Framing the Violence: How Mainstream American Newspapers and Cable Networks Frame Coverage of Mass Shootings

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Chapter I
Introduction

Gun violence has become an unfortunate staple in contemporary American society. If the media is to be believed, both in terms of content of message and quantity of coverage, mass shootings are becoming more frequent. Statistics seem to confirm this. According to ongoing research conducted by Mother Jones magazine, there have been 68 mass shootings since 1982, 41 of them occurring after the Columbine shooting of April 1999, perpetrated by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (Follman, Aronsen, & Pan, 2014). Among the criteria used to define an incident as a mass shooting were at least four fatalities by a shooter acting alone who was also a fatality or casualty of the event. The event also needed to occur in public (Follman et al., 2014). With the advent of 24-hour cable news networks and the ubiquity of online news sites, an increase in frequency of mass shootings results in saturation of coverage. When these tragic events occur, they remain in the mind of the public for weeks or months at a time.

In 2014, the website Every Town for Gun Safety released an infographic that quickly went viral. It claimed that since the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012, there had been 74 school shootings. Though this statistic may at first seem very startling and sadly unsurprising given the current climate as far as mass shootings are concerned, the political fact-checking organization PolitiFact declared this claim to be mostly false (PolitiFact, 2014). PolitiFact noted that while the number of shootings was itself true, that they had not been mass shootings on the level of Sandy Hook, where 28 people lost their lives. Included in the statistics were even such incidents as a suicide in a school parking lot when school was not in session. However, this anecdote does illustrate how polarizing and alarming the discussion about gun violence in America can be, especially when younger people or schools are involved.
The increase of frequency of mass shootings is not the only indication of the gun violence problem that America faces. The U.S. has far higher levels of gun ownership and more instances of gun violence, mass shootings or not, than any other developed country in the world.

According to a 2013 study conducted by Dr. Sripal Bangalore and Dr. Franz Merreli, the U.S. averages almost 90 firearms per 100 people. The U.S. also averages over 10 firearm-related deaths per 100,000 people. (Lupkin, 2013). Compare this to a country such as Japan, which averages 0.6 guns per 100 people, and 0.06 firearm-related deaths per 100,000 people. No other developed country from the list of 27 comes anywhere close to owning as many firearms as the U.S. It would be a gross oversimplification to claim that a higher rate of gun ownership equates to higher instances of gun violence, but that does not mean that these statistics are invalid or irrelevant. There may be other factors at play, and this study aims to determine what they are.

The bottom line is that mass shootings are a frequent occurrence in this country. This high instance of incidents leads to a search for causality. Coupling the long news cycle that these events spawn with the understandable emotional need for closure, it is only logical that once the details of an event have solidified, a cause must be determined. Most recently, the mass killings in Aurora, Colorado, and Newtown, Connecticut, ignited a nationwide political debate about gun control laws and mental health awareness. After the Sandy Hook shooting, President Obama proposed a number of actions including assault weapon bans, universal background checks, limits on magazine capacity, and harsher penalties against weapon trafficking (Wing, 2013).

Some media outlets have also noted a shift in the gun violence debate from gun control legislation to mental health policies and general awareness. In the wake of the Washington, D.C., Navy Yard shooting in September 2013, many senators began pushing for mental health legislation that stood on its own rather than as part of gun control packages, as they felt this
technique would lead to better passage rates on congressional votes (Killough, 2013). Killings such as those at Virginia Tech, Fort Hood, Aurora, Colorado, Newtown, Connecticut, and the Washington Navy Yard all involved individuals who had been flagged prior to their outbursts as representing a danger both to themselves and others, and this group is unfortunately not entirely inclusive (Follman et al., 2013).

It would be beneficial to analyze what possible causes are discussed the most in coverage of mass shootings, and how they are discussed. The outcome would not determine what actually causes mass shootings, but rather what possible causes are given the most legitimacy by the media, and possibly which causes are taken most seriously by consumers of the news. Identifying any patterns or tendencies in our collective perception of such events might further progress towards decreasing the frequency of such events, or perhaps at least making the grieving and healing process less difficult as a society. If the public grieving process for these events plays out in a predictable cycle, identifying and internalizing the components of the cycle would only serve to increase our understanding of these matters.
Chapter II
Literature Review

Prior to conducting an actual analysis of the way in which mainstream news media covers mass shootings, an in-depth survey of relevant scholarly literature is both necessary and beneficial. The following section covers not only general framing literature, but also the way in which news is framed, how mass shootings are framed, and how the news frames violence in entertainment. Scientific research about the effects of violence in entertainment is also covered. This will result in a thorough theoretical background not only pertaining to mass shootings, gun violence and the news, but also concepts related to mass shootings.

Framing Theory and Possible Applications

David Tewksbury and Dietram Scheufele, writing in “Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research,” in a chapter titled “News framing theory and research,” provided a metaphor that perfectly captured the essence of what framing theory tries to do:

Artists know that the frame placed around a painting can affect how viewers interpret and react to the painting itself. As a result, some artists take great care in how they present their work, choosing a frame that they hope will help audiences see the image in just the right way. Journalists – often subconsciously – engage in essentially the same process when they decide how to describe the political world. They choose images and words that have the power to influence how audiences interpret and evaluate issues and policies. (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2008)

Framing theory is about examining not only what kind of information is being presented, but also how it is being presented. According to framing theory, the lens through which an individual perceives information, whether cultural, psychological, or political, is just as important as the content of the message itself.
The two authors admitted that while framing theory has a somewhat fractured history in which different approaches conflict with one another, there are certain core principles that remain the same. As they explained the idea of reference dependency, they made the point that “a given piece of information will be interpreted differently, depending on which interpretive schema an individual applies. More importantly, however, different interpretive schemas can be invoked by framing the same message in different ways” (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2008). What this means in a practical sense is that every individual brings a different point of view to the table.

The most common way in which framing theory is invoked is to study the effects of framing on individuals reading news stories. Journalists, whether consciously or subconsciously, invoke different frames of reference when presenting a news story. Individuals also bring their own personal frames to a story, whether they are psychological, cultural, etc. An effective example of this as explained by the authors detailed an experiment in which a fake news story was written about an abortion procedure, only in different versions of the story, the words “fetus” and “baby” were swapped (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2008). These two words can have vastly different connotations depending on the individual reading, and may heavily influence the way an individual feels about an issue. “Fetus” is a more clinical, scientific definition, whereas “baby” might elicit more emotional reactions from a specific readership. For a more pertinent example, the title “Call of Duty” might be referred to merely as a video game, or more specifically as a “first-person shooter.” The use of the word “shooter” might cause the reader or viewer to have a different perception of violence in entertainment than a more generic term.

However, it is not just how information is presented, but what information is omitted from a story or not. As the authors explained, “Frames in the news can take the form of
journalists’ descriptions of people and other political objects, their choice of elements of an event to include in the news, words used to name an issue, and more. The framing literature suggests that news audiences are often not aware of the presence of frames and the influence they can wield” (as cited in Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000). For example, choosing to describe a subject’s race or gender in a story where it is not otherwise relevant may have an undue influence on the way the reader interprets the story.

Journalists are not the only actors who are invoking framing theory, whether it is direct or indirect. Corporations do this in their public relations campaigns. Politicians do this during election campaigns. However, for the purposes of this study, journalists and journalism outlets are the most relevant parties to examine.

Framing Analysis and the News

In his 1993 discussion of framing, Robert Entman stated that “Whatever its specific use, the concept of framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text. Analysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel – to that consciousness” (p. 51). Framing could be used to analyze the way news outlets report stories or discussions about mass shootings and their causes.

In terms of a definition of framing or frames, Entman offered that “The text contains frames, which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (p. 52). Journalists and cable news pundits, whether consciously or unconsciously, may be using particular words or phrases to discuss access to firearms, mental health, or violence in entertainment in the wake of a mass shooting, and a framing analysis of
newspaper articles and cable news broadcasts would reveal what these frames are. As Entman described “The culture is the stock of commonly invoked frames; in fact, culture might be defined as the empirically demonstrable set of common frames exhibited in the discourse and thinking of most people in a social grouping” (p. 52).

Entman used the term “salience” when referring to framing. Something is salient when it becomes emphasized by a text or texts as being of worth. Salient terms are more noticeable and important. As he described it, “Texts can make bits of information more salient by placement or repetition, or by associating them with culturally familiar symbols” (53). Because of their frequency, mass shootings have become so ingrained in our culture that they almost cease to be events, instead becoming more akin to concepts or terms. The cycle of shooting, news coverage, and debate might be an inescapable, cyclical entity. Journalists may feel a need to utilize the most salient frames, as they can become so deeply embedded in a culture that to not use them would risk a loss in credibility on the part of the writer or publication (Entman, 1993). With a topic as sensitive and often controversial as mass shootings, publications might feel even more pressure to stick to conventional frames to avoid alienating their viewers. This might be causing journalists, whether consciously or subconsciously, to limit the number of frames present in the wake of a mass shooting.

Scheufele offered a more specific definition of framing in his 1999 response to Entman’s influential essay. Responding to Entman’s assertion that framing at the time did not have a comprehensive theoretical grounding, Scheufele attempted to put together a more cohesive model. One of the definitions he cultivated from the general discussion is of particular note – Pan and Kosicki’s 1993 identification of:

Structural dimensions of news that influence formation of frames: “(a) syntactic
structures, or patterns in the arrangements of words or phrases; (b) script structures, referring to the general newsworthiness of an event as well as the intention to communicate news and events to the audience that transcends their limited sensory experiences; (c) thematic structures, reflecting the tendency of journalists to impose a causal theme on their news stories, either in the form of explicit causal statements or by linking observations to the direct quote of a source; and (d) rhetorical structures, referring to the “stylistic choices made by journalists in relation to their intended effects.” (p. 61) However, framing is not just about news in general. Framing theory can be used to tackle specific subjects within the news.

**Framing of Media Violence Related to Mass Shootings**

Examining other relevant framing literature will help inform this study, particularly literature pertaining to how the media frames instances of violence on the national stage. Perhaps the most remembered instance of a mass shooting capturing the rapt attention of the mass media occurred in Columbine High School in April 1999. This is because it was a crime perpetrated by students against other students in a school, and also because the death toll was so high at 15 casualties and 24 injuries. Columbine became a touchstone and recurrent reference in the discussions surrounding mass shootings going forward.

David Altheide, in his essay “The Columbine shootings and the discourse of fear,” examined this concept. He claimed that shootings like this, and the way that the media cover them, focus on fear on an elemental level. This fear of the unknown and the prospect that something like Columbine could happen at any moment pervades society (Altheide, 2009). He noted that “School shootings are very rare, but fear is very common. And parents’ fear for their children’s safety shoots up whenever school violence receives mass media attention” (p. 1355).

Altheide concluded that Columbine was such a significant event, not only because of the
events that transpired, but because of how it influenced society. One author writing about Virginia Tech referred to “Columbine Syndrome” when discussing the shooters (Altheide, 2009). Altheide elaborated on how much of a phenomenon Columbine has become. “Columbine is the most cited school shooting in the United States … and has for some become a synonym for several crises, including gangs, youthful rebellion, institutional failure of schools, as well as crises in families and government ([as cited in] Stein, 2000)” (p. 1356).

Columbine is important because it was an instance of public violence perpetrated by teenage shooters that involved discussions of violence in entertainment, but also because it served as a benchmark for how these events are discussed. As Altheide summed up, “An important lesson of Columbine is that a horrible event can be cast within an expansive discourse such as terrorism” (p. 1365). We will see this in action as events like Columbine and Virginia Tech, which took place at schools, will be tied to similar outbursts of violence such as the Navy Yard shootings or the Fort Hood massacre. Mass shootings in schools are not simply instances of homicide. They are tragic events that transcend normal crime coverage. Add in religious issues, such as those pertaining to Islam in relation to the Fort Hood shooting, and it becomes easy to see how powerful these events can become in the minds of readers and viewers of the news.

Aaron Kupchik and Nicole Bracy, in their essay “The news media on school crime and violence” explored media violence along similar lines. They presupposed that violence in schools is more likely to garner higher amounts of news coverage, as it is often directed at a population (children) that are more feared for than others (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009). These shootings become events that are part of a pantheon of similar tragedies. They become linked together in a way that it becomes impossible for journalists not to reference them when a new shooting occurs. As the two authors stated, “The frequency of reporting about school crime and
violence will increase dramatically after these visible school crime incidents, and this frequency will remain high long after the story has ceased to be news” (p. 139).

Hsiang Iris Chyi and Maxwell McCombs, in their 2004 essay “Media salience and the process of framing: Coverage of the Columbine school shootings” explored how the news media utilize and exploit frames to draw out the lifespan of a news event such as Columbine. As they described it, “One can hypothesize that journalists (and many of their sources) enhance issue salience on the media agenda through frame-changing. It may well be that the social significance inherent in the nature of the news event makes framing at multiple levels possible” (31).

Current State of Scientific Media Violence Research

Whereas access to firearms and mental health issues have obvious bearing on occurrences of mass shootings, such cannot be said for violence in entertainment. Having said that, a review of pertinent literature proves insightful. The scientific community is far from reaching an uncontested consensus when it comes to determining whether or not there are any definitive effects of consuming violent entertainment. There have been numerous studies that have attempted to determine whether or not violent entertainment either desensitizes people to violence, or makes them more prone to committing aggressive acts.

In their chapter in “Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research” titled “Media Violence,” authors Glenn Sparks, Cheri Sparks, and Erin Sparks explored and summarized the current state of scientific research on the effects of media violence on individuals. The reason they gave for the popularity of this type of research is that it “is frequently punctuated by new movies or TV programs that either push the envelope of violent content or attract attention because of their presumed ‘copy-cat’ effects on some new members of the audience” (Sparks et al., 2008). The essay explored not only the controversy within this particular field of research,
but also how it is conducted and what the common terms are.

While it is demonstrated that many laboratory studies have concluded a positive link between exposure to violent content in the media and an increase in aggressive behavior, the arguments of the opposition are also compelling. For example, the authors pointed out that the opposition take issue with “biased sample selection, imprecise coding techniques, or selected anecdotes based upon dramatic testimony from boys who were being treated for a wide range of psychological problems” (Sparks et al., 2008). While the results of many of these laboratory studies find a positive correlation, as the authors pointed out, the settings under which these experiments are conducted are often far removed from real-world settings.

Even something as basic as a definition of violence is not as clear cut as might be expected. Sparks et al utilized the definition put by George Gerbner in 1972. Gerbner was a communications scholar who pioneered research into the effects on the public of violence on television (Miller, 2005). Gerbner defined violence as “the overt expression of physical force against others or self, or the compelling of action against one’s will on pain of being hurt or killed (as cited in Gerbner, 1972). The authors noted that Gerbner’s focus was not the effects of violent content, but rather a “theory of cultivation” that “emphasized the cumulative effects of exposure to violence on beliefs that people held about the social world” (Sparks et. al, 2008). Gerbner’s theory illustrates an important point: violence or aggressive behavior does not spontaneously occur in a vacuum. There are a number of factors that contribute to violent incidents. The authors pointed out that “too often, researchers have simply concluded that a causal effect exists without even addressing the possible vantage points from which the actual size of an effect can be gauged” (Sparks et al., 2008). This presents a problem as it pertains to news coverage, as these studies that are cited in the media are unlikely to have been properly
verified before they are cited, or are simply too complicated to fit into a sixty-second clip in the middle of a fast-paced news cycle. This runs the risk that public perception might be altered by an improperly contextualized “expert” opinion.

Kwan Min Lee, Wei Peng, and Namkee Park, also in “Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research,” explored the research surrounding the effects of media violence in a chapter titled “Effects of computer/video games and beyond.” Though the chapter focused primarily on video games, the points brought up are important to note regardless of what medium is being discussed. For example, the authors took issue with the way in which aggression is defined in many of these scientific studies. They claimed that “in the worst case, the terms ‘aggression’ and ‘violence’ are used interchangeably, making it almost impossible to distinguish independent and dependent variables from each other” (Lee, Peng, & Park, 2008). The takeaway from this is that an aggressive individual is not necessarily a violent individual.

The three authors also referenced the numerous factors that can lead to an outburst of violence that are often not present or considered in isolated laboratory studies. “…(1) it is not easy to take into account all possible mediating variables such as gender, age, personality, and so forth and that (2) a relationship of the opposite direction – aggressive people seek out violent computer games – or a two-way relationship – reinforcing or reciprocal – is also plausible” (Lee et al, 2008). The point being made is that these laboratory studies might find a slightly positive correlation between exposure to violent content and an increase in aggressive behavior in the subjects of the experiment, but this does not necessarily translate to the real world in any meaningful way. It could be, as they posited, that an already aggressive person seeks outlets that reinforce that aggression, which could be entertainment containing violent content.

These are not the only works that have observed this point. Kurt Squire, in his essay
“Cultural framing of computer/video games,” criticized what he believed to be a dissonance between these studies and the conclusions they draw. He went on to describe one study in which players in a laboratory would play games against one another, and if they lost, they were permitted to punish the enemy players with a sound blast. He noted that the study concluded that players that played violent video games would punish the opposing players with a longer sound blast than players who had played a nonviolent game (2002). Squire took issue and stated that:

To suggest that a .16-second increase in duration of a noise blast is qualitatively the same as committing mass murder is not only an illogical leap, but a disservice to the worthwhile enterprise of studying what are the root causes of tragic events like school shootings or youth violence. (Squire, 2002)

These types of studies are often brought up in discussions of mass shootings, but the method in which they are utilized is hardly scientific and usually suspect to validity. Pundits and journalists are often trying to prove a point that may or may not be true. These scientific studies are complicated in such a way that compressing them into one-sentence summaries for a short news sound bite unsurprisingly leads to confusion as to just what the studies conclude, and makes it easy for writers or pundits to select bits out of context to push their own agendas.

According to a 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 97% of children from ages 12 to 17 play video games, including 99% of males and 94% of females. The survey was conducted “between November 1, 2007, and February 5, 2008, among a sample of 1,102 teens ages 12-17 and a parent or guardian. (PEW Internet and American Life Project, 2008). Considering the violent content of video games, it would seem likely that any definitive effects would have become evident by now – but that is a topic for further research beyond the scope of this particular study.
Rather than try to determine definitively whether people are influenced by violent media, it is worth consideration to attempt to discover just how the media interact with entertainment containing violent content. Given the widespread influence of mass media, it could be that the manner in which violent media are discussed, especially after a traumatically violent event, could have undue influence on the way violent media are perceived. It is therefore important to identify the frames used by the news media after these events.

**Framing Analyses of Video Games**

Framing of all violent entertainment will be within the scope of this study, but video games deserve special attention. As the “newest” medium of mainstream entertainment, games are the focus of more harsh criticism than film or television. Framing in the gaming criticism realm is a very narrow field. There have been two large examples of framing analyses aimed at gaming, and both of them had very broad focuses over long periods of time to determine how the media’s portrayal of gaming has changed over time.

One such work was Dmitri Williams’ 2003 essay “The video game lightning rod.” Williams’ piece is notable because it provides a theoretical background for the kinds of criticism faced by new media, but also because it provides a baseline example of what frames are commonly encountered in texts centered on gaming. In his essay, Williams noted that new media are typically used as a canvas on which society projects its hopes, fears, and morality. He noted that games, like most new media technologies that preceded them, have been touchstones for a vast array of social hopes and fears. As he described it, “Their initial foray into the public spotlight seems at first to be a confusing amalgam of ambivalence, but, as deconstructed here, it illustrates the simultaneous utopian and dystopian visions that typify a new medium” (Williams, 2003, p. 524).
Williams elaborated upon this by providing examples of how new technology and media will often tap into current social issues and fears. He showed that in the 1980’s, the belief was that single parents raising children irresponsibility might tear at the moral fabric of society, and how new electronic media would contribute to this (Williams, 2003, p. 527).

As far as frames go, Williams uncovered more than a few. There are identity frames according to gender (p. 531), age (p. 534), and utopian and dystopian frames in general (p. 537). Dystopian frames will be of the most interest to this study. Utopian frames involved two waves including a focus on the propensity for video games to increase motor skills and intelligence and also an outlet or “catharsis” for violent or aggressive impulses (p. 537). The second wave “celebrated the medium as intelligence-building, fun, social, and an important way to empower children with technology skills” (p. 539).

The dystopian frames that Williams uncovered also occurred in two waves. The first included four distinct frames: “bad displacement, health risks, theft and drug use, and occurred primarily in the early 1980s” (p. 540). The second wave “highlighted fears of video games’ effects on values, attitudes, and behavior and a rise in the language of addiction in game use” (p. 541). Williams noted that two events in particular influenced the definition and length of this second frame: the news controversy stemming from the release of the hyper-violent “Mortal Kombat” and the Columbine high school massacre (Williams, 2003). “Both served as catalysts for fears about the social risks of video-game players, specifically in how games might make players more violent” (p. 541).

These dystopian frames focusing on fear and the potential danger involved in consuming violence in entertainment might possibly be the dominant frames in the week after a mass shooting, and it is not too much to suppose that given the subject matter, this frame might be
amplified. Younger people are considered a vulnerable population deserving of protection, so if violent media are deemed to be a threat, coverage from them will likely be negative, regardless of whether or not the fears are warranted.

Brian McKernan conducted another framing analysis in 2013 centered on gaming that expanded upon Williams’ scope by carrying it almost all the way through the 2000s after starting in 1980, due to the fact that this was the upper and lower limitation of the LexisNexis database that he used (McKernan, 2013, p. 313). In his findings, he noted that the “social threat” frame still remained a prominent one, despite the fact that gaming had become much more popular than at the time of Williams’ framing study (p. 308). This suggests that news coverage plays a large role in how the public perceive a medium.

McKernan elaborated on why he believes a framing analysis such as this is worthwhile. He stated that “Praise by discursive channels closely affiliated with the official public sphere can lead to social prestige and valuable resources for video games and video game players. In contrast, critical portrayals may result in restrictive policies targeting video games and the social stigmatization of video game players” (p. 309). Identifying these frames might be able to prevent that.

This particular framing analysis, though it covered roughly three decades worth of coverage, only focused on one publication: the New York Times. McKernan’s findings were similar to Williams’, and found many of the same frames. He noted that there were five school shootings between October 1997 and May 1999, and that “media figures blamed violent media content, including video games” (p. 317). He elaborated that the newspaper primarily covered gaming as a form of children’s entertainment, and that because of society’s predisposition to take a protective angle when covering children, that video games were portrayed as a threat.
(McKernan, 2013). This is an example of how news coverage and the way subjects are framed can influence public perception.

It is important to determine to what extent violence in entertainment is discussed in the wake of a mass shooting, and what frames are present when it is discussed, or if it is discussed at all. It is entirely possible that violence in entertainment does not take the full force of the blame when it comes to determining the cause of a mass shooting. If the mechanisms and frames used by the media to cover mass shootings are uncovered, it might result in a diminishing of bias. Society might actually get closer to determining what cause, if any, these events have in common so that it might be treated or eliminated. The media coverage of these events plays a large role in the events themselves, and possibly future shootings. A study such as this can help determine what that role is.
Chapter III
Research Methodology

This study focused around the following events: the Virginia Tech shooting of 2007, the Northern Illinois University shooting of 2008, the Fort Hood shooting of 2009, the Aurora, Colorado, theater shooting of 2012, the Sandy Hook shooting of 2012, and the Washington Navy Yard shooting of 2013. These events were chosen because from the list of mass shootings to have taken place in the U.S. since Columbine in 1999, these resulted in the most deaths and injuries (Follman et al., 2013). The study utilized the previously detailed framing theory along with textual analysis to explore the framing of violent entertainment in the wake of mass shootings.

Subjects of Analysis

The Virginia Tech massacre took place on April 16, 2007. Thirty-three people were murdered and 23 additional people were injured. The shooter, 23-year-old Seung-Hui Cho, also died during the incident from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. At 33 deaths, it is the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history (Follman et al., 2013). This shooting was notable because of the fact that Cho sent a confession tape and various other materials in a package to NBC News. It sparked a debate as to whether or not it was responsible of NBC to release the materials (Johnson, 2007). Part of that multimedia package featured what appeared to be Cho imitating a pose from a South Korean film titled “Old Boy,” which sparked yet another violent media debate (Hendrix, 2007).

The Northern Illinois University shooting occurred on February 14, 2008. Six people were killed and 21 were injured. Much like the Virginia Tech massacre, gunman Steven Kazmierscak committed suicide at the scene. Kazmierscak was also said to have stopped taking medication for depression prior to the shooting (Boudreau & Zamost, 2008). According to the
U.S. Fire Administration’s official report on the shooting, Kazmierscak was heavily influenced by Cho’s actions at Virginia Tech (Stambaugh, 2008). This fact makes the Northern Illinois shooting notable not because the shooter was influenced by violence in entertainment, but possibly by the news media itself, particularly the large amount of coverage given to Cho and the Virginia Tech shooting. Kazmierscak’s mental health issues and prescribed medication also made this shooting of note to this study.

The shooting at the Fort Hood base in Texas took place on November 5, 2009. Major Nidal Malik Hasan murdered 13 people and injured 33. Though he did not die at the scene, Hasan is part of the list of casualties, as he was shot and incapacitated by another soldier. The Fort Hood massacre is the deadliest shooting to have taken place on a U.S. military base. Because of Hasan’s Islamist beliefs, as well as investigators’ conclusions, the belief is that this shooting was religiously motivated. Many in the news referred to it as a terrorist attack, but the U.S. government declined to classify it as such (Crabtree, 2012).

The shooting at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, took place on July 20, 2012. During a screening of “The Dark Knight Rises,” perpetrator James Holmes killed 12 people and injured seven others before surrendering to police outside of the theater. As previously mentioned, Holmes seemed obsessed with vigilante justice fiction, particularly the DC comic book character “Batman” (Quinones, Murphy, & Mozingo, 2012).

The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting took place on December 14, 2012 in Newtown, Connecticut. Perpetrator Adam Lanza killed his mother at their home, and then drove to the school and began killing students and staff members. Initial reports suggested that Nancy Lanza worked at the school, but the superintendent denied this (Flegenheimer & Somaiya, 2012). A year after the incident, however, a note was found in her home thanking her for her volunteer
service at the school (Winter, Rappleye, Alba, & Dahlgren, 2013). In total, 28 people were killed, including Lanza, who committed suicide at the school. An additional two people were injured. As previously mentioned, shooter Adam Lanza was said to be “a socially fragile individual captivated by warfare video games and bent on military service” (Kleinfield, Rivera, & Kovaleski, 2013). Though Lanza played video games, it has also been said by members of his family that he was diagnosed as autistic, specifically suffering from Asperger’s Syndrome (Lysiak & Hutchinson, 2013).

The Washington Navy Yard shooting took place on September 16, 2013 in Washington, D.C. Gunman Aaron Alexis, a subcontractor and former Navy sailor, killed 13 people and injured eight. Alexis was killed by law enforcement. As previously mentioned, Alexis was also said to have played video games obsessively. It is also speculated that he suffered from mental illness leading up to the shooting. He reportedly professed the belief that he was hearing voices, and that he was being controlled by “extremely low frequency electromagnetic waves” (Botelho & Sterling, 2013).

**Data Collection**

The database Factiva was utilized to collect data for this study, as it offered access to all of the publications explored in this study. This study focused on three newspapers and three cable networks. For newspapers, data collection included the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. The justification for this is that they are all prominent mainstream news sources with large circulations, and are considered “national” newspapers.

Ideological alignment also played a role in the selection of these publications. The *New York Times* is considered to have a somewhat liberal slant, while the *Wall Street Journal* has a conservative reputation, and the *Washington Post* is considered to be moderate. The cable news
networks utilized were CNN, Fox News Network and MSNBC – for the same reasons as the print publications. CNN has a moderate reputation, Fox News Network is conservative, and MSNBC is seen as liberal. Factiva was chosen as the database specifically because it offered access to all of these publications. This ensures that the study is pulling data from the same pool of potential articles, rather than pulling articles from five publications from one database, and pulling articles from another publication from a different database. It is important to note that this is not a random sampling of the news, but rather a sample of convenience. These outlets were chosen both because they are easily accessible and because they are highly visible in the public eye.

**Search Terms and Sample**

The method of data collection was to construct a pool of articles from the week after each one of the six mass shootings serving as subjects for this study. This process began by searching Factiva for the keywords associated with the event. Time frame was limited to make sure that articles were relevant. Searches were conducted with a limit of one week after the occurrence of a mass shooting. Expanding further than this might have run the risk that the mentioning of the event in an article may lose relevance. After a week, coverage may start to become redundant or repetitious. For example, a mentioning of Columbine in an article written over a decade after the actual event is likely a reference to the event rather than a discussion of the event itself.

Duplicate articles were omitted for the selection, e.g. articles that turn up because a past event is referenced in a text pertaining to a more recent event. For example, a shooting such as the one in Aurora, Colorado, would be referenced in articles pertaining to Sandy Hook Elementary not only because of the chronological proximity of the two events, but also because of the content – both featured young shooters and a high volume of victims. Columbine, for
example, was mentioned in a large number of these articles, but none were direct news accounts of the event itself. In other words, Columbine is such a watershed event that it becomes a frame that is commonly invoked in stories about mass shootings.

Search terms were also limited in another meaningful way. Rather than search for terms like “violent entertainment” or “gun control” and “Sandy Hook,” only the name of the incident was searched for during the specified time frame. Narrowing the scope further than that ran the risk of detrimentally limiting the sample pool of the study. Words like “shooting” and “massacre” were not included in the search terms, as they were unnecessary. For example, in the week after the Virginia Tech massacre, any search for “Virginia Tech” in the news will turn up stories regarding the shooting. Categorizing an incident by using one descriptor over another also runs the risk of eliminating relevant articles from the search.

The following table shows the number of articles that each search returned, organized by shooting and publication. Total number of articles is in parentheses next to the shooting.
The search turned up a total of 3,764 articles across all six shootings and publications. This needed to be narrowed to a manageable amount, so a sample of 10% of the articles was selected from the total sample pool. To clarify, within the set of articles pulled from each shooting, 10% of a publication’s articles were selected. For example, the search returned 530 articles from CNN related to Sandy Hook, so 53 articles were randomly selected from that set. This was not an entirely random sample in that respect. However, the proportion of articles per publication in each event was preserved. How much a publication is trying to get its message out can be just as important as the message itself. Within those samples, a random number generator was used to select the actual articles in an unbiased manner (Haar, 1998). When 10% of a publication’s articles turned out to be a decimal, it was rounded up to include one additional article.

The final sample was as follows:

Table 1

*Total Data Set Prior to Sampling*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incident</th>
<th>CNN</th>
<th>FOX</th>
<th>MSNBC</th>
<th>NYT</th>
<th>WP</th>
<th>WSJ</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Tech</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Illinois</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Hood</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy Hook</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navy Yard</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>675</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Final Data Set after Sampling*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incident</th>
<th>CNN</th>
<th>FOX</th>
<th>MSNBC</th>
<th>NYT</th>
<th>WP</th>
<th>WSJ</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Tech</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Illinois</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Hood</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy Hook</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navy Yard</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This turned out to be 382 articles, or slightly more than 10% of the original sample.

**Textual Analysis**

Once the sample of articles was collected, a textual analysis was conducted to establish what frames are present when discussing violent entertainment in relation to mass shootings. In his book “Textual Analysis: A Beginner’s Guide,” Alan McKee defines textual analysis as “a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world. It is a methodology – a data-gathering process – for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are” (McKee, 2003).

McKee’s text served as a guide for the analysis process of this research project. The texts, in this case, were the news articles and broadcast transcripts culled from Factiva. The texts were analyzed to determine if there are any recurring phrases or tones, or any topics that are brought up in relation to violent media and mass shootings. The articles were first read in a general sense without taking notes. I wanted to read the articles first as the pieces of news that they are, and second as texts to be analyzed. The articles were then read again to highlight salient terms or phrases. Cable broadcasts in particular contained large swathes of information in which the
shooting was not being discussed. Conventional television news coverage entails rotating between developing stories as the broadcast goes on, so large segments of the transcripts were irrelevant, as opposed to news articles in which the entire story is dedicated to the shooting. Transcripts required a special attention to detail to ensure that no coverage of the shooting was missed.

Those terms were then categorized to determine if there are any specific frames pertaining to this discussion, and if so, what those frames are. For example, there may be frames in which violence in the media is discussed explicitly as a cause for actual violence, with scientific evidence provided. There may be another frame in which addictive gameplay is used as a way of illustrating the nature of the shooter’s unstable mind. Stories might also focus on the firearms used, or whether or not the firearm belonged to the individual, was obtained legally, etc.

Prior to analysis, I was careful to be mindful of my own personal biases. As a journalist, I am acutely aware of how the news works on a level that the average reader or viewer is unlikely to match. On a personal level, I have been an avid gamer for most of my life and have watched numerous movies and television programs containing violence. I strongly believe that video games do not cause violence. I do not own any firearms, have never fired a gun, and do not believe that any individual other than a soldier in a sanctioned army needs to own anything more dangerous than a hunting rifle.

I believe that these shooters are more often than not aggressive individuals suffering from crippling mental illnesses. I believe that they seek out entertainment with violent content as an outlet for their violent tendencies. Based on what I have read in the news and online previous to this study, I expected to find that violence in entertainment would be frequently mentioned in a negative way. That being said, I was very careful to not simply look for what I wanted to see. I
was very open to the possibility that the media might not talk about violent entertainment as much as I believe it does, and the tone might not be as blameful as I suspect it would be. The results of the study demonstrate that my personal biases did not unduly influence the findings of the study in an inappropriate way.

This study attempts to answer the following questions

RQ1: What frames pertaining to mass shootings are present in mainstream news coverage in the immediate wake of such an event?

RQ2: What factors influence or impact the creation and establishment of these frames?

RQ3: What patterns emerge in coverage of these events?
Chapter IV
Findings

The following section explores the findings of this research project. It is structured in a way that answers the previously posed research questions in a roughly numerical order. First, there is a general background on the typical mass shooting news cycle. Then, the frames that occur frequently in coverage of mass shootings will be explored in order of dominance. In summary, the two most dominant frames were issues related to access to firearms and mental health issues. Later in the findings section, but primarily in the discussion section, the factors that influence of impact the creation of these frames, as well as patterns in these frames, will be explored. Rather than organizing the findings by shooting, they will be organized by frame, as many of the frames are common to all mass shootings rather than some. Below is a frame that identifies the forthcoming frames.
Table 3

*Frames Present in Coverage of Mass Shootings*

**Blame Frames**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Sub-frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Issues</td>
<td>Symptoms suffered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drugs and medication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Military issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to Firearms</td>
<td>Military issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence in Entertainment</td>
<td>Entertainment as a symptom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>News as violent entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entertainment as a cause</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other Frames**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Sub-frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Depictions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proﬁling the Shooter</td>
<td>Never saw it coming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slipping through the cracks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery and Mourning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Typical Mass Shooting News Cycle**

Much of the coverage related to a mass shooting, especially in the very early hours of coverage, adheres to the standard breaking news cycle. Generally speaking, the first 24 hours after a shooting occurs is dedicated entirely to reporting emerging details. This is truer of the cable news networks than the print outlets, as the news networks have a vast abundance of air time to fill. This leads to hours upon hours of coverage in which details are dripped as if out of a leaky faucet. Networks are trying to figure out who is responsible for the shooting, if the killer is still at large, how many people have been killed or injured, and what security precautions, if necessary, were taken to contain the violence.

As a matter of journalistic principle, most networks are careful not to report details until they have been verified, though occasionally mistakes are made. For example, both the Fort
Hood and Navy Yard shootings originally reported more than one shooter, despite the fact that only one individual was responsible for each shooting. In the case of Sandy Hook, the shooter was originally reported as having been Ryan Lanza, the brother of shooter Adam Lanza. This may have been because Adam Lanza had been carrying his brother’s identification at the time of the shooting. News outlets are always careful to refer to suspects as a “gunman” or “shooter” rather than to name names, for fear or reporting misinformation.

Cable news networks will typically alternate back and forth between news stories that have already broken and a shooting that is in progress. This can mean minutes or hours before a clear picture of the scene can take shape. As details begin to coalesce, outlets begin to search for motivation for the shooting. This typically does not happen until the second day of coverage, as it no doubt takes investigators time to conduct their operations. With rare exception, there is little “editorializing” of the situation in the early hours of coverage, though as will be seen later in the section, “experts” are occasionally brought on to speculate about the events in times when details are scarce.

Narrative Depictions. A smaller subset of breaking news has a peculiar resonance with one of the topics of this research project. Specifically, two print outlets elected to frame the shooting in a narrative way. The events of the shooting are rendered with descriptive words and action, designed to elicit emotional responses in the same way that a similar piece of fiction might. This is notable, given the nation’s attitude towards our cultural obsession with violence.

In an article about the Northern Illinois University shooting in the Washington Post, by Peter Slevin and Kari Lydersen, contains descriptions of action such as “Students screamed and crawled on their bellies to escape the auditorium in Cole Hall as bullets and buckshot flew. The gunman, a former graduate student in sociology, carried a shotgun and two handguns. Police said
he volunteered no motive before he died” (Slevin & Lydersen, 2008). The article contains these bits of narrative sprinkled in with actual details from the case. Another notable excerpt read “A student seated behind her was shot, Cosgrove said. Terrified, she crawled down an aisle to get to the door, soaking her jeans in blood, and scrambled out of the building. Emerging into a winter afternoon, she had left behind her coat, wallet and cellphone. She ran with a crowd of fleeing people toward the student center, she said” (Slevin and Lydersen, 2008).

The New York Times also ran a similar article about the NIU shooting, written by Susan Saulny and Monica Davey. This article is more action-oriented than the previous article. An excerpt read “The man shot again and again, witnesses said, perhaps 20 times or more. Students in the large lecture hall, stunned and screaming, dropped to the floor. They crouched behind anything they could find, even an overhead projector. They scattered, the blood of victims spattering, some said, on those who escaped injury” (Saulny & Davey, 2008). However, this article does provide a wealth of first-person accounts and quotes from witnesses.

The Washington Post also ran a similar article on the Fort Hood shooting of 2009, written by Greg Jaffe and Philip Rucker. It describes the manner in which Kimberly Munley disabled, but did not kill, Hasan. “Hasan, an Army psychiatrist, had already killed or wounded dozens of soldiers, having fired more than 100 rounds, according to Army officials. He was still shooting at unarmed troops who were dragging away their bleeding colleagues when he locked his eyes on Munley, raised his pistols, and charged her” (Jaffe & Rucker, 2009). The final sentence, containing phrases such as “locking eyes” and the brandishing of pistols and the charge toward her, read very much like an action sequence in narrative fiction. The article is even titled “I could hear the bullets going past me.” This article, at almost 1,600 words, is lengthier than the other narrative pieces, and does give a very detailed description of the events with quotes from
This type of article presents an interesting dichotomy. Alternatively, the narrative descriptions, however accurate they may or may not be, might help some readers put themselves in the shoes of those unfortunate people who experienced the shooting. This might lead to more empathy on the part of the reader. On the other hand, in a sense it is impossible to truly achieve an understanding of these events from an outside perspective. The writing in these articles may seem sensationalized, but it also may serve to try to provide an empathic outlet for readers of the story.

**Blame Frames**

After the details have all been reported on and there is a good picture of the events that occurred, outlets search for the shooter’s motivation. These events represent a tragic loss of life, so victims and consumers of the news alike are highly invested in finding out the reason for the loss of life. These frames include not only the shooter’s personal motivation, but also what may have driven them to commit the crime.

**Mental Health Issues.** The mental state of the shooter is often a large focus in the news, as many of these shooters turn out to be mentally unstable individuals. A court had ruled Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho a danger to himself, and members of Sandy Hook shooter Adam Lanza’s family claimed that he had been diagnosed as autistic. These frames serve as a way not only to provide possible explanations for the events, but also to illustrate ways in which these perpetrators are different from the average citizen. The media outlets for this study turned to mental health more than any other subject as an explanation for why these crimes occur. Obsessive consumption of violent entertainment is a symptom of the mental illnesses that many of these shooters suffered from, so it makes sense that the media would use this as an explanation
rather than focusing on one aspect of it.

**Symptoms suffered by the shooter.** Another mental health frame has to do with what specific ailments the shooter suffered from, so that people might better understand the frame of mind of someone who would commit such a crime. For example, the *New York Times* ran an article that not only explored how Navy Yard shooter Aaron Alexis suffered from schizophrenia, but provided general information about the disorder. Writer T.M. Luhrmann poses an interesting possibility: “An unsettling question is whether the violent commands from these voices reflect our culture as much as they result from the disease process of the illness” (Luhrmann, 2013). This question is “unsettling” because of the vicious cycle that it implies. If mental illness causes mass shootings, but is in turn caused by our violent culture, it might be difficult surmise any sort of solution to the problem.

**Drugs and medication.** Along with mental health, pharmaceuticals and drugs also influence the blame frames. For example, Northern Illinois University shooter Steven Kazmierczak was said to have been on antidepressants prior to the shooting, but that he had stopped taking them. In an article in the *New York Times*, Benedict Carey writes “Steven P. Kazmierczak stopped taking Prozac before he shot to death five Northern Illinois University students and himself, his girlfriend said Sunday in a remark likely to fuel the debate over the risks and benefits of drug treatment for emotional problems” (Carey, 2008). This is interesting because it not only discusses a possible cause for the shooting, but also acknowledges the debate that is likely to ensue.

Some outlets turned to medical experts to see if they could learn whether or not aggressive behavior is a possible side effect of going off of medication, or the potential danger of the side effects of these medications in general. Carey writes “Over the years, the antidepressant
Prozac and its cousins, including Paxil and Zoloft, have been linked to suicide and violence in hundreds of patients. Tens of millions of people have taken them, and doctors say it is almost impossible to tell whether the spasms of violence stem in part from drug reactions or the underlying illnesses” (Carey, 2008).

Carey has a quote from a medical professional about possible solutions to this problem. “Ms. Bostock wrote in an e-mail message, "As an observer and suicide survivor, my main wish is that medical professionals, regulatory authorities and other scientists will examine closely the entire medical and treatment history of the perpetrators of these violent incidents in which innocent people are victims” (Carey, 2008).

**Political and Institutional Failings.** While most outlets seemed to agree that mental health issues were the most responsible for causing mass shootings, the angle of coverage differed. Sometimes, it focused on the specific mental issues suffered by the shooter, while other times there was a meta-level discussion about how to deal with such a widespread issue in our country. In a “CNN Newsroom” broadcast with anchor Don Lemon on April 19, 2007, Mary Zdanowicz of the Treatment Advocacy Center spoke about the Cho situation, and how he had slipped through the cracks at Virginia Tech:

There’s no doubt that the laws can present a barrier to getting treatment for people with severe mental illnesses. And in a situation where we have a disease that affects a person’s ability to even recognize whether they need treatment, that’s just wrong. And the whole mental health system really needs to be reformed. (Lemon, 2007)

She goes on to talk about how Cho failed to recognize the symptoms that he was experiencing, or that he was even different from other people. This angle proves the most productive, as it creates discussion about mental illness and ways in which changes in government policy might actually
be able to curb the frequency of mass shootings.

In an interview with CNN’s Piers Morgan about the Sandy Hook shooting, Richard Feldman, President of the Independent Firearms Owners Association, made the point that lip service is often paid to the mental health problem, but that real solutions are often left off the table, as though the discussion was too difficult to have. He pointed out that “we started talking about the particular type of gun used as though being shot with a different type of gun would somehow be better or worse instead of focusing on the problem” (Morgan, 2013).

**Access to Firearms.** The weapons used to commit the crime and the manner in which they were acquired is also a large frame of reference for reporting. This frame focuses on whether or not the guns were acquired legally, or whether or not the shooter should have been allowed to legally obtain the weapon. Mentally unstable individuals’ ability to acquire firearms becomes a polarizing topic of discussion. There is also usually a large amount of coverage dealing with what changes, if any, should be made to gun control laws, and whether gun control laws would have any effect on these crimes whatsoever.

**Military issues.** This is a frame that fits both in the firearms frame and the mental health frame, as shooters with military experience are individuals that are prone to mental health issues that also have access to deadly weapons. In some shootings, particularly those such as the Fort Hood and Washington Navy Yard shootings, the life of a soldier and many other issues related to the military become a frame of reference. For example, Major Hasan was said to have been affected by the many stories of PTSD he encountered while counseling veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In an editorial board statement in the *Washington Post*, there was this quote about Hasan’s working life:

Maj. Hasan, a psychiatrist, was assigned to help soldiers suffering from the
terrible stresses of war and repeated deployments abroad. Fort Hood has had its share of such trouble, with 10 suicides reported this year. During his eight years at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, relatives said, Maj. Hasan was deeply bothered by the cases of post-traumatic stress disorder he saw. But it was Maj. Hasan, not those suffering men and women, who chose to turn a gun on his fellow service members. Whether he did so out of calculation or madness, he inflicted a grievous wound on the men and women of Fort Hood -- one that the nation must now do its best to salve.” (The Washington Post, 2009)

This is only one aspect of Hasan’s possible motivations, and it encapsulates how difficult it was for outlets, and the public, to rationalize how a soldier with seemingly no diagnosed mental illness, could perpetrate such a crime.

There was also speculation that part of his impetus for committing the crime was that he was about to be deployed to a conflict where he would have to fight against other Muslims. Hasan also had reportedly been scrutinized and faced discrimination due to his status as both soldier and devoted Muslim. A *Washington Post* article contained this testimony from a friend of Hasan’s: “Everyone else just sat down there and drunk their beer and looked at him and giggled at him,” the woman said, starting to cry. "They just would laugh at him when he walked down with his Muslim clothes. . . . He was mistreated. He didn't have nobody. He was all alone. He went to his apartment there and was all alone” (Rucker, 2009).

Another military issue frame that occurred had to do with security issues. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* wondered why Navy Yard shooter Aaron Alexis had such high levels of clearance that enabled him to do as much damage as he did, despite the fact that there had been incidents that should have resulted in him being flagged as an individual who should not have access to a military installation.
Shootings such as those at Fort Hood and the Washington Navy Yard, because they took place at military or government installations, face extra scrutiny for their security practices after such tragedies. From a Washington Post editorial board statement: “Investigators also will need to determine how Maj. Hasan managed to smuggle weapons and ammunition into the post facility where he launched his attack, in spite of rules prohibiting the carrying of loaded weapons. The soldiers who were gunned down -- many of whom were preparing for deployment to a war zone -- were unarmed” (The Washington Post, 2009).

These often lead to reviews and overhauls of security practices at these installations.

Regarding the Navy Yard shooting, Wall Street Journal reporter Dion Nissenbaum writes: “Mr. Hagel has ordered a broad review of security and background procedures to figure out what shortfalls exist in the process that allowed Aaron Alexis to hold "secret security" clearance, obtain a job as a contract worker at the Navy Yard and bring a weapon onto the secure military facility, where authorities say he launched a shooting spree before being shot dead by police” (Nissenbaum, 2013).

**Violence in Entertainment.** Violence in entertainment, though not as prominent, does come up frequently during discussions of a shooter’s motivation. Violence in entertainment is generally seen as a symptom of a crime rather than the cause of the crime itself, but some coverage or media personalities do frame violence in entertainment as a cause of real-life crime. Media coverage itself also factors into the discussion of violence in entertainment. The media seems at least partially aware of its role in the process in terms of other potential shooters becoming cognizant of the fact that these types of crimes garner a great deal of media coverage.

**Symptom frames.** Rather than blaming violence in entertainment directly, the most common frame that dealt with this subject treated violent entertainment consumption as a
symptom of a troubled individual’s personality rather than an impetus to act unto itself. Author Brad Thor, from the same “CNN Showbiz” broadcast, stated that:

> When the Secret Service analyzes school shooters, one of the things they have found is that 14 percent of them really gravitated toward violent video games. But 24 percent of them gravitated more towards violent books. So, as an author, I should be more concerned about books than video games, and I think the American public should be less concerned about the video game aspect here. (Hammer, 2007)

Though the quote illustrates that more shooters seem to gravitate to violent books rather than violent video games, the point is not to single out any particular medium for blame. Rather, it goes against the general public perception to illustrate that there are things that the public should be concerned with about these shootings, and violent entertainment obsession on the part of the shooter is low on the list.

Coverage of the April 2007 Virginia Tech shooting also raised similar questions. Gunman Cho sent a multimedia package to NBC detailing and confessing to the crimes he was in the process of committing, and the package contained a number of pictures and videos. In some of the pictures, Cho posed with firearms. The poses were reminiscent of those in video games, as previously stated, but one in particular depicted Cho posing with a hammer, which many in the media believed to be an imitation of the protagonist in the South Korean film “Old Boy.”

However, the tone of this coverage was more questioning than declaratory. Rather than blame violence in entertainment for Cho’s actions, many wondered if it might have been an influence nonetheless. Given the multimedia package that Cho sent, this is not an illogical thing to wonder. However, there were voices of moderation in print media, where there is more time for thought and reflection. *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott wrote in his column that the
public should not blame violent entertainment for mass shootings. He states that:

We have been here before. The extreme, inexplicable actions of a tiny number of profoundly alienated, mentally disturbed young men have a way of turning attention toward the cultural interests they share with countless others who would never dream -- or who would only dream -- of committing acts of homicidal violence. (Scott, 2007)

Scott goes on to point out that it was unconfirmed that Cho had even seen the film that he was imitating, and that millions of people enjoy entertainment containing violence without incident, and that the level of violence in entertainment is unlikely to change any time soon. This frame of treating violence in entertainment as a symptom rather than a cause was the most frequently appearing frame pertaining to violence in entertainment. Cho’s multimedia package, however, hints at another interesting frame.

*News media as violent entertainment.* The last frame pertaining directly to violence in entertainment actually does not have to do with violent video games or movies at all. Rather, it relates to the fact that millions of people, potential shooters among them, are exposed to extensive coverage of these horrific crimes by the news media itself. As Pat Brown alluded in the blame frame, there exists the possibility that potential shooters, in their fragmented worldview, see how “famous” these mass shooters become, and aspire to achieve that level of infamy. The news is obligated to report on these events, and the rise of 24-hour news networks means that there will be no shortage of coverage for these crimes.

This frame came up during analysis of coverage of each of the shootings, but it was most prominent during the Virginia Tech coverage. The decision on the part of NBC to air parts of Cho’s videos and publish his photos was a difficult and controversial choice. Though NBC was not a part of the sample collected for this study, other news organizations were forced to report
on the actions of NBC due to the shooter’s decision to mail his package to them. NBC must be mentioned in some of these frames because the outlet became an essential part of the Virginia Tech story.

This decision spawned discussions and debates across all of the outlets, who wondered if it was a responsible action to take. It was polarizing not only because of the fear of copycat crimes, but also as a matter of sensitivity to the victims. It is interesting that rather than discuss the effects of violent entertainment directly, that the news media recognizes that it, too, is part of the culture surrounding these shootings. A *Washington Post* article detailed an interview with then-NBC News president Steve Capus: “Of course, no one forced NBC to broadcast those words and pictures. Capus said network journalists debated for hours what they should make public. "There are some things we haven't shown and words we haven't released that are more appropriate to hold back," he said. "Journalists have a responsibility. We're not just here to pass on in direct form raw video and complete documents” (Kurtz, 2007).

Many felt that to air such violent materials so soon after the incident was in poor taste and violated codes of ethics. Capus explained the need to maintain a balance between sensitivity and duty. From the same *Washington Post* article: “We tried to be sensitive to the families involved and to the investigation," Capus said in an interview. While it is "possible" that some relatives of the 32 students shot to death Monday may say that the network is giving the killer the platform he wanted, "they also may say, 'We want to know why. We need to know what was in his head, what drove him to do this.' This is a portrait of a killer” (Kurtz, 2007).

These frames are not surprising and do not diverge significantly from the typical frames found in coverage of violent entertainment previously identified in the literature review. However, while there positive frames when there is no proximity to a shooting, positive frames
are nonexistent in the wake of a mass shooting. There are no stories about the educational or therapeutic effects of video games or movies while they are being discussed as a possible cause of symptom of a horrific crime. Rather, all of these can be seen as part of the dystopian frame identified by Williams in his framing analysis. For the most part the frames do not peg violent entertainment as a direct cause, but each of the frames fits within the dystopian frame, merely because of the tone of the discussion and the subject. As Williams put forth in his essay, the dystopian frame focuses on the negative effects that violence in entertainment can have. He defined a “Fear Order Hypothesis” as “news frames involving children…fears of destructive displacement of worthwhile activities, as illustrated in the first wave, then fears of negative health effects; and then, fears about the effects of content on values, attitudes and behavior” (Williams, 2003, p. 541). This is in line with the way in which news reports about mass shootings talk about violence in entertainment. When it is discussed, though it is rare in comparison to other possible causes, it is negative in nature.

**Blame frames.** Though it appears to be exceedingly rare, there is a frame in which the media directly blames consumption of violent entertainment for real world violence. One glaring example of this came during analysis of the Northern Illinois shooting. During an MSNBC cable broadcast of “Live with Dan Abrams” on February 14, 2008 criminal profiler Pat Brown was brought on to discuss the perpetrator with then-MSNBC host Dan Abrams. When asked if it was abnormal that Kazmierczak had no prior criminal record, Brown responded:

> Not surprising at all. Usually, these men are young and they are kind of involved in the anti-life kind of culture of young people. That’s why we always have the guy turning up in black and he’s usually obsessed with killing. And it’s a very cultural thing. If you look back in time, we had kamikaze pilots who killed themselves. And then we have in some
cultures suicide bombers. Here, we have, what you do to get the glory when life is not going well? You become a school shooter. (Abrams, 2008)

Brown goes on to discuss the culture surrounding these school shootings:

And if you actually find out, if you go on the Internet, you`ll find a lot of sites that will actually encourage you how to do this. There are actually games you can play that you practice this. And there is just a lot of ideation out there. How you can be the biggest and baddest and most horrible creature on earth, and it`s considered cool -- as I say, a cool thing to do. It`s like you`re a vampire and you`re going to go out in society that you hate and take care of them. (Abrams, 2008)

It is very clear that the expert Abrams brought onto the broadcast believed that there was a subculture of school shooters and potential school shooters, and not that these are isolated events perpetrated by troubled, lone individuals.

What is even more interesting is that this transcript was not late in the coverage cycle. Rather, this interview took place the day of the shooting. Details surrounding the shooting had not yet even solidified before speculation on the shooter`s motives occurred. This type of frame was very rare.

Another definitive example of this was during the coverage of the Washington Navy Yard shooting. On a Fox News broadcast of “On Record with Greta Van Susteren” on September 17, 2013, a close friend of shooter Aaron Alexis was interviewed. He had this to say about Alexis’ motivation for the crime:

The only thing I can think of is the video games. He played violent video games all the time. That was one of the things he liked to do. I tried to discourage him from it because sometimes it took up more of his time, even more so than hanging around adults. I have
had people comment he was more like a kid playing those games. And I agree with him.

(Van Susteren, 2013)

It is important to note that while Alexis’ friend is far from what one would consider an expert on the subject of the psychological effects of violent entertainment consumption, Fox chose to air his opinion, which might be enough in the minds of the viewers to give it the weight of an expert testimony.

However, even though the media seemed largely to stay away from blaming violent entertainment directly for these violent outbursts, the fear was still there. On a broadcast of “CNN Showbiz Tonight” on April 19, 2007, investigative journalist Jane Velez-Mitchell, speaking to host A.J. Hammer, stated that:

I spoke to somebody who works in the gaming industry, and they were highly alarmed by that shot of the Virginia Tech killer holding up his arms with the two guns extended because that’s a classic stance from gaming. And of course, in videogames, the more points you get, the better off you are. And how do you get those points? By killing people. (Hammer, 2007)

Even though the rest of the broadcast featured discussions in which violence in entertainment was discussed as a symptom, this example shows that people who manufacture this violent content still fear that the public will view them as responsible for the crimes that these shooters commit.

Profiling the Shooter Frames

During the process of reporting a full and accurate version of the events following a shooting, it is natural that outlets try to find out more about the perpetrator in an effort to understand how someone could reach a point where they would commit such a crime.
Never saw it coming. In the course of the investigation, those who knew or lived nearby the shooter are interviewed for their perspective. More often than not, they will express the sentiment that they could never imagine the perpetrator doing something like this. The shooters are often described as quiet and polite, but rarely ever troubled or violent. This frame seems to highlight the fact that these events are tragically unexpected.

Slipping through the cracks. One of the most commonly expressed phrases pertaining to a shooter, along with things like “red flags,” is the phrase “slipped through the cracks.” Often times, the case of the shooter seems like something that should have been noticed or dealt with before, but warning signs and red flags often get ignored, for whatever reason. There was an instance where Navy Yard shooter Aaron Alexis had run-ins with local police, and had even sought treatment at the local Veteran’s Affairs hospital, but neither of these things raised red flags for those in charge of his security clearance. From a Wall Street Journal article by Dion Nissenbaum: “The Navy security official who took the call from local police never passed it along for further investigation, officials said, missing a potential warning sign. “There is no indication that the information went beyond the Naval security force” in Rhode Island, one Navy official said” (Nissenbaum, 2013).

For example, Cho was reported to have stalked two girls on the Virginia Tech campus who reported it to the police. There were also some concerning content in his school work, and a teacher even refused to have him in class. A court had at one point ruled him an immediate danger to himself two years prior to the incident. Yet, he was still a student at the university and nothing was done about it. Many outlets seize on examples like this as a way of blaming the incident on an uncaring system that allows these disturbed individuals to continue on until they cause harm to themselves or others.
Recovery and Mourning Frames

The tail end of the news cycle that accompanies a mass shooting deals with how the victims, the community they live in, and society at large go through the grief, mourning and recovery process. There are many articles and stories that focus on the identities and lives of the victims of these shootings, as well as coverage of their funerals. These typically include a short anecdote and a few qualities about some of the victims. Consider the following from the wake of the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting: “At least three more students being laid to rest, Allison Wyatt who loved to draw, wanted to be an artist, Benjamin Wheeler who was apparently a pint-size fan of the Beatles and Catherine Hubbard who loved animals” (Baldwin, 2012).

Sandy Hook, because of the extremely young age of the victims, featured a large number of funeral stories, as did the Fort Hood shooting, because the victims were soldiers and the shooting was in such close proximity to Veteran’s Day. Consider: “We have been watching the final salute, the final salute to the victims of the Fort Hood massacre, President Obama offering comfort, urging his troops to carry on. This is a time when the entire country is mourning, mourning those 13 and hoping the 30 or 40 others who were injured recover, and recover completely. We saw the grief in all their faces at this memorial for these 13 fallen Americans. The president promised that their killer will face justice in this world and, he said, in the next world” (Blitzer, 2009).

However, the presence of media in the towns where these tragedies take place, and their participation in the grieving process, is not always taken for granted. There is an occasional undercurrent where media are admonished or criticized for not giving the victims more privacy during this difficult time. A New York Times article details the views of CNN’s Wolf Blitzer and his experience covering the Sandy Hook shooting: “Mr. Blitzer, the longtime CNN anchor, said
the few exhortations to go home he had heard while working here had been far outnumbered by comments from people who thank him for telling Newtown’s story sensitively and who want the world to know what happened here. Still, he said, Newtown is providing a particularly vivid laboratory of how the media report this kind of tragedy” (Applebome & Stelter, 2012).

There are also a number of support stories that feature members of the community coming together to support the victims of the tragedy. Visits from the president are a frequent subject of coverage. However, not all of the presidential visits are photo-ops or strictly for emotional support. Consider this quote of President Obama from a Wall Street Journal article in the wake of the Navy Yard shooting:

As president, I have now grieved with five American communities ripped apart by mass violence," Mr. Obama said, citing shootings at the Navy Yard and at Fort Hood, Texas; Tucson, Ariz.; Aurora, Colo.; and Sandy Hook, Conn. By now, though, it should be clear that the change we need will not come from Washington, even when tragedy strikes Washington," the president said. "Change will come the only way it ever has come, and that's from the American people.” (Trindle, 2013)

Even as President Obama attempts to provide emotional closure and act as an anchor for the victims, he admonishes congress for not doing more to prevent these sorts of tragedies.

During the Navy Yard shooting, there were also stories about how the Washington Nationals wore special uniforms to show their support for the victims. A Washington Post article touched on this, and only really mentioned the Navy Yard shooting in passing. It was a recap of a Washington Nationals baseball game, but it had an interesting perspective of recovery and moving on. “A day after the Washington Navy Yard shootings, the horror that unfolded four blocks from Nationals Park, baseball resumed in the District. The Nationals gave anyone who
wanted it a popup pitching idol, a moment to remember and a doubleheader sweep they could sink their teeth into” (Kilgore, 2013). It goes on to quote a player on how he desperately wanted to provide some relief in the only way he knew how – winning a ballgame.

However, another Washington Post article tapped into some controversy on this very subject, citing a Keith Olbermann ESPN report in which he admonished the Nationals for not wearing their commemorative memorial hats during the actual game:

“I'm told by a reliable Washington source that at least some of the players did not want to take the Navy caps off, but still they did. And then just as they had been symbolically telling the victims and the Navy and the nation that they were with them all the way, now the Nationals and Major League Baseball were symbolically declaring that all the way was over, and the grief was over, and the mourning was over, and the regular caps were back on, and available online, and at souvenir stands, and from stadium vendors.”

(Steinberg, 2013)

This is an example of how controversial these events can be, even in the mourning and recovery phase.
Chapter V
Discussion

By and large, the two most dominant coverage frames in the wake of mass shooting are related to mental health and access to firearms. When the hard news is over, and it is known with certainty what has occurred, who is responsible, and who has been affected, the next natural questions to ask are “Why?” and “How?” Typically, these are also the two hardest questions to answer. The answer is that a mentally unstable individual obtained a firearm and used it to kill others, for reasons that usually only the perpetrator truly understands.

What follows is a combination of grieving and politicization. Actions taken by the shooter, or failings on the part of those tasked with providing security, are used to further political agendas on both ends of the ideological spectrum. If the shooter obtained the gun illegally, people will push for stronger gun laws, with the resulting backlash from gun owners and enthusiasts. If it was obtained legally, then the discussion might focus on what type of gun it was, and if a private citizen should be able to own it. Stronger background checks before purchasing guns will always likely be an issue, as many of these mentally unstable individuals are somehow able to legally purchase guns, even if they have red flags that should deter them from being able to do so.

That mental illness is such a dominant frame makes even more sense than issues relating to access to firearms, despite the logical association between mass shootings and gun violence. The U.S is a country with a lot of guns, but other countries have guns, too – only they are not exhibiting the same problems with mass shootings. The question, then, becomes not how these shootings are occurring, but why. Much of the discussion centers around how the “system” has failed these individuals and society as a whole by letting them continue to be a danger to themselves and others until the danger is actually realized.
The days and weeks after a mass shooting are a difficult cycle of shock, anger, grief, answer seeking, and recovery. The average citizen has a difficult time rationalizing the motives and actions of the mentally unstable individuals that commit these crimes. That is why the news, after it establishes all the pertinent details of these crimes, tries desperately to grasp at whatever possible motivations the shooter might have had.

Many of these shooters seem to show an unhealthy predilection for violence in entertainment. Cho took pictures recreating poses from violent movies and video games. James Holmes was obsessed with “Batman,” identified himself as “the Joker,” and chose a screening of “The Dark Knight Rises” as the scene for his massacre. Adam Lanza was obsessed with warfare video games. Aaron Alexis spent countless hours locked away in his residence playing violent games before he committed his crime. It is not surprising in the least that in a time when people are desperate for answers, the idea that violence in entertainment is to blame is considered.

The more liberal side of the media, and niche communities online, lash out greatly at any insinuation from any party in the media that suggests that violence in entertainment is to blame for mass shootings. On websites dedicated to gaming in particular, these types of articles can stretch out for days at a time, making the rounds on numerous websites. They typically employ a frame along the lines of “us against the world,” meant to bind gaming communities together in the face of a seemingly unified movement against them.

However, many of these stories are focused around specific individuals. As previously mentioned in the introduction to this paper, Wayne LaPierre and the National Rifle Association garnered a great deal of coverage in these circles for the hyperbolic statements they made in the wake of the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting. Leland Yee, Democratic state senator from California, has a long history of crusading against video games, including sponsoring a law to
criminalize the sale of video games to minors (Sterling, 2011). These are stories focused around
certain individuals or programs in the media, not any sort of sweeping zeitgeist.

It could be that it is these smaller communities that are framing these comments in a way
that suggests that society at large truly does blame violent entertainment for violence in the real
world. A study along those lines might be beneficial. However, the fact that there have been and
continue to be numerous scientific studies conducted in this area to determine the effects of
violent entertainment on the mind leads to the conclusion that this issue is bigger than specific
communities attempting to alter public perception by framing stories in different ways.

Interestingly, this study of the framing aspect of this subject has concluded that violence
in entertainment is not as prominent a factor in post-shooting coverage. By and large, issues such
as mental health awareness and gun control politics played a much larger role in the post-
shooting discussion environment.

Rather than blaming these incidences of violence on obsessions with violence in
entertainment, news media outlets seemed to treat the subject in a very realistic fashion. They
treated it as a symptom of a problem, an indication or red flag among many others that these
perpetrators are mentally unstable. Untreated mental illness and warning signs that are ignored or
slip through the cracks are seen as more responsible for these outbursts of violence than too
much time shooting virtual terrorists on a screen. The frames present in the wake of a mass
shooting pertaining to blame are dominated largely by mental health and issues related to access
to firearms. There are a number of factors that appear to influence the creation and establishment
of these frames, though some play a larger role than others.

For the most part, the media outlet responsible for the reporting does not seem to
significantly affect the frame of the coverage. Some outlets reported more or less than others. For
example, the data collection returned far more articles from CNN than from MSNBC, for example. However, this did not affect coverage, as the same types of stories were seen from all of the outlets examined. Part of this has to do with the way some of the transcripts of cable broadcasts were structured. For example, Fox broke their transcripts up by story, whereas CNN and MSNBC transcripts covered many minutes of television spanning multiple stories, many of which were unrelated to shootings that were breaking news. This means that some CNN transcripts may have been anywhere from six to ten thousand words, while most Fox transcripts averaged in the low thousands.

There seems to be a very well-established cycle for covering mass shootings. There is a breaking news phase, an investigatory phase, and a long recovery phase. Compounding this with the already clogged 24-hour news cycle, coverage of these events plays out in a relatively predictable fashion. Aside from an editorial or expert guest here and there, there are few outliers or surprises in terms of news coverage. This could be because these events are so tragic and often controversial that to stray from conventional coverage methods would risk a loss of credibility in the eyes of the news consumer.

The location of the shooting plays a significant role in what frames are present in the coverage of a shooting. If the shooter has a military history, or if the shooting takes place on a military base, gun control and military issues will be in the forefront. Coverage of the Fort Hood and Washington Navy Yard shootings demonstrates this effectively. Fort Hood coverage featured discussions of extremist Islam, PTSD, terrorism, supporting the troops, etc. That the shooting took place so close to Veteran’s Day only compounded this fact. The Navy Yard shooting coverage chose to focus a great deal of coverage on security clearance issues and if military bases and assets are properly protected.
Shootings at schools, such as Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois, and Sandy Hook also have their own frames. School shootings are seen as tragic because young students are not as prepared to defend themselves as soldiers might be. As previously discussed in the literature review, children are a vulnerable population, and the fear for the safety of children is played up heavily in coverage of these events.

The identity of the shooter also heavily influences the frames utilized in coverage of a shooting. For example, it seemed to be much more difficult for the media to understand the motives of a shooter like Adam Lanza, about which little was known, in comparison to the politically and religiously motivated attack of Nidal Hasan. While Hasan did suffer some mental illness and possible PTSD, the media had a much more difficult time parsing out any sort of motivation for Lanza’s crime. Violent entertainment is more likely to be brought up during the coverage of a shooting in which the shooter is younger and suffers from mental illness, rather than if the shooter is an adult and/or a member of the military, such as Hasan.

Despite a few outliers whose loud voices seem to rise above the general din of news coverage, the blame that the media places on consumption of violence in entertainment appears to be exaggerated. The media seems to recognize that horrific public gun violence is a result of a mental health system that fails those who need it the most, and inadequately enforced gun control laws. Obsessive consumption of violence in entertainment is a symptom of a larger disease, rather than the case of the disease itself, and the mainstream news media outlets seem to recognize this.

It makes sense that violence in entertainment appears in these discussions, and given the controversial, polarizing, and tragic nature of these shootings, it is unsurprising that groups with opinions on either side of the spectrum are highly opinionated. However, if the way in which
coverage is framed is any indication of what the media believes the causes of these events to be, news coverage is on the right track.

Further Research

Possible improvements on this study would entail a wider scope in terms of both date ranges and publications. While it makes sense to choose outlets and publications that are not only well known, but also represent a variety of ideologies, it might be beneficial to expand the study to smaller websites and communities. Expanding analysis to additional weeks after a shooting to see if violent entertainment becomes more of a subject of discussion might also be beneficial. It could be that as new details about a shooting run dry, outlets might begin to meander to other subjects or delve deeper into others. Any research on mass shootings is beneficial, whether it is done on what causes these incidents, or what role these shootings play in our society, whether from a psychological or political standpoint. As these shootings become more frequent, the need for research becomes greater.
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