

Media and the Invisible Crisis of Everyday Life

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On 6 December 1989, late in the afternoon, a young man armed with a semi-automatic rifle burst into a classroom at the École Polytechnique de Montréal (the engineering faculty of the University of Montreal). He separated the people present into two groups, men and women. Then, according to witnesses, he cried: 'You're all a bunch of feminists. I hate feminists', and opened fire. In a rampage through the building lasting barely 15 minutes, he murdered 14 women. Then, he killed himself.

The Canadian media reacted to this spectacular 'event' in a thoroughly predictable manner. The detailed description of the carnage, reaction of the authorities and representatives of various elite groups, portraits of the killer and his victims, the survivors in mourning, and theories of the experts occupied newspaper headlines, television specials and radio hotlines in the days to come.

But the aftermath of the drama was most notably marked by what we would call a *discursive struggle* – a rush to name things in a certain way, in the wake of this occurrence (see Pêcheux, 1988). In fact, the interpretation of what had happened was the object of unprecedented conflict for such a case, and the media were there every step of the way, both taking positions and acting as a platform for the different interests involved.

In spite of themselves, and through the classical coverage that they accorded to the event, the media bore witness to the profound social unease revealed by this 'act of a madman' as it was called by the press. The force with which different ideological tendencies imbued their efforts to interpret the meaning of the event indicated just to what extent the changing relations between men and women constituted a real social crisis,¹ and the behaviour of the media demonstrated, once again, to what extent these important institutions are themselves in a situation of crisis.

An abundant literature attests to the mass media's limitations in contextualizing and explaining the meaning of social information (eg Tuchman, 1978; Carey, 1986; Miège et al., 1986). The phenomenon of spectacularization, and the reasons for its emergence as the dominant mode of presenting the news, have been equally well documented (eg Debord, 1983; Knight, 1989). The tendency of mediated information to support the various institutionalized forms of power has also been the

object of numerous important studies (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980, 1982, 1985).

Media have reported on sensational 'news stories' since the early days of the mass circulation press. During the past 25 years, many political groups, as well as individuals, have had recourse to spectacular deeds precisely with the main goal of attracting the attention of the media – in full understanding, whether conscious or unconscious, of the ground rules that govern their operations (see eg Gitlin, 1980; Schmid and de Graaf, 1982; Raboy, 1984).

The anti-feminist multiple murder in Montreal was not this type of event, however. While carried out by a single individual acting alone, it was clearly directed at an identifiable social group: women on the way to achieving a certain degree of professional success.

In general, the media did everything possible to obscure this fact. Of course, the 'facts' were diligently reported, according to standard journalistic norms. But that was precisely the problem, because the routines of journalistic reporting, and the rules governing the separation of fact and opinion, ended up muddling a situation that was rather remarkably transparent. In this case, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, the media's ideological role was in sustaining a set of representations of reality which was 'not so much false, as a *false inflection* of the "real relations" on which, in fact, they depend' (Hall, 1977: 324).

In their 'news' formats, the media basically stuck to the narrative of the drama, each one telling the story in its own habitual manner. The representation of reality varied from one medium to the next according to each one's perception of its audience as a potential market.

Where the media normally take an institutional position on the important issues of the day – newspaper editorials, for example – they were remarkably, even uncharacteristically, prudent. Even more so than usual, editorial commentators behaved like transmission agents for the representatives of social power.

Yet, in the spaces designated for the expression of various points of view – columns, opinion/editorial pages, and to a lesser degree, certain radio and television public affairs programmes – the potential role of media as a forum for symbolic sharing and exchange through communication was partially realized. There, at least, the social issues were underscored and discussed.

On the whole, the media contributed little to structuring and orienting the public debate prompted by the Polytechnique murders. Their efforts were, rather, directed primarily at making the event fit the reading of society that they present to their publics in normal circumstances.

But a public debate ensued nonetheless – and in the weeks and months that followed, even a year after the event, the debate over the significance of the event became the story.

Highlights of the Narrative²

Thursday 7 December As the event had occurred late in the day, the following morning's newspapers had a few hours – a very few – in which to react. The front page of *La Presse* stuck to a straightforward description, headlined: 'Insane marksman kills fourteen women'. The text described the act as one of 'unusual violence against women', while a second article on page 2 quoted the murderer's cry: 'You're all a bunch of feminists. I hate feminists.'

The Gazette devoted three front-page articles to the event, including one by its city columnist, Jack Todd, whose column usually appears on page 3. The most outstanding feature of *The Gazette's* coverage, however, was a photograph of the inert body of a dead woman in a cafeteria seat while a man in the background removed Christmas decorations from the cafeteria wall. The photograph was sold by *The Gazette* to an international distribution agency, and was eventually published around the world.

Friday 8 December Coverage now moved into high gear. *La Presse* announced, in a tabloid-style reverse band across the top of its front page, 'Ten pages of articles and photographs on the Polytechnique killings'. The lead story focused on the murderer ('The killer had three obsessions: Women, war and electronics'). The sub-title indicated the meaning of the act: 'The antifeminist murderer carried with him a "hit list" of 15 well-known women'. Readers were told various biographical details about the individual, Marc Lépine, and it was revealed that a letter found on his body blamed feminists for having ruined his life. The article named some of the public figures appearing on Lépine's hit list.

Among the articles and photographs about the victims and police procedures, there was a reaction story about Quebec's political leaders. The premier declared that society could not accept that violence should become an outlet for irrationality and despair. The minister of education worried about the quality of services available for social deviants. The minister of public security called for looking into better forms of gun control. The leader of the opposition appealed for silence as the only appropriate public response to such a horrific event. These official reactions set the tone for the perspectives that would be repeated in the media, notably by editorialists, in the days to come.

Elsewhere in *La Presse*, a clergyman called it 'an occasion to reflect on the meaning of life'; a female student said, 'So much violence everywhere has me scared'; a male student said, 'What upsets me the most is my feeling of powerlessness and sadness'. The random reactions mingled with those of elite figures ('Cardinal deeply shaken'), experts ('Multiple murder an individual phenomenon') and survivors ('Mother feels pity for crazed killer'). On page 2, the paper's star columnist, Pierre Foglia, described an interview with the killer's neighbour.

Among these, one report stood out. By bizarre coincidence, the mayor

of Montreal was personally close to one of the victims, the daughter of a city councillor and occasional babysitter of his own children. 'For the mayor of Montreal', reported *La Presse*, 'the apparent motive of the mad killer shows that many men have not yet accepted an equal role for women in society.' It was the first cited reaction that interpreted the event in this way.

Further inside the paper, the city columnist 'wonders' whether the killer had not chosen this 'male bastion' deliberately in order to make these future women engineers pay for his inability to share power with women. (16 per cent of Polytechnique students and 3 per cent of faculty were women, according to a separate article in the paper.) 'Women's' reactions were grouped together and presented in a scattering of articles deeper inside.

In the editorial space, *La Presse's* publisher (who rarely appears in print) reproduced the theme introduced by the leader of the opposition: 'This is not a time for analysis or opinion. It is a time for silence. It is a time for personal reflection . . . Out of respect, in collective mourning, we shall remain silent.'

However, on the following page-and-a-half, the newspaper reprinted the viewpoints of various official representatives, from the Prime Minister of Canada to an association of centres for battered women. The premier of Quebec described the act as 'an incomprehensible crime', while for two (male) researchers it was 'the tip of the iceberg of masculine rage against women'. Could they be talking about the same thing?

An interesting variance was found in *The Gazette's* coverage, which paid less attention to official reactions (except for the mayor of Montreal – who was, however, framed as someone close to one of the victims, rather than as a politician). In columns and news stories, *The Gazette* picked up the theme of gun control. Its editorial, while recognizing the targeting of women as a central element, was nonetheless entitled 'Beyond Understanding' – reiterating the motif of powerlessness and incomprehensibility expressed by the premier of the province as well as ordinary citizens. Rather than citing institutional spokespeople, *The Gazette* opened its pages to readers – whose views ranged from a call for the return of the death penalty to denunciation of the front-page photograph of a bullet-riddled victim. The paper's political columnist was critical of the politicians' responses so far: 'All women were the target of the executioner at the École Polytechnique . . . Madmen invent nothing. They act out the furtive fantasies of the sane.'

Television columnists, meanwhile, found that TV was 'shockingly inadequate', unable to break its routines and interrupt regular programming to deal with the event.

Saturday 9 December A wounded survivor held a press conference at which she described how she had tried to reason with the killer in the ill-fated classroom: 'He told us he was struggling against feminism. I told

him we were only women studying engineering, not necessarily feminists . . . That's when he started to shoot.'

La Presse published a truncated version of Marc Lépine's hit list, with photographs of five of the high-profile targeted women, including one of its own columnists. (Montreal police released only some of the names, and a summary of the content of Lépine's letter.) This later sparked some debate among journalists' organizations about the news judgement and notion of public interest that could justify publication of such information.

La Presse columnist Foglia deplored the fact that media and the public had painted Marc Lépine as 'a monster'. There are no monsters, only ordinary people 'like you or me'. Any of us can fall into a demented state at any time, he wrote. That's just the way it is: 'When it happens, it's awful. But it has nothing to do with anything. *It's death, man.* [English in original] . . . There's nothing to be done about it.' Postmodern chronicler par excellence, Foglia lashed out at the legions of psychologists, feminists and journalists who saw a 'macho neuropath' behind the act.

The weekend sections began to present some critically distanced analysis, suggesting a need to examine the social meaning of the event. A former woman president of the Quebec Order of Engineers was quoted stating 'The Polytechnique is the strongest symbol of women's penetration of a non-traditional sector. The killer was sending a very strong message'. For columnist Francine Pelletier (who *La Presse* had revealed to be on Lépine's list), the message was 'the price for the emancipation of women is death'. One journalist noted that 'it is impossible to react to this drama without thinking about the relations between men and women' – but then hastened to add that one should not build a theory based on a barbaric incident that only lasted five minutes. He concluded, however, that the act was the expression of 'a malaise that really exists: the difficult adjustment of numerous men to the changing role of women and relations between the sexes'. A colleague of his wallowed in self-pity meanwhile, complaining that 'feminists of both sexes have not lost any time interpreting the event through their own ideological grid'.

The Gazette followed in a similar vein, but with an absence of anti-feminist sympathy and with a certain break in journalistic routine – for example, on the front page, a woman news reporter described her personal feelings about the event as a woman, about its effect on her daily life. Columnist Todd re-examined the theme of everyday violence against women. *The Gazette's* ombudsman responded to written and telephoned protests from several hundred readers outraged by the front-page photograph of the murdered woman. The paper defended its publication of the photograph, but announced that proceeds from the sale of international rights would be donated to charity.

Gazette columnists and feature writers were more explicit and homogeneous in characterizing the act as one of violence against women and specifically directed at feminism, 'the logical consequence of the rape, wife-beating, sexual harassment, incest, prostitution, pornography and the

glorification of violence and male aggressivity in our popular culture' (Bauch, 1989). A political columnist noted the refusal of politicians to recognize this fact, taking solace in the more comforting view that it was the isolated act of a madman.

The leitmotiv of the first days carried over into the following week. As 10,000 people attended the civic funeral, columns, editorials and news reports reiterated the well-established positions of the first few days. The ineffable Foglia, for example, related his desire to howl in the face of the moralists, 'those frocked and unfrocked clergymen, the clergymen of nonviolence and the clergymen of feminism'. Social violence, he declared, is an aesthetic question: 'He didn't like women, this much is clear . . . But perhaps women didn't like him either'. *The Gazette* and *La Presse* called for gun control; Quebec City's *Le Soleil* saw no indication of deeper social unrest, while for Montreal's *Le Devoir* this display of anti-feminist terrorism saw women's success as the cause and the symbol of its own failures.

Analysis

During the weeks that followed the Polytechnique killings, one had the impression the media were paying more attention than before to certain types of 'news' concerning relations between the sexes. One journalist at *The Gazette* dug into the dry statistics of criminality and family violence showing that one Canadian woman in ten suffers violent aggression in her own home, and that conjugal murder was on the rise (Bagnall, 1989). But the report showed that this information had been available for some time: 'They could have seen it before if they had wanted to'. A therapist was quoted saying 'Society will not reflect unless there's an act that projects it into a crisis. The killings at the University of Montreal have provoked a crisis' (Bagnall, 1989).

As the *real* story – violence and aggression against women – returned to the back pages, episodic flurries brought it back to life. On 6 February 1990, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's national radio news led off with a story about an attempted rape in a downtown Calgary street, in front of passive bystanders. A few weeks later, a federal cabinet minister's sexist remarks about an opposition politician got him into hot water.

Did this represent a real change as a result of the Polytechnique event, or was it illusory? In other words, did the event actually *provoke* a crisis, reflected in increased media coverage, or had it *signalled* an existing crisis that the media had been dealing with in a 'non-crisis' (ie *uncritical*) way? The evidence points to the latter.

Research conducted in the summer of 1990 showed that, with certain exceptions, attention to the problematic aspects of relations between men and women remained essentially unchanged in Quebec and Canadian newspapers as a result of 6 December 1989.³

In the francophone press, articles dealing with sexual aggression, conjugal violence, pay equity and feminism as a political movement were more numerous before the event than after. The only exception to this was gun control, which had generated virtually no press reports between January and December 1989, and more than 50 times as many during the following six months.

In the anglophone press, articles on battered women, sexual aggression and women in the workplace were more numerous before than after the event. Articles on family violence, sexual harassment and women's rights were roughly in the same proportion. Articles on sexual discrimination, sexual stereotypes, feminism and gun control were slightly more numerous after 6 December 1989.

One can note quickly that with the single exception of gun control in the francophone press, there was no appreciable modification in the importance afforded the various subjects raised in the public debate that followed 6 December 1989. Indeed, in several areas we found considerably *less* attention paid to these subjects in the months that followed the Polytechnique murders (francophone press: sexual aggression, feminism, pay equity; anglophone press: battered women, sexual aggression, women in the workplace).

In April 1990, when a mass circulation Quebec magazine published an article attributing anti-Semitic remarks to a well-known businessman, protests rained from all quarters. The text in question was even more injurious towards women and their place in society than it was towards Jews, however, but critics were painfully slow to point this out (Raboy, 1990b).

Seven months later, a marginal local journalist published a book-length pamphlet entitled *Manifeste d'un Salaud* (A Swine's Manifesto), purporting to be a critique of the rhetorical excesses of radical feminism. Characteristically, the book was the focus of a brief but significant flurry of diversionary and divisive polemic in the press, coinciding with the anniversary of the killings (Côté, 1990).

In a situation like the one we have just described, media are quickly overwhelmed by the crisis. Thus, by applying the usual norms of journalistic coverage and definition of what constitutes news – in short, by accentuating the spectacular and the unusual instead of the everyday and the mundane – the media embark on a course that they can not easily control afterwards.

Under these circumstances, it was unthinkable for media to treat the Polytechnique event any differently in their news formats. This resulted in certain aberrant situations that angered parts of the audience and that managers eventually came to deplore (publication of a sensational photograph; publication of the hit list targeting prominent women). In their editorial formats, they were careful to remain within respectable limits, using the reactions of political authorities and other elite representatives as indicators. Nonetheless, the elements of a public debate were

brought out by certain columnists and others with access to media platforms.⁴

We can postulate that the overall impact of this coverage was something similar to the one described by Schmid and de Graaf in their study of terrorism: that media coverage of violent acts intimidates members of victim groups (Schmid and de Graaf, 1982). It focuses on the act of aggression rather than the social consequences, by accentuating events rather than processes. The coverage of 6 December 1989 followed this pattern.

According to Quebec journalists themselves, the media obscured the real nature of the event, taking an unduly long time to recognize its sexist character. They failed to report properly 'the great distress felt by all women in Quebec at that moment'. It was 'an unprecedented social phenomenon', according to the journalists (*Le Devoir*, 1990).

According to Gaye Tuchman, 'news imparts to occurrences their *public character* as it transforms mere happenings into publicly discussable events' (Tuchman, 1978: 3, emphasis in original). Media activity is situated principally in the symbolic sphere: it consists of making sense. This is to say, Marc Lépine killed 14 women, but for an entire population that was not *directly* touched by the event (ie all those who experienced it in a public, rather than a private, way), it acquired its meaning through the media. Media thus 'constructed reality'. By emphasizing the 'inexplicable' nature of the event, for example, the media left the entire female half of the population naked before its own vulnerability, denying not only the notions of resistance or positive preventive action, but even the possibility of a clear understanding of what had happened. In some cases, this went so far as to attempt to submerge reality altogether.

This singular aspect of media coverage was noted and denounced by feminist analysts (Malette and Chalouh, 1991). Some political authorities, seconded by their acolytes in the media, spared no efforts to camouflage the social character of the killer's act – its sexism, its misogyny, its anti-feminism. This must be seen in a framework of discursive struggle – of the struggle to name things for what they are. In our news system, the description of events is often followed by conflicting attempts to interpret their meaning. These struggles generally emanate from the centre of the media system – news pages of major dailies, radio hot-line shows, television public affairs programmes – and eventually wind up on the margins, in specialized, small-circulation journals, books, alternative video, documentary films. Social analysis, on the other hand, follows an opposite course: it usually begins in so-called marginal media, which are driven by other forces than 'events'. Analyses, especially radical ones, eventually find their way into the mainstream when the mainstream media are no longer able to ignore them (Raboy, 1984).

It is always problematic to call something by its real name. In the case we are considering here, the appeals for 'silence', the insistence on classifying the event as something 'incomprehensible' – as if it were a kind of social

unidentified flying object! – were simply attempts to repress and to camouflage the obvious, motivated by a fear of confronting reality and taking the consequences.

Prejudicial signification, of which sexism is an example, is a form of domination. So is the ideological position that denies that our society is sexist. When one factors in the effects of media spectacularization, social experience and its principal means of representation, language, are deprived of their expressive force, and become objects of consumption. This is disempowerment (see Bruck and Raboy, 1989).

The use of feminist discourse is exactly the obvious: a form of empowerment. Here, for example, is an alternative way of describing what happened at l'École Polytechnique, taken from a student newspaper of the following day. With one or two arguably excessive choices of terminology, it corresponds perfectly to the journalistic canons of objectivity and balance, yet we never see this language used in this way in reporting in the mainstream press:

Fourteen women were executed at the Polytechnique, several others wounded. Their crime: that they were women? That they were students in a discipline traditionally reserved for men? I think (I WANT TO BELIEVE IT, I want desperately to believe) that it was an isolated act, that the killer belongs to no particular group, that his act represents no general way of thinking. But one thing we know for sure: a man has killed some women. It appears that he set up the following equation: woman student in Engineering = non-traditional vocation = potential feminist = danger . . . (Bérard, 1991: 76)

Women have brought into public view some of the hidden aspects of their oppression, but the affirmation of feminist values and the feminist critique of society has been intercepted by the media, writes *québécoise* journalist Colette Beauchamp in her ground-breaking study, *Le silence des médias*:

If you are a coherent feminist, you lose all credibility – not in the eyes of the public, but within your own profession. You pass for a fanatic, an object of frustration, a maniac. You run the risk of not only slowing down your career but of being shown the door altogether. If you provide a platform for feminists . . . you will be accused of using the media to serve a cause . . . as though not taking women into consideration and giving the floor to the representatives of power more often than is their due had nothing to do with ideology and activism. (Beauchamp, 1987: 245)

Except for a few isolated interventions, the feminist point of view about the Polytechnique had to await the publication, several months after the fact, of a book of articles assembled by a small publishing house. Much of the discussion dealt precisely with the problems posed by the media (Malette and Chalouh, 1991).

Ericson and his colleagues (1987) have shown that, in spite of the vast range of potential sources available to journalists, they tend to limit themselves to spokespeople for important institutions. Individuals without institutional affiliation do not figure in news reports, unless they have been involved in tragic events. The coverage of the Polytechnique confirmed this finding.

According to one study, more than half the newspaper articles appearing during the week following the event featured people speaking about it. Aside from individuals directly involved, commentators fell into two broad categories: authorities and women. But articles relating women's viewpoints grouped several speakers together, while in most cases, authorities were allowed to speak on their own. On the whole, three times more importance was accorded to the views of a person in authority than to those of a woman (Legault, 1990). There was thus a manifest imbalance in the news by virtue of the fact that certain actors were deemed more deserving of speech due to their social status and their subscribing to dominant ideological precepts.

More than anything else, journalism is about the relationship of order to conflict (Ericson et al., 1989). Through the media, the representatives of social power make claims to knowledge. The most important news is that which represents authority as power legitimated by knowledge. The essence of media and crisis reporting is that authorities will always claim to find order in situations of conflict, and conflict where none exists.

At the same time, the media relegate all non-authority, non-powerful actors to second-rate status (when they are not excluded altogether). News thus becomes a means of communication at the summit of the 'knowledge structure of society', while those at the bottom of the structure remain spectators.

The notion of knowledge as spectacle is also denounced by James Carey, for whom 'The purpose of news is not to represent and inform but to signal, tell a story, and activate inquiry . . . [but] the press, by seeing its role as that of informing the public, abandons its role as an agency for carrying on the conversation of our culture. We lack not only an effective press but certain vital habits: the ability to follow an argument, grasp the point of view of another, expand the boundaries of understanding, debate the alternative purposes that might be pursued' (Carey, 1989b: 82).

Carey's theoretical contribution to communication studies is fundamental. According to him, there are two ways to think about mediated communication, as 'transmission' or as 'ritual'. In the first case, communication is comparable to an electric circuit linking sender and receiver; in the second, it is an intersubjective process of sharing and exchange (see Carey, 1989a).

Press reports can be separated into those that manifest a transmission approach, simply relating the details of an event, and those that, in more of a ritual mode, try to contextualize the event and analyse its repercussions for society.

Another study of the Polytechnique coverage compared press reports on this basis. Ninety per cent of articles in a tabloid daily and two-thirds in a general mass circulation paper were of the transmission type. All of these were 'news' articles. On the other hand, while much fewer, articles of a ritual type were found across various categories - news, editorials,

