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Robinson Meyer

The Righteous Anger of the Parkland Shooting's Teen Survivors

Students have mourned and rallied the public after the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High that left 17 dead.

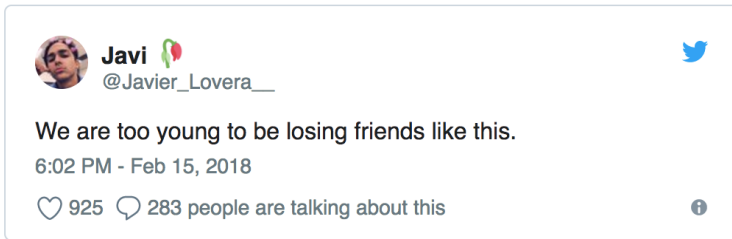


Students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School attend a memorial for their teachers and classmates on Thursday. Image credit: Thom Baur/AP

Something was different about the mass shooting this week in Parkland, Florida, in which 14 students and three adults were killed.

It was not only the death toll. The mass murder at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High became the deadliest high-school shooting in American history (edging out Columbine, which killed 13 in 1999).

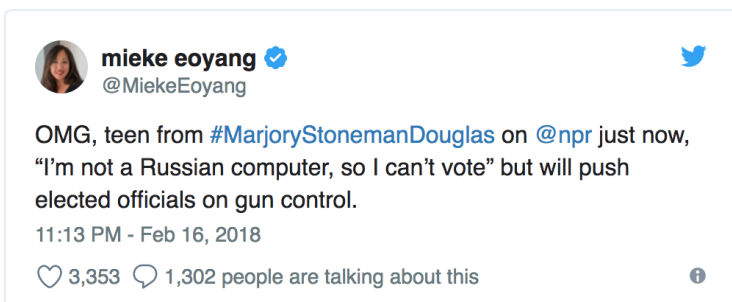
5 What made Parkland different were the people who stepped forward to describe it. High-school students – the survivors of the calamity themselves – became the voice of the tragedy. Tweets that were widely reported as coming from the students expressed grief for the victims, pushed against false reports, and demanded accountability.



10 On television, on social media, they were unignorable. Many of them called for legislation to address the violence.

“We are children. You guys are the adults. Work together, come over your politics, and get something done,” David Hogg, a student who survived the killing, told CNN.

Another student was more pithy:





15 As the death toll rose, survivors leapt into the debate. When President Trump tweeted his condolences to the victims, and then said that neighbors and classmates should always report “bad and erratic behavior ... to authorities,” one student responded directly to him:




2/14/18, 5:42 PM

136K Retweets 325K Likes



She later deleted that tweet and said:

 **Sarah Chadwick// #NEVERAGAIN** 
@sarahchad_ 


@realDonaldTrump hello I'm the 16 year old girl who tweeted you that I didn't want your condolences, I wanted gun control, and went viral because of it. I heard you are coming to my community soon. I would love for you to hear my opinions on gun control in person.



- a survivor
7:46 PM - Feb 16, 2018
♡ 66.5K 💬 21.3K people are talking about this 

20 When the conservative pundit Tomi Lahren demanded that “the left ... let the families grieve for even 24 hours before they push their anti-gun and anti-gun-owner agenda,” the same survivors, who knew the victims, responded in kind:


 **Kyra**
@longlivekcx 

A gun has killed 17 of my fellow classmates. A gun has traumatized my friends. My entire school, traumatized from this tragedy. This could have been prevented. Please stfu tomi [twitter.com/tomilahren/sta...](https://twitter.com/tomilahren/status/9641111111)

6:48 AM - Feb 15, 2018
♡ 559K 💬 187K people are talking about this 

 **carly**
@car_nove 

I was hiding in a closet for 2 hours. It was about guns. You weren't there, you don't know how it felt. Guns give these disgusting people the ability to kill other human beings. This IS about guns and this is about all the people who had their life abruptly ended because of guns. [twitter.com/tomilahren/sta...](https://twitter.com/tomilahren/status/9641111111)

2:00 PM - Feb 15, 2018
♡ 895K 💬 363K people are talking about this 

 **nikki**
@nikta04 

it is actually about guns u witch from hell [twitter.com/tomilahren/sta...](https://twitter.com/tomilahren/status/9641111111)

2:02 PM - Feb 15, 2018
♡ 26.9K 💬 4,506 people are talking about this 

It all seems like a new phenomenon. After Sandy Hook¹, the victims' parents became their de facto advocates, a role they still hold. And in the wake of a mass shooting that targets adults, usually victims' husbands, wives, parents, or adult children speak for them. But this is the largest *high-school* shooting in the social-media age – so it centers on adolescents, who can discuss and understand the tragedy as adults but who are as blameless for it as children.

Of course, not all teens may get the same hearing. Stoneman Douglas is a mostly white school in a mostly upper-middle-class area. From John Hughes² on down, the white suburban teenager is a cherished figure in American culture, and that may give their pleas heightened visibility – even, perhaps, across party lines. That's not a cut against the Douglas kids at all, but merely a note that the press and the public may not regard all high schoolers rallying against gun violence with the same seriousness.

It's easy to look at the conversation over the past few days and conclude that teens must be getting savvier about the news. The televised political culture of *Crossfire* and *Meet the Press*³ is basically Deep History for many of today's high schoolers, who would likely cite the election of Barack Obama as one of their earliest historical memories.

The current cohort came to heightened political awareness during the 2016 election, meaning they have watched the logic of Twitter absorb the presidency while adopting and adjusting the language of Twitter – and Snapchat and Instagram – for themselves. They bicker about the intersectional⁴ politics of young-adult novels on Tumblr; they trade in a constantly shifting visual culture of memes and half-remembered Vines⁵.

Their lives have been drenched in media, and they have made much of that media themselves. They are used to telling their story. And when their story suffered a catastrophe, they told it.

But media savvy alone doesn't explain what the kids have done. Hogg, the Douglas student who talked to CNN, is also a student journalist. With keen reportorial instinct, he interviewed his fellow students *while the shooting was taking place* – in a closet, in a classroom, while the school remained on lockdown. In the brief video he captured, a female student whose name was not given appeared to see the shooting as a political event – even before it ended.

"I don't really think there's anything new to say, but there shouldn't have to be," she told Hogg. "Because if you looked around this closet and saw everyone just hiding together, you would know that this shouldn't be happening anymore, and that it doesn't deserve to happen to anyone."

This is what astonished and confronted me while watching Stoneman Douglas High's speakers for the dead. Even as the shooting was happening, many of them talked about it not as an inexplicable catastrophe, not as an unforeseeable tragedy, but as something that just happens. A car crash, not an earthquake. It was something they had trained for, something they had perhaps visualized in their head once or twice before. And since it was almost normal, it was preventable – and thus political.

Those students understand that they live in a country that they have very little power to change – a country where, several times a year, a school for children becomes a charnel house. So when that hideous transformation struck *their* school, they already knew what they wanted to do. That girl in the closet, talking to her classmate, anticipated the next several days of talking points without knowing whether she would get to see those days at all. These assorted Florida teenagers knew the contours of the gun debate so well that they were rebutting NRA⁶ talking points just after emerging from their safe zones. Now, a few days later, their insistence on their own authority has gummed up the works of the otherwise clichéd national debate. Their calls for action may not lead to any imminent change in policy. But they have given the country a striking symbol of what – and who – we're really talking about when we have these debates.

¹ *Sandy Hook*: an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut where a school shooting took place in 2012

² *John Hughes*: (1950-2009) American film director

³ *Crossfire*, *Meet the Press*: current events television programmes

⁴ *intersectional*: relating to discrimination

⁵ *Vine*: a video hosting platform

⁶ *National Rifle Association*: an organisation that lobbies against gun control

And they will not be the last victims to face a loaded assault rifle and think: *This is preventable. I must politicize this.*

65 Which is a tragedy. Even as they endure the restrictions of childhood, these high schoolers have adopted the frustrated and realist politics of adults. And it's clear that was true before the first shot went off, before the first ambulance arrived, before the first newspaper listed their friends on its front page. They are teenagers in the United States in 2018, which means that they have been preconditioned to grow up fast.

(2018)