Chapter 6


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ABSTRACT

Mass shootings in the United States continue to be a cause for national concern both for the public and politicians alike. A key component in this pervasive discourse is the news media, which, since most people never will directly experience a mass shooting or other episodic violent crime, acts as the main source for information about these and other crime events. The present study analyzes the media coverage and framing patterns of 12 years of public mass shootings following the 1999 attack at Columbine High School. A two-dimensional analytic model is used to examine framing at both the spatial and temporal levels. The findings indicate that while the framing across the time dimension remains consistent with previous research, the use of the space frames departs from previous research, indicating a shift in the coverage. These findings and their associated implications for policy responses to mass shootings also are considered.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5670-1.ch006
INTRODUCTION

In the wake of mass shootings, and particularly following high profile events such as Columbine (1999), Virginia Tech (2007), Aurora (2012), and Sandy Hook (2012), media coverage inundates television screens, newspaper headlines, and other modes of communication. As people struggle to understand how or why such an attack occurred, demands for action against the shooters (as well as future perpetrators), coupled with appeals for change to prevent additional attacks, fill the national discourse. In response, many politicians and pundits offer potential solutions, often aimed at addressing the three major proffered causal factors of mass shootings – guns, mental health, and violent media (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016a; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013). The discourse between those with the power to enact change and those who demand it typically plays out on a national stage via the media.

Given that the majority of news consumers never will directly be impacted by a mass shooting, the media then simultaneously become their main source of information about these events, much like with other types of crime that are rare (see, generally, Graber, 1980; Surette, 1992). As such, the manner in which these stories are framed can have broader reaching consequences beyond simply attracting viewers and ratings. In addition to providing a platform or stage upon which politicians and pundits can campaign for response and prevention strategies, the way in which mass shootings are covered by the media can give audiences a disproportionate understanding about these events, which can in turn lead to a moral panic about the phenomenon (see Elsass, Schildkraut, & Stafford, 2014; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Stafford, 2015) and unrealistic expectations or support for related policies. As such, understanding the way in which such stories are framed can be an important first step in assessing such strategies as they relate to the prevention of and recovery from mass shootings. Such investigation also is the focus of the present study.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Spanning disciplines of mass communication, political science, and sociology, researchers have continued to examine the role of media in influencing the saliency of social issues, including mass shootings. This body of scholarly work can be divided loosely into three key research areas: the issue-attention cycle, agenda setting, and media framing. These categories, while useful as conceptual tools for organizing relevant research, actually are interdependent of one another.
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