

Mass Shootings In America: Media Coverage and the Aftermath

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Abstract

Introduction: Media in Relation to Mass Shootings in the United States

“Mass shooting” – it’s a phrase that many Americans are too familiar with seeing and hearing all over the news media, and an event that occurs every 12.5 days (Meindl, Ivy 2017). The U.S. today is scattered daily with stories of the next tragic mass shooting in America since the United States has more mass shootings than any other country in the world (Lankford, 2019). But what happens behind the 30-second news story or headline? When the reporters swarm the building, eager for the next quote, or when citizens pull their mobile devices to begin recording gunshots being filed and claiming it is “news.” The Dart Center, a recourse for journalism in trauma reporting, defines “mass shooting” as “murders of multiple people with a firearm in the same location and timeframe.” According to the FBI, mass murder is “an incident in which four or more people are killed with no distinctive temporal space between the murders.” Furthermore, [The Gun Violence Archive](#), which often is cited as a source for mass shooting statistics, uses this definition: “A minimum of four victims shot, either injured or killed, not including any shooter who may also have been killed or injured in the incident.” For this literature review, I will be using the Federal Bureau of Investigations definition for the purpose since it is a standard governmental definition; however, I would like to acknowledge that other definitions are important especially The Gun Violence Archive as it states a minimum of four victims are shot, regardless of whether those victims are injured or killed.

I am studying the professional ethics of trauma reporting to understand how journalism can best cover mass shootings. I will do this by examining the challenge between citizen journalism and professionally trained journalism and different means of reporting on mass

shootings due to new technologies, platforms, etc. I will also dive into parachute journalism, the practice of non-local journalists arriving and staying for several days, causing a pack of reporters jockeying for access and interviews to get the first story out or the scoop on a new angle. I will also navigate the ethical reporting of breaking news coverage in mass shootings while using real examples of media coverage since 1999. I will cover three Colorado-based shootings, all of which received national attention. These three shootings will touch on different aspects of journalism. These three shootings will touch on various aspects of journalism, and the underlying concern is how the victims are affected by these different lenses that have different nuances between them. For the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, I am analyzing how the spread of information affected coping skills and the misinformation regarding the shooting. For the 2012 shooting at an Aurora theater, I plan to unpack the sensationalism that the shooter, dressing as the Joker (a character in a Batman movie), received from the media. Finally, with the 2021 Boulder King Soopers shooting, I will address how the live-streaming coverage from a man claiming to be a journalist affected victims and the overall ethics of journalism. I also want to understand what affects those most impacted, the victims who survive and family of victims who are killed, to see the effect on the overall credibility and reputation of “good” journalism.

According to the Dart Center, an online platform guide for journalists in relation to trauma-related journalism in different realms, reporting on trauma is a critical aspect of journalism. However, knowledgeable and ethical reporting on crisis, violence, and tragedy poses a challenge to journalists who have to balance their obligation to the public to report on these events with their duty to victims to do so responsibly and with care.

Literature Review

What are the different types of Mass Shootings?

There are several different kinds of mass shootings including rampage shootings, disgruntled employee shootings, school and lone wolf shootings, and terrorist mass shootings. However, not all mass shootings receive the same treatment and coverage in the media. Coverage decisions are made by the news media outlets regarding which attacks to report on, the extent to which the incident is covered, and the shaping of the public perception of this event due to the coverage (Silvia, Capellan 2019). By highlighting certain stories, the media play a significant role in providing a narrative about a topic, and the media may influence imitation amongst other want-to-be perpetrators whether it is through life, via film and other entertainment media, or even just described in news reports (Meindl, Ivy 2017). Furthermore, some experts argue that how the media reports a mass shooting can play a role in promoting or deterring an imitation shooting. Meindel & Ivy (2017) argues that extensive media coverage after a mass shooting, such as repeatedly showing the perpetrator's image, showing the manifestos, and sharing details of the event, can increase the chances of an imitation shooting, according to some scholars. It is important to note that the contagion effect has been challenged by others, and there is not a settled claim in regard to imitation shootings.

Columbine High School Mass Shooting (1999) and the dangers of misinformation

On April 20, 1999, two young gunmen walked into Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, and killed 12 of their fellow students and one teacher before turning their guns on themselves. According to the Pew Research Center's monthly surveys of public attentiveness to domestic and international developments, 68% of fellow Americans followed the shootings very closely, making the Columbine shooting the third most closely followed story of the 1990s.

To further understand the salience of Columbine, the *New York Times* analyzed the specific keyword searches of "Columbine" and "Littleton in 2004." These results showed 226 items related to the incident, with more than 70 percent of these stories being published in the first two weeks of the mass shooting.

Dave Cullen, who wrote the book *Columbine* on this shooting, examined CNN transcripts from the first four hours after the news organization went live about the attack. He found that within these few hours, major myths were already structurally in place. Cullen also blamed three major myths for the misguided coverage in the media. First, the preconceptions of a supposed school shooter profile were thrown into the mix by news outlets claiming the two shooters to be outcasts (Cullen, n.d.). The second myth was that much of the information that was used in the media was allegedly extrapolated, with a key myth being that the shooters were a part of the "Trenchcoat Mafia" (Cullen). Finally, the last reason was that once the public believed a specific narrative regarding the Columbine shooting, people could not let it go, even when evidence directly contradicted it, with the key myth being that the two attackers were specifically targeting jocks (Cullen, Dart Center). However, as telling as Cullen's findings from the early hours of the coverage are, it is important to acknowledge that many of Cullen's other statements regarding

Columbine were later proven to be false, or otherwise extremely inaccurate. This was especially seen in relation to certain victims' deaths and their religion.

Other research on Columbine, including the scholarly text, "Media Salience and The Process of Framing " (Chyi, Hsiang, and McCombs, 2004) talks about the media salience in the Columbine shooting in 1999. The authors use agenda-setting theory, which shows that once an object appears on the media agenda, the "volume of that coverage on the topic increases its importance" for the public (Chyi, Hsiang, and McCombs). During these sorts of news events, the media often re-airs the story in different ways (consciously or not) to keep the story alive.

Since Columbine brought a mass shooting into many U.S. living rooms on live television, public perception of mass school shootings has been largely associated with the Columbine shooting archetype. After the Columbine shooting, one-third of students who took part in a survey by [Gallup Youth](#) (1999) mentioned that there were students at their school who were potentially violent enough to cause a situation similar to Columbine (Silva & Capellan, 2019). This perception also leads to the narrative of stigmatizing alienated individuals in school who don't fit a typical social norm. This stigma can further encourage violence (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). It is also possible that by highlighting certain stories in regard to mass shootings, specifically lone-wolf terrorism and school shootings, the media plays a large role in influencing perceptions of risk (Silva & Capellan 2019).

However, the infamous Columbine shooting started a pushback against making shooters famous by reporting on them in great detail and was an integral moment not only in the media but in the culture of mass school shootings for many years to come.

In the *Mother Jones* article "How the Media Inspires Mass Shooters," Mark Follman notes that ever since the Columbine attack, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has been

studying what motivates people to carry out these crimes. They discovered that attackers often emulate the Columbine mass shooting. What is known as the “Columbine Effect” has included 74 plots and attacks across 30 different states, all of which have been inspired by Columbine. The perpetrators’ goals range from marking the anniversary of Columbine to outdoing the original victim body count of the 1999 mass shooting.

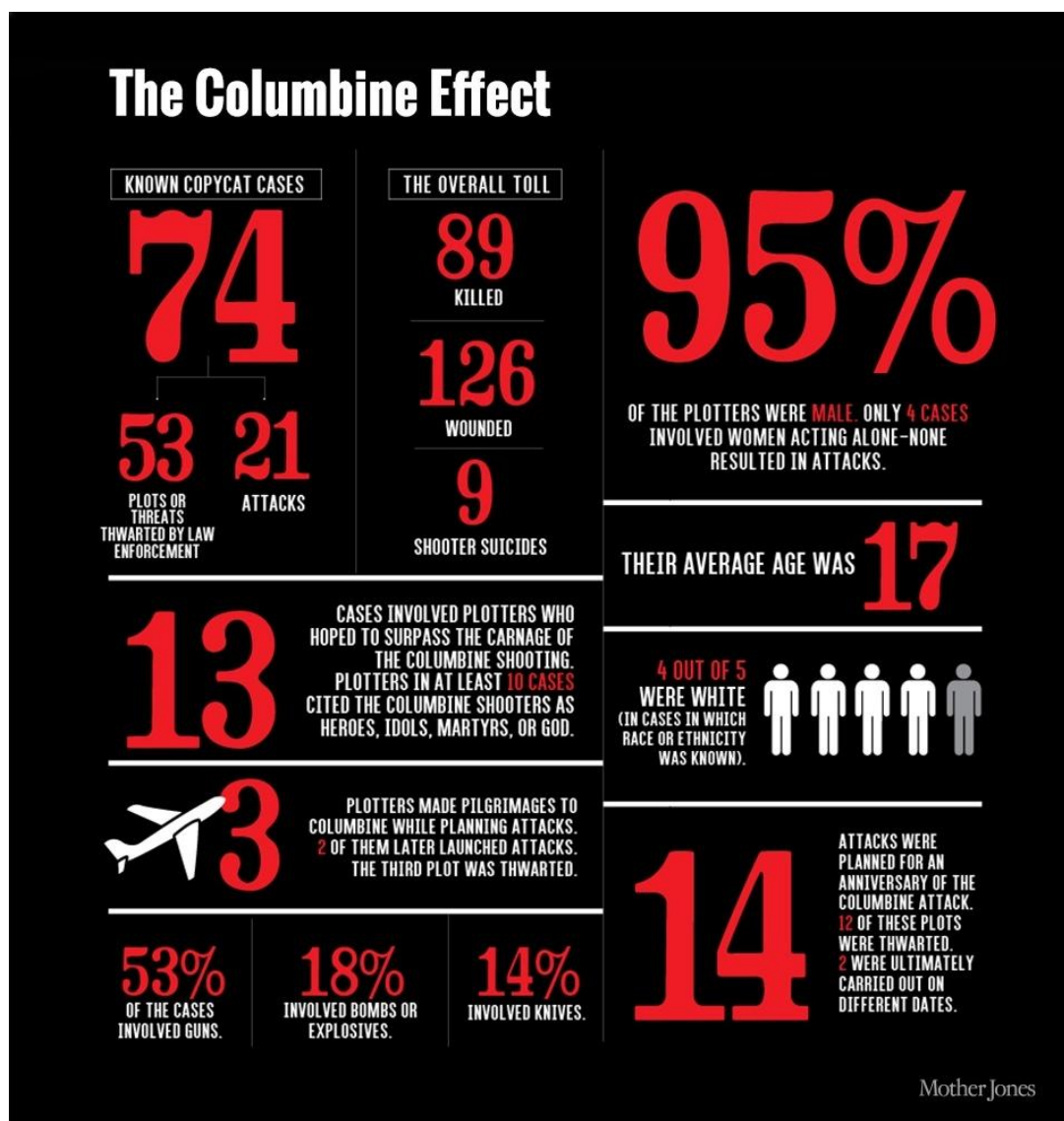


Figure 1: (Mother Jones Follman, Andrews 2015)

Law enforcement was able to stop 53 of these plots before they occurred. Still, 21 cases elevated to actual attacks, with 81 people killed, 126 injured, and 9 shooters committing suicide.

The Aurora Theater Mass Shooting (2012) and the Infamy of the Shooter, as well as the launch of the “No Notoriety” Campaign

On the morning of July 21, 2012, as moviegoers attended the first showing of the new Batman film, *The Dark Knight Rises*, a gunman entered the theater dressed as the Joker, a character in the film, and killed 12 people and wounded another 58. The coverage of the shooting constructed media spectacles by portraying someone overcoming ostracization by turning to weapons and carrying out mass shootings, which is extremely harmful. (Kellner, 2013). The perpetrator, James Holmes, arrived with loaded guns at the movie theater. Holmes had dyed his hair orange and was wearing military protective gear. He set off smoke bombs before shouting “I am the Joker” to the crowd.

Within hours, several media reports said the assault was one of the deadliest mass shootings in recent U.S. history. Holmes had apparently meticulously planned out the massacre and spent the months before the shooting buying guns and ammunition. Police officers discovered that Holmes took four weapons inside the Century 16 theater, including an AK-47 semi-automatic assault rifle that could shoot 100 rounds without reloading, a 12-gauge shotgun, a Glock 40-caliber semiautomatic pistol with a magazine allowing for multiple shots, and a handgun (Kellner, 2013).

After his arrest, Holmes told police that he had explosives stored in his apartment. Police evacuated the apartment building and then discovered that Holmes had trip-wired the door to his apartment with a mechanical device, which was assumed to be a plan to have more casualties,

this time involving police or other people that entered his home (Kellner, 2013). Police spent an entire day disarming his apartment, which was full of explosive devices including the trip-wire, improvised explosives, and around 30 canisters that were full of chemicals. A neighbor also reported that loud techno music was playing at the time of the Aurora theater mass shooting. By appearing in the theater dressed as the Joker, Holmes created a media spectacle and generated infamy and celebrity for himself as a media spectacle as he appeared on local and national television as well as in thousands of news articles.

The 2012 Aurora Theater shooting provides an example of a high-profile rampage shooting, which produces a cultural trauma that extends beyond the community in which it occurred and accentuates awareness of the phenomenon (Silva & Capellan 2019; Garland, 2008). This awareness led to a broader public fear and the perceived risk of victimization by simply attending a movie at a public theater.

As the story of the shooting was breaking, many news organizations, such as 9News ran stories and noted in their news coverage that they did not want to name the shooter during their reporting. After the incident, Caren and Tom Teves—whose son Alex was one of the 12 people murdered in the massacre — launched the “No Notoriety” campaign. The “No Notoriety Protocol” as stated on their [website](#), suggests ways to reduce mass shootings by limiting the shooter’s ability to become famous (or infamous) through the media. These protocols include:



NO NOTORIETY MEDIA PROTOCOL
To reduce rampage acts of mass violence due to media-inspired fame.

- Adhere to the journalistic principle to "Minimize Harm," keeping in mind the responsibility of balancing the public's need for information vs. potential harm.
- Recognize that the prospect of infamy serves as a motivating factor for other individuals to kill and inspires copycat crimes
- Report the facts surrounding the mindset, demographic and motivational profile, without adding complimentary color to the individual or their actions, and downplay the individual's name and likeness, unless the alleged assailant is at large.
- Limit the name to once per piece as a reference point, never in the headlines and no photo above the fold. Refuse to broadcast/publish self-serving statements, photos, videos and/or manifestos made by the individual. After initial identification, limit the name and likeness of the individual in reporting, except when the alleged assailant is still at large and, in doing so, would aid in the assailant's capture.
- Elevate the names and likenesses of all victims killed and/or injured to send the message their lives are more important than the killer's actions.
- Agree to promote data and analysis from experts in mental health, public safety, and other relevant professions to support further steps to help eliminate the motivation behind mass murder.

IT'S A MATTER OF PUBLIC SAFETY

No Name. No Photo. #NoNotoriety.

www.nonotoriety.com

Figure 2: (*Nonotoriety.com*)

King Soopers Mass Shooting (2021) and the Representation of Citizen journalism

On March 22, 2021, 10 people were killed in Boulder by a 21-year-old shooter who first opened fire at customers in the parking lot of a King Soopers grocery store before entering the store and firing at customers and employees randomly. In the midst of this terrible tragedy, Dean Schiller, who identified himself as a citizen journalist, began live-streaming the event. He was not a journalist for a recognized news organization, and instead was a citizen acting unethically in his “reporting.” In an article published in *The Denver Post*, “Schiller argued his actions were protected under the First Amendment” (Bradbury, 2022).

Despite the fact that Schiller is not a professional journalist, his claim at the scene that he was a journalist was extremely harmful to the public’s perception of the ethical integrity of journalism by ignoring journalistic standards that guide professional reporters and editors.

Patterns That Emerge From Media Coverage of Mass Shootings, Especially the Three Colorado Shootings

The Columbine, Aurora Theater, and Boulder King Soopers shootings are all tragedies that Colorado has faced. After diving into the three mass shootings, these common threads emerge:

1. The media may well have an impact by influencing copycat shootings.
2. Journalists should be prepared in order to handle trauma-related events to respect victims and survivors properly.
3. Agenda setting can have the power to make media coverage more salient.

Other Factors that impact coverage of mass shootings

Parachute journalism

The Salem Press Encyclopedia describes the term *parachute journalism* as “journalism that is produced when journalists travel to a location to which they have no prior connection to cover news there. This is also meant to represent ‘parachuting’ into an area to cover specific events and then leaving” (Mohn, E. 2021). Often, the term “parachute journalism” is a negative term that suggests that journalists are likely to cover an event quickly, with very little background and context. “The journalists then leave the area and do not cover or care about the aftermath of the disaster or event that brought them to the area, to begin with” (Mohn, E. 2021).

Social media

In his *Mother Jones* article, “How the Media Inspires Mass Shooters,” Mark Follman states that many mass shooters desire the fame the media gives social media posts as a means of foreshadowing a shooter’s intent. Follman explains that the media faces a challenge in how its content is spread and recycled amongst different news outlets and social media platforms (Follman 2020). Oftentimes, the rise in mass shootings is linked to the “Media Contagion” theory, which suggests that society’s never-ending news cycle can have the ability to create a “copycat” effect on these crimes (Surrette, 2014). Although the contagion effect is not restricted to social media (as these issues have predated social media), online platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and others, can incite gun violence and spread the manifestos of multiple mass shooters to the public. In general, the authors make the argument that the spread of mass shooting incidents on social media is very contagious and has a harmful impact on society (Liu, Sasha

Dong, & Qiu, 2022). This is also problematic with other social media sites including the dark web, where many of these mass shootings have a fan base of supporters and admirers.

Given various motivations for posting such content on social media around the topic of mass shootings, it is highly unlikely that these reforms can be successfully mandated legally in the realm of graphic content. With the current social media practices, content may not be flagged for hours. Social media outlets have a responsibility to provide quicker content moderation. Furthermore, Jetter & Walker (2018) examined news coverage on ABC and compared natural disasters, as a control variable, to mass shootings. This was done to find a connection between news coverage of mass shootings and the likelihood of subsequent shootings in the days and weeks after the initial shooting. They found that between 32-57% of mass shootings after the initial shooting speeds up the timeline for subsequent shootings, and could increase and cause more mass shootings in the future.

	(1) Excluding disasters on day $t - 1^c$	(2) Excluding disasters in the US	(3) Excluding disaster outliers ^d	(4) Excluding 2016	(5) Additional shooting- related terms ^e	(6) Coding missing days as zero coverage	(7) Coding missing days as mean coverage
2nd stage coefficients, predicting the number of shootings on days $t + 1$ until $t + 7$							
ABC news coverage	0.743*** (0.237)	0.838*** (0.262)	0.742** (0.341)	0.484*** (0.139)	0.832*** (0.261)	0.854*** (0.273)	0.839*** (0.258)
Control variables ^a	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
% of mass shootings explained at mean of ABC news coverage	49	56	49	32	55	57	56
F-test insignificance of IV ^b	14.87***	13.75***	8.22***	24.18***	13.76***	14.17***	14.54***
<i>N</i>	1,198	1,198	1,194	1,026	1,198	1,263	1,263

Figure 3: *Jetter and Walker (2018)*

There are several effects that come out of this sort of graphic content. A *Nieman Reports* article by Helen Lewis, “How Newsrooms Handle Graphic Images of Violence,” poses the question of what effect the availability and accessibility of graphic images on social media have on these media platforms’ users. Lewis states that the effects are:

- It is difficult to look at these images, but difficult to look away from them.
- Dehumanization of the victims as the graphic content can prioritize the suffering of those involved.
- Promoting mass shootings as an increasing phenomenon.
- Sensationalist reporting can potentially encourage would-be perpetrators to act and make their crime more spectacular for fame.

A challenge to Lewis’s argument regarding dehumanization is that professional journalists nearly always use non-graphic images to humanize the story and to prioritize the victims over the killer's actions, though some social media channels may not take the same approach.

To combat this, Lewis claims that news organizations need to be sure the content they broadcast and post does not contribute to self-mythologization. For example, she suggests that if media outlets are going to use a photo of the shooter, they should use a yearbook photo rather than a mugshot since a mugshot can give the shooter a more menacing appearance and can further entice others who might want to emulate the shooter. The news media is influencing the public, but the news media is also reaching would-be killers. Lewis also poses a test for media outlets to use by asking the following questions when thinking about posting graphic content: Is the content's news value greater than a potential negative impact? Does it bolster an existing narrative about an already existing topic? If so, does it do so consciously and fairly? Does it

dehumanize the victim(s)? Could posting and or broadcasting such content influence more crime? Is it essential and should it be published anyway?

On August 26, 2015, Alison Parker and Adam Ward were on live television while reporting on a feature story for WDBJ in Roanoke, Virginia. While they were on air, a former station employee killed them and seriously wounded the woman they were interviewing. The gunman fled, then posted a video of the attack on Twitter and Facebook before turning the gun on himself. The *New York Daily News* tweeted stills from the footage the shooter took, as did other news organizations. This was a gut punch to the victim's family and loved ones, as this was used as an example of how the approach of sensationalism can do more than offend, it can even influence the next perpetrator. The next shooting happened only five short weeks later, with the perpetrator of the Umpqua Community College shooting in Oregon posting his admiration for the previous shooting. “The 26-year-old man who murdered nine and wounded nine others at Umpqua Community College last Thursday had posted comments expressing admiration for the Virginia killer, apparently impressed with his social-media achievement” (Follman, 2015).

Sensationalism

Scholars at the University of Oregon interviewed journalists and found that coverage of mass shootings is sensational and that there are ethical concerns about the way that many newsrooms approach this coverage (Dhamen et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the media should avoid the volume of coverage to not sensationalize an event (Meindl, J. N., & Ivy, J. W. 2017). The media too often can be responsible for potentially providing a bluebook for future perpetrators to imitate, and the coverage of such events is important for the spread of such behavior. It can be difficult as sensationalism in times of tragic events often draws in more views and revenue, but the cost of this can risk increasing the

likelihood of future shootings, according to a study by Murray (2017). In that study, Murray also said that this can potentially provide new scripts for potential killers in guiding them in their violent acts.

Ethics of reporting mass shootings

The article, "Covering Mass Shootings: Journalists' Perception of Coverage and Factors influencing Attitudes" (Dhamen et al., 2018) also says that older journalists favor the state of how mass shootings are being covered, while strongly supporting the coverage of perpetrators, and claim to have not thought that the coverage of these topics was an ethical issue. Younger journalists showed a stronger belief that the coverage of mass shootings presented an ethical issue.

Effect of Media Coverage in Relation to Mass Shootings

High-profile mass shootings produce a cultural trauma that accentuates awareness of the phenomenon (Garland, 2008). Research also shows that the excessive coverage of a public mass shooting has increased the overall sense of fear, perceived risk of victimization, and perception of an epidemic while in public spaces in these communities (Garland, 2008). Furthermore, the coverage that is devoted to a particular type or instance of a public mass shooting will affect different subsections of the community and population differently. For example, a school shooting will increase the chances of a parent or student having fear of victimization. The same instance occurs in the workplace, where a boss might be afraid to fire an employee due to fear of being victimized in a disgruntled employee shooting. Mass public shootings have also been on the rise since the 1990s.

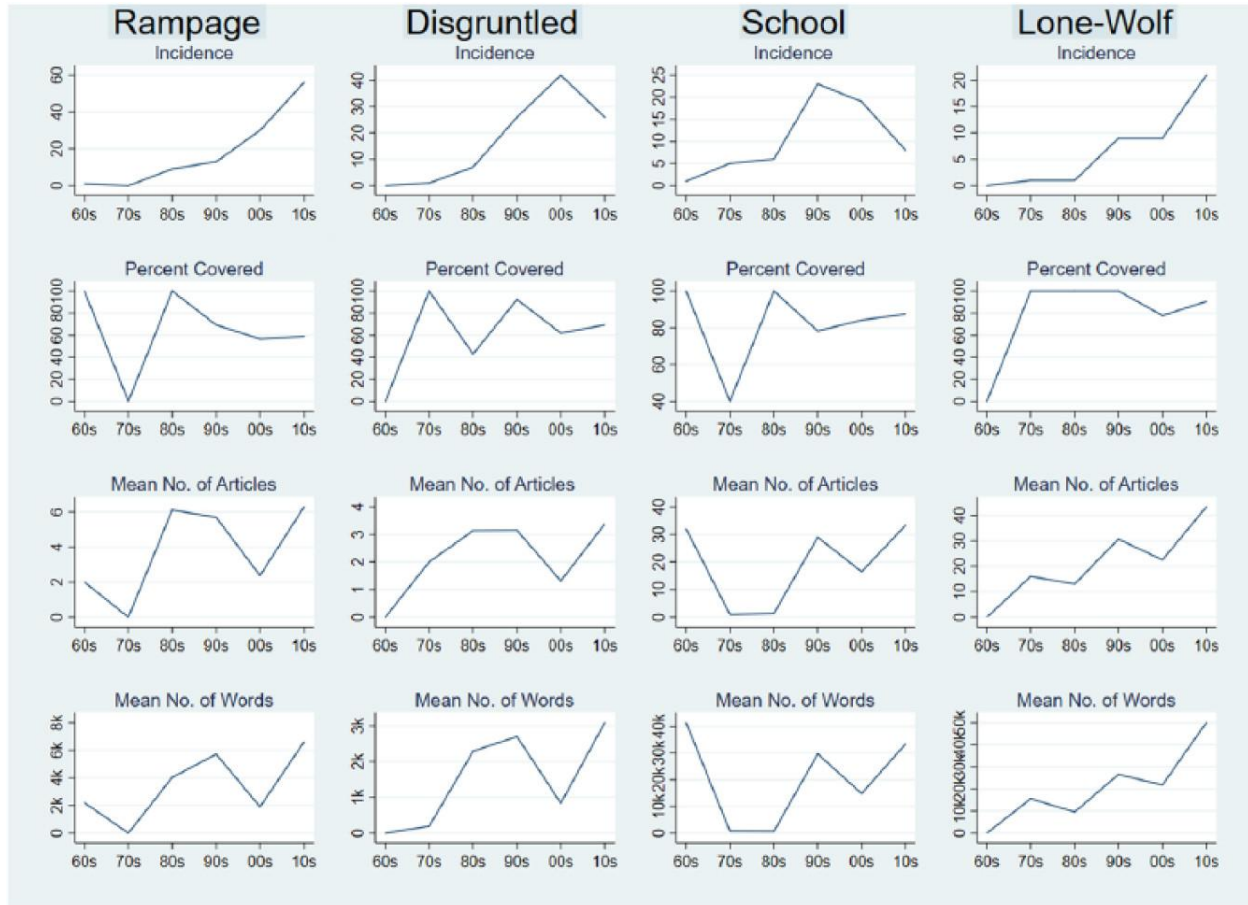


Figure 4 (Silva, J. R., & Capellan, J. A. (2019))

Figure 4 presents temporal variations in news coverage among the different types of mass public shooters. Rampage and lone wolf shooting incidents have been on a steady rise since the 1960s. There are also temporal differences in news coverage by the type of public mass shooting (Silva, J. R., & Capellan, J. A., 2019).

In a *Columbia Journalism Review* article, “The Intermediary: A former reporter wants to end traumatizing coverage,” Deborah Bloom describes the guilt and impact that journalists feel when reporting on sensitive topics whilst conducting interviews. Bloom created a series of surveys with 71 different survivors of mass shootings, and 50 of her interviewees described their first experience with the news and media as being negative. Many described dodging calls from

reporters and even hiding from the media in the immediate aftermath of a loved one's death. Over half of the respondents said their interactions with the media contributed further to their trauma experiences regarding the event. Journalists must be aware of the potential impact of a traumatic story and need to understand how to be ethical and respectful journalists in the case of mass shootings (Seely, 2020).

What can be done?

Although there will never be a clear answer as to what can be done in the media to reduce mass shootings in America, there have been nationally acknowledged campaigns created to help. The first of them is the Don't Name Them Campaign, which aims to curb media-induced imitation shootings and suggests minimizing naming and describing the perpetrators of gun violence and mass shootings, limiting sensationalism, and refusing to broadcast shooter statements and or videos (Meindl, J. N., & Ivy, J. W. 2017). The “No Notoriety Campaign” began after Caren and Tom Teves’s son, Alex Teves, was one of the 12 murdered in the 2012 Aurora theater shooting. The Teves’s launched a “No Notoriety Campaign” asking the media to minimize the names of the perpetrators (Follman 2020).

Another campaign that is developed in the vast realm of mass shootings is the My Last Shot Campaign, which launched and ended in 2019 at Columbine High School. Students at the high school made the argument to not sanitize the event so the public can feel the real impact of gun violence. Students came together to create a sticker that read, “In the event that I die from gun violence, please publicize the photo of my death. #MyLastShot. Signed _____” that people could put on the back of their driver's licenses. The students wanted to have violent truth rather than a calming effect on the public, to show the true reality of these horrific events.

To be sure, we may be able to use these methods as a way to deter copycat shootings. However, journalists and reporters have a duty to report important events to the public, especially when those events have public policy implications. Sometimes it is necessary to include the names of a perpetrator. The news outlets need to report on the killer and these instances as it is necessary for the public's understanding of the event (Follman, 2020). Reporting, if done correctly, will also stop the misinformation that commonly spreads in the immediate aftermath of an attack.

Follman, in his *Mother Jones Article*, argues that to some degree, these campaigns are unrealistic because journalists have a duty to inform the public. Follman argues that reporting on the killer is crucial to the public's understanding of the problem and helps stop the misinformation that spreads in the immediate aftermath of an attack.

To help balance this tension between the media's duty to the public and the risk of glorifying mass shootings, some journalists are re-organizing news coverage of mass shootings to not glamorize the event, and Follman argues that this proportionality matters. This can be done by showing footage once per day on television, for example, as an improvement to de-sensationalizing violence of the common looping so common on cable news networks (Follman 2020).

In the Aurora theater shooting that was previously mentioned, as one example, the perpetrator got into a Ph.D. program and was a brilliant student, however as time went on, he devolved to the point where he went into a theater and took innocent moviegoers' lives. Do we forget to ask what went wrong? What didn't people notice and what prevented him from getting the help he needed so this didn't happen? If we don't talk about the killer we may not be able to get to the policies that need to be in place to help combat the increasingly high amounts of mass shootings.

How the Media Can Help Reduce Copycat Effect

Follman mentions seven ways that the media can help reduce what is known as the copycat effect in mass shootings when being reported by the media.

1. **Report on the perpetrator forensically and with dispassionate language:** Avoid the term “School Shooter” which may gain popularity among potential copycat shooters. Instead use language like “perpetrator,” “lone act of terrorism” and an “act of mass murder” to avoid gaining popularity.
2. **Keep the perpetrator's name out of the headlines:** Rarely if ever will a generic reference to a shooter be any less practical.
3. **Minimize the use of images of the perpetrator:** If it isn't necessary to repeat their name, don't.
4. **Minimize the use of perpetrators' photos/images of them:** This is especially important for aspiring attackers and the continuing desire for fame. This also could gain traction psychologically for individuals who may be vulnerable in identifying with a mass shooter.
5. **Avoid using posed photos of the perpetrator:** Self-styled photos are often what the attacker wants to be used/remembered as. Also, do not post if the images of the perpetrator are outdated. (Ex: using an image of the Aurora theater attacker shown with green “Joker” hair three years later after his image had changed).
6. **Avoid posting their manifestos/videos except if it is clearly adding value:** Instead, paraphrase, cite sparingly, and provide analysis accordingly.

7. **Do not fixate on numbers:** Would-be attackers are keeping score too, and many want to outdo the previous attackers' death toll.

The *Dart Center's* “Style Guide for Trauma-Informed Journalism” recommends that during the first breaking news coverage of a mass shooting, reporters need to take as much time and care as they can before the reporter has to go on air to verify as many facts as possible. Also, the *Dart Center* suggests reporters avoid repeating unnecessary information and rumors regarding body count, possible suspects, or anything that has been posted to social media without proper verification from official sources. The *Dart Center* also recommends that when reporters are interviewing witnesses in the aftermath, they stick to the facts, rather than trying to get emotion out of that source.

Another strategy that can support media coverage of public mass shootings is to limit the discussions of the actions and motives of the shooter, such as the preparation and planning of the event itself while covering mass shootings. Meindl also argues that associating the observed behavior with punishment has been shown to decrease the likelihood of imitation shootings re-occurring in the future (Meindl, J. N., & Ivy, J. W. 2017). Presenting the perpetrator’s actions as shameful in the media can also decrease any perceived reward for the behavior such as gaining fame from committing these acts of mass shootings. It is important to note that infamy can also be seen as a kind of fame, so shameful behavior can still garner a measure of name recognition if that is their motivation.

People are generally more likely to imitate the behavior of those who they see as being similar to themselves. (Meindl, J. N., & Ivy, J. W. 2017). When the media repeatedly describes a perpetrator’s motive for a mass shooting, it may inadvertently be pointing out the similarities between the perpetrator and other members of the community that may have gone unnoticed

otherwise. Although descriptions can be helpful when informing the public, they may also incentivize a copycat shooting in the near future. (Meindl, J. N., & Ivy, J. W. 2017).

Although there is a push for information to be released immediately following a public mass shooting, it does not always need to be in the form of a live event. This could potentially raise the overall “excitement” of the event.

It is also important for news outlets to only present the direct facts whilst reporting on public mass shootings, rather than providing false information for views, entertainment, engagement, dramatic re-creations of the event, etc. There should be a clear and distinguished attempt from the media to reduce the energy and emotion that so frequently occurs during a breaking news event. According to the Dart Center, it is also vital to accurately portray the emotions of the perpetrator without hinting at any kind of glamorization.

Although it is feasible, it can be perceived as naive. Would-be killers spend time they are in contact with social media and have found chats with other want-to-be killers. If mainstream media outlets do all of what the experts suggest – which is unlikely – will it end the problem? Probably not- it seems like they are already getting a lot of information on social media- so how effective is it with all the dark web things online in the first place?

The Effect That This Kind of Reporting Has on the Journalist

Breaking news, or “hard news,” is bound to happen in society, and the media is expected to cover it. In a *Columbia Journalism Review* article, “The Intermediary: A former reporter wants to end traumatizing coverage,” Deborah Bloom interviewed 22 reporters who had covered traumatic events. Most said they had received no training in covering traumatic events and weren’t sure if their newsroom had guidelines for covering traumatic events in relation to victims

and survivors. Most were also uncomfortable interviewing and contacting survivors in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event. Some journalists even described this kind of reporting to have a negative impact on their own lives, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, abuse of alcohol, and other negative effects. (Bloom, 2022).

However, in the same article, Bloom states that reporters might be able to benefit and minimize the survivor/victim harm through their reporting- depending on the approach. In the Bloom article, a team of media researchers interviewing sixteen survivors of the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech found that criticism in media coverage was the most common report. Despite this, however, nearly all respondents gave some sort of positive feedback about some journalists they had talked to. The journalists who received positive feedback behaved with sensitivity and compassion and made an effort to form a real connection with the survivor/victim rather than simply using them for the story or a quote (Bloom, 2022).

Lose-lose scenario

Journalism is also a business. Waiting to report on breaking news will lose revenue for news outlets across the country. Many journalists will be out-reported by others if they wait to go on air until after they get an official press release. However, where do journalistic ethics come into play in reporting on these mass shooting cases? It is a journalist's duty to inform the public and also to minimize harm. Can we do both?

With the rise of technology and anyone being able to live stream, photograph, or tweet whatever they want, what role do these attributes play in the journalistic world? How do journalists manage the impact of "citizen journalists" – those who might claim to be a reporter as

a way to go viral on Facebook? Where are the ethics in this? Do the means of journalism ethics need to be re-defined in order to keep up with the times and the climate of our nation?

Some of the journalists interviewed by Bloom acknowledged the harm that their reporting and interactions with victims have but mentioned there was no viable alternative (Bloom, 2022).

Methods

For my documentary, I plan to include 3 Colorado shootings – Columbine, the Aurora theater, and Boulder King Soopers. I will talk to survivors and victims' families to see how those most impacted and those who have gone through a trauma-related situation feel in regard to the media. I also will ask about their interactions with reporters and what they think needs to be done to improve the experience of trauma victims.

In my literature review, I have determined that these three shootings represent areas where the media could have done better in reporting. Whether it is the spread of misinformation, sensationalizing the shooter, or shoddy citizen journalism, these are all problematic representations of what journalism stands for. I will talk with the victims in order to find out what the overall impact is on those most directly involved, while also determining what victims of trauma experience with reporters is like.

I plan on doing this in a documentary, interview format so that those I sit down with can talk about their loved one (or their own experience. I will then ask them about the mass shooting they were involved in (or their loved one was involved in) to examine how they were treated by the media on the day, weeks, and months following the incident. I will end by asking them for their opinion as to what they think can be done in order to mend the journalist-victim relationship moving forward.

I do want to disclose that I understand the challenge that this approach has emotionally for the victims involved in all three of the mass shootings I have researched. I will work with the boundaries that each victim has, and will respectfully take “no” as an answer. I will not push a source into committing to do something they don't want to do or are not ready to do in their healing process.

This choice of creative approach is specifically due to the fact that a video really captured the intensity and emotion of those most affected not only by mass shootings but the way in which the media reported them. Video will allow my audience to see the victims’ faces, and emotions, hear their voices, and allow a further connection rather than a written story. My audience will be directed towards journalists themselves, as they can see a visual representation of the mistakes in regard to trauma-related journalism, journalism ethics, and the mental health of the journalist.

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