

2022

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Media and Mass Shootings:

Field Theory in CNN News Coverage of the Columbine High School and Parkland High School Mass Shootings

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Abstract

Through discourse analysis, this article seeks to compare the cable news coverage of the Columbine High School shooting and the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting (n=81) in the first two days of coverage using field theory, with CNN broadcast transcripts as the unit of analysis. The research showed that the shooter was the dominant shaping force in the CNN discourse in both school shooting events.

KEYWORDS:

FIELD THEORY
MASS SHOOTINGS
SCHOOL SHOOTINGS
CABLE NEWS
ELECTRONIC NEWS

NOTE: This is the ACCEPTED version of the manuscript and hence may not reflect all changes in the final version.

TO CITE: Hume, H. & Perreault, G. (2022) Media and Mass Shootings: Field Theory in CNN News Coverage of the Columbine High School and Parkland High School Mass Shootings. *Electronic News*. <http://doi.org/10.1177/19312431221111380>

School shootings are at the forefront of social issues in the U.S. political climate, sparking discussions about gun safety and legislation across the country. According to a study conducted by the Center for Homeland Defense and Security at the Naval Postgraduate School (2020), 2018 accounted for the highest number of active school shooter incidents since the start of their data tracking in 1970. In 2018, there were 11 incidents reported, resulting in 83 people injured or killed. The shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Florida, contributed to the record-breaking numbers of 2018, taking the lives of 14 students, a teacher, an athletic director, and a football coach (Levenson & Sterling, 2018).

With the substantial number of U.S. school shootings, it is important to analyze the information that cable news media outlets select to disseminate to the American public. Cable news media are an important and influential source of news for the U.S. population, influencing the way political, social, and economic events are perceived and interpreted. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, watching the news is still the preferred method of news consumption for Americans, over reading the news or listening (Mitchell, 2018). Even with the emergence of digital media, cable news media is a major source for news, with viewership increasing (Grieco, 2019). The Columbine High School shooting attracted the most public interest out of any other news story in 1999, according to the Pew Research Center (1999). 92% of Americans said they followed the shooting “very closely” at the time. During the shooting, the mass media played an “integral role in the public perception of school shootings as a social problem” (Muschert, 2007, p. 65). The shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School only extended this perception, in that it was followed by an urgent call for policy change, notably spearheaded by the youth affected by the tragedy. The night of the shooting, news media

reported on the “unified message” of “remarkably poised and articulate teenagers” calling for gun control (Goodkind, 2019, para. 3).

This article compares CNN news coverage in the two days following the events of the Columbine High School, or Columbine, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, or Parkland, shootings. A discourse analysis explores how the conversations following the Columbine and the Parkland school shootings reflected field norms for the presentation of the event and the discursive construction for the victims and the perpetrators. The objective of this discourse analysis is to examine the shift in journalistic discourse surrounding school shootings across almost two decades by looking at two visible and robust cases. The emphasis on a single case helps circumscribe attention to a field’s norms, which we know are resistant to change (Vos et al., 2012). That said, certain norms have changed in response to sustained pressure (e.g. integration of Twitter into news routines as a result of market pressure, the explicit labeling of lies and misinformation during the Donald Trump presidency in the United States). This article highlights the ways in which CNN’s reporting norms have remained static in regards to school shooting events as a result of the news values presented through the tragedies.

Literature Review

Field Theory

In essence, Bourdieu’s (1977, 2005) field theory reflects a sports metaphor—imagining professional fields as operating on a field. Actors on the field are pulled in multiple directions as a result of the expectations of their profession’s *game*. In essence, the theory emphasizes an interest in understanding the “reproduction of fields of intellectual or economic striving” (Lizardo, 2004, p. 377. Fields tend to fight for the preservation of their space as it stands, even as athletes push against the renegotiation of the games’ rules while in play. Journalism is no

different with journalism fighting to preserve its norms (Vos et al., 2012). Research has demonstrated that the traditional values of journalism prove very resilient to calls for change or even to pressure from external forces (e.g. Vos et al., 2012; Perreault & Stanfield, 2019; Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020). Journalists operate with *doxa*, a well of knowledge and experience that helps journalists understand their place within the field (Bourdieu, 2005). Journalists also operate with *habitus*, the habits of the field or the “strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 77). This sort of principle has proven valuable in other sorts of unexpected challenges, allowing journalists to innately and almost unconsciously respond to breaking news events with an understanding of their journalistic role (Perreault, 2014; Perreault et al., 2020; Perreault et al., 2021; Thomson et al., 2018;) or to the coronavirus pandemic with an understanding of how their practices need adapt (Perreault et al., 2022).

The goal for actors on the field are forms of *capital*—economic, cultural, and social. Cultural capital is often referred to in terms of prestige, often reflected in terms of valued journalistic work such as investigative reporting, in-depth reporting and thoughtful commentary (Vos, 2020). Social capital is often connected to a journalists’ social circle—or their social network. And economic capital refers to the whole of a news organizations financial resources. In prior research on school shootings, Alaimo (2021) postulates that journalist’s race to “attain cultural and economic capital” (p. 13) may prevent newsrooms from being able to shift their norms, and by extension, the continually trod narratives of school shootings.

News Coverage of School Shootings

Research on news coverage of school shootings has primarily focused on newsworthiness (Lawrence & Mueller, 2003; Schildkraut et al., 2018). U.S. news media coverage of school

shootings tends to reflect a general lack of discussion regarding the intricacies of policy implications, with a stronger emphasis on spectacle (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). Given that school shootings would tend to reflect so many news values—relevance, personalization, frequency, timeliness, negativity, unexpectedness, they would tend to receive more coverage as a result (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001).

Certain norms have shifted with the development of technology, notably the emphasis on live coverage (Kananovich & Perreault, 2021; Matsa, 2017). This has had implications for coverage of crisis events over time with a greater degree of misinformation tending to be shared between confirmed reports (Deavours, 2020). Deavours (2020) compared the Sandy Hook school shooting with news coverage of 9/11 in particular with an interest in the journalistic norm of neutrality—a norm journalists struggled to enact. Her study (2020) demonstrates that enacting neutrality primarily became difficult in light of discussing policy decisions, more so even than in discussing the deaths resulting from the school shooting event.

One norm that has been deemed to be relatively static in coverage of school shootings is “offering explanations of events” (Pelled et al., 2021, p. 2119). In mass shootings, these explanations tend to reflect the antecedents of the shooting (e.g. the shooters behavior, background; Muschert & Carr, 2006). Pelled et al. (2021) argues that “‘logical’ motives for the shooting can help explain the event” (p. 2119) which may explain why so much time is granted to the shooter in such circumstances—their actions would seem to reflect strong news values.

Birkland and Lawrence (2009) supported the idea of focusing on youth as the guiding norm for reporting following Columbine, asserting that the news coverage of “the Columbine attack constituted their own lessons, although those lessons are often advanced to pursue disparate policy goals” (p. 1421). Newsrooms increasingly highlight concerns about the

contagion effect of news coverage of mass shootings: the likelihood that reporting on a mass shooting would seem to result in further mass shooting events (Dahmen, 2018), perhaps a reason for newsrooms emphasize policy issues in light of mass shooting tragedies.

The data collected will be used to address the following research questions:

RQ 1: How does the cable news coverage by CNN discursively place school shooting events in the context of the field?

RQ 2: How are school shooters discursively constructed in the cable news coverage by CNN?

RQ 3: How are school shooting survivors discursively constructed in cable news coverage by CNN?

Methods

Cable news media was selected as the medium for analysis because of the popularity of receiving news from television amongst Americans. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center reports that TV remains “the dominant screen” for Americans receiving their news, leading with 57% of U.S. adults reporting that cable, local, or network nightly news is the platform they most often turn to (Mitchell et al., 2016, p. 2). And while there is comparative value in reflecting on the differences across networks, more at stake in coverage of mass shooting events are the norms of journalists. Hence, a single-outlet focus was selected given that this would allow us to focus on the nature of the norms of journalism, which, while resistant to shifting, have indeed shifted in certain circumstances (Vos et al., 2012; Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020). Discourse analysis was selected as the method for research because discourse analysis focuses on how “talk constructs meaning” (Davis et al., 2010, p. 332) and how communication through language is used to create social realities (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). And so hence, the

focus on CNN here allows us to better reflect on what has and has not changed in journalistic norms over time. The use of discourse analysis will allow for the deconstruction of the words used to communicate facts by cable news media in order to understand the norms constructed for journalists in coverage of mass shooting events.

The date parameter selected for this study was the day of the event and the two days after the event occurred. For Columbine, this includes the day of the event, April 20, 1999, to April 22, 1999. For Parkland, this includes the day of the event, February 14, 2018, to February 16, 2018. This date range was selected to include not only the basic fact reporting assumed to be disseminated in the first couple of days of reporting, but also the policy conversations that followed the events. This time frame allows for the evolution of conversational discourse to be represented from the occurrence of the event.

The channel for analysis that was selected was CNN. This channel was selected because of its popularity nationally and its wide viewership. According to Statista (2020), CNN averaged 744,000 viewers per day, making it the fourth most-watched channel in terms of daily viewers.

The unit of analysis for this research is the transcript. Each transcript was analyzed in the data collection process. The cable news media broadcasts for the reporting on Columbine were analyzed through transcripts accessed through the database Nexis Uni. A custom search was conducted, restricting news article types to “broadcast transcripts” and setting the custom date range from April 20, 1999, to April 22, 1999. The search term selected was “Columbine.” The total number of results from CNN was ($n = 60$). The results included all kinds of segment material describing the shooting event. The cable news media broadcasts for the reporting on Parkland were analyzed through transcripts using the database NewsBank, also known as Nexis Uni. The results were filtered to produce only broadcast transcripts, with the customized date

range set to produce any segment describing the shooting event from February 14, 2018, to February 16, 2018. The key search term used was “Parkland,” producing a total of $N = 483$, with the CNN ($n = 21$). That brought the total number of analytical units to 81 transcripts.

The researcher undertook a process of etic coding, initially examining all transcripts for field discourse processes and labeling criteria that progressed in the news agenda (Fram, 2013). During this time, the researcher paid particular mind to the ways in which norms manifested discursively.

Result

The purpose of RQ1 was to explore how the cable news coverage by CNN placed school shooting events in the context of the field. The research reflected that the cable news coverage of the Columbine shootings reflected an overarching theme of a lack of morality, which was extended to include a theme in which parents and child rearing were influential factors in the incident, placing the journalist in the role of a moral advisor. In contrast, Parkland’s cable news coverage emphasized the issue of mental health and restructuring policies at a national government level in order to stop further tragedies from occurring.

The coverage of Columbine painted a lack of morality, especially pertaining to juvenile morality, as a key contributor to the incident. During a video tape clip that was broadcast during the newscast, then-Representative Jennifer Dunn asserted that the “solution is found with our children,” and that the parents of America need to “talk to [their] children, after they get home from school, every night at the dinner table, on weekends, to find out what they’re thinking and feeling” (Woodruff et al., 1999). Dinner table conversation was mentioned again in a later newscast, highlighting research that reported that a significant majority of children between 6th

and 12th grade had not had a 10-minute “conversation of substance” with their parents in the past year (Ferraro & Carlson, 1999).

While Parkland created the framework for calling for a restructuring at the national political level, commentary on Columbine during coverage on April 21 starkly contrasted with this ideal, specifically stating that answers are “not in the state legislatures and city councils” and that “we really need to figure out how to change the human heart” (Woodruff et al., 1999). Then-U.S. presidential candidate Gary Bauer argued that the school shooters were motivated by a lack of religious guidance. According to Bauer, children were not being told that they are “created by God” and argued this should be the central factor of the then-upcoming presidential campaign (Woodruff et al., 1999). The need to emphasize children and how they are loved by God was discussed again in this news segment, alluding to the fact that the issue could be related to the fact that religious discourse had been de-emphasized in public schools.

Bauer reflected on what he perceived as the glorification of death in Hollywood, including the vulgarity of current music and how it encouraged violence, specifically against women and police, calling these shortcomings a “virtue deficit” (Woodruff et al., 1999). Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush suggested that the solution could be found in parents screening what their children watch on television (Woodruff et al., 1999). One newscast even mentioned that the AOL profile of one of the shooters reflected a specific video game, highlighting that the video game “calls on players to use pipe bombs, frag bombs, and shotguns to kill other players” (Waters et al., 1999).

One newscast included an interview conducted by Tucker Carlson with an actor who has played violent roles in movies, questioning him on whether or not he would allow his children to watch his violent movies and discussed the influence of violent films on children; at one point in

the conversation, Carlson even suggested that the film industry should set aside some of their profits from violent films for anti-violence campaigns (Ferraro & Carlson, 1999). CNN's coverage also saw the U.S. as manifesting a culture of violence, specifically youth violence. Janet Reno, the U.S. Attorney General at the time, in a another segment asserted that witnessing abuse in the home leads children to accept violence as "a way of life" (Woodruff, 1999).

The Parkland shooting, however, constructed the solution to the issue to lie within mental health reform, not any rectification of morality or parenting practices. This is reflected in news coverage highlighting suggestions of restructuring mental health laws to give the police power to have individuals involuntarily examined by mental health professionals if authorities are alerted to behavior such as "graphic pictures of rifles and blood and gore and guns and bombs [on social media]," "horrific language," or a "person talking about [how they] want to grow up to be a serial killer" (Foreman et al., 2018). Retired FBI special agent Bobby Ciccone pointed toward a solution through the Baker Act, describing it as "allow[ing] schools to target people," like the perpetrator of the Parkland shooting, "who are likely to do substantial harm to themselves in the near future" by bringing them in "for an involuntary confinement for 72 hours" (Berman et al., 2018). Ciccone argued that if the Baker Act had been invoked, the perpetrator would have "been off the street," but instead he was expelled, resulting in him missing out on a "psychiatric evaluation [and] hopefully g[etting] the treatment he needed" (Berman et al., 2018).

Worries about the stigmatization of mental health included dialogue surrounding the Toomey-Manchin bill. Then-Representative Charlie Dent, who asserted that mental health was an "enormous part" of the events that occurred, described the bill as having "a provision that would basically protect health care providers from any liability when they transmit mental health information to the instant check system" (Cooper, 2018b). During the newscasts, individuals

acknowledged the major role that mental health plays but asserted that the conversations need to occur in tandem with discussions on gun control (Cooper, 2018b). Emphasis in a different newscast, again, was placed on “not demoniz[ing] people with mental illness,” asserting that it is important to get people who need help into mental illness treatment, figuring out how to “get people the care they need,” and making sure that they “cannot get their hands on guns” if they are “dangerous to themselves or others” (Cooper, 2018a).

Newscasts emphasized how the shooter had legally obtained the AR-15 he used in the shooting after passing an FBI background check with “no red flags, despite mental health treatment he had undergone in the past” (Foreman et al., 2018). Mental health was described by one CNN law enforcement contributor as “one brick in this wall,” with another brick being access to weapons such as AR-15s. He stated that the combination of mental health, high-powered weapons, and threats result in “critical mass,” arguing that “when you combine two or three [of these elements]” and a “declining life or a failure in life” then that is like “lighting the fuse on the bomb you already have” (Cooper, 2018d). One broadcast included a clip of then-President Donald Trump’s commentary on the event, showing him saying that the White House “is committed to working with state and local leaders to help secure our schools and tackle this difficult issue of mental health” (Howell et al., 2018).

All of this together indicates that the reporting on mass shooting presented an avenue for journalists to obtain greater cultural capital by entering, in a central manner, into significant discussions of child-rearing and mental health among American children.

According to a changing landscape of media ethics, it has become the new standard for American journalism to not give notoriety to those who commit mass shootings (Vincent, 2019). Giving notoriety to shooters can have consequences such as rewarding the shooters with the

fame that they were seeking, shooters increasing the number of fatalities in order to receive fame, and sparking contagion of the behavior (Lankford & Madfis, 2018). While it is important to eliminate identification of the perpetrators, “the details of mass shooters’ lives, motives, and behavior are...an essential topic of the media’s reporting” due to the fact that “scientific studies of mass shooters...would be significantly inhibited [without their inclusion]” (Lankford & Madfis, 2018, p. 267).

In regards to RQ 2, CNN coverage of both mass shooting events includes mention of the names of the shooters even as the identification of the shooters became more highly discouraged following Columbine (Lankford & Madfis, 2018). Both shootings had their perpetrators constructed in tandem with the creation of the overall tragedy.

The Columbine shooters were painted as troubled teens misguided by American pop culture, which reflected the previously described agenda of rectifying a lack of morality; the Parkland shooter was constructed as mentally unstable, following the agenda set forth for mental health reform.

During news coverage of the Columbine shooters, CNN host Greta Van Susteren interviewed Vicky Bane, a writer for *People* magazine, who wrote a cover story on the Columbine tragedy and discussed the perpetrators in her narrative. Bane referred to them as the “typical American boys,” highlighting the fact that they were “involved in soccer,” making them “jocks themselves,” and that they were involved in a “felony car theft of some kind” (Cossack & Van Susteren, 1999). The “troubled kid” discursive construction was furthered by discussions surrounding “programs that [the perpetrators] were in after they were caught,” which were explained by Dave Thomas, the then-Jefferson County District Attorney as “a diversion program operated by [his] office” that was “very similar to probation” (in Woodruff, et al., 1999). Bane

communicated information she gathered from interviewing a soccer teammate of both the perpetrators, that “the families would attend the soccer matches and that although the boys seemed isolated, and of course dressed differently and were made fun of at school, they seemed [to be] fairly normal boys” (Cossack & Van Susteren, 1999). Their membership in the “trench coat mafia” was discussed, saying that the members of this group “picked fights, elbowed kids out of the way in the hallways,” and that “kids complained about this [behavior] and that there were warning signs” (Woodruff et al., 1999). The online activity of one of the perpetrators was detailed during a newscast, emphasizing his last post in an AOL chat room and how in his AOL profile he “used phrases that are used by people who use the computer game ‘Doom’” (Waters, et al., 1999). This particular newscast also discussed how he “used his computer to keep a web site through which he communicated with his buddies in the Trench Coat Mafia gang” to “post violent lyrics from a German techno music group” and a “scribbled drawings with a Satan-like figure and features that seem to portray violence” (Waters, et al., 1999).

Janet Parshall of the Family Research Council argued that she “look[ed] at the pictures, the high school pictures of th[ose] two boys” and thought that “from outward appearances they have all of the ambience of being normal, American kids” and it makes “you wonder what [it] takes that into a child whose heart was clearly so filled with darkness that they walk up to somebody and say, ‘do you believe in Jesus Christ?’” and then shoot them before they answer the question” (Ferraro & Carlson, 1999).

The discursive construction of the Parkland shooter was created by the emphasis placed on his mental health history. CNN correspondent Rosa Flores shared that “the police [were] called to his home 39 times since 2010 for things like domestic disturbance and [being a] mentally ill person” and that he possessed a second Instagram account that “show[ed] pictures of

him with a mask, [and] menacing photos of an arsenal of weapons” (Cooper, 2018c). A separate newscast expressed that the multiple trips to the home by the authorities and his social media “should have raised alarms” and that “we need to find out what happened and find out how we can use that kind of data to get people the care they need” (Cooper, 2018a). His behavior was described in one newscast as “erratic,” communicating that he had a “desire to kill,” and that his social media posts were “disturbing,” all language that supports the creation of the mental illness discourse (Baldwin et al., 2018a).

CNN correspondent Natalie Allen said that the shooters’ “public defenders [were] painting a sad and disturbing picture of the teenager,” and a newsclip was showed of Gordon Weekes, the executive chief assistant public defender, saying that the perpetrator “ha[d] been experiencing enduring mental illness his entire life” and that it had been “an ongoing issue that he ha[d] been dealing with” (Howell, et. al, 2018). Kyung Lah, Senior CNN U.S. Correspondent, followed Weekes’s statement by informing viewers that Weekes also said the shooter had “lost his adoptive father more than a decade ago” and that he “suffer[ed] from brain development issues and depression” (Howell, et. al, 2018). When a former coworker from his time at Dollar Tree was interviewed, he said that “you could tell he was a little off...but there are people that are off that you wouldn’t say let’s lock him away because he is that dangerous” (Howell, et. al, 2018).

In regards to RQ3, the research question set out to address the different ways the survivors of the two mass shootings were discursively constructed in reference to their recovery and reactions to the events that had taken place in the day(s) prior. The research showed that the biggest dichotomy between the way CNN discursively constructed the survivors was the

“thoughts and prayers” language associated with Columbine, contrasted with the action-based reactions that were emphasized in the coverage of Parkland.

In coverage of Columbine survivors, tragedy and an element of helplessness and devastation to the community was emphasized. In news coverage of Parkland, the idea of thoughts and prayers is often discussed in a negative way, but this is one of the guiding themes throughout Columbine coverage. Rick Kaufman, Communications Director for Jefferson County schools at the time, opened his statements in one newscast by saying that “our hearts and our prayers go out to the families, to the students and our staff at Columbine High School that have witnessed and gone through this terrible tragedy” (in Cossack & Van Susteren, 1999). This sentiment was also communicated by then-Governor of Colorado Bill Owens, who communicated that “today our thoughts and prayers are with the families and the faculty and the students at Columbine High School” and that “no words can convey the grief” (in Woodruff, et al., 1999).

The newscasts shared a hotline phone number that included 24-hour information as well as “numbers and people to contact to get victim assistance and grief counselors” (Cossack & Van Susteren, 1999). Another newscast mentioned the presence of church and religion in the healing process when CNN anchor Carol Lin interviewed Fritz Dale, the youth pastor at Southern Gables Church, who said that they “wanted to really capture [the students’] needs and provide a time where [the church] could minister to them and really provide God’s care to them in a very, very traumatic time” (in Lin, 1999).

An exception to this discourse—and one that bears more resemblance to the Parkland shooting reporting—was when then-Attorney General Janet Reno expressed that the students and the school “wanted to make sure that the people of America knew that Columbine High School

would not be known for a tragedy” but instead be “known for its ability to overcome adversity” (in Woodruff, 1999). During the news conference, it was highlighted that “some of the students were very fearful of going back,” and Reno was asked if it was possible for the federal government to help with “literally raz[ing] the school and “build[ing] another one in its place” (Woodruff, 1999). CNN correspondent Martin Savidge reported that there was “a lot of speculation that the school w[ould] not reopen, mainly, in part, due to the damage and to the memories of many of the students who would have to suffer stepping into the hallways so soon after the tragedy” (Guida, et al., 1999).

In coverage of the Parkland shooting, the survivors were constructed as looking for policy change in addition to their feelings of grief and shock. Anderson Cooper reported that there were “so many students [there] who [he’d] talked to ... who seem mobilized, who seem to ... be angry, who seem to think ... that this time something [could] be done” (Cooper, 2018b). Later in the newscast, Cooper mentioned that there were “so many people” in Parkland who “do not want the school and this community to be defined by this” (Cooper, 2018b). In response to Cooper, Michael Udine, the then-Broward County Commissioner said: “Parkland’s an amazing city. This school is an amazing school. You’re seeing the kids that are going on TV. These are kids that are achievers, be it in drama, in business, in school and academics. We’re going to rebound because this is an amazing school and an amazing setting” (Cooper, 2018b). According to Cooper, family members were “asking for justice to be served,” reflecting an action-oriented response instead of passivity.

Lori Alhadeff, mother of a child who was killed in the shooting, told CNN reporter Alisyn Camerota: “My child is dead. I can’t help her. But I can help all those other kids at

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and all the other kids in America and around the world. We have to protect our children, we have to fight for them” (Cooper, 2018c).

When asked by Camerota what she would like to say to President Trump, she responded: “You need to help us now. We need security now for all these children that have to go to school. We need action. Action. Action.” (Cooper, 2018c). Cooper acknowledged that this “highly mobilized” reaction from surviving students is “kind of rare to see in students so quickly after a school shootings” (Cooper, 2018d). Cooper reported that “survivors of the massacre [were] speaking to lawmakers” and that they were “see[ing] this as a catalyst for change” (Cooper, 2018c).

Then-representative Ted Deutch, a member of the Judiciary Committee at the time, expressed that the students “need to [be] give[n] the opportunity [and] the tools” and a “platform to use their voice” because “America needs to hear from them” (Cooper, 2018a). Lissette Rozenblatt, the mother of a child who was a survivor, mentioned that her daughter was interested in holding a local rally to take action and encouraged voting, because “if we don’t vote, nothing happens” (Baldwin, et al., 2018b).

Discussion

This manuscript utilized discourse analysis to compare how CNN news coverage discursively operated within the journalistic field across two U.S. school shooting events, Columbine and Parkland, and to explore how norms have shifted over time.

First, it is worth considering that while the Columbine shootings overall reflected a discursive theme of *morality* and the Parkland shooting *mental health*, these are both considered

serious issues in U.S. society. Both of which reflect that cable news saw coverage of mass shooting events as events aimed at building cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977).

In RQ1, the research showed that Columbine coverage discursively constructed as a morality deficit, while the Parkland coverage discursively constructed as a mental health problem—but both reflected a desire among journalists to achieve greater cultural capital. In RQ2, the research showed that the shooters were discursively constructed in tandem with the overarching discussions surrounding policy reform and issues within the country and that the media has not evolved with suggested practices of not giving notoriety to perpetrators of school shooting events. In RQ3, the research showed that the discursive language reflected devastation and loss for Columbine victims, which contrasted with the action-based discourse of Parkland victims’.

From the perspective of field theory, it is important to note a similarity across the reporting—a focus on the perpetrator. Conversant with Vos et al. (2012), this would seem to be a static norm that has been relatively immune to pressure from police, lawmakers, etc.—given that the emphasis on the shooter has been linked to contagion effects (Dahmen, 2021). While RQ 1 rightly indicated the placement of journalists as striving for cultural capital by placing themselves as a central locus in the discussions of child reading and mental health, when the RQs are taken together they are notable in their lack of reflectivity on the journalistic *doxa*. Normatively, journalists have a responsibility to emphasize the victimized in this reporting, reflected in standard journalistic understandings of the field. Yet what we see here is that journalists instead emphasizing the perpetrator. Given the nature of the reporting, it would seem the capital journalists are reaching for here is economic—seeking eyeballs for ratings using salacious details about the perpetrators. As the Columbine perpetrators were discursively

constructed as troubled teens from their run-ins with the law to their questionable choice of video games, the lack of morality became the overarching issue for all of America, not just the two perpetrators. This happened, likewise, with the Parkland shooting. The perpetrator had a history of mental illness— so the conversation transformed from focusing on how the mental illness of an individual might have influenced this particular event to an urgent need to reform mental health in the U.S. as a whole. This gives way to the idea that the “broken” attributes in the shooter(s) themselves are the same as the “broken” attributes in society as a whole. With all this considered, it is important for Americans to notice which particular facts are being selected about an event when they are being reported on in the news media.

Likely the enduring norm of emphasizing the perpetrator has its roots in the newsworthiness long-established in mass shooting coverage (Muschert & Carr, 2006). Journalists, in their effort to move from the difficult emotions of the reporting (Deavours, 2020) would naturally seek to produce more *explanatory pieces*. Yet it is in those explanatory pieces that journalists would find themselves seeking the antecedents for the shooting event in the shooters background (Pelled et al., 2021).

Moving forward, journalists should seriously consider solidifying “no-notoriety” policies that are suggested amongst the communications community (Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Vincent, 2019). Policies, while imperfect, have been effective in shaping reporting norms (Perreault & Meltzer, 2022). In addition, it is important for media practitioners to consider not generalizing the flawed character traits of a perpetrator or perpetrators to all similar criminals in the country. Media practitioners should take great care to acknowledge that they are in charge of shaping the public’s opinions and understanding of politics and society as a whole. As the intermediary between politicians and the public, the media must take responsibility for the weight of their

words and how the selection of facts influences what the American people expect from their government.

It is important to recognize the limitations and opportunities that are rooted in this research. Because discourse analysis is a qualitative form of research, this research is not generalizable to all channels of media, or cable news coverage of all school shooting events. The research was intended to explore the norms of the two events, and meant to increase understanding— it in no way predicts, or intends to predict, future coverage of any such type of events. Also, it is important to note that the dataset only includes CNN and excludes a comparative cable news channel or channels from consideration. While efforts were made to include Fox News, the singular channel is a shortcoming and should be considered while interpreting the data. With that being said, this provides an opportunity for further research into the comparison of mass school shooting events across different channels of media to give a different perspective.

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