What We Don’t Know: the Media Legacy of the Columbine Massacre and Present-Day Prevention

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WHAT WE DON’T KNOW: THE MEDIA LEGACY OF THE COLUMBINE MASSACRE
AND PRESENT-DAY PREVENTION

by

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A dissertation submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Media Studies
2017
This dissertation entitled:
What We Don’t Know: The Media Legacy of the Columbine Massacre and Present-day Prevention
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IRB protocol # 17-0169
Daggett, Chelsea (Ph.D., Media Studies)

What We Don’t Know: The Media Legacy of the Columbine Massacre and Present-day Prevention

Dissertation directed by Associate Professor Elizabeth Skewes

The Columbine Massacre holds an important place in America’s cultural memory. This study examines why this particular mass shooting, as opposed to hundreds of others, made such a strong impact. Using Conjunctural analysis, I summarize the historical factors that made this shooting a ruptural moment that represented the Moral Panic over youth delinquency in the 1990s. This study also examines how the vibrant narrative about the Columbine Massacre, complete with trench coats, Nazis, and bullied outcasts still echoes across media coverage of mass shootings today despite its weak relationship to the facts of the case. Content analysis guides conclusions about just how far removed discussions of prevention were from most of the media coverage of the shooting which primarily focused on victims. Prevention remains stagnant today as sharing a Facebook post becomes synonymous with gun violence prevention advocacy in the public mind. After interviewing prevention experts who hope to deepen the conversation about mass shootings to address their complexity, I suggest a new media model that can inform the audiences of ways to affect real change. Using historical analysis, content, analysis, and interviews with prevention experts, this study concludes that present-day prevention is limited by a narrative of senselessness and focus on victims that dominates media coverage today.
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CHAPTER I

Public Memory Revised: The Columbine Massacre and Politics

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and killed 13 people before killing themselves in what is commonly known as the Columbine Massacre. This mass shooting represents the moment when mass shootings became a central cultural event facilitated by live news coverage on site, wild speculation by reporters that subsequently compromised the police investigation, and graphic images of survivors injured or in mourning. All these vivid images of crisis signaled a watershed moment in the relationship between news media and spectacular violence. The event solidified news coverage of mass shootings into a cohesive trope, informed by common sense, that provided explanations quickly and offered an easy-to-replicate model for future events. However, the story of the Columbine Massacre slowly became more complex as details surfaced that questioned the speculation reported regularly throughout the first week of coverage. Myths about the local Gothic Subculture in Littleton, assumptions about the shooters targeting victims based on characteristics like race and religion, as well as simple explanations about juvenile delinquency, video games, and bullied loners were disproven long after the original media buzz about the shooting subsided (Toppo; 2009, Apr. 14). One early commentary argued that,

“Human beings are ciphers, capable of terrible acts. When someone does something this awful, and this unusual, it does no good to pretend we can reduce it to any simple lesson… We do know that bullies routinely picked on Harris, Klebold, and others like them... But most outcasts do not take weapons to school and kill the people who tormented them. We don't know what it was inside Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold that made them into the exception And we never will” (Walker; 1999, July, emphasis added).
Jesse Walker’s comments subscribe to the assumed inexplicability of this act. Shooters continue to be viewed as exceptions who cannot be understood or helped before they reach the moment of violence. Because mass shootings still occur all too frequently in our culture, we must not immediately dismiss the possibility of understanding. Violence may be an age-old problem with no absolute solutions but in the almost two decades since the Columbine Massacre, research has found that there are ways to prevent some of these events.

This project develops a media model meant to reduce the uncertainty around the issue of mass shootings. This research mobilizes individuals who prioritize complex explanations of these events to inform the public of actions they can take to address the problem. The Columbine Massacre uncovered many ethical short-comings in contemporary news coverage of crises. However, this project diverges from those issues to focus on what the media and researchers often don’t discuss; how dialogue about multiple social issues along with the shooters motivations reveals possible spaces of intervention. This project addresses four research questions to develop a full picture of context, text, and audience:

Research Question 1: Why was this shooting so impactful over the long-term and not another? Why 1999 as the historical moment of rupture?

Research Question 2: How has media coverage of Columbine framed, narrowed, or shaped common discourses about mass shootings? How do these definitions limit institutional or policy reactions?

Research Question 3: Who defines which pressures and circumstances are highlighted in media coverage of mass shootings?

Research Question 4: What is unique about the perspective of “alternative audiences”?

Sub-question 1: How could constructive discussions of mass shootings include the majority stakeholder perspectives?

Sub-question 2: Could a more well-rounded approach lead to a more active discussion and/or more effective, creative solutions to the problem of mass shootings?

This project argues that news coverage of the Columbine Massacre established a legacy of stagnant prevention efforts and emptied meaning from media coverage of subsequent mass
shootings. Media-makers continue to excuse a lack of critical thinking by prioritizing an emphasis on victims and citing journalism ethics. There are lots of ethical dilemmas that need to be considered to protect victims, but journalism also has a duty to the public. Part of that duty is to inform citizens of broader social issues that require change and intervention so that the public can become active in responding to those social issues. The project will examine the social process by which Moral Panic supported these news norms, the media texts that were used as a template in future reporting, and how well-informed and strongly invested audiences use those texts or revise them in their prevention efforts and advocacy. Overall, the dismissal of alternative, complex explanations for mass shootings in news coverage of the Columbine Massacre indicates a deep need to reassess the significance of this tragic event.

**Overcoming Entrenched and Rigid Responses**

Much media research about mass shootings originates from the realm of journalism ethics and begins from the knee-jerk dismissal of “alternative audiences” who have something complicated or controversial to contribute to the social conversation about these events. The Columbine Massacre presented a limited set of narrative tropes for understanding mass shootings as an event-driven genre. Thomas de Zengotita (1999) described this genre in *Harper’s Magazine*, immediately after the shooting. He states “it is very much a show, and not only in the trivial sense that anything covered by the media becomes a show. ‘Senseless School Shooting’ is now a genre with resonance across the country because it unites universality and specificity so compellingly” (de Zengotita; 1999, 56, emphasis added). The Columbine Massacre established the genre in every way; even the name still invokes important ideas about mass shootings. De Zengotita views the emptiness and inexplicability that was emphasized in news coverage as a by-
product of audiences knowing and clinging to the tropes assigned to these events rather than
digging into the issues that underlie mass shootings.

Censuring the shooters’ perspective plays a large role in news coverage of mass
shootings. The national media’s preoccupation with the shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold,
drew criticism from journalists and the public alike. Overall, 35.5% of New York Times articles
featured shooters while 32.3% featured victims; an almost even amount of coverage. Meg Moritz
(2011), speaking from the perspective of news-makers, states that journalists “must confront who
committed this crime and why. The video diaries offer some answers to those questions…”
Nonetheless, allowing school shooters to circulate heroic self-portraits in which their alienation
is valorized and their depression and psychological ills are masked is no doubt difficult for
audiences to see at a moment of communal crisis” (153). The ethical struggle to choose between
covering the shooters or the victims (as though these things can’t coexist) represents a distraction
from prevention efforts. Normalized news coverage limits discussion of shooters’ motivations,
personal details, and even names to preserve sensitivity to the victims. As a result, what is and is
not revealed publicly limits conversation at the outset. We cannot discuss what we don’t know.
As a result, our news coverage of mass shootings often has large gaping holes where proposed
interventions should be. Without knowing who the shooters are, we cannot know why these
things happen. Without knowing why these things happen, we cannot begin to stop them from
happening again.

Even victims view information about prevention as a high priority. The survivors
included in this study, for instance, approached the issue as well-informed, proactive political
advocates. Many have directly experienced or helped those experiencing a personal loss after a
mass shooting. The generic quality of news coverage often prohibits survivors from telling their
story and highlighting these issues. Researcher Kim Walsh-Childers (2011) asked survivors of the Virginia Tech Shooting about their good and bad experiences with journalists. The desire to tell their story their way was one of the main themes that Walsh-Childers found. For instance, after the Virginia Tech Shooting, the father of victim Jamie Bishop, “praised ABC [who] honored the Bishops’ request to mention the… peace studies center… gun control, and to dispute something then-President George W. Bush had said about the shootings” despite ABC’s advice not to get political (Walsh-Childers; 2011, 200). After the Columbine Massacre, Daniel Mauser’s father, Tom Mauser, and Brooks Browns’ family spoke out against the Jefferson County Police Department for their neglect of obvious warning signs. And when the National Rifle Association (NRA) hosted a convention in Denver just 11 days after the shooting, Tom Mauser led a throng of protestors with the infamous sign “My son Daniel died at Columbine. He’d expect me to be here today.” These examples show how the focus on the media being “sensitive” to victims ignores their own insensitivity to the issues that victims find important. Are journalists serving victims or themselves with this gesture? This project focuses less on what is considered acceptable or insensitive and more on how new, effective norms for news coverage of mass shootings can be developed in service of prevention.

The news coverage of the Columbine Massacre offered a variety of potential “causes” for the shooting that rested on a legacy of Media Effects extending all the way back to the Payne Fund Studies, an example of early administrative research. Administrative research originates from institutions who essentially “buy” research findings that support pre-existing agendas. Garth Jowett (1996) prepared an extensive history of the Payne Fund Studies which were funded under the assumption that the results would show the negative effects of films on youth. Although the researchers initially felt “sympathy for… negative presuppositions about motion
pictures’ influence, their research experiences opened many areas of contradiction and complexity… Even if the Payne Fund researchers’ projects failed, they did so only in that they did not provide support for [the belief] that the movies directly, and detrimentally, influenced children” (Jowett; 1996, 59). The Payne Fund Studies found there were few direct effects on youth because of film, contradicting the original goal of the project and leading to a series of confused research findings. This history of administrative research reflects institutional responses to the Columbine Massacre. Responses to mass shootings were directed by pre-existing beliefs and agendas held by politicians and advocates alike. Fears about violent youth were connected to violent media in the aftermath. These pre-determined narratives also guided responses towards a Media Effects argument for why the shooting occurred.

The Media Effects paradigm originated from Moral Panic that suggested watching violence, sex, etc. in new media forms would encourage such behavior, specifically in youth. Early studies in this discipline believed that “it was logical to set up studies of information, attitudes, health, and emotions as well as upon one-to-one correspondence between motion pictures and child behavior” (Charters; 1934, 5); what is also commonly known as the hypodermic needle model of media. Many readers and journalists alike accepted there was such a one-to-one correlation between behavior and media consumption after the Columbine Massacre; video games, Gothic Subcultures, violent films, and more were said to play an important causal role in the shooting. However, this paradigm has long since shifted and very few academic researchers still depend on such a simplistic model.

More recent Media Effects research focuses on the ways that individual personal histories influence receptivity to media messages and concludes that media may have some positive, cathartic effects for audiences at-risk of committing violence as well. Joseph Klapper’s (1960)
research on Media Effects rested on a belief in “the reinforcement of the existing attitudes or behavioral tendencies of the individual audience member, be these socially good or ill…
determined, a least in part, by the personal experiences of the audience member” (160). Klapper acknowledges that individuals approach media from many different positions which affects the individual’s susceptibility to media messages based on their behavioral tendencies and their own history. The difficulty of controlling for individual quirks has led to mixed-methods and the theory of Limited Effects. This Limited Effects paradigm more closely resembles Popular Culture’s relationship to the Columbine Massacre and other mass shootings as well. In particular, the Limited Effects approach justifies concerns about the “copycat effect.” The “copycat effect” argues that publishing details about mass shootings and perpetrators will encourage future mass shooters. This concern doesn’t account for the way that individuals are primed with the interest and motivation to commit a mass shooting before consuming media coverage of these events. To posit a clear cause-and-effect relationship between individualized factors and very common behaviors of media consumption misleads viewers by simplifying these events. Cause-and-effect are inverted, and prevention stifled.

Critical discussion of mass shootings is also limited because policy topics don’t make compelling stories. Critical media theories conclude that the media thrive by exploiting victims and have no need to address prevention—ending the phenomenon would go against their self-interest. Journalism’s preoccupation with the victim speaks to the critical media perspective originating from anxieties about the “grief industry” (Linenthal; 2001, 88). This ambivalence about commodification dissuades individuals from action as well. Critical theory argues that escaping the Marxist cycle of reproduction is the only way social change can even become possible. Max Horkheimer (1976) laments this cycle stating that in “the internal and external
tensions of the modern era; it generates these tensions over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation for the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism” (227). Critical studies theorists view social structure as a cycle that cannot easily be intervened upon. They prefigure the reality of hindered development and heightened fear associated with the commodification of grief without offering any solutions. These theories believe that the profit motive dictates media content rather than any ethical sense of duty to the public. Cynical perspectives of media-makers have some value in explaining why journalists’ ethical gestures are not entirely genuine and work against the public interest. But these theorists stop short of articulating effective ways to break away from mainstream meanings towards a deeper discussion of prevention. The inability of critical theory to accommodate the complexity of contradiction or see potential acts of resistance as incremental to change delimits its use for a political project of resistance.

Restoring complexity to public discussions about mass shootings and encouraging action in the name of understanding and prevention requires a more hopeful and constructive, rather than critical, perspective. Several realms of media theory offer more options for this type of intervention. Cultural Studies offers a broad basis for describing the process of cultural authorship, centrally driven by media and institutions. Not only does Cultural Studies attempt to make sense of the process that establishes cultural narratives about phenomena, but it also discusses the position of youth (central to the post-Columbine Moral Panics), focuses on political intervention, and uses a historically situated mode of analysis. This theory explains how society controls information about tragedies using pre-existing cultural material. Public memory
discusses how social gestures of mourning and memorialization define the meaning of tragedies like the Columbine Massacre. This theory is hopeful in that it believes that public memory is open to revision. However, this theory also acknowledges that institutions and centralized functions of Social Control, like Moral Panic, make revision difficult to legitimize. The sub-field of Audience Studies offers a way to examine various audiences who receive information about mass shootings as a catalyst for change. These audiences have different understandings, motivations, and investments in mass shootings than the general public. The larger umbrella of Cultural Studies embraces variety—terms like polysemy describe various interpretations of media events within a larger framework for understanding how groups invest in alternative meanings. Media audiences play an important role in this process; sometimes simply as readers and sometimes as members of specific social groups like subcultures. However, audience members are not blank slates—they constantly receive new information designed to shape their thinking about events like mass shootings. These three fields—Cultural Studies, public memory, and Audience Studies—reveal the way that text, audience, and context interact to construct an event like the Columbine Massacre.

**Defining Spaces for Intervention**

The FBI and other law enforcement agencies adamantly insist there is no real profile for mass shooters (FBI; 2013). The Congressional Research Service has expanded the FBI definition of mass killing to also apply to public mass shootings. They state that they use their “own definition for public mass shootings. These are incidents occurring in relatively public places, involving four or more deaths—not including the shooter(s)—and gunmen who select victims somewhat indiscriminately. The violence in these cases is not a means to an end—the gunmen do not pursue criminal profit or kill in the name of terrorist ideologies” (McCallion; 2013, 2). The
FBI definition states that a mass killing is three or more deaths and some interpretations by law enforcement include injuries in the total as well. The number of deaths and inclusion of injuries is frequently debated because this detail drastically changes the number of events that qualify as mass shootings (FBI; 2013). Even more widely debated is the idea of a profile for mass shooters. Various experts have gathered lists of common characteristics for some, but not all, mass shooters; typically male, typically middle-class, typically with a history of anger issues, typically with mental health risk factors like a recent loss or chronic mental illness. Yet there are many exceptions to these rules and most people with these characteristics are not at risk of committing acts of mass murder. The broadness of this profile certainly supports the common misconception that prevention is impossible.

Despite the lack of a cohesive profile for mass shooters, research has discovered a relatively consistent set of behaviors, beliefs, and actions that often precede an individual’s decision to commit a public mass shooting. These indicators are most commonly known as “risk factors” or “warning signs.” Peter Langman (2009) offers a strong set of warning signs for school shooters that reflects many of the warning signs identified in the Columbine Massacre: access to weapons is the number one risk factor followed closely by what is called “rehearsal.” Rehearsal behaviors include consuming violent media, doing research on past violent attacks, writing on topics of violence, or creating media where the potential shooters act violently (Langman; 2009, 184-86). These warning signs are all concrete behaviors, but they are not the root of these behaviors. In response to the Columbine Massacre, one warning sign, a fascination with violent media, was interpreted by news media as a “cause” of the shooting. This inversion or misinterpretation of warning signs as “causes” remains extremely common, especially in media coverage of mass shootings. These warning signs are compounded by a variety of other
factors such as poor family life, childhood traumas including physical or sexual abuse, declining grades and school performance, experiences of mental illness like depression, and personal loss (i.e. death of a parent or changes in the home from divorce). Many of these warning signs can describe almost any teenager. Yet prevention efforts can and do identify these behaviors by putting together various pieces of information about an individual’s experience to assess how acute any one case might be.

Preceding the Columbine Massacre, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold exhibited a wide variety of warning signs. Each encounter would be viewed by threat assessment teams as a place for intervention and de-escalation. They rehearsed through the video game *Doom*, wrote school assignments about Nazis and violent revenge, created a website about building explosives, and went out to shoot guns with their friends. They also exhibited more common delinquent behaviors seen in adolescents. They were arrested for theft and placed in counseling during a juvenile diversion program. They had multiple unrelated complaints lodged against them with the police. After the shooting, several other parents of children from Columbine High School, like those of Brooks Brown, came forward with stories of violent altercations their children had with the shooters. Additionally, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were targets of frequent bullying that alienated them from many school groups and activities. This list of nine moments where intervention was possible is not exhaustive but demonstrates the large amount of information available about Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold which signaled impending violence. After the shooting, further details were released about the violent films that they imitated—their nickname for the Columbine Massacre was NBK based off the film *Natural Born Killers*. These boys planned extensively—another strong warning sign of actual violence. They mapped out their school and wrote journal entries about individuals they would like to shoot (not targeted in the
actual shooting). These entries revealed their feelings of anger, depression, and isolation as well as the methods by which they constructed their arsenal of firearms and explosives used in the attack. Planning for the Columbine Massacre took place for over a year before the shooting and the plan visibly influenced every facet of these boys’ lives and behavior.

This summary of Eric and Dylan’s visible warning signs isn’t an attack on the institutions in place at the time of the Columbine Massacre because the phenomenon of mass shootings was still emerging. Additionally, the connection between mass shootings committed by adolescents as opposed to adults has taken even longer to disentangle. Perhaps, at the moment of the Columbine Massacre, hopelessness seemed like the only response; but it no longer is. The media must overcome an outdated trope of senselessness for prevention to be widely acknowledged. All those behaviors listed above as warning signs support the idea that access to Weapons, Popular Culture, and Bullying caused the Columbine Massacre. Again, this is an inversion or misinterpretation of warning signs as “causes.” This distinction is important for two reasons. One, this distinction reassures individuals that they can identify potential shooters through visible behaviors and, two, that the exact cause of violence—a large, highly individualized, and shifting category—doesn’t need to be identified to limit or combat violence. While not necessarily providing a neat narrative understanding of the issue, these facts do contradict the feelings of senselessness and hopelessness that pervade media coverage of mass shootings.

**Profiling Toxicity: Masculinity and Local Cultures**

Part of the struggle to profile mass shooters is the broadness of two key “risk factors”; many shooters are male, and many have a history of aggression. These factors point to one sociological argument that will be taken as a given in this project. How and where shooters emerge can be a central component to understanding these issues. Single-factor explanations and
interventions were most common after the Columbine Massacre. Limitations on gun laws, surveillance in schools, and anti-bullying programs offered a variety of disconnected solutions to a complex set of problems intimately connected to the common factor of toxic masculinity. Douglas Kellner (2008) suggests that rather than media, it is “the broader culture of militarism, gun culture, extreme sports, ultraviolent video and computer games, subcultures of bullying and violence, and the rewarding of ultramasculinity in the corporate and business worlds that is a major factor in constructing hegemonic violent masculinities,” (157). Kellner argues that the complexity of these factors requires a multi-causal response. Attacking “culture” writ large seems insurmountable without a consideration of multiple factors. Michael Kimmel (2013), the leading theorist on hegemonic masculinity, describes this powder keg of factors as “the toxic climate combin(ing) brutal harassment, sanctimonious superiority, traditional gender norms, and a belief in violence as restorative… regardless of a boy’s personal values, boys are much more likely to engage in violence if the local cultural expectations are that boys retaliate” (92). Kimmel is not simply pointing to a conjunction of conditions but also set of localized cultural factors and values. Indeed, mass shootings tend to occur in similar places and in similar circumstances over time. The greater Denver area has experienced another of the worst mass shootings in the history of the United States—the Aurora Theater Shooting (as well as several more minor school shootings like the Platte Canyon High School hostage crisis, Arapahoe High School Shooting, and the November 2, 2017 shooting at a Thornton, Colorado Wal-mart). This pattern is chilling in its suggestion that not all places are equally affected by these sorts of crimes despite the popular idea that mass shooting could happen to anyone, anywhere.

Several authors echo Kimmel and Kellner’s argument that location plays a central role in shaping gendered norms and risk factors for mass shooters—Jeff Kass (2009) the local journalist
who wrote the book *Columbine: A True Crime Story* and Mark Ames. Ames (2005) offers a compelling dissection of various proposed mass shooter profiles. He reaches the conclusion that “the source of these rampages must be the environment that creates them… and by environment I don’t mean something as vague as society but rather the schools and the people they shoot and bomb… it is the workplaces and schools that need to be profiled” (Ames; 2005, 152). Similarly, Kass describes a “culture of honor” throughout the Southwest that encourages revenge, aggression, and gun ownership. He concludes that in this culture, “those who do not respond to a violent affront by fighting, or shooting back, are ‘not much of a man,’” (2009, 187). Masculinity is large and generalized concept. But when looking at how the risk factors, behaviors, and warning signs for mass shooters relate to what it means to be a man, it becomes apparent there is a need to recuperate healthy masculinity at the root of the problem. Further investigations of the Columbine Massacre must consider the set of circumstances, the location, and the cultural symbolic history of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to find a better way to understand mass shootings as complex phenomena that stem, not from each other, but from sustained social factors like gender.

**Moral Panic and The Media as Control Culture**

This project proceeds from the perspective of Cultural Studies and the sub-theory of Moral Panic. Stuart Hall and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) examined the way that youth were coded as deviant and on what basis these conclusions were drawn. They found that the media played a central role in constructing definitions of deviance:

\[
\text{Deviant Event} \rightarrow \text{Control Culture as primary definers} \rightarrow \text{Media as producers} \rightarrow \text{Control Culture as reproducers} \rightarrow \text{Media as reproducers}
\]

Fig. 1.1 The Media and Control Culture: A Symbiotic Relationship (Hall; 1993, 75-76)
Through this cycle both the Control Culture, represented by the institutions affected by deviance, and the media validate the others’ perspective. As a result, dissent is “controlled” and critical thought is replaced with empty phrases, so often repeated, alongside emotional claims that embody social anxieties. Hall (1993) explains how the Control Culture—the institutions of the police, the media, expert sources, and politicians who favor order and compliance—insinuates itself through supposed objectivity. He states that, “the routine structures of news production—impartiality and objectivity—direct the media in the first instance to outside accredited sources [this] means the representatives of the Control Culture. Thus, news items are based in the reproductions of primary definitions presented by the Control Culture” (Hall; 1993, 75). In a strange contradiction, seemingly authoritative claims are based on emotional reactions to new social phenomenon even as they criticize the emotionality of “alternative audiences.” Events that include the death of children often play on such emotion to maintain stability and Social Control.

Emotion need not be a negative aspect of politics. However, when utilized to maintain the status quo emotion can limit rational responses to real problems. In the case of mass shootings, the focus on victims, inexplicability, and public grief stokes these emotions into a panic. Stanley Cohen (1980) concluded that “Sensitization is a form of the simplest type of generalized belief system, hysteria which ‘… transforms an ambiguous situation into an absolutely potent generalized threat; Ambiguity, which gives rise to anxiety, is eliminated by structuring the situation to make it more predictable” (77). By placing these events into a more recognizable framework littered with already labelled threats—youth, violent media, gun violence, bullying—ambiguity is reduced, and social anxieties addressed, even if temporarily. Emotion plays a large role in how society resolves threats but can be subsumed by authoritative claims. Journalists act as “experts” in this process due to their quick involvement in reporting on these stories and the
audience’s desire for fast answers that ease their anxieties. Really, journalists mimic pre-existing tropes within a new context; what Cohen calls the signification spiral. He states that “governing authorities channel existing social anxieties towards a specific target in a fairly direct fashion for the purpose of imposing a sense of moral order or social control on situations or on events that are perceived to lack that property” (Hier; 2006, 308). The emergence of tropes about perceived juvenile offenders occurred in response to social anxieties about youth and the family as aspects of the larger social order and preceded the Columbine Massacre. However, two decades later, the focus on fast, emotionally driven solutions continues.

Moral Panic is an historically situated phenomena and therefore cannot feasibly apply 20 years later. The late 1990s represented the height of Moral Panics about youth; fear of violent video games, violent media consumption, the Internet, and a perception that violence among youth had increased, which was highlighted by media coverage of the Columbine Massacre. Yet these Moral Panics say more about society than they say about the actual threat posed to youth by media violence and media influence. Karen Sternheimer, a sociologist who lectures at USC, actively debunks the myths of Moral Panics about youth in her work, largely driven by the cultural significance of the Columbine Massacre. She states that, “a great deal of concern about media and media’s potential effects on kids has more to do with uncertainty about the future and the changing landscape of childhood” (Sternheimer; 2003, 2). This observation points to the stability underscored by viewing these symptomatic behaviors as “causes” in responses to the Columbine Massacre. Technological determinism drove the 1990s social anxiety over youths’ access to violent and questionable media through the Internet and video games. Fears about this issue stemmed largely from adults feeling uneducated and out of control of these new media. Moral Panic shaped the inversion of cause-and-effect as well as the tropes used to define the
Columbine Massacre. This Social Control function needs to be assessed as an historical construct.

**Public memory and the Repressed**

Public memory of mass shootings has been limited in scope to certain institutional concerns and the effects of mass violence on both local and national communities. As previously stated, sensitivity ignores the complexity of the shootings to focus on the “correct or appropriate” limits of memorialization. Kenneth Foote (2003) discusses how mass murders have typically been forgotten and ignored (rather than memorialized) as a stabilizing social function until quite recently (339). This narrow focus has largely been justified by the belief that victims and society are best served by hearing less about the shooters and more about the communal reaction to the shooting. These publicly legitimated reactions represent the official quality of public memory. Pierre Nora (1997) defined public memory specifically as “a nexus of state politics, civic heritage, and material culture” (32). Not only does this definition position public memory as a narrow category but it also signals the institutional alignment of public memory. These practices focus on politics and civic culture and are most often embodied in speech acts by politicians and memorials. The official quality of public memory supports the Social Control function of media narratives about traumatic events. Public memory lacks the ability to accommodate contestation and revision because it is the realm of Hall’s primary definers.

This project uses alternative sources rather than the Control Culture’s definition of mass shootings to reopen discussions of these events and revise and contest public memory. Reopening dialogue about mass shootings helps to circulate research from the last 20 years which has resulted in progress for prevention that remains underpublicized and lacks support from citizens. Edward Casey (2000) points to two situations that allow the revision of public
memory: “first, a discovery of a glaringly false part of its content; second, a reassessment of its primary significance as a wider, or simply different, ethical or historical context arises” (29). The “true” story of the Columbine Massacre has been published in several forms, including the 11,000-page police report, to correct glaringly false elements of the initial narrative of the event. However, the significance of the event is consistently called to public attention without revision. The Columbine Massacre remains a media touch stone for mass shootings while many other mass shootings over the past 20 years have largely been forgotten. Public memory of the event is so ingrained that just the name invokes all the relevant symbols and discourses of the event.

Some researchers address the limitations associated with a focus on victims and community in discussions of crime more generally. They conclude that responsible media coverage includes a discussion of the social significance of crime. Romayne Fullerton (2006) insists that, “When readers set criminals and their victims outside their communities’ boundaries, they fail to make connections between the individual crime and larger social policies. They can fail to understand the long-term toll that crime takes on its victims and the social fabric. They can fail to obtain the necessary foundation for a clear evaluation of the effectiveness of the criminal justice system” (317). The continuing significance of the Columbine Massacre and problem of mass shootings says a great deal about the lack of resolution provided by previous policy responses and public discussions about mass shootings. Progress in solutions can only come from a different focus using different data. Henri Lefebvre (1991) explains the cost of consensus. He states “Monumental space offered each member of society an image of that membership… The monument thus effected a ‘consensus’… The element of repression in it and the element of exaltation could scarcely be disentangled” (Lefebvre; 1991, 220). Repression validates Social
Control and the official quality of public memory by what it leaves out. Yet what is repressed is often the information most likely to contribute to new solutions.

Our continual cultural fascination with the repressed underlies the official story of mass shootings and other forms of crime. Many of the most successful film and television franchises are rooted in a social attempt to understand repressed forms of violence—Law and Order, NCIS, CSI, and Criminal Minds focus on fictionalized versions of crime stories. However, the popularity of the true crime genre including Making of a Murderer, Unsolved Mysteries, and the entire Investigative Discovery network shows that the repressed fascinates audiences outside of the insulated fictional world as well. Some researchers, like Johanna Sumiala (2012), see this fascination as just as relevant to the search for consensus and belonging as public memory. Speaking of the horror of Abu Ghraib, she states that “this has to do with the drive to feel connected to reality through desire and repulsion—both elements… are crucial to the existence of social imagination” (Sumiala; 2012, 55). Social imagination provides a useful description about how we attempt to understand crime. These activities occur outside the mainstream news coverage of mass shootings, often long after the fact. Exceptionalism drives the othering of mass shooters and their motivations as “outside society” and reflects social fears about individual anomalies; what some theorists have labeled the Fear of Small Numbers. In his book, Arjun Appadurai (2006) discusses the rise of global terrorism stating “a deep sort of social uncertainty must mix with high levels of doctrinal certainty. The worry this produces is that the ordinary faces of everyday life (with names, practices, and faiths different from one’s own) are in fact masks of everydayness behind which lurk the real identities… of traitors” (91). Ultimately, the repressed is the feeling of fear that stems from the unpredictable; a disruption of Social Order. The broadness of the mass shooter profile, the emotional charge of news coverage, the continual
appeal to pre-existent social anxieties, and the ineffectualness of primary definitions in ending mass violence all heighten the anxieties that lead to violence. To reign in this cycle of violence, emotion must become a constructive, not destructive social force.

“Alternative Audience” Studies: Negotiated Readings of Trauma

The Birmingham School of CCCS made an important distinction by separating institutional responses or “primary definitions” from the responses of audiences and even deviants themselves; called “alternative definitions.” Media-makers favor “primary definitions” and properly legitimize those definitions by dismissing “alternative definitions” through explicit censure or absence. In the case of the Columbine Massacre, early reports recognized and discounted “alternative definitions” from online communities sympathetic to the shooters in a single article. The article took stock of “alternative definitions” solely to publicly censure them. Amy Harmon stated that online there were “quick reminders from others that Mr. Harris and Mr. Klebold were not simply victims of senseless teasing. ‘They were not ‘cool different,’ they were racists,’… the event seemed to open a vein of troubling introspection that is perhaps remarkable only because… it is on display for the public” (1999, Apr. 24, A14). Public exposure of these opinions was limited by such a quick repression of the social imagination related to the event. Such “alternative definitions” from non-official sources must be privileged to combat the continued circulation of the single-factor approaches to prevention. These “alternative definitions” come from sources that have been dismissed either because they are not expert sources, are seen as highly emotional, and/or their statements don’t fit popular narratives about mass shootings. This project repurposes Hall’s idea of “alternative definitions” as that of “alternative audiences”; defined as those that have a personal investment in the issue of mass shootings through expertise on prevention and, in some cases, a deeply personal, emotional
connection to one or more mass shootings. The individuals interviewed either experienced a loss from a mass shooting and/or have long-term personal experience with prevention and advocacy.

Contrary to the seeming rigidity of public memory, there is never simply one narrative about an event like the Columbine Massacre, but rather, many. These narratives are interpreted differently by different audience members in different situations—based on the ways that they relate to the text. Stuart Hall (2007) initially explored this concept of the audience in his famous article “encoding/decoding,” which categorizes audiences based on their relationship to the solidified practices and frames produced in response to events like the Columbine Massacre. His three proposed positions are dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings. Audiences that value negotiated and oppositional readings of the Columbine Massacre exist on the periphery of mainstream news-making processes. The re-use of the Columbine Massacre as a symbol in continuing news coverage of mass shootings reinforces dominant readings. Tragedies like mass shootings unite audiences across various spheres of experience because each of the players holds a specific moral position—shooters are “othered” and de-humanized, while victims are innocent and heavily prioritized. Prevention is impossible because we cannot comprehend evil. These moral positions are maintained by dominant tropes. According to Hall, dominant, hegemonic definitions of media events function in two ways; one, they define the limits of possible meaning at the societal level and, two, the legitimacy of these definitions leads them to be taken-for-granted or seem inevitable. In the case of the Columbine Massacre, many of the dominant meanings associated with the shooting have been reiterated in news coverage of subsequent mass shootings and some entirely inaccurate information from the first days of news coverage is still assumed to be true by dominant-hegemonic audience members. The resilience of dominant narratives about the Columbine Massacre indicates that audiences must form negotiated and
oppositional readings to generate new approaches to prevention and break out of this pre-existing pattern.

Negotiated readings are those under discussion in this study. Previously, I have examined oppositional readings from Columbine “fan” groups; online communities that discuss the “causes” of the shooting and engage in typical “fan” behaviors focused on Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. The most interesting finding in this study was the way these individuals advocated for a greater understanding of the shooting to prevent not condone further violence as many outsiders assume. However, negotiated readings are more likely to have a mainstream impact on media practices around mass shootings. These readings “acknowledge the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restrictive level, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules—it operates with exceptions to the rule” (Hall; 2007, 102). Negotiated readings offer a middle-ground position from which advocates can engage media discourse about mass shootings. Some advocates might focus on correcting the inversion of cause-and-effect. Some advocates might want to shift the focus away from gun violence prevention due to the dominance of the topic in news coverage. Others might want to revise the way shooters are discussed by limiting the use of their names, their images, information about their history, or most importantly details about how they committed their crimes. Sometimes these groups will have goals that conflict with both dominant-hegemonic readings and other negotiated readings. These definitions restore complexity to a now-stagnant issue.

Cultural Studies primarily offers advantages over critical theories because the CCCS focused on what could be done to redefine social meanings through social struggle. To reach the dominant audience you must use the “primary definitions” but activists must also revise these
definitions to be effective. Films and television about the repressed are one location where this struggle safely occurs. Hall insists that “Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle… It is the arena of consent and resistance.” (Hall; 1998, 442). To mobilize the repressed requires consent and resistance negotiated outside of the realm of Popular Culture. The dominant-hegemonic audience must question the common sense of “primary definitions.”

By bringing back the repressed, audiences can see what is the same now and what is different in mass shooting responses compared to 20 years ago. They can see that these events stand apart from other forms of gun violence and need more than gun violence prevention to be reduced. Muschert and Sumiala (2012) describe these events as

“a symbolic statement… to illustrate a broader message… beyond the immediate target (school and/or victims). It is about a struggle grander than meets the eye… about attacking organized society: the school and its authorities and their symbolic power, which is rooted in its community… the deeper the symbolic destruction, the more profound the repair work needed to overcome the damage of the social fabric” (xvii).

The layer of institutional rebellion and destruction of Social Control is intentional on the part of the shooters. If the shooters’ intention is not revealed, then this is a failure on the part of audiences to invalidate that intention as well. Ethically, the repressed offers the most direct route to a multi-causal approach to mass shootings. Audiences outside of the dominant-hegemonic structure have experience and expertise to lend this struggle.

**Text/Audience/Context: Three Sides to Every Crisis**

Audience Studies has widely adopted the film studies model of text, audience, and context to address phenomena and media more holistically. The focus on culture as lived as well as written and produced altered analysis of media texts across several disciplines including Cultural Studies. Jackie Stacey (1994) originally proposed the need to discuss these three
elements of media based on Stuart Hall’s notion of encoding and decoding as well as the nascent field of Audience Studies. She explains her new model stating there is “the need for an interactive model of text/audience/context to account for the complexity of the viewing process… much recent cultural studies work has argued for a model of the spectator as a social subject… inscribed by various and competing discursive formations” (Stacey; 1994, 47). Media have been described both as one-way sources of information and interactive processes—both models bear some relevance to the creation of media events. Indeed, the context of production limits the forms of representation circulated within our media culture and is informed by socio-historical factors. These forces shape the text itself. The relationship between production and ideology shifts depending on who authors the media text and why. Despite the goal of narrowing discourses and understanding through production, audiences produce their own meanings through alternative practices, occasionally outside the realm of given meanings. Hall (1997) says of these ‘practices of representation’

“Meaning must enter the domain of these practices, if it is to circulate effectively… it cannot be considered to have completed its ‘passage’… until it has been ‘decoded’ or intelligibly received… Language, then, is… the shared cultural ‘space’ in which the production of meaning… representation… Speaker and hearer or writer and reader are active participants in a process which is always double-sided, always interactive.” (10)

This project aims to examine the cultural space of representation about the Columbine Massacre. This space includes the double-sided, interactive process between media audience and producer, a relationship mediated through the text as well as the discursive domains that the representation itself expresses. In other words, the project will examine the socio-historical moment of production and how it guides meaning, the media texts and their intentional or unintentional effects, and how audiences use those texts to define their own perspective.
Because of the Columbine Massacre’s historically ambivalent relationship to media—Were media a “cause” or effect of the shooting? How do those anxieties remain relevant today?—the Columbine Massacre must be investigated as a media event with a lasting impact on these various levels of culture. Incorporating text/audience/context into a single project requires looking at these spheres as co-constitutive. Patrick Murphy (2003) calls for a “multi-site media ethnography” that acknowledges “fieldwork needs to be in constant dialogue with how biography relates to history, and how the performative, ritualized, distinct and plural manifestations of local life nevertheless echo hegemonic culture” (14). Murphy sees similarities between hegemonic culture and values at all levels of media consumption and practice. By analyzing text, audience and context, this project aims to explain the developments of dominant media manifestations of the Columbine Massacre and the ways that these dominant understandings have been critiqued and refined. This goal requires data from several spheres that offer qualitative and quantitative counterpoints. Revised subcultural theory acknowledges that from an audience perspective, “Analysis of subcultural content does not have to be disconnected from other forms… The words of participants can be compared and contrasted not only with one another, but with direct observation of their behavior, with evidence about the broader orientation, development or impact of their subculture and with existing research theory” (Hodkinson; 2012, 564). In the case of the Columbine Massacre, a large body of research remains relegated to specific case studies that target interested experts and answer narrow questions defined as important by the "primary definers" of the journalistic institution. This information is necessarily limited although not un-useful—indeed, a secondary analysis of research about the shooting can illuminate how these initial limitations continue to limit prevention and response.
 Audience Studies has developed a model that examines various points of entry into the dynamic between text/audience/context. This method focuses on empirical observations gathered through field work and statistical analysis to better understand key players and discourses in the process. Sonia Livingstone (1993) states that, “any research project should consider text, audience, and context, that the argument in favor of empirical investigation of any amenable theoretical development has largely been won” (249). While Livingstone cautions against idealistic investigations of audiences and calls for researchers to engage in self-reflexivity, she does pinpoint three important sources of information; texts can be analyzed using discourse analysis, audiences can be interviewed, and context can be understood through historical analysis. Together, all three dimensions offer points of comparison to better describe out the “circuit of culture” and how that circuit deals with recurrent invocations of media events. The complex relationship between these dimensions offers valuable information about ideology, experience, and the disjuncture between lived and historical realities.

**Summary of Chapters**

This study takes stock of all three elements of Stacey’s proposed interactive model for textual analysis. Each chapter addresses one side of this model using a different method. Chapter 2 discusses the historical context of the late 1990s in which the Columbine Massacre emerged using conjunctural analysis. I examine how the shooting embodied and validated a variety of Moral Panics related to violence, Popular Culture, Bullying and youth culture. These irrationally driven narratives amplified the social anxieties that both produced and was affected by them. This chapter focuses on primary historical sources including statistics, documents, and histories of this time-period. These data help to construct a model that explains the relationship between various Moral Panics and describes how they cluster and relate to one another. Describing the
moment of rupture begins to answer the question “why” the Columbine Massacre took on the level of cultural significance that it did. Ultimately, this shooting had a large impact because it exemplified the cultural anxieties of the 1990s.

Chapter 3 explores the text itself; in this case, the news coverage of the Columbine Massacre. This study uses a mixed-methods approach to content analysis to examine how news norms were established for mass shootings by this event. This chapter describes the frames and stakeholders involved in the shooting. Statistical analysis outlines the frequency and shape of the sample. Correlations describe the relationships between key frames, topics, and stakeholders. I then discuss key relationships between frames and news norms which strongly represent the socio-cultural context in which they originally appeared. I conclude that news coverage contributes to the feelings of hopelessness and meaninglessness that still pervade news coverage of mass shootings. Additionally, this coverage emphasized many aspects of the shooting to support the sense of Moral Panic. These sensationalized statements contributed to an entrenched myth-making process that personifies the long-term effects of the Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle stemming from the moment of rupture.

Chapter 4 analyzes the practice of media-makers in the wake of mass shootings from the perspective of what I call “alternative audiences.” In this case, the “alternative audiences” under investigation are experts that developed prevention and response efforts during the post-problem stage which continues today. I interviewed individuals who had a direct emotional and/or expert connection to particular incidents; the Columbine Massacre, the Aurora Theater Shooting, and a more minor incident involving a man with a machete who was shot by police on the CU Boulder campus that occurred on October 5, 2016. After the initial police shooting, rumors of an active shooter on campus led to panic, confusion, and the evacuation of the University Memorial Center
This incident is included here because it tested the pre-planning and communication capabilities of many organizations on the CU campus like the CU Police Department and The Emergency Management Operations Group (EMOG). Interviewees from these groups discussed the lessons they learned from this event, especially regarding communication. This chapter posits that passion and personal interest are critical to developing effective prevention and intervention policies. The difference between groups sharing information across “systems” and those working independently in “silos” plays an important role. Communication also plays a large part in the more reactive, crisis management side after a mass shooting. The interviews featured here are split between individuals in proactive and reactive groups although many groups work on both aspects. Importantly, the majority of these individuals mentioned the hopelessness they feel in the face of media coverage about mass shootings, as well as their frustration with the media’s lack of depth and reflection on this issue.

Chapter 5 provides a working model and set of best practices for how media organizations can combat the hopelessness that characterizes public perceptions of mass shootings today. Ethical journalists should move to a model of social responsibility rather than sensationalism or extreme sensitivity. This sensational quality of news coverage exploits the victims and politicizes mass shootings long before the facts of any given case are known. The proposed model builds on “alternative audience” perspectives that lead to several key questions about the media’s approach to coverage of mass shootings. By developing a broader strategy and adopting new norms in speed, accuracy, and collaboration, the news media may play a constructive role in understanding and preventing future mass shootings.
CHAPTER II

Mapping the Rupture: The Columbine Massacre as History

A variety of events over the past several decades signify different layers of Moral Panic about the supposed oppression of the white, male, middle-class. This multidimensional conflict plays out on American soil as moments of rebellion from angry white men seen in instances of violence and intimidation like the 2017 summer demonstration in Charlottesville, Virginia. Mass shootings and bombings have increasingly become an expression of this group’s discontent. These events are acts of domestic terror, but they do not exist in a vacuum. The overlapping and complex motivations behind each of these domestic terror attacks mirror aspects of societal crisis that extend backwards over decades. Many perceived social problems continue to be recycled to support the belief that there is a cultural attack against white men. The disappearance of the working class, the increase in diversity hiring practices and equality movements, as well as a sense in which their rights, especially 2nd amendment rights, are being violated demonstrate a perceived threat to this white, male demographic. This demographic plays on social fears of different groups, like Muslims, Mexicans, the LGBTQ community, women, and other minorities that collapse into one another until they become too difficult and threatening to accept. These tensions coalesce into support for the status quo. Examining these Moral Panics unearths our societal subconscious fears indicating concentrations or knots of social tension.

The conjunctural approach analyzes these knots of social tension as a point of historical rupture in which certain groups or events come to say certain things about our culture; in the post-Reagan Era it is angry white men. This chapter analyzes how the moment of 1999 became the moment when mass shootings became a “social problem.” This chapter asks
Research Question 1: Why was this shooting so impactful over the long-term and not another? Why 1999 as the historical moment of rupture?

It is not enough to recognize that Moral Panic drives angry white men to acts of violence and terrorism. Instead, we must also dissect these complex, multidimensional expressions of social unrest to recognize the way these panics maintain social myths underlying the status quo. These social myths associate contemporary Moral Panics with old social problems through the signification spiral; a classic model for Moral Panic theory. In this case study, the Columbine Massacre represents an historically important moment, specifically for youth Moral Panic and politics. This shooting continues to be recalled by the media as the primary example of mass shootings despite the many details that make the Columbine Massacre historically unique and different from other similar events. The shooting became a symbol because it condensed a specific pre-existing set of beliefs about the perceived attack on the white, male working class suburban culture. The shooting embodied an accumulation of collective anxieties about the socio-historical moment of 1999. Analysis of the socio-historical context that granted the shooting a long-lasting symbolic significance demonstrates the reasons those contexts remain relevant, revised, and contested over 15 years later despite conflicting evidence.

Visual Metaphors

The public remembers large-scale social crises like the Columbine Massacre as a set of conceptual narratives or frames imbued with both local and national significance. These narratives represent a hierarchy of social memory from the most official to the most repressed. This chapter outlines the factors leading specifically to the creation of public memory about the Columbine Massacre. This conjunctural analysis examines the effects of Moral Panic and rupture as Social Controls which define the limits of public memory. Collective memory and public memory seem like equitable terms at first glance. However, there are significant theoretical
differences that revolve around the level of importance afforded to individual narratives in each type of memory and the ethical weight attached to social memory. Collective memory has been differentiated from public memory as an individualized understanding of a collectively experienced event. This individualization permits a looser ethical orientation towards collective events. On the other side, public memory represents an official account driven by hegemonic ideology and a set of socially appropriate responses to crisis. Moral Panic functions as a Social Control by solidifying and strengthening the normative effects of public memory while often suppressing and denouncing, many alternative perspectives.

In the case of the Columbine Massacre, the public memory of the event has been largely defined within a set of historical events, ideals, practices, and values which are the material of Moral Panic. This broad application reflects Nora’s definition of public memory as “a nexus of state politics, civic heritage, and material culture” (1997, 32). Nora’s definition of public memory signals the “official” quality of this category of social memory. The limitations official narratives place on discourse can be understood as an effect of Social Control that preserves the strength of consensus through the repression of alternative perspectives. However, this stance has been attacked as ethically irresponsible. For instance, Bradford Vivian (2011) states that “despite a sophisticated awareness of the fact that public memories are selectively mediated… contemporary treatments of such memory assign little, if any, positive value to the operations of forgetting… Intentional or unintentional episodes of distortion, excision, or loss in regard to the past understandably signify not only commemorative but ethical failings” (6). Ultimately, Moral Panic, as a process, leads to ethical failings in commemoration. This phenomenon focuses primarily on the importance of forgetting or distorting information that contradicts or undermines the "official" narrative. In this act of forgetting, moral panic transforms into the most coherent
and self-evident narrative. This chapter describes these ethical failings within the historical context of the Columbine Massacre.

The observation that public memory is selective and often normative is not a radical proposition. The concepts underlying Moral Panic and Social Control reinforce the relationship between the hegemonic mainstream and public memory. However, contemporary cultural conversations about the Columbine Massacre and the larger issue of mass shootings continue to offer opportunities for revision. Casey (2004) points to two situations that call for “Public memory” to be revised: “first, a discovery of a glaringly false part of its content; second, a reassessment of its primary significance as a wider, or simply different, ethical or historical context arises” (29). Public memory of the Columbine Massacre has been subjected to the first type of revision on a broad social level. When Dave Cullen released his account of the shooting, titled Columbine, many news outlets revisited the narrative of the event and exposed “myths.” Many of these myths were created by the same news outlets suddenly so concerned with debunking them. For instance, one of the most tenacious myths, The Trench Coat Mafia, was revised after Cullen (a journalist himself) verified that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were never part of the group. Never mind that news-makers debunked the myth within 72 hours of the shooting as well. Regrettably, the social impact of revising this narrative nearly a decade later was minimal at best. Rather than simply recognizing the weaknesses in long-term public memory of this event, this study adopts Casey’s second precept by revising long-term narratives within the larger socio-historical context of the Columbine Massacre.

Media studies and social memory studies overlap in many ways and they share an important concept; figurations. Both disciplines use the term to describe issues relevant to conjunctural analysis. Nick Couldry (2015) explains these figurations as highly descriptive rather
than explanatory. He focuses on multidimensionality or complex interdependencies. He explains that figurations “capture the emergent patterns of practice that arise over time as stable solutions to the many normative, resource, and personal conflicts that derive from the changing weaves of interdependence. [These figurations] spread throughout social space… because they have de facto become working default solutions,” (Couldry; 2015, 238). Conjunctural analysis describes how normative pressures build to the point of rupture and figurations offer one way to think of the material under investigation, much like public memory. Figurations are also elaborated on in social memory theory. Jeffrey Olick (2013) describes the material of figurations as “developing relations between past and present—where images, contexts traditions, and interests come together in fluid, though not necessarily harmonious, ways,” (91). There is a fluidity and indeterminacy in these terms that make them conceptual tools fitting Cultural Studies’ methodology. These figurations are the stuff of conjunctural analysis. The dialectic between past and future represented by points of interdependence are visible evidence of a building rupture. In this chapter, a spatial, multi-dimensional examination of history as social space describes the rupture around the Columbine Massacre and all it represents in our present culture.

Public memory, ritual theory, and the idea of fields in mediatization theory all converge through an orientation towards documenting macro and micro processes of cultural narratives circulating at the level of media. Couldry (2015) theorizes about the multidimensional quality of mediatization alongside field theory. In both theories, public memory theory and field theory, we see that there is some shared understanding of what delineates social space. This term offers a spatial mode of thinking helpful to a conjunctural analysis. Couldry’s account of the connections between mediatization and field theory, while more recent, expands on observations he made over a decade earlier about visualizations of culture as a Cultural Studies methodology. He states
“there is no reason… to suppress or reduce the complexity all around us. Why not focus on the places whose meaning cannot be summed up in a single narrative… stretched across many sites and many roles, without necessarily cohering into a unity… Culture emerges on a ‘differently configured spatial canvas’ where the connections between sites matters… sometimes more, than the sites of imagined closure” (Couldry; 2000, 105).

Here Couldry describes the visual metaphor that guides his later analysis of the social impact of the media. Couldry’s move towards mediatization significantly limits the compatibility of these terms with a Cultural Studies method of analysis. By explaining the world as a process of mediatization, the primacy of media influence ignores the larger idea of culture as common practice. Cultural Studies, on the other hand, views culture as potentially but not necessarily, related to media. The Columbine Massacre can, in part, be understood as one rupture that shifted attention to media primacy in our wider culture.

The concept of figurations and the spatial canvas of society associate conjunctural analysis with the possibility of visualization or modeling. Another concept to explain the historical interconnections between public memory, figurations, and visual methods originates within the information and computer science discipline; the Neural Network. This technology is known for learning and making connections that may not be noticeable until we learn more. This learning occurs over time just as we learn from history unevenly, across time and space.

Although the technical, statistical method of Neural Network analysis lies outside the scope of this project, the theoretical implications of this model reflect how history develops. The way that these networks develop also recalls Raymond Williams’ concept of the “structure of feeling” which can only be understood as a “structure” after learning occurs. However, the idea of a Neural Network eschews the rigidity that many see as a weakness is Williams’ concept. Neural networks learn from messy data and connections that don’t quite fit; in other words, the fluid, indeterminate space around an historical conjuncture.
This concept has yet to be mined by social sciences to any significant degree, but a few comments can point to its theoretical use value for Cultural Studies. These Neural Networks “model nonlinear relationships [and] deal with noisy and incomplete data commonly found in real life situations,” (Liebrand; 1998, 87). The stuff of conjunctural analysis is necessarily noisy and incomplete in a way that quantitative data is not—however, both field theory and Neural Networks as a theoretical concept lack explanatory power. For conjunctural analysis, this limitation is a general axiom and therefore not necessarily an incompatibility. Additionally, wide-reaching and inaccurate explanations for mass shootings are all too common and ultimately harmful; we don’t need to explain mass shootings as cause-and-effect to prevent them. According to Neural Network theory, this descriptive project can be a representative model with its own internal rules. The primary work on the use of this concept states “Models that are given as a collection of internal parameters within a neural network can be denoted as implicit models. Such implicit models remain valid only as long as the conditions of their formation persist” (Liebrand; 1998, 89, emphasis in original). The internal parameters that define an historical event like the Columbine Massacre are, according to social memory theory, open to revision. The concept of a Neural Network helps to measure changes over time. The implicit nature of this model suggests a way to track the absolutist construction of Moral Panics through their social dimensions and connections. The concept of a Neural Network focuses less on explanation and more on how historical specificity alters the model under discussion.

In the case of mass shootings, society (as a Neural Network) takes in new information that creates new parameters for understanding these events. As the Neural Network starts with some information and general axioms, so do Moral Panics. These phenomena don’t appear out of nowhere. The proximity of the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting and the Aurora Theater
Shooting, both of which occurred in 2012, led to a revelation in public memory about the importance of mental health in addressing mass shootings. This “new” information revises our understanding of the Columbine Massacre and why it remains important; the shooters certainly displayed symptoms of psychological illness, like depression, and received counseling. Eric Harris even took Luvox to treat his anger management problems. However, it took 13 years for this issue of mental health to become prominent in discussion of other "causes" of mass shootings. Neural Networks offer a flexible model of interconnection and social learning over time to describe these delayed and uneven social responses. These connections *across time* are the focus of conjunctural analysis.

The relationship between different factors leading to a particular rupture like the Columbine Massacre has been reinforced through public memory, field theory, and the concept of Neural Networks. However, Cultural Studies defined the method of conjunctural analysis and therefore offers several important models as well. Stanley Cohen and Stuart Hall developed this method as the Birmingham School grew and changed in the 1980s from a focus on subcultures to state influence on culture. The school deepened the principle of conjunctural analysis with many shifting models, most notably the model laid out in *Policing the Crisis*. To discuss the Moral Panic of the 1990s, we must discuss the concept of the signification spiral and how it amplifies deviance. The signification spiral describes how connections between deviant groups and practices become increasingly troubled and troubling as they become reinforced across social space. The most important moment is that of convergence. This moment “occurs when two or more activities are linked in the process of signification as to implicitly or explicitly draw parallels between them” (Hall; 2006, 45). These moments build into a rupture; they “spiral” to a central moment of convergence. The Columbine Massacre represents one such rupture around
issues of gun culture, media culture, and school culture in the 1990s. So what kinds of activities and groups became linked in this rupture? In response, Cohen points out that the amplification effect of the signification spiral doesn’t answer this question.

If the signification spiral helps describe the issues linked to create a rupture, then conjunctural analysis answers the question of how these things are linked to reinforce, at every level, the social pressures that lead to rupture. Cohen (1980) describes the weaknesses of the amplification model. He states that “the crucial question [is] why the reaction took the particular form and intensity it did at the particular time” and adds that amplification deals “inadequately with why the initial reaction takes place and even less adequately with why the whole sequence itself might come to an end” (177-78). The moment of rupture needs to be re-centered to answer the question “why now?” Figurations, Neural Networks, and mediatization in field theory help to identify how these things continue to exist, change, and lead to new ruptures. The relationships between these concepts must be elaborated because these material aspects of culture contribute to the cycle of rupture represented by the signification spiral. These elaborations help identify how these cycles might also come to an end or even whether this process can end.

**Visual Models**

Conjunctural analysis has few concrete rules or rigid steps. However, the method is guided by several central tenets that can be expanded upon using different conceptual models. Qualitative data can be especially helpful in a mixed-methods study because it offers a method for crystallization; “Instead of seeking one version of truth, ‘scholars using crystallization can celebrate multiple points of view of a phenomenon across the methodological continuum’” (Lindlof; 2011; 277). As a method focused on the historical situation of any number of key stakeholders, the conjunctural perspective acknowledges the multidimensional quality of social
space. This comparison also embraces key elements of Moral Panic theory; complexity, over-determination, and rupture. There are any number of starting points for this kind of textual analysis, but most importantly, the analysis must be guided by some type of reasoning—in this case, inductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning is when “one infers a principle from many particulars of discourse and action” (Lindlof; 2011, 243). Those particulars represent the implicit parameters established by the media. What discourses were labeled as "causes" and how did those "causes" generate action? When looking at a ruptural moment like the Columbine Massacre, discourse and action reinforce one another across many sites over time. Repetition then dictates the central themes for analysis.

In conjunctural analysis, we can consider a large number of events and stakeholders at once; what Neural Network theory calls noisy data. Based on an historically aware perspective, researchers make strongly supported inferences about the relationship between events and stakeholders. This method addresses broad historical questions and provides a starting point for understanding moments of rupture and ensuing crisis; the ruptural moment of the Columbine Massacre and the lasting crisis of “mass shootings” writ large. Or, as this project frames the question “Why was this shooting so impactful over the long-term and not another? Why 1999 as the historical moment?” The question becomes “why now?” which Christine Griffin (2014) has proposed is the guiding question for conjunctural analysis (26). Cultural Studies’ principles of complexity, over-determination, and rupture help to formulate some answers, however imperfect, to such a large question. Hall explains these principles stating “we must address the complexity of the crisis as a whole. This is a difficult balance, but, as you say, crises are always ‘over-determined’. Different levels of society, the economy, politics, ideology, common sense, etc, come together or ‘fuse’. (Hall; 2010, 59, emphasis added). The aspiration to contextualize an
entire era leads to a generalist orientation rather than a step-by-step method. However, the very fact that these crises are over-determined points to several qualitative analytical methods that can be adapted to the conjunctural approach.

Some common qualitative methods can help researchers visualize this broad cultural map. Once the information is organized visually, connections become more clearly visible. These visual models represent the process of categorization. Importantly, visual modeling offers a way to observe and analyze more data. Robert Kozinets (2009) suggests that such visual modeling offers several advantages complementary to the broadness of the conjunctural approach:

1. Thinking about sprawling data as one
2. Organization
3. Visualization can lead to Creativity

Kozinets also cites the danger of losing oneself in the data. (Kozinets; 2010, 128). All three of these advantages make the task of conjunctural analysis more manageable. These advantages and methods also reflect the Neural Network approach of intuitively mapping learned interdependencies.

Cultural Studies has often relied on visual models, taxonomies, chronologies, and categorizations to organize large amounts of historically specific information like Cohen’s Model of Class & Subcultures featured in the CCCS’ seminal work *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall; 1975, 34, Fig. 2.1).
Fig. 2.1 Class & Subcultures: A Version of Cohen’s Model

These mapping techniques compliment Cultural Studies’ interest in complexity, over-determination, and rupture through a conceptual representation of these principles. Ultimately, all these models work towards one goal—a holistic description of the historical conjuncture through categorization. Categorization is a simple process wherein “Category is a covering term for an array of general phenomena, concepts, constructs, themes [etc.] Categorization refers to… sorting units of data with respect to properties that they have in common,” (Lindlof; 2011, 246).
The categories in an historical analysis are dictated by the narrative of the conjuncture. And the categories can be arranged loosely based on different levels of society—the economy, politics, ideology, common sense, etc.—as all these theories suggest through the shared emphasis on multidimensionality across social space. Evolving historical knowledge and the particularities of each conjuncture make each analysis unique. In the case of the Columbine Massacre, the quantitative data and qualitative data sets suggest several dimensions for analysis which guide my own visual model of this particular conjuncture.

Fig. 2.2 Visual Model of the 1999 Moral Panic

In this analysis, I proceed from the basis of the quantitative data. The most often cited “common causes,” according to this variable in my coding, served as starting points in the analysis. They are the primary fields of power under investigation. From there I developed two
more “dimensions” of social meaning by sorting through the other events, images, contexts, traditions, and interests cited in news coverage of the shooting:

Layer 1: Parents; mentioned in 17.4% of articles

Layer 2: Three major “causes,” highly correlated with one another and mentioned in a large percentage of articles were Weapons (34%), Popular Culture (33%), and Bullying (25%) all of which were broadly connected to failures in parenting.

Layer 3: From this starting point, which was dictated by the data, I developed a layer that included the key stakeholders and events related to these supposed “causes.” Many of these stakeholders and events were directly referred to within the news coverage of the Columbine Massacre. Others represent cultural trends, regulations, and narratives that shaped our understanding of those events and stakeholders. For instance, “FBI Incompetence” relates to several other violent attacks in the 1990s (Ruby Ridge, Waco, and the Oklahoma City Bombing). This narrative also played a role in the 2000 election and was seen as a contributing factor in the increase of domestic terrorism. The Columbine Massacre was planned as one such domestic terrorist attack.

Layer 4: I looked at the connections between the events and stakeholders proposed in layer 3 and connected them with historical panics that influenced cultural understandings of the 1990s. I effectively traced the signification spiral backwards to historical constructs that the media drew parallels to when describing the Columbine Massacre. Conjunctural analysis looks backwards in time and outwards in scope to general ideas to trace these parallels. The signification spiral explains how fear can move from one issue or panic into another, building across time. For instance, Moral Panic over the hippie subculture’s relationship to new age cult movements in the late 1960s led to a fear of the heavy metal subculture’s relationship to
Satanism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This Moral Panic was again repackaged in the wake of the Columbine Massacre to focus on youth in Gothic Subcultures. Overall, the conjunctural model offered here is simply one step-by-step approach to a loosely theorized historical method of analysis.

**Describing the Conjuncture: Rhetorical Tools**

Moral Panic, as the name implies, originates from a sense of social crisis and collective fear. The 1990s defined groups outside of the status quo as a threat to white, male hegemony; Black Americans, LGBTQ populations, Youth, etc. The youth population was the subject of this panic after the Columbine Massacre. Moral Panics are largely rhetorical tools that help hegemonic populations allay fears about various events, stakeholders, and social ideas. One function of Moral Panic is to purport logical fallacies in service of resolving fear. Cohen calls these rhetorical tools “the inventory” and it is worth listing the tools here to contextualize the examples included in this chapter. “The inventory includes”:

1. **Exaggeration and Distortion**: “exaggerating grossly the seriousness of [the crisis]”
2. **Prediction**: “the implicit assumption, present in virtually every report, that what had happened was inevitably going to happen again”
3. **Symbolization**: “a word becomes symbolic of a certain status; objects symbolize the word; the objects themselves become symbolic of the status (and the emotions attached)” (Cohen; 1980; 31-43, emphasis added)

Cohen suggests that all these tools work together to transform an event into a cultural crisis which leads to a rupture. Throughout the analysis, these terms will appear frequently. The continuing inevitability of mass shootings and associated emotions limit discussions about preventing future shootings even today.
Parents: The Common Thread

One prominent “cause” particular to the Columbine Massacre that separates it from many past and future shootings, is the public memory’s focus on parental responsibility. The analysis begins with parents because the cultural moment of the 1990s exposed fears and anxieties about decreasing parental control of youth. By starting with the factor most unique to the Columbine Massacre, we are also starting with the root of the Moral Panic. Importantly, Moral Panic is about exaggeration rather than the actual existence of certain social problems. Social anxieties dictate reactions and solutions which leads to a false sense of resolution.

Anthony Downs (1972) discusses this false sense of resolution in relationship to media coverage of social problems as part of the final “post-problem” stage. He states that “Any major problem that once was elevated to national prominence may sporadically recapture public interest… it may become attached to some other problem…. problems that have gone through the cycle almost always receive a higher average level of attention, public effort, and general concern” (41). In the 1990s, there were several factors that made adults feel out of control of their children which in turn created a new generationally driven discourse that stated children are out of control. This narrative was embodied across many levels of social space, over-determining the perception that contemporary teens’ behavior was undoubtedly evidence of modern social decay.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the number of women in the workplace rose to 47% of the labor force (Census Bureau; 1990). This period noted a shift during which “Maternal employment, like paternal employment, [became] normative. In 1990, 75% of mothers… were employed, most of them full time” (Belle; 1999). This trend affected school age children as more and more parents came to rely on child care, often provided by relative strangers. These changes connect to the Moral Panic over Satanism and Ritual Abuse in the 1980s. During this preliminary, related panic,
children’s accusations of sexual abuse led to fear about infamous daycares run by satanic cult members like those accused in the McMartin trial. However, much like the crisis surrounding the Columbine Massacre, the narrative was merely a symptom of larger forces. More connections between the Satanism and Ritual Abuse panic and Moral Panic about Youth Violence after the Columbine Massacre emerge sporadically throughout this analysis. Many other narratives as overdetermined as this one appear throughout as well, demonstrating the complexity of social space.

During the 1990s, the emphasis shifted to teenagers, reigniting an already decades old Moral Panic musing “It’s 10 pm, do you know where your children are?” This phrase was central to our understanding of youth as deviant in the 1990s because it recalled pre-existent fears about unsupervised youth. One criminologist, James Alan Fox (1996), interpreted an 8% increase in juvenile crime around 3 p.m., a time when many teens are without adult supervision, as an example of increasing youth deviance (3). This spike in criminal activity also notably occurred at the same time younger children were often in day care. As the children raised in child care grew into unsupervised teenagers, the Moral Panic shifted to youth delinquency. Yet the central fear remained the same; parents weren’t watching out enough for their children. Instead, they were focused on work.

It’s worth noting that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold both came from two-income households. Eric’s mother, Kathy, worked at a catering company and Dylan’s mother, Sue worked with disabled community college students. Not only did this household configuration represent a steady national average but it also mirrors the average household in Jefferson County. In 1990, about 50% of all households in Jefferson County were married-couple households with children under 18 and in about 60% of those married-couple households the wife was employed
This trend also corresponded with the sense that suburban “safety” was under attack by the “creep” of urban crime. In the 1990s, suburban neighborhoods were largely homogenous, white, and middle class much like Jefferson County. The region was 94.8% white (Census Bureau; 1990, 6). If anything, Littleton represented an extremely normative environment. Indeed, the pressure to conform has been cited as substantial and potentially damaging in this region of Colorado by other analyses of the Columbine Massacre (Kass; 2009, Brown; 2001, Moore; 2002, Ames; 2005). This pressure originates from parents and the adult community in a place as normal as Littleton, CO. As a neighbor of both families, Victor Good, pointed out “‘Here's the real tragedy’… Eric and Dylan ‘were raised in loving families that built their lives around their kids, and it happened to them. Think of the horror of that.’” (Lowe; 1999, emphasis in original). The inevitability that characterizes this statement demonstrates the fear of ineffectual parenting prevalent during this period. No longer did normalcy and strong parental support guarantee safety after the Columbine Massacre.

Victor Good’s reaction to the idea that parental neglect “caused” the shooting inadvertently validates fears of youth. He insists that it wasn’t the Harris or Klebold families at fault but instead the school system. Others believed that the main "causes" of the Columbine Massacre were Pop Culture and easy access to Weapons. Indeed, there is a positive correlation between articles that attribute Weapons and Pop Culture as “causes” of the Columbine Massacre ($r=.296** p≤.000$). The prominent themes of Weapons, Pop Culture, and Bullying were all connected to parental neglect as well although they were connected in a wide variety of ways. The common narrative about Eric and Dylan’s parents exaggerated and distorted the importance of their oversight or lack of oversight, especially in regard to Eric and Dylan’s interest in Weapons and violent Popular Culture. For instance, the newspapers insisted that because the
weapons were left out in the open on the day of the shooting, the parents had willfully neglected their existence (Galberson; 1999, Apr. 27, A20). Because Eric’s website was easily accessible and because he played violent games (also played by many, many thousands of others), the parents were being too permissive and allowing their children to indulge in abnormal violent fantasies (Goode; 1999, Apr. 25, 1-30). Because their children had been in trouble with the law and had conflicts with their peers, the parents were not paying attention to their children’s emotional well-being (Wilogren and Johnson; 1999 Apr. 23, A1). Regardless of the accuracy of these arguments, they appear logical on their face. However, these themes reflect common fears in our culture rather than anything “True” about the Columbine Massacre itself. Just as Satanists were believed to harm unsupervised children, unsupervised teens destroy themselves and their calm, normal communities in the process. These arguments ultimately became comforting antidotes to a bleak prediction—school shootings will continue to occur unless parents regain control of their children.

Youth Culture and Delinquency: Out of Control

The observation that youth subcultures disproportionately appear at the center of Moral Panic throughout history is nothing new. However, the privileged class and racial position of the Columbine shooters complicated society’s understanding of which youth are violent. White, middle-class men were not seen as the primary threat up until that point. In the early 1990s, the focus had been on gang-related crime in schools. The Columbine Massacre appeared to be an evolution of urban crime into the suburbs. Along with racial stereotypes, these two violent youths broke traditional ideas of deviant youth as working class and aspiring to a hegemonic interpretation of masculinity. Instead, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold came from an average neighborhood and average families. These kids struggled with conformity and expressed
ambivalence about being supposed outcasts. For instance, Dylan wrote often about rejection and how strange he felt. He even wrote a poem entitled “People are alike/I am different.” Eric swung between anger and superiority in reaction to feeling different and rejected. He insisted that he would survive “Natural Selection” and his fascination with Hitler externalized his anger and feelings of superiority (Kass; 2009). However, these feelings appeared in personal journals detailing the boys' most intimate, concealed feelings. Whereas, the exterior normalcy of their life added to the "senselessness" of the crime and therefore hastened society’s effort to resolve the Columbine Massacre’s impact.

Skepticism about violent movies, cable programs, video games, and internet access represented one force in the larger field of power hoping to recover control of youth. With the proliferation of media outlets, some specifically geared towards youth and others deemed too graphic for youth, legislation addressed the fears of technological determinism that come with media expansion. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 symbolized the need for “parental control” more acutely than any other media regulation of the period. This act mandated that V-chips be installed in televisions to allow parents to block channels and programs they didn’t want their child to see—what we now understand quite literally as “parental controls.” This act also created the television rating system which roughly mirrors the MPAA’s rating system for film (Mullen; 2008, 186). These technologies allowed parents to monitor inappropriate television content. Still, parents feared technologies they lacked literacy with such as video games and the internet. After the landmark decision of Reno v. ACLU, which determined that content could not be regulated online, the internet was seen as a dangerous place for children and teens. This decision overturned the “Communications Decency Act” provision of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 (Trager; 2014, 514). This provision was about pornography alone and not violent
media. Still, the overreach of FCC power in creating a law that favored media censorship represented social fears of a media landscape becoming more varied and “adult” in its content.

Tightening regulations on media content and loosening ownership laws facilitated both online and traditional media expansion during the 1990s. Parental groups expressed fear over a variety of symbols associated with youth culture that were less simple to “control” than television consumption. Sternheimer attributes this regulatory shift to changes in media ownership and the 24-hour news cycle which focused on reporting crime through sensationalism. Sternheimer states that “campaigning against youth culture is a win-win proposition: it draws on existing fears of youth and political promises never have to lead to action since regulating culture is impossible in a free society” (2003, 51). The repeal of the “Communications Decency Act” certainly confirmed the importance of the 1st amendment but the focus simply shifted from censoring porn to censoring violent and offensive material more informally. Many of the cited “causes” of the Columbine Massacre were media hypothetically consumed by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold although many of these connections later proved false. In Michael Moore’s controversial and often problematic documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, he includes a succinct and impactful montage of Popular Culture icons accused of being “guilty” of contributing to the Columbine Massacre. These “causes” include angry heavy metal subculture, parents, violent movies, *South Park*, video games, television, entertainment, Satan, cartoons, society, toy guns, drugs, and Marilyn Manson (Moore; 2002). In response to the Columbine Massacre, all of these media properties were understood as promoting bad behavior rather than representative of normative media consumption for American teens.

Not only were parents concerned about the media youth consumed, but they were also concerned about media representations of youth. The volume of media representing teenagers
increased significantly in the 1980s and 1990s when teenagers became a lucrative market. These representations weren’t particularly reassuring to adults. Nichols and Good (2004) researched myths about American Youth in the 1990s and stated, “Entertainment and news media both provide a negatively skewed perspective on youth… given the rapid media growth over the past five decades… there is an increase in the number of adults who view youth negatively” (8). This media growth included the new “netlet” the WB which targeted teenage audiences with programs like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Smallville*. Adults suddenly saw teenage culture represented on television more—youth on these shows fought violent monsters and were sexually active; symbols of youth delinquency. These negative images transformed common media representations into symbols of delinquency.

Youth subcultures take the impact of symbolism to the next level by exemplifying, through style, the anxieties associated with stereotypes represented in teen media. The symbiotic relationship between teens and objects of consumption has historically played a central role in understanding subculture. In the Cultural Studies school of thought, Dick Hebdige (1979) famously described this cycle stating, “the two forms of incorporation (the semantic/ideological and the ‘real’/commercial) can be said to converge on the commodity form. Youth cultural style may begin by issuing *symbolic* challenges but they must *inevitably* end by establishing new sets of conventions” (96, emphasis added). Importantly, two groups who share a certain set of symbols around dark magic and pagan arts were the heavy metal subculture and the Gothic Subculture. While both subcultures were mentioned as culprits in response to the Columbine Massacre, the heavy metal subculture was also formerly associated with 1980s fears of Satanism and Ritual Abuse. Those associations bled into the 1990s youth crisis. This repetition and
collapsing of differences between subcultures shows how the signification spiral over-determines crises.

In the case of the Columbine Massacre, the symbol of the *trench coat* became the central subcultural element under attack from a variety of opponents including schools who wanted to ban the Gothic Subculture entirely. Academic Henry Jenkins spoke to Congress regarding the "causes" of the Columbine Massacre, particularly the roots of the logical fallacy that violent video games and youth subcultures "cause" anything. He states that “However spooky looking they may seem to some adults, goths aren’t monsters. They are a peaceful subculture committed to tolerance of diversity and providing a sheltering community for others who have been hurt. It is, however, monstrously inappropriate when GOP strategist Mike Murphy advocates ‘goth control’ not ‘gun control’” (Jenkins; 1999). Notably, in his reflection on the experience, Jenkins lamented the fact that those arguing against Popular Culture far out-weighed those arguing for Popular Culture in front of Congress.

Jenkins’ speech reinforces many of the themes discussed here; adult fears of youth, adult fears of technology, and the increasing visibility of youth culture. The dynamic of Moral Panic was recognizable, and yet, many Goths were mistreated and fearful of persecution after the Columbine Massacre (Hodkinson; 2002, 158). Many groups like Muslims following 9/11 or Japanese-Americans during WWII experience similar feelings of fear and persecution when subjects of Moral Panic. A distinctly generational dynamic emerges throughout history in the face of intense social change. Each new problem is both new and old. Sternheimer (2014) states, “This trend is historically consistent. Moral panics tend to mutate, ebb, and flow over time. Fears about the impact of one form of media may transform into a concern about another form of popular culture while using essentially the same arguments” (30). A cycle of new technology and
the emergence of new youth subcultures keeps the signification spiral going, building on itself until there is a new conjunctural moment, a new crisis of a similar kind. However, only hindsight allows society to recognize this new crisis as an extension of the previous crisis. Barely perceptible changes in the argument validate societal fears over the long-term and lead to the next moment of rupture.

The Invisible Crime Wave and Moral Education

The 1990s Moral Panic about youth was exacerbated by the confluence of several different forces enacted at multiple levels. The rise of 24-hour news and the disproportionate focus on crimes committed by youth overdetermined the perceived connection between youth deviance, media use, and the idea that crime was on the rise. As has been pointed out by many researchers across many different disciplines and in the popular press as well, the crime rate dropped steadily and significantly throughout the 1990s. The number of violent crimes dropped from approximately 24,000 to approximately 16,000 by 1999, a decrease of 33% (FBI; Fig. 2.3).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Violent Crime rate</th>
<th>Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter rate</th>
<th>Legacy rape rate</th>
<th>Revised rape rate</th>
<th>Robbery rate</th>
<th>Aggravated assault rate</th>
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Fig. 2.3 National Crime Statistics—FBI
So why did people believe the opposite was true? The answer has been publicly discussed in a variety of ways that also reinforce the mainstream narrative of the Columbine Massacre. These factors include the rise of the 24-hour news cycle, the expectation for schools and media to provide “moral education,” exaggerations about violent crime, and cultural symbolism related to religious ideas of “evil.”

The news media increasingly promoted fear through their focus on sensationalistic crimes. Crises are good for ratings as well as politics unlike the necessary policy stories that can help advocates prevent further mass shootings. Advocacy for censorship of media violence and several heavily televised crises, including Waco and the Oklahoma City Bombing, set the stage for the Columbine Massacre’s own live broadcast milestones. We watched an injured boy fall out of a window, heard live 911 calls with scared teens, and saw helicopter footage of teenagers dead on the sidewalk in front of the school. Everyday crime reports often focused on youth culture and violence during this period. One 1997 content analysis of 8,000 newscasts from 26 California television stations found that 70% of all stories focused on youth violence and in 84% of those stories focused on youth violence “the context in which violence occurred was ignored or deemphasized” (Dorfman; 1997, 1314). This shift in emphasis led to predictions about youth crime that were framed as realistic but were based on distortions of the relevant data. In reality, there was an overall increase in the amount of juvenile arrests but only for non-violent offences. “Juveniles and older youth combined… made up 38% of the increase in violent crime arrests from 1985-1995, whereas they accounted for 51% of the decrease in years 1995-1999” (Butts; 2000). Gun related homicides also decreased for youth during these years despite the growing concern with school shootings. Youth were not becoming more violent, but rather, they were
being arrested for more minor offences. Social Control became more powerful underlined by the feeling of Moral Panic which created a self-fulfilling prophecy about teen delinquency.

The lingering influence of 1980s assumptions about youth violence appears quite clearly in the distorted youth crime statistics that supported the sense of crisis in the late 1990s. One impactful example of a predictive model that overestimated the rise in youth crime is the James Alan Fox model. In 1995, at the height of youth arrests for violent crime, Fox predicted that the youth homicide rate would double by 2004 (Levitt; 2004, 169).

Fig. 2.4 The James Alan Fox Model (Levitt; 2004)
In several media interviews, Fox added that “the next crime wave will get so bad that it will make 1995 look like the good old days” (Yam; 1996, 44). This prediction was based on the most recent increase in violent youth arrests rather than a longer-term analysis. This prediction seemed quite troubling alongside the increasing visibility of school shootings from 1997-1999. The Columbine Massacre was by no means the first or only, but certainly the most impactful, mass shooting during this period. Additionally, Fox’s prominence as a source in the popular press helps explain the disproportionate number of news stories about violent youth from 1995-1999. Misconceptions are commonly validated in the process of moral panic; one statistic can be repeated ad nauseam across many different dimensions of social space. This repetition becomes proof that the crisis is based in reality.

If youth were the central figures in a contemporary crisis and parents had taken a backseat to controlling their children, then some other body had to step in to offer the education that was missing at home. In the 1990s, the idea of "moral education" played an important part in educational practice. Adults and communities shifted responsibility for their teenagers’ acquisition of social norms to the school and even, ironically, the media. In the 1980s and 1990s, prevention programs aimed at crime, drugs, and violence in schools became common. D.A.R.E., one of the most popular drug prevention programs aimed at teens, emerged in 1983 and was used in 80% of school districts by 2001 (Birkeland; 2005, 247). These programs pointed to increasing fears about guns and drugs in urban school districts and yet the Columbine Massacre in many ways confirmed wider judgments about all youth. Even the television industry stepped into the realm of moral education. The Children’s Television Act of 1990 mandated educational programming and allowed those programs deemed “prosocial” to qualify as educational (Calvert; 2003). Television networks created any number of mild, socially appealing television shows with
social lessons. For example, the TGIF block on ABC offered family programming like *Boy Meets World* which focused on social issues, including teen delinquency, regularly. These programs often ended with a moral or social lesson. Ultimately, the perception that children weren’t learning “prosocial” lessons from their parents supported the idea these programs were quality—they were offering something that parents were not. The term “prosocial” indirectly acknowledges that teenagers were assumed to fall outside of socially acceptable norms. These programs produced moral social messages to reassert Social Control over youth more informally.

Legislation in schools expanded this moral education with zero tolerance policies intended to combat the increase in juvenile crime. The increase in social programs and school presentations by groups like DARE, MADD, and Stranger Danger were joined by concerns about previously normalized “bullying” behaviors. News coverage of the Columbine Massacre showed a gap in beliefs about the impact of bullying. Some articles state that Bullying was nothing more than an excuse for bad behavior (Callahan; 1999, Apr. 23). Others advocated for anti-bullying programs to mitigate the risk of school shootings specifically (Leib; 1999 Apr. 22, A-18). These statements reflect ambivalence about the salience of bullying as a "cause" in the Columbine Massacre and yet anti-bullying programs, in some cases became mandated, and in other cases, joined the litany of prevention programs common in schools after the Columbine Massacre (Muschert; 2014, 111). Additionally, the infamous No Child Left Behind Act, approved in 2001, reflects the assumption that violence is a serious problem in schools and should be monitored in a variety of ways; mandated anti-drug programs, accountability for safety, zero-tolerance policies, crime prevention and prosecution, and community-supported after-school programs (Nichols; 2004, 58). This moralistic addition to educational policy shows the connection between 1980s fears of drugs and alcohol abuse and the alleged 1990s epidemic
of youth violence. The policy also reflects concerns about “controlling” youth by granting teachers “control of their classrooms,” allowing search and seizure that may violate youth civil liberties, and enforcing community support to keep teens off the street after school (Nichols; 2004, 58). After the Columbine Massacre, schools worked to formalize moral education while also hoping to revive parent and community confidence in their ability to keep youth safe.

However, some individuals, like Glenn Muschert, have pointed out that these goals can contradict one another—zero tolerance policies turn students into enemies and reaffirm stereotypes that are detrimental to certain youth subcultures and minorities. The focus on limiting youth subcultural expression in schools was considerably acute after the Columbine Massacre. Muschert discusses the effects of such broad school regulation. He states that “the net is widened to formally regulate a variety of behaviors, including child’s play and dress [collapsing] the line between dangerous and annoying behaviors; students who pose a danger to others are equated with those who challenge authority through dress” (2014, 109). Many schools limited black clothing, Gothic symbolism, and trench coats. To this day, trench coats are not permitted on the Columbine High School campus although the Jefferson County School Board does not explicitly ban them (Thomas; 2014). This tenacious dedication to forbidding a symbol so loaded with meaning for the Columbine Massacre, and yet so disassociated with the actual youth culture at issue in the case, shows how the shooting shut down community discussion about any internal or localized problems. Dissent cannot reasonably exist in schools if all non-conformity is coded as deviant. When the school system shifts to a moralistic role, students must conform to the institution’s judgment of what is good and what is bad or be labeled delinquents.

Moral Panic thrives on extreme moralistic beliefs because symbols of good and evil hold an important, preternatural place in any culture, but especially one as saturated with religious
imagery as America. The greater Littleton area extending south to Colorado Springs is littered with a variety of Christian communities. The loudest of these communities is the Evangelical Christians who rose to cultural consciousness with the expansion of religious television in the late 1980s and 1990s (Hoover; 1998). Colorado contains what many in secular culture understand simplistically as the *good* and *bad* extremes of religion in close proximity; Christianity and Satanism. Indeed, Anton LaVey, founder of the Church of Satan and the religion of LaVeyan Satanism, was rumored to be based in Colorado Springs around 1990, the height of the Satanism and Ritual Abuse scare (Raschke; 1990, 214). Again, the truth of such a statement is hardly relevant. Instead, the statement reveals conflict within the local community about what is morally appropriate. Christianity is also fraught with conflict in the local culture; fueled by contention, schisms, and pressure to convert citizens outside of the religious culture. Jeff Kass describes this tension stating that “[Religious] strife is said to continue in Jefferson County today, with believers against non-believers, and sect versus sect. ‘The churches have very little to do with each other,’ says Reverend Don Marxhausen, who presided over Dylan Klebold’s funeral. ‘There’s two separate groups, the evangelicals and the mainliners’” (Kass; 23). Pressure to conform to the local religious culture aligned with the pressure to conform to social norms as well. Because Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold rejected this community’s definition of “good” as religiously and socially conformist, they were cast easily in opposition to these norms as “evil.”

The occult symbols common to Gothic Subcultures invoke the 1980s preoccupation with Satanism and Ritual Abuse. After the Columbine Massacre, Gothic Subcultures and their embrace of differences were framed as “evil” on a national stage. Being symbolically different became an admission of complicity in the “culture of violence” that created the Columbine Massacre. “Good” and “evil” understood broadly as religious rhetoric, infects normative strains
of secular American culture and contributes to a polarized culture of symbolic and exaggerated
claims. David Altheide (2002) explains how secular culture absorbs these moral discourses
stating that “fear is circularly (or reflexively) joined to the ‘other,’ a role played by the Devil…
This fear was realized in everyday-life terms as people tried to ‘be good’” (246). The seemingly
normal lives of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were understood as deviant to solidify a
normative understanding of the event. Through this process, the boys became symbols of “evil”
in society, just as their trench coats (worn for convenience, not as a symbol of subcultural
membership) became symbols of danger in schools. These absolute judgments represent local
values which ultimately contribute to the narrative of the Columbine Massacre and are projected
onto our larger national culture. In this way, the Columbine Massacre created the symbol of the
school shooter, a folk devil or “visible reminder of what we should not be” (Cohen; 1980, 10).
The folk devil of the 1990s youth moral panic is the gun-toting, social outcast, obsessed with
violent media who perpetually dons a large black trench coat.

The Invisible Crime Wave and Self-Protection

The folk devil symbol of the school shooter that emerged from the Columbine Massacre
further circulated within the upper dimension of social space, the field of power. This space was
generally concerned with larger patterns of social breakdown, morality, and violence. These
forces illustrate the macro-institutional rebellion to the Columbine Massacre’s micro-attack on
the school system and suburban conformity. The Columbine Massacre was intimately related to a
growing fear of Far-Right domestic terrorism. Two notable events broadcast live on CNN before
the Columbine Massacre represented this newly problematized form of crime; the FBI stand-off
at Waco and the Oklahoma City Bombing. Both these events pointed to a problem with the easy
accessibility of increasingly high-powered weapons; guns and explosives. The Columbine
Massacre reinforced those fears and placed the danger posed by these weapons in the context of the youth Moral Panic. Even more notably, these three events share a strange history; “perhaps not by accident the Columbine High shootings took place on April 20, while the Oklahoma City bombings took place on April 19, 1995, on the anniversary of the government siege of Waco that killed members of a religious community” (Kellner; 2008, 37). These events resonate because the Columbine Massacre was intended to destroy the high school with bombs just as Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building with bombs. The shooting was also originally planned for April 19th although Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold never explained why they chose this date.

Both these attacks targeted broad, normative ideologies represented by the institutions they bombed. The perception that the FBI and ATF misused their power in the stand-off at Waco motivated the Oklahoma City Bombers, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. The viewed this overreach as a violation of their 1st and 2nd amendment rights. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold hoped to symbolically destroy the oppressive conformity of their school and town as a similar show of power against institutions. Their diaries never confirmed that they saw a direct connection between their planned massacre and the Oklahoma City Bombing which in some ways marks the parallel even more strongly as a projection of social anxieties and Moral Panic. However, Eric Harris explicitly fantasized about flying a plane into a skyscraper two years before 9/11 and their attack was intended to become a nation-wide killing spree. The shared symbolism and anti-establishment meaning of these events speaks to how unsettled society was regarding the emerging phenomenon of mass violence in the 1990s.

Due to these institutional implications, the meaning of the Oklahoma City Bombing was quickly resolved in our national culture. The public memory of these events was solidified
through memorialization. Of the Oklahoma City Bombing memorial Kenneth Foote (2003) states “dedicated in 2000, only five years after the bombing, it seemed to appear too quickly and on too grand a scale for a site associated with mass murder and terrorism and of such potentially equivocal meaning—that is, what would drive an apparently normal middle-class American to attack hundreds of innocent civilians?” (338). Foote cites the Columbine Memorial as another example of hastened resolution. These events both validated fears of highly normative Americans attacking their own institutions to make a larger political statement. Middle-class suburban Americans could perpetrate or be victims of such large-scale, public violence for no apparent reason. Despite the desire for resolution and healing, fear of the unpredictable and unknown is inscribed throughout the memorial for the Columbine Massacre. The commemorative quotes featured on plaques encased in the brick wall at the edge of the circular monument pose open questions that invoke the unintelligible or “senseless” quality of the shooting like “how have things changed; What have we learned?” (Fig. 2.5), “I didn’t have any answers” (Fig. 2.6), “the hardest part to understand was kids killing kids” (Fig. 2.7), “it would be misleading if I said I understand this, I don’t” (Fig. 2.8).
“It brought the nation to its knees, but now that we've gotten back up how have things changed; what have we learned?”

“I didn't have any answers.”

(student)

“The hardest part to understand was kids killing kids.”

(student)

“I would be misleading you if I said I understand this. I don’t.”

(student)
However, all these attacks had clearly articulated motives; mainstream culture simply wasn’t listening. The ideological undercurrent of domestic terrorism, broadly defined, corresponds with a reactive Right-Wing culture exemplified in the Littleton Area by conflict between different sects of Christianity, its proximity to notoriously conservative Colorado Springs, and Colorado’s history as a pro-firearm state. Domestic terrorism by Far-Right extremists is its own brand of terror typically (but not always) associated with white men. However, the threat posed by these crimes, much like the threat posed by mass shootings more generally, has been exaggerated. From 1990-2013, Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) found that there were 155 incidents of Far-Right Domestic Terrorism and these attacks were responsible for 368 deaths (2014, 1). These statistics do not include incidents of school violence including casualties from the Columbine Massacre. In comparison to the general rates of violent crimes, with 16,000 incidents a year at its lowest point in 1999, these crimes don’t seem as significant as the level of attention they receive in the popular media would suggest. The spectacular quality and “newness” of these types of attacks made them more visible in the media and public culture of the 1990s.

These events also contributed to the overall fear of crime in the 1990s. Douglas Kellner (2008) summarizes the socio-economic shift that boosted this home-grown ideological violence. He states that “the rise of militia and extremist white male identity politics and the attendant antistatism… attests to the decline of national identity… in the face of identity politics, globalization… focus on the local community… a decline of democratic politics and rise of a panorama of ‘antipolitics’ ranging from militia and survivalists to cult and spiritualist groups” (95). The Columbine Massacre reflected a broad array of changes closely related to this idea of ‘antipolitics.’ The shooting was uncomfortably squeezed between white male identity politics, a
local community in which Far-Right ideology was common, and fear of the cult and spiritualist movements that extended historically for several decades. These fears developed from Charles Manson’s cult in the late 1960s, through the Satanism and Ritual Abuse panic in the 1980s, to fears of youth subcultures like Goth, and Far-Right Domestic Terrorism in the 1990s. According to the signification spiral, these different ideas transform and build upon one another which only adds fuel to the most recent iteration of Moral Panic.

Far-Right Domestic Terrorism also represented fears about the availability of powerful weapons and explosives in the 1990s. The connection between a perceived increase in crime and a perceived increase in the use of these weapons over-determined the sense of danger posed by these crimes. The Waco stand-off revolved around the number of firearms that the Branch Davidian cult had amassed over several years. The fear of religiously “fanatic” cults with guns only increased when the Oklahoma City Bombers explicitly referred to the Waco stand-off as one motivation for the attack. The Oklahoma City Bombing also increased fears about explosives. In Far-Right Domestic terrorism, 60% of those victims have been killed by firearms and the Oklahoma City Bombing alone was responsible for about 46% of all Far-Right Domestic Terrorist casualties (START; 2014, 1). As national awareness turned to spectacular crimes committed by U.S. citizens, anxiety about the availability of firearms and access to bomb-making information online increased. However, the overall percentage of gun ownership by household has steadily declined from 1972 to the most recent report in 2014. This pattern didn’t diverge significantly from its downward trend during the 1990s (NORC; 2014, 3). Additionally, Colorado’s gun culture was highly representative of the national norm, just as Littleton represented the working household demographic norms of the United States. On average, 34% of Colorado households owned guns in 2002, approximately 2% higher than the national average
(Okoro; 2005, 372). However, the *significance* of gun ownership in Colorado cannot be disentangled from the Far-Right, religious ideology represented by its local culture.

Gun control became a central issue in the 2000 election driven by several factors—the political strength of the National Rifle Association (NRA), increased *attention* to violent crime, and lapses in government control represented by Far-Right Terrorism and school shootings. The Republican candidate, George W. Bush faced an immense amount of pressure from the gun lobby going into the election. He was scrutinized when he defended President Clinton against character attack ads produced by the NRA. Peter Brown states that “Gun-control advocates have long maintained that Bush made certain promises to the NRA through mediators so that the president could not be directly linked to NRA platforms and demands… they decided not to endorse Bush” (Brown; 293). Public opinion kept the focus on the NRA and crime in general going into the election. In 1998, as the election agenda was in its early phases, “crime and lawlessness” was the number one public concern (46%) with “breakdown of the family” and “the quality of public education” following close behind (Dilulio; 1999, 336-7). These statistics preceded the Columbine Massacre. Yet the shooting embodied these major public concerns.

The NRA faced an even larger obstacle in the form of mass shootings that occurred through illegally obtained weapons. These incidents recalled pre-existing points of social tension between gun violence prevention advocates and guns rights advocates. One point of tension was the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act (more widely known as the Brady Bill), enacted after John Hinckley attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan based on a delusion about the film *Taxi Driver*. The symbolism tying Popular Culture to gun violence reappeared after the Columbine Massacre when news outlets connected the shooting to video games in the genre known as “shooters” (like *Doom*) and violent action films. In this era of fear about violence and
possession of firearms and explosives, the 1st amendment was also at issue. In the face of a rising conservative voice, even Liberals called for caution and censorship. Edward Linenthal (2001) explains that conservative radio offered an outlet for the perspective of angry white men like McVeigh and Nichols. He states “Conservatives… now react with anger to the suggestion that hate-filled, right-wing radio shows might push some people to violence… the danger… is in the message of hatred and violence, not in which medium carries them” (37). Expressions of violence became visible in much the same way as representations of youth. Cable television shows like those on HBO featured graphic violence, video games became more violent and realistic, bomb-making information was readily available online, and even radio became a place filled with shocking and hateful language. The 1st amendment fused with technological fears into a sign of Moral Panic.

The connection between the Brady Bill and the Columbine Massacre runs more deeply than its symbolism as Popular Culture induced violence. The Brady Bill also contained one important caveat called the “gun show loophole” which allowed Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to obtain most of the weapons used in the Columbine Massacre. The “gun show loophole” allowed private sellers to forgo background checks. The shooters researched their gun purchases extensively and even wrote school papers on the topic. Eric Harris wrote about the bill in his journal; “All I want is a couple of guns, and thanks to your fucking bill I will probably not get any! Come on, I’ll have a clean record and I only want for personal protection. It’s not like I’m some psycho who would go on a shooting spree” (Kass; 2009, 124). Without making any assumptions about Eric’s intention to invoke the beliefs of other right-wing terrorists with his statements, the sentiment remains the same. The idea of self-protection was central to the 2nd amendment arguments of those involved in Waco and the Oklahoma City Bombing. The
Columbine Massacre reaffirmed pre-existent fears that there was more to this behavior of collecting firearms than simply self-protection. As a result, more citizens grew afraid of a gun violence epidemic facilitated by weak laws.

Gun violence prevention remains the primary lens through which the average American citizen views the issue of mass shootings. Because of the primacy of gun violence prevention after mass shootings, the lack of progress in lawmaking can contribute to feelings of hopelessness. The “gun show loophole” has yet to be closed at the federal level despite its association with several shootings besides the Columbine Massacre (Watts; 2015, July 20). Some states have begun to make their own laws to address what many Americans still see as a weakness in gun legislation. One of the states that now requires universal background checks for all types of weapons, even those purchased through private dealers, is Colorado (N.A; 2016 Sept. 30). However, this loophole was only closed in 2013 as a response to the Aurora Theater Shooting, fourteen years after the Columbine Massacre. Moving into the 2018 local elections, an effort to repeal this bill has grown in the face of a new American Populism and the re-emergence of the Far-Right (Matthews; 2017, Oct. 22). Gun violence prevention has become the “cause” for mass shootings in public memory; perhaps in part because it seems like the most straightforward solution to ending gun deaths. Certainly, the issue has a role to play in any multi-causal response to mass shootings, but it cannot remain the only issue.

**Loaded Significance**

The Columbine Massacre became such a culturally significant mass shooting in U.S. history because the event embodied a myriad of social anxieties specific to the historical moment of 1999. The shooting exemplified the growing Moral Panic centered on youth and youth violence that seemed to seep into every facet of youth culture including Popular Culture and
education. The Columbine Massacre’s cultural salience allowed it to become the shooting that defined what mass shootings were *about*. Fears of gun ownership and violence in schools defined the surveillance approaches that many schools and parents took following the event. Even today, one of the first reactions after a mass shooting is to increase surveillance at public events (Berr; 2017, Oct. 3). None of these solutions seeks to cut through to the heart of the issue; instead, they focus on one aspect of the phenomenon of mass shootings as a “cause” and address that agenda above all else. To address the complexity of the issue of mass shootings beyond this cluster of issues so tightly fused to an historically situated event, media-makers must develop a more refined approach. This approach must proceed from the understanding that the Columbine Massacre spoke to our cultural anxieties before it spoke to the reality of mass shootings. Rather than perpetuate Moral Panic, media-makers can show audiences that these issues are complex but not unintelligible or insurmountable.
CHAPTER III

Repression and Prevention: Media Frames and The Columbine Massacre

When analyzing a text, it’s important to capture both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of that text because it allows researchers to account for *how* news coverage tells us what to think about. Looking at news coverage of the Columbine Massacre will help to answer several important questions that relate to both the volume and tone of news coverage.

**Research Question 2:** How has media coverage of The Columbine Massacre framed, narrowed, or shaped common discourses about mass shootings? Do these definitions limit institutional statements or policy reactions?

**Research Question 3:** Who defines which pressures and circumstances are highlighted in media coverage of mass shootings?

To answer these questions, I coded frames, topics, and information about individual stakeholders included in these news stories. These questions help us understand what news norms the Columbine Massacre set for future coverage of mass shootings. In this chapter, the primary goal is to describe those news norms to determine how much they help or hinder prevention efforts. The limitations of news coverage and the emphasis on different frames and stakeholders reveals that coverage about prevention is sharply differentiated from coverage about victims and that victims were disproportionately featured in news coverage. These results reinforce the long-term agenda of media-makers and researchers focused on determining what constitutes ethical coverage of mass shootings in regard to victims without seeming to consider the importance of informing the audience about prevention efforts. Overall, the results show that prevention and coverage of the shooters was underemphasized in news coverage of the Columbine Massacre which established a precedent of repressing discussions of prevention to this day.
The Downs' Issue-Attention Cycle: A Matter of Hope

Stanley Cohen adapted a disaster framework to his analysis of Moral Panics. This seven-part sequence resonates with news coverage of mass shootings, particularly the emphasis on the victims of a disaster. This model provides the useful idea of the “suprasystem.” Cohen’s adapted model attributes two duties to the suprasystem—in the rescue stage, this system provides aid that cannot be provided locally and, in the remedy stage it also “take[s] over the functions the emergency system cannot perform” (Cohen; 1980, 23). These functions include issues of meaning that need to be addressed through action to restore equilibrium in the final recovery stage. This system may be analogous to the political system or society as a whole; in other words, the hegemonic institutions inhabited by the “primary definers” of a disaster or tragedy. In the instance of the Columbine Massacre, the suprasystem expressed grief for the local community of Littleton on the national stage while targeting larger social trends rooted in deep social anxieties as problems that needed to be solved to restore equilibrium. The micro-macro relationship between those affected by disasters and the suprasystem is by no means exclusive to mass shootings—terrorism and police protests are two similarly politicized forms of grief. Their position of authority grants the “suprasystem” the first word in interpretation. For the project at hand, it is essential to define who has control of meaning-making. The degree to which stakeholders are heard and the frames that are highlighted extend from this suprasystem and its role in processing a disaster, natural or man-made.

Anthony Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle is a more commonly used model for describing how news coverage defines new or emerging social problems. The five stages of this cycle demonstrate the speed with which these events are “resolved” and the open-ended quality of meaning in those necessarily partial resolutions. The Columbine Massacre wasn’t the first mass
shooting of its kind but the timing and number of casualties from the shooting caused the issue to evolve from what Downs calls the “Pre-problem” stage to the “Alarmed Discovery” stage. The “Pre-problem” stage has been well documented by the conjunctural analysis of the 1999 historical moment. This stage establishes the conditions for serious alarm and potential intervention. The “Alarmed Discovery and Euphoric Enthusiasm” stage occurs “within a relatively short time” according to Downs (1972, 39). The implication of this theory is that the issue-attention cycle only lasts for short bursts of time, like the week following an event. This cycle can be shortened by a feeling of all-encompassing helplessness like the feeling inspired by the discourse used to define the Columbine Massacre.

The third and fourth stages of Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle can be explicated using the results of the following content analysis. The cycle points to the role of different stakeholders in each stage which can be examined statistically as well as qualitatively. These stages represent how all these stakeholders shape the public perception of various social issues related to the Columbine Massacre. This theory states that the majority of society only acknowledges a problem so long as they feel they can “solve this problem” or “do something effective” (Downs; 1972, 39). In the case of mass shootings, this cycle resolves very quickly because our entrenched societal belief and cultural common sense tells us these are inexplicable events, senseless violence, and that rational responses don’t work in resolving irrational problems. Moral Panic explains the paranoia and destabilization that validated these fears. However, this content analysis points to several other ways the pattern of meaninglessness was established following the Columbine Massacre.

The next stage, “Realizing the Significant Cost of Progress,” occurred quickly when broad, protected rights were targeted by the commentary surrounding the Columbine Massacre.
Weapons represented ongoing debates about 2nd Amendment Rights. Pop Culture cannot be legislated according to the 1st Amendment and Bullying had been normalized in American culture to the point where its harmful effects were up for debate following the shooting. Downs explains that “part of the problem results from arrangements that are providing significant benefits to someone” (Downs; 1972, 40). Within the first week of coverage about the Columbine Massacre, different stakeholders, like politicians, benefitted from the continued debate about gun violence prevention in which the Columbine Massacre only represented one small moment. The all-encompassing nature of the perceived "causes" of the shooting and a cynical perception of self-interested stakeholders contributed to the “Decline of Public Interest” (Stage four). The transition from these previous stages to the “Post-problem” stage occurs more gradually and, as Down states, “almost imperceptibly.” (40) However, within the first week of coverage about the Columbine Massacre there is strong evidence that the first three stages were complete; capped by the resolution of victims’ narratives through funeral ceremonies and other forms of memorialization. Content analysis shows this process in action as stakeholders and narratives shift within this short time frame.

**Framing the Agenda: How Stakeholders Use Mass Shootings**

Two theories better describe the what of the discourses and stakeholders that undergo the process of the Downs' Issue-Attention Cycle; Agenda-setting and framing analysis. Agenda-setting theory points to how certain agendas and explanations become more central than others, to say nothing of the process of interpretation. Max McCombs (1972) explained this dynamic, stating, “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (13). He explains how news routines that limit information at the story level also guide which issues are highlighted as most
important. Part of the ruptural moment of the Columbine Massacre came from the fact that it raised mass shootings to a vivid, visual, front-page genre and, tangentially, defined the salience of different explanations for mass shootings. Critical depth and myth correction occurred much later, only after the salience of certain issues like gun violence prevention and violent media was established. The Agenda-setting function prioritizes different explanations and stakeholders over others during the process of issue-attention.

The frames used to describe these agendas shape the connotations, narratives, and emotions attached to these “salient” issues. Frames are broad enough to be recognized through qualitative analysis but conclusions about these frames can be further supported through statistical analysis that helps measure the salience of frames. Reese describes framing theory as “an interplay of media practices, culture, audiences, and producers, the framing approach guards against unduly compartmentalizing components of communication… more critical, qualitative and interpretive approaches allow for ambiguity, historical contingency, the implicit, and emphasize how meaning is signified” (2001; 7-8). The details of the shooting, as interpreted by the news media, fall into the category of frames. Not all aspects of an event become frames and other features of framing besides content like volume, primacy, connotation of coverage, etc. reveal which discourses endure. Reese qualifies the category of the frame by stating “frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese, 5, emphasis in the original). This process occurs when the media repeatedly report similar details in the same way across multiple shootings due to speed, limited space, and short audience attention spans. These similarities can be as acute as the repeated use of one particular sentence in several different stories and as loosely associated as naming the same two frames within the same portion of several stories.
Frames in coverage of the Columbine Massacre narrowed and shaped meanings about mass shootings as a phenomenon.

This recycling of themes is what Downs’ calls the “Post-problem” stage where progress to address an issue can no longer be made. He states the “Post-problem” stage is a “twilight realm of lesser attention or spasmodic recurrences of interest… during the time that interest was sharply focused on this problem, new institutions, programs, and policies may have been created to help solve it” (Downs; 1972, 40-41). The Columbine Massacre is considered one of the defining moments in the history of mass shootings due to many factors both specific to the shooting and broadly reflected in culture at that historic moment. In tracing the Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle of this prototypical mass shooting, the content analysis accounts for the salient themes developed in stages two and three. The analysis also accounts for the moment attention drifted off in stage four and frames current common sense in our culture’s response to mass shootings.

Media research about mass shootings typically focuses on the ethical issues of approaching victims after the shooting and the censorship of information about mass shooters. The ethics of care theory in journalism and the theory of repression in public memory define the role of media coverage about mass violence and death. The ethics of care perspective has been prescribed in many places as the best way to interact with victims after mass shootings. Walsh-Childers outlines this approach for journalists stating that interviewees “reacted positively to journalists who treated them with compassion, showing concern for their well-being, managing interviews to accommodate sources’ physical and emotional needs, and giving sources an opportunity to express what they wanted to say” (199). The responsibility to put victims first in news coverage includes limiting details about the mass shooters ranging from their names, to the
warning signs they exhibited, to the media they left behind (Moritz, Sumiala). The “No Notoriety” movement aims to limit the use of a shooters name and picture (Teves; 2012). While multiple studies have insisted that manifestos like Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold’s “Basement Tapes” (which have never been publicly released in their entirety), “valorized [their alienation] and their depression and psychological ills” and “supports the scaffolding of various themes derived from violence, such as depression and contemplation of suicide” (Moritz; 2011, 153; Paton; 2012, 222). The combination of media-making practice and pre-existing social contracts prioritizes the victims’ perspective over the shooters'. Sumiala explains that “mediatization affects what we consider normal and exceptional death, or whose death we find important and thus worth public mourning.” (Sumiala; 682). This statement explains how repression relates to Agenda-setting; we are told what to think about and warned of what not to think about through the exclusion of the shooters’ perspective and the inclusion of extended discussions of ethical reporting behavior. These norms are emphasized over time to create a rigid, generic set of frames that address the issue of mass shootings.

Capturing the Cycle at the Local and National Level

To better understand how the news-making process both reflects common sense ideas about mass shootings and produces new ideas, I conducted a content analysis. I looked at six major mass shootings from the 1969 Texas Towers Shooting to the 2012 Sandy Hook School Shooting. This broad sample allows me to make observations across several decades. However, the results presented here only include data about the Columbine Massacre to better understand what makes this particular shooting an "unofficial" prototype for social and news norms about mass shootings. Indeed, the Columbine Massacre has been connected to many shootings over the past 18 years and is still blamed for copycat shootings regularly. Some researchers, like the
investigative team at *Mother Jones* (well known for quality research on mass shootings), have dubbed shooters’ and journalists’ continued fascination with the shooting the “Columbine Effect” (Follman and Andrews; 2015, Oct. 5). This content analysis examines why the perception that all mass shootings, in some small way, stem from the Columbine Massacre persists.

The study includes all the news articles from the *Denver Post* and the *New York Times* for the first week after the shooting. I chose these two publications to compare local and national coverage of the shooting. Although the narrative of the Columbine Massacre has shifted over time, I contend that the majority of readers only recall details from the first few days of coverage or the first four stages of the Downs' Issue-Attention Cycle—in the case of the Columbine Massacre, stage four occurred within the first week of coverage. The study includes a variety of recording variables: newspaper, date of publication, weekday, byline, item words, item sentences, and number of sentences about past mass shootings. These variables offer descriptive and time measurements to help strengthen the statistical results.

The study also includes many coding variables to assess the way that the *Denver Post* and the *New York Times* talked about key stakeholders in the shooting (victims, first responders, shooters, etc.) as well as variables that determine the degree to which news coverage focused on each group. The relevant variables in this category include reporting location, story type, topics, and two important binary variables; First, was the story primarily about trauma or politics? Second, was the story primarily framing the shooting in local or national terms? Where there was some uncertainty about which of these variables was most prominent, I counted the number of sentences addressing each binary variable. However, most stories fell clearly into one category or the other.
The variables most relevant to the following discussion were the “common causes” of the Columbine Massacre, a series of important reporting norms, and the number of articles featuring the victims, shooters, prevention, and the Littleton community. “Causes” were coded based on a list of common factors attributed to many mass shootings. These “causes” include Weapons, Pop Culture, Physical Illness, Mental Illness, Revenge, Bullying, Loss of Employment, Outcast, Unknown (which encompasses explicit statements that the motive for the shooting is unknowable), and "Other." Each mass shooting has conditions unique to that shooting and these conditions are captured using the "other" category. The three most commonly cited "other causes" in the Columbine Massacre were Parents, Goth, and Race. These "causes" stem from contemporary anxieties discussed in the historical analysis.

**Results: Summarizing the Split**

The sample included 269 articles; every article that focused on the Columbine Massacre in the first eight days of news coverage, April 20, 1999 through April 27, 1999. No articles were published on the day of the shooting itself. These articles were gathered from the *Denver Post* and the *New York Times*. The *Denver Post* included 207 articles about the shooting and the *New York Times* included 62 articles about the shooting in the period under discussion. Some important dimensions include the frequency of articles about trauma and the local community as opposed to political and national narratives (Table 3.1). Overall, 208 articles (77.3%) focused primarily on traumatic aspects of the Columbine Massacre and 61 articles (22.7%) focused primarily on political aspects. On the other hand, 158 articles framed the Columbine Massacre as primarily a local event (58.7%) and 111 articles framed the event as a national tragedy (41.3%).

Further breaking down these two dichotomous variables by paper, in the *New York Times*, 37 articles focused primarily on traumatic aspects of the shooting (59.7%) and 25 articles
focused primarily on political aspects (40.3%) as opposed to the Denver Post in which 171 articles focused on traumatic aspects (82.6%) and 36 articles focused on political aspects (17.4%). The vast difference between the amount coverage of this events as trauma or politics in each paper signals a pronounced split that appears throughout this sample (Table 3.1). When looking at local or national narratives, the New York Times framed the Columbine Massacre as a local event in 23 articles (37.1%) and as a national event in 39 articles (62.9%). The Denver Post framed the shooting as a local event in 175 articles (65.2%) and as a national event in 72 articles (34.8%). These numbers reflect each paper’s duty to their primary audience, local or national.

Table 3.1 Frequency of Dichotomous Variables, Causes, and Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>% The New York Times</th>
<th>% The Denver Post</th>
<th>% Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By Paper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma vs. Politics</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
<td>82.6%</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40.3%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local vs. National</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>65.2%</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>62.9%</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>41.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapons</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop Culture</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goth</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooters</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>50.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N for The New York Times = 62
N for The Denver Post = 207
N for total Sample = 269

Articles were coded for contributing factors or “causes” behind the Columbine Massacre and for topics about key players such as the shooters, victims, community, and the issue of
prevention (Table 3.1). The top 6 “causes” are highlighted here and include; Weapons featured in 91 articles or 34%, Popular Culture featured in 89 articles or 33%, Bullying featured in 68 articles or 25%, Parents featured in 27 articles or 17%, Goth featured in 34 articles or 13%, and Race featured in 18 articles or 7%. The “causes” were featured to the same proportion in each paper although the New York Times dedicated slightly more articles to each topic overall (Table 3.1). For example, Weapons were featured in 58 articles in the Denver Post and 33 articles in the New York Times. However, the larger sample size for the Denver Post overall explains this difference. Additionally, Goth and Race were both featured in the exact same number of articles, 16 articles for Goth and 9 articles for Race, in both papers. The differences between coverage of each “cause” by paper can be attributed to the drastic difference in sample size between these papers.

Each article was coded for up to three topics. Victims were the topic of 135 articles or 50%. Shooters were the topic of 80 articles or 30%. Prevention was the topic of 49 articles or 18% and the Littleton community was the topic of 64 articles or 24%. The split between coverage of Shooters and Victims, as well as the small number of articles focused on Prevention reveals a pattern of meaninglessness that will appear throughout this analysis. The focus on Victims and the Community is more pronounced in the Denver Post; 55% of the stories featured Victims while Shooters were featured in 28% of articles. In the New York Times, Victims and Shooters were featured about the same; 32.3% versus 35.5%. Importantly, neither paper featured Prevention as often as the Shooters themselves despite the controversy over featuring personal details about the Shooters. The Denver Post included about two times more stories focused on Prevention (33 or 15.9%) than the New York Times (16 or 25.8%), again due to the difference in
sample size between these publications. The degree of coverage these different stakeholders received speaks to the problem of Prevention and meaninglessness as well.

Table 3.2 Correlations between Topics and dichotomous variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
<th>6.</th>
<th>7.</th>
<th>8.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shooters</td>
<td>.725** (269)</td>
<td>-.360** (269)</td>
<td>-.230** (269)</td>
<td>.075 (269)</td>
<td>-.069 (269)</td>
<td>.211** (269)</td>
<td>.148* (269)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.281** (269)</td>
<td>-.151* (269)</td>
<td>.020 (269)</td>
<td>-.108 (269)</td>
<td>.319** (269)</td>
<td>.230** (269)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.557** (269)</td>
<td>-.115 (269)</td>
<td>.196** (269)</td>
<td>-.437** (269)</td>
<td>-.388** (269)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.153* (269)</td>
<td>.161** (269)</td>
<td>-.240** (269)</td>
<td>-.149* (269)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speculation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.098 (269)</td>
<td>-.055 (269)</td>
<td>-.049 (269)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Paper</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.231** (269)</td>
<td>-.241** (269)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma v</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.484** (269)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local v</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p ≤ .05
** p ≤ .01

Measuring the relationships between the key topics and the two dichotomous variables of Trauma versus Political or Local versus National revealed a notable split already evident in the descriptive statistics (Table 3.2). Shooters and Prevention had a strong negative correlation with Victims and the Community. Shooters and Prevention were positively correlated with Political and National narratives of the shooting while Victims and the Community were positively correlated with Trauma and Local narratives. The Victims and Community also shared a strong positive relationship with one another as well as being more featured more prominently in the Denver Post. The split between Shooters and Prevention set against Victims and the Community characterizes much of the data in this analysis. This deep division greatly impacted the emphasis on who makes meaning after a mass shooting.
Measuring the relationship between the top six “causes,” Shooters, Victims, and degree of speculation reveals how closely associated these factors became through news coverage of the Columbine Massacre (Table 3.3). Weapons positively correlated with each “cause” aside from Parents and Goth. Popular Culture also shared a strong positive relationship with Bullying and Parents. Bullying was strongly associated with each “cause” aside from Parents. Importantly, the issues of Goth and Race shared a strong positive correlation. The top four “causes” had a strong positive relationship to articles that focused primarily on the Shooters. In contrast, only Weapons and Popular Culture had a strong negative relationship to articles that focused on the Victims.

The “causes” again relate to the separation of content about Victims from content about Shooters although most “causes” shared no relationship to articles about Victims.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
<th>6.</th>
<th>7.</th>
<th>8.</th>
<th>9.</th>
<th>10.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weapons</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.315**</td>
<td>.163**</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.080</td>
<td>.129*</td>
<td>.274**</td>
<td>-.325**</td>
<td>.167**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop Culture</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.300**</td>
<td>.165**</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.320**</td>
<td>-.342**</td>
<td>.169**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>.211**</td>
<td>.272**</td>
<td>.295**</td>
<td>-.225</td>
<td>.146*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.062</td>
<td>-.066</td>
<td>.136*</td>
<td>-.061</td>
<td>-.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goth</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.231**</td>
<td>.087</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.171**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>.165**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooters</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.360**</td>
<td>.075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speculation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p ≤ .05  
** p ≤ .01
Independent T-tests were performed for the top six “causes” and four featured topics as well as speculation along each of the five reporting norms under discussion. I examined the differences between newspapers, Local Versus National, Trauma versus Politics, Breaking New versus Commentary, and Weekday versus Weekend reporting (Table 3.4). Each “cause” aside from Bullying and Parents was covered to a different degree in the Denver Post versus the New York Times. The Victims and Community were also covered to a significantly different degree according to paper. Each “cause” and topic was covered to a significantly different degree through a local or national lens. The two exceptions were the “causes” of Bullying and Race. The same pattern was true for Trauma versus Politics. However, Goth was not statistically significant according to this dichotomous variable while Race was. These two dichotomous variables highlight the stability of Bullying in all coverage that features this “cause.” In fact, Bullying was only significantly different in terms of weekday versus weekend reporting.

Table 3.4 Significance of T-tests for Causes, Topics, and Speculation across Reporting Norms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>By Paper</th>
<th>Trauma Vs Politics</th>
<th>Local Vs National</th>
<th>Breaking News Vs Commentary</th>
<th>Weekday Vs Weekend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weapons</td>
<td>P &lt; .001</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>p &lt; .002</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop Culture</td>
<td>P &lt; .059</td>
<td>p &lt; .002</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>p &lt; .017</td>
<td>p &lt; .083</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goth</td>
<td>p &lt; .002</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>p &lt; .007</td>
<td>p &lt; .019</td>
<td>p &lt; .004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>p &lt; .035</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>n.s</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooters</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>p &lt; .002</td>
<td>p &lt; .017</td>
<td>p &lt; .022</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>p &lt; .006</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>p &lt; .002</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>p &lt; .011</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speculation</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For detailed results see Appendix A.
Just as Bullying and Parents were the only non-significant factors between the *Denver Post* and the *New York Times*, these factors were not significantly different when comparing Breaking News to Commentary. While in most cases the Independent T-tests showed largely homogenous and significant differences across the previously discussed reporting variables, the exception was the difference between Weekday and Weekend reporting. Only Bullying, Goth, and Race were different in this category, most likely because of the school week and the quick resolution of misinformation about the topics of Goth and Race.

Speculation plays a large role in the continuation of certain myths about the Columbine Massacre. However, the variable here doesn’t measure the existence of misinformation in articles, but rather, whether the article clearly signaled that its information may not be true. In this case, speculation is an unpredictable variable that can either be helpful in signaling uncertain details or harmful in repeating certain unverified information until it is treated as fact. Lisa Finnegan (2006) argues that “Good journalists also sort fact from fiction and alert their audience when speculation or rumor is reported as fact” (2). Overall, the *New York Times* more clearly signaled their speculative statements. Speculation was negatively correlated with stories about the Community but shared no relationship to any other topics or the primary dichotomous variables of Trauma versus Politics and Local versus National (Table 3.2). On the other hand, speculation was strongly correlated with Weapons, Popular Culture, Goth, and Race and *slightly* correlated with Bullying (Table 3.3). Speculation only differed significantly across the reporting norm of Breaking News versus Commentary (Table 3.4). Speculation about “causes” was in some cases strongly signaled. However, further breaking down these numbers according to paper (*New York Time* or *Denver Post*) alters this pattern.
Table 3.5 Correlations between “Causes,” Dichotomous Variables, and Speculation in *New York Times*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
<th>6.</th>
<th>7.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weapons</td>
<td>.163</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>.087</td>
<td>.258*</td>
<td>.243</td>
<td>.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.474*</td>
<td>.494*</td>
<td>.166</td>
<td>-.216</td>
<td>-.256*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goth</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.239</td>
<td>.426*</td>
<td>-.211</td>
<td>-.349**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.274*</td>
<td>-.303*</td>
<td>-.365**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speculation</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-.282*</td>
<td>-.422**</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
<td>(N=62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma v Politics</td>
<td>-</td>
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*p ≤ .05  
**p ≤ .01

Table 3.6 Correlations between “Causes,” Dichotomous Variables, and Speculation in *Denver Post*

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<td>.109</td>
<td>.103</td>
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<td>Bullying</td>
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<td>.139*</td>
<td>.127</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goth</td>
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<td>.183*</td>
<td>-.029</td>
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*p ≤ .05  
**p ≤ .01
The *New York Times* more clearly signaled their speculation than the *Denver Post.* Speculation in the *New York Times* correlated with Weapons, Goth, and Race (Table 3.5). In comparison, the *Denver Post* did not clearly signal their speculation about any “causes” (Table 3.6). The *New York Times* also more strongly signaled their speculation when speaking about Trauma and Local factors; likely due to their once removed perspective from the community. Each paper also aligned with several “causes” according to the variables of Trauma versus Politics and Local versus National. Goth and Race are positively correlated with one another in the *New York Times.* However, only Race is framed as a Traumatic factor in this coverage. Both Goth and Race are also framed as a Local issue in the *New York Times.* Bullying is also correlated with Local issues in this national publication (Table 3.5). The opposite is true of Bullying in the *Denver Post*; this “cause” is framed as a National issue. Goth and not Race are not correlated with one another in the *Denver Post.* In fact, Race is not significant in any category in this publication while Goth is framed as a Local issue (Table 3.6). Speculation and “causes” differ in important ways between news coverage of the Columbine Massacre in the *New York Times* versus the *Denver Post.*

**News Routines Framing Prevention: Bullying and the “Blame Game”**

All mass shootings are associated implicitly and explicitly with various "causes" and discourses about what factors could have been addressed to prevent the tragedy. Those "causes" include both generalized discourses commonly used to discuss mass shootings and factors that say more about one specific shooting than mass shootings as a phenomenon. The most frequently cited “common causes” in this sample were—Weapons, Pop Culture, and Bullying. The most frequently cited “other causes”, unique to the Columbine Massacre, were—Parents, Goth, and Race. The data illustrate the dynamic between discussions of "causes," targeted by advocates of
prevention efforts, and major patterns of news coverage along different dimensions defined by news-making factors.

Agenda-setting narratives develop in reaction to the pressures of news routines and practice. The Columbine Massacre exacerbated the limits of these routines and practices; it was both a ruptural moment, representing a new phenomenon, and a fast-paced story. A variety of factors in news-making practice greatly shaped which narratives were emphasized in coverage. For instance, the focus on Weapons and Parents remains stable across weekday and weekend reporting for the event. These two issues reflected the pre-existing national political agenda moving into the 2000 election. These discourses were important before and after the shooting, representing the issues of “crime and lawlessness” and “breakdown of the family” (Dilulio; 1999, 336-7). Most of the "common causes" were significantly different across all the news-making factors coded in this analysis; Weekday vs Weekend reporting, Breaking News vs Commentary, Trauma vs Political, Local vs National, and by Paper.

It’s particularly interesting how these discourses differ across Trauma versus Political and Local versus National narratives. Weapons, Popular Culture, and Parents were all covered to a significantly different degree across both these variables, the emphasis was more political and primarily framed these issues as a national concern. However, Bullying diverged from this pattern—the topic was covered similarly in stories about trauma and politics as well as stories about local and national issues. This result shows that Bullying reflected a cultural trend, but one that prompted little conversation about solid solutions, unlike the legislative and pro-censorship solutions that developed from discussions of Weapons, Popular Culture, and Parents. The data nullifies the possibility that this outlier means that the news was covering the Bullying that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold endured sympathetically; that is, acknowledging their trauma. Instead,
it appears as though each publication was playing the “blame game.” The issue of Bullying correlated with Local narratives in the New York Times. But the issue correlated with National narratives in the Denver Post. Overall, the coverage of victims had a strong negative correlation to both discussions of Bullying (r= -.225 p ≤ .000) and discussions of Columbine High School’s culture (r= -.191 p≤ .002) which quickly came under attack in the National media as one that inattentive to the dangers of bullying. The tail for Bullying also aligned with the shooter and prevention topics rather than the Victim and Community topics which reinforces the fact that Bullying was largely viewed as a national issue. Similarly, the articles that focused specifically on Columbine High School are only covered to a significantly different degree when comparing Local versus National narratives of the shooting. The Denver Post and the New York Times struggled to resolve two questions: Was Bullying a localized issue worth ignoring? Or was Bullying a fact of life as difficult to combat as the negative effects of Popular Culture, and therefore, hopeless?

The New York Times series “Terror in Littleton” profiled the culture of the school and Littleton community. These articles discussed Bullying prominently. One article recounted an incident in which “a group of freshmen football players surrounded Mr. Morris [an interviewee from the real “Trench Coat Mafia”] in the cafeteria, yelling taunts and backing him up against a wall” (Wilogren; 1999, Apr. 25, 1-30;1). Another article summarized an incident in which “Someone from the Breed-Maher [Jock] group tossed a doughnut and some biting insults at those in the Harris-Klebold cadre” (Wilogren and Johnson; 1999, Apr. 25). There was also a focus on how the school was a microcosm of the “clique” problem affecting the nation. One article explains that “from the jocks and preps who rule the roost to stoners, skaters, freaks and, yes, the trench coat mafia. Among these latter groups, many have chafed for some time at the
dominance and arrogance of the jocks. That is to say, Columbine High School is separated into cliques and classes and ins and outs, as complicated a place as the society beyond” (Rimer; 1999, Apr. 22, A27; 1). All these stories focus on the way Bullying manifested in the Littleton area. However, they also viewed the issue as a broader representation of society. Even though, national news coverage scrutinized the local culture, at the local level, to speak about Bullying would be acknowledging responsibility and the issue was therefore framed as a National epidemic in the Denver Post instead.

Downs states that the national audience loses interest when they feel ineffectual in preventing the issue under discussion. In the case of the Columbine Massacre, a feeling of helplessness in the face of a national “Bullying epidemic” contributed to the quick resolution of prevention efforts and media coverage of these efforts. For instance, one early article from the Denver Post about the issue of bullying called it an “age-old cruelty” and used phrases like “the reasons [for bullying] haven’t changed,” “always,” and argues that “most people can fit in somewhere,” even as the article calls for bullying prevention programs (Callahan and Auge; 23 Apr. 1999). These phrases allude to the long taken-for-granted existence of youth bullying and only suggests combating these behaviors to stop school shootings. Pre-figuring a “cause” that can be addressed by prevention as all-encompassing and natural reinforces the public’s feelings of helplessness and advances the decline of public interest. Similarly, the public realized quickly that legislating Weapons, Popular Culture, and Bullying required sacrifices on their part. The Public also realized that these problems pre-dated the phenomenon of mass shootings—they are part of our culture—which makes prevention appear impossible. Reframing supposed “causes” as warning signs or risk factors can help to break through this misperception about cause-and-effect in mass shootings.
The news tells us what to think about and not what to think. Speculation was more commonly signaled when stories discussed the “causes” of the shooting at length. These news stories largely shaped prevention narratives through a myth-making process. The pressure to continually report new information and the reliance on expert commentary to contextualize this information without access to reliable data about the shooters can explain this high level of speculation. Even though much speculation was clearly signaled as commentary, especially in the New York Times, the more speculation appears, the more it is interpreted as fact. Part of the resilience of misinformation following the Columbine Massacre stems from the way that the key “causes” played off our social anxieties. Lisa Finnegan (2006) states reporters can “lose sight of the story itself and report rumors and speculation as fact. The result is a dizzying array of information that is reported and often taken back. It leaves the public confused and promotes a sense of instability and paranoia” (31-32). Considering the potency of images of out of control youth invoked in news coverage of the Columbine Massacre, the most salient information was that which played on instability and paranoia. In terms of Agenda-setting, repetition also tells us what to think about. The New York Times tried to contextualize and limit their speculation, especially speculation about Trauma ($r = -0.282$ $p \leq 0.05$) and Local factors ($r = -0.422$ $p \leq 0.01$) as demonstrated by the strong negative correlation between speculation and these variables. On the other hand, the Denver Post did not clearly signal their speculation even when speaking about the supposed “causes” of the shooting. This result is more troubling when considering the volume of coverage from the Denver Post and the pooling of resources between the Denver Post and the New York Times. Ultimately, the blending of Moral Panic, speculation (often not differentiated from fact), as well as the volume of sensationalized information led to many misconceptions. Some of these misconceptions, like the shooters’ affiliation with the Trench
Coat Mafia clique, remain a part of the Littleton community’s narrative of the shooting even today.

**Local Ownership of Sense—lessness**

Topics related to the shooting’s “causes” and the shooters’ lives occupied about one-third (29.7%) of the total news coverage of the event. Two times more news coverage focused on the victims which established the common emphasis on victims after mass shootings. This emphasis on victims leads to the insulation of the community from discussions of prevention and the “causes” of the shooting. On the national stage, there was some acknowledgment that Columbine High School and Littleton’s local culture played a role in the shooting. This observation extends to criticisms of the prevalent gun culture in the area, the Bullying culture in the high school, and the Gothic subculture represented by the local group the Trench Coat Mafia.

The national media’s acknowledgment of this local culture is striking when compared to the average-ness of the Littleton area—the school represented a microcosm of America and its problems.

The disconnect between the local and national dialogue about the Columbine Massacre shaped ethical norms associated with reporting on and responding to mass shootings. The liveness of the situation, the young age of the victims, the infiltration of a tight-knit community by journalists, and the early accessibility of graphic images from the shooting validated the need for a discussion of these ethical dilemmas. Those conversations still occur today. the Columbine Massacre also established the importance of allowing local communities and victims to direct the meaning of these events. One central example of the community’s control over the meaning of the event is the difference between formalized and informal memorialization after the shooting. While the formal brick-and-mortar memorial for the Columbine Massacre was created by and for
the local community, more informal memorials established immediately after the shooting struggled with whether to include or exclude meanings associated with the shooters and prevention more generally. Stevens and Franck (2015) state that in “formal memorials the markers only represent the victims, never the perpetrators who often have also died. At informal memorials, people sometimes attempt to include markers that recognize the perpetrators. These efforts arouse strong passions and such markers are often contested and removed” (65). For the Columbine memorial, meanings associated with the killers were disruptive. News coverage in the Denver Post reinforced the repression of meanings associated with the shooters.

One of the most infamous stories about the Columbine Massacre involves the repeated vandalism and removal of black crosses from one informal memorial that appeared right after the shooting. These crosses represented Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold who committed suicide to end the Massacre. The community responded by tearing down these crosses, and yet, Greg Zanis, the man responsible for one set of 15 crosses, replaced those dedicated to the shooters repeatedly (Obmascik; 23 Apr. 1999). It’s interesting to note that in the New York Times, these crosses drew no attention during the first week of coverage but did warrant a single disapproving comment from the Denver Post. Even more interestingly, the discussion about these crosses reoccurred after the Aurora Theater Shooting in the nearby Denver suburb of Aurora. In response to this more recent shooting, Mr. Zanis is paraphrased in the Denver Post as stating that “he made the crosses to elevate the names of the dead above the name of the person who investigators believe killed them” (Crummy; 23 July, 2012, 9A). This statement is tortuously decontextualized—even as the article acknowledges that Mr. Zanis erected 15 crosses after the Columbine Massacre (the body count correctly includes Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold), the article fails to make the distinction that James Holmes, the perpetrator of the Aurora Theater Shooting, survived. These
value judgments about the meaning of the crosses only appeared in the Denver Post while the New York Times simply mentions the crosses he erected at Columbine High School 13 years earlier. This story warrants recounting as an anecdotal demonstration of the emphasis on community meaning after mass shootings. The Denver Post maintains a normative stance to the shooters in the Columbine Massacre to the point of projecting their audience’s understanding of the event onto their sources. The quantitative data reinforce a severe split between discussions of the shooters and victims. Readers could avoid learning about the root “causes” of the shooting and potential areas for prevention uncritically because stories about the Victims were so sharply delineated from stories about the Shooters.

Looking at the role of the community helps to answer some of the research questions outlined in this project. RQ 2 and RQ 3 ask what is being repressed or left out and which stakeholders are prioritized in response to the journalistic pressures following mass shootings? The story of the crosses represents the relationship between the repression of the shooters’ perspective and the privileging of the community’s interpretation of the shooting. The quantitative data support this dynamic between prevention and community control over meaning. An overwhelming frequency of articles focused on victims and the local community—two times as many articles as those focused on the shooters and prevention. This division appears across the various layers of statistical analysis—descriptive statistics, correlations, and Independent T-tests all reflect a similarly severe division. Articles focused on the Community and Victims were significantly different across all reporting norms aside from Weekday versus Weekend reporting. The significance of these topics was aligned against Shooters and Prevention in terms of Local versus National coverage, Trauma versus Politics, and Breaking News versus Commentary. This split in reporting norms shows that those interested in following the Victims and Community
need not engage with coverage that attributed meaning to the shooting. Furthermore, many of the strongest correlations consolidate the relationships between Victims and the Community as opposed to the Shooters and Prevention. Articles about Victims were negatively correlated with both Shooters ($r = -.360 \, p \leq .01$) and Prevention ($r = -.281 \, p \leq .01$) and articles about the Littleton Community followed a similar pattern with a slightly less pronounced negative relationship to Prevention ($r = -.151 \, p \leq .05$). Articles about Victims also had a strong negative correlation with the top two “causes,” Weapons and Popular Culture. Logically, these negative correlations lead to the conclusion that there was little overlap in articles that discussed Victims and Prevention.

As a result, privileging the perspective of Victims also extracted any meaning or potentially constructive response to the shooting that was included in news coverage of the Columbine Massacre.

Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle moves into the fourth stage more quickly when people are discouraged or disinterested in the “issue” under discussion. This dynamic is perpetuated by the belief that nothing can be done; if you, as an audience member, only read news coverage about the victims after the Columbine Massacre, you would not know that prevention was possible. Victims, suffering from shock within the affected community, do not have the knowledge or expertise to explain the shooting in the immediate aftermath, nor should they be expected to provide answers. However, the news reporting from the Columbine Massacre established the expectation that meaning should come from these stakeholders. In the news coverage, this expectation led to many articles lamenting the confusion felt by Littleton and, by proxy, the nation. In the *Denver Post*, articles featured the watchword “senseless” in their coverage of both the Victims and Prevention. However, the *New York Times* used the word only once—not in the context of the shooting itself but rather the experiences of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Not
only was the word “senseless” utilized to an inordinate degree in the Denver Post but the word was most often fused with emotional imagery and appeals. One description of the funeral service for Danny Rohrbough stated “Beneath a huge cross suspended from the ceiling and surrounded with flowers, the teenager's closed coffin was a somber reminder of the senseless killings, even as the healing words of hymns and scripture filled the sanctuary.” (Barrett; 1999, Apr. 27, AA05, emphasis added). To create a sense of community one article explains that “‘By no means are we detaching or separating ourselves from the great sorrow we all feel in these senseless deaths,’ he said. ‘We're all grieving just as if it were in our city.’” (Young; 1999, Apr. 24, A24, emphasis added). To offer hope, another article stated, “While the world mourned the senseless killings of 14 students and one teacher at Columbine High School, survivors recalled acts of heroism” (Obmascik; 1999, Apr. 22, A1, emphasis added). Senseless remains a commonly used term in news coverage of mass shootings today. The word connotes emotions like hopelessness, grief, and futility. This trend of focusing on the Victims reinforces and strengthens our societal common sense that says prevention and understanding of mass shootings is impossible.

The focus on preserving and prioritizing the concerns of the local community also leads to the generalization of “causes.” Importantly, both national and political articles appeared more frequently in The New York Times. The New York Times series “Terror in Littleton” maintained this separation as well, suggesting that the conventionality of the area and the bullying culture of the school contributed to the shooters’ decision to commit this terrible act. As shown through the cultural analysis provided, these narratives were more culturally driven than specific to mass shootings or the Littleton community. Articles framing the event as a national one positively correlated with more generalized discussions of Crime (Pearson .155 sig=.011) and Popular Culture’s influence (Pearson .310 sig=.000). National narratives lend credence to the idea that
corrupt media culture filled with violence and adult content in video games and films and a growing national crime wave led to this event rather than anything specific to the local culture that other articles examined. National narratives also strongly correlated with discussions of Prevention and Weapons. Apart from Bullying (described in depth above), all the frames analyzed in nationally-oriented articles deflected any specificity from Jefferson County or Columbine High School. The importance of what Kellner calls “a constellation of interacting factors” stemming from toxic local cultures is lost in this process of generalization (Kellner; 2008, 28). By handing over the meaning-making process to the victims and local community, much of the news coverage was stripped of meaning or generalized to a degree that makes the issue of mass shootings appear insurmountable. This dynamic still inflects coverage of mass shootings today.

**The Persistence of Myths: Illustrating Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle**

Journalists who covered the Columbine Massacre recognized the complexity of the shooting’s “causes” quickly but had already released inaccurate information. Some journalists later, notably Jeff Kass, attempted to “undo” the myth-making process that was solidified in the first few days of coverage. Two persistent myths reinforce the strong influence of news coverage published in the first 72 hours after the shooting; one, that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were part of the Gothic Subculture represented in Littleton by the Trench Coat Mafia. Two, that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold targeted racial minorities. Targeting was a persistent myth more generally as well—the boys allegedly targeted religious students and jocks as well. Goth and Race as causal factors are mentioned here together for a few reasons. First, these two narratives are identified as two of the top three “causes” specific to the Columbine Massacre. Second, these narratives also appear within the same sentence in articles that featured both “causes” together
quite frequently; 11% of the sentences in *New York Times* articles and 12% of the sentences in *Denver Post*. Finally, the fact that these myths were corrected very quickly in the mainstream media coverage of the event is the most salient reason they are analyzed together here. The persistence of these narratives illustrates the short life-span of public interest in the shooting. Tracing these long perpetuated and inaccurate frames—the myth of the Trench Coat Mafia and the myth of Racial Targeting—through the first week of coverage shows the fast movement of the Columbine Massacre through the Downs Issue-Attention Cycle.

The myth of Eric Harris and Dylan’s Klebold’s membership in the Trench Coat Mafia began with their choice of outfits for the massacre. Early descriptions of the shooters mentioned trench coats. The Trench Coat Mafia, an informal but tight-knit group of friends, only one of whom associated with Eric Harris, was then mentioned by students to news outlets who seized on the detail. Within days, eyewitness interviews revealed that although the Trench Coat Mafia existed and many of its members were bullied, these individuals had no direct influence on the shooters. By April 23, the newspapers had already printed stories amending original statements about the Trench Coat Mafia. Similarly, the myth of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold targeting racial minorities originated from statements made by victims and eyewitnesses. Students initially stated that the shooters targeted minorities, that the Trench Coat Mafia expressed racist beliefs, and that this group and these students were looking for revenge over being bullied. This set of rumors was solidified within the first 48 hours of coverage when the father of the only minority student killed in the attack, Isaiah Shoels, repeated the statement that being black and being an athlete made his son a target. However, he also added that his son previously “had a conflict” with the shooters without elaborating on the reasons for the original conflict (Barron; 1999, Apr. 22). By April 23, this narrative had also disappeared or been amended in news coverage that
acknowledged these stories were based solely on speculation. For two narratives resolved so quickly, the Goth and Race myths about the Columbine Massacre remain central to the general Public’s understanding of the event. The quantitative data reinforces the significance of this early speculation.

Goth and Race were two of the most significant “other causes” coded in this study; not a surprising outcome considering the social climate of the time. Bound up in these two narratives was the fear of teenagers, especially the idea of the clique. Goths represented one such clique and they were set against minority students and athletes in this narrative. The importance of the clique is highlighted by the strong correlation between stories about Bullying and Goth (r= .211 p≤ .000) and Race (r= .272 p≤ .000). Some variation of the following sentence appeared four times in the New York Times and seven times in the Denver Post in the first 48 hours of coverage and not again after: “Witnesses said that the two gunmen pulled weapons and explosives from beneath their black trench coats, and appeared to be aiming specifically at members of racial minorities and athletes.” (Pulley, 21 Apr., 1999). These articles also contain extended discussions of the central ideas represented by that statement; that the shooters’ dress somehow influenced their actions along with racist ideologies. The abrupt disappearance of articles that included these statements reflects the significance of the t-test comparing the amount of coverage discussing the “other causes,” Goth and Race, during the week as opposed to the weekend. Despite the media’s quick acknowledgement that these narratives were propagated by eyewitness rumors and speculation, the audience did not absorb these corrections (Kass; 2009, Toppo; 2009). Tom Mauser even revealed in an interview for this project that he still receives letters asking about the Trench Coat Mafia. This lack of audience responsiveness to amended information demonstrates both the strength of the story as a cultural symbol and the quick
revolution of the event through the first three stages of the Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle in just a few days’ time. Before these narratives were even resolved, there was a shift in the audience’s interest away from prevention.

Like all of the top six “causes,” Goth and Race differ drastically along major lines of reporting norms. However, the most interesting observations point to which meanings were repressed through news coverage. For the Trauma versus Political category, we see that race is significantly different and Goth is only approaching significance. On the other hand, in the local versus national category Goth is significantly different but race is only approaching significance. In addition, the Denver Post did not signal the speculative nature of their reporting about Goth and Race which were highly correlated in this publication ($r= .183 \ p \leq .05$). On the other hand, the New York Times, clearly signaled their speculation about these narratives. The idea that speculation quickly becomes interpreted as fact (even when clearly marked through language as speculation) and subsequently cemented as myth is well-supported by this pattern; especially when juxtaposed with the rapid resolution of these narratives and their long-term cultural impact.

Again, the sensationalized and vivid imagery associated with these myths helps to strengthen their impact. The traumatic factor in the racial narrative about Isaiah Shoels’ death played a role in shaping these myths. The Goth narrative seems to hinge on something different, perhaps that this subculture was seen as representative of the national problem of youth violence. There was a correlation between mentions of Goth as a “cause” for the shooting and the use of objectifying language ($r= .124 \ p \leq .042$) like descriptions of the trench coat. In effect, the subculture was reduced to a symbol, that of the trench coat, which was subsequently banned from many schools (Illescas; 22 Apr, 1999). Eric Harris’ fascination with Nazism and German Culture supported this narrative in the earliest stage of news coverage. What these narratives
miss is their symptomatic quality—trench coats and a fascination with Nazi culture may be apt warning signs but they are not the “cause” of the Columbine Massacre. These myths ultimately detract from public efforts to accurately pinpoint and address the “cause” of this particular shooting.

Media Models for Engagement

Downs states that the movement from stage three to four of the issue-attention cycle occurs because people feel “discouraged, threatened, or bored” by the potential solutions to the problem. In the case of the Columbine Massacre, the Goth and Race narratives had a long-term impact because they seemed more specific and individualized than the all-encompassing, broad issues that defined the first few days of coverage. These narratives validated Moral Panic over youth and separated the shooters from the community by addressing the most specific “causes” and deflecting blame to larger cultural issues. We cannot easily solve the problem of Popular Culture or parenting or gun violence in a culture that prioritizes individual freedoms. We cannot simply violate individuals’ legally protected right to own firearms or exercise their free speech. Downs goes further in his definition of the post-problem stage; in this stage people depend on potential institutions, programs, and policies to address reoccurring social problems (1972,41). He adds that after the ruptural moment, the impact of these events becomes far less likely to inspire real, lasting change.

If the news coverage of the Columbine Massacre repressed anything, it wasn’t details about the shooters’ lives, but rather what audiences could do to address the issues that led to such a tragedy. Mass shootings today continue to inspire a feeling of hopelessness and boredom. News coverage rarely focuses on those institutions, programs, and policies that have emerged in response to these episodes of mass violence in a reassuring way. On September 13th, 2017, a
young man brought a gun into his school in Spokane, Washington and killed a young boy who attempted to stop the shooting. These empty words from a law enforcement officer were featured prominently in reputable publications and CNN:

“These are senseless and tragic events that don’t need to happen. I don’t understand them, I don’t think anybody can make sense out of this. We need to figure out what’s gone wrong in our society that our children decided they needed to take weapons out to deal with the issues they’re facing” (Narayan; 2017, Sept. 14)

These words echo the hopelessness and “causes” of the Columbine Massacre 18 years later. Yet only one of these statements is actually true—these tragic events don’t need to happen. But how can media-makers empower their audiences if they are featuring inaccurate statements that insist prevention isn’t possible? While issues of violence cannot be completely mitigated, mass shootings have become easier to predict and prevent with increasing research. So how can journalists speak realistically about “causes” and prevention without violating their ethical standards in reporting about mass shootings? The perspective of key stakeholders and advocates offers some insight into solutions for addressing “causes” and prevention of mass shootings.
CHAPTER IV

Mobilizing Emotion: The Politics of Prevention after The Columbine Massacre

Moral Panic surrounding the Columbine Massacre affected the salience of certain discourses about the "causes" of the shooting. One of the most notably neglected topics in news coverage of the shooting was prevention. The lack of time and historical distance from the ruptural moment of the shooting certainly played a role in the de-emphasis of proposed solutions and questions about how to prevent future mass shootings. No one can predict or prevent an emergent issue. However, groups like the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV) drew some conclusions about prevention before the Columbine Massacre. This group appears several times in news coverage of the Columbine Massacre; they speak about risk factors and programs like “safe schools” which they have developed and still use today. Still, the director of the group concludes “when we get down to explaining which of those kids will actually do something like this, that's a tough question” (Egan; 1999, Apr. 25, 4;1). The article further characterizes the potential effectiveness of these prevention efforts as “doubtful” again invoking the sense of hopelessness these articles should combat. More importantly, the narratives of senselessness and hopelessness that are legitimate in the face of an emergent phenomenon continue into the present despite a wealth of effective responses that have been developed. Unfortunately, these proposals are not widely supported by or even known to the average citizen. "Alternative audiences" offer a variety of expertise that challenge and revise popular understandings of prevention and response to mass shootings. However, due to the factors of emotional investment and a lack of institutional support by the government and media, these
effective responses remain under-emphasized. Media are instrumental to informing the mainstream or "dominant audience" about how prevention has developed, changed, and grown since the Columbine Massacre.

Based on interviews with "alternative audience" members—the families of victims, a variety of prevention experts, law enforcement, mental health professionals, and public information officers—this chapter identifies gaps in communication and knowledge about prevention and response to mass shootings. These interviews helped address several questions.

**Research Question 4: What is unique about the perspective of “alternative audiences”?**

**Sub-question 1: How could constructive discussions of mass shootings include the majority stakeholder perspectives?**

**Sub-question 2: Could a more well-rounded approach lead to a more active discussion and/or more effective and creative solutions to the problem of mass shootings?**

These "alternative audiences" demonstrate how emotional investment can contribute positively to advocacy despite the media’s perception of victims and victims’ narratives as necessarily apolitical as a show of respect. Instead of the media projecting their agendas and their sense of victims’ needs into their reporting, we need a model of advocacy that encourages education about prevention through the media cycle after mass shootings. According to interviews with 12 members of various "alternative audiences," several important themes are the need to assure media audiences that prevention and response to mass shootings is not hopeless, the need to have a clear, united message, and the need to work with and within systems instead of silos. These themes and the lessons learned by "alternative audiences" provide several beginning guidelines for intervention.
Emotion as Political Strategy

This analysis begins by arguing for the importance of passion and investment in research and advocacy. Many advocates are driven by passion and, in the case of mass shootings, they work to solve a problem that the mainstream long-term narrative has labeled hopeless or senseless. Feminist theory originally distinguished itself from more traditional objectivist research approaches using the famous axiom “the personal is political.” Carol Hanish’s original thesis hinged on the idea that sharing experience provides a necessary space for fully articulating the issue at hand. In other words, it’s impossible to solve a problem without a good sense of what the problem is. Her work offers three useful insights for effective political interventions addressing complex problems:

1. Talking about our experiences allows us to articulate things that are not easily articulated
2. Articulating the problem through experience helps us understand the problem more fully
3. Only through understanding the problem can we move towards effective political intervention or “chang[ing] the objective conditions, [rather than] adjust[ing] to them.”
   
   (Hanish; 1969)

When discussing a ruptural moment like The Columbine Massacre, there must be a pause. Experience needs to be considered, processed, and acted on but these things take both time and a collective desire to understand the problem fully.

Other feminist scholars expanded on the importance of experience in solving social problems or changing social conditions. Elspeth Probyn argued for a recuperation of experience in Cultural Studies. She states that when “located within an epistemological/ontological tension, the experience of the critic, of her ‘lived’ and of its connections to an object of analysis, can be put to work to motivate alternative modes of intervention” (18). Many critics of social theory
have asserted that it’s impossible to be a fully objective observer. Yet, using experience as an
approach for suggesting action is also viewed with skepticism and criticism. This analysis
proceeds from the productive possibility of passion and emotional investment. The problem of
mass shootings requires solutions outside the box as defined by current social conditions, just as
the problem of women’s rights in the 1960s required an awareness of the scope of the issue
before action could be taken. Therefore, emotions can be used effectively in motivating audience
members rather than diminishing the possibility of intervention.

Today, the media frame the issue of mass shootings reactively rather than proactively. This dynamic illustrates what queer theorist Sara Ahmed discusses in her analysis of “Stranger Danger,” a phenomenon historically tied to the same Moral Panic as the Columbine Massacre. She states that common sense “involves the normalisation of ways of ‘sensing’ the difference between common and uncommon. That is, information is not given about how to tell the difference between normal and suspicious, because that difference is already ’sensed’ through a prior history of making sense as the making of 'the common'” (29). The media’s tendency to invert warning signs to be understood as "causes" and the preservation of the victimized community then is not a focus on prevention at all. Instead, this process only occurs after a moment that establishes a “prior history” or the ruptural moment that has affected a community at the local or national level. The individuals interviewed in this study argue for a proactive rather than reactive stance towards mass shootings. They must push past the othering process of common sense as shaped by the media and local community. Once safety is restored, the mainstream moves on, but this group of advocates use their experience to engage the topic. These individuals reside in the post-problem stage trying to seize and develop moments of potential intervention as the crisis reappears in the public interest.
How do these "alternative audiences" become involved in addressing mass shooting prevention and response? By gaining an awareness of which larger factors are important to the phenomenon at hand rather than those factors important to the cultural moment of the rupture. Douglas Kellner’s perspective on mass shootings primarily stems from a cultural, sociological analysis but he also points to the complexity needed to address and prevent violence. He states that “If there is a multiplicity of causes for violent behavior, there is necessarily a complex multiplicity of solutions,” (Kellner; 2008, 137). Beginning from a multi-causal perspective, it’s easy to see that many groups have something to offer prevention of violence and, more specifically, prevention of mass shootings. To change the public response to mass shootings, journalism must contribute to the organization of various stakeholders across many different perspectives. Sandra Borden offers a defense of journalism’s purpose as “public journalism” or, giving an informed public, the information needed to act. She states that, “the news should also help citizens evaluate the actionability of specific issues [by providing] a reliable assessment of risks and benefits, and views on a range of possibilities [and] a thorough analysis of the values at stake in various policy options” (Borden; 56). In framing the Columbine Massacre and mass shootings as a set of deep cultural problems and “senseless” violence, the news media did not fulfill this function of “public journalism” at the ruptural moment. Instead, the media established a narrative that dismissed the possibility of actionable responses. This project will offer a new model that journalists can use to reinvigorate a proactive and complex response to mass shootings based on the work of current stakeholders.

It is not controversial to advocate for solving the problem of violence, but violence has long since been labeled too big and too deeply rooted in our culture to be resolved. When violence is deemed unintelligible, the public more quickly relegates concern and action to
experts or "alternative audiences." However, because violence is a cultural problem, the solutions require wide social awareness and support to succeed. When speaking of something emotionally dissonant or difficult, Carrie Freeman (2017) discusses the importance of ethical messaging for advocates: speaking from a PR perspective, she states “advocacy communicators must avoid the kind of manipulative, misleading, and reductionist message constructions that are characteristic of propaganda, such as reliance on authority figures; use of unverifiable abstractions; belief in a fixed, polarized world; reduction of complex issues into simplified cause and effect; and emphasis on conflict over cooperation” (Black, 2001). Some places where violence prevention experts struggle to maintain an ethical, unified message about mass shootings include emotional appeals, use of experts, focus on broad cultural factors, and conflicted political agendas between groups that share similar goals. Critically, groups that absorb mass shootings and violence prevention as one vector of their advocacy couched within a broader issue risk reducing the complexity of mass shootings. As a result, they can reinforce common sense responses to mass shootings. One good example of this problem is gun violence prevention advocacy—while many advocates acknowledge that mass shootings only represent a small part of their mission, this agenda dominates the news narrative about mass shootings which neglects the complexity of the issue, uses mass shootings to support a pre-existing agenda, and leaves mass shooting prevention experts out of the conversation. To re-establish an ethical messaging strategy for mass shooting prevention, the phenomenon needs to be addressed in its specificity by advocacy groups, not just adopted as a sensationalized example to support a pre-existing agenda.

Mass shooting prevention shouldn’t be viewed as equivalent to other social movement organizations for the simple reason that solving this problem requires counter-hegemonic action while also requiring hegemonic legitimacy. Some of the actions proposed by advocates such as
gun violence prevention groups, mental health initiatives, and better resources for bullied students challenge hegemonic institutions to improve; the goal of reducing violence fulfills a hegemonic function. Freeman suggests three factors that should guide the communication means/message of advocates: how confrontational and critical the message is of hegemony, how much the message relies on asymmetric or symmetric communication and how much emotional dissonance and discomfort the message causes in the audience (Freeman; 284). It’s possible to show audiences how little they must sacrifice to save lives and preserve the status quo. However, persuading audiences, against the hegemonic narrative of hopelessness—that the issue has a solution—is less easy. Cutting through the emotional reactions of audiences is even more difficult; the news norms of respecting the audience and victims’ emotions and the impact of rendering violence incomprehensible undermine these efforts. Some research suggests that supporting victims and educating the public about advocacy can be cathartic and goes together with ethical journalism. Research on the ethics of interviewing mass shooting victims shows they feel more positively about the process the more they can control the story (Walsh-Childers; 193; Strand, n.d.). This control takes different forms including criticism of institutions, personal information about victims, and speaking to political issues of concern (Roy; 2009, Anastasio & Costa; 2004, Walsh-Childers; 2011). This project draws similar conclusions based on interviews with both victims and advocates, many of whom inhabit both roles.

“Alternative Audiences” Incorporating Negotiated Readings

The interviews in this project analyze how highly invested stakeholders negotiate prevention efforts and how they view the media’s impact on those prevention efforts. Mass shootings affect many different key stakeholders, which I call “alternative audiences.” Media coverage of mass shootings prioritizes certain “alternative audiences” over others. For instance,
mass media coverage of the Columbine Massacre prioritized audiences concerned about the availability of Weapons, the dangers of Popular Culture, and the long-term effects of Bullying in schools. These different “causes” -- or more appropriately, warning signs -- are advocated for by special interest groups. These groups are the “alternative audiences” under investigation.

I recruited 12 individuals who approached these prevention efforts through personal interest, experience, and passion. I asked questions related to their personal experiences with mass shootings, their own stake in the way mass shootings are reported, and the advocacy or policy work they engaged in afterwards. This project explores the connections between different “alternative audiences” in order to move beyond singular, individualized discussions of the “causes” of mass shootings. By interviewing a variety of stakeholders and finding common themes about the difficulties that affect their various advocacy efforts, I developed a model for a group, or groups that incorporates a variety of stakeholders to address the issue of mass shootings.

Among the 12 participants; 2 were mental health professionals, 3 were prevention experts, 2 were law enforcement officers, both of whom had SWAT maneuver experience, 3 were gun violence prevention advocates, and 2 were public information and strategic communications representatives. I am looking at groups that represent both “systems” and “silo” approaches to advocacy—that is groups that cooperate across various vectors versus those that operate primarily independently. These interviewees represent “alternative audiences” that have a stake in our cultural understanding of mass shootings and who work consistently on prevention efforts between events of mass violence.
Interview Subjects

1. Jessica Ladd-Webert from the CU Boulder Office of Victim’s Assistance (OVA)
2. Matthew Tomatz from the CU Boulder office of Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS)
3. Bill Todd (Pseudonym) from the CU Boulder office of Student Support and Case Management (SSCM)
4. Kenneth Koch Chief of CU Boulder Police Department (CUPD)
5. Eileen McCarron of Colorado Ceasefire
6. Sandy and Lonnie Phillips of Survivors in Power and parents of Jessica Ghawi, a victim of the Aurora Theater Shooting
7. Tom Mauser of Colorado Ceasefire and father of Daniel Mauser, a victim of the Columbine Massacre
8. Ryan Huff of CU Boulder's Office of Strategic Media Relations. Huff also served as the Public Information Officer for AJ Boiks, a victim of the Aurora Theater Shooting
9. Tina Dirgis (Pseudonym) Legal contact for CU Boulder’s Students of Concern Team (SOCT)
10. Bill Woodward of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV)
11. Steve Davis, Public Information Officer for Jefferson County at the time of the Columbine Massacre
12. Mike DeNuzzi, Sergeant at the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, shot and killed suspect at the Platte Canyon High School Shooting

Each interview was audio recorded. The interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 2 hours in length based on the amount of time that each participant could dedicate to speaking with me. I
transcribed each interview, paying attention to emerging themes in the process. After completing the interviews, the statements were sorted according to those emerging themes. The following analysis includes these sorted statements and focuses on the primary take-aways from these conversations. These interviews showed that advocates were also affected by the sense of hopelessness that affects media audiences after mass shootings. However, they wanted support in their prevention and response efforts because they feel they can’t be effective in a vacuum. The importance of communication before and after a mass shooting, especially around pre-planning of information dissemination, was central to all the groups under discussion. Finally, I found that politicization, divisive rhetoric, and legal limitations keep some groups “silod” despite each group in the study acknowledging the importance of acting with one voice or strategy as “systems” groups do. Overall, these groups shared the belief that the media must develop a model that engages audiences as activists and advocates.

**What model could that be?**

Any media model for addressing mass shootings must start from the realization that singular responses—like the “no notoriety rule” promoted by many survivors of mass shootings or gun violence prevention or increased surveillance in schools—only address one aspect of a complicated problem. Media-makers must move away from focusing on tactics that address mass shootings as technical problems towards developing strategies that treat mass shootings as adaptive challenges. When we speak of tactics, we mean the “how” of the situation—you may use an anti-bullying program as a tactic to target the problem of bullying. While bullying is one of a variety of factors that can lead someone to commit a mass shooting, more often, bullying is a better predictor for suicide. We need to contextualize specific tactics, like an anti-bullying program, within a larger strategy that addresses the “what” of the situation. In looking at mass
shooting prevention, we should construct a program that addresses many factors at once. We should ask ourselves what goal unites various related areas of expertise and then articulate a larger strategy for organizing those experts. To return to the example of an anti-bullying program; you may still use an anti-bullying program as one tactic within your strategy, but you would also bring in a threat assessment team who watches for troubling behavior. You may include counselors who have expert knowledge of the students and you may include the administration by looking over their records for students who have displayed troubling behavior and/or who have brought a weapon to school. The overall strategy becomes supporting the kids in the school by examining potential risks to self and others rather than ending bullying.

Why do systems play such a significant role in discussing prevention of mass shootings? Because they offer a place to discuss multiple perceived “causes” and develop a united strategy that addresses various factors together. One of the groups interviewed for this project, the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV), utilizes a thorough systems method that encourages schools to move from a single solution like an anti-bullying program to something more nuanced. They are guided by Heifitz and Laurie from organizational communication. These researchers draw an important distinction between “technical problems” and “adaptive challenges.”

1. Technical problems are easy to identify while adaptive challenges are difficult to identify (and therefore easy to deny)
2. Technical problems often lend themselves to quick and easy solutions while adaptive challenges require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, and approaches to work
3. Technical problems can often be solved by an authority or expert while adaptive challenges need people with the problem to do the work of solving it.
4. Technical problems require change in one or a few places within organizational boundaries while adaptive challenges require changes in multiple places across organizational boundaries.

5. People are generally receptive to technical solutions while people resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges.

6. Technical problems can often be implemented quickly, even by edict while adaptive solutions require research and new discoveries that can take a long time to implement and cannot be imposed by edict.

This list shows that technical problems call for speed and shallow Band-Aid fixes for one aspect of a complex problem. On the other hand, adaptive challenges are multi-causal, like the issue of mass shootings, and require deep solutions developed within systems. These adaptive challenges have been addressed as technical problems in the two decades since the Columbine Massacre.

For instance, the struggle of gun violence prevention efforts against the powerful lobby of the National Rifle Association (NRA) inspires some understandable feelings of hopelessness. This avenue of advocacy offers a great case study in how hard it is to approach an adaptive challenge from just one angle. After a mass shooting, the speed at which some news organizations, politicians, and advocacy groups resolve the narrative using a single solution like gun violence prevention allows people to deny the deeper social dynamics underlying the issue. Certainly, we need to reform gun laws but that won’t stop people from wanting to harm others with acts of mass violence. The recent increase in vehicular mass violence, exemplified by overseas terrorist attacks and the incident with white nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia, is an example of how these attacks can morph into the use of an everyday “weapon” (CNN Library; 2017, Oct. 17). Legal reform, despite the time it takes and the difficulty of altering large
institutions, is a very straightforward solution implemented by edict from the top-down experts. This top-down approach has begun to shift towards “people with the problem do(ing) the work of solving it” as shown by the U.S. Senate filibuster on gun control and the House sit-in where many victims of gun violence and their families (in a broader context than mass shootings) spoke about their experiences and the consequences of gun violence following the Pulse Nightclub Shooting (Reitman; 2016, July 20; Drabold; July 22). However, those that make the decisions are still within the political institution. Although many citizens were moved by the filibuster and sit-in, many are moved after every mass shooting; yet, nothing is ultimately done to address the adaptive challenge this phenomenon presents. Anthony Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle makes maintaining this kind of criticism, especially from one specific perspective like gun violence prevention, unsustainable. Based on these interviews and my previous research, I don’t believe that this focus on technical problems by the media is inevitable. However, several preconditions must be established that are not yet standard practice in media coverage of mass shootings. Media must mobilize audiences by combating widespread hopelessness to fulfill their role informing public of the actionability of responses to a public safety crisis.

**Stage Four Hopelessness**

The Columbine Massacre occurred almost 20 years ago. Yet, as the cultural influence on current news coverage of this event shows, many of the current responses to mass shootings were established by this ruptural moment. The media still use the narrative of hopelessness in response to mass shootings and concurrently perpetuate the Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle. Many of the interviewees in this project expressed their own feelings of hopelessness, either in response to the violence of mass shootings or in response to media coverage of these events. Ken Koch, the CUPD police chief, created a series of active harmer courses during his own private sector law
enforcement career. He revealed that when he asks his classes what can be done to prevent mass violence, the most common reaction is that they didn’t know anything could be done. He states that

It’s been my experience that when I put that question that most people had never even considered that. Because there, and again, in my opinion by the media, their perception is that this is a spur of the moment emotional attack that does not have months of planning and preparation behind it. So, for an individual who’s operating from that perception, they even think about well are these things even preventable right? When I ask that question most people don’t think they are because they’re misinformed and under the impression that this is just and individual who snapped and just grabbed the gun or the knife or the car they drove to school and started killing their classmates and we know that that is not the case

The everyday audience member, only familiar with these incidents through media coverage and a broad cultural history, isn’t informed about the many potential moments for intervention before mass shootings occur or the development of strong crisis response planning in the two decades since the Columbine Massacre. The potential for prevention has not been widely addressed by the media. Therefore, the average citizen doesn’t know that their participation is useful.

These interviews also showed that even advocates and experts absorb this collective sense of helplessness. Eight of 12 interviewees with expertise in mental health, law enforcement, gun violence prevention, public information, and the law said that media coverage of mass shootings leaves them feeling helpless even though they know things can and are being done to address these issues. Sandy and Lonnie Phillips, who lost their daughter Jessica Ghawi in the Aurora Theater Shooting, explained their transformation from passive observers to activists. Sandy stated that
Before this happened, we were those people sitting on the couch going ‘how did that happen?’ In fact, I remember when Columbine happened, and my kids were little… I was like ‘well somebody’s got to do something’ and I assumed that somebody was. And now when I talk with people and say ‘you’re assuming that somebody’s doing something and you’re pointing that finger that somebody’s got to do something about this, there are three more pointing right back at you and you’re the one that needs to stand up and it’s not hard. This is not difficult work. It means writing a letter constantly. You know, even if it’s the same form letter every month but write it every month. Pick up the phone and call your leadership and say I want you to do something about gun violence prevention. I want my family to be safe.

This description reinforces the societal shift from stage four to stage five of Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle. After the Columbine Massacre, the problem of mass shootings became stuck in the post-problem stage and remains there, occasionally garnering attention before falling into stage four again when it appears these events are still “senseless.” Strategies for addressing adaptive challenges must start with those affected by mass shootings like Sandy and Lonnie. Their incredible loss led to education and expertise that mobilized them as citizens. Tom Mauser, who lost his son Daniel in the Columbine Massacre spoke to the need to form what he called “natural alliances” stating that “you can find a lot of ways to dismiss something but people who deal with it every day. The doctors and nurses, some policemen… they see it every day and it affects their opinions.” Tom’s comments point to how those affected can become hopeless from witnessing and being impacted by violence on a daily basis. These individuals cannot deny the severity or prevalence of mass violence as many audience members can.

Feelings of hopelessness are understandable, especially for gun violence prevention groups who fight an up-hill battle against the NRA. After 18 years of work on gun violence prevention, Colorado Ceasefire has successfully testified in support of five important gun laws and unseated seven candidates who oppose gun violence prevention efforts. Eileen McCarron, the head of this group explained that news coverage indicates to her that “we haven’t had enough
impact yet. That we need to work harder because these things should not be happening and what else can we do to stop them? I don’t feel like we should throw up our hands and say we can’t do anything.” Sandy and Lonnie Phillips pointed out that at the federal level “we haven’t had any meaningful laws passed in the last 25 years, since the Brady Bill.” Overall, seven interviewees indicated that collective feelings of hopelessness limited the effectiveness of their advocacy. Some interviewees who didn’t note the impact of hopelessness on audiences did note the media’s role in limiting prevention. Only three interviewees did not mention the role of hopelessness in mass shooting responses or their own advocacy. The way this hopelessness manifests in people who actively work on prevention suggests that the problem is even more acute in the uneducated public. News stories need to take the time to dispel the simple myth that nothing can be done, and these are “senseless” acts that we can’t understand.

Fig. 4.1 Political Cartoon Published after the Aurora Theater Shooting
In the 2001 Surgeon General’s report on youth violence, authored, by the CSPV’s leadership partially in response to the Columbine Massacre, one of the most harmful myths they cite is that “nothing works with respect to treating or preventing violent behavior” (Surgeon General). Audiences are so inundated with messages that perpetuate this myth that they cannot reasonably see past it. In response to many shootings after The Columbine Massacre, the term “senseless” has become rote. After the Las Vegas Shooting, a senator described the shooting in a tweet as a “Senseless, horrifying act of violence” (Savransky; 2017, Oct. 2, emphasis added). In response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting in December 2012, a reverend preached that “The senseless slaughter of innocents scars the soul and overwhelms the mind” (Green; 16 Dec. 2012, emphasis added). The Aurora Theater Shooting spawned political cartoons that commented on mass shootings by highlighting the word “senseless” (Fig. 4.1). And, coverage of the Spokane, Washington shooting included a statement from a sheriff who used the term to describe the event (Narayan; 2017, Sept. 14). These are only a few of the many examples of this language still being used in response to mass shootings. These comments affect the public by perpetuating this harmful myth of "senselessness." However, they also function to dismiss institutional responsibility for these crimes. Dorner states

> “when someone simply walks away from difficult problems or ‘solves’ them by delegating them to others … when someone solves the problems she can solve rather than the ones she ought to solve, when someone is reluctant to reflect on his actions, it is hard not to see in such behaviors a refusal to recognize one’s impotence and helplessness and a tendency to seek refuge in certainty and security” (27-28)

These statements of helplessness allow institutions that could and should address the issue of mass shootings to remain silent on the subject. There is no responsibility on the part of individuals who make these statements. In fact, in response to the Las Vegas Shooting, U.S. congressman Seth Moulton (D-Mass) refused to acknowledge the moment of silence in congress
because he strongly believed that someone should be doing something, aside from mourning, to stop these shootings in the future (Thomsen; 2017 Oct 2). Media must show audiences that this “senseless” narrative is just that, a narrative.

The feeling of hopelessness inspired by a lack of knowledge about mass shooting prevention allows audiences to deny progress. Audiences also cling to their hopelessness when the effects of prevention are hard to measure. The issue of not knowing what has been prevented appeared across several interviews: CU’s Legal Contact, Tina Dirgis, states that “maybe some of the time we don’t know what we prevent. Maybe most of the time we don’t know what we prevent. It’s the tail of the dog that never wags. It’s the bark that never occurs. So, do we factually, how do we know what has been prevented (sic)?” Tom Mauser addressed this issue as well stating, “We’re stuck with the fact that it’s hard for us to know what we’ve prevented but it’s not a reason not to do prevention.” Sergeant Ken Koch stated that

My strong opinion is there are these attacks that are prevented all the time that we never become aware of because someone intervened in that individual’s life before they reached the event horizon, before they peaked so how we track that? I have no idea but the ones we are aware of; where intervention, where someone calls and says hey, little Billy is really acting weird… we have instances like that time and time again, but it never reached report in the story. Well why is that?

Addressing a societal problem as a technical rather than adaptive challenge justifies the focus on the direct cause-and-effect between prevention and a falling number of incidents of mass violence. The issue is more systemic and complex than a technical problem so of course there is less observable impact when mass shootings are addressed through single-factor responses.

These “alternative audiences” invariably shared the belief that the media could play a positive role in shaping mass shooting prevention. However, very few of them viewed that educational work as being done effectively or receiving enough attention at present. Eileen McCarron states that
you’ve got to keep pounding it to the media about this… I think there’s always room for more education. I think the media does have a huge role to play but as you’ll notice, the right wing has been so very effective at dissing the media… and people are digesting media from very unreliable sources… I hate for it to be more awful gun violence that occurs that makes our work, that makes the interest rise again because it’s that people die… I don’t mind hanging up my shoes if we can end this

Mass shooting prevention, in its current form, cannot escape collective hopelessness when violence is the only way to gain the audience’s attention. These advocates remain ineffective without support from individual citizens and the larger American Public. The media have the reach and attention to reassure disengaged individuals that there is something to do after all the vigils and memorial services have passed.

However, limited resources also prevent journalists from responding to something complex with depth and understanding. Several interviewees acknowledged these practical limitations. Matt Tomatz of CU Boulder’s Counseling and Psychiatric Services spoke to the need for complexity but admitted “I don’t know how you could do it in a news story. Particularly sound byte news which is… [struggles for words] so that’s the feeling bad, feeling sort of hopeless perhaps—like oh my god, this is such a big and complex issue that represents what our culture is and how many people are struggling with depression and isolation and intense pressure.” Hopelessness and an inability to take the time to cover a story as in depth as they may want to affect journalists as well as advocates. For 18 years, Tom Mauser has been actively engaged in a political struggle for gun violence prevention. He described how the changes in journalism have limited the attention his organization receives, and the amount of time media-makers can give to an issue like gun violence prevention. He explains that after becoming an activist “I needed the media… my message and my concerns about gun issues; If I’m going to get it out there, they’re the ones who are going to get it out there. You know I’ve got to be
careful and craft what I’m saying so they hear it and they’re going to get it out there.” Tom displayed a lot of media savvy and contextualized his statements according to journalistic practice. He discussed how journalists pick and choose particularly gripping actions or images to highlight in coverage and how preparation can help ensure your message is used over others. These practical limitations on journalists limit the effectiveness of advocates just as much as they harm the audience’s understanding of complex issues like mass shootings.

How can media-makers, within their limited means, help to limit these feelings of hopelessness?

**Best Practices in Messaging and Communication**

Universally, interviewees spoke of the need for quality, cohesive communication in both effective prevention and crisis response planning. The quality of communication before during, and after mass shootings defined how effective advocates were in achieving their goals. In the moment of crisis, information is a matter of public safety and must be reported—sometimes this function of journalism results in rumors, speculation, and bad information. Journalists should strive to mitigate the risks associated with rumors as best as they can. Kelly McBride, an expert in media ethics and mass shootings recommends this type of caution as well. She states “As more information becomes available, be careful to be accurate and contextual. Small details can take on inappropriate levels of importance in the early reporting stages. Those details can be harmful to the truth if they are inaccurate or out of context” (McBride; 2017). The dynamic of small details taking on inappropriate levels of truth appeared in coverage of the Columbine Massacre in the form of rumors about the Trench Coat Mafia and racial targeting.
Steve Davis, the lead public information officer for the Columbine Massacre’s investigation, spoke at length about the uneven communication between journalists, community members, and even the Sherriff’s Office immediately following the shooting. He states:

I personally don’t know how you could completely control rumors and speculation … Doing those news conferences that often gave me the opportunity to say, no that’s not true. We haven’t heard that … Trench Coat Mafia, no haven’t heard that. Submachine gun? No there’s no submachine gun as far as I know … there were a ton of rumors every hour. I would dispel only the ones I was certain about but there were many I didn’t have an answer for … I’m not saying it’s not accurate we just haven’t heard that yet.

Communication never exists in a one-to-one perfect transmission of information and despite Steve’s effort to update media-makers every 20 (eventually 30) minutes, new information was difficult to manage. He explained that keeping the media in Clemet Park, close to where the shooting occurred, didn’t stop journalists from seeking out often questionable information from witnesses and neighbors although it did limit these behaviors. This trend of seeking out rumors and information not yet released by the police investigation continued for months following the event.

Even within the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, information was often contradictory and unpredictable. Steve offered this anecdote about his frustration with Sherriff John Stone’s impromptu interviews about the shooting and how it undermined their credibility even in the long-term.
Steve struggled with the responsibility of both representing his organization and serving the Public, especially in the face of uneven support for his role within the department. The position of a Public Information Office (PIO) must always balance these duties but the lack of support in a time of crisis can undermine the authority of the official story and lead to misinformation. Ultimately, these interviews and inaccuracies impacted the credibility of the organization’s official story for years into the investigation.

Steve Davis echoes questions and concerns that many advocates still struggle with today—What are the right terms needed to best communicate about mass shootings? Where should the message come from? How should we plan the process of communication with stakeholders—citizens, victims, journalists, politicians, etc.—so that the stress of an event will not compromise the quality of communication used to respond?

On the CU Boulder campus, a mass shooting scare occurred on October 5, 2016, following the police shooting of an active harmer with a machete on campus. After the initial police shooting, rumors of an active shooter on campus led to panic, confusion, and the evacuation of the University Memorial Center (UMC). This incident appears in this study primarily due to the level of miscommunication that occurred on that day, contributing to
additional panic. In response to second incident on campus that day, a mass shooter scare that occurred hours after the original police shooting, Ryan Huff from CU’s Strategic Media Relations Office stated “It was important to me to say unconfirmed because nobody had actually seen somebody with a gun or heard gunshots inside. It was all this, you know telephone game.”

The importance of words and the struggle to limit speculation and rumor go hand-in-hand. CUPD Chief Ken Koch talked about the way that words mattered in the confused response to the situation; “Certain factions heard the words ‘scene secured.’ they assumed it was okay for everyone to come back in the building like a fire drill. No… So, the words that are used to explain what is happening and what you should do to respond are absolutely crucial… that was one of our biggest lessons that we took away as it applies to the media.” In the case of CU Boulder’s on-campus incident, rumors amplified fear and panic rather than adding to public safety. The language used to communicate that day, including the term “active harmer”—a term the general public did not recognize—led to more danger. The risks associated with rumors extend to media-makers who hope to preserve public safety with good information.

The issue of terminology and definitions occurred across all but one interview included in this study. Some terms up for discussion included psychological first aid, advocacy, active harmer, snapped, area secure, unconfirmed, perishable skills, gun violence prevention, automatic weapons, “true believers,” natural alliance, and no notoriety. Each group had their own unique set of jargon to be acknowledged and contextualized in media coverage on mass shootings. For instance, gun violence prevention advocates felt journalists should avoid collapsing semi-automatic with automatic weapons in news coverage. These groups also believe the media could help to educate the public on the original text of the 2nd amendment, which contextualizes gun ownership as part of forming a “well-regulated militia” rather than an absolute right. Using
precise language can undercut some of the extremist arguments from the NRA like “they’re coming to take our guns” by pushing the focus towards “sensible” gun regulations. Threat assessment experts emphasized the difference between preparation and prevention stating that the CUPD’s active harmer classes are more about “living through an active shooter” than understanding warning signs and identifying threats. The difference between preparation and response should be acknowledged in news coverage. However, these sides are not entirely in opposition; they learn from each other and grow in tandem.

Journalists can still use language that shows respect for victims while also offering precise and detailed information. For instance, “no notoriety,” an effort not to name the killer outside of initial reporting, has a reputation for being about censorship of the shooters’ perspective. However, many of those who advocate for this approach also acknowledge the need for information—they simply believe the emphasis should be on prevention and response over sensationalism. Sergeant Mike DeNuzzi of the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office states

“It seems like in these instances, well [the shooters] were abused as a child or something like that. That just gets really old to hear. Why don’t we just tell them what the truth is which is that this person shot this many people and they’re investigating as to why this person may have done it and leave it at that and don’t speculate that they, you know, had a broken life. Their childhood was messed up or whatnot. Let’s just leave that out for a while.”

The idea is not to focus on sympathy and understanding based on incomplete information. These individuals prefer to discuss how the shooters’ behaviors relate to missed chances for intervention over humanizing elements like names and faces. In influencing Anderson Cooper to respect “no notoriety,” Sandy and Lonnie Phillips stated, “we can certainly say we influenced this and we certainly helped to change the narrative, to change the dialogue so we can know that when these mass casualties happen we’re not going to focus just on the killer.” Using precise language can be constructive and help educate the public on the complexity of mass shootings
while also respecting victims. This last point about respecting victims matters when these individuals are used as a justification for remaining apolitical after a mass shooting. This shift in language is one way of changing the conversation and addressing misconceptions.

While each group struggled with different terms, the need for universal best practices in vocabulary and speculation emerged as an important commonality. Terms like “snapped” perpetuate long-term misconceptions about the exceptionalism of mass shooters. Reports about the Trench Coat Mafia that were dismissed within the first 72 hours of news coverage are still mentioned in letters that Tom Mauser receives from those interested in The Columbine Massacre. Connotation and rumors can quickly change the Public’s perception of an evolving incident, sometimes semi-permanently. The best way to combat these misconceptions is context and explanation—even a sentence explaining the difference between automatic and semi-automatic weapons can lend some complexity and context to a news story on gun violence prevention.

Ownership of the message also played an important role in both prevention and response to mass shootings. On the CU Boulder campus, messaging was part of the collective in-depth crisis response planning across a variety of on-campus groups. The Office of Strategic Media Relations disseminated the University’s official statement while also coordinating each group’s responsibilities after the event. Ryan Huff stated that “you have to speak with one voice, especially when you have multiple agencies involved.” The CU Boulder campus includes 32,000 students and all the faculty and staff that support them. The more fragmented the centralized message, the more fragmented discussions about mass shootings can become. The response to mass shooting reports on CU’s campus required coordination with the Boulder Police Department, the coroner’s office, the police investigative team, and the District Attorney’s
Office. Huff added that “it’s important that you’re checking in with each other and all have the same message because if you don’t there’ll be a lack of trust from the public.” He contended that across the University’s 11,000 official social media accounts for different departments and organizations the message was consistent even if outside noise from students interfered with their plans. While rumors cannot be eliminated, the consistency of internal messaging can help signal the quality of information for audiences. For instance, the Office of Victim’s Assistance (OVA) didn’t comment on the evolving status or meaning of the event as details emerged. Jessica Ladd-Webert spoke about what she posted on Facebook during the event. She stated that “our focus is how do they get out information about, um, uh, support services, self-care, so things like what I was just posting on Facebook was things like ‘how to take care of yourself in times of stress,’ and I would post a couple different things, some tips, some pictures. So, our message was self-care.” The complimentary messages described by Ryan and Jessica were part of a crisis response strategy developed well in advance of the actual threat of violence. Of course, these narratives didn’t completely mitigate rumors and didn’t allow for a perfectly transparent message. However, pre-planning did help the CU Boulder system successfully delegate control of the message across multiple stakeholders in important ways.

Other mass shooting events were defined by a variety of stakeholder groups with different agendas. The Columbine Massacre struggled to maintain a unified message. Tom commented on the variation in narratives about the Columbine Massacre as an effect of predetermined understandings of the issue. He states that “[Other groups and the media] spread something because it fits their narrative. Their particular issue.” Historically, the narratives presented by the media were dominant in media coverage before the Columbine Massacre. Fears about crime seeping into the suburbs, the issue of gun violence prevention, and a focus on youth
as perpetrators of violence all emerged from the historical moment of 1999. The emphasis on different narratives continues to shift according to new historical circumstances. For instance, mental illness became the focus of news articles about the Aurora Theater Shooting and the Sandy Hook School Shooting because James Holmes and Adam Lanza exhibited signs of mental illness (Hood; 2015, Jan. 19). This shift shows how history affects the salience of different frames while still failing to offer anything unique or new over time.

Ownership and having a unified message presents a huge challenge to political advocates. All the gun violence prevention advocates mentioned how internal disagreements led to a confused message. Tom and Eileen echoed each other in this assessment. Tom insisted that advocacy groups should emerge only after defining their positions and media message internally. Eileen stated that

You need to work out your differences behind closed doors. And that you come out with a unified purpose. And if you have a disagreement about a bill and people aren’t going to support the bill or oppose the bill that you aren’t out there speaking to the opposite side. It’s a very confused message.

Bringing together groups that don’t share a common goal or vision can undermine the overall message of advocates. Even those in seemingly “natural alliances” with doctors, first responders, and law enforcement that Tom mentioned can struggle to find a shared set of goals and values. Political groups are best positioned to comment as experts on mass shootings after these events. As a result, they also need to pre-plan their messaging. Colorado Ceasefire is in the process of forming a communications committee for just this reason.

The final question, how should we plan the process of communication with stakeholders—citizens, victims, journalists, politicians, etc.—so that the stress of an event will not compromise the quality of communication used to respond? remains fraught and unanswerable. Each group interviewed engaged in pre-planning for threat assessment, crisis
communication, and/or crisis response. Many groups on the CU Boulder campus had been through training and drills to respond to a crisis on campus within weeks, sometimes days, of the October 5th incident. The CUPD trained for active harmer response in the months and weeks leading up to event. They also trained the staff in the Champion Center, where the machete-wielding attacker went to find victims, only a month before. Following up after the incident, the CUPD gathered reactions to the course’s utility. Chief Koch explained that these reactions “ranged everything from ‘I wish I had paid better attention in the class because I didn’t want to deal with this’ to ‘I’m glad I did pay attention in the class and I remembered x, y, and z part of it and that’s what really helped me rapidly decide what I was going to do instead of deciding what to do in that moment.’” Ironically, the OVA was “actually reviewing our protocol on how to respond to disasters that morning.” This planning benefits groups in their effort to transparently interact with stakeholders in a moment of crisis. Those that are trained for response also maintain a better position from which to develop prevention and education efforts than wholly reactionary groups like political advocates. For instance, Chief Koch has begun to offer his course that focuses on warning signs and the history of perpetrators of mass violence to the entire campus rather than a select few groups of faculty and staff members since this incident. There has been a greater demand for accurate information on the CU Boulder campus in the aftermath of this mass shooting scare.

Political advocates and families of victims showed skepticism of the pre-planning process, not because of any shortcoming in the training or response process itself, but because they argued that these groups can’t know how the pressure will alter or complicate that response without already having been there. Sandy Phillips explained how this not knowing plays into her advocacy.
Most mayors and civic minded people don’t deal with this… Some may have said well we’re doing training and this kind of stuff but they just--it’s not the same when it happens. They have no idea. They have no idea what they’re about to face. And the victims and survivors have no idea what they’re about to face. So… we begin to find ways to make contact with them and let them know ok this is just phase one. Here’s all the other things that you’re about to face

Sandy’s statements indicate that preparation isn’t sufficient to ensure an effective reaction to these situations which explains the struggle of groups who have responded to incidents. Despite preparation, the narrative of improving communications was a common goal in 11 of 12 interviews. Sergeant DeNuzzi works for a department that has experienced several of these events yet even he states that you can’t know without first-hand experience. He states “I think law enforcement agencies spend a lot of time analyzing, um, and they need to do that, and I think it needs to be done and I think law enforcement agencies—and I’m speaking about the whole--can’t sit back and armchair quarterback something that they know nothing about. If you weren’t there, don’t comment.” At the same time, Sergeant DeNuzzi acknowledged that there have been changes and improvements since the Columbine Massacre. Although the learning curve is steep in situations with such high stakes, not learning from them only makes those risks greater.

Despite the limitations associated with preparation, all those experienced in crisis response indicated pre-planning was important. Ryan argued pre-planning was necessary because “It’s not if [a shooting will happen], it’s when.” Without any guidelines in place, panic is even more inevitable.

The issue of social media and citizen journalism adds a whole new layer of misinformation. Ryan explained that on social media after the shooting scare “there were so many rumors that [Channel 7 news] even put out this page [full of rumors] and put it up on the screen.” This approach dispelled many rumors about the incident at once; that CU’s social media was hacked, that there was a killer clown, and that a man with green hair in a van nearby had
weapons. Ryan approved of using this aggregate method for rumor control. He added “there’s so much noise out there we just need to tell people no, that’s not true.” In terms of speed, the inclusion of parents and family members as stakeholders took the CU system by surprise. The speed at which these stakeholders wanted answers and the speed with which these parents criticized the University’s response to the incident speaks to the difficulty of anticipating the situation. Despite pre-planning, the demand for information from these stakeholders complicated the situation. Jessica stated that “communication can be helpful. But also, it’s hard to tell people to be patient for communication… when they’re scared and worried. I know we’re continuing to be improving our text alert systems… but always taking them as a learning opportunity. And I do know that post-those-events is when lots of meetings and lots of assessments on continuing how to improve.” Pre-planning cannot fully anticipate the pressures of an emergency situation and rumors always originate from the need to communicate quickly when public safety is threatened. Ryan emphasized that someone would always criticize the communication after a crisis along the lines of “too soon, too late, inaccurate.” However, each event is a learning experience to refine planning and in some cases, the process featured in one incident can be applied in others like the idea of aggregate rumor control advocated by Ryan in response to the incident on CU’s campus. Whenever possible, rumors should be limited or amended to assure audiences that the situation was handled appropriately.

Overall, planning has improved the communication process over time. Steve Davis learned a lot very quickly when on the job covering The Columbine Massacre. Internal messaging can and should be controlled to maintain a united voice and limit cross-talk. In the case of the Columbine Massacre, Sherriff Stone’s actions undermined public trust in the
investigation by contradicting this internal message. Internal messaging requires pre-planning just like other forms of police response. Steve Davis states

I think there needs to be a conversation that the PIO has with his sheriff, with his chief, with his DA, whatever it is, long before anything happens, and I have had that conversation with every sheriff, every chief that I’ve worked for after that. And that is ‘Okay sir,’ you know if we get involved in something that’s that big of a media storm, I understand that you being the chief or you being the sheriff you have a sense of duty, and probably rightfully so, to stand up there and say to the world something to the effect of ‘You know what this is a very tragic set of circumstances that happened in our city… I’m sheriff so and so. I am here. I’m going to be in my office. But I have put the people in place… that I have confidence in. I have every confidence in my people—my investigators, my spokesperson and I will let them do their job and I will support them’ … it’s pretty hard for me to tell the boss would you shut up! Get off the stage!

Not only has planning within departments improved but organizations have developed best practices for managing media coverage after these events. In particular, the Emergency Service Public Information Officers of Colorado (ESPIOC), an organization that includes both Steve Davis and Ryan Huff, has used lessons learned from the Columbine Massacre and the Aurora Theater Shooting to plan future responses. This model assigns an individual PIO to each victims’ family, uses one official spokesperson for law enforcement, and limits media contact with victims through a centralized G-mail account where journalists can request interviews. These requests are then filtered through knowledgeable professionals. At the time of the Columbine Massacre, Steve explained that journalists preferred fax to e-mail because of the loud alerts fax machines use so this option of aggregating requests by e-mail was not possible. However, having PIOs for the families has been effective in the past as well. Tom Mauser was lucky enough to work for the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) at the time of the Columbine Massacre and they provided a media contact for him. He stated that this intermediary was helpful because “it helped to have a victim’s advocate. One of the first things she told me was you don’t have to say anything to the media. Just keep that in mind. You have no obligation. It was good to
have that as a reminder.” A model like the ESPIOC’s was also used in response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting. These examples show how different groups, especially those in charge of media messaging, have developed strategies for responding to mass shootings before the fact. Translating best practices in rumor control, internal messaging, and contact with victims across multiple events has proven helpful despite the difficulty of knowing just how the pressure of an event will affect communication until it happens.

**Information Sharing and Adaptive Strategies**

The most pronounced differences between groups stemmed from whether they operated within a system or as a silo. Systems share information across organizational boundaries and participate in pre-planning together. On the other hand, silos keep information exclusively within the organization which limits the effectiveness of certain advocates and creates some tension between groups. Systems develop through strategies. Erik Dorner articulated the importance of systems. He writes

> A system is a network of many variables in causal relationship to one another…We need to know more than just the causal relationship between individual variables in a system, however. We may also need to know what abstractions we can make out of the variables—what broad concepts subsume the narrow concepts represented by our variables? It may be useful to know as well which hierarchy of parts and wholes the variable belongs to—of what whole is the variable a part, and of what parts does it in turn consist? (Dorner; 73-76)

Dorner envisions an approach that can be used to address broad societal issues tied to a system (gun violence prevention, mental health, bullying, toxic masculinity, etc.) as well as the institutional hierarchy of these variables (law makers, politicians, educators, individual victims). The need for multi-causal approaches was especially central to the work of Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV) which utilizes many layers of institutional support including educators, law enforcement, mental health professionals, sociologists, historians, and more to
create strategies used to identify warning signs and those at risk of committing violence in schools. They proceed from Dorner’s idea of systems to build their multi-causal, multi-disciplinary focus. This approach addresses specific variables, related societal problems, and the institutions that can help limit risk.

Many groups, especially those on the CU Boulder campus, worked within systems. The systems included in this study are CU Boulder crisis response team, CU’s Students of Concern Team (SOCT), the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV), and the Emergency Services Public Information Officers of Colorado (ESPIOC). Siloed groups under investigation included; CU’s Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS), Colorado Ceasefire, and the Jefferson County Police Department. The emerging organization Survivors in Power represents a more hybrid approach because although they don’t partner within systems, they plan to create a variety of outlets for victims to talk about their experiences and the issues that matter to them in a variety of ways. Generally, groups with a more interdisciplinary focus that weren’t limited by a narrow agenda or their individual pool of information felt they were more effective. This success makes sense not just because there is more mutual support and a broader educational process occurring but also because the issue of mass violence is multi-faceted. Below is a list of the different groups included in each system:


- CU’s Students of Concern Team (SOCT): Student Support and Case Management (SSCM), CUPD, CU legal counsel, Student Housing & Dining Services, Office of
Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution, and CAPS (although the information this final group shares is limited by doctor/patient confidentiality; more below)

- Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV): Department of Psychology, Department of History, local educators, local school systems, local law enforcement, school counselors and staff, and Safe2Tell, an anonymous reporting system for at-risk students

- Emergency Services Public Information Officers of Colorado (ESPIOC): local firefighters, first responders, law enforcement, and others involved in crisis communication

- Survivors in Power: limited partnerships with Sandy Hook Promise, Moms Demand Action, Colorado Ceasefire (and similar state organizations across the country), as well as various politicians

Two important advantages characterized the systems approach to mass shooting prevention and response; bouncing ideas off one another and facilitating a multi-causal and multi-disciplinary dialogue. Several of the interviewees have operated within silos as well as within systems. These individuals highlighted the advantages of a systems approach. Chief Koch explained that

“Universities have an extreme advantage over… our peers in municipalities in other communities… because of the resources … the lines of communication that we have here. Very few cities have a police department and a mental health field and a constituent management process in place—student affairs—that are very intertwined and connected… and that helps to communicate and share information about those constituents… and the City of Boulder.”

Groups within systems provide support and information to one another so having many groups together in one place offers a variety of resources, like on-site mental health support and counseling, that do not exist outside of systems. Jessica from OVA started as a victims’ advocate
for a sheriff’s office. She summarized the differences between systems and silos stating that in a system “there are people to bounce ideas off with and there’s a team of people to work together… I feel like if I was in private practice that would be isolating and I’m part of a system—now systems has challenges because you have to communicate with a lot more people and sometimes there’s red tape or bureaucracy which comes with any system.” Steve Davis has pushed for a greater systems approach since his time representing the Columbine Massacre. He holds meetings with various factions within the Lakewood Police Department and polls ESPIOC members to develop better approaches to problems. He engages in this systems work because “I don’t want to think I have the best way to do things.” Collaboration is what sets these groups apart. While many groups enter prevention and response from a narrow specialization and agenda, these groups share strategies rather than tactics and agendas.

The CSPV has worked for more than two decades to create an effective multi-disciplinary systems approach to violence prevention in educational settings. Bill Woodward talks about how systems failures typically originate from the organization of tactics within silos. He states that “I usually say to people, ‘Well here’s a system failure, you didn’t put the cop in the threat assessment.’ You know, the police should have been a part of that because they know all this other information about this person. Nobody else knows and different teachers didn’t know different problems that [the shooter Karl Pierson or KP] had had.” In these statements, Bill refers to the Arapahoe High School shooting which took place in 2013. KP killed teacher Claire Davis and then himself during this incident. Despite the CSPV system being approved and supported by the school district, the shooting resulted from 27 systems failures—that is, moments when someone should have intervened, sought out more information about the shooter, or included multi-disciplinary experts such as both law enforcement and counselors trained in threat
assessment (Woodward; 2016). These failures are quite similar to the failures of local law enforcement and the Jefferson County School District to compile the myriad of troubling behaviors exhibited by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold preceding the Columbine Massacre. If the police had approached the school and looked over their assignments or the police had connected Eric’s website packed with bomb-making advice to his juvenile record for theft or if the parents of Brooks Brown had been taken seriously by the police and school district, perhaps the shooting wouldn’t have happened. You cannot pick and choose tactics from a system to make it work. Instead, you must form and maintain a cohesive strategy. This effort takes sustained cooperation, dedication, and communication between many factions.

A cohesive strategy also characterized the success of multi-disciplinary teams. The Students of Concern Team’s legal contact, Tina Dirgis, suggested that the team is successful because they all share the goal of protecting the University, students, and the local community. Tina states that members have

different areas of expertise but ultimately, I think our goals are all the same and that is a great place to be because I think may be possible to build that rapport a little quicker… there is something special that happens, especially when you meet on a regular basis. So, when you form people together one time, I’d be less skeptical about the utility, long-standing impact anyway, that you’d have with that. When you get people in a room, that start to get to know each other and know each other’s areas of strengths and weaknesses and expertise, people have more informed conversations. They know the questions to kind of ask. They kind of know who to go to. You start to get organized in a more meaningful way… let’s try to have some consistency. And that consistency is needed because of the rapport. You know trust is important… people might hold back information if they don’t trust you know the other members of the team. They might just have real concern right that the information they share, if it’s not going to go in a direction they want it to go to they might hold back. So, getting to know each other and having that trust and rapport is important (Emphasis added)

The SOCT demonstrates several key qualities for successful prevention and response organizations—a shared strategy, multi-disciplinary teamwork, trust to support a dialogue, and
Information sharing. Information sharing is a particularly important strength unique to a systems approach. Failures in information sharing directly contributed to the Columbine Massacre, the Aurora Theater Shooting and the Arapahoe High School Shooting, along with many others. For instance, James Holmes confessed his homicidal urges to Dr. Lynne Fenton at CU Anschutz Medical Campus—he described a fascination with violence, a worsening of his homicidal urges over time, described his own research on past attacks, and threatened her directly—any one of these warnings signs could have been addressed by a team like the CU Students of Concern Team to initiate a proper threat assessment (O’Neill; 2015, July 17). Reporting on these behaviors is necessary and useful although there are legal issues of confidentiality for medical providers like Dr. Fenton to contend with. The lack of information sharing puts those outside of systems at a disadvantage.

Siloed groups often struggle against politics and legal limitations in their attempts to share information. Many of the siloed groups included in this study openly acknowledged the limitations of their approach stemming from isolated information and different goals. For instance, CAPS was less central to the CU Boulder systems because they are legally limited in what they can share within these groups. For example, the leader of the SOCT, Bill Todd, discussed how CAPS faces stringent state laws around disclosing information about patients. He stated that on the Students of Concern Team “we have a mental health professional from CAPS and that also helps to manage that silo because they can take that information back and we have processes in place where they can access our weekly agendas and, so they can see who’s new and tell their therapist and the therapist can get more information and that kind of thing, it’s just not a two-way street.” The interviewee also admitted that this one-way relationship was more difficult to manage and integrate. Student Support Case and Management (SSCM) can only
advise CAPS on outreach and cannot receive support or follow up on a student’s progress within this silo. This separation goes against the stated goal of the team. Tina Dirgis explained that “the reason the team exists is in part to consolidate bits of information that are otherwise isolated in silos around campus… students are fluid. They interact with a variety of individuals on campus and unless those individuals come together and talk or there’s some system for these things, that information stays isolated.” These statements show that the centrality of information sharing and collaboration in systems can occasionally be limited by confidentiality requirements.

Information sharing, especially when not done transparently, can hurt stakeholders. Jessica stated that systems groups can also have legal requirements that individual stakeholders, like victims, may not be aware of. In these cases, information sharing can be less about collaboration and transparency and more about gathering information for the dominant group—gun violence prevention advocates or mental health advocates or educators depending on the context and organization. In Jessica’s role, this dominant group was the Sheriff’s Office she worked as an advocate under. She explains that “system based advocates … who work for like a police department, they actually have to tell the police department that they work for everything—that they’re told. So, I think that’s a subtle difference depending on the type of trauma that we’re responding to that some victims don’t always know but that I think is important.” Without knowing that your information is being shared within a system, some victims can struggle, and response efforts can be undermined. Like any method, there are reasons to remain cautious within systems, especially when negotiating legal lines. SOCT includes a legal contact on their team precisely to address these difficulties. Information sharing cuts both ways but must be one part of a systems approach.
Political advocacy groups struggle with information sharing for other reasons. Fundraising and uneven resources play a role in siloed political advocacy groups. Conflicts of interest also occasionally hinder certain proposals and bills. This tension occurs because of the various strategies of different groups that are included in “stakeholder meetings.” When looking at gun violence prevention, the issue is quite broad, which results in groups that support some proposals but cannot support others because they undermine that group’s agenda. One proposed measure for a mental health task force met with resistance from an unexpected source, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. The goal of the task force was to assess the idea that

... if you went in for a 72-hour hold for mental health issues, that when you came out there would be a one-year temporary ban on purchasing a gun. That was too controversial and particularly... the group that most fought us on it and was responsible for (and we turned into a task force to study it, not even a bill) and the one that was most responsible for the demise of that bill was in the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI), and they got a Democratic senator to vote against it who has a mentally ill child”

NAMI was concerned that limiting the gun ownership rights of mentally ill individuals would create additional stigma. There is a harmful misconception that gun violence is disproportionately committed by mentally ill individuals—this is true of mass shootings although many shooters remain undiagnosed which is one reason for their escalation. However, the majority of gun violence committed by mentally ill individuals is suicide. In fact, suicide accounts for the majority of gun related deaths (Sanger-Katz; 2016, Oct. 8). Only by combatting negative stereotypes about mass shootings could this important distinction become common knowledge. This task force was meant to protect mentally ill people, but miseducation about mass shootings convinced those that should be advocating for such a task force to fight against it. This struggle is simply one example of the harm that comes from silos, agendas, and misinformation. If the group arguing for this task force shared the goal of suicide or mass
shooting prevention rather than operating separately with sometimes competing agendas, the task force may gain more support and be more effective.

Individuals interviewed from these political groups acknowledged that they would benefit from a freer circulation of information between themselves and other groups. The emerging advocacy group Survivors in Power, established in October of 2017 by Sandy and Lonnie Phillips, doesn’t fall neatly into the category of system or silo, but rather focuses on creating a group using a strategy that occasionally intersects with the tactics of other groups. Their overall goal is to politicize the emotion and personal loss experienced by victims of gun violence and their families and friends. However, they don’t limit the activities or approaches their members can take to action. They aim to

[work] with those victims and survivors and empowering them in any way they need to be. In other words, if they want to write a book, we’ll turn you on to other people who might be able to help you write that book. If you want to write a letter to your congressman and you’re not sure how to do it, we’ll help you do that. If you want to speak and become an advocate or an activist, we’ll help you there. So, it’s not like okay come into our little circle here and we’re going to tell you what to do. Not at all. It’s about your voice, your story authentically told, and then which direction do you want to go to be able to use your voice and make a difference in our society

Although this couple began working on gun violence prevention and continue to through this group, they don’t limit the scope of that work to political advocacy and they recognize the ways that gun violence prevention intersects with the goals of other groups like Sandy Hook Promise, which focuses on identifying shooters. The organization will include both an advocacy and activist branch—the activism will focus on gun violence prevention while the advocacy will focus on supporting other survivors in their own activism, whatever form that takes. This group challenges the separation between work that elevates victims and work that addresses potential shooters.
Survivors in Power challenges the idea that there is one correct approach to advocacy, which opens their group up to possibilities aside from political advocacy. The shared focus on protecting the interests of victims rather than a shared agenda articulates a unique strategy that unites these individuals. This group also works closely with other gun violence prevention groups. However, they conceptualize the issue of silos much differently than those in the other groups under investigation. They explain that Survivors in Power and other gun violence prevention groups are on “two different paths… going towards the same goal. We say it’s like lanes on a freeway… We’re all going down a different lane perhaps. We’re all going at different speeds. We all have different amounts of money. Some of us are on a toll road because we can afford it. Others are not, we’re in the slow lane and we’re just chugging through but we’re all working towards it.” Searching for a shared purpose outside of a single agenda and recognizing the intersection of various groups sets this organization apart from the total systems or total siloed approaches that other groups operate under. The need for a strategy and systemic or multi-causal approach to mass shooting prevention must be addressed to the larger public, not just within these organizations.

How can we address the issues associated with media coverage of mass shootings from a systems perspective?

These interviews offer a wealth of information and suggestions about how to create a more effective model of media engagement around the issue of mass shootings. Complexity challenges the finances, time, and resources of journalists, who may have to learn a lot to address a phenomenon as broad and complex as mass shootings. However, with a widely adopted media model and a basis of shared knowledge about the topic, journalists can address hopelessness and offer audiences a united strategy that mobilizes them to action. Media need to offer models of
systems approaches even as they maintain their objectivity by operating outside those systems. Bill Woodward noted that “[the media] want simple answers and… I think we could do a better job of presenting the complex answers. Because I don’t think we do a good enough job of explaining that a systems failure—we need to find a way to conceptualize that. So, we can draw pictures or something.” By working alongside violence prevention efforts and widening social perceptions of the “causes” of mass shootings, the media can help their audience respond proactively to these events and create well-informed citizens. This project advocates a four-pronged approach that encourages media-makers to develop a shared strategy, engage in multi-disciplinary teamwork, build organizational and public trust to support a dialogue, and share information and/or favor the perspective of groups who share information. I advise that mass shooting experts create a task force to acknowledge this distinction and move to more solid systems solutions. One function of this task force would be educating the media and the public about the potential solutions for mass shooting prevention. With more knowledge about developments in prevention and how multiple “causes” intertwine, media-makers may use their position to help audiences learn about potential actions they can take towards mass shooting prevention.
Revising the Columbine Massacre Narrative through Education in Media

The legacy of media coverage about the Columbine Massacre still influences our cultural, causal, and prevention narratives about mass shootings. Recent coverage of the horrific mass shooting in Las Vegas, Nevada, on October 1, 2017, which left 59 dead and 546 injured, repeated many of the mistakes made in coverage of the Columbine Massacre. The shooter was painted as an "exception" driven by a strange lifestyle, which the media compared to a vampire. NBC News and other networks highlighted a statement the shooter made in a previous court hearing for a suit he brought against a casino where he slipped and fell. During this case, shooter Stephen Paddock stated, “I do not do sun,” a succinct phrase that these news networks cherry picked from the 97-page court document (Siemaskzo; 2017, Oct. 9). These statements are used to paint a picture of Paddock as a “vampire”; a dark, descriptive term that reflects the sensationalizing that occurred after the Columbine Massacre, even going to far as to draw a parallel to the Gothic Subculture’s fascination with death and the undead. In five words, “I do not do sun,” this story invoked a legacy of symbolism that sensationalizes the behaviors of mass shooters and characterizes them as “exceptions.” The coverage of the Las Vegas shooting, more than many in recent history, focused primarily on the shooter and not in a constructive way. Prevention and response should be the focus of news coverage of mass shootings not the myth of “exceptionalism.”

Media efforts have become more rigorous in terms of limiting speculation and waiting for information before reporting on mass shooters (McBride; 2017, Oct. 2). However, social media (including Google and Facebook) incorrectly identified the Las Vegas shooter in the first few hours after the shooting, and many organizations all-too-quickly dismissed the possibility that the attack was ideological due to the race of the shooter (Sydell; 2017, Oct 3; Gessen; 2017, Oct.
3). These examples illustrate both new and lingering problems with the quality of media reports on mass shootings. Most harmful of all is the focus on gun violence prevention at the expense of other narratives and other causal factors (Sargent; 2017, Oct. 1). Mass shootings are not good representative cases for the problem of gun violence prevention and perpetuating the idea that they are good touchstones for this political issue can fuel gun rights supporters’ arguments in some cases. Maggie Koreth-Baker of ESPN’s five-thirty-eight summarized several good reasons not to use mass shootings to discuss gun violence: First, mass shootings are rare rather than a representative sample. Second, because these events are exceptional they are not a good groundwork for convincing people to vote in favor of regulation, and finally, the focus on these events perpetuates inequalities by glossing over the fact that minorities are disproportionately affected by gun violence (2017, Oct. 3). These arguments show how using a sensationalized event like mass shootings to discuss a political agenda can backfire.

When looking at the issue of gun violence prevention from the lens of a gun owner, advocates undercut their own point when they focus on these large-scale sensationalized attacks. Although mass violence committed using firearms is more lethal, an exclusive focus on guns also neglects the fact that bombs, vehicles, knives, and even drones (according to Chief Koch) are used to commit acts of mass violence. For instance, two days after the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting that resulted in 28 deaths, a Chinese man killed 19 students with a knife overseas (Liu; 2012, Dec. 15). Additionally, common factors such as warning signs, gender, mental health, personal history, bullying in the school or workplace, etc. become secondary, thus limiting responses to one avenue of action, which is not an effective model for political advocacy and mass shooting prevention. Returning to the research questions featured in this project reinforces the need for a new media model to respond to mass shootings.
Research Question 1: Why was this shooting so impactful over the long-term and not another? Why 1999 as the historical moment of rupture?

The 1990s amplified fears of teenagers, and the phenomenon of mass shootings in schools exemplified these fears. Approaching this problem from the perspective of conjunctural analysis helps to differentiate specific aspects of the Columbine Massacre from key features that all mass shootings have in common. Moral Panic amplifies pre-existing fears. In the case of the Columbine Massacre, the seeds for society’s fear of youth were planted in the late 1980s in the Satanism and Ritual Abuse scare, the rise of cable television and video games, and a variety of educational programs targeting youth delinquency in schools like DARE. Considering this long history, it’s interesting to note that the workplace shootings of the 1980s did not generate the same panic. These shootings didn’t affect children and they didn’t embody the same social anxieties as school shootings in the 1990s. School shootings represented a variety of historical issues that can be modeled using conjunctural analysis. News coverage of the Columbine Massacre rested on the foundation of a Moral Panic affecting the political landscape of United States in the late 1990s. Concerns specific to this period, such as fears of youth, fears of bombings by domestic terrorists, and fears of difference as manifested by subcultures, characterized mass shootings as a direct product of culture. This self-fulfilling prophecy of youth killing youth justified the Moral Panic further. The strength of this cycle is the way it can morph from one ruptural moment into the next.

The moment of rupture is when meanings are solidified, and frames are further narrowed and shaped into a common sense understanding of a crisis. Conjunctural analysis relies on statistics and primary sources, especially popular culture in media, to trace the dominant issues related to any Moral Panic to their historical roots. In the process, this analysis reveals patterns
known but not articulated at the moment of rupture. This perspective criticizes the direct effects model prevalent in research that supports institutional agendas. These institutions seek out research that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, often in the service of Moral Panic. These agendas came first, not the phenomenon of mass shootings. The inversion of cause-and-effect trickled down to each narrative the media leveled as a "cause" of the shooting. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold did not shoot up their school because they played Doom, listened to Rammstein, or made videos in which they avenged bullied students. Rather, their fascination with these behaviors and media were a warning sign of potential violence that went unheeded. Taken alone, many of the media and behaviors these two shooters engaged with seem common place, which led many to believe, alongside the narrative of exceptionalism, that anyone or any teenager at least, was capable of mass violence. In the case of the Columbine Massacre, the shooting was interpreted too early for an event that truly represented a ruptural moment. When emergent phenomena are interpreted too quickly, the complexity of the crisis can be subjected to sense-making guided by over-determined narratives that stem from cultural fears and anxieties rather than fact. The news media contributed to pre-existing narratives labelled Common Sense in the 1990s without considering the impact this coverage might have on society's long-term understanding of mass shootings as a larger social phenomenon.

Moral Panic is best represented by the amplification spiral, a key visual metaphor for the way that certain fears morph and cohere into variations on the same social anxieties over time. The issue of parental responsibility guides my analysis of the Columbine Massacre because it represented fears of a shift in the social order through a reorganization of the domestic sphere. However, this cycle remains important even as it embodies different fears in the face of new ruptural moments. For instance, the 9/11 terrorist attacks added layers of new meaning and
variation to previous Moral Panics about mass violence. The hegemonic, dominant position of the angry, white male now drives fears that label mass shooters as terrorists or not within hours of a mass shooting. Typically, these judgments align with surface indicators like brown bodies and foreign sounding names just as Gothic Subcultures distracted audiences from the underlying issues in the Columbine Massacre. Moral Panic about mass violence has shifted further in the direction of xenophobia and American Exceptionalism that Appadurai (2006) foresaw in the moment of rupture represented by 9/11. He states that

“the forms of global terrorism of which we are most conscious after 9/11 are only instances of a deep and broad transformation... of which global terror is the violent and asymmetric edge... a crisis produced by what in my earlier work I called the 'disjunctures' between various kinds of flows—of images, ideologies, goods, people, and wealth... produced by modes and means of circulation which operate with different rhythms in their negotiation of space and time.” (2006, 29-30)

Appadurai points to this shift in the historical rupture as a Moral Panic about globalization. The importance of “othering” mass shooters has largely become a game of sorting internal from external threats—terrorists versus angry, white men subject to some sympathy over the decaying state of the nation. This barely perceptible shift from a Moral Panic about youth to a Moral Panic about foreigners stemmed from a fresh rupture that is still cycling throughout our culture today. The “Why Now?” of 2001 presents another example of the dynamic that keeps fear circulating and Social Control solidified.

**Research Question 2: How has media coverage of Columbine framed, narrowed, or shaped common discourses about mass shootings? How do these definitions limit institutional or policy reactions?**

The Columbine Massacre was represented as a senseless event that required a quick resolution through single-factor solutions and a focus on healing at the expense of prevention.
The choice by media-makers to emphasize these themes repressed dialogue and still impacts media narratives today. Shortly after the shooting, Tom Mauser appeared in the public spotlight and as he navigated media attention, he found that the media ask questions expecting certain answers and choose quotes that misrepresent the overall sentiment of the interview. He stated that “[Other groups and the media] spread something because it fits their narrative. Their particular issue.” He explained that this trend was why he often separated his experience with the Columbine Massacre from his gun violence prevention advocacy although he believed both issues were important. In the face of an emergent phenomenon, what is forgotten or repressed says as much as that which is remembered. Rather than making sense of this new phenomenon on its own terms, the media used frames accumulated over decades of Moral Panic to cleanly contain the uncomfortable truth that mass shootings are complicated multi-causal events. Media-makers’ own preconceptions affected their reporting of the Columbine Massacre by both remembering and forgetting certain aspects of the event.

The narrative of the Columbine Massacre established important trends that reappear with each iteration of the Downs’ cycle. News coverage of the Columbine Massacre contributes to the fast resolution of meaning and the process of laying blame that also characterizes media coverage of current mass shootings. These events remain trapped in the “post-problem stage,” only briefly reappearing in the public consciousness after a large-scale attack like the 2017 shooting in Las Vegas; after the moment of rupture represented by the Columbine Massacre, activism is now the realm of experts and the perception that nothing can be done continues to shorten the life-span of public interest. For instance, in the first week following the Las Vegas shooting, many people posted social media about the event but by the time of the November 9, 2017 shooting in a Texas Church, it had passed from national attention. After the Columbine
Massacre, the media created a set of “causes,” now rote and limited, with which to address this problem; Weapons, Pop Culture, and Bullying accompany more specific concerns that arise within the historical context of other shootings. News coverage highlights specific details about individual shootings, like the odd nocturnal lifestyle of the Las Vegas shooter, over patterning or deeper discussions of the interplay between various factors. News coverage at the local and national level addressed the issue of prevention to a very different degree. Yet, the proportion of stories about trauma as opposed to stories about politics which often featured potential methods of prevention remained consistent between the two news sources featured in this study; the Denver Post and the New York Times. Limited discussions of successful and developing solutions repress the progress advocates have made over the past twenty years as well as constructive dialogues about mass shootings that acknowledge the complex relationship between various risk-factors.

News routines play a role in these limited narratives because the speed at which these issues are resolved often sacrifices accuracy, relies on common stereotypes or tropes, sensationalizes aspects of a shooters dress or lifestyle, and presents speculation as fact. At present, dialogue is repressed through a deep mythology that categorizes the Columbine Massacre as an act of “evil,” a by-product of corrupt subcultures and hateful ideologies. These narratives repress dissent and criticism forcing both the public and victims into a dichotomous view of mass shootings as an “us vs. them” phenomenon. The ethics of journalism in mass shootings cannot begin and end with victims if effective solutions are to be identified and enacted. Instead, news norms can be re-examined as factors that shape institutional and policy reactions—by recovering the repressed, new solutions can be considered.
Research Question 3: Who defines which pressures and circumstances are highlighted in media coverage of mass shootings?

News coverage also pushed media research on mass shootings towards ethical issues regarding victims rather than focusing on the problem of meaning. The term “mass shootings” invokes senseless violence, memorialized victims, traumatized communities, and agenda-driven discussions of broad political issues like gun control. This specific set of meanings prioritized certain stakeholders—particularly, the victims—which limited discussions of prevention at the outset. Media continue to treat coverage of mass shootings as an either/or decision between victims and shooters; a solid trend established in media coverage of the Columbine Massacre. The focus on consensus and healing “affects what we consider normal and exceptional death, or whose death we find important and thus worth public mourning.” (Sumiala; 682). News coverage reinforces public perceptions of shooters as outsiders by excluding the shooters’ perspective and including extended discussions of ethical reporting behavior. However, this approach, while seemingly kind to victims in the immediate aftermath of a shooting, is—in the long term—a disservice to victims who ultimately want something to be done about mass shootings. Politically neutering victims continues today in news coverage and advocacy. Sandy Phillips stated that “[victims have] been told you know your story’s great and we want to use your story but you’re too emotional for a leadership position… But 99% of the time they’re going to be extremely effective for you because they’re all in.” Victims are exploited through this apolitical focus. Both the news media and advocacy groups use the stories of victims for their agendas without considering the victims’ needs in terms of politics and action.

Today, ethical issues about interviewing victims remain but many have been addressed through best practices and planning efforts. The ESPIOC’s model of assigning an individual PIO
to each victims’ family, using one official spokesperson for law enforcement, and limiting media contact with victims through a centralized Gmail account where journalists can request interviews that are then filtered through knowledgeable professionals represents one such solution to help victims cope with media after mass shootings. This model was successful in addressing both the Aurora Theater Shooting and the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting.

How can we also establish a sense of ethical responsibility to the meaning of mass shootings as well as the victims’ emotional well-being? At present, each case study prioritizes a specific issue; at Aurora and Sandy Hook, mental health was prioritized by the media as “the cause.” Homophobia drove the Pulse Nightclub shooter and the troubled life of a Vegas gambler drove the Las Vegas shooter. But this focus on a single narrative to explain the actions of the shooters underemphasizes that many issues must compound before someone acts on the urge to commit a mass shooting. Describing the relationship between factors like mental health, homophobia, and addiction to explain how those commonalities signal potential shooters must become part of ethical journalism on the topic of mass shootings.

Media-makers and experts incorporate mass shootings into their pre-determined tropes and explanations and continue the cycle of inverting cause-and-effect. The issue of mass shootings spins infinitely in Downs’ “twilight realm.” This focus on larger agendas makes sense according to the dynamics of Anthony Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle. He states that when “there is still a great deal of public interest… it cannot be said that the post-problem stage has been reached. In fact… the environmental issue may well retain more attention than social problems that affect smaller proportions of the population” (Downs; 1972, 43). The current cultural focus on broader problems explains how public attention has shifted away from the multi-causal factors underlying mass shootings towards the problem of gun violence prevention which affects
many more Americans in complex ways. However, the blending of something so specific with broader issues limits the proposed solutions to mass shootings and distorts the conversation around gun violence prevention. In the “post-problem stage,” mass shootings only represent other issues, and not well, due to their specificity.

**Research Question 4: What is unique about the perspective of “alternative audiences”?**

- **Sub-question 1:** How could constructive discussions of mass shootings include the majority stakeholder perspectives?
- **Sub-question 2:** Could a more well-rounded approach lead to a more active discussion and/or more effective and creative solutions to the problem of mass shootings?

Media-makers continually reference the *senselessness* of mass shootings leading to emotions of hopelessness that re-emerge with every instance of spasmodic interest in mass shootings. However, “alternative audiences” view these instances as moments to potentially harness public interest in these events, not apolitical expressions of grief. As both Eileen McCarron and Sandy Phillips stated, the outrage over the Aurora Theater Shooting and Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting represented a “perfect storm” to achieve something. Yet few effective laws have been passed at the state level to address gun violence and no effective laws have been passed at the federal level since the Columbine Massacre. The narrow focus on gun violence prevention labels this outcome a “failure.” Instead, the media could benefit society by acknowledging the breadth of issues specific to mass shootings to mobilize their audience and combat hopelessness. Following Sandra Borden’s idea of “public journalism,” “the news should also help citizens evaluate the *actionability* of specific issues [by providing] a reliable assessment of risks and benefits, and views on a range of possibilities [and] a thorough analysis.
of the values at stake in various policy options” (Borden; 56, emphasis in original). The media play an important role in informing the public of threats to public safety by summarizing the details of mass shootings. However, to further calm and reassure the public, the media’s role can also include education on the multiple roles citizens can play in prevention. Focusing on multi-causal responses serves this goal by exposing the audience to many facets of the problem of mass shootings and explaining how we, as a society, can act to prevent future events.

The breadth of issues underlying mass shootings offer many spaces for intervention that audiences have not been educated about—anonymous reporting, recognizing warning signs, the role of mental health and the lack of systemic treatment, the issue of educational support for at-risk students, and more. The groups under investigation that were most successful addressed a wide variety of issues and risk factors within a system. The Students of Concern Team developed a system for threat assessment that combined many different multi-disciplinary experts to share information and identify students who exhibit potential warning signs of violence. The shared goals of those working within a University system to support students and the community proved quite illuminating in terms of developing a strategy for addressing these events. CU Boulder also employs individuals who have developed their own approaches to pre-planning and prevention. These systems are constructive if adopted holistically—when systems are only partially adopted, they fail. These failures stem from moments when someone should have intervened, sought out more information about the shooter, or included multi-disciplinary experts such as both law enforcement and counselors trained in threat assessment (Woodward; 2016). With an eye towards educating the public, the complexity of these issues can come to light and receive support from a broad array of stakeholders. Media-makers should guide people in this educational process.
This project also suggests that media-makers use a systems perspective to illuminate the importance of multi-causal response. This educational emphasis and assemblage of relevant factors needs to be incorporated into the realm of media to encourage activism at the societal level. Interviews with a variety of experts on the topic of mass shootings and crisis response emphasized the need for political agendas to become secondary to discussions of prevention. For instance, a focus on gun violence prevention should not use mass shootings as a case study, nor should mass shooting experts use gun violence prevention as a platform to discuss their highly specific issue. Instead, a more comprehensive approach to prevention must include a variety of factors and a shared strategy built among those from different backgrounds. The media model proposed by this project offers one method for developing a strategy that moves beyond understanding mass shootings as single-factor issues.

Limitations

One important limitation of this study is the absence of a journalistic perspective on news coverage of mass shootings. While the study includes many stakeholder perspectives, there needs to be more consideration of the pressures that journalists face in the field. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma outlines some of the issues and risks associated with field work on such a sensitive issue; PTSD, Depression, and Substance Abuse are potentially long-term effects of reporting on these issues that affect journalists as well as victims as first responders. These risks can be exacerbated based on the amount of time reporters spend in the field, the high-pressure and speed of news routines, personal histories and more (Smith; 2015, July 1). While acknowledging the hard work and ethical difficulties journalists face when reporting on mass shootings, this study aims to move away from privileging the media’s current approach to covering mass shootings.
To properly construct a model that would be effective for journalists and other media-makers, there must be buy-in and collaboration. Journalists play a central role in answering the criticisms presented in this research and amending their practices to combat a harmful and weak history of mass shooting coverage. The public relations perspective in this project illuminates some places where conflict can become cooperation, like the issue of precise language and accuracy. A better alignment between the official story and speculation that occurs too quickly, as well as a greater understanding of what information must be withheld could help to address some of these issues. Journalists can and should, in their role as institutional watchdogs, push for more information but if there is no information available, they can still seek an explanation as to why the information is unavailable and report the response transparently as well. However, the pressures of journalism require information for public safety at a rapid pace, especially in the era of social media. There are also limitations associated with scarce resources; time, money, bodies to cover each issue, etc. The process by which a cooperative strategy can be developed must include a fair assessment of the journalists’ perspective.

In addition to the emotional hardships and limited resources journalists suffer, news organizations have adopted practices that cripple any attempt at variation and innovation in news storytelling. Andrew Lindner summarizes these practices as “reporter lay-offs, increasing reliance on wire services and content-sharing, the consolidation of newsroom positions, and the creation of centralized centers producing content for multiple newspapers” (2017, 1179). These trends are evident in news coverage of the Columbine Massacre as much coverage was reported verbatim in the New York Times, the Denver Post, and across wire services featured in both publications. These unavoidable weaknesses in reporting cause problems with media credibility and access to quality information.
In the wake of these changes to the realm of professional journalism, Citizen Journalism takes on a new significance. However, this shift comes at the cost of some of the ground gained in ethical journalistic coverage of mass shootings. Inaccuracies from citizen journalists, particularly the users of the social media site Reddit, have caused a flood of misinformation in the aftermath of various crises. These users have a habit of misidentifying the culprits of landmark mass shootings and terrorist attacks, including the Las Vegas shooting and the Boston Marathon Bombing. However, even social media rumors and misinformation about micro-events like the shooting scare on the CU Boulder campus have a lasting impact. These issues affect stakeholders involved in managing mass media coverage like law enforcement and crisis response teams. There is no easy way, in a free speech culture, to prevent this “noise” from spreading and finding validation from various sources. Steve Davis spoke to the new issues attendant to social media. He said, “I think a lot about the same exact situation, the same set of circumstances today what it would be like to try and stay on top of things—Twitter going, Facebook going, Instagram, I can’t even imagine.” After a recent homicide, he added “I hadn’t even sent out a new release yet… but you’ve got neighbors shooting photo, shooting video, talking to media, sending in information, tweeting their stuff… the news cast, they had the whole story.” Granted, the story inaccurately identified the victim of the homicide, an egregious error that can cause distress for family members and loved one. In response to the continually blurred lines between rumor, fact, and “journalism” as a practice of evaluating and contextualizing information, one important distinction appears; the difference between citizen journalism and rumor-mongering which has always occurred through word of mouth but now has a new platform from which to speak with perceived authority.
In the era of fake news and bad information that impacts all areas of society, mass shootings represent only a small portion of the problem. Companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Google are struggling to maintain barriers against bad information. Social media rumors result from confirmation bias and easy access to aggregated information. Google, FB, and Twitter are ultimately mainstream media sources of a different kind, a representation of word of mouth which has always existed but now is published for the world to see. Conflict about social issues now stands-in for something being done about these issues which can further complicate the relationship between rumors and “news.” Danah Boyd offers a bleak picture of the effects of collapsing these distinctions. She states “But I think labeling would reinforce polarization—but it would feel like something was done. Nonbelievers would use the label to reinforce their view that the information is fake (and minimize the spread, which is probably a good thing), while believers would simply ignore the label” (Boyd; 2017, Jan. 5, emphasis added). Her overall argument rests on the idea that debunking bad information can perpetuate it although she misses an opportunity to reflect on the need to unseat this perception that liking or sharing a post is action.

Central to the effectiveness of citizen journalism is credibility which can be built using mainstream Journalists’ best practices while preserving the diversity touted as the strength of this mode of journalism. For instance, the Poynter Institute and other journalism organizations have begun to spread information about media literacy (Kreuger; 2016, Apr. 4). In the case of mass shootings, media literacy should include informing audiences of how soon to trust information as fact, how to identify sources of information with a pre-determined agenda, and how to become active in combating mass violence. These forms of information can be part of or complimentary
to Citizen Journalism provided it moves towards building a critical audience and explains the role of media literacy in political participation.

Ultimately, Citizen Journalism paired with media literacy could offer a unique entry into the ethical issues and best practices advocated for in this proposed media model. These solutions focus primarily on top-down organizations because of access and resources but many of these suggestions apply or can be adapted to Citizen Journalists. These individuals could be most helpful in shifting the focus away from the live, crisis response reporting on mass shootings towards complex commentary on prevention. This would require an acknowledgement that fast information and “scooping” need not define Citizen Journalism, but rather, long-form research focused on contextualizing and complicating people’s understandings of social issues can fulfill a function that many mainstream media outlets have long-since shed. Despite Boyd’s pessimism about the impact of media literacy, she suggests the potential to develop new practices in media. She states “We also cannot simply assume that information intermediaries can fix the problem for us, whether they be traditional news media or social media. We need to get creative and build the social infrastructure necessary for people to meaningfully and substantively engage across existing structural lines” (Boyd; 2017, Jan. 5.). Her argument applies more broadly to how we create a media literate society. In advocating for this relationship building and sense of social responsibility, Boyd suggests we need a systems approach to the media sphere, something this project provides.

**The Proposed Model for Education**

This study has resulted in several lingering questions and several pieces of advice for media-makers who cover mass shootings moving forward. The remaining questions developed in reaction to an historical and long-lasting pattern of news coverage. These questions include:
1. How can the media help to limit the feeling of hopelessness that impacts many stakeholders in a mass shooting?

2. What are the right terms needed to best communicate about mass shootings? Where should the message come from?

3. How should we plan the process of communication with stakeholders—citizens, victims, journalists, politicians, etc.—so that the stress of an event will not compromise the quality of communication used to respond?

4. How can we address the issues associated with media coverage of mass shootings from a systems perspective?

I interviewed various stakeholders in the areas of prevention and crisis response to mass shootings. The pressures associated with on-scene reporting on the event and on-going education about prevention present different ethical dilemmas and practical difficulties and therefore require different tactics. However, these interviews revealed several key commonalities between successful prevention and crisis response teams that can guide a media model. The most successful groups included in this study demonstrated a shared strategy, multi-disciplinary teamwork, trust to support a dialogue, and information sharing. Any effective model that promotes an educational, activist stance towards media coverage of mass shootings must proceed with these guidelines in mind. How can media-makers utilize these pieces of advice?

To develop a shared strategy, experts must collectively agree on a mission statement that does not limit their approach to advocacy and prevention. Is the goal of your group to mobilize the emotionality of victims? Is the goal of your group to intervene in the lives of those at-risk of committing an act of mass violence? Is your goal to support young people who are affected by a culture of toxic masculinity? There are a wide variety of strategies that lend themselves to a
multi-disciplinary response. Survivors in Power developed their mission statement as an open way for victims to contribute and speak their truth; Sandy explains that in news coverage “you see somebody who’s still in shock and still reeling from their pain speaking. And it’s like a little robot. *They tell them what to say and how to say it* and they go—dadadadadada—which is fine. If that makes them feel better, that is fine.” Strategies require cooperation and acknowledgment of many perspectives. For Survivors in Power, this group hopes to mobilize survivors in their own way rather than some way that serves a pre-determined agenda.

Media must also develop a shared strategy around mass shootings. In terms of educating audiences about prevention—Is your goal to promote education on the complexity of mass shootings as a phenomenon? Is your goal to contextualize the issue of mass shootings within the societal epidemic of gun violence? In terms of responding to the crisis of a mass shooting in the moment—Is your goal to allow victims to speak their truth? Is your goal to gather good information? Media can successfully contextualize mass shootings within a specific issue without reducing the phenomenon to that specific issue. For instance, you can discuss how Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were bullied in school but contextualize how this treatment leads to anger, depression, and acting out; in other words, how mental illness and bullying relate to the manifestation of visible risk factors. The shared strategy should articulate the approach to any given story about a mass shooting. The goal should not be to highlight a specific issue with mass shootings as the primary cornerstone of their argument because mass shootings are narrowly defined and require a specific approach that does not fit neatly into any one category. The goal should be articulated first and foremost. After the strategy is clearly defined, you can decide which practices, tactics, and methods you will use to realize that strategy.
Creating a multi-disciplinary team may not be possible for journalists who typically have generalized knowledge. The increasingly limited time, space, and resources of journalists also makes this type of multi-disciplinary project difficult. However, in the age of expert journalism, these specialties can be developed slowly over time. In the present, journalists should utilize the expertise of pre-existing multi-disciplinary groups such as the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV) to develop a strategy for addressing mass shootings. Media-makers may also triangulate information from different experts. Media coverage of the Columbine Massacre often addressed multiple experts in a single story, yet those perspectives were not put in dialogue with one another. Start with a set of questions that advances your strategy and can be addressed to many different experts on the topic of mass shootings. In doing so, you will have information that interrelates and emphasizes a single point rather than harboring very narrow and pre-defined agendas. Limit leading questions in these interviews as well—approach the subject as objectively and openly as possible. Addressing multiple areas of expertise together can complicate the issue and put various agendas in dialogue. As the crisis is unfolding, it’s helpful to have a list of contacts that are vetted, reliable, and aware of your organization’s strategy on-hand. This list will help to gather good information quickly, so you can limit speculation and call a prevention expert instead.

The need for a dialogue must also develop over time due to the central need for trust. Trust between members of an advocacy group, trust between media and advocacy groups, and trust between different advocacy groups has led to more effective solutions. This need for dialogue and trust makes intuitive sense when addressing mass shootings because the issue is contentious, emotional, and has been contextualized as a divisive single-factor issue for two decades. Divisions based on beliefs about gun rights, in particular, characterize the all-or-
nothing, either/or think pieces on mass shootings. Polarized viewpoints are increasingly part of the common discourse in our culture. However, mass shootings should not be a partisan issue. The loss of human life need not be political or divisive if there is trust between various stakeholders including media and various advocacy groups. Again, follow your strategy to determine the best way to productively discuss different viewpoints—explain your strategy to other organizations as transparently as possible. Articulate, educate, and advocate for your media strategy to gain buy-in and necessary trust from your interviewees and audience. Invest in a set of best practices to ensure them you will not ask leading questions, use their words against them, or choose sides when constructing your argument. Many siloed groups in this study expressed skepticism towards this research project due to their previous experiences with political opponents and the media. This distrust must be eroded and replaced with a sense of shared purpose and dialogue.

Information sharing depends primarily on newly established trust and the negotiation of legal barriers. This category is as much about what isn’t shared as it is about what is shared, especially in an active mass shooting situation or the immediate aftermath. For instance, rather than sharing preliminary or speculative information, media sources can explain what information is not currently available and why not. This is standard practice for some news sources regarding other events like elections, open investigations, and other quickly evolving stories—why not extend this understanding to mass shootings? When there is a delay, the audience can be educated on why this delay occurs and the media can assure their audience that material is withheld for the sake of justice and the investigation. When the mass shooter has committed suicide, or been killed by police and will not face trial, 53% of the time, information about the incident can often be shared more readily and completely (N.A.; 2017, Apr. 11). If that is the
case, journalists can push back harder. The idea is not to excuse a lack of public transparency but to contextualize the lack of information for the audience. As Ryan explained, there will always be criticism that information is “too early, too late, or inaccurate.” A more consistent approach to information management could strengthen the quality of early information about mass shootings and limit misconceptions.

Sharing information also becomes a good way to triangulate different perspectives when engaging in longer-term education about prevention. Even if the opinions of interviewees are polarized, use data from many sides and collect a breadth of information to settle on an argument that advances your strategy. Be transparent with your sources about who else you are speaking to and the information you have already gathered. This decision helps your sources make informed decisions on what information should be shared and whether you have established trust to support how that information will be used. Synthesize information from several different groups, especially those that operate in silos. Be aware of which groups are systems based and which are siloed. Take the status of each group into account when deciding which information to prioritize. This approach has two functions—to limit inaccuracies and to ensure the quality and complexity of the arguments included in any given commentary on mass shootings.

**Best Practices in Reporting and Vocabulary**

The interviews in this project provide a blueprint to construct a more effective model for media coverage of mass shootings, but also synthesize a swath of best practices and vocabulary for media-makers. These finding represent tactics media-makers can use when putting their media strategy into action. They should be used to supplement this strategy *not* replace it. Not these tactics will apply to all strategies. Below is a summary of these findings:

**Vocabulary dos/don’ts**

- Do not use the term “snapped” to describe the behavior of the shooter or shooters
Avoid phrases that indicate an inability to understand or prevent these events; ex. "senseless" or "hopeless" or "evil"

Use terms most people know or explain those that they don't

Semi-automatic instead of automatic weapons

Words like exception, different, loner, etc.—anything that indicates an anomaly rather than an identifiable pattern

List of best practices

Prioritize information about the behaviors of the shooter or shooters so audiences become aware of warning signs

Talk about missed places for intervention based on those behaviors

Contextualize statistics

If you’re going to publish a non-answer (“we can’t share that information at this time” or “we don’t know”), call an expert to talk about what we do know about mass shootings more generally instead

Respect the official story in the first few hours

Whenever possible, limit noise and help sort through misinformation

Favor accuracy over speed

Draw a distinction between symptomatic behaviors and “causes”

Use social media for shorter, more frequent updates and stick to known facts

Clearly indicate which statements are speculative

Look at old, even unused, press releases to identify experts

Let victims tell their story; **DO NOT LEAD!**

Value the personal experiences and beliefs of sources

Look over local laws and requirements to identify groups not bound by confidentiality

No agendas; only facts

Write cumulative stories to show similarities and patterns across many shootings

Ask “What does the shooting mean and what do you do with that?”

Choose the “reasonable story”

Find common ground between different groups and movements

Get lots of sides; triangulate sources

Depend on liaisons to approach victims' families

Show skepticism of first reports, rumors, and early “numbers.” If you’re uncertain of the accuracy of these numbers or are told they are unconfirmed, clearly mark this information as speculative or “best known information”

Rumor control: dispel many rumors together

Use social media to spread the official word faster

Find a way to conceptualize systems issues

Interview with various systems actors
Some questions continue to prevent both advocacy groups and media-makers from uniting under a shared strategy to affect change. Some struggles that affect both media-makers and these groups include:

- How do we know what we prevent?
- How do we translate expertise and complexity into engaging media?
- How do we harness the momentum of Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle?

To this final point, journalists and advocacy groups already do some of this work after mass shootings. Media-makers call attention to issues like gun violence prevention and mental health, typically taking the latest mass shooting as a case study. Advocacy groups canvas different areas after a year full of high-profile shootings like the Aurora Theater Shooting and the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting in 2012. However, these groups often invert the best way to address the root of mass shootings. These groups use mass shootings to further their agenda. Instead, we must look to mobilize citizens to support a variety of solutions to mass shootings. Media should juxtapose the idea that "only experts can help" with the need for more participation and widespread support for prevention. The issue of mass shootings remains stuck in the post-problem stage of Downs' Issue-Attention Cycle even as mass shootings occur frequently in the United States. After these events, there are brief recurrences of interest in which mass shootings are attached to issues like gun violence, mental health, security in public places, etc. These gestures characterize the post-problem stage as well as the emergence of new institutions, programs, and policies developed to address the issue. How can media-makers educate audiences about these institutions, programs, and policies? How can media-makers help audiences understand that single-factor approaches alone cannot yield visible results? To move forward with a complex societal understanding of mass shootings with the goal of prevention, media-makers should start by explaining that everyone can be helpful in some way. Journalism prides
itself on illuminating social issues, as the new *Washington Post* slogan states, because “democracy dies in darkness.” Society needs to *know* what we didn’t *know* 20 years ago, at the time of the Columbine Massacre, and better journalistic practice is the place to begin.
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## APPENDIX A: Detailed Independent T-Test Results

Independent Samples T-test: “Causes” and Topics by Paper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>t value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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Independent Samples T-test: “Causes” and Topics by Local versus National

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### Independent Samples T-test: “Causes” and Topics by Trauma versus Politics

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### Independent Samples T-test: “Causes” and Topics by Breaking News versus Commentary

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Independent Samples T-test: “Causes” and Topics by Weekday versus Weekend Reporting

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End Notes

i Hall (2013) Hall’s Informal Process for Conjunctural Analysis:
1. Identify main themes or arguments around phenomenon
2. To begin with, accept commonly cited statistics
3. Identify gaps between states and ideology or arguments
4. Update or Correct Statistics
5. Examine Why and How this gap appeared
6. Relate facts to “constructions of reality”—You need to identify points of Ideological displacement—
   putting pressure on repressed by scapegoating groups or ideas

ii Cohen (1980) Phases of a typical disaster:
1. Warning: during which arises, mistakenly or not, some apprehensions based on conditions out of which
danger may arise. The warning must be coded to be understood and impressive enough to overcome
resistance to the belief that current tranquility can be upset.
2. Threat: during which people are exposed to communication from others, or to signs from the approaching
disaster itself indicating specific imminent danger. This phase begins with the perception of some change,
but as with the first phase, may be absent or truncated in the case of a sudden disaster.
3. Impact: during which disaster strikes and the immediate unorganized response to the death, injury or
destruction takes place.
4. Inventory: during which those exposed to the disaster begin to form a preliminary picture of what has
happened and of their own condition.
5. Rescue: during which the activities are geared to immediate help for the survivors. As well as people in
the impact area helping each other, the suprasystem begins to send aid.
6. Remedy: during which more deliberate and formal activities are undertaken towards relieving the
affected. The suprasystem takes over the functions the emergency system cannot perform.
7. Recovery: during which, for an extended period, the community either recovers its former equilibrium or
achieves a stable adaptation to the changes which the disaster may have brought about.