

Columbine massacre and its everlasting effect

Brena Moreti.

^a Faculty of Law, “Eurípedes Soares da Rocha” Foundation, Marília, São Paulo, Brazil, desenvolvimento@univem.edu.br

Abstract. The Columbine massacre brought the world to its knees on April 20th 1999, when two shooters entered Columbine High School with the intention of bringing it down and making as many victims as they could. This research mainly consists of information from the time and from this day, in order to try to explain the part the media took by transforming this tragedy into a huge spectacle, as well as understanding how and why there are people around the world who still idealize the perpetrators.

Keywords. Columbine, massacre, shooting, media, spectacle.

1. Introduction

It is well known that the shooting that took place in Littleton, Colorado, was and still is one of the most tragic High School shootings in the United States. Totalizing 15 deceased, counting with both perpetrators, and over 20 injured, the Columbine massacre brought attention to this little town in America, and not in a good way. Gun violence was brought to the spotlight, and the discussion rose, allegedly, because of how easy it was to buy a gun in some American states, since not very much was needed.

Other than that, many teenagers around the world got to know about the massacre because of the intense media coverage it had. Nowadays, with the Internet, it is incredibly easy to gain access to this shooting and many others, all it takes is a quick Google search. This, of course, it is not the ideal – as much important as it is to have information about the past, because those who don't learn history are doomed to repeat it, this case specifically was very romanticized. All over the globe, since 1999, people are still commenting on it, some people planned massacres in their own school, some went as far as perpetrating it, explicitly making references to Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the shooters in Columbine.

This research paper has the only intention of showing how much school violence has gotten worse since the Columbine shooting. It is not trying to idealize the killers or instigating violence in any way.

2. The media spectacle

2.1 Before Columbine

Although the Columbine massacre was not the first school shooting to exist in the US, nor it was the last,

it was the first one televised that became a huge phenomenon. That happened, mainly, because the news about the shooting spreaded so fast that the emergency lines weren't picking up anymore. That being the case, many parents, and the kids in the school, started to call the media, in order to get some sort of help from them.

Before Columbine, perpetrators sought revenge from those who wronged them in anyway by shooting them in the school. However, after the effect Eric and Dylan had in the society, a whole new era of school shootings began, becoming increasingly more refined.

The rumor about a shooting in a suburban High School in Jefferson County spreaded extremely fast and soon enough the media had made a huge coverage of it. Everything changed after that.

2.2 April 20th, 1999

The killers planned the massacre almost 2 years before it actually happened, accordingly to their journals. Alongside with the planning, both of them also showed early signs of their plans, such an incredibly detailed essay for a creative writing class, written by Klebold, about how a killer murders his pairs while he is a peer who only watches everything and recounts the story. He received a 10 for it, no questions asked. It is known, also, that Harris liked to talk about how the human race should be “killed off”, complaining that humans destroyed the natural selection by including the weaker in society. Both boys were also known for their “Heil Hitler” greetings to each other.

Both boys seemed normal at first sight, with friends and good grades, but that perspective was just a facade. Brooks Brown, a boy who went to school with

both boys and was friends with Dylan since 7th grade, received death threats from Harris a year prior to the massacre. Those threats were posted in Harris blog and they became so serious that his family went to the police with it. Again, nothing happened.

On April 20th, 1999, a bit before midday, terror struck. Both boys left homemade bombs near a fire department, to distract the police from what was about to happen. They also planted bombs inside the school, made to explode at exactly 11:17, the time where the canteen would be filled with students. Both would be standing at the entrance of the south parking lot, waiting for the survivors with guns, ready to shoot anyone who left those doors. They planned to kill themselves after shooting the police that would get there eventually, that would make them die like heroes in their minds. They wouldn't be able to see "Act 3", as they called it, where their cars would explode circa an hour after their deaths, killing whomever was close to the parking lot.

None of the bombs they planted worked like they planned, so they decided to take matter into their own hands. When they realized their bombs wouldn't explode, they entered the school with semiautomatic rifles and pistols. Their first victim was Rachel Scott, a senior, who was eating lunch outside with a friend., After her, twelve other people would lose their lives to Eric and Dylan.

At first, students at Columbine would think they were just making a prank, since pranks were being held by the seniors to celebrate their graduation. Patti Neilson, a teacher at Columbine, heard the gunshots and, thinking the students were just making a video, decided to walk up to them and ask them to stop, because the noise was disturbing those who were still in class. She realized they were actually shooting the school when they saw her and aimed at her. Neilson managed to escape and hide in the library. She would also be the one to make the first and most famous call to 911 that day.

After shooting people who were in the front counter, they headed to the library, where most of their victims were made. The shots were random, there wasn't a list of people they wanted to kill – they shot who they felt like shooting. When they left the library, there weren't anymore victims. There's a video showing Dylan going back into the cafeteria and trying to see why the bombs hadn't worked. They returned to the library when they got bored, according to survivors, and shot themselves in the head ten minutes after midday.

SWAT teams took the entire afternoon to enter the school, which was criticized by many members of the society. That happened because it was believed that only 2 people wouldn't be able to do the damage Harris and Klebold did, so they were preparing to face a number of shooters still alive. However, that measure led to the death of Coach Sanders, who was shot while trying to lead yet another herd of students out of the school – he was responsible for leading

hundreds of students to a safe place, as far away from danger as he could.

A sign as posted in the window of the Science Lab by the student Deidra Kucera, in hopes of getting any help from the police. Even with the effort, it took to long to help to get there, and Wiliam "Dave" Sanders died in the arms of the students he helped protect.



Fig. 1 – Sign held up in the window.

3. The impact Columbine had on culture

It's been over 20 years since the masssacre, but it's still famous and Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold are well known names until this day. The media is one of the mot import reason, if not the only reason, to why this happens.

Right after the shooting, journalists were to quick to try and interview the desperate parents of the injured and wounded kids, going as far as interviewing the victims' families right after they got the heartbreaking news of their sons and daughters deaths. KMGH-TV filmed a student trying to escape from the second floor window, a student gave an interview while hiding in the library and it went on live television. Those are some of the reasons led to believe that the intense media coverage gave courage to other perpetrators to do the most horrendous human act, murder. Internet is a world that keeps everything alive, if only one is brave enough to explore the dephts of it. Columbine still has a great impact on nowadays world, even if it's two decades behind us. Or, at least, it should be.

3.1 TV Shows and music

The great media extends itself to all kinds of forms of spreading information, and that includes entertainment. The iconic show American Horror Story is a great example of it, as well as the song Pumped Up Kicks, by Foster the People.

In the first season of the show, the character of Tate Langdon is a teenager who died in the 90s. The reason for his death is explained at the end of the season, where Langdon is seen going into his school in a black trenchcoat, with a rather spooky makeup,

and shooting up his classmates in the library, in a clear inspiration by the murders perpetrated by Harris and Klebold. The scene brings some sort of romantization of the killer, not only because of how the producers show him killing his peers, but by the way the character is portrayed – a young man, quite handsome, and perplexing.



Fig. 2 – Character Tate Langdon, portrayed by the actor Evan Peters.

The song by Foster the People, with its extremely violent lyrics, was received well by the public in general, even hitting the Billboard Hot 5 when it was released in 2010. The lyrics describe a shooting in a school and, although the song composer Mark Foster already came public to explain that he wrote Pumped Up Kicks thinking in the perspective of a psychotic and homicidal young man to try to start the debate on mental health during teenage years, it was still banned from US radios after the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012.

4. The Columbine Effect

The echoes of Columbine are still very much alive to this day. With the media coverage from the day, hints and inspiration taken from it from big screen directors, Harris and Klebold got what they wanted – to be remembered.

Gun violence and school mass shootings increased since Columbine and, although it may look like a problem just from the United States, it affects the whole world.

Eric and Dylan inspired several perpetrators. Only 10 days after the Columbine massacre, a 16-year-old teenage boy was caught with a list of people he wanted to kill, referring to Eric and Dylan.

They were also inspiration for one of the most lethal Elementary School massacre, the Sandy Hook

shooting. Adam Lanza, the gunman, killed 26 people, mainly children from the age of 6 through 10, in less than 15 minutes. He had an unhealthy obsession with both Columbine shooters and school shootings in general. Before going into the school, he also shot his mother in the head. Similar to Eric and Dylan, Lanza also had extremely easy access to weapons.

In March 2019, a 17-year-old boy and a 25-year-old man entered a public school in Suzano, Brazil, and murdered seven people before killing themselves. Although gun control in Brazil is more rigid than in the US, both males still were able to enter the school with pistols. The boy, Guilherme, posted pictures of himself on Facebook making crude gestures and holding a gun to his own head. Before heading to the school, Guilherme shot his uncle, who later died in the hospital. They entered the school at 9h43, armed with a .38 calibre, a jet loader, two types of hatchets, homemade bombs and an arrow. Guilherme was also obsessed with the Columbine shootings and police officers later said that he posted in online forums that he wanted to make a bigger tragedy than Harris and Klebold had made in 1999. Guilherme killed his partner Luiz Henrique before shooting himself in the head, totalizing 10 people dead.

Those are only three examples of way too many. The Columbine Effect is still very much alive and numerous people already posted on social media that they feel inspired and seen by Eric and Dylan. Although many of the perpetrators come from stable and loving families, the discussion about gun violence and mental health should not be taken for granted. Family, peers and school workers need to be always cautious with the various signs given before a shooting, no matter how small they may seem.

5. Critique

It's not a new thing to blame violent behaviours on violent videogames, specially by worried parents. However, there's been a long list of studies that show no correlation between game violence and criminal violence. That myth is, possibly, one of the hardest to be unmythified, because of how intrinsic it became in modern society. Just because a teenager likes to play Call of Duty, for example, with his friend does not imply, in any way, that he's thinking about committing a violent crime.

The media, once again, is responsible for spreading this false information – since the Columbine shooters liked to play Doom, then it must be true that all videogame players are also going to be violent mass murderers.

Of course, violent games could be a trigger for someone who already has the predisposition to be a violent person – but, again, that does not only apply to videogames. Violent movies, violent education, violent plays could also lead to a violent person in the future. The glorification of violent acts in any sort of media has a serious negative effect on human development, specially if it starts from a young age.

The discussion of mental health is as important as the discussion of gun violence, specially in countries prone to either. Guns may just be objects but when in the hands of someone mentally unstable could lead – as has already led – to extreme violence and great catastrophies.

6. Conclusion

It is clear that the Columbine massacre was, and still is, a real life horror story. It has changed the way individuals see mass shootings forever. Survivors are now parents, and some are still terrified of sending their kids to school. Others talk about the importance of continuing with life – like Patrick Ireland, also known as The Boy In The Window.

There is still debate about whether or not the shooting was caused because of the bullying Eric and Dylan allegedly faced every day – some people say they were not bullied and others, like Brooks Brown, say they were. One thing is certain: violence should never be fought with more violence. It does not lead to anything but tragedy.

Over 20 years there has been more than 200 mass shootings in the US and another handful of shootings around the world, including in Brazil. Students of all ages have been on both ends – as perpetrators and as survivors. Debates on gun control and mental health have increased in the past years. People talk more about everything. People care more about each other. In a perfect world, people would not have to worry about having drills on how to act if there is an active shooter in the same place as they are. We are far from being in a perfect world, but people are starting to echo violence with love and respect towards each other. Changes may not seem drastic yet, but hopefully the world will evolve into a better place and Eric and Dylan will return to being just names, not synonyms of loss and hatred.

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