



PRINT & PIXELS

We All Play Our Parts

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Five discomfiting aspects of the media spectacle that now accompanies every mass shooting.

On February 20, six days after the shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, the following email was sent to a reporter at the *Tampa Bay Times*:

Both kids in the picture are not students here but actors that travel to various crisis when they happen.

Respectfully,

Benjamin A. Kelly

**District Secretary for
Representative Shawn Harrison
District 63**

The result was predictable. The reporter posted the email on his Twitter feed. The public responded with outrage. The email's author, Benjamin Kelly, got fired. His boss, Florida State Representative Shawn Harrison, tweeted, "I am appalled at and strongly denounce [Kelley's] comments about the Parkland students." And finally, Kelly tweeted sheepishly that he had "made a mistake" and Harrison should not "be held responsible for my error in judgement."

A mere blip in the 24/7 coverage of America's latest mass shooting, this incident is nonetheless worth a second look, because it reveals five discomfiting aspects of the media spectacle that now accompanies these horrific events.

The first discomfiting aspect is the casual way in which an everyday political grunt like Kelly shares a deliberate falsehood. His goal was clearly to stoke

opposition to a motion in the Florida House to debate a bill that would ban semi-automatic assault rifles like the AR-15 used in the attack. But this is Florida, folks, the state with the nation's most powerful NRA lobby. The vote was not on the actual bill, because anti-gun bills never reach the voting stage in Florida. It was on a motion to consider the bill. And that motion was roundly defeated, with 71 Republicans, including Harrison, voting against it. Does such routine business really require Russian-style disinformation?

The second discomfiting aspect is the willingness, nay, eagerness, of many Americans to believe that the young people who stepped into the national limelight after the Parkland shooting are not students but “crisis actors” hired to trick the public into supporting gun control. This morsel of troll-bait has been circulating through pro-gun websites for a long time, swelling on occasion to a full-blown conspiracy theory claiming that no mass shootings have actually occurred in America—that they’ve all been staged by rabid anti-gun Democrats and their accomplices in the liberal media.

Not surprisingly, the students took umbrage at this lie. For example, 18-year-old Cameron Kasky is reported to have warned his classmates while boarding a bus to Tallahassee, “Over the next couple days, there are a lot of people who are being paid a lot of money to ruin what we are doing. A lot of the people with cameras here are here to help, and a lot of the people with cameras here are here to destroy us.” He was right, of course. But at the same time, an observer watching these poised, self-contained teenagers speak so confidently into those same cameras might be forgiven for thinking they *are* professionals.

As the 24/7 coverage rolled on, it was reported that some of these camera-ready students belonged to the Stoneman Douglas drama club. When asked about this on the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*, Kasky’s reply was worthy of a celebrity guest on late-night TV: “I’ve been acting since kindergarten. In Miss Blakely’s production of *The Rainbow People*, I was the Narrator. Since then I’ve been lucky enough to be in *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. And if you’ve seen those, you’d know I am not somebody who deserves any money for acting.”

Here again, an observer watching Kasky deliver this punchline with perfect comic timing, then assume an expression of sweet humility while Ellen and the studio audience erupt in laughter and applause, might be forgiven for thinking he might very soon be offered a lot of money for performing. The Parkland students are not “crisis actors,” reciting their lines for propaganda purposes. But they are the children of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Whatsapp, Snapchat, Telegram, Kik, and all the other social media that condition young people to communicate by selfie, video, and meme.

Of course, as every high school drama coach knows, some students communicate better than others. The third discomfiting aspect of this latest school shooting is the undertow of competition pulling at these teenagers just as they struggle to build solidarity. Their movement depends on the media, and the media must have its darlings. Right now, the movement is trying to be bipartisan, so the emerging stars are gay Latina Emma González, with her peach-fuzz scalp and intense dark eyes, paired with cool Caucasian Kasky, with his preppy charm and pro-gun policeman dad. The other students may be better organizers or thinkers, but already they are being edged out of the picture.

The fourth discomfiting aspect pertains to the rest of us. School shootings are now so commonplace that, when one occurs, most Americans instinctively know what to do—or more precisely, what to say and how to behave when the cameras arrive. I’m not suggesting that we confuse performance with reality. I’m simply noting that we, too, are conditioned to play our parts in a familiar scenario that starts with the shock of the first report, then continues with the waves of hysteria and panic; the suspense of the shooter killed or captured; the official body count bringing grief to some families and relief to others; the sorrowful aftermath of tears, hugs, and tributes; the memorial made of candles, hearts and flowers, pictures, toys, scrawled messages, and other fond paraphernalia; and finally the calls for “healing” that are ridiculously premature but get voiced anyway, because the drama must be concluded before the cameras leave town.

This ritual is discomfiting because it hides so much pain. The most devastated families cower in their houses, and behind the brave smiles and consoling embraces churn oceans of agony and despair. But isn't this true of most rituals? We have rituals to tell us what to do when we are overwhelmed by events. If the media are providing Americans with a predictable path through these ugly ordeals, then more power to them. We can't invent a new ritual every time somebody shoots up a school, any more than we can invent a new ceremony every time somebody gets married, gives birth, or dies. As Aristotle wrote 2500 years ago, "the instinct of Imitation is implanted in man from childhood."¹ We imitate what we know.

But aye, there's the rub. Right after the Parkland shooting, a friend of mine—a conservative and a gun owner—wrote to me: "The AR-15 is a cultural fetish in this country thanks in large part to the entertainment industry, and they are getting off scot-free." The fifth and most disconcerting aspect of the media spectacle is the way it ignores, or downplays, any connection between school shootings and the grotesque violence now pervading American entertainment, from comic books to action films to first-person-shooter video games.

That connection cannot be proven "scientifically," meaning no one has yet conducted a laboratory experiment in which subjects are shown violent material and then found to have a measurable uptick in their propensity to commit mayhem. But surely the responses of human beings to expressive culture are more complex than that. Among serious researchers the consensus is that, rather than brainwash us instantly or roll off our backs like the proverbial water off a duck, the media condition us, gradually and incrementally, to accept—or at least consider normal—ways of thinking and acting that we otherwise would not.² This is also common sense, as expressed by the long-time neighbor who told the *Miami Herald* that the Parkland shooter, Nikolas Cruz, spent hours playing violent video games: "It was kill, kill, kill, blow up something, and kill some more, all day."

It would be nice to think that our political leaders are more mature than all those idle adolescents out there, blasting virtual enemies to smithereens with their keyboards, joysticks, and game controllers. But the word *mature* no longer means what it once did. According to the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB), the label "Mature" on a video game means "intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language." Watching the Republicans—and the President—loudly proclaim that video games, not guns, are to blame for the mayhem in Parkland, while on the other side of the looking glass, the Democrats are just as loudly proclaiming the opposite, it is tempting to wish a plague on both their houses.

But there's no point in doing that. The plague is already here.

¹ *Poetics*, IV:2, trans. Francis Ferguson (Hill and Wang, 1961).

² See, for example, Stephen Prince, *Screening Violence* (Rutgers UP, 2000).

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