ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF COMMUNICATING RISK IN THE MEDIA: A HEURISTIC FOR REPORTING ON CRISIS EVENTS WITH A FOCUS ON MASS SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

by

Ashley Yuckenberg
A Dissertation
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of
Doctor of Philosophy
Writing and Rhetoric

Committee:

___________________________________________ Director

___________________________________________

___________________________________________ Department Chairperson

___________________________________________ Program Director

___________________________________________ Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

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Fairfax, VA
Ethical Implications of Communicating Risk in the Media: A Heuristic for Reporting on Crisis Events with a Focus on Mass School Shootings

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

by

Ashley Yuckenber
Master of Arts
George Mason University, 2011
Bachelor of Arts
James Madison University, 2006

Director: Douglas Eyman, Associate Professor, English

Fall Semester 2021
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
DEDICATION

For my sister, Jessica, who survived and thrived after the Tech shootings, and my sister, Emily, who carried the school forward after tragedy. For my daughters who should never fear going to school.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the many friends, relatives, and supporters who have made this happen: My loving husband, Jason, who has been my editor for the last 20 years, and my cheerleader for even longer. You supported me through every stage and I wouldn’t have completed this journey without you there to pick up my pieces. My daughters who distracted me in the best ways, and put up with my writing days. I hope I set a good example for all you can achieve in this world. Doug, for knowing when to push me and pointing me in the right direction. You are an amazing sounding board. Heidi, for joining my committee mid-dissertation, I know that was tricky. Your work inspires me and helps push my ideas forward. Kathy, thank you for hanging in there with me for the last 4 years even during your retirement. Your feedback always brought new ideas and inspiration. Steve, your theories on care and wounding inspired me, and I appreciate you for giving me new questions and ideas, and for leading the way in the research. Thank you to my cohort of amazing colleagues, Jackie, for always checking in and being a fantastic friend, Elizabeth, for memes and messages, Colleen and Lourdes, as sounding boards and encouragement. To Heather for her encouragement and a place to vent. Finally, to my amazing parents who made all this possible with their financial support, and their emotional support. To my mom who gave me faith when I wasn’t sure and encouraged me to go for it: you checked in on my progress and encouraged me to FINISH! To Dad who kept me company at the Library of Congress during long days of data collection. Thank you for nagging me about what I still needed to finish. And to both of you for encouraging me to believe that becoming a Dr. was a possibility. To my in-laws, for letting me borrow the lake house as a writing retreat, and especially Robin for helping with the kids during late night classes. Very last this is for my grandmother who earned a degree in home ec and chemistry in the 1950s when science classes were filled with mostly men, and later went back to earn her masters in molecular biology. Thank you for paving the way, and showing us how important a good education is. You were right college is the best time of your life, which is why I stayed for fourteen years!
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This dissertation looks at the idea of “if it bleeds it leads” (Sontag, 2003, p.18), an expression that implies all news concerns violence, and applies the ethics of care to the rhetoric used in the coverage of crisis events, with a particular focus on mass school shootings. Using frame analysis I analyzed the coverage provided to the public in the two weeks after the Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Parkland school shootings to create a heuristic to limit undue trauma to victims and the general audience during the coverage of crisis events. As shown by the Center for Disease Control, contagion events (or copycat events) can be limited by following reporting guidelines that focus media coverage on the victims of the event and away from the perpetrator. This heuristic is meant to be used in the coverage of crisis events to work toward what Aristotle calls a hexis (Aristotle, 1999), or habit, of honest rhetoric, and create awareness of the repercussions of some of the media’s communication methods.
April 16, 2007, dawned sunny and warm in Central Florida where my new husband and I boarded the train to travel around the outskirts of Disney World. We were enjoying the second day of our honeymoon exploring the Magic Kingdom. My Blackberry buzzed with a voice mail from my mom. I held the phone to my ear and tried to make out what she was saying as the connection wasn’t good. “I just wanted to let you know Jessie is ok. I’m not sure if you had seen anything but it’s all over the news.” I quickly called her back. “What do you mean? What happened?” “I didn’t want to interrupt your trip, but something big happened at Tech. It’s on the national news. Don’t worry though Jessie is ok.”

In the days after the Virginia Tech shooting my family tried to recover. My sister, a senior at Virginia Tech, traveled home when classes were cancelled. She had lived in the West Ambler Johnston dorms her freshman year and was a building away when the first young woman was killed in the Virginia Tech shooting. She didn’t get the email blast that went out to students to stay off campus, as she didn’t have a laptop and in 2007, emergency text messages were not in use. She and a few other classmates sheltered in place after a classmate with a laptop was able to find out why their professor didn’t show up. She graduated that May amid strong Hokie spirit and deep sadness over lost classmates. My family walked among the Hokie stones that served as a memorial created
by classmates for classmates. Two stones represented young women who went to our high school.

Over those first hours of news coverage we also learned the shooter was a young man who went to high school with my sister and me. He was a student in the class between ours, apparently a quiet kid, not involved in much. Neither of us knew him, and we were involved in many activities from sports to band and journalism. He wasn’t. Reports came out about his family, good neighbors, immigrants from Korea who worked hard in our community. The warning signs so often mentioned in news coverage didn’t show up until college, and yet it was surreal that such evil could emerge from the community where I had lived for the last seven years. Walking the halls with me was a mass murderer, the person who would kill 33 and wound 17, the worst school shooting ever in the United States (Statista, 2019), someone who could walk back and forth in a building and methodically shoot people multiple times as chaos ensued. He deeply affected my family’s life, and we didn’t lose a sister or a daughter that day. For about a year after, Jessica would tense at the sound of sirens, my mom had severe anxiety, my dad to this day, 13 years later, will still not watch NBC news after they decided to release parts of the shooter’s manifesto, and he is the reason I began this research.

I was a freshman in high school when Columbine occurred. I remember hearing rumors of copycat shootings. Because of those rumors, my fellow high school students and I had to walk through metal detectors at my high school in Texas. I began teaching high school in 2007, and in the years after Tech we began active shooter drills. I worried for my students and made plans for what I would do if someone showed up with a gun. I
became a mother, and my husband asked my daughters’ preschool if they had a plan in
place for an active shooter. I sent my daughters off to kindergarten the year after 1st
graders were killed in Sandy Hook. My bachelor’s degree is in journalism and so all these
facts situate where I stand as a researcher. I’m trained in journalism and understand the
importance of covering a story, but in the same vein I’m a mother with school-aged
children and someone deeply touched by mass school shootings with a hope to find
deeper understanding in how we as writers can promote change to a deeply embedded
social issue.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The professional journalist’s workload has increased with media outlets working in smaller staffs and so has the social demand for instant access to news (Reuters, 2012). As the field changes, changes to journalism education programs should be made to address the workload and the growth in types of coverage due to technological advances. Changes in basic reporting methods are required to keep up with social media and 24-hour coverage and so the genre must adapt and so too do the ethical decision-making processes that go into determining the frame of the story, the sources of information, the details to cover, and the process involved in fact checking. As educators how can we adapt our curriculum for new journalists to face the task of ethically covering crisis situations? Virilio (2012) said, “Fear and its administration are now supported by the incredible spread of real-time technology” (p. 16), and so journalists bear a heavy burden to mitigate this difficult balance. They must make ethical choices with speed to provide news that people need. Unfortunately, this news may create undue fear.

Problem Statement

Coverage of events in American journalism begins with the selection of stories and sources. McCluskey (2017) argues that journalists select stories they cover based on a number of outside influences, including what they perceive the public will read, advertisers want, personal beliefs, and what their editors want: “News is socially constructed, dependent upon a wide range of factors. Based upon those norms and practices, it is perhaps inevitable that traumatic events like a rampage school shooting
would receive extensive news coverage” (p. 13). Ultimately the adage “if it bleeds it leads” (Sontag, 2003, p. 18), meaning the more shocking a story is the more likely it is the story will be printed on the front page, still stands true. People want to read/hear about breaking news of violence, even more so when the victims are innocent people from a population that should be protected, as explained by Cavararo (2004) in her theory of horrorism. Some of this fascination could be out of an evolutionary need for survival (Kendal, 2016). A person needs to survive and protect their offspring, and so knowing of potential danger can be achieved by reading or watching media outlets. The extra level of children murdering children could be why mass shootings at schools are typically immediately reported front page news, in countries that protect freedom of the press.

**Problem Background**

Several publications agree that the current school shooting crisis began when a man climbed the bell tower at University of Texas, Austin on Aug. 1, 1966 (Washington Post, March 4, 2020; Scott-Coe, 2017; Petersen & Densley, 2021). The Post says in the 50 years before the UT shooting only 25 events occurred in which 4 or more unrelated people were killed in an event not related to gang violence or a war, which is the definition used by the Washington Post of a mass shooting (Washington Post, March 4, 2020). Unfortunately, one of the many difficulties presented in covering the topic of mass shooting is how different entities choose to define what “counts” as a mass shooting. There is no set number even with in the United States government: the FBI considers a mass shooting to be one that claims 4 or more lives, while a report commissioned by the United States Congress after the shooting in Newton, Connecticut, at an elementary
school in 2012, defines it as 3 or more people who aren’t exclusively friends or family of
the perpetrator perish in one occurrence, unrelated to gang or organized crime
(Washington Post, Dec. 3, 2015; Crouse & Richardson, 2015). The same article also
discusses whether perpetrators should be counted in the numbers of dead, as they often
commit suicide or are killed by the police officers responding to the scene, and whether
the harm should include the number shot as opposed to dead.

Assuming a mass shooting is one where there are four or more victims, 1,242
people have been killed in mass shootings across the United States from August 1966 to
March 2020. Of 182 shootings, 178 were committed by men, and 100 died, usually by
suicide (March 4, 2020; Crouse & Richardson, 2015). According to the Gun Violence
Archive, a site that collects data on gun violence and defines a mass shooting as 4 or
more people shot not including the perpetrator, the number of mass shootings has nearly
doubled in the last 6 years with Gun Violence Archive reporting at total of 417 mass
shooting events in 2019 (2020).

Not only is there a continued debate over what qualifies as a mass shooting, but
there is continued discussion in the news media, social media, and among local, state, and
national politicians as to what to do about these increasing incidents. According to the
Institution for Health Metrics and Evaluation, America has more mass shootings than any
other high-income country in the world (March 25, 2021). The United States suffers from
the copycat effect, in which one mass shooting creates an uptick in shootings in the two
weeks following the first occurrence (Christensen, Oct. 5, 2017). There is also a desire
for notoriety by the shooter that may suggest how to control the occurrence of mass
shootings. According to Cowan and Cole, mental health, and access to fire arms are often cited as causes of mass shootings. But Cowan and Cole point to the media and contagion effect, also known as copycat effect, as a noted and researched cause of mass shootings cited by the shooters (2020).

The frequency of mass shootings has not done much to change the gun laws, or mental health support. After Columbine and Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook, changes were made to security at schools and investigations led to school resource officers, locked doors to classrooms, and active shooter drills at schools. Changes were also made to police response practices and communication between schools, parents, students, and government entities (Leavitt, Spellings, & Gonzales, 2007). Laws on gun control have changed in some states: Florida, for instance, enacted gun control laws three weeks after the Parkland shootings, as did 24 other states (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, June 13, 2018; Vasilogambros, 2018). In 2020 Virginia failed to ban assault weapons and other similar guns that are frequently used in school shootings (NPR, Feb. 17, 2020). Mass shootings in the United States are a many-faceted 54-year-old problem.

**Theoretical Framework**

In her book *Horrorism*, Cavarero (2009) discusses horror as a rhetorical construct, and her arguments are the basis for the majority of the theoretical framework I apply to this research on mass school shootings. In her introduction she asks, “Did they think that violence makes a stronger impression when there are no qualms about massacring children?” (Cavarero, 2009, p. 1). Her answer is yes, that when children are killed or the perpetrator is someone you would see as an innocent, like a child or mother, it changes
the response people have to the violence, it is more than terror and becomes horror (Cavarero, 2009, p. 1). The difference between the terror and horror Cavarero (2009) says is “terror in this sense displays a specific link with the kind of total fear, synonymous with absolute disorder and loss of all control, known as panic” (p. 5). Horror on the other hand has “to do with instinctive disgust for a violence that, not content merely to kill because killing would be too little, aims to destroy the uniqueness of the body, tearing at its constitutive vulnerability” (Cavarero, 2009, p. 8). For Cavarero, terror creates panic while horror is revulsion about violence so terrible it violates a victim’s vulnerability and renders the person no longer human. To relate this idea of horror to school shootings we must define vulnerability. Cavarero (2009) expresses vulnerability as “two poles of the essential alternative inscribed in the condition of vulnerability, wounding and caring…the singular body is irremediably open to both responses” (p. 20). Cavarero helps us to understand the draw readers have to these horrific events. The vulnerability of children take the act of terrorism beyond terror as theater (Schmid, 2010) to what Cavarero labels as horror. This creation of horror that is enhanced by the vulnerability of the victim as outlined by Cavarero can be mitigated by the application of the ethics of care. The ethics of care is the idea that as vulnerable human beings people are subject to the need to care for and be cared by in relation to their most basic needs (Mol, 2008; Colton, Holmes, & Walwema, 2017). By using frame theory, or the idea that journalists select stories and how they cover events based on their perception of an event (Shahin, 2016), an analysis can be done to determine if there is a script in place when crisis events occur or if there
are any gaps in coverage that can address the ethics of care for those who are most vulnerable.

How can journalists use an ethics of care? According to the Society of Professional Journalists, “public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy” (Preamble, 2014). A free press is meant to inform the public of the dealings of the government, and to inform citizens of information necessary for daily life.

There are a variety of guidelines for conduct available for journalists through professional organizations, such as the Poynter Institute and the Society for Professional Journalist (SPJ). According to SPJ, this code of ethics includes: seek the truth, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent (2014). These guidelines are taught in journalism schools across the country and hopefully students have them engrained into them before entering the field. Do ethical concerns change when covering a crisis? They do become more complex as a professional balances the need to cover breaking news and availability of information with the need to avoid becoming a tool of terrorism. Aiding terrorism through the media is highlighted in Schmid, “This temporary presence of the terrorist then perpetuates itself through media coverage, rumors and speculation and gains a longevity it could not generate by itself” (2010, pg. 210).

Providing a stage for terrorists becomes a concern and was debated after the Virginia Tech shooting when the shooter mailed his manifesto to a media outlet. So, how should organizations fill the lag time before the full information about a mass shooting can be reported? What is too graphic to post when the availability of cell phone video and
photography is so wide spread? How do journalists navigate the idea of “minimize harm”? This research hopes to fill that void. What constitutes minimizing harm and what heuristic could be laid out to allow students to continue to create this ethical hexis, which according to Rosalind Hursthouse, as quoted by Duffy, is defined as “the concept of something that makes its possessor good; a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent, or admirable person who acts and reacts well, rightly” (2017, p. 231). To address this question, its key terms must first be defined and the research question carefully stated.

**Terms**

**Coverage.** When addressing news coverage, several elements will be focused on in this research. In coverage for a news story, journalists apply multiple professional conventions, including the frame of the story or the overall category the story would fall into, the sources used to gather information about the event, the selected information that is shared in the story, and the overall tone/attitude based on the above selections (McCluskey, 2017). Coverage of a school shooting would first involve including the event in the final publication disseminated to the public, or the information that is disseminated to the readers through the publication. Then coverage would include the topics the story or stories address. For example, coverage of a mass shooting could be an article on the unfolding events including basic facts such as who did the shooting, who was killed, where and when the shooting occurred, and why it happened. Coverage might provide an in-depth article on information known about the shooter, one on legislation in the state involving gun control, or an article discussing the victims, etc. Finally, coverage also includes the overall information in each story about the event. Coverage is not a
single story in itself. Each choice in the process creates the coverage of an event, and it is not a single piece in itself. Leaving out one of the stories creates an incomplete picture of how a publication covered a crisis.

**Media.** For this dissertation the media being analyzed will consist of local or regional newspapers that would be easily accessible for the victims and community where the shootings occurred. When discussing media, the term will encompass professional print, broadcast, and radio outlets that employ reporters and pay them for their work.

**Society/Public.** This term will encompass the people who consume news through watching, listening, or reading about the crisis events as they occur.

**Virtue Ethics.** Using Duffy’s definition, “the concept of something that makes its possessor good; a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent, or admirable person who acts and reacts well, rightly” (2017, p. 231).

**Ethics of Care.** The theory that all humans need their basic needs to be covered and want to take care of the basic needs of others (Mol, 2008; Colton, Holmes, & Walwema, 2017).

**Framing/Frame Theory.** The idea that journalists select how they cover an event based on their perceptions of cultural and their professional expectations (Shahin, 2016). As an example, when a major news event occurs there are typically several articles run in a newspaper with information on the event. With a mass shooting there could be articles with information on the timeline of the event, an article covering who the victims were, one covering the experience of the survivors, and one that discusses the history of the
shooter. All provide different information to the reader so the audience can get a full view of the event. The same story can also be covered with different information to be published in different sections of the newspaper. For example, the Wells Fargo scandal that came to light in 2016 was covered as a news story with a frame of how the company was responding to allegations, and also in the business section with advice on what would happen to the company’s stocks and how it would affect banking.

One caution in selecting frames as highlighted by Chyi and McCombs, is to be aware of any intentional or unintentional bias so the journalist is reflecting frames that are salient to the event and audience, and not what the newspaper deems beneficial (2004). “[Framing means to] select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1994, pg. 55v). The frames selected by editors and journalists inform the knowledge the public has on an event.

**Research Question**

In what ways have newspapers covered crisis events such as mass shootings, and is there a way that journalists can report on crisis events to ethically address the needs of the audience while still reporting on all the necessary information the public needs about the event?

**Study’s Scope**

To address my overarching research question, the coverage from regional publications of three mass school shooting event in the weeks following these shootings
was examined using frame analysis as the primary method. Articles were collected from the Denver Post from April 21 through May 5, 1999, to analyze coverage of the Columbine High School shooting. Articles were collected from the Washington Post from April 17 through 30, 2007 to analyze coverage of the Virginia Tech University shooting. Articles were collected from the Miami Herald from Feb. 15 through 29, 2018 to analyze the Parkland area Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. Through analyzing each newspaper’s selection of story topics, photographs, and infographics I created codes that addressed each area of coverage and then used those topics to address the areas to be considered by journalists when covering crisis events. The coded topics were used to develop a heuristic for teaching emerging journalists to evaluate the possible ethical considerations that can be present in a crisis. The coverage was assessed to create a heuristic or set of criteria for assessing journalists’ use if horror is a rhetorical construct.

**The Study’s Purpose**

The heuristic will be created by considering rhetoric and empathy with suggestions for encouraging ethically balanced coverage.

Frame analysis, defined as the elements journalists decide to include in an article (Chyi & McCombs, 2004), was used to conduct a rhetorical analysis. This dissertation critically addresses some of the differences that occur in the stories the media share and perhaps why and when reporters use horror as a rhetorical device, and if they do so ethically. This research moves to conduct a frame analysis of the coverage in major news organizations’ print articles, of school shootings. McCluskey (2017) began this work by using framing analysis to trace the ways in which newspapers focus coverage on
particular aspects of the shooting, particularly a shooter’s motives. This project will take
the research he began one step further by looking at the connections between the stories,
the images and infographics selected, and the rhetorical decisions that reporters and
editors made when it comes to content selections of images, descriptions, etc. Frame
analysis will organize articles into coverage categories to see the topics addressed in
coverage, and how the placement and selection of stories by reporters may highlight the
violence Cavararo (2009) and Ardent (1970) say people are obsessed with.

In particular this dissertation will apply a heuristic focused on the ethics of care to
help students create a hexis of empathy in the coverage of crisis events. The heuristic is
not meant to “cure” bias or unethical coverage, but serve as a means to encourage
students to look at the rhetoric involved in covering a crisis situation.

This heuristic that can be used in the classroom to assist students, and future
journalists, in being able to identify the opportunities for the ethical decisions (with a
focus on care ethics) they are making when choosing the frame of their story and all the
implications that frame may have on the audience. Virtue ethics are taught through the
practice and creation of a habit, or hexis, (Duffy, 2017) and so the more exposure
students have to this heuristic based on the virtue of empathy hopefully the more likely
they are to carefully consider the rhetorical means they have available when faced with
crisis situations. By applying the heuristic to the coverage of mass school shootings we
can not only test its efficiency but also provide an example, or narrative, for students of
how to act in these crisis situations, which Sam Dragga (1997) shows is of importance
when teaching ethics. While the main audience for this research is journalism educators a
second audience could also be professional journalism organizations, those in the field, or
the people who work for media corporations are also an important audience. Dragga’s
(1997) research on technical communicators in the field shows that they make ethical
decisions mostly based on colleagues’ input and so circulating this theory of ethical
decision making among professionals would also be helpful to changing how we cover
crisis.

**Chapter Outline**

In chapter two the literature review draws connections between Cavarero’s
horrorism and mass school shootings to address why these events are perhaps so
egregious for us to witness through the media. Chapter two also addresses the definition
and use of virtue ethics to make suggestions for journalists to consider how they cover
crisis events. Chapter three addresses the methods of collecting data from the Library of
Congress to obtain full microfilm copies of the newspapers local to the crisis event.
Codes were created around the variety of frames presented in the articles and the image
selection of the paper. Chapter four is an overview of the cases and explains the final
outcome of the data analysis of frames. It looks at the patterns discovered through the
process and how this can inform the heuristic. Chapter five is the final recommended
heuristic to assist in teaching students how to ethically cover crisis events. It also looks at
how students can apply this research to their field. There are also ideas for further use of
the heuristic for multiple crisis events, and ways to consider the future of the media.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

To analyze how these crisis events can be covered ethically I will first look at the literature in rhetoric which points to how journalists could be creating harm for their readers through the language they use by looking at the rhetoric of violence and Cavarero’s idea of Horrorism. I will then present what the current professional standards are for the field of journalism. Building from the Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics I focus on their recommendation of do no harm, and grows into Aristotle’s idea of the Golden Mean and into the more narrow thinking done by Mols and Colton and Homes of creating an ethic of care that could be used by journalists.

Rhetoric of Violence

Horrorism To illustrate the depth of impact coverage of crisis events can have on readers I apply Cavarero’s arguments in her book Horrorism. Cavarero (2009) creates the basis for her argument by addressing vulnerability, and to do this she draws from theories by Hannah Arendt and Judith Butler. Arendt was a political philosopher born to a German Jewish family who suffered the atrocities of the Nazis. After World War II she covered the trial of German officer Adolf Eichmann for the New York Times, and wrote extensively about totalitarianism (Kohn, 2001). Arendt (1970) states that as humans we are each unique and because of this uniqueness we are vulnerable to being harmed when we share that uniqueness with other humans. Butler’s (2004) approach on vulnerability comes from her writings on grief and mourning. She argues that in order to experience grief we must make ourselves vulnerable to others, which we do in the mere fact that we
are human and cannot help but form an attachment to other people. By building on Butler’s ideas Cavarero (2009) continues to address that the more dependent we are on others the more vulnerable we become, and the more easily we are exposed to the possibility of being wounded. This occurs because we are more exposed to the people we are dependent on. Cavarero (2009) relates this to the infant who is cared for by the mother. Mother is the only person the infant can trust because they are completely dependent on their mother and without her care they would die. She further explains the term vulnerable as a person who is “unilaterally exposed to wounds against which he cannot defend himself” (Cavarero, 2009, p. 31). With these pieces in place, defenseless people are vulnerable to wounding.

The next level Cavarero brings to this argument is horror. Horror occurs when wounding happens to someone who is defenseless, or when the wounding is done by a person who should be taking care of the person. For an example as to how this pertains to school shootings, the children in schools are vulnerable because they cannot defend themselves against weapons. In addition, children are sent to school where they should be cared for as though the school is a surrogate parent, and so this intensifies the horror. To create horror there is a necessary face-to-face element in which there is a level of eye contact the assailant must make with the person before they obliterate them, recognizing that they are a human individual that is becoming another faceless being as part of the unrecognizable group labeled victim and vulnerable (Cavarero, 2009). She details that, “The violence of horror always hits someone, striking each human victim separately, and that the victims of massacres are always singular creatures” (Cavarero, 2009, p. 19) who
then become part of an unidentifiable whole, the victims. To lessen this horror it becomes one of the jobs of the reporters to put names and identities back onto the victims and not add to the striping of faces by lumping victims together. Brooke reported in the April 21, 1999 edition of the New York Times, “‘Everyone around me got shot and I begged him for 10 minutes not to shoot me,’ one young woman, who was not identified, said tonight in an interview broadcast on the Cable News Network. ‘And he just put the gun in my face and started laughing and saying it was all because people were mean to him last year’” (Sec. A, p. 1, col. 6). The imagery created in the quote reiterates this idea of removing the victim’s identity, someone not involved in the teasing was used to serve as victim for them, putting the gun in her face and wanting to remove the identifying features all serve to increase the level of horror experienced by readers through the quote this young woman gave. Through analyzing the language, the reporter uses in the story we see this statement as an example of the horrorism Cavarero (2009) discusses in her theory. As I will address later in applying Aristotle’s Golden Mean, there is a balancing act that must be applied when looking at these articles. While the shooter places the girl into a faceless category the reporter gives her a voice, and shows the reader the horror applied to the crisis by the perpetrator.

**Vulnerability** In Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* she addresses vulnerability in the manner that Cavarero references in *Horrorism*. Butler (2004) says, “That we can be injured, that others can be injured, that we are subject to death at the whim of another, are all reasons for both fear and grief” (p. XII). This ability to be injured makes one vulnerable as humans and open to the ability to be wounded, and thus to experience
Cavarero’s horror. Butler (2004) expands on this idea in that there is also the consideration of whose voice counts when it comes to speaking out in the public, and says that while we are all human some views are considered more “reasonable” (p. 1). The voices that are particularly loud are the media. Butler (2004), “the media function as ‘public voices’ that operate at a distance from their constituency, that…report the ‘voice’ of the government for us” (p. 1). The media gets to decide what voices are valued because of what they cover in the publication, since they make the decision and select the coverage they determine whose view is validated. But with the large variety of news sources created by having access to the internet the reader receives choice in what media outlet they decide to listen to. Even with options there is always a chance that some part of the story will never get told.

From defining voices, she begins to discuss who counts as human and what it means to be vulnerable. She says, “Each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies…Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (Butler, 2004, p. 20). Just by the virtue of being people we are vulnerable and exposed to the possibility of violence, but our vulnerability also seems to fall on a scale depending on how valued we are by the public in which we are situated. Butler (2004) points out that by being women, or minorities, we are more susceptible to violence, minorities are “subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not its realization” (p. 20). This is in part because of how the world views women and minorities, when the message is constantly reiterated that these
groups are less that becomes how they are viewed. By being less they then become more vulnerable to violence. By this definition children fall into the category of being more vulnerable, as American society does not grant full rights as adults until the age of 18. So, because children are more vulnerable based on Cavarero’s (2009) idea that they still need protection from parents, and as Butler (2004) says they have no voice in the public as they cannot vote and do not participate in the media. When the vulnerable are murdered by their peers at shocking numbers these acts fit Cavarero’s definition of horror.

Butler (2004) also discusses violence in terms of vulnerability, a vulnerability that we all live with every day. She says, “Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged” (Butler, 2004, p. 29). We live in a world with this exposure to each other because we rely on one another as part of a community. Butler (2004) argues this vulnerability to one another is another way at looking at community. Butler (2004) not only helps to define vulnerability but also addresses the role of the press in this creation. As they make selections on story topics, interview sources, and select images, they are curating a view of the world that everyone else is exposed to. While readers have the agency to be able to read or ignore publications, the press does have the opportunity to make lives valuable or not with their selections, and they use this power to sculpt our public.

Cavarero’s hexis of care plays an important balance in the consideration of the virtue of empathy for journalists. As journalists have a duty to tell the truth they should
also consider the responsibility they have to care for their audience and the victims involved in a crisis event. The need for care toward vulnerable populations is laid out carefully in Cavarero’s book *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (2009). According to Colton and Holmes “Cavarero’s vulnerability and ethics of care also link to Aristotle through hexis of empathy and reciprocity. We see the recognition of these ethical positions as first steps in developing a hexis of care” (2018, p. 83). Using this idea of who is vulnerable and what constitutes horror can be a beginning step in evaluating the content of crisis events coverage to consider how to build the virtue of empathy toward the audience and victims.

**Ethics in Journalism**

Considering Arendt’s argument that the media can provide a voice for terrorists, what responsibilities do reporters have to the public to report or not report details of the event that may create what Cavarero (2011) calls a vulnerability within the public? The Society of Professional Journalists offers the code of ethics: seek the truth, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent (2014), but when applied against virtue ethics the advice to minimize harm in particular can be taken a step further. What exactly does it mean to minimize harm and for whom? This answer will of course change depending on the audience and the story topic, but journalists should have a framework in place when covering a crisis for evaluating the presence of harm and who is being affected by their writing. This is where virtue ethics can come into the evaluative process. While the practice of teaching virtue is a complex task, several rhetoricians agree that through the analysis of complex cases or exemplars people can be guided
through the process of evaluating the situation to respond virtuously (Duffy, Gallagher, Gage 2018).

**Ethical Code** While the virtues are not a set of rules, the profession of journalism does have its own set of ethical codes. For the purpose of this dissertation I am defining ethical code as a set of rules created by a governing organization. While virtue is an individual’s determination of how they participate in the field of journalism, the ethical code is how the field of journalism expects the individual to behave as a journalist. There is gray area between the ethical code of the profession and the virtues of the journalist where choices can be made as to content and coverage. As MacIntyre (2007) said, there is no explicit shared moral language across all news organizations and so we must return to our communities, and journalism has set up several different codes. There is of course the code of ethics from SPJ that’s already been addressed with the particular focus on minimizing harm but within the professional group’s recommendations comes the actual practice of not only what the media outlets do but what journalism students are taught. In the text *Journalism Ethics*, revised by Fred Brown, several case studies are offered that look at what actual newspapers do to address ethical concerns. Of the five journalism ethical codes they sample from only one addresses the idea of graphic details and the repercussions of covering these details. Reuters’ *Handbook of Journalism* says,

We have an obligation to convey the reality of what we report accurately, yet a duty to be aware that such material can cause distress, damage the dignity of the viewer or reader that a rational understanding of the facts is impaired. We do not sanitize violence…We should not however, publish graphic details and obscene
or blasphemous language gratuitously or with an intention to titillate or to shock.

There must be a valid news reason for running such material… (2011, p. 202). The use of graphic detail could cause psychological harm to victims reliving the event through the text and for family members of victims coming to terms with what their loved ones experienced. At the same time there is a good argument here for an application of Aristotle’s (1953) Golden Mean, which calls for finding the middle ground between too much graphic content and too little. If too little information is given to the public the lack of information could prevent the community from spotting future warning signs that a similar event may occur. Journalists need to find a way to report the truth of exactly what happened during a crisis without becoming the stage for terrorists to voice their manifesto.

Another aspect addressed with in the code of ethics is balance. Balance is important so the news can be covered with a careful eye to audience, and what can create harm to the victims, and viewers/readers. According to Brown (2011) the concept of minimizing harm is currently an important part of the journalism ethics code. He says, “‘Minimizing Harm’ means letting your humanity show through. Show a little compassion for the people who are affected by what you write…They live with the consequences of what you’ve written long after you’ve moved on to other stories” (p. 93). His discussion of ethics, and that of the SPJ, highlights the many grey areas that shade the coverage of news events. There are complex factors that go into the decision-making process, such as the scope of the newspaper, the audience, the type of story, crime and/or victim.
These codes also focus on the use of sources who are often the victims of a crime (particularly with the focus of this research), or the perpetrators of one. Brown says journalists should, “recognize the tenuous nature of the reporter-source relationship. The bottom line is a warning to keep a professional distance or to behave so honorably during the interview and the writing that sources are not deceived” (2011, p. 226). The use of sources is how journalists gather their information and is an important aspect of covering any story, but particularly those related to mass shootings. Sources are vulnerable because they are recent victims of violence and are vulnerable, or open to wounding as Cavarero states. There is a power dynamic at play that journalists should be aware of and not take advantage of by fully identifying the type of story being published, the information being sought, and that the person is in fact a reporter. The SPJ Code of Ethics says, “Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect” (Brown, 2011, p. 281). This idea ties firmly into virtue ethics. That is, reporters should ask themselves, who will you be if you make this decision, or what type of reporter do you want to be? Looking forward journalists should continue to consider the connection between virtue ethics and the coverage of news events.

**Virtue Ethics and the Ethics of Care**

To bring together Cavarero’s (2007) ideas on vulnerability and the Society of Professional Journalists’ code to minimize harm (2014) I am using the theory called the ethics of care. Colton, Holmes, and Walwema (2017) address how the theory of horrorism and Cavarero’s definition of vulnerability fit into the ethic of care. Care ethics is defined as finding moral value in the act of taking care of others without judgment,
with the sole purpose of completing practical acts to make life better for another (Mol, 2008; Colton, Holmes, and Walwema, 2017). For Cavarero (2007) because part of being human is being vulnerable to the wounding and care of others, and as stated before this juxtaposition of wounding and care is dependent on how vulnerable the person is and their value within society. The notion of wounding and caring “offers a set of fluid ratios to allow us to characterize the totality of relations of those affected by a given tactical action, and, in turn, to attribute ethical behavior which, in some cases, will involve wounding certain individuals to help ensure our collective ability to ensure an ethics of care for the most vulnerable” (Colton, Holmes, & Walwema, 2017, pg. 60). Journalist have to use this ethics of care to balance coverage in crisis events, or in a similar ethic standard they must find Aristotle’s (1953) Golden Mean, or finding a good balance between two extremes. This Golden Mean helps reporters to care for the vulnerable, and still report the necessary information.

Duffy provides some direction in how this balance can be achieved, “the practice of rhetorical virtues is based not on rules, because good writers know when to break rules, nor on the calculation of outcomes, because at times we must write without fear of consequences. The virtues offer instead a conception of ethics that is context-dependent, responsive to the kairotic moment, social in nature, and developed, according to Aristotle, through instruction, practice, and habit” (2015, p. 6). As Duffy addresses these rhetorical virtues must be addressed in the kairotic moment, or at the most opportune time, when students are trying to learn how to make decisions in the field when things are moving quickly. Teaching students that ethics and reporting in general are context-
dependent is an important part of teaching journalism and writing. They need to not only understand the process and consequences but also the importance of their overall decisions.

**Virtue** Katz ties this idea of ethics into the practice of technical writing. He says, Ethics, defined as human character manifested in behavior, is an important consideration in deliberative rhetoric. All deliberative rhetoric is concerned with decision and action. Technical writing, perhaps even more than other kinds of rhetorical discourse, always leads to action, and thus always impacts on human life…we need to consider technical writing based on deliberative rhetoric from the standpoint of both rhetoric and ethics (1992, p. 259-260).

This idea of an impact on human life is an important part for the writing done by journalists and so deliberative rhetoric should be an important part of the curriculum in journalism schools. If journalists are creating a call for action against something, such as gun violence, then they need to consider the ethical ramifications of their writing. What are they calling for through the use of their words and graphics they include and how can they do this in an ethical manner that takes into consideration all sides and viewpoints of the argument, and ultimately do they even need to consider all the viewpoints. Their overall decisions must be weighed and considered when composing the text. Colton (2016) too addresses this topic through the look of wounding and caring that Cavarero provides, He says, “Acknowledging that perhaps both caring and wounding are taking place in my practicing of a heuristic of vulnerability, I should attempt to justify those actions ethically” (Colton, 2016, p. 23). In the same article Colton expresses that he is
creating a heuristic not to set up a course of action or flow chart students must take in creating digital compositions, but as a “lens to generate ethical questions of relationality” (2016, p. 2). Again, having students practice this idea of being able to justify their actions ethically shows a need for a heuristic to help them to consider the rhetorical decisions they are making when reporting; it is not a method for telling them what they must do in every case as that is impossible.

The interrelation between violence and rhetoric is a dynamic relationship that must be addressed by journalists. An important thought that should cross the reporter’s mind is how is the portrayal of the argument going to increase and/or decrease the occurrence or perception of violence to the reader or viewer? Hunter says, “In one way rhetoric manages violence by substituting contestatory if not violent words for violent actions, but in another it addresses a root of violence, the fear of difference, by offering strategies for valuing things we don’t understand yet are becoming part of our lives. In another way, rhetoric instigates violence: impels people into the cycle of brutality that once started becomes self-justifying. This too has its own rhetoric” (2000, p. 3). Hunter looks at the ideas of a rhetoric of violence, rhetorical violence, violence and rhetoric, and violent rhetoric. (2000) She notes how each of these terms may be a slight change but mean very different things, suggesting that we must be careful of our word choice and how it portrays violence to the readers. Her mention of rhetoric instigating violence is perhaps the most central to my arguments, as professional writers there is an ethical responsibility to not provide rhetoric that instigates violence but that does accurately portray the crisis event that took place. We must acknowledge the rhetorical devices, or
methods of persuasion as Aristotle states, used in the writing and speaking that are used in news coverage, especially when that coverage will reach many people, some of whom were deeply harmed by the violent act being reported.

Drawing from Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 1953), John Duffy discusses virtue ethics as part of the rhetorical decision-making process. Duffy defines virtue ethics as a process in which “we raise those questions moral philosophers attach to the ethical: What kind of person do I want to be? How should I live my life? What does it mean to be a good person?” (2017, p. 230) Teaching students to take a step back amidst all the chaos and think through what Duffy calls the rhetorical virtues is one way to teach students the ethical repercussions of their writing. In *Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle (1953) says that these virtues will become ingrained in a person as they continue to use the virtue. For Duffy (2017), and as he points out, Aristotle, the ability to reason well means being able to step back and assess and then respond appropriately to the situation. For Aristotle the appropriate reaction was then one that took the middle path or selected the mean between vice and virtue (the Golden Mean), so this appropriate reaction is all part of the rhetorical decision-making process and the selection of the middle path is arguably one that isn’t always taken. Aristotle encourages one to work toward Eudaimonia, or the selection of these right actions that lead to our fulfillment and an overall happy life (Aristotle, 1999).

Duffy defines these rhetorical virtues as “the discursive practices of honesty, generosity, and other [virtues], that students and teachers of writing can find ‘principles for action,’ or rationales for making ethical decisions in the writing class” (2017, p. 231).
Through the practice of these rhetorical virtues we can create within students a reaction to respond, or act, in “the right way, at the right time, and in the right manner” (Duffy, 2017, p. 234). By reinforcing ethical standards, we can look at reporting methods to evaluate them, and allow students to respond to the rhetorical methods utilized by the writers and the repercussions of that work. Rhetorical virtues, such as utilizing an ethic of care, open up the idea asking students to think about whether their reporting is causing or minimizing harm. A reporter can consider this ethic of care when selecting the frame, they choose to use about a crisis event, such as focusing on a frame that highlights the type of weapon used in a mass shooting the reporter writes about victim resources. Another way would be selecting sources, making sure to include authorities and witnesses in an article and not just speaking to witnesses without the background information from authorities often have a larger picture of the events.

Colton and Holmes (2018) discuss the interplay of virtue ethics and the move toward postmodern ethics. Postmodern theorists are looking at the move toward considering the importance of recognizing how language is tied to daily life and the need for inclusivity in language as the underprivileged or undervalued population is often overlooked. This postmodern consideration of virtue ethics identifies the idea that virtues are not fixed and they waiver on the situation and society, the virtues are not law (Colton & Holmes, 2018).

**Framing** Another rhetorical device utilized by journalists is framing. The theory of frame analysis focuses on the idea that journalists select how they cover an event based on their perceptions of cultural and their professional expectations (Shahin, 2016).
As an example, Shahin (2016) examines two crisis events and using the language of the reporters and what information is not presented Shahin (2016) looks at coverage of the Boston bombings that is labeled as a terrorist event because the two Muslim men who carry out the violence are labeled as terrorists. In the explain frame, a frame that focuses on the event as a tragedy with no human actor as the culprit (Shahin, 2016), he discusses the blast at the West Fertilizer plant, in West, Texas, where an explosion killed 15 people but no human error or single person was blamed for the event. He analyzes the difference in coverage and how the language is used to describe the events, who is interviewed and what information is included depending on the frame each story falls into (Shahin, 2016). Ethically what are the repercussion of this for society, as journalists make the rhetorical decisions to label or not to label when they are framing the story? The unfortunate repercussions are the fact that journalists are in a position of power to sway public opinion. Based on the information presented people can make a decision on the topic, and if the decision is made on incorrect or incomplete information the public may never receive the full story.

Pan and Kosicki (1993) discussed the use of frames in journalism, and define framing as both a sociological and psychological conception. They say sociologically “Frame Analysis maintains that we all actively classify, organize, and interpret our life experiences to make sense of them” (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 56), and Gamson and Modigliani (1987) identified frames as a “central organizing idea or story linen that provides meaning” (p. 56). On the psychological side, “framing is viewed as placing information in a unique context” (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 57). Ultimately, frames are
used by people to organize information in their minds so they can process it. Journalists use the same techniques in their coverage of an event by organizing the story along multiple topics about a single event. Based on my previous content analysis, frames of the shooting at Virginia Tech included informational stories providing basic details such as:

- Who was killed
- What the timeline was
- The experiences of the shooter prior to the event
- Stories from eye witnesses about what the experience of being in the shooting
- Motives or causes of the shooting
- Speculation on what could have been done differently by police
- Changes to the laws
- Changes to the school
- Changes to society to prevent the shooting

Framing analysis, according to Pan and Kosicki (1993), is somewhat similar to content analysis but it looks at the news stories specifically and acknowledges that they do not operate in a vacuum but have social constraints placed on them and are subject to the readers memory and interpretation of events.

Using Cavarero’s (2007) approach to care ethics by acknowledging the particular horror attached to violence against those most vulnerable to being wounded allows for journalists to examine how they approach the coverage of crisis events. By analyzing articles published in regional papers after crisis events of mass shootings this dissertation
looks at the steps which were historically taken, and applies the idea that we can protect the most vulnerable and improve coverage of the event by using care ethics. Creating a heuristic with care ethics at the center to encourage knowledge of the event and awareness of the shooters using terrorism as theater allows journalists to consider all the possible frames and balance the coverage to provide information in an unbiased manor and to protect the vulnerable.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS OF RESEARCH

Through narrowing down the questions I had on coverage of crisis events it became clear that there was not a set roadmap to processing the information available on school shooting crisis events, particularly when looking at them through the lens of virtue. After trying to look at the intricate details in each article about a variety of shootings it became clear that the field of journalism had not determined a set method for covering each crisis as the reporting was mandated based on the particulars of the event: one shooter, or two; suicide or capture of the shooter; number of victims and wounded; technology available to reporters and victims; possible motives of the perpetrator; the inadequacies of school security; and of course, the age of the victims. Based on the variety of factors that could be analyzed I selected to look at the bigger picture when it came to analyzing my data.

Design of Research

My methods are a rhetorical analysis of an archive of newspaper articles conducted through frame analysis. Frame or framing is one piece of the decision-making process used by reporters to create the picture, or rhetoric, of an event. Pan and Kosicki (1993) offer, “Framing analysis as an approach to analyzing news discourse mainly deals with how public discourse about public policy issues is constructed and negotiated” (p. 70). Frame analysis looks at the idea of journalists selecting the way in which they cover an event based on their perceptions of cultural and professional expectations (Shahin, 2016). Shahin (2016) quotes Entman saying “journalists ‘select some aspects of a
perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as
to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or
treatment recommendation” (p. 648). As an example, Shahin (2016) looks at two crisis
events that are covered in newspapers and builds evidence through use of the stories that
there are two frames used when covering crisis events, the blame frame or the explain
frame. The blame frame is used when an event can be pinned on a particular person or
entity. For example, the blame frame was used for the men who executed the Boston
Marathon bombing in 2013. They were seen as “other” and terrorists. The explain frame
is often used when there is not an evil entity to place blame on, such as natural disasters.
It is important to note that the same event or crisis can be covered in multiple sections of
the newspaper using different frames, as all of the case study shootings were. Articles ran
as news on the front page covering the facts of the event and developments in the police
cases, regional news sections covered victim funerals and memorials; sports sections
covered sport teams’ reactions to the event.

Like Shahin, I will use frame analysis to organize the stories by coverage and
determine not only the number of different frames used and how they were used but also
if the frame changes over time during the course of one event and over the years as
different shootings are covered. Based on my previously conducted content analysis of a
small selection of articles from the Journal Storage (JSTOR) database, frames of the
shooting at Virginia Tech included informational, stories providing basic details as to
who was killed and what the timeline was, experience, stories from eye witnesses about
the experience of being in the shooting, and causes, speculation on what could have been
done differently by police, legislators, the school, or society to prevent the shooting.

While framing is part of the rhetoric analyzed in this study, I will not focus on the public policy or political alone, but on how the dominant frame on mass shooting may influence the ethical decision making involved in the coverage of an event and readers’ understanding of why mass shootings occur and how they might be stopped.

**Instrumentation**

Using frame analysis, I will analyze the headlines and first few sentences of each article to obtain a category for the frame the reporter selected as they covered the event. Using this form of critical rhetoric, the research will look at images or infographics used in articles, headlines and ledes, that is the opening paragraphs of each story. This close look at a set of articles and corresponding content will be used to discuss the events in each of the three publications in the two weeks following each crisis. In the context of this project frame analysis will be used to look at the relationship of articles published in the same newspaper and see how the publications frame the events overall, addressing how this coverage applies to Cavarero’s horrorism theory, in how journalists may add to the wounding and/or care of the victims and the community, and looking at Aristotle’s Golden Mean to balance the coverage.

**Case Studies**

To create a heuristic, or set of guiding questions that assists journalists in reflecting on ethics, I examine three case studies of mass school shootings. School shootings create a specific case of Caveraro’s (2009) view of horrorism because the victims are peers and children who require extra care because they are particularly
vulnerable, and school can be seen as an extension of Caveraro’s view of the 
mother/womb (2009) as it is a place where they are meant to be cared for and safe.

The three school shootings selected mark specific events that stood out in 
American culture as turning points because of the coverage, number of wounded, or 
availability of technology. Columbine is the first case analyzed, a shooting which 
ocurred on April 20, 1999. This case was selected because, according to The Violence 
Project (2021), the occurrences of mass school shootings noticeably become more 
frequent after the Columbine shootings. The shooting is also often cited by future mass 
school shooting perpetrators in writings, or videos. Two students killed 13 people and 
wounded 23 before killing themselves (Denver Post, April 22, 1999). Reporter and author 
Dave Cullen recounts in his book written 11 years after the shooting how wrong the early 
reports of the event were because of the mad dash the media made to try to release the 
story first (2010). According to the Washington Post (Contrera, 2019) this shooting was 
the impetus for several changes to police trainings for active shooters and changes to 
school security. The second case study is Virginia Tech, which occurred on April 16, 
2007. One shooter killed 32 and injured 23 people in two locations on campus before 
killing himself (Washington Post, April 17, 2007). According to Peterson and Densley 
(2021) as of March 2021 this is still the deadliest school shooting in American history. It 
also occurred at a time when students were beginning to utilize technology such as social 
media and cell phones. (Washington Post, April 17, 2007) The final case study will be 
Parkland, where one shooter killed 17 and injured 17 people on Feb. 14, 2018 (Miami 
Herald, Feb 15, 2018). During this event, the students were able to share images and
information from inside the building because of the availability of technology. They were also able to interact with local and national leaders through social media to change how their story was told (Miami Herald, Feb 15-17, 2018).

**Sampling**

The sample of articles that will be used to conduct the frame analysis will come from regional newspapers that covered each event. These are The Denver Post for analysis of the Columbine shooting and articles from April 20-May 4, 1999, the two weeks following the event. This created a corpus of about 300 articles about the event to analyze. Articles from the Washington Post April 17-May 1, 2007 were analyzed for the Virginia Tech shooting, resulting in about 200 articles. Finally articles from the Miami Herald Feb. 14-28, 2018 were analyzed for the Parkland shooting, also resulting in about 200 articles. Full page screen captures were taken from the microfilm collection available at the Library of Congress collected over four trips during the months of October-December 2019. These images were saved as PDF files onto a thumb drive and analyzed from October 2019-May 2020. The newspapers contained coverage of the shooting from the day of each shooting. The three newspapers were selected as the largest city paper that was closest to each event.

**Analysis of Case Studies**

The analysis included a close reading of the corpus of material and coding looks for the following:

1. What is the frame of each story- what is the general topic?
   a. Factual (timeline of events, facts about the perpetrator)
   b. Personal interest (heroes, victim profiles)
c. Opinion pieces (including responses from the community)
d. Legislative changes (safety in schools, gun control, mental health)
e. Societal blame (video games, violent movies, etc.)

2. Where coverage appears in the newspaper- what sections and what pages?
3. Images- what graphics are included with stories, what photos, do they show
   blood and gore, images of the shooters, interactive graphics?
4. Headlines- do they include main facts from the story, are they “click bait” and
   highlight gore or shocking information?
5. Efficacy- is any information included to help the public prevent what has
   happened or protect themselves during an event?
   a. Mental health help
   b. Gun control
   c. Safety standards in schools
   d. Warning signs

To begin the coding, I sat with PDFs of each page and read through the articles
and headlines. Starting with April 21, 1999, of the Denver Post page 1A shows a large
headline under the masthead that takes up one third of the page, High School Massacre.
The images on the page tie into the article, a girl and her father hugging and crying,
students running from the building with their hands on their head, and a map of the
school and surrounding fields. There is a short story that continues on 15A and a bulleted
infographic that highlights the coverage of the story contained in other sections of the
paper. Since the A section of a paper is typically reserved for news stories one can
assume this story focuses on a news aspect, of which there are several frames the paper
can take. This particular story focuses on the facts of the event, offering a timeline of
when everything happened, numbers dead and injured, statements from the police, and
statements from student witnesses. I coded the article and the photos included as an event overview frame, a frame that provided the facts of the event that occurred. The next page that included coverage on the shooting was on page 10A and included only an article, “Angry Constituents Target Legislature’s Gun Debate.” At the time of the shooting the Colorado state government was debating gun laws, and so legislators received numerous emails and phone calls after the shooting about changes that should or should not be made to gun laws. The article highlights the opinions of local legislators on both sides of the aisle about gun control, and was coded as a gun control article. Coverage on the first day included articles about what other local schools were doing to protect students, and so coded as school security; stories and responses posted on message boards online in a time when AOL was a main means of internet communication which were coded as community response; statements made by U.S. President William Clinton were coded as national response. There were also several stories coded as personal experience in which victims discussed with reporters what they experienced in the school during the shooting.

This process was repeated for each of the events and the codes used were streamlined. I started coding by reading through the articles and recording the following information on a spreadsheet-

- Headline
- Date
- Frame- my initial reaction of the angle of the story
- Section
- Images
After the initial label of the frame I went back and tried to group the articles under similar topics, what umbrellas could I use to narrow how I was defining these frames. The purpose for this was to determine if there was a script, or established format, which Veil (2012) suggested may exist for crisis news. I tried to narrow these topics down as much as reasonably possible. I identified 14 different frames, some of which were used in one shooting and not in the others, and some that carried across all three. Each shooting coverage had victim and shooter profiles, or information on the people involved usually in the form of funeral coverage or exploration of motives in the case of the shooters. Personal experiences were usually included in the coverage, or what the victims of the event went through during the shooting, as was event overview, or the facts of the event. Gun control, community response, political response, and school response were frequently covered. That is, how the government or politicians responded with prayers or changes to the law, memorials the community set up, politicians making statements, school safety and changes that were put in place to protect students. Police response was also discussed in each event, and focused on the errors the police made in each case.

Some frames changed based on the shooting and the events surrounding the crisis. For Columbine there were a number of articles on societal blame, a focus on violent movies and video games, “Emo” culture, and the response of parents and educators to the threat posed by the shooters. “Emo” culture refers to fans of emotional hardcore music, a subgenre of punk music, who dressed in black, wore heavy makeup, etc. In the Virginia Tech shooting, there were many articles focused on mental health, because of the known
mental health problems of the shooter. Finally, in the Parkland coverage, articles focused on activism because of the response students had after the shooting to protest at the state capital and appear in rallies on national television. Narrowing down the frames allowed the analysis to look at the similarities in the coverage and where the coverage varied from past events.

By extracting each of these frames from the stories, I can determine the difference in coverage between sets of publications over the course of decades, and even the variety of articles in the same publication. The articles can be compared along with the types of frames each publication uses, if perhaps one avoids a certain subject or frame altogether and how their use of images and graphics vary. Veil (2012) indicates that journalists select their coverage based on several factors, mentioned above, that include relationships with sources such as the media relations teams or public officials, internal and external forces like the public’s expectations of what a disaster story would include, and the expectations of publishers, advertisers, and editors. Looking at the frames based on Veil’s (2012) suggestion of coverage influence helped me make comparisons between the publications in this study which pointed out where certain publications took advantage of the public or publications power over the public to draw in readers/viewers by including more violence in the publication. Matching similar stories highlighted the frame, so as to determine if one used more violent details.
CHAPTER FOUR: FRAMES IDENTIFIED

This section looks at the details of three mass school shootings to create and analyze a heuristic to assist reporters in creating an ethics of care when covering crisis events. I used frame theory to analyze the topics regional newspapers selected in the two weeks following a mass school shooting event, and see if any topics were missed or could have been adjusted to consider the horror created for the victims while reading the coverage. Stepping through the details of the event helps to highlight the differences in each and why the frames can vary or stay the same. The three cases I used were Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Parkland, each selected because they changed something in the coverage of events. The Columbine high school shooting in 1999 was really the turning point in mass school shootings, while some shootings had occurred in the past after Columbine mass school shootings became more frequent. The shooting was committed by two senior students who had grown up in the community. The Virginia Tech 2007 shooting was selected because of the number of victims, it is still the deadliest school shooting and one of the first where students and the media had access to cell phones and social media. Videos and photos also appeared from student cell phones in the days after the event. The shooting was committed by one gunman in two separate locations, and was carefully planned to include using the media to disperse his manifesto. Finally, the 2018 Parkland was selected because of the extensive access the media had

1 Throughout the writing of this dissertation I made the decision to not refer to any of the shooters by name in order to follow the reporting standards I mention, and not give the perpetrator any recognition for their crimes.
social media posts shared by victims that included images and videos of what it was like in the building. Students also used their platforms after the event to advocate for gun control and other school safety laws. After discussion of the details I discuss the frames that were presented by the local coverage of each event, comparing them to the past events and how those frames were altered based on the facts of the event.

**Columbine High School**

On April 20, 1999, at 11:19 a.m. during “A” lunch, two males approached Columbine High School from the parking lot armed with an Intractec TEC-DC9 9mm semiautomatic handgun, a Hi-Point 9mm carbine rifle, and two sawed off barrel shotguns. They also had 8 pipe bombs and CO2 bombs, and had placed two propane tank bombs in the cafeteria. The shooters were seniors at the high school from white middle class families in Littleton, Colorado (Cullen, 2009).

The propane bombs were supposed to ignite at 11:17 a.m. during the peak of the school’s “A” lunch but failed to do so. The boys moved from their location in the parking lot at 11:19 a.m. to a set of stairs on the outside of the school building so they could take aim at their fellow students who were enjoying lunch outside. At the top of the stairs they managed to shoot five students and release 50 rounds in five minutes. As soon as people in the building became aware of the shooting, students and faculty began to vacate the building or lock themselves in class rooms. Not everyone was immediately aware of the threat though. At 11:24 the shooters moved inside toward the cafeteria to inspect the bombs while continuing their shooting spree. They moved up the staircase in the cafeteria and ended their attack in the library, where first responders and students reported the
worst carnage. At 12:08 the two shooters took their lives in the library after killing 12 students and 1 teacher, and injuring 23 (Cullen, 2009).

While the shooting lasted 49 minutes it took police until 1:15 p.m. to enter the building, almost two hours after the shooting began. The police had an original assumption they were dealing with a hostage situation although there was never any contact made by the shooters with police. The SWAT team released the first set of students from the building two and a half hours after the shooting started at 2:47 p.m., although some of the student body had already escaped during the chaos of the shooting. It wasn’t until 3:15 p.m., three hours after the shooting, that officers discovered the shooters dead in the library. Even after that, some groups of students remained in the building for nearly five hours after the shooting because police were unsure of how many shooters were actually involved (Cullen, 2009).

The event was heavily covered by the media. Television journalists from a local station were on air 28 minutes after the start of the shooting, and the story made national television news 35 minutes after the shooting began. Police were called at 11:28 a.m. and CNN aired the story at 11:54 a.m. Reporters interviewed students as they left the school building and tried to find their families, interviewing students who still had friends’ blood on their clothes, trying to speak with students who were loaded on to buses that transported them to the local public library and elementary school where parents were waiting for information about their children. Students shared the rumors they had heard throughout the school building while they hid. The intense media coverage arose because in 1999 mass school shootings were still a rare situation, unlike they are today. While a
few mass shootings in schools had occurred in the past there was nothing like this at a high school before. Media coverage was spurred because the event was first deemed a hostage situation (Cullen, 2009). There were long hours students where stuck inside the school building, and the school shooting became the deadliest mass school shooting, at that point in history (Berkowitz & Alcantara, 2020).

By using frame analysis, or looking at the overall theme or angle the reporter used in the story, I was able to code the Columbine articles into groups based on the reporter’s selected topic (frame). By doing this I analyzed the patterns that appeared in the coverage as shown in Table 4-1, such as: how often were certain frames used, when were they used, and were some frames the same across different events. I coded these articles into 23 different groups including the most frequently used- event overview, gun control, personal experience, political response, world response, community response, police response, activism, shooter profile, warning signs, copycat, mental health, mass shooting history, societal blame, warning signs, and motive. Through the analysis of the articles published in the Denver Post several frames were frequently repeated. Over the two weeks of coverage the number one frame discussed in articles was how the community responded to the shooting. Thirty-seven percent of the coverage focused on the events that occurred in the community surrounding the shooting. For example, The Denver Post reported on page 13A, April 21, “Doors were locked and security was pumped up at schools across the southern metropolitan area Tuesday as a reign of terror played out at Columbine High School.” Other articles that fell into this category included events that were cancelled in the wake of the shooting, blood and money donations, ceremonies that
were held, and the way the community mourned for the victims. The second most popular frame that appeared in the Post was both coverage of gun control and personal experiences of those who were victims during the event at thirteen percent of the articles of the event in the two-week time period. The articles covering personal experiences addressed what the students and teachers inside the building recalled of the events of the April 20. One article highlights the experience of a 17-year-old student who was injured. “He headed for the library to a crescendo of gunfire and explosions that marked the beginning of a bloody rampage” (The Denver Post, April 21, 1999, pg. 14A). As opposed to articles that laid out a timeline of what happened during the day and used sources like the law enforcement officials or government officials, these articles used quotes from those who lived through the event and what the shooting was like for them. Event overview articles included more facts, for example, “Two students, cloaked in black trench coats and armed with guns and bombs, opened fire Tuesday at Columbine High School, killing as many as 25 people and wounding at least 22 others in the worst school shooting in U.S. history” (The Denver Post, April 21, 1999, 1A). The gun control articles addressed hand guns pulled from local stores, an NRA conference postponed, how government officials responded to the event, and specifics on gun laws in the area. One article addressed how the state legislature quickly began to address state laws, “It didn’t take long for House Speaker Russell George to start getting messages Tuesday blaming the legislature’s gun debate for the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton” (The Denver Post, April 21, 1999, 10A). Several articles that fell into these frames included reference to the upcoming NRA convention that was to be held in Denver in the
following weeks. These articles were only used if they mentioned the Columbine shooting in conjunction with the conference and how the NRA responded to criticism.

Table 4-1. Frames about the shooting in the Denver Post on April 21-May 5, 1999.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Response</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Experience</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun Control</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal Blame</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim Profile</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooter Profile</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Overview</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Response</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall during the first two weeks following the Columbine shooting there were eight frames that were frequently used. The final five frames were societal blame, or blaming violent video games/movies and American culture for the event, at ten percent of coverage; victim profiles that showed who the victims were as people, at eight percent of the coverage; shooter profiles, who the shooters were, at seven percent of the coverage; and the last two both at six percent were the event overview, what happened, and how the school responded by fixing the building, where students would go, etc. The societal
blame articles showed up in a number of sections across the newspaper, but often as opinion pieces in the opinion section, the lifestyle/entertainment section, and even the sports section. For example, in section A, in a column labeled opinion, Chuck Green wrote, “For some reason, apparently, people like to kill. And we like to watch people get killed, in our living rooms on TV and in our movie theaters at the mall…But what is even worse than that is that we don’t seem to care” (The Denver Post, April 21, 1999, pg. 22A). A few of the articles in this category also wrote about goth culture, or the trend of some students to listen to hard core music and dress all in black, and how the shooters fit into this category. The Post included pages of coverage highlighting the lives of all the victims including their names, pictures, and short blurbs about them as shown in Figure 4-1. These fell into the victim profile frame.
The final frame of shooter profile gave details of who the shooter was, what they did in the time leading up to the event, and perhaps warning signs the person exhibited or motives they made have had. For example, “Friends of [the shooters] said they were surprised the two turned violent, although they were aware both had learned how to build high-powered explosives” (The Denver Post, April 22, 1999, 10A). While giving the shooters some focus or infamy the articles also helped readers to understand why these events may have occurred.
I also analyzed data from the first day after the shooting, April 21, since the height of coverage and interest in the event is at its peak in the day after the event as victims and the world try to figure out what happened. As shown in Table 4-2, there was a wider variety in the types of frames during the first day of coverage, assuming that the Post would want to cover as many aspects of the event as possible. The most covered frame was personal experience (twenty-two percent), and the next most used was community response (nineteen percent), the same as for the coverage over the two weeks.

Why were these articles the focus of the paper? Based on the timeline of the shooting (Cullen, 2009) it appears that the information reporters were able to access quickly came from the victims who gathered in a park across from the school and/or were bussed to the local library and a local elementary school. Police were focused on the events occurring in the building, and their investigation lasted hours before they could clear the building (Cullen, 2009). The press was left with limited access to the police officials but with open access to the victims and other community members. This heavy coverage of personal experience and community response would reflect the accessibility of the sources.

Other frames that were available that day were media response, or how the media reacted to covering the shooting; school response- a critique as to how the school handled the shooting and releasing information to parents; event overview- a timeline of events and official statements from police as to what occurred; shooter profiles drawn from social media information, school and police records, and information from classmates; national response from politicians such as the president, and gun control. The articles involving records were fewer as they required source information from officials who
were harder to access and gain information from (Cullen, 2009). For example, one national response article called attention to President Bill Clinton’s response, “Clinton offered prayers to the students, parents and faculty of Columbine High but said he would make no extensive remarks until after officials were certain they had heard the last gunshots inside the school” (The Denver Post, April 21, 1999, 16A). The media response frame looks critically about the media response to the event. An article with this frame interviewed U.S. Rep. Tom Tancredo who represented the area and lived near the school. “‘They keep showing that kid coming out of that window. It makes me sick to my stomach,’ Tancredo said, watching the continuous cable news coverage” (The Denver Post, April 21, 1999, 10A). The Media response frame provides a good look into how the victims responded to the coverage of the event, and according to Tancredo, watching injured kids pulled from the building was upsetting. Patrick Ireland was the student pulled from the library window, and he did survive, although one father was able to identify his dead son, Daniel Rohrbough, from a Pulitzer Prize winning photo published by Rocky Mountain News (Cullen, 2009).

The final frames present on the first day were not as frequent later. These frames provided self-efficacy steps for readers as shown in Figure 4-2. The articles focused on victim mental health and how to support students who had lived through the experience.
Another group of articles in this category focused on warning signs that could signify if other students may be planning to do something similar, and how society/adults/parents could prevent this from happening. One article ran the first day after the Columbine shooting with recommendations from Rob Clyman, director of the Kempe National Center for Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse. “Warning signs would include ‘adolescent property crimes, or violent crimes against people on a smaller scale, less dramatic than what we are seeing today…These (gunman) may have had trouble in
school” (The Denver Post, 1999, 18A). A few more of these types of articles appeared as more information became available about the shooters.

Table 4-2. Frames about the shooting in the Denver Post on April 21, 1999.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Experience</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Response</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Overview</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Response</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim Mental Health</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Response</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooter Profile</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warning Signs</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over the three case studies different features of each may have influenced how the event was covered by the media. One feature of the Columbine case that influenced coverage was easy accessibility to unaccompanied minors who waited for transportation back to their families at the park. This accessibility led to victims who may have been in shock and who had just experienced a traumatic event allowed for speculation as stories were shared with the media. Phrases such as “I heard” or “a friend said” led to

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2 As of 2021 we know that these warning signs are not a failsafe as not every shooter presents them and even if they do and the instance is reported to officials there isn’t always a way to stop the perpetrator (Gun Violence Archive, 2021; Brooke, 2020; Christensen, 2017).
misinformation and rumors such as the Trench Coat Mafia, a club the shooters were allegedly a part of that never actually existed. Another detail that affected coverage was length of time it took for police to clear the school building. It took hours to empty the building and figure out what had happened, again leading to information coming from students and not from the police. Other smaller details, such as having two shooters, one of the largest shootings that had occurred at that point, and bombs at the site, led to some changes in the frames. There were twice the number of shooter profiles, since there were two shooters. The bombs on site led to some confusion for the police (Cullen, 2009) as to whether this was a hostage situation, or a shooting. The event received extensive coverage because of the notoriety of the event; the death toll, the age of students, the location in middle class suburbia, and the unprecedented nature. The frames vary among the three case studies as the details vary and the times in which they occur are so different.

**Virginia Tech University**

On a cold, windy morning on April 16, 2007, a 23- year-old English major opened fire in a dorm common area on the Virginia Tech University classroom in Blacksburg, Virginia. The student was a quiet immigrant from South Korea who had lived most of his life in a middle-class neighborhood in Northern Virginia. Before the shootings he had been diagnosed with selective mutism in middle school and attended therapy, referred to University officials for cruel and jarring writings in his poetry class, hospitalized for suicidal thoughts, and reprimanded by police for harassing female classmates (Alvis-Banks & Mallory, 2007). Around 7 a.m. he left his dorm room and
entered the dormitory named West Ambler Johnston, located two buildings East of his
dorm. There he found his first victim waiting for her roommate in one of the common
areas on the fourth floor, and the shooter next killed the resident advisor when he came to
investigate the commotion. At 7:15 a.m. the first 911 call occurred and residents in the
building were placed on lockdown. Officials had no idea why the shooter selected West
Ambler Johnston or if he was looking for someone specific (Virginian-Pilot, 2007).
Campus police didn’t send an email to students about the shooting until 9:26 a.m.
because they believed the shooting was a lover’s quarrel and an isolated incident.
Between 7:15 and 9:45 a.m. the shooter disappeared, except for a stop at the post office
just off campus at 9 a.m. to mail a package full of his videos, writings, and photographs
to NBC News in New York (Virginian-Pilot, 2007). He eventually made his way across
campus to Norris Hall, a half-mile from Ambler Johnston, where classes were being held.
Around 9:45 a.m., just after classes began, he wrapped chains around the main door of
Norris Hall to lock the doors. Officials believed he had practiced this about a week before
when they found the doors locked in the same manner. He climbed to the second floor of
the building and according to the victims, he moved methodically between rooms 207,
206, 204, and 211, entering each multiple times. Students and instructors in the rooms hid
under desks and behind tables, barricaded the doors, and some jumped from the windows
(Virginian-Pilot, 2007). The outdated design of the classroom meant doors didn’t lock,
halls were narrow, and the classrooms were long and narrow filled with lecture podium,
large heavy tables, and chairs attached to desks.
The first 911 call for the shooting at Norris Hall came in at 9:45 a.m., and the shooting lasted a total of nine minutes and finished with the shooter ending his life as police entered the building. In those nine minutes he killed thirty people; a total of thirty-two people died on campus that day. After the 911 call, the University emailed students again at 9:50 and at 10:16 a.m. to alert students to shelter in place. Information was released to the public with preliminary numbers of injured and killed at noon and at a press conference at 8 p.m. police said they had identified the shooter although his name wasn’t released until the next day (Virginian-Pilot, 2007). During that time police went through the process of eliminating suspects and determining the link between the shooting in the dorm and the one at Norris Hall. According to the shooter’s records (police, school, and medical) he had a history of mental illness, although his diagnosis of selective mutism and depression do not typically lead an individual to commit mass murder (Hacker, 2007). His records also showed that many of his writings were found disturbing; in particular instructor and renowned poet Nikki Giovanni had asked for him to be removed from her course after a number of poems he had written upset her and his classmates (Hacker, 2007). He also had a run in with the police when a female student reported him for following her around and making her feel uncomfortable; shortly after this event his roommates sought help for him threatening suicide. At that point he was admitted to the hospital but not detained (Hacker, 2007). Despite all of these warning signs he was still able to plan the attack months in advance. He purchased both firearms at local stores, along with ammunition, renting vehicles to make practice runs and film his manifesto. He also rented a hotel room where his manifesto was filmed, and visited
firing ranges to practice shooting (Hacker, 2007). While the details of the shooting are different from those that occurred at Columbine the shooter was reportedly obsessed with the Columbine shootings and mentions them in his manifesto, as well as in conversations with his peers.

Over the first two weeks of coverage in The Washington Post there were eight frames: community response, gun control, personal experience, political response, school response, shooter profile, media response, and victim profiles. As shown in Table 4-3, the articles in the Post that focused on school response represent nine percent of the coverage. These articles looked at the shooter’s ability to return to the rooms multiple times and the delayed relay of information sent out in the emails to the student body. The first article addressing the school response appeared the day after the shooting on the front page of the Post. It read, “A single question stood out yesterday at Virginia Tech: Would more students be alive if the university had stopped them from going to class after a shooting occurred in a campus dorm?” (The Washington Post, April 17, 2007, pg. A1).

After the first shooting in the dorm room where two students were killed, University Officials believed the murders were a “lover’s dispute” and an isolated case. This was why they allowed classes to continue as normal. The school response articles also focused on the panel Governor Tim Kane commissioned to investigate the shooting. There was concern over the school not being prepared in a day and age where school shootings were becoming more frequent.
Table 4-3. The frames covered in The Washington Post from April 17-May 1, 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virginia Tech Frames</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Most Used Frames Over Two Weeks:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28% Community Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14% Victim Profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13% Gun Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10% Personal Experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The top frame covered over the course of two weeks was the community response to the shooting. These articles looked at how the community responded to the tragedy of losing so many, including memorials that were held, charity people conducted, events that were canceled, and how the community honored victims. A vigil was held for victims the day after the shootings. The Post said, “At nightfall, thousands of people held
candles in a vigil at the campus Drillfield…Some people talked and laughed, others sobbed and still others held bunches of flowers and American flags” (April 18, 2007, pg. A12). The same article also addressed how important staying on campus was for students in the days after the event to be supported by their peers. Political response was also covered frequently, looking at President George W. Bush’s response, and Gov. Tim Kane who formed a committee to look at the causes of the shooting and how to prevent future occurrences. The Post reported on the panel on page A1, April 18, saying “Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (D) ordered an independent review yesterday of Virginia Tech’s handling of Monday’s massacre after 24 hours of criticism that the university waited too long to inform students and faculty of a potential danger.” There were a number of articles that address the proceedings of the review. Along with the political response frame was the frame of gun control. A number of these frames were opinion articles that asked for changes to the gun laws. One editorial said, “Virginia is among the nation’s most gun-friendly states, and it would be nice to think that the massacre in Blacksburg might jar legislators from their complacent romance with firearms” (The Washington Post, April 20, 2007, pg. A30). A few articles did address changes to laws in Virginia that would work toward limiting access to guns. In one the frame focused on the NRA working to look at background checks. “The National Rifle Association has begun negotiations with senior Democrats over legislation to bolster the national background-check system and potentially block gun purchases by the mentally ill” (The Washington Post, April 20, 2007, pg. A10). Gun control frames ranked third as the most used frame over the two weeks.
The Post also published profiles of the victims and of the shooter. There were a number of articles about the shooter’s background looking at a number of different aspects of his personality that seemed to suggest warning signs, or things in his past that happened but did not prevent the shooting. These included his placement in the hospital for mental health observations, and difficulty with professors and peers at Tech. One article said, “He had so upset other instructors that Virginia Tech officials asked whether the professor wanted protection…She thought [the shooter] exuded loneliness, and she volunteered to teach him by herself, to spare her colleagues” (The Washington Post, April 18, 2007, pg. A10). There was also coverage on the video the shooter sent to NBC, some of the articles written about the video fell into the shooter profile frame, while some fell into media response. “The production of the videos indicated that [the shooter] had worked on the package for some time, because he not only took the time to record the videos, but he also broke them down into snippets” (The Washington Post, April 19, 2007, pg. A1). This article focused on the shooter’s profile, looking at his history of mental illness, and encounters with the law. A separate article published the same day discussed the video through the frame of NBC deciding on sharing any of the manifesto; this fell into the media response frame since it looked at the media deciding on what was necessary for the public to know without causing undue harm. In the article NBC News President Steve Capus said, “We tried to be sensitive to the families involved and to the investigation…While it is possible that some relative…may say that the network is giving the killer the platform he wanted, they also may say, we want to know why” (The Washington Post, April 19, 2007, pg. A9). There were also a few opinion articles
published that critiqued the decision NBC made. The victims’ profiles were similar to the ones printed after Columbine, they included the victim’s name, an image, and some information about who the person was as shown in Figure 4-3.

Washington Post, April 18, 2007).

These articles were published for each of the victims along with some coverage about victims’ funerals, depending on what the family wanted and if the funeral was held in the region. The personal experience frame still ranked highly, as the fourth most covered
frame. This frame looked at the experiences the victims had during the course of the shooting. One article included a number of interviews from students who witnessed the shooting from inside the classrooms. “Then he began firing at the students. Shot after shot, ‘some 30 shots in all,’ said Trey Perkins, who was seated in the back of the German class. He shot a girl in the mouth, a boy in the legs” (The Washington Post, April 17, 2007, pg. A9). Using quotes to lay out the timeline of the day separated the article from the event overview frame because it gave a more personal view of what the victims experienced than just the facts of an event overview frame. The event overview frame focuses on the facts of the event. “He carried a 9mm semiautomatic and a .22-caliber handgun, both with the serial numbers obliterated, federal law enforcement officials said” (The Washington Post, April 17, 2007, pg. A1). Like this example event overview articles use fewer quotes from the victims and more from law enforcement officials, or other experts.
Table 4-4. Frames used in The Washington Post on April 17, 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virginia Tech Frames</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Most Used Frames On the First Day:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18% Personal Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14% Event Overview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9% Media Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9% Mental Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9% World Reaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A few frames included in the two weeks coverage differed from the frames used in the first day coverage, as shown in Table 4-4. Day one coverage had three extra themes: Mental health, world reaction, and school reputation. The school reputation frame was one that was university specific as universities have to market and sell their school to prospective students. Overcoming the stigma that may occur because of a school shooting was mentioned in these articles, along with background information about Virginia Tech. “The massacre on Tech’s Blacksburg campus in the state’s scenic southwest, experts said, might have at least a short-term negative effect on admissions” (The Washington Post, April 17, 2007, pg. A10). This article also included a quote from a prospective student who was reconsidering her decision. Mental health was also
addressed on the first day. While mental health was an important frame used throughout the following two weeks because of the shooter’s history with mental health care, the articles on the first day focused on the mental health of the victims. One article included a list of resources for those suffering, and looked at how the victims of mass shooting are affected mentally by the event. “Students should be encouraged to return to classes after a reasonable period but with counseling support and a lenient attitude” (The Washington Post, April 17, 2007, pg. A9). The story also cites experiences from those who have been affected by mass school shootings in the past, and information from the director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. The final frame addressed the reaction of the world to the shooting, and these mostly focused on criticism of U.S. gun laws. “There was shock at the scale of the killings, but many people said they were not surprised, seeing the United States as a nation obsessed with guns, where firearms are easy to obtain” (The Washington Post, April 17, 2007, pg. A11). It would make sense that this world reaction frame only appears on the first day as the reaction most likely doesn’t change after the initial article so there is no reason to report the same thing in later editions of the paper.

As noted in the Columbine case study the distinct details of each event led to some changes in the frames. The details that seemed to make a difference in the Virginia Tech event were the mental health of the shooter, the acknowledged warning signs that didn’t prevent the event from occurring, school security, and the number of casualties. The same can be seen for the final case study of Parkland the event at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, community response, event details, shooter details, and victim
profiles remain consistent while some frames change because of how and possibly when
the event occurred.

**Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School**

On Valentine’s Day, Feb. 14, 2018, a former 19-year-old student who had been
expelled for disciplinary reasons entered Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School
building 12. Stoneman Douglas High School is located in Parkland, Florida, an affluent
community about an hour from Miami. The shooter exited his Uber ride with a large
black bag and walked into the stairwell of the “Freshmen Building.” Once inside he
pulled an AR-15 out of the bag and quickly encountered a student he told to get out of the
building. The student fled and reported the incident. Dressed in dark clothes, a baseball
cap, tactical vest, backpack, and shooting glasses he began shooting down the hall at 2:21
p.m., just 19 minutes before the end of the school day (Minn, 2018). He immediately shot
and killed three students who were waiting to be let into their classroom, and injured
another student on the way to the bathroom. He then began shooting the windows out of
the classroom doors and firing into the rooms were students and teachers rushed to find
cover (Minn, 2018). He never entered a room but easily could have after shooting out the
door windows; he moved down the hallway attacking two rooms and then returning to the
first. At this point, not quite two minutes since entering the building, he was confronted
by two teachers who heard the shots and rushed to help students. He spent 2 minutes and
13 seconds on the first floor killing 11 people and wounding 13 (Minn, 2018).

At this point students and teachers on the second floor recognized the gun shots
and had been able to secure their classrooms, following the active shooter drills of hiding
and turning off the classroom lights. He fired into an empty room and then believed the whole floor was empty and moved to the third floor after 51 seconds (Minn, 2018). Teachers and students on the third floor were unaware of the shooting, thinking the noises were furniture being moved, so when the fire alarm went off they began to head downstairs. They quickly realized something was wrong as they heard the gun shots on the second floor and rushed back to their classes (Minn, 2018). The faculty secured all but one class, that of a teacher who accidentally locked his keys in the classroom. Some students ended up in other rooms, and those who didn’t the teacher hid in an alcove outside his door. The shooter immediately kills one teacher who just locked his class in his room, and injured a second who managed to slip in behind her students (Minn, 2018). Two students tried to hide in a bathroom that ended up being locked and were injured, along with the teacher who hid his students, and a third student who was hit five times and left for dead. The shooter moved down the hall checking classrooms and firing into them as he did on the first floor, until his gun jammed and the students in the hall take the opportunity to run. The shooter killed the five people left in the hall and entered the teacher’s lounge to try and shoot out the window at students who ran from the building but couldn’t because of the hurricane proof glass (Minn, 2018). He then left his weapons and outer clothing behind and hid with other students leaving the building. He spent three minutes and five seconds on the third floor killing six people and wounding four, killing seventeen people in a matter of just over six minutes. He is apprehended outside of McDonald’s eighty-two minutes after the shooting (Minn, 2018). Police arrived at the school at 2:32 p.m., eleven minutes after the shooting. The first 911 call wasn’t received
until 2:30 p.m. because many in the building believed the shots being fired were a part of an active shooter drill until students were injured by bullets (Minn, 2018).

While the shooter was apprehended, as of the completion of this dissertation he is still in prison awaiting trial due to delays in the court system caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A public safety commission was formed to analyze changes that could be made to prevent further shootings in Florida, and the Broward County Police Department released a detailed animation (a blueprint of the school with small dots representing the victims and shooter) of the shooter’s movements within the school, shown in Figure 4-4 (Silva, 2018).
With the accessibility of cellphones, students recorded, and even posted to social media, many of the moments that happened during the event; these events were captured and shared with investigators and the media.

One feature of the event that affected the frames covered was the students’ move to activism after the event. Students and parents quickly moved to critique not only school safety but also gun control in the United States.

Table 4-5. The frames covered about the shooting in the Denver Post from Feb. 15-March 1, 2018.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parkland Frames</th>
<th>Most Used Frames Over Two Weeks:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20% Gun Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19% Political Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15% Victim Profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13% Activism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The students’ move for gun control is why the frame ranked so highly, as shown in Table 4-5. The number of articles on gun control was different than the activism frame. The gun control frame focused on the specific legislation, along with the opinion articles that called for more restrictions. For example, “House Republicans on Tuesday decisively
blocked a move by Democrats to debate a ban on assault weapons in Florida, six days after a massacre that took 17 lives” (The Miami Herald, Feb. 21, 2018, pg. 7A). The activism frame focused on the actions students and parents took to change laws around guns and school safety. One article printed Feb. 22, 2018 said, “Students…got a real-life lesson in the perils of high expectations Wednesday as they met with state legislators to discuss their promise of stricter gun laws and left disappointed” (The Miami Herald, pg. 1A). The activism frame also looked at the fundraising movement of several students to raise money for awareness about gun violence. Articles that fell into the political response frame were also similar but the distinction occurred when politicians directly addressed their response to the shooting. These articles typically were printed in the first few days following the event, before politicians’ comments switched toward gun control and changes to the laws. For example, one article printed on Feb. 15, 2018 gave several statements from politicians in both parties. “Florida state Rep. Jared Moskowitz…said ‘This country and its elected leaders collectively have failed our children’” (The Miami Herald, pg. 4A). In the same article “Miami Republican Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart said he was ‘outraged’ by the shooting.” The political response frame was exactly that: politicians’ response to the shooting, or their remarks to the families in the wake of the event.

Again, like with the other events, the personal experience frame and the event overview frame appeared, but held a lower percentage of articles perhaps because of the focus on activism and gun control. The personal experience frame focused on the statements of the victims and what they experienced while living through the event. The
information for this frame was almost immediately available because so many students turned to social media to share what had happened during the course of the event.

Students shared images and video on Twitter, like the one in Figure 4-5, and could not only give information to the outside world but could also be updated themselves. Those watching the event unfold on television news could update the students on where the police were. One student who tweeted about the event said, “‘We thought maybe it was firecrackers,’ said the 14-year-old. ‘Until we heard screaming and people, not falling, but
crashing when they were barricading the door. We knew it wasn’t a joke any more’” (Miami Herald, Feb. 15, 2018, pg. 4A). There were also a few stories with teacher experiences that were more detailed in what the teacher experienced. Perhaps interviewing teachers on the more graphic details was done to protect students who saw more bloodshed from reliving traumatizing experiences so close to the event. If so this tactic of protecting the vulnerable would lend itself to the idea of an ethic of care.

Teacher Ernest Rospierski told the Miami Herald about his experience, he “felt a bullet graze his cheek. The shooting stopped abruptly as the gunman reloaded. Rospierski said he took advantage of the pause to push his students toward the stairway so they could escape. He followed closely behind. A girl was lying by the stairs. He checked for a pulse but couldn’t find one” (Miami Herald, Feb. 15, 2018, pg. 3A). The student interviewed had been in a classroom and didn’t see anything, but the teacher interviewed had been injured and came face-to-face with the shooter. Not interviewing students who are young and vulnerable and in need of care, as Cavarraro recommends, may be an important step in protecting the vulnerable and instilling an ethic of care in reporting on crisis events.

The Education Writers’ Association through a grant from the Ethics and Excellence Journalism Foundation produced a guide for interviewing children in a crisis that included: having a parent or trusted adult present, using appropriate language, and corroborating information provided by children with authorities (Carr, 2013).

In comparison to the personal experience frame is the event overview frame. This frame again focuses on the details of the event and utilizes official or professional sources to gather information about what occurred. These frames occurred over the course of
coverage as new details were released and particularly in the case of this shooting since
the perpetrator was captured alive, and details about the case against him were released
over the following weeks and even years. An example on page 1A the first day of
coverage, “The Broward Sheriff’s Office says [the shooter], 19, walked the halls of the
high school wielding an AR-15 and multiple magazines” (Miami Herald, Feb. 15, 2018).
The article utilized the police as the main source to share the known facts about the
shooting. The two other frames that were consistent across the case studies were the
community response and victim profile. The community response again covered how the
community recognized the victims of the event through memorials and stories about a
number of professional sports teams who donated money or rescheduled games. “The
Florida Panthers began wearing helmet decals and jersey patches…to pay tribute to the
victims of the school shooting at Parkland’s Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School”
(Miami Herald, Feb. 20, 2018, pg. 4B). These sports tributes were the majority of the
community response frame most likely because the conversation after the shooting
quickly turned to gun control. The victim profiles frame was also different from past
coverage and focused on memorializing the victims through coverage of the funerals and
memorial services for those who died. “Scott Beigel, 35, who taught geography and also
coached cross-country running, was remembered for his wit and the heroism that
characterized his actions long before he died selflessly” (Miami Herald, Feb. 20, 2018,
pg. 3A). The frame included coverage of several funerals as well as stories about heroism
during the shooting.
The final frame of police response was an important one for the Parkland shooting. After the event there was much criticism about the police response due to two factors, the lack of action on behalf of the school resource officer, and the lack of response from the FBI to warnings about the shooter’s internet activity. The article said “A school campus cop heard the gunfire and rushed to the building but never went inside—instead waiting outside for another four agonizing minutes” (Miami Herald, Feb. 23, 2018, pg. 1A). The sheriff’s office also missed a tip about the shooter, as did the FBI. “The agency issued an extraordinary apology for failing to act on a tip that [the shooter] may have been planning a school shooting” (Miami Herald, Feb. 17, 2018, pg. 2A). The failure on behalf of the school resource officer led to a few frames on the school response; these articles looked at how to improve safety and not the response of the police. The frame also covered the students’ return to the school, although the building where the shooting occurred was shut down. For example, the principal’s comments were shared in an article, “Thompson thanked students and staff for following school protocol…first responders who swarmed the campus after the shooting began…and other schools that offered help and support” (Miami Herald, Feb. 20, 2018, pg. 6A). The school response frame didn’t have enough articles to fall into the top frames though as Table 4-6 shows.
Table 4-6. Frames covered on the shooting in the Miami Herald on Feb. 15, 2018.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parkland Frames</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Most Used Frames On the First Day:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75% Personal Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8% Political Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8% Victim Profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8% Mass Shooting History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8% World Response</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As with the other two cases, the Parkland coverage had a wider selection of frames on the first day because the Miami Herald was trying to cover the full scope of the event. Many of the frames on the first day only had a few articles, which reflects the low percentages. There were a few frames that differed from the coverage over the two weeks; these perhaps showed up in the first day because of the large number of frames with small percentages, and because once the article is printed there is no need to update the information. These frames include information on the firearms used, mass shooting history, and world response. The shooter profile and victim mental health frames also appeared in the first day coverage but not in the overall coverage, perhaps because the shooter remained alive and so the more pertinent information needed concerned the trial. The victim mental health frame may have appeared less often because the victims
focused so quickly on activism. The shooter profile included information about his suspension from the school, his family life, and his disturbing history of social media posts. An article on the front page described him, “He preened with guns and knives on social media, bragged about shooting rats with his BB gun and got kicked out of school” (Miami Herald, Feb. 15, 2018, pg. 3A). There was only one mental health article that summarized statements from the school superintendent, which would have almost fit into the school response frame except the article focused on how those outside the school can help students. “We’ve got to be able to recognize individuals that are in distress, that have challenges…and be able to find ways to support them” (Miami Herald, Feb. 15, 2018, 4A). There was a very small focus on mental health.

Two different frames that appeared were the mass school shooting history article and the detailed article about the fire arms used. The shooting history frame looked at how the seventeen people lost in the Parkland shooting made it the worst high school shooting since Columbine where thirteen people were killed. “Assuming the death count reported by Broward County Sheriff Scott Israel remains at 17, the Stoneman Douglas shooting would land third on the list of the nation’s deadliest school shootings” (Miami Herald, Feb. 15, 2018, 2A). This seemed a strange frame to share but it does highlight the issue that mass school shootings have become common in America by outlining the major events beginning with the 1966 shooting at University of Texas. The firearm frame seemed out of place, too, but it was educational as to what the different types of weapons are, how they work, and what is legally available for purchase. This information can be good for those who don’t know about firearms and are interested in the intricacies of the
laws that are under debate after shootings occur. For example, “‘AR-15’ is used as a
generic term for a broad range of semi-automatic rifles, designed to be tactical versions
of the original automatic M16 military rifle. AR-15 weapons are often used by SWAT
teams and other tactical teams during, often close range, operations” (Miami Herald, Feb.
15, 2018, 3A). An AR-15 rifle was used in the Parkland shooting. So, while the frames
remained relatively the same over the nearly twenty years that separated Columbine and
Parkland, there were certain advances that changed the features of the cases.
Discussion of the Cases Frames

Table 4-7. The top frames covered in the three newspapers showing the popular themes for the first two weeks and first day of coverage.

OVERALL FRAMES

While each case study had their own specific frames, overall the majority of the frames covered over the course of two weeks was largely the same.

Overall Total Frames
26
Virginia Tech held 1 extra:
Victim Response

Total of Articles Analyzed
798
Columbine Parkland
414 213
Virginia Tech
171

Comparison of Frames between Events

Frames in First 24 Hours

Coverage in the first 24 hours after the event held a wide variety of article frames. Each event varied in frames based on the details of the event, as shown in the right column.
There were numerous and obvious differences in the features of the events but a number of the frames still overlapped in the first day coverage especially when the details weren’t known yet, but also in the later coverage the frames remained similar as shown by Figure 4-7. With Columbine and Virginia Tech the frames did not vary much. There were fewer articles, perhaps because of the size of the Washington Post and the wide distribution, plus the fact that Virginia Tech is about four hours from Washington, DC, could contribute to that fact. The varying numbers could also be affected by the other events that occurred around the same time that were deemed news worthy. With almost 8 years between the two events and the high number of people who perished there was only one new frame added to the coverage, that of the victim reaction at two percent of the coverage. This could be because of the age of the victims; they were all adults (over 18) and so access to them was perhaps easier. The advent of social media could also have played a role in the frequency of this frame. As an alumna of Westfield High School, the shooter’s high school, I had news reporters reach out to me through direct message on Facebook. My sister and several of her friends from Virginia Tech did as well. The articles that fell within this frame looked at how the students specifically, not the community, rallied around each other and the other victims. The articles discuss the way the students turned to each other to protect the school community and help each other heal.

There were other small differences in the top eight frames between the two; Columbine had more event overview stories at four percent of the coverage vs. Virginia Tech’s at two percent that focused on the facts of the shooting. Virginia Tech had
numerous articles focusing on media response at eight percent of the coverage that looked at the reaction to NBC releasing parts of the shooter’s manifesto videos. These articles included reactions of the victims and reactions from other professional reporters to the video being released. The other frame that was present for Virginia Tech and not Columbine in the top eight was political response at nine percent of the coverage. The articles focused on the panel investigation and on the decisions of the local and U.S. government about laws around both mental health and gun control. There may have been more political articles because of the Post’s proximity to District of Columbia and their typical readers’ expectations on political coverage. The top eight articles were looked at because the remaining frames after eight shared similar numbers of articles in the single digits with very similar percentage points, and so the top eight was a natural focus.

The day one coverage between the two events varies greatly, showing that the features of the event are important in determining which frames are published. The overlap occurs in some of the expected areas: personal experiences at eighteen percent of the coverage for Virginia Tech and twenty-two percent for Columbine; and event overview at fourteen percent for Virginia Tech and eight percent for Columbine. For the Virginia Tech and Columbine coverage the personal experience stories described victims who were present during the shootings and what it was like for them to go through the event. The event overview in both gave the basic facts of the event, the timeline, the response by police and hospitals, the numbers of injured and killed. Both frames are in the top three types of frames for each event. The frame of community reaction was a major part of the first day coverage for Columbine. On the other hand, for Virginia Tech
the frame of community reaction did not appear in the first day of coverage. Community response may have been missing because Virginia Tech is a university community and so the victims were from a wider area that wasn’t immediately accessible to reporters. The immediate area where Virginia Tech is located is Christiansburg, Virginia, and most of the students are from other parts of Virginia and the United States. The local community was not as directly affected like with the other two cases of school shootings. The frame of community response includes the vigils and funerals held for victims. These events were held later in the week after the shooting, and so they were covered after the first day. Another frame, media response was in the top three frames of coverage for Virginia Tech at nine percent of the coverage. There were two articles that covered the media’s response to the shooting on the first day; one that addressed many news networks going back to normal prime time coverage, as suggested by the article perhaps in response to school shootings becoming more frequent. The second article about media response that was published the first day looked at the experience of covering a mass school shooting as a reporter. Both the Washington Post and the Denver Post covered mental health in the top five frames. Columbine with a focus on victims’ mental health, while the Virginia Tech coverage discussed both victims’ and the shooter’s mental health with nine percent of the coverage. The Columbine first day coverage of mental health also focused on the warning signs for mass shootings and Virginia Tech didn’t; perhaps because so many warning signs the shooter showed were acknowledged by the police and Virginia Tech administration but could not prevent the events. Two final frames that were covered at Tech and not Columbine in the first day were world response at nine percent of the
coverage and victim reaction at nine percent. The world response was prevalent most likely because of the unprecedented number of those who lost their lives, and victim reaction because of accessibility to the victims through social media and age of the students.

The only differing item was societal blame at three percent of the coverage in the top of Columbine’s coverage, and school response at nine percent of coverage in the top of Virginia Tech’s. The Virginia Tech shooter’s writings and recordings didn’t trend toward violent video games and movies in the same way that the Columbine shooters had so the articles didn’t include that information (Hacker, 2007; Cullen, 2009).

Even though the Columbine shooting and Parkland (Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School) shooting occurred almost nineteen years apart and the details varied greatly, the frames presented by the local media outlet remained the same twenty-five frames although the frequency with which different frames appeared was vastly different. The most covered frame with in the first two weeks after the event was gun control at twenty percent of the coverage, closely followed by political response at nineteen percent, and activism at thirteen percent. For Columbine these two frames represented only fifteen percent of the coverage, at thirteen percent for gun control, two percent for political response, and only one article (.002%) on activism. With Columbine the political response articles focused on not only the moves being made in response to the shooting but also to what has been titled the “thoughts and prayers” statements, where a person responds to a tragic event with a statement that their thoughts and prayers are with the victims. The one article on activism in the Denver Post addressed a rally at the state
capitol to protest the NRA and gun violence. The article gave equal coverage to statements made by the NRA. For Parkland, the political response articles included the reactions of politicians, but also a critique by victims of the political response by lawmakers. There were many factors that could have contributed to this change including the increase of school shootings between 1999 and 2018. According to the K-12 School Shooting database maintained by the Center for Homeland Defense and Security, there were six active school shootings in 1999 and eleven in 2018 (2021). Or the response could have been a combination of an increase in shootings and the political climate in 2018 with a Republican led Congress and White House, who were historically pro-gun rights; or the access students had to politicians via social media, where several victims openly criticized President Donald Trump’s response to the shooting (Minn, 2018).

The rest of Parkland’s top 8 frames mirrored those presented in Columbine and Virginia Tech, including victim profiles in the top three at fifteen percent, community response at eleven percent, event overview at eight percent, and personal experience and police response at seven percent. Much in the way parents were unhappy after the police response to Columbine, parents were unhappy with the police in Parkland. Several articles focused on the fact that the police resource officer, a position put in place after Columbine, did not enter the building during the shooting and actually told other authorities to stay away (Minn, 2018). The FBI, which for the case of analyzing the frames was placed in police response category, was also criticized for not acting on reports that were made to them about the shooter. The Columbine articles focused on the slow police response because of misreading the scene as a hostage situation. Event
overview and the community response articles were the same type as for both Columbine and Virginia Tech.

The day of coverage for Parkland included the wide variety of frames that the other two shootings included, to cover the wide amount of information available after the event especially with the alleged perpetrator still alive. The top frame covered that day was the personal experiences of the victims at fifteen percent of the frames. This was also the case for Columbine and Tech. The other frames that day were fairly evenly covered at either eight percent or seven percent of the coverage. Many of these frames were the same as the other events such as, world response, victim profiles, shooter profile, mental health and the world reaction. A few frames stood out that were not covered in other events. One of these was firearm information, which included in-depth details on the AR-15 rifle used in the attack and similar guns used in other mass shooting events including images of similar rifles. The other frame that stood out was that of school shooting history, and the comparison of Parkland to Columbine. Parkland replaced Columbine as the deadliest high school shooting in the United States and the article in the Miami Herald discussed that along with other shootings that had occurred in the past including an infographic with details. The details in this shooting that made a difference with the frames were not only the availability of extensive cell phone images and recording, but the fact that the shooter lived, that he had exhibited extensive warning signs, and the activism the victims engaged in during the days that followed the event. Another important detail that changed was pointed out in the Parkland case; the reporters focused on interviewing teachers for the more troubling and gruesome details of the event. This
may have been because of the information shared on social media, and perhaps reporters have learned how to protect witnesses and vulnerable students. This action would fit into the ethics of care if the reporters are working to not re-traumatize the witnesses to the event while interviewing them. During Columbine students were interviewed in-depth right after the event occurred. The three case studies varied but stood out as three major events that were spread over the recent history of mass school shootings and marked in different ways some of the turning points in the timeline of shooting events, being the deadliest for their time period. While details and frames varied over the two-week coverage following each event, similarities can be seen in the initial coverage before the details emerge in the weeks after the event.

One consideration is how these frequently used frames connect to current recommendations made for reporters and how these frames compare to an ethics of care. The CDC recommends to avoid encouraging contagion events by offering a number of steps reporters can take to present unbiased but sensitive coverage of these events. In a one-sheeter, or handout, they say reporters should minimize coverage of the perpetrator; use photo coverage sparingly especially as pertains to the weapons and perpetrator; avoid prejudice when covering mental illness; not sensationalize the incident; focus coverage on the victims and the response of the community; don’t stigmatize the community where the event occurred; be sensitive of the victims when conducting interviews; report on warning signs, and educate the public (SAVE, 2017).

In looking at the frames covered in the first day of the three case studies, The Washington Post seems to do the best job following the recommendations provided. They
keep coverage focused on the victims’ experiences and the response of the local community and the world in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shooting. They also discuss the warning signs and how the crisis can affect victims’ mental health. The Columbine coverage was the most out of line with the recommendations, perhaps because the recommendations were released after analyzing Columbine. Some of the top frames do focus on the personal experiences of the victims and the reaction of the world and community. Other articles focus on the topics that could create contagion events, which we know Columbine did because of the frequent mention of the event in other school shooters’ manifestos. Articles that focused on the shooters were frequent, as were articles on the mental health of the shooters. Articles also focused on how the media covered the event using some techniques that the CDC did not recommend as being gentle with the victims. Several articles also stigmatized the community by focusing on how it was possible for a shooting to occur in a small middle-class community that was deemed as safe. Finally, Parkland did the same things well by looking at the world response, personal experiences, and victim mental health. The frames that were harmful included a number of articles on the shooter, a comparison of the event to Columbine, and an exact guide of the type of firearm and how it was purchased that included pictures. The articles on the shooter were a little more difficult with coverage because the shooter did not commit suicide as is the case with the first two cases studies. This meant the newspaper also had to include coverage of the arrest, and court proceedings.

In all the frames used in covering these crisis events make the moves to begin the work of improving coverage but still have ground to cover to decrease contagion events.
Perhaps by integrating an ethics of care in journalism ethics these final missing recommendations offered by the CDC can be included. By stepping outside of the immediate journalism demands of the story and remembering the victims being interviewed are people in need of care can help to close the gap in the coverage. Ultimately the CDC guidelines stay focused on the idea that the victims are people in need of care and to be aware of the audience being written for. The gap in frames and the CDC are ones that focus too much on stigmatizing the community or those with mental illness and moves attention away from the people the event is happening to. By using care for those victims, the CDC guidelines would be more carefully followed to prevent contagion. Building from the CDC guidelines to encourage journalists to bring this ethic of care to the coverage of crisis events can be done from the addition of a heuristic, or set of questions, for journalists to think through as they interview witnesses and write stories.

This heuristic is not meant to be the type of heuristic used in psychology to help journalists make mental short cuts. It is not meant to be something that allows journalists to make snap decisions when they are thinking intuitively about events. This heuristic is meant to help create more careful thinking on the part of the journalist. In rhetoric a heuristic is used to create a set of guiding questions for a person to ask themselves when thinking through a problem. For example, a heuristic can look like the concept of the “5W’s” reporters use to remind them to cover the Who? What? When? Where? And Why? Of an event. The following heuristic will allow for journalists to consider more deeply the repercussions of working with victims in the middle of crisis events.
CHAPTER FIVE: A HEURISTIC FOR CARE

After reviewing the material published in regional newspapers from the two weeks following the case study shootings we can see that steps can be taken by journalists to ethically cover an event following the conventions of the ethics of care. The application of the proposed heuristic below should be considered to mitigate the horror brought on by a crisis, particularly when children are involved or the primary victims in an event. The use of this proposed heuristic should bring forward options to apply an ethics of care toward protecting victims and keeping the focus of the coverage on the victims as opposed to the perpetrator. This focus may help to decrease the occurrence of copycat events as proposed by the Center for Disease Control. The application of the heuristic would be for anyone writing or broadcasting a story, with particular focus on those covering crisis events. This recommendation is not meant to limit the free press, but to help refocus coverage on the victims to avoid perpetuating events and to prevent factual inaccuracies by considering the use of sources. The heuristic can also be used by those consuming the media in an age when “fake news” can easily be shared and consumed on social media sites. The heuristic was designed with a starting point based in the knowledge of the SPJ code of ethics, and then expanded by drawing from lessons learned from analyzing the frames with a focus on the ethics of care with the particular focus of not further wounding the vulnerable. The first point of analyzing who the audience will be uses Cavarero’s (2009) theory of the ability to wound the vulnerable and that those who are vulnerable are more open to being wounded; to prevent this wounding...
from occurring the reporter must know the audience and how vulnerable the readers are
to being wounded and what can wound them. So, the first part of the heuristic works to
balance how much the audience may be wounded with the necessity of the media
informing the public of the crisis. The second section addresses how certain pieces of the
reporting can persuade and possibly wound the vulnerable. The rhetorical devices used
through images and frames can influence readers’ reactions to the vulnerable victims:
such as creating copycats by showing the weapons used, or making the audience
sympathetic to the shooter through the shooter profile frame. The rhetorical devices can
also encourage writers to reflect on how the frame or images with the article may change
or confuse the frame. Finally, the limitations section looks at how reporters can protect
the vulnerable from further wounding by not publishing information too early. The
limitations section asks reporters to be sure they have all sides of the story, and to be sure
the frame won’t change if more information becomes available. The victims can be
wounded if the story is missing details such as if information related to motives is
missing, like at Virginia Tech when information was initially released after the two
students were killed in a dorm and officials thought it was an isolated case. The
limitations section of the proposed heuristic also picks up the ethics of care by looking at
who is being interviewed, and by asking reporters to consider whether their questions
may injure vulnerable children. By utilizing the heuristic, reporters can address who
readers are and how readers can be wounded. By acknowledging the harm that can be
created by the coverage of an event, and working to mitigate that harm, the reporters are
applying the ethics of care through the use of the heuristic. Below is the heuristic
developed from the analysis of the frames, and after presenting the heuristic, I will draw connections to each element using examples from the case studies.

**Heuristic**

1. **Audience**
   a. Who is the audience?
      i. What is the scope/or possible reach of the story?
   b. Who gets hurt if you publish? What is the impact?
      i. Are children involved?
   c. What is essential information about the event?
      i. What information could be harmful?
      ii. Does the benefit of the information outweigh the harm of sharing it?
      iii. What repercussions are there for all involved if you share this information?

2. **Rhetorical Devices**
   a. Are you influencing the audience?
      i. How are you doing so?
      ii. What frame or picture is the language use creating?
      iii. Can you eliminate or add items to mitigate this misleading slant?
   b. What’s the angle/frame of the story?
i. Is there another side of the story to tell?

ii. Is there a side you are telling that shouldn’t be told?

c. What images or infographics are going to be included with the story?

   i. Do these change the meaning of the story?

d. If known, where will this story be located (paper section, time of day, web)?

   i. What repercussions does this placement of the story have when paired with the story?

e. Are the headlines factual and highlight the important facts?

f. Will your story’s key features be consistent with your organization’s ethics policy?

3. Limitations

   a. Is it true?

   b. Will the story make a difference?

   c. What information is not yet available?

      i. Does this missing information have the potential to change the story?

      ii. Did you make readers aware of this missing piece?

   d. What sources do you not have access to?

      i. Would access to these sources have the potential to change the story?
ii. Did you make readers aware of this missing piece?

e. Are your sources reliable witnesses?
   i. Have you corroborated the information sources provided?
   ii. Are your sources children (under 18) or are they inexperienced or unsophisticated?
       1. Do they understand the language you are using to interview them?
       2. Do the sources understand the repercussions of the use of their words?
   iii. Are you causing them harm through your information gathering?
       1. How can you mitigate this harm?
   iv. Are you influencing the public to view the story in a particular way?

Audience

The first part of this heuristic considers the aspect of audience. The audience is an important piece for newspapers because editors and reporters select stories based on what will sell papers to their audience; hence the audience consists of those who will purchase the paper or read the article online. For the papers in the case study these were regional papers. The purpose behind considering the audience from this heuristic is to analyze who could be harmed by the coverage and who could be assisted. By harmed I mean those who could be sharing inaccurate information without knowing it, since they have a
limited sense of the crisis as they are viewing it from only their experience, or those who may have been involved in the event and are reading the information afterward. For example, in the coverage of the Columbine shooting, the students heard that the shooters were shooting jocks, and bullies in the library. Later investigations did not find this evidence. The shooters said things to taunt the students but the evidence did not show the shooters were bullied even though the reporters and/or students drew that conclusion based on the statements. This misinformation created harm because based on this information a list of warning signs that included students who were outcasts in their school. By cared for I mean those that could be given resources through the media to prevent the crisis from reoccurring or who could benefit from some form of information shared in the media: donations, counseling, gatherings or vigils, etc. The Washington Post and The Denver Post both included infographics that gave information on counseling services and donations. This step provides care for the readers who are experiencing trauma and may need to seek out services or who can find solace by providing aid.

In sum, the first consideration in the heuristic is who is the audience? As described above this is who could consume this media. This means what is the scope/or possible reach of the story? During crisis events regional stories are often picked up by larger news organizations. On occasion this is something to consider: if the story is being re-published, could it affect the larger audience? Why should local/regional reporters worry about this? Adding background information on the local area or population can help give other readers a scope of the crisis. For example, The Denver Post provided
information on the type of town Columbine, Colo., was after the shooting, and gave
readers the idea that a school shooting could happen in middle class neighborhoods by
children who came from seemingly white-collar loving families who were involved in
their children’s lives. The implication of this information is that gun violence wasn’t
necessarily an urban issue. Background information on the shooters could provide ideas
of warning signs for adults to watch for in schools or in their children, and allow for those
at risk to get help. This information provides care for those feeling vulnerable after the
shooting and worried that this could happen at their schools, and it builds an ethic of care.

Looking more deeply into the issue of audience, we can ask, who gets hurt if we
publish? What is the impact of this story if it is shared with the audience? This is an
important consideration because it encourages the writer to look beyond the immediate.
Reporters are taught about libel, or intentional publication of information they know to be
false, and know sharing false information without support from a source could lead to
serious repercussions, but this idea of who gets hurt should take these concerns a step
farther. If the reporter presents false information, could someone be harmed when that
information is published? For example, after the mass shooting at the FedEx Ground
warehouse in Indianapolis on April 15, 2021 the Today show was interviewing one of the
victims who worked at the facility live on-air. The anchor asked the man if he recognized
the shooter, and he responded that he didn’t. She then asked have you heard who it might
be and he said yes, he had heard rumors. She pushed him again, and he said he had heard
it was a former employee that he didn’t know. This seems innocent enough, particularly
because it was the truth, but harm could come from pointing to former employees. It
could be easier to identify the wrong person as the perpetrator when the field is narrowed to those fired; it could also give the employer a bad name if they possibly mistreat their employees enough to push someone to cause an event like what occurred. Another part of this set of questions is that of children: are children involved? This concern arises because, as Cavarero (2009) shows, children are more vulnerable and thus in need of more care if a story is published with them as the victims and/or witnesses. Could there be harm in having children relive the events they witnessed in an interview? For this dissertation I considered children any of the students who were involved in the shootings based on the idea that when a person is sent to school American society sees this as an extension of the home, a place that is safe where a student can learn and grow as a person. Ideally, they have not yet entered the world where they are meant to earn a living and take care of themselves. This of course is not always the case, particularly for college students, but based on Cavarero’s (2009) theories American society sees students as more vulnerable as they have not yet left the safety of their parents care. Children being involved should certainly be considered and perhaps interviews should only be conducted in the presence of a trusted adult who would know when the child has had enough. Children could also be unreliable witnesses, as we see in Columbine coverage. The high school students who were victims and witnesses of the events were interviewed shortly after they exited the building. Victims have a limited sense of the events that occurred and could only tell facts based on the events they saw, but they quickly spoke with other students and so much like the childhood game telephone information was changed and rumors were spread to the media (Cullen, 2009). For example, there was no trench coat
mafia and there was no significant evidence two perpetrators were bullied, facts that came out later but the rumors are still prevalent in popular culture.

The next concern is that of essential information about the event that the audience needs. What information could be harmful? Does the benefit of the information outweigh the harm of sharing it? What repercussions are there for all involved if we share this information? These questions are important and media organizations that follow the SPJ guidelines of do no harm most likely already ask these questions of the stories they publish. They are important to highlight again here because this balance is not a clear one, and addressing the idea of what the final outcome could be if certain information is shared in a particular way can help with making a final decision. Some examples of these decisions may be found in media coverage of the Watergate scandal, where President Richard Nixon’s campaign employees broke into the opposition’s offices, did they have enough facts to go forward with the story that forced a president to resign? Similarly, the Snowden story, published in 2013, where it was reported the U.S. National Security Agency was tracking U.S. citizens. Were these actions treason or whistle blowing? Looking at the Virginia Tech shooting, NBC received a package from the shooter containing a video manifesto, writings, and pictures. NBC convened a group to debate whether to publish this manifesto and ultimately decided to publish parts of the documents in a compromise to share information the public needed to know to understand why the event happened balanced against protecting the vulnerable against the more vile or harmful images and rantings. They also had to consider how sharing these images might encourage copycat events, and thus harm the public. Fortunately,
these bigger ethical dilemmas are often addressed by a group of people within a media organization but smaller scale issues are also of concern. *The Miami Herald* published an in-depth article on where, how, and what fire arms were purchased and used in the Parkland shooting. This included pictures of the fire arms and what the type of gun was, how it was regulated. Was this a necessary frame to present in the newspaper in the days after the shooting? A general mention of the type of weapon is often included in stories outlining the event, but the readers don’t benefit from knowing such extensive details that the article came across as a how-to for future shooters. Although it could be important to know the gun laws in the area, and what stipulations are in place for purchasing firearms so improvements to the laws can be made to protect all citizens. Consideration of the audience and what information is necessary versus what may cause harm is an important first step in writing articles.

**Rhetorical Devices**

The next consideration is how could the reporter be persuading the audience. Aristotle defines rhetoric as every available means of persuasion, and it is important for the writer to remember every decision made in covering an event could be an opportunity to persuade readers whether they mean to or not. These items include not only the article frame as addressed in this dissertation, but also who is interviewed, the headline, pictures and graphics published with the article, and where the article is located in the paper.

Journalist should consider whether we are swaying the audience, and if so how? For example, an article published in *The Miami Herald* on Feb. 15, 2018, with the frame of event overview focuses on the timeline of the event released by the police. The
headline for this article reads “He turned school into slaughter house, then stopped at McDonald’s,” and so the reader would assume the article frame was what a terrible person the shooter was. This headline gives the reader the impression that the shooter was callous and unfeeling, which one could probably assume of a person willing to commit mass murder, but is it appropriate for the publication to share this opinion on a news article focused on the event overview? This opinion could be mitigated by printing a more neutral headline. Remembering the selection of items included in the story can sway a reader and can allow for additional information to be added to present the story in an unbiased way, and can address the need for care of the audience. Though in using this headline the reporter paints the shooter in a negative light, and could prevent future shootings by taking away any glory that a reader might perceive the shooter having. A graphic with warning signs for those at risk could also add to the ethic of care and ease readers’ fears. The Denver Post printed a list of counseling services available to victims the day after the event, as shown in Figure 5-1, and continued to print daily a graphic with ways people could help.
This example also highlights the heuristic’s question of are the headlines factual and highlight the important facts? In this case the headline was factual but probably used some inciting language as click bait to get more people to read the article by focusing on a part of the story that was only a very small piece of what was included in the story.

The focus of this dissertation highlighted the frame of the stories covering crisis events. Selecting the topic of the story is an important rhetorical decision, especially when placed within the context of the entire day’s worth of coverage for the paper. An important question to pair with looking at the frame is to ask, are you telling the whole story within the publication’s coverage, or are you focusing on a piece that will upset or horrify people to get readers? Is there another side of the story to tell, or is there a side you are telling that shouldn’t be told? The CDC (2021) recommends focusing the
majority of coverage on the victims and avoiding too much coverage on the shooter as to avoid giving the shooter infamy and creating copy cats.

Outside of specifics of the article, one can also ask, what images or infographics are going to be included with the story? What level of detail do these images or graphics have that could cause trauma and harm to the audience? Both The Washington Post and The Miami Herald included pictures of the shooter with guns, shown in Figure 5-2; this could create harm for the victims but at the same time it does give readers an idea of the type of people the shooters were. Images of the shooter looking tough and scary could also create some fame for them by providing a platform to share these images.

![Figure 5-2. Images of Virginia Tech and Parkland shooter displaying firearms (The Washington Post, 2007, The Miami Herald, 2018).](image)

The Post shared an extensive graphic with maps, shown in Figure 5-3, of where the shooting occurred, detailing the distance between building and the movements of the shooter. This again could cause trauma to the audience but it could also be used to analyze how school safety could be enhanced to limit access to areas and prevent similar movements from occurring. Again, as with the rest of the heuristic, these prompts are
provided to allow the writers to analyze their decisions and make sure they are making the best possible choices for their audience and the victims of the events.

The final rhetorical decisions to consider, concern where this story will be located (paper section, time of day, web) and what repercussions does this medium have when paired with the story? The frames of the story change with the section the article is placed in and in all three publications discussed in this dissertation articles appeared in a majority of sections including: news, opinion, sports, style, and local. Each also had their own special section in early coverage typically at the front of the paper, as the news was important and impacted the immediate area. Each section has the possibility of reaching a different audience and so the content presented should be considered for the audience.
Limitations

The limitations of the coverage are especially important to consider and I believe the area where the most harm can occur if not considered, and so it must be approached with the most care. Questions about the limitations of ones reporting focuses on what information is not yet available at the time of publication and how could this information change the narrative of the story? The first question, is it true, addresses the idea of speculation. As with the Indianapolis warehouse shooting during 2021, the anchor speculated as to the identity of the shooter, and so the information presented was not yet confirmed as not all the facts were available. There is also the consideration of will the story make a difference, in either a positive or negative way. If it won’t, why publish it? If it the story presents negative information, then there is the consideration of what harm could occur because of its publication? The misinformation shared by witnesses after Columbine perpetuated a story of false warnings signs: students who were being bullied, students who were isolated, those who were moody and dressed in dark clothes were ones to be on the lookout for. This reporting could have created harm because people were looking for the wrong attributes and thus didn’t help prevent future shootings.

Another important limitation to consider is what information is not yet available? Often as a story is unfolding we don’t know who the victims are, how many victims there are, how many shooters, or the names of the shooters. These are important facts that affect coverage and the perception of the readers. Knowing this information has the potential to change the story. Was the shooting a mass shooting, by a student, or was it someone coming from outside to attack? Was it a targeted event? Was it gang violence or
motivated in some other way? These specifics change how the reader responds to the story and how the story is covered since different sources would need to be accessed. If these pieces of information are missing the writer should make readers aware of the missing pieces and that information may not have yet been released. This concern can be seen in the coverage of Columbine; most of the initial information about the shooters that students shared was wrong. They were thought to be loners, but it was learned later that these students were popular, and there was no trench coat mafia. The goth culture and society blame frame are the focus of several articles about the Columbine shooting, and they really had nothing to do with the shooting. In line with that, when information isn’t yet available it often means there are sources that have not been accessed yet. Therefore, writers should consider the potential that a news source has to change the story. If the story is about the timeline of events or the perpetrator then the police should be a source, but if the article is about the mental health of the shooter, should a psychiatrist be interviewed? Or, if the story is about the firearm used should a firearms expert be contacted? Talking to experts can help mitigate harm because it provides the reader with accurate facts and prevents misinformation that may be given by witnesses.

The next point is more difficult to determine but something that could change the story: are our sources reliable witnesses? The way journalists typically report is by using multiple sources that can corroborate information gathered, and this step should be the standard. There are other matters to consider when it comes to reliability, though, such as are the news sources children or are they inexperienced or unsophisticated? We know that children have a different view of the world and particularly in the case of traumatic
events their experience is limited and they can be impressionable, as in the case of the
Columbine shooter rumors. When it comes to inexperienced or unsophisticated
individuals it is important to know that the witness understands the language being used
in the interview and that there is no jargon being used or confusion over what the
question being asked is. Sources should also be made to understand the repercussions of
the use of their words. If they are a minor an adult representative should be present
during an interview, and the witness shouldn’t be pushed to provide an answer if they do
not know the facts. Also, as was the case in Columbine, if a witness starts responding
with “I heard” or “my friend said” then the information most likely is not reliable. If the
information is used including that it is speculation is probably an important part of
communicating the story. The subject of interviewing also brings up the important
questions of whether or not harm could be caused to the victim by having them relive the
events. Seeking an interview through appropriate channels, like through the parents, can
prevent trauma, as opposed to approaching students at a vigil or immediately after the
event when emotions are just under the surface. Ultimately the heuristic’s three
categories are meant to encourage questions that may prevent undue trauma and provide
care to victims of crisis events.

**Heuristic Application**

While the heuristic works to cover an extensive number of questions for
journalists to consider as they write a story, it can be minimized to a few key questions
that professional reporters might not already consider on a daily basis. These specific
questions not only highlight some of the gaps in the frames and recommendations offered
by the CDC, but they also offer a focus on the ethics of care when working with victims and reporting to the audience of the publication. The five guidelines that stood out as key were:

1. Does the benefit of the information outweigh the harm of sharing it?
2. Are you influencing the audience?
3. Is there another side of the story to tell?
4. What information is not available yet?
5. Are your sources reliable witnesses?

These five questions highlight several of the items that appeared in the frames of the case studies and that were missing in the frames according to the CDC. These five questions pull the focus back to the victims and bring the journalist to an ethics of care by keeping that focus on the victims and the witnesses.

In the first question, does the benefit outweigh the harm, journalists are asked to analyze the situation they are in and think of people who could be harmed by the information being released in the article. This question is already often asked as part of many codes of ethics for journalists, including in the SPJ code as has already been addressed. It is important to include because at times information that is harmful to the victims is necessary to include in an article. Knowing how the shooter in the Virginia Tech shooting was able to re-enter classrooms because the doors could not be locked, lead to an investigation by the Virginia government and allowed for changes to be made to school security at many universities. Reliving the details of what happened in the
classroom could have been harmful to the victims and their families but knowing the
details created a greater benefit to the public by allowing changes to be made.

The second question, are you influencing the audience, on the other hand, is not
often considered by other codes. While this is a complex question with many items to
consider when writing an article, it is an important piece to connect to the CDC
recommendations and the ethic of care. The CDC asks that journalists don’t influence
other potential shooters to create a contagion event. Using the frame and the word choice
of the article can this information cause someone to go out and think they can earn fame
by killing other people? By including portions of a manifesto, as was the case in Virginia
Tech, NBC allowed some of the words and messages the shooter shared to be consumed
by others who might cause harm. This leads to more harm and is not in keeping with
caring for the audience and victims.

The third question, is there another side, helps reporters to pause and consider
what information they may still need to include to provide care to those reading. This
aligns with the CDC in assisting to avoid speculating. Is there someone else the journalist
can talk to and get more information the topic? The CDC puts a significant emphasis on
using care when covering mental health so as not to put out information that may prevent
others from seeking professional help. Including a mental health expert as a witness in an
article that looks at the mental health of the shooter can help prevent harmful information
from reaching the audience. In Columbine there were many rumors about the shooters
and their motivates. After many years, information came out that one shooter was
depressed, and one was a sociopath (Cullen, 2009). The information at the time of the
shooting was that both boys were bullied and this was the motive behind the event, this was apparently false. Making sure witness and experts are included in the story when possible can help round out all the facts of an event.

Next, what information is unavailable still? In an event that is still in the process of unfolding this is an important question to ask. This does not mean a story cannot run until all the information is available, but that the reporter should make note of the information that could change or that has not been released. Including that information for the reader is an important part of covering a story with an ethic of care because it allows for contingencies that could change as the story plays out and reminds the reader that the event is not over yet. In the Columbine shooting coverage continued for hours because police were not able to enter the building immediately. Reporters had limited information at the beginning of their coverage because the police had limited information. It would have been important for reporters to remind the readers of this fact. Early on they did not know the number of victims, or even the number of shooters. They also didn’t know about the bombs placed around the school building. As the CDC notes in their guidelines, reporters should also not speculate on the motives of the shooters. When speculating it can cause harm, and is not in alignment with the ethics of care, by spreading false information as it can take days or weeks for police to determine a possible motive.

Finally, is the fact of witnesses because we know witnesses are not always reliable. When possible, reporters should be able to verify the information provided by the victims. In the case of a school shooting the victims only have a small piece of the
overall picture of the event. They are often contained in one space during the duration of the event and do not know what happened throughout the building. Also, with school shootings the victims are young and typically in shock of some form. So, the information provided can be unreliable. This is shown in the rumor of the coverage of the Trench Coat Mafia. The shooters dressed in trench coats to hold ammo and conceal weapons. At some point a witness gave information about the shooters being members of the Trench Coat Mafia, which apparently there was no such thing (Cullen, 2009). By reflecting on this question of witnesses, reporters can be sure to confirm information they receive to avoid spreading misinformation about an event.

An easy way for journalists to remember these key five questions is by using the mnemonic WHIMM, because of course one would never report on a whim.

Witnesses
Harm
Influence
Missing side
Missing information

While each of the questions in the heuristic has a level of importance when looking at the issues that come with covering crisis events, the five above hold the most value in addressing the vital information that often becomes muddled in the chaos of the event. W- are the witnesses reliable; H- does the benefit outweigh the harm; I- are you influencing the audience; M- has a side of the story not been covered; M- is any information missing or not yet available. With the mnemonic device and the concise information, it should be easy for reporters in the field to reference the questions and
maintain an ethic of care toward the victims and audience. It would be beneficial to put this condensed heuristic to a test during the coverage of a future crisis event.

Conclusions

The purpose of this dissertation was to evaluate the frames used in coverage of mass school shootings and other crises to see if a guideline for an ethics of care could be provided to improve future coverage of crisis events. When looking at the frames within the first few days of three mass school shootings, there seems to be a script or pattern of coverage. The publications analyzed look to cover the event broadly in the first days so they can present the full picture of the event. As details on the shooting begin to be found, the script then dissolves and coverage focuses on the details of the individual event. This can be seen in the frames for each event. The mass shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999 was an early case; coverage was focused on how the community responded to the event. The coverage in The Denver Post also contained the largest number of articles. I don’t put much weight on this as there could be many factors as to why including, the move of more coverage online over the last 23 years, or the fact it was an early and deadly shooting many had never seen before. The Marjorie Stoneman Douglas shooting in Parkland, Florida, in 2018, with the availability of social media and the students’ use of it, highlighted activism as students found voices to speak out against gun violence. The coverage for Virginia Tech focused on the community and the victims, perhaps because of the high number of lives lost. While there does appear to be a general script for coverage of mass school shootings in the United States, that script quickly focuses on the details of each event. The hope behind creating this heuristic would be to
encourage journalists to use care ethics, and to focus on including frames that would draw the readers away from providing infamy to the shooter, and to focus on the victims.

Much in the way the Center for Disease Control (CDC) provides guidelines to reporters when covering suicide, we should consider using similar guidelines in covering mass shootings and other crisis events where contagion is a possibility. The Columbine shooting is cited by both the shooters in the other two case studies addressed in this dissertation. The extensive coverage of the event and the shooters led to the notoriety of the shooters. According to research done by the CDC (2017) and Jetter and Walker (2018) this notoriety encourages contagion or copy-cat events. I hope that by applying the proposed heuristic to consider an ethics of care media, outlets can take away some of the theater around mass shootings while still providing the details of the event the public should know and honoring the victims. The CDC does provide similar guidelines for mass shootings, but this heuristic takes their recommendations to a deeper level. Their research reiterates that media coverage can lead to contagion events (CDC, 2017). This heuristic expands on the CDC recommendations, by guiding reporters to look more specifically at the content of the reporting and their sources. The CDC guidelines focus more on what to avoid or leave out. They say to not blame mental illness as the cause of the shooting, or that one specific problem caused the event, don’t use the shooter’s name too often, and to not use terms like “lone wolf” or “broken hearted” or use images of the shooter with weapons. They also encourage reporters to only share facts and to not speculate on motive or mental health (CDC, 2017). The heuristic in this dissertation uses open ended questions to encourage reporters to reflect on the circumstances around the
event, as the frames in the three case studies show that details can change what needs to be covered. By looking at questions to consider the heuristic allows reporters to develop an ethic of care for reporting on crisis events.

I believe this research needs to continue. Newspapers are delayed in their release of the coverage, I only had access to articles published the day after the event. It would be beneficial to study and review the messages being released by television media in the minutes and hours after the event as the news is first breaking. This is because much of the information is not available as a crisis is first being reported on. With live coverage there is also the question of the images being shown to the audience and the effect that seeing those images may have on the well-being of the viewer, or the victims. The proposed heuristic of care would certainly apply to broadcast media but there is the possibility that more questions could arise out of studying the frames or language used in broadcast or video coverage. Another area where study could change the heuristic is media shared across the internet. Questions have risen after coverage of the 2016 U.S. presidential election about fake news and click bait, and how we can seek more balanced coverage of controversies. Much of this challenge can be addressed by the media analyzing the frames they cover in their reporting, and by looking at the larger audience clicking on stories. An analysis of how readers click through articles and what combination of frames and headlines attract readers could be helpful in adjusting the heuristic for online readers so news organizations can highlight important news. Finally, we can also continue to study the frames of future mass school shootings to see if the script changes and how society and technology continue to influence the way we
communicate. Based on data collected by the Gun Violence Archive mass shootings are a problem that only continues to get worse in the United States. If this research is continued perhaps a pattern can become apparent, and changes that can be made will become clear.

Ultimately this heuristic is just a beginning step in addressing how the media covers crisis events. It is meant to start the process of acknowledging the information readers consume can have an effect on their well-being and the role the media can play in balancing the frames they use to provide care for readers. I hope that this dissertation stands as a call to action to continue research on gun violence, and the need for changes to be made across many aspects of United States culture: including journalism, mental health, and gun control.
APPENDIX

As I avoided using the names of the shooters in the body of this dissertation I would like to provide that information here, but first I would like to provide the names of the victims as this dissertation shows the focus should remain on them.


**The Perpetrators**
Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, Seung-Hui Cho, Nikolas Cruz
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BIOGRAPHY

Ashley Yuckenberg received her Bachelor of Arts in English and Media Arts and Design from James Madison University in 2006. She was employed as a teacher in Fairfax County for seven years and while working on her Master of Arts in English with a focus on Teaching Writing and Literature from George Mason University in 2011. She has three daughters and four rescue pets, all of whom help inspire her love for teaching and social change.

EDUCATION/LICENSURE

Ph.D. Writing and Rhetoric, George Mason University, Aug. 2013- Dec. 2021
  Dissertation: Ethical Implications of Communicating Risk in the Media: A Heuristic for Reporting on Crisis Events with a Focus on Mass School Shootings, Committee: Dr. Douglas Eyman (Chair), Dr. Katherine Rowan, Dr. Heidi Lawrence

Master of Arts English, Teaching Writing and Literature, George Mason University, Jan. 2009-Dec. 2011

Teaching Certification, University of Virginia, Jan. 2006-Dec. 2006

Bachelor of Arts, English and Media Arts and Design/Print Journalism, James Madison University, Aug. 2002-May 2006

VA Post-Graduate Professional License of Education with endorsements in English and Journalism, 6-12

PRESENTATIONS

National Conference Paper Presentations
“A Heuristic for Media Consumption with a focus on Rhetoric” National Consortium for Teachers of English National Conference 2019
“The Disappearance of Writing in the Disciplines in Writing Intensive Courses” presented at International Writing Across the Curriculum (2016)
Yearbook Planning Tips and Tricks presented at Gettysburg Yearbook Experience (2009)

Regional Presentations
“Managing Groups in Online Environments” presented at Innovations in Teaching and Learning Conference, Fairfax, Virginia, 2021
“Teaching Transformation Talks: How Your Teaching has Changed” presented at Innovations in Teaching and Learning Conference, Fairfax, Virginia, 2021
“Virtue Ethics in the Coverage of Crisis Events” presented at Association of Business Communication Southwest Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2018

Local Conference Paper Presentations
Mason and Northern Virginia Community College Writing Across the Curriculum Best Practices (2017)
Genre in the WI Classroom presentation to the Writing Across the Curriculum committee (2016)
Staff Development Presentations
Using Technology to Write (2009)
Best Practices, Creating a Classroom Newspaper (2008)

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS
George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia  
BUS 103/303, Professional Skills Term Professor  

George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia  
SOM 301, Business Communications Lecture/Lab Term Professor  
Jan. 2017 – Present