas identity is conceived here as consisting of qualities that characterise individuals, groups and places, belonging refers to emotional bonds, which are built through the media narratives.

Geographical studies of belonging can be grouped in terms of their scalar perspective. Belonging is an *embodied* emotion (Davidson & Milligan 2004; Christou 2011; Wolfe 2017), often easy to comprehend within the context of *domestic* (Blunt 2005; Walsh 2006; Caluya 2011), or *local* (Mackenzie 2004; Nelson 2007; Kearney & Bradley 2009), also reflecting the general nature of *urbanity* (Secor 2004; Mills 2006; De Backer & Pavoni 2018), and *regionalism* (Argent 2008; Bugg 2013; Tomaney 2015; Ridanpää 2017). Belonging is also an inseparable part of how various forms of a *nationality* and *nationalism* attain their emotional load (Anderson & Taylor 2005; Adams 2009; Wetherell *et al.* 2015). Belonging can also mean a more extensive, *global* sense of togetherness (Ehrkamp & Leitner 2006; Friesen 2008; Gilmartin 2008). Although individual experiences have been used as the research examples of how the scalar local/national divide can be contested (see Antonsich 2018), different scales are important abstractions through and across which people form ideas about their own relation to various social phenomena in their everyday lives. However, it is still important to emphasise that belonging happens simultaneously at and across various spatial scales (Morley 2001), generating new networks of belonging that exceed the conventional manners of comprehending scalarity.

### School shootings and the scales of community building

People are simultaneously members of various intersectional groups that define their identity (Valentine 2007), while the emotional aspect of belonging and togetherness typically becomes recognised at the moment when a person is excluded from a group. This is the basic logic of how belonging is approached within the context of school shootings in the media. In these cases, the media narrations function as a mechanism that creates boundaries between inclusion and exclusion (Madianou 2005). Often, a particular topic of media discussion concerns the social role of the shooters within their communities. For school shooters it is highly typical that they are depicted as loners, as people who do 'not belong' to any community. Shooters are usually profiled by the media as alienated, antisocial outsiders.

School communities represent an example of a group that takes place at a particular spatial level; for students, the school environment and community mean an affective relation, a 'thick' degree of intensity between a person and a place (see De Backer & Pavoni 2018). Correspondingly, belonging to 'youth' refers to a more blurred form of community that comes into being across and over spatial scales and boundaries. Whereas shame is an affective feeling of (non-)belonging in school spaces (Wolfe 2017), 'feeling safe' is an essential part in terms of how the formation of 'youth citizenship', as a civic identity, is initiated (Alexander 2008). The political agency of young people is often questioned and restricted by law and social norms (Kallio & Häkli 2011, 2013), while a demand for safety, publicly announced by the young people themselves, signifies a political appeal to determine one's own form of belonging.

The local scale is often associated with socially shared bonds between people, a community. The local scale thus refers to a geographical, sociological and psychological space confined by face-to-face experiences and group cohesion (Appleton 2002). A vigil organised for local people to commemorate the victims of shootings, for example, is an event of shared emotionality in which 'being together' creates the sense of dark belonging, a very concrete and physical feeling of 'we'. On the other hand, when news reports mediate the representations of emotional attachment across the nation (and world), the sense of local level togetherness becomes nationally shared and we-feelings are moved to the scale of national. Media utilises visual representations, not only to attract the audience's attention, but also to establish persuasive messages with strong emotional tone (Joffe 2008), thus emotionalising the scale of national for wider audiences. This 'affective nationalism', emotional proximity and embodied becoming of national, refers to how the nation is brought into being through embodied and emotional practices (Militz & Schurr 2016). Pantti and Wieten (2005), for example, analysed the media coverage of the murder of controversial right-wing Dutch politician

Pim Fortuyn and argue how the representation of emotions become “implicated in the construction of a national, multicultural consensus” (Pantti & Wieten 2005, 301). The national identity and sense of national belonging can also be broken down to local-scale face-to-face experiences, which are then mediated to wider audiences by the media (Appleton 2002).

Although school shootings typically provoke discussion in media over how the safety of local communities is ruptured, on some occasions shootings are also associated with the wider discussion on terrorism, meaning a shift from the scale of body and local to the scale of global. Altheide (2009) argues how in the case of the Columbine shootings:

terrorism was used as a symbolic wedge to gain more support for policies and strategies to combat school violence, but paradoxically, some proponents of stronger measures also derided the seriousness of terrorism. (Altheide 2009, 1360)

Attaching school shootings to the discourse of terrorism also attaches the scale of national with the scale of global, that is, global terrorism and the war against it, at the same time establishing the global sense of togetherness.

### **Beliefs contradicted: “This cannot happen here”**

School shootings are typically associated with American society, at the same time characterising American society and the United States as a nation. This said, it is important to remember that school shootings take place all across the world. In the case of two school shooting events that took place in small countryside villages in Finland, Kauhajoki and Jokela, the immediate reaction of local inhabitants was that school shootings are something that happen only in America, not in Finland (Oksanen *et al.* 2010). This is in connection not only to national stereotypes and past events, but also to how citizens perceive themselves as members of their shared national community. Anderson’s (1991) concept of ‘imagined community’ refers to how the existence of the state would be impossible without a shared social imagination and that although the members of a nation will never know most of their fellow members, they nevertheless have a shared image and sense of belonging to the same community. This is in connection with a much-used metaphor of ‘nation as home’ (see e.g. Caluya 2011).

Whereas school shootings, as a social problem, are commonly associated with American society, everyday violence in the country is often associated with urban environments. Still, most school rampage shootings in America actually happen in rural or suburban regions, both of which are (stereotypically) marked by lack of overall crime and conceived of as ‘relatively safe’ spatial settings. This has also sustained the conception that school shootings are distinct from other forms of violence (Rocque 2012). In fact, “this cannot happen here” is a statement that is repeatedly voiced by the media after every school shooting, both outside and inside America:

The sense of outrage, the moral panic, evolves in part from the media spectacle of school shootings in seemingly tight-knit, family-oriented communities. How can something so horrifying happen to communities that so resemble middle America? How can the perpetrator be so like my son? Such perspectives are disturbing because they erase and homogenize the many social and spatial contexts that make up the lives of young people and the complexities of their families and communities. (Aitken 2001, 599)

The general idea regarding how exceptional that school violence happens *here* and to *us* is in connection with why school shootings usually attain an exceptional amount of media attention. According to Newman and others (2004), school shootings are particularly frightening as they contradict beliefs about childhood, home and community and expose the vulnerability of everyday life. School shootings are a socio-politically ambiguous form of crisis, which simultaneously both constructs and contests the emotions of togetherness and belonging, at various spatial scales. School shootings take place in a school environment, a local-scale small school community, but through the media several forms of emotional reactions, such as human suffering, anger, pity, guilt, and frustration, are transferred to other geographical contexts and to new arenas of (political) debate. “How did this happen to *us*”, is thus a typical question posed by the media, implicitly engaging readers with the logic of dark we-feelings.

## Mediatisation of school shootings

One of the key characteristics of contemporary mass media is that it has the potential to arouse and shape people's emotions across spatial scales (Doveling *et al.* 2010). The framing of a school shooting in the media also contributes to 'mediatisation', a concept referring to how the media presentations profoundly divert our understanding of cultural and social processes (Hjarvard 2008). Through mediatisation school shootings become more 'real' than the real-life events themselves (Schildkraut 2012). Newspapers also invite readers to identify with the victims, to participate in the membership of victimhood, as a dark form of (mediated) communal belonging. In crime studies the concept of 'mediated witness' refers to how news narratives about shocking criminal acts enable readers to identify with "actual eyewitnesses to a crime and vicariously experience the crime from up close" (van Krieken *et al.* 2015, 580). The concept of 'mediated witness' also refers to how newspapers persuade readers towards emotional engagement with victims and victimhood (Peelo 2006) whereas the concept of 'distant suffering' conveys how the media invites audiences towards emotional caring beyond their own communities of belonging (Chouliaraki 2008; Boltanski 2009).

Although group affiliation is much used as a coping mechanism at the moment of crisis, it is highly common that being exposed in the news media, coming under 'society's gaze', generates shame among people, which also reveals the symbolic power of social monitoring that the media represents (Madianou 2012). For example, after six students and two staff members were killed in a school shooting in November 2007 in the small town of Jokela, Finland, many locals felt guilty for being a local, for being from Jokela, a place name blackened by the national media (Oksanen *et al.* 2010). In the case of school shootings, place names carry a (negative) emotional load, a fact that Kearney and Bradley (2009, 77) call "the power of a place name". At the community/local level, the Jokela school shooting tragedy was followed by a rise in social solidarity, but there were negative impacts as well, such as strengthened group divisions between youth and adults, social stigmatisation, and feelings of collective guilt (Nurmi 2012; Nurmi *et al.* 2012). Nurmi, Räsänen and Oksanen (2012) emphasise that as the case of Jokela illustrated, collective guilt can have positive implications by motivating the community to develop new forms of solidarity, but on the other hand, collective guilt can mean a shared paralysing feeling of being blamed by the outsiders for not averting the tragedy. As Stephens and others (2017, 44) pointedly argue in their analysis of the ten-year anniversary of the 2005 London bombings, "people attune to political atmospheres of memory and trauma in multiple ways, which do not always cohere to sovereign narratives about unity and certainty".

The Parkland school shooting – the deadliest high school shooting in American history, with 17 killed and 17 wounded – occurred at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, on 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2018. As a rampage shooting with numerous victims, the event received extensive media coverage all over the world. At the same time, Parkland, a city of 24,000 inhabitants in Broward County, part of the Miami metropolitan area, came to be globally associated with a notoriety that will be remembered for a long time. After the event, *The New York Times* reported:

The mass shootings of recent years, the proliferation of grief from rural Oregon to the tip of Florida, have forced hundreds of family members into an unwanted fellowship. Veterans like the Phillippses serve as guides in the immediate aftermath, introducing the bereaved of Sandy Hook to those of San Bernardino and the parents of Virginia Tech to those of Roseburg, in a loose but growing network.

Some mourn in private. Some confront politicians, join gun-control groups and flock to rallies. But whether they turn to advocacy or not, many gravitate toward one another, checking on each other by Facebook or phone whenever another gunman strikes. (Yee 2018)

Although the community building impact of a shooting is underscored in news report, readers are simultaneously reminded that each victim, each family member and each mourner are individual within their communities. In case of school shootings belonging to a community is, as described above, 'unwanted fellowship' – not-to-be-desired 'one another' and 'each other' – a unique form of shared victimhood in where belonging to a community entails having (imagined) interconnections to other forms of communities, such as veterans, in a networked manner. Stories also persuade readers towards an emotional engagement with the victimhood (see Peelo 2006), at the same time letting

readers from outside of the community to witness and learn how to grieve according to the right moral codes, how to cope with the pain and what being a member of a victimhood means in practice. A moralising effect on the spectators is made through the emotionally loaded mediatisation of victims (Hakala 2012). This unwanted fellowship is an imagined, networked community based on shared emotions – fear, anger, frustration – linked with the problems in American society, mediated by the ‘shocking news’.

The media typically portray the perpetrators of school shootings as ‘twisted’ individuals. However, the attention is also paid to their background of being bullied, teased, or having experienced some other sense of injustice in the school community (Agnich 2015). Based on the cases of 15 school shootings across America between 1995 and 2001, Leary and others (2003) have shown that shooters can also be portrayed as ‘victims’ of social rejection in the form of ostracism, bullying, and/or romantic rejection. In the study in question, it was also found that:

shooters tended to be characterized by one or more of three other risk factors – an interest in firearms or bombs, a fascination with death or Satanism, or psychological problems involving depression, impulse control, or sadistic tendencies. (Leary *et al.* 2003, 202)

The consequences of school shootings are typically approached as individual psychological symptoms. The media constructs an image of a murderer as a twisted individual who is simultaneously both inside and outside of their local community, but still, with intensively dramatised characterisations, the categorical difference between belonging and non-belonging becomes an emotionally natural matter of fact. It is true that understanding perpetrators being simultaneously insiders and outsiders within their communities in a certain way contests the logic of binarity on which the concept of dark belonging is based on, but even in case of school shootings, there are differences in the manners how the ‘other’ is constructed in the media. In their study on mediated extremes of otherness, Greer and Jewkes (2005) conceive the demonisation of ‘others’ as a spectrum of deviance between the ends of ‘stigmatized others’ and ‘absolute others’. They suggest that:

the repulsion expressed through the popular media to particular forms of offending facilitates the continued public denial of the fact that those who commit crimes are not ‘others’. They are ‘us’, and are of our making. (Greer & Jewkes 2005, 21)

Also common in how media constructs the image of a murder is the ‘race attribute’, which is always used whenever there is potential to make the event more newsworthy (Park *et al.* 2012). The ethnic background of shooters is under debate in the national media and shooters are often profiled as not true Americans if the subject offers this possibility. The crimes conducted by racial minorities justify othering as a social practice and thereby easily amend themselves to consumption, while reciprocally, the extensive media coverage of crime activities conducted particularly by ‘other races’, strengthen the nexus of ethnic stereotypes and discrimination. The social status of a perpetrator thus plays a major role in how they become demonised and stigmatised in the media (see Greer & Jewkes 2005).

When the victims and/or perpetrators of any brutal violence are children or young people, moral panic is fostered in the media (Aitken & Marchant 2003). At the local level moral panic simultaneously harms communities, while also building, in a dark manner, the sense of togetherness. On the other hand, it is typical that after moral panic the mass media attempts to address the dissonances that school shootings inflict on hegemonic ideology by trying to find and define a clear, culpable explanation for why the incident had happened, by ‘normalising’ a shocking, senseless and incomprehensible event (Larkin 2009). Simultaneously, the audience’s attention is directed from human and psychological issues to social and political concerns.

## **Discussion: entertainmentalisation of crisis**

Violent shootings with extensive number of victims are naturally newsworthy events, but it is important to remember that there is no single univocal media narrative and that the news format is a restrictive discourse type, legitimating and limiting the subject produced by the news (Morse 2004). Profiling shooters as evil villains and therefore offering a clear logic for excluding ‘others’ from the community helps the audience to deal with the shock, while on the other hand, presenting a shooting event as



'shocking news' increases the feel of fear and horror attached to it. Through the news media, the victims of shootings are mourned and commemorated, while in social media, in quite the opposite manner, shooters may also be afforded compassion and even dark fandom (see Paton 2012). This stands as a simple example of how master narratives can become contested, especially when the shootings become politicised. For example, by transferring the public debate into discourse on gun laws, the master narrative is divided into various perspectives and opinions.

When the media motivates their audience to build an emotional bond with the victims and other participants involved with the shooting, it also 'teaches' them the basic logic of belonging. However, the logic of belonging always depends on a viewpoint of narration as well as the spatial scale discussed. Individual victims and shooters alike, are members of their local communities, which establish, in both good and bad ways, various forms of nationalism, national identities and the (globally conceived) images of the nation, as well as new, networked forms of belonging between other spatial scales. This is closely connected to the scalar performances of belonging. In the media reports of American school shootings, the scale of the body, in this case naturally in the form of victims, is under particular scrutiny, and yet victims are always mourned as members of local communities, and also as members of nations. Correspondingly, shooters are outsiders who do not belong, or who should not belong, neither to their local communities, nor to the collective American nation. At the same time, the media employs a politically charged narrative in which belonging and the warm feelings of togetherness go hand in hand with the political struggles over gun advocacy and other social issues. Correspondingly, politically active 'youth' is a scale-crossing discursive community, constructed by the media, which is characterised by strong political advocacy and the firm sense of national togetherness.

In cases of school shootings memory is selective (see Aitken & Marchant 2003); there are various levels of homicide newsworthiness, depending, for example, on the societal status of the victims and perpetrators, and fatal school shootings are not automatically followed by major news coverage (Sorenson *et al.* 1998). However, school shootings with multiple victims are always newsworthy and the volume of media attention reveals the logic behind the conceptions and expectations directed at belonging to a local community. Friendship and togetherness are relevant topics when discussing loner perpetrators and victims within their communities, but the stories in discordance with the simplified categorical separation between good and bad people are rarely reported. Although the media has a consoling impact on both local and national levels, the so-called 'copycat effect' is an example of how it has direct negative impacts as well. The Columbine rampage shootings inspired subsequent shooters by encouraging them to exact revenge for past wrongs, humiliations, and social isolation, and by providing a paradigm on how to plan and execute a high-profile school rampage shooting (Larkin 2009). Some media critics have called on the media to act more responsibly regarding how shootings are reported, arguing that the media's focus on the shooter's person encourages copycats, while defenders of reporting on the suspect's background note that evidence of the copycat effect is scant (Russell 2018).

It is essential to emphasise that, rather than telling the facts 'as they are', the media are never unbiased and always function within and in the service of multiple value systems, which is linked to the perennial criticism of the media for its 'mission' of ever stretching the limits of decency (Ridanpää 2012). School shootings are a sensitive topic, especially for those who are directly involved with the events. It has been argued that for homicide survivors, "media professionals are often the source of additional trauma, and yet, most survivors expressed a need for continued communication and continued coverage of their case" (Wellman 2018, 3). However, it is still relatively rare that the media are blamed for going too far or for stretching the limits of tolerance, no matter how sensitive the details of the reporting on crisis events and victims is.

The big question is, why do people read shocking news about the school shootings in the first place? There is a long history of people being entertained by following news containing violence (see Ridanpää, 2019b), but as underscored here, school shootings are a unique form of crisis events which has a strongly embedded sense of building togetherness. Through the eyes of the media, the audience is able not only to witness the crime (van Krieken *et al.* 2015), but also to build an emotional and moral bond with other people, sharing feelings that without the media they would not have any access to. Being entertained by crisis is not a category of things, but rather an attitude or a guiding

principle (Dyer 2005). In the case of school shootings, the guiding principle is emotionally loaded enthusiasm, with a wide variety of feelings involved. The rapid development of new media platforms catalyses 'the entertainmentisation of crisis', at the same time offering audiences new 'mechanisms' with which to work out who they are. The variety of emotions linked to school shootings is wide, ranging from guilt, shame, sorrow and pity to frustration and anger. The emotional load attached to the 'rupture', both in communal and national harmony, guarantees media attention, but as underscored in this article, the media simultaneously constructs and diverts the logic of belonging, offering people normative understandings of how belonging and non-belonging should be separated and comprehended.

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