

# The Krugersdorp samurai sword killing: a media analysis

First submission: 6 December 2010

Acceptance: 5 May 2011

Using data gathered from the South African newspaper coverage, this article examines the space and time frames through which the media cultivated a particular view of the Krugersdorp samurai sword killing. The article also reports on findings from a qualitative content analysis on newspapers' portrayal of the three dominant space frames, namely the individual, the organisational (teaching and learning milieu) and the societal frames. A total of 62 news stories and editorials were analysed. The study found that the event was mostly framed at the individual level and the present time frame. Findings from the content analysis highlighted newspapers' conflicting portrayal of Morné Harmse, his parents and the school where the killing took place.

## Die Krugerdorp samurai-swaardmoord: 'n media-analise

Deur die ontginning van data wat verkry is van Suid-Afrikaanse koerantberigte oor die Krugerdorpse samurai-swaardmoord, ondersoek hierdie artikel die tydruimtelike mediaraminge waarmee 'n spesifieke siening van dié gebeurtenis gevestig het. Ook word verslag gelewer van 'n kwalitatiewe inhoudanalise van koerante se uitbeelding van die drie dominante ruimtelike mediarampe, naamlik die individuele, die organisatoriese (onderrig- en leermilieu) en die sosiale. In totaal is 62 nuusstories en redaksionele kommentare ontleed. Die studie het bevind dat die gebeurtenis hoofsaaklik op 'n individuele vlak en binne die teenswoordige tyd geraam is. Bevindinge van die inhoudanalise beklemtoon die koerante se teenstrydige uitbeelding van Morné Harmse, sy ouers en die skool waar die moord plaasgevind het.

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*Acta Academica*  
2011 43(3): 132-165  
ISSN 0587-2405  
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On Monday 18 August 2008 Morné Harmse carried out what Ajam (2008a: 1) calls “the most barbaric act of schoolboy violence in South African history”. Wearing a home-made mask resembling those worn by USA rockers “Slipknot”, Harmse attacked Jacques Pretorius (aged 16), metres from the principal’s office, slitting his throat with a samurai sword. Subsequently, Pretorius bled to death. Harmse then slashed Stephan Bouwer (aged 18) on the head before injuring two school gardeners, Mr Sam Namame-la (aged 43) and Mr Joseph Kodisang (aged 26) who had come to Bouwer’s aid. In April 2009 Harmse pleaded guilty to all the charges of murder and attempted murder. The High Court in Johannesburg sentenced him to 20 years’ imprisonment (Roestoff & Groenewald 2009: 1).

The media plays a significant role in focusing people’s attention on a certain issue. The frequency, depth and importance given by the media concerning an issue are believed to determine the level of observation, the reaction or the thoughts of the targeted audience or society towards it. The influence used by the media is the same, whether it concerns a positive or a negative image or character of a certain race, society, country or the individual him-/herself (Tiang & Hasim 2009: 410). The media’s depiction of events can impact on the casual reasoning employed by the public by emphasising particular attitudinal or behavioural linkages of cause and effect. Consequently, coverage and portrayals of social problems, such as school violence in the media, are particularly important because they help to create the perception of risk and willingness to support an investment of resources in prevention and intervention. If the media representation is biased, then people’s perceptions of the issue will be biased (*cf* Carlyle *et al* 2008: 171).

A small, but growing body of research on the incidence of school violence has attracted attention in the media (Muschert 2007: 354). The topic has been addressed from various angles, including different framings of school shootings (*cf* Kwon & Moon 2009, Muschert & Carr 2006, Spencer & Muschert 2009), the media’s myth-like depiction of victims of violence (Muschert 2007), a feminist perspective on the media’s construction of male perpetrators of school

violence (Consalvo 2003), the bias towards blacks (O'Grady *et al* 2010), a neo-liberal view on the coverage of a school excursion rape case in Australia (Gannon 2007), the role of the media in the creation of fear (Altheide 2009), and the expansion of anti-violence policies (Birkland & Lawrence 2009). While these research studies predominantly focus on a single event, for example, the Columbine killings (*cf* Altheide 2009, Muschert 2007), Virginia Tech (Kwon & Moon 2009) or Toronto (O'Grady *et al* 2010) and the rape of an Australian girl during a school excursion in Europe (Gannon 2007), research studies on the portrayal of school violence in the media within the South African context are summative in nature (De Wet 2002 & 2009). The De Wet studies typically provide findings based on a content analysis of numerous incidents of school violence within a specific time frame. The news media, however, predominantly provide information about a specific newsworthy event such as the sword killing (*cf* Carlyle *et al* 2008: 171).

Against this background, this article aimed to expand the body of knowledge on the media's portrayal of a specific incident of school violence in a South African context. To reach the stated purpose a two-phase design was followed, namely the interrogation of the South African media's framing of a specific event of school violence, namely the Krugersdorp samurai sword killing, and a content analysis of the newspapers' portrayal of the three dominant space frames identified during the first phase of the study. The following aims guided the first phases of this study:

- To ascertain how many news stories about this event were published and how they were distributed across this event's lifespan.
- To identify the dominant space frames across the five levels, namely individual, community, regional, societal and international.
- To determine the distribution of time frames across the three levels, namely past, present and future.

The second phase of the study is an attempt to move beyond the quantification of the different media frames by reporting on the find-

ings of a qualitative content analysis of newspapers' reporting on the samurai sword killing.

## 1. Concept clarification

### 1.1 School violence

Researchers studying school violence found that there is no clear definition as to what constitutes school violence (Henry 2000: 20 & 2009: 1249, McGowan 2008: 15, Rabrenovic *et al* 2004: 115). According to Furlong & Morrison (2000: 72):

School violence is a multifaceted construct that involves both criminal acts and aggression in schools, which inhibit development and learning, as well as harm the school climate.

Henry's (2000: 21) expansive definition reads as follows:

School violence is the exercise of power over others in school-related settings, by some individual, agency, or social process, that denies those subjected to it their humanity to make a difference, either by reducing them from what they are or by limiting them from becoming what they might be.

School violence can thus consist of anything from antisocial behaviour, to bullying, to criminal behaviour, including theft, assault and even murder – and it can occur in classrooms, in hallways, in the schoolyard, on school buses or in any school-related activity (sport or academic tours, for instance). These definitions emphasise the long- and short-term consequences on the victims, as well as on the teaching and learning milieu.

### 1.2 Framing

Framing theory is a relatively new communication theory and is closely linked to agenda-setting theory and cultivation theory, according to which the mass media cultivate (or promote) a particular view of social reality, by shaping and contextualising the view in a particular frame of reference and/or in a latent structure of meaning (Du Plooy 2009: 226, Tiung & Hasim 2009: 409). Media framing occurs when journalists or editors

[...] select some aspects of a perceived reality and make [it] more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman 1993: 52).

A frame is something that defines a problem, meaning that when a journalist frames an issue, s/he is, in turn, moving that slice of information in salience. Salience is defined as making a piece of information more noticeable and meaningful, or memorable to an audience. According to framing theory, communicators, such as journalists, make judgments about what messages to send. As a result, the messages they send are frames which are manifested by the presence or absence of keywords, phrases, images or sources of information (*cf* Lee & Kim 2010: 283). The framing and presentation of events in the media can systematically affect how recipients of the news come to understand these events. The importance of framing an issue, a person or an event in a particular manner is increased through repeated coverage (Du Plooy 2009: 226). A single newspaper story may have multiple frames (for example, structural, content, space and time frames). Each of these frames may also have different levels of dominance (*cf* McManus & Dorfman 2002: 2). According to Dimitrova & Lee (2009: 538), framing provides an appropriate theoretical basis for examining media messages.

## 2. Theoretical framework and measurement scheme

This study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and guided by Chyi & McCombs's (2004: 24) two-dimensional measurement scheme.

The notion that multiple environments influence individuals is not a new concept. Much has been written on the reciprocal nature between the individual, family, peer group, school, community and culture: all individuals are part of interrelated systems that locate the individual at the centre and move out from the centre to include all systems that affect the individual (Swearer & Espelage 2004: 2).

Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory it can be argued that school violence does not occur in isolation and must be understood across the different ecological systems. School violence is encouraged and/or inhibited as a result of the complex relationships between the individual, family, peer group, school, community and culture (Swearer & Espelage 2004: 1). Benbenishty & Astor (2005: 113) motivate the use of this model for analysing school violence as follows:

School violence is the product of many factors that are associated with multiple levels organized hierarchically (nested like a matryoshka doll): individual students within classes, classes within schools, schools within neighbourhoods, and neighbourhoods within societies and cultures.

This study uses a three-level ecology model to represent the complexity of the risk factors, as well as the impact of school violence on the victims, their work and their social environment. The first level identifies the biological and personal factors that influence how individuals behave and thus increase their likelihood of becoming victims or perpetrators of school violence: demographic characteristics, personality disorders, and a history of experiencing, witnessing or engaging in violent behaviour. This level also focuses on the association between the family environment and behaviour (for example, inadequate parental supervision, hostile discipline practices, and domestic violence). The second level focuses on the organisational or institutional factors that shape or structure the environment within which the individual exists and in which interpersonal relations occur. These aspects can be rules, policies, and acceptable behaviour within more formal organisations (for example, schools). The third level examines the broad societal factors that help create a climate in which violence is encouraged or inhibited: the responsiveness of the criminal justice system and/or trade unions, social and cultural norms regarding gender roles, the social acceptability of bullying, violence, and political instability. The foregoing exposition of the three-level ecology model is *mutatis mutandis* applicable to the prevention of violence: risk factors should be addressed on all three levels (*cf* Krug *et al*

2002: 1085). Henry (2009: 1254) cautions researchers who use this framework against treating the different levels in isolation rather than in an interactive matrix.

In search of a measurement scheme for news events, Chyi & McCombs (2004: 24) started with the fundamental question: “What is news?” According to them, “space” and “time” are two of the most important dimensions pertinent to the coverage of any news event. Time corresponds with the “when” in the five Ws of journalism. Space refers to the “where”, and may also include the “who”, the “what”, and even the “why”. The space dimension consists of five levels, ranging from the individual to the international. These levels can be interpreted as intervals on a continuum:

- Individual level

A news event is framed within a scope limited to the individuals involved in an event (for example, a crime story featuring the particulars of the perpetrator).

- Community level

A news event is framed as particular to a specific community (for example, teaching and learning milieu).

- Regional level

A news event is framed as relevant to a more general population, such as residents of an urban area (for example, a debate on the location of a soccer stadium in a city).

- Societal level

A news event is framed in terms of social or national significance (for example, a story associating the O J Simpson case with racism).

- International level

A news event is framed from an international perspective (for example, military action in a foreign country analysed in terms of power relations between different countries).

Chyi & McCombs’s (2004: 25) second dimension is time. They argue that, although according to conventional wisdom news deals with the present happenings, news stories may focus on

the past, thus providing historical background or tracing related events in the past or the future, making predictions about further developments, proposing actions to be taken, or evaluating the impact of the event in the future.

The decision to utilise Chyi & McCombs's (2004: 24) measurement scheme in the first phase of the study was motivated by the similarities between this scheme's space dimensions and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is used as the theoretical framework for the second phase of the study.

### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1 Sample

Articles related to the Krugersdorp samurai school attack published in South African newspapers during a one-month period (19 August 2008 to 18 September 2008) were retrieved from the SAMedia database.<sup>1</sup> Although the lifespan of a newsworthy item has been empirically described as 18.5 months, the duration of the Columbine event was one month, according to research (Birkland & Lawrence 2009: 1408, Muschert & Carr 2006: 752). The decision to retrieve newspaper articles for a period of one month was based on the assumption that the one-month lifespan of school killings can be generalised. Full-text keyword searches ("Krugersdorp", "violence", "murder" were the keywords) yielded 81 items related to the incident. It should be noted that syndicated articles are not replicated on SAMedia's database. An article published, for example, more than once in Media 24 newspapers will therefore appear only once on the database and indexed under the banner of the newspaper that first carried the story. Over 75% of the retrieved items concentrated on the first week. The amount of coverage diminished rapidly during the second week, with only 3.8% during the last two weeks of this one-month period. Among the 81 items, 19 were letters to the editor. As the letters to the

1 Cf <<http://www.samedia.uovs.ac.za/>>



editor reflect the interplay between the media agenda and the public agenda, the letters were excluded (Chyi & McCombs 2004: 27). The final data set contained 62 news stories and editorials.

## 3.2 Data analysis

### 3.2.1 First phase of the study

During the first phase of the study each article was coded on three variables: date of publication, space frame, and time frame. Coding for the “space” variables include:

- Individual

If the story focuses on the individuals (for example, the perpetrator, the victims, their family members, or bystanders), the interaction among them, or descriptions of their acts, reactions or background information.

- Community

If the story focuses on the Nic Diedericks Technical High School or the town (Krugersdorp).

- Regional

If the story focuses on the Gauteng Province or the West Rand.

- Societal

If the story focuses on concerns, events, or discussions of national interest.

- International

If the story focuses on related phenomena or societal problems observed in other countries.

Coding categories for the “time” variable include:

- Past

If the story focuses on previous events with no direct linkage to the key event (for example, school violence in the past, the perpetra-

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tor's school life history), analysis with a historical perspective, or editorial pieces based on past experiences.

- Present

If the story focuses on events/developments relating to the key event in time and the immediate consequences of the event.

- Future

If the story focuses on the long-term effects of the event, suggestions for solutions, or actions to be taken.

Two coders performed the content analysis in accordance with Chyi & McCombs's (2004: 28) guidelines. When a story contains multiple attributes, the coder identifies the dominant frame, based on the headline, the lead, or the central organising idea. To ensure intercessory reliability, several pretests were conducted until Scott's *pi* reached 0.80 across the two key variables "space" and "time" (Neuendorf 2002: 150, 154).

### 3.2.2 Second phase of the study

During the second phase of the study a qualitative content analysis and an interpretive approach was used (Cavaglioni 2009: 129) to analyse the 55 articles and editorials focusing on the three dominant space frames, namely the individual, the community and societal spaces. Henning *et al's* (2005: 104-6) guidelines were used to reduce, condense and group the content of the articles and editorials. A coding frame was drawn up which also provided for *verbatim* reporting where applicable. The researcher used pre-coded categories that were identified during the first phase of the study. All the data were processed and coded. Related codes were thereafter organised into preset categories. Upon completion of the categorisation, the articles and editorials were re-read to check whether all the important insights that had emerged from the data had been captured. From the categories, patterns and themes, which could also be linked to the second main research question, were identified and described. The identification of emergent themes allowed the information to be analysed and related to the literature. The researcher used an independent qualitative

researcher to do an independent re-coding of some of the data in order to determine whether the same themes became evident and could be confirmed. Consensus discussions between the researcher and the independent expert were held in order to determine the final findings of the research.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 First phase of the study

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the 62 news stories and editorials relating to the sword killing between 19 August and 11 September 2008. In line with the directives by Chyri & McCombs (2004: 28), the aim of this study was to analyse articles that appeared in newspapers for one month after the incident. The data search, however, did not produce any articles on the incident after 11 September 2008. Newspapers refocused on the incident in April 2009, when Harmse pleaded guilty on all charges of murder and attempted murder (Roestoff & Groenewald 2009: 1). The amount of coverage reached its peak on 20 August, immediately after the incident first appeared in the news, with 14 articles appearing in the papers on the same day. After the first week, the amount of coverage diminished rapidly and nearly disappeared from the media agenda after a mere 10 days.

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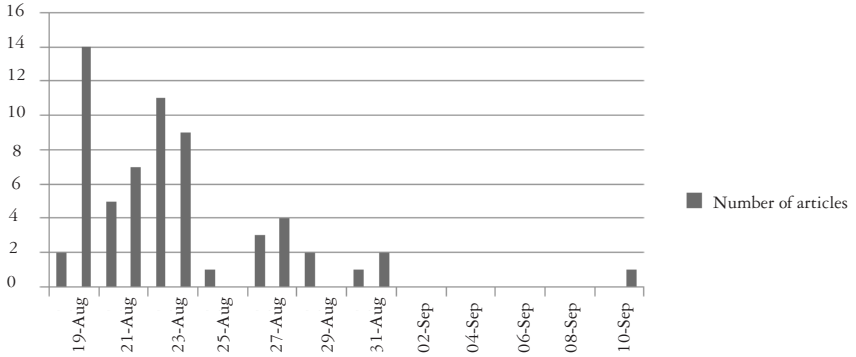


Figure 1: Distribution of newspaper articles

Of the 62 articles an equal number of articles, namely 20 (32.3%) adopted societal and individual frames, and 24.2% adopted a community frame. Only 9.7% adopted a regional frame. Aside from a *Daily Dispatch* (2008: 9) editorial that compared the sword killing with the Columbine massacre, none of the news stories or editorials adopted the international frame.

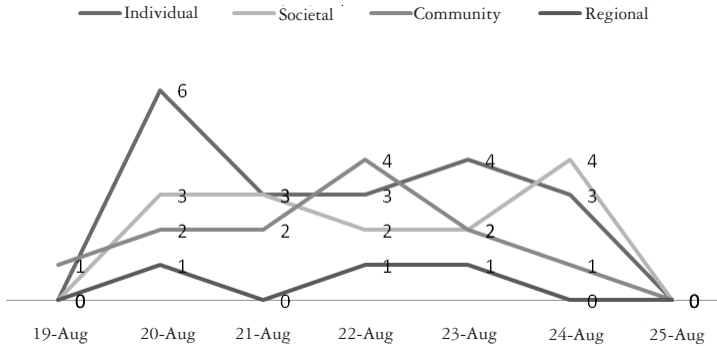


Figure 2: Distribution of space frames

Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of the three dominant space frames during the first week following the incident. The data reveal that the individual frame comprises 50% of the articles appearing immediately after the killing, thus suggesting that immediately after the killing the media focused on the individuals involved. Thereafter, the pattern changed, suggesting a more equal focus on the individuals involved, the teaching and learning milieu and the significance of the event for society at large, as well as the possible impact of societal risk factors on the event. During the second week following the incident, the societal frame dominated with two and four news stories on 27 and 28 August 2008, respectively. During this period, three articles focused on the school community and only one on the individuals involved. None of the articles focused on the other two space frames.

To address the third research question of the first phase of the study, the frames on the time dimension were examined: 42.6% adopted the present frame, while 29.5% dealt with the past and 27.9% focused on the future. Table 1 shows the relationship between the use of space frames and the use of time frames. Whereas any event can be framed in multiple ways, some frames are, according to Chyli & Combs (2004: 30), more important than others. In the current study the combination of the “individual” and the “present” on the space and time dimensions may be seen regarded as the core frame, namely the framing that initially propelled the object into the news. The introductory sentences of two articles capture the fundamental elements that constitute this incident :

He came dressed to kill – prepared for his one moment when the world would take notice of him (Smillie 2008: 3).

The boy behind the mask was a quiet, polite boy who had an obsession. Morné Harmse’s fixation with ninjas and masks turned deadly the day he brought a sword to school, intending to wield it (Serrao & Foss 2008a: 1).

Table 1: Space frame by time frame

		Time		
		Past	Present	Future
Space	Societal	18.2%	3.6%	14.5%
	Individual	1.8%	32.7%	1.8%
	Community	5.5%	9.1%	12.7%

Cell entries are a percentage of the total (n=55)

## 4.2 Second phase of the study

The three dominant media frames identified during the first phase of the study, namely the individual, community and societal spaces, may be equated to the three levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model, namely the personal/individual level (first level), the organisational level (teaching and learning milieu) (second level), and the societal level (third level). The subsequent exposition of the findings of the content analysis will be informed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model. The levels should not be dealt with in isolation.

### 4.2.1 Individual level

The media went to great lengths to paint a picture of “the ninja-hit man” (Chuenyane 2008: 6) and to a lesser extent, his parents. A minor theme on the individual level is the plight of the victims of the attack. The following discussion will focus on the two dissimilar pictures of Harmse, his home background and his religious orientation. Thereafter, the main narrative themes related to the victims will be considered.

#### 4.2.1.1 Who was/is Harmse?

In some newspaper articles Harmse is denounced. He is described as “a troubled youngster” who “became increasingly withdrawn and despondent over a period of five months”, was “heavily into ninjas and samurais”, and often made sketches of ninja-type characters (La Grange 2008: 1). He “had been known to do a lot of drugs” (Serrao & Foss 2008a: 1). He is also sketched as “a loner [who] enjoyed drawing and had not had a girlfriend since junior

school” and “a quiet, polite boy who had an obsession” (Serrao & Foss 2008a:1). Govender (2008: 5) cited members of Harmse’s family in her assertion that the event should be regarded as “a desperate plea for attention [and ...] Harmse had always wanted to be a celebrity [...] he wanted to be somebody”. Serrao & Foss (2008: 3) echo the view that Harmse was seeking recognition:

[...] the quiet boy needed elements of the mass media to make him feel like he belonged to something. He adopted things that he saw as strong: the ninja, Satanism and music groups.

Numerous articles paint a vivid picture of Harmse on the day of the rampage. In her portrayal of Harmse, Rademeyer (2008: 2) quotes a clinical psychologist who believes that the sword killing was the act of somebody who was mentally deranged (“psigiese stoornis”). According to a friend of Harmse, who was interviewed by Serrao & Foss (2008a: 1), he was “definitely in an alerted state [...] his eyes were not the same eyes, they were big and you just saw the whites. His voice was different”. This is supported by one of the victims (Bouwer) who was interviewed by La Grange (2008: 1):

He came to me once more, and started laughing in a strange voice  
[...] I did not recognise his voice.

Based on eyewitness accounts, Serrao & Foss (2008a: 1) create the notion that Harmse possessed supernatural strengths on the day of the killing; he was able to kill and hurt his victims with a blunt and heavy sword. The impression of a deranged human being is confirmed by Serrao & Foss’s (2008a: 1) portrayal of the aftermath of the rampage:

Eventually, Harmse sat down on a brick wall and stuck his sword into the ground. [...] he was laughing: ‘I killed three people, didn’t I?’

One of the most negative portrayals of Harmse is by Ajam (2008b: 4). He depicts Harmse as a criminal who acted with premeditation, in cold blood and with rational intent. Ajam builds his description on findings by a forensic graphologist. According to the graphologist, Harmse’s handwriting is:

[...] similar to that of many convicted serial killers. He might appear to be an obedient child, but was doomed to be a bad boy [...] who] was troubled and has a dark imagination.

In another article Ajam (2008a: 1) describes in detail how Harmse planned the attack. He states that Harmse “was neither bullied nor did he snap”. On the contrary:

He was a quiet, yet confident youngster who was very popular among those in his group. He apparently often talked about doing violent things, but he had never acted upon his word – until now.

Some newspapers elevate Harmse into a metaphor for deviant youths, as illustrated by the following citation from the *Saturday Star* (2008a: 14):

[...] our classrooms across the country have too many other dysfunctional youths, alienated from their families and angry at the world.

Not all newspapers draw a negative picture of Harmse. The mother of the injured boy told Roestoff (2008: 20) that she was surprised when she had heard that Harmse was the culprit. According to her, he was a diligent and well-behaved boy. Serrao & Floss (2008a: 1) cite a member of Harmse’s family describing him as “shy, well-mannered and playful”. Moname (2008: 4) quotes a learner saying:

The guy who did this was a normal pupil at school. He neither dressed weirdly nor acted strangely. He was a great guy.

Understandably, the most sympathetic portrayal of Harmse is in an open letter written by his parents to the Afrikaans daily newspaper *Beeld* (2008: 1). In this letter, Harmse’s parents give mitigating reasons for their son’s deeds. According to them, Harmse was bullied relentlessly because of his slight stature (he accepted bullying as part of his life). The bullying had a negative impact on his self-image (he saw himself as a failure). He wanted to give vent to all his pent-up anger and feelings of helplessness. They also said that their boy experimented with Satanism in order to feel more powerful and in control of his destiny. The parents also mentioned that when Harmse donned his mask on



the Monday morning, an all-encompassing stillness came over him; he wanted to stop, but could not. They also believed that his fear for possibly failing his matriculation examinations may have contributed to the deed. By publishing this letter as the leading article on the front page, *Beeld* (2008: 1) granted legitimacy to the parents' claims and elevated the letter from a personal perspective to the status of a newspaper article.

Whereas Harmse is portrayed in a variety of ways, it surfaced from the data analysis that newspapers – with the exception of a front-page article/letter in *Beeld* – sketched his home environment as mostly negative.

#### 4.2.1.2 The impact of Harmse's home environment on the sword killing

In several newspaper articles the blame for the killing is directly or indirectly placed on the parents. In some of these articles experts (for example, educationalists, psychologists) are quoted to validate the negative depiction (*cf* Rademeyer 2008: 2, Smillie 2008: 3). The *Saturday Star's* (2008a: 14) editorial states:

We believe that if Harmse's parents had been more involved in their son's life, they could have interceded long beforehand.

This view is emphasised by Ajam (2008a: 1). With reference to the satanic paraphernalia found in Harmse's room, Ajam notes that the perpetrator's mother "by her own admission [...] never entered [his room]". Govender (2008: 5) gives the following background information in her quest to find a reason for Harmse's rampage: the family lived in a rented house, his mother was hospitalised some years ago after suffering a nervous breakdown, and both parents had worked as security guards.

Harmse's parents' letter to *Beeld* (2008: 1) stands out in sharp contrast to the foregoing. According to the letter, Harmse grew up in a close-knit family of strict, fair and loving parents. The parents suggest that circumstances outside their control should be held responsible for their son's deeds.

Several journalists (*cf* Bezuidenhout 2008: 6) used the sword killing as a platform to air their views on the disintegration of family life and the lack of parental involvement. According to an editorial (*Saturday Star* 2008a: 14), the incident should not be viewed as an isolated case of school violence:

[...] there will be more violence, more deaths of the innocent, until we find the resolve to act once and for all against this scourge that lurks in our homes and in our families.

It may be concluded that the newspapers, with the exception of *Beeld*, were unsympathetic in their portrayal of Harmse's parents: they gave intimate details of their socio-economic circumstances, the mother's mental health and their lack of involvement in their son's life. This lack of parental involvement was also highlighted by journalists in their discussion of Harmse's alleged involvement with the occult.

#### 4.2.1.3 The possible impact of Harmse's spiritual orientation on the rampage

An important theme that became evident in analysing the data is the perpetrator's spiritual orientation. His alleged involvement with Satanism is prominent. Serrao & Foss (2008a: 1) and Ajam (2008a: 1) describe in detail the police's findings of satanic paraphernalia in Harmse's room. It is suggested that he experimented with Satanism "in the hope of protecting himself, escaping into the idea that he would experience some power" (La Grange 2008: 5). Two cartoons that were identified during the media search call attention to Satanism (*cf Cape Times* 2008: 8, *Saturday Star* 2008b: 14). Harmse's alleged involvement with Satanism is used as a starting-point for journalists to discuss some Durban school pupils' "horrific rituals" (Gouden 2008: 5) and to give guidelines on "how to spot signs of Satanism" (Barbeau 2008: 5). Mention is also made of claims that Harmse converted to Christianity after his arrest (for example, "Samurai accused turned to God. [...] He gave his heart to God [...] he is reading the Bible and praying") (La Grange 2008: 5).

The media thus portrayed him as a very troubled youth: he often talked about doing violent things; he planned the attack in detail; he had a fixation with swords; he was an attention-seeking loner who had a negative self-image; he blamed others for his deeds; he used drugs; he had a pre-occupation with the occult, violence, violent media and music; he lacked parental support, and he had a family history of mental illness.

It should be noted that, although these findings predominantly focus on the “dark side” of Harmse, a few articles portray him as “normal” and “a great guy”.

#### 4.2.1.4 The newspapers’ portrayal of the victims

The coverage of the victims of the slaying centres on three themes: the slaying of an innocent boy, the neutral portrayal of the injured learner, and the heroic gardeners.

Jacques Pretorius, who died at the hand of Harmse because he “was too close to Harmse when the boy started lashing around with his 60cm sword” (Ajam 2008a: 1), is depicted as an innocent victim. In an article entitled “Tears for the boy who was much loved”, Foss (2008: 4) writes about “the congregations [that] seemed numb with the shock of a young life taken too early”. Quoting the victim’s father (“he was my right hand”), the principal (“he was a naughty boy. But he was a well-balanced boy who participated actively in school life. He was close to my heart”) and the pastor (who told the family “You are not alone, we are crying with you”), and describing the emotions of the mourners, as well as photographs of the deceased vividly displayed in the church (“his blond hair messily framing a happy face”) create sympathy for Pretorius and his family. Pretorius is elevated to a hero. Newspapers mention that fellow-learners laid wreaths and wrote messages in memory of the deceased. One read: “Thank you for saving 600 lives. You are our hero, Jacques” (Govender 2008: 5).

Newspapers pay scant attention to the learner who survived the attack. With the exception of La Grange (2008: 1), who conducted an interview with Stephan Bouwer, articles merely mention his name, age and injury. Although La Grange (2008a: 1) mentions that Bouwer suffered from “a large, near-fatal gash to the head” and writes

that Boucher said “I will never forget what happened; I will never forgive him”, the focus of the article is Harmse. He quotes Boucher extensively in order to give the victim’s (negative) view of Harmse.

Whereas Boucher is predominantly mentioned in a neutral way, the two gardeners who came to Boucher’s rescue are elevated to the status of heroes. Several newspapers describe in detail how the two gardeners immediately and instinctively ran to render aid when they heard cries for help. Both were struck by Harmse when they “tried to stop Harmse’s death spree” (Ajam 2008a: 1).

It is thus evident that the majority of the newspaper articles paid scant attention to the victims of the slaying. They were, with the exception of the two gardeners, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

#### 4.3.1 The organisational level (teaching and learning milieu)

As was the case with the individual level, the media analysis reveals that there is no uniformity in the newspapers’ framing of the teaching and learning milieu. Conflicting views of the school’s security, as well as the staff’s ability to proactively prevent violence will be evident in the next exposition of the findings.

Monama (2008: 4) quotes a learner saying that the school where the slaying took place “is actually a very good school. Only registered pupils can enter the school. We use fingerprints to go through a revolving door”. This is confirmed by Serrao & Floss (2008b: 3): The school is “one of the best secured schools in Krugersdorp”. Fences guard the school from threats of the outside world; security cameras capture who goes in and out. Whereas the foregoing two articles depict the school as well secured, Chuenyane (2008: 6) emphasises the failure of the school to identify the perpetrator prior to the incident (“killer evaded safety net”). In linking with the foregoing article, Roestoff & Du Plessis (2008: 4) mention that the school was the only one in the specific school district which did not participate in the education department’s safety analysis.

From an article by Serrao & Floss (2008b: 3), it surfaced that the Nick Diedericks Technical High School is not only a well-secured school, but also a school in which the educators are seemingly knowledgeable about their learners’ emotional wellbeing and are willing

to act proactively (“regularly spoke to children to find out if anything was wrong”). According to the school’s principal,

[...] teachers had noticed that 18-year-old Morné Harmse had become withdrawn and very quiet over the last five months, but he had displayed no signs of violence. [...] last Thursday we had discussions with all the matrics [...] and we noticed that he didn’t have any vision for his future [...] we spoke about him on Friday and said we needed to do something, but Monday came and it was too late (Serrao & Floss 2008b: 3).

In the same mode, Govender (2008: 5) refers to an interview with the then Gauteng education MEC, Angie Motshekga, who said that the school was not to blame, despite the fact that staff had failed to heed the warning signs.

Whereas Serrao & Floss (2008b: 3) and Govender (2008: 5) use interviews with the principal and MEC to exonerate the school from blame, Tshemese (2008: 9) holds the school responsible. He deplores the fact that educators picked up “a sense of hopelessness” during panel discussions with Harmse, yet they ignored it. Moreover, he writes that Harmse “talked about violence, but no one took him seriously”. In a retrospective examination of the events he contrasts the school’s passivity with that of another school which he visited on the 18<sup>th</sup> (the day of the killing). According to him, this school has structures in place which deal with issues such as bullying, discrimination and human rights on a weekly basis. According to Tshemese (2008: 9), “kids are adrift in a sea of despair” because of a lack of compassion in schools.

Several newspaper articles use the sword killing as a platform to discuss and/or list other incidents of violence in South African schools. Jooste (2008: 5) writes, for example, that there is a “culture of fear in the classroom” and “this horrific incident is just one event in an alarmingly long list”. The *Saturday Star* (2008c: 4) gives a “timeline of South African school attacks in the past month”. According to Waldner (2008: 6), “the horrific sword-slaying [...] was but one in a series of violent incidents at schools”.

#### 4.3.2 Societal level

Several articles view the rampage as symptomatic of a sick society: “a reflection of what is happening in our society” (*Daily News* 2008: 3); “mirror the frustrations, anger and anxiety that are holding us hostage” (Khumalo 2008: 20), and “in a society with no moral compass, children go astray” (Foss 2008: 6).

A few newspaper articles use the sword killing as a point of departure to investigate possible reasons for school violence. Rademeyer (2008: 2) quotes several experts in her article in which she blames violence on television, in movies, on the worldwide web, and on modern technology such as MXit, SMSs, and iPods for the sword killing and other violent incidents in schools. In his in-depth article, written as a response to the sword killing, Bezuidenhout (2008: 6) expands on Rademeyer’s discussion. He also blames, among others, gangsterism, peer pressure, friends, materialism, and the lack of positive values, drugs and the culture of violence for the violence in schools. In his discussion on the culture of violence, Bezuidenhout (2008: 6) argues that the South African youth view violence as acceptable behaviour often modelled on that of political and/or community leaders. Khumalo (2008: 20) believes that the main cause for school violence is the unprofessional conduct of some educators, the prevailing human rights culture and a lack of discipline in schools.

In their quest to explain the sword killing, several journalists mention that Harmse donned a home-made mask resembling those of the metal band “Slipknot”. Although Evans & Swart (2008: 3) do not directly blame heavy metal music, their article mentions incidents in the USA in which this type of music was, among others, linked to the killing of a Californian man and an incident of grave robbery. They also quote a member of a South African heavy metal band as saying:

If you are down, then the music [lyrics] will work with your mind.  
You need to be mentally strong to listen to that kind of music.

Rademeyer (2008: 2) cautions in her discussion of the possible role heavy metal music played in instigating the killing. She quotes a psychologist who said that children who listen to this

type of music may lose track of reality. Labuschagne, a forensic criminologist, supports the view that heavy metal music cannot be blamed for the incident (Smillie 2008: 3). She comments:

[...] if it is heavy metal that drives teenagers to kill, we would all have been dumped off by now.

This sentiment is shared by Serrao & Foss (2008: 3):

[...] thousands of youngsters are interested in the same type of things [i.e. heavy metal music, the occult and ninjas ... yet] none of them lifted the sword that day and killed another child.

At a societal level, journalists identified numerous scapegoats for the sword killing, including a sick society, the disintegration of values, modern communication and entertainment technology, the media and popular culture.

## 5. Discussion

A total of 62 articles adopting various kinds of frames on the space and time dimensions kept the sword killing alive in the newspapers for three weeks and contributed to its importance on the media agenda. The newspapers developed the salience of the sword killing by emphasising different aspects of this incident over time to keep the story fresh (*cf* Figure 2, Chyli & Combs 2004: 30). For example, the societal level gained ground in the second week following the event. Overall, this event was framed mostly at the individual level and the present time frame. The majority of the articles sensationalised the event and the individuals involved, thus often resulting in superficial reporting. In line with evidence supplied by Birkland & Lawrence (2009: 1406), it may be argued that, because of the relatively short lifespan of the event (Figure 1), its impact on public opinion was limited. The sword killing faded from view and long-term public attempts to change policies on school violence in response to the tragedy thus diminished.

A multitude of explanations for the killing were posited in the articles that were analysed. For some, the answers can be found in the individual and his home environment; for others, in the negligence

of the school or with the impact of the media and popular culture. Some focused on the interplay between the individual, the school and the community. In the subsequent discussion, the findings from the content analysis will be linked, where possible, with research findings on media analysis and school violence *per se*. It should, however, be mentioned that the aim of the study was not to investigate school violence or to critique the soundness of the newspapers' perspectives on specific aspects of school violence. The linking of the media frames to the findings on school violence should be regarded as a limited attempt to place the newspaper frames within the broader academic debate on school violence.

In casting Harmse negatively, journalists set him apart from "normal" boys in society. According to Consalvo (2003: 33), this is a common discursive shift journalists make when portraying men who kill. Harmse was framed as deviant. Consalvo (2003: 33) argues that this positioning has often been used to differentiate between "good" men who do not pose a threat to others, and men more likely to be considered "bad" or sociopaths; "men outside the main stream of society". Harmse was on the wrong side of the divide – even wearing a black mask associated with "Slipknot", brandishing a ninja sword and in possession of satanic paraphernalia in his room. Some newspapers used terms such as "killer", "bad boy" and "a dark imagination", as well as minute descriptions of the strangeness of his voice and the whiteness of his eyes on the day of the rampage as evidence of evil. He is, however, also portrayed as a shy, quiet, well-mannered boy who was desperate for fame and the victim of relentless bullying. Harmse's act may thus also be viewed, in line with findings by school violence researchers such as Klein (2006: 61), as retaliation from a small, bullied and lonely boy against the hegemonic masculinity that prevails in schools where manliness, sport and power prevails. In line with Klein's (2006: 67) findings, it may be argued that Harmse was ostracised and therefore unable to walk and speak freely without fear of being bullied. He therefore looked for a way to give himself power and prestige, and perhaps establish himself as a new leader. Yet, in his destructive acts, he magnified the same power structures that were used repeatedly to humiliate him. He used masculinity



signifiers – violence and a samurai sword – to try to prove that he was the most powerful boy in the school. He felt momentarily vindicated (“[...] he was laughing: ‘I killed three people, didn’t I?’”), yet he failed in the end. He is currently serving time for his deeds.

Some newspapers depicted Harmse as a “super predator” (being able to effortlessly kill and hurt people with a heavy and blunt sword), a vicious killer (Harmse’s handwriting is similar to that of convicted serial killers), utterly devoid of any feeling and incapable of remorse (the description of Harmse triumphantly laughing after his rampage). This depiction validates Muschert’s (2007: 351) view that the post-Columbine media coverage has created the myth of the child “super predator”.

In his article on the framing of Columbine victims and perpetrators, Muschert (2007: 352) writes that there are four myths related to the narrative development of a story. In Table 2 the four characteristics of crime myths will be juxtaposed with findings from the current study. According to Muschert (2007: 352), myths help people to understand the causes and solutions to challenges in life. The existence of myths about crime and justice are no different, in that

[...] they provide us with a conceptual framework from which to identify certain social issues as crime related, to develop our personal opinions on issues of justice, and to apply ready-made solutions to social problems (Kappeler & Potter, in Muschert 2007: 352).

Table 2: Crime myths and the sword killing

Characteristics of a crime myth	The sword killing
A myth requires the identification of innocent and often helpless victims.	Jacques Pretorius and Stephan Bower. Both boys were in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were the victims of a random attack.
A myth requires the appearance of brave and virtuous heroes.	Mr Sam Namamela and Mr Joseph Kodisang intervened without thinking about their own safety.  Pretorius is elevated to a hero ( <i>cf</i> the article on his memorial service).

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Characteristics of a crime myth	The sword killing
There must be a threat to legitimate and established norms, values and lifestyles.	The rampage becomes a symbol of “the frustrations, anger and anxiety that are holding us hostage”. The disintegration of teaching and learning.
A crime myth needs the identification of a deviant population as responsible.	The occult and popular culture (for example, heavy metal music, modern technology, ninjas), materialism, negligent parents, deviant youths, and so on.

While journalists could have framed the victims and the perpetrator of the sword killings in many ways, the content analysis reveals that they may also have drawn on crime myths. Harmse is a typical example of a youth offender (for example, male, premeditative, devoid of any feeling, issues with substance use, stress and poor coping skills, low interest in school, no aspirations) (*cf* McGowan 2008: 51, Muschert 2007: 363, Strawhacker 2002: 689) and a “super predator”. The victim narratives demonstrate the other three characteristics of crime myths: the presence of innocent victims, the appearance of heroes, and the threat to established norms (*cf* Table 2).

A frame that became obvious in the analysis of the articles is that the killing had its roots in the lower middle-class whites of the West Rand. Reference was made to the parents’ rented house and their occupation, the mother’s nervous breakdown and implied negligence. The importance the media attached to Harmse’s home environment is in line with research findings. Various studies have focused on factors relating to the family environment of children who kill. Fritzon & Brun (2005: 54), Klein (2006: 64), Pietersen (2005: 463), Rabrenovic *et al* (2004: 118) and Strawhacker (2002: 69) refer to several studies that have found that children who commit serious offences (for example, kill) are often raised by uncaring parents, have grown up in broken homes, or in families that can be described as violent, abusive, inconsistent and aggressive, and come from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. These findings should, however, be read with caution: “the qualities that differentiate families with dysfunctional and pathological offspring from those that produce murderers

remain vague at best” (Fritzon & Brun 2005: 54). Research on the possible impact of differentiating socio-economic status on school violence is also inconclusive (*cf* Klein 2006: 64).

Rabrenovic *et al* (2004: 115) and Strawhacker (2002: 68) argue that most schools, contrary to popular belief, are relatively safe places. The findings of this study draw two conflicting pictures of the school’s efforts to create a safe teaching and learning environment. This study has shown that even sophisticated security systems can be bypassed. Whereas several newspapers insinuated that the school may be held responsible for the killing because of its inability to prevent the slaying, others quoted experts to exonerate the school from any blame. Researchers echo the expectation that schools will create a safe learning environment by creating and implementing policies to curb misbehaviour and violence (Petersen 2005: 469).

Several newspapers provided information on the music of the USA rockers “Slipknot” and even discuss the possible influence of the band’s music on the killing of a man by two Californian teenagers in 2003 after listening to the band (Evans & Swart 2008: 3). Whereas the South African media cautiously focus on “Slipknot” as a possible cause for the sword killing, the American media scrutinised the impact of video games on the Columbine killings (Consalvo 2003: 38). According to Consalvo (2003: 38), the Internet and video games have been turned into the “new scapegoats”. In line with this view, Mahiri & Conner (2003: 112), in their article on black youth violence in America, argue that the media often turn “dangerous others” (in this case “Slipknot”) into scapegoats. In this way, other social forces and institutions are absolved of responsibility. Mahiri & Conner (2003: 121) quote Chomsky (1995):

The building up of scapegoats and fear is standard [...] You don’t want people to look at the actual source of power; that’s much too dangerous, so, therefore, you need to have them blame or be frightened of someone else.

This confirms Birkland & Lawrence’s (2009: 1409) observation, in their study on media framing of the Columbine massacre, that “corrosive popular culture seemed a logical explanation for unrelated events in different parts of the country” and that “pop

culture was the culprit most explored in thematic news coverage". The inclination of journalists to examine the way in which culture, and the economic, social and political structures of South Africa may lead to school violence is also common in research on school violence (Henry 2000: 27).

The analysed articles abound with possible reasons for and allegations of who should be held responsible for the slaying. Yet, solutions are scarce and not explicit (for example, guidelines on how parents could identify their children's possible involvement with Satanism). De Wet (2009) however, found that newspapers often use incidents of school violence as a platform to provide prevention strategies.

This article, which provides a glimpse, through the eyes of newspapers, of an incidence of school violence in a South African context, fills a hiatus in the media framing literature. Juxtaposing the multitude of explanations for the killing that were identified with international research highlighted the similarities rather than the differences in the South African and international media's reporting of incidence of school violence. None of the analysed newspaper articles explored the possible impact of South Africa's socio-political and economic milieu on the sword killing. On the contrary, some of the articles stressed the influence of USA pop culture (USA rockers "Slipknot") on the perpetrator. Through the myth-like depiction of the sword killing, the negative portrayal of Harmse and his parents, and the creation of scapegoats, the media formed a divide between the incident/perpetrator and the reader. This enables readers to detach themselves from this horrific incident and the Harmse family ("they are not like us"). The detachment of the readers is also strengthened by the sensationalised, superficial character of the majority of the reports, the short life cycle of the story, as well the lack of media advocacy for policy changes in order to create safer schools.

This study has several limitations. The content analysis focused on a narrow time period following a particular news event, namely the sword killing. The results may thus not be generalised to other types of events. The analysis included only the first/original article that appeared in syndicated newspapers in order to exclude repro-

duced articles. Including all the news articles may have revealed a larger number of articles and thus different patterns of coverage.

The media frames projected in the media coverage of the sword killing may evoke cognitive reactions that support the particular frame and reinforce previously held stereotypes of school violence (*cf* O'Grady *et al* 2010: 58). Will Harmse become a metaphor for dysfunctional male youths who kill innocent victim(s)? Or a symbol of victims of bullying who seek retribution? Or will societal ills, Satanism, rock music, lack of parental involvement and indifferent educators be held accountable for school violence?

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