

## **The Kauhajoki School Shooting in the Media**

The study describes how Finnish media dealt with the school massacre in Kauhajoki on September 23, 2008. It is a follow-up of an earlier study conducted in June 2008, *The Jokela Massacre in the Media*. The research data comprise the content of the significant national mass media and of local newspapers around Kauhajoki, as well as interviews with over 50 journalists.

The study shows how memories of the Jokela school shooting in November 2007 and the criticism that followed its media coverage were still present in Kauhajoki, affecting journalists, authorities, crisis workers and audiences alike. Many journalists interviewed felt that reporting of the events on the day of the incident was clearly made easier by the authorities who disseminated information effectively, unlike in Jokela. However, finding a scoop was practically impossible. Upon the arrival of the media on the scene, the school and its surroundings had been cordoned off and the crisis workers protected from journalists all those who had managed to escape from the school.

Also, journalists approached the young people who had experienced the incident, as well as the relatives of the victims, with more caution and consideration than in Jokela. Consequently, their points of view very seldom stole the limelight in the reports, and according to many journalists, the coverage was detached and unsympathetic, with politicians, experts and authorities – and above all the shooter with his images and videos – coming to the forefront.

In the media depictions of the shooter, a variety of different roles emerge – more, less or not at all intentionally: he was viewed as a cruel criminal, as a bullied victim, as the builder of his own heroic figure and as a quite ordinary young man.

The journalists interviewed for the study were eager to take a stand on how news media should relate to school shooters seeking publicity. In addition to emphasizing how journalism should provide information, they stressed how it should assume responsibility for the consequences of its acts as well, for example for providing a pattern which may inspire potential school shooters. In this light, it is no wonder why many journalists advocated a markedly more cautious policy compared to Jokela in the matter of publishing the shooter's images and his material on the internet news sites.

In Jokela, newsrooms seemingly had a new order of publishing news: all media companies went "web ahead" in their coverage. This, however, was not entirely true in Kauhajoki; news was updated frequently online, but especially newspapers also spared stories for the next day's paper.

Explaining the reasons for the incident quickly turned into a search for individual culprits. In their quest to look for people responsible for the massacre, the media politicized the incident at an early stage and favoured easy and simplified explanations.

The study also ponders if crisis reporting and the journalistic system of self-regulation are in a crisis or at a turning point. It is argued that in Kauhajoki, the experiences and media critique of Jokela had a greater effect on journalists' ways of acquiring information and their decisions on publishing than, for instance, the code of the Council for Mass Media in Finland (CMM). So, instead of self-regulation, the profession seems to define good journalistic practice in a more audience-based way.

This kind of development calls for more initiative on behalf of the CMM in the formulation of the code of practice for journalists in a crisis situation. The CMM's more active role could help to avoid a situation in which the profession hands over the authority concerning the contents of communication outside newsdesks.

The study was conducted at the Journalism Research and Development Centre, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Tampere. The project was led by Dr Pentti Raittila, and the other researchers in the group were Paula Haara, Laura Kangasluoma, Kari Koljonen, Ville Kumpu and Jari Väliverronen.