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**“Visualizing Victims and Victimizers. An Iconological Approach to Analyzing
Media Coverage of School Shootings.”**

In the last ten years, the comparatively frequent tragedy of high-school and university shootings garners ever growing media attention.¹ The media coverage of this violent phenomenon is of great scholarly interest because it not only spreads information, but also actively shapes the perception and interpretation processes within audiences and decision-makers. Therefore, both the public as well as politicians heavily depend on media to form opinions and to draft legal frameworks. One particularly effective means to both transmit information and to strike an emotional chord is the use of images. Technological developments in printing, layout, broadcasting, and web publishing have made visuals a central part of media content. This development of the past quarter century leads to the fact that meaning attribution to media-reported events rarely resides in textual messages alone. Rather, visuals have assumed a major role in enhancing the messages in mass communication processes (Brosius, 1993). First research results on the visual coverage of school shootings (Fahmy & Roedl, 2008; Park, 2008) indicate that mediated visuals might have a strong impact on the media-audience. However there are but few studies which analyze the impact of visualization and the particular types of visuals used in press-reporting on school shootings in the news. This is where our research comes into play, providing a first, tentative, assessment of the types of mediated visuals disseminated in news-media (print and online) after school shootings.

Visuals are also intricately linked with emotions and gut responses (Leary et al, 2003). School shootings are highly emotion-laden, and the nature of this particular type of violence produces a variety of poignant images: mourning parents and friends, shrines

¹ For an overview of shooting incidents at schools and universities see Rückert & Willeke in *Zeit Dossier*, 19.03.2009, 13-17, as well as the respective Wikipedia website:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_shooting <14.05.2009>

dedicated to the victims, victim portraits, and portraits of the victimizers. Our paper will focus particularly on the last two categories, contrasting the depiction of victims with the depiction of victimizers in mass media, both print and online. We apply iconological image analysis focusing on a recent school shooting in Winnenden, Germany, which took place in March 2009, with a death-toll of 15 students and teachers. Comparing this visual coverage of a school shooting with previous cases in Germany (Emsdetten 11/2006, Erfurt 4/2002), Finland (Tuusula 9/2007), and the US (Virginia 4/2007, Littleton 4/1999). Drawing on the PIAV-archive² of newspaper clippings as well as on data generated in the context of the research project "Bild-Film-Diskurs" (Visual-Film-Discourse)³ we formulate the hypothesis that the visual focus in the media coverage of school shootings is on the perpetrators and not on the victims. Assuming that news about a social problem that visually represents victims heightens the intensity of audience reactions (Aust & Zillman, 1996), the media's visual focus on victimizers goes against common sense and might be sending the wrong visual message. However, before concrete effects in terms of quantitatively measurable reception data can be retrieved, certain types of visual reporting on school shootings have to be identified in order to break them down into measurable categories. This is the goal of our exploratory study on the specific visual motifs detectable in school-shooting reporting. Our study also builds on previous research we conducted with respect to visual reporting about honor crimes and the emotional impact of honor crime visuals on audiences (see Yildiz et al, 2009). The paper will conclude with a tentative typology of victim and victimizer visualizations in print and online news coverage of school shootings with the potential for recommendations for journalists and audiences alike.

² The Political Iconographic-Archive of Vision is a newspaper clipping archive at Jacobs University Bremen, assembled by Marion G. Müller, first author of this paper, over the past 15 years, dedicated to collecting, annotating and indexing news visuals and detecting long-term depiction patterns. Most of the historic visuals that will be used for this paper, are derived from the archive's holdings in the category of "victims" and "victimizer".

³ The collaborative project „Bild-Film-Diskurs. Ein neuer integrativer Ansatz“ is an interdisciplinary three-year project (2008-2011) funded by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF), combining communication, computer science, and linguistics with the intention to develop a new architecture and tools for automatic image retrieval in huge databases. Project leaders are: John Bateman (coordinator/Universität Bremen), Otthein Herzog (Universität Bremen), Rainer Malaka (Universität Bremen), and Marion G. Müller (Jacobs University),

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