

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION ARTS AND SCIENCES

THE RHETORICAL INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA ON AMERICAN PUBLICS IN THE
AFTERMATH OF MASS SHOOTINGS

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FALL 2017

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in Communication Arts and Sciences and Supply Chain Management
with honors in Communication Arts and Sciences

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ABSTRACT

Gun violence resulting in three or more deaths, or mass shootings, has become almost a daily occurrence in America's news. After each shooting, media outlets immediately report on the facts, the history, and the potential policy changes that may arise. Newspaper media in particular though continue reporting for a longer period of time after the event. Using a method focused on Aristotelian topoi, this thesis includes the analysis of local and national newspaper articles for one year after three major mass shootings: Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Pulse Nightclub. The analysis of each case will answer questions about how newspapers report and what topics they most frequently report on, while distinguishing between local and national print news sources. The rhetorical analysis discusses what constants exist in mass shooting reporting and what aspects have evolved over a span of seventeen years. Throughout this thesis, I have worked to provide my readers with an understanding of the rhetorical influence that print media reports have on publics in the aftermath of mass shootings.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my deepest thanks first and foremost to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Rosa Eberly, for sharing your knowledge and resources throughout this thesis writing process, but more importantly for your support throughout the past three years that I have known you. Thank you, Rosa, for encouraging me to keep searching as I thought I would never settle on one specific topic, and for still encouraging me when I went through rough periods of no writing.

Thank you to my thesis advisor, Lori Bedell for constantly putting a smile on my face and being the positive voice I needed as I worked through this writing journey. Thank you also to Dr. Brad Serber for your work and for your helpful comments those many times in Rosa's office, and to Jeff Knapp for teaching me the magic of library databases. And lastly, thank you to my roommates, friends, and family for hearing about my thesis far more than I'm sure you ever wanted to.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Aftermath

In the immediate moments after a mass shooting, the media become a whirlwind of reporting. In order to be the first to report, outlets share the most available information, even before confirmation by credible sources. As Stephen King writes about in his essay *Guns*, the process goes somewhat along the lines of a shooting occurring, then “the BREAKING NEWS logos at the bottom of your screen,” followed by “the first video. It’s always from a cellphone. You know this because it’s short, and everything is all crooked and jittery. Mostly what it shows is people running.” The victim count begins, “as many as six. No, as many as twelve. No, witnesses who fled the shooter say it’s at least eight,” and is then confirmed. Next come reports outside of hospitals and interviews with witnesses, which lead into the next seventy-two hours of cable news coverage.¹

This very first hour though, is not what I am most interested in looking at. Our twenty-first century mindsets expect news immediately; our patience has dwindled so low that we’re willing to accept any news that comes to us and will wait for confirmation on its truth until later. The media outlets realize that “the pressure is worse than ever to be fast” but that “we shouldn’t accept these kind of errors as the norm.”² Newspaper reporting, however, forces us to wait at

¹Stephen King. “Guns.” Philtrum Press, January 25, 2013.

²“Sandy Hook Shooting Media Inaccuracies - Business Insider.” Accessed October 1, 2017.

least a marginal window of time before reading the news. With an article being published the day after a shooting, there has been at least some amount of time for journalists to gather and verify facts. These facts, or conjecture, as Corbett and Eberly use, are at the primary level of stasis.³ News reports tend to begin at this initial level, and then move beyond facts into evaluation and proposals.⁴ The focus of this thesis though, is not on the immediate reporting of facts as a mass shooting is occurring; the focus is on newspaper media in the aftermath.

Focus of Thesis

This project will focus from the day after the shooting up to the first anniversary of each mass shooting studied. The three events that I will analyze are the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999, Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, and Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in 2016. In wanting both comparable and contrasting events, I chose two that could be defined as *school shootings* and one that would fall outside of that category; all three shootings were chosen to span from one of the first events of this nature to one of the most recent. I will analyze newspaper articles from both local and national sources for one year after each of these events. By looking at an entire year post-shooting, I found articles that begin to explore the idea of policy change, as well as a broader range of articles to see how publics are influenced over time.

As I began to analyze newspaper articles written about these mass shootings, I considered a few questions: In the aftermath of a mass shooting, how do newspapers report? Do the topoi

<http://www.businessinsider.com/sandy-hook-shooting-media-inaccuracies-2012-12>.

³ Edward Corbett, and Rosa Eberly. *The Elements of Reasoning*. 2nd ed. Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

⁴ Ibid.

change based on local or national sources? Does the reporting change from one stasis to another? Do they report on the same topoi? Do they influence publics in any particular ways? Do they propose public policy changes? These questions are just a few that must be asked to determine the rhetorical influence that print media reports have on publics in the aftermath of mass shootings.

Literature Review

Scholars have studied the aftermath of mass violence from several different disciplinary perspectives. Craig Rood writes his dissertation on the concept of blame that surfaces while publics deliberate in the aftermath of a mass shooting. Rood discusses both good and bad rhetoric and the use of blame in epideictic, forensic, and deliberative rhetoric, as speakers praise certain people, hold others responsible, and attempt to avoid shootings in the future.⁵

Schildkraut and Muschert conducted a content analysis on newspaper articles in the aftermath of school shootings in order to see how each event was framed. Focusing mostly on the spacing and time frames of the articles, Schildkraut and Muschert concluded that the way in which the media report on school shootings has changed significantly since the Columbine shooting.⁶

The research done by Rood and by Schildkraut and Muschert has a direct connection with the rhetorical analysis that I have completed on the media reports. The framing of these articles

⁵ Craig Rood. "Deliberating in the Aftermath of Mass Shootings." The Pennsylvania State University, 2015.

⁶ Jaclyn Schildkraut and Glenn W. Muschert. "Media Salience and the Framing of Mass Murder in Schools A Comparison of the Columbine and Sandy Hook Massacres." *Homicide Studies* 18, no. 1 (February 1, 2014): 23–43. doi:10.1177/1088767913511458.

goes hand-in-hand with the rhetorical influence of the article, as they both affect what the publics focus on after reading. The rhetorical influence on the publics then almost directly impacts the deliberation that these same publics take part in. Rood notes that although not all deliberation is ideal, even the non-ideal deliberation is important as “participants are making public claims about the shared past, present, or future.”⁷ The blame that is used during these deliberations can stand at multiple different stasis levels. In my analysis, determining the stasis level at which an article is written will often impact what type of “blame” is at play. These various types of blame— “blame of shooters, blame of U.S. culture, blame of mental illness, and blame of guns” all play a part in readers’ and publics’ focus as well.⁸

Multiple Publics

In addition to scholarship on the aftermath of mass shootings, this thesis uses research on publics as another point of departure. A singular *public* is a term that encompasses all people into a group that holds a uniform view. Seeing that all people of “the public” do not hold the same views, it makes sense to analyze the rhetorical influence of a newspaper article on both a certain public, and its counterpublic. As Dewey discussed and Eberly reflected on, many publics are often unaware they themselves make up a public.⁹ Throughout years of high school, students are taught that they are part of the *community*, a word that suggests agreement and consent. However, the concept of publics gives room for discourse, deliberation, and even disagreement.

⁷ Craig Rood. “Deliberating in the Aftermath of Mass Shootings.” The Pennsylvania State University, 2015.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rosa A. Eberly “From Writers, Audiences, and Communities to Publics: Writing Classrooms as Protopublic Spaces.” *Rhetoric Review* 18, no. 1 (September 1, 1999): 165–78.

doi:10.1080/07350199909359262.

Eberly suggests the idea of looking at classrooms as *protopublic spaces* in which students are encouraged to “see themselves as actors in different and overlapping publics” in order to “help them realize the particular and situated nature of rhetoric and the need for effective writing to respond to particular needs of particular publics at particular times.”¹⁰ Newspaper and media reports after a mass shooting assist with just that—they open up a space for understanding the event and allow readers to become part of a public. Through writing at a stasis beyond fact and conjecture, a journalist can urge a reader to agree, to disagree, or to look further into a causal, value or proposal claim about an event. By acknowledging the existence of multiple publics, readers begin to associate with these publics. Eberly discusses the danger of a public not recognizing itself, and then shares Dewey’s solution that “improving the means and methods of communication is the only way citizens can recognize their common interest.”¹¹ In the case of a mass shooting, this common interest is often found through reading the media’s reports. The newspaper articles begin a one-sided method of communication, which then gives readers an exigence to continue the communication further, often times leading to discussion of policy. In the specific cases of the Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Pulse Nightclub shootings, publics have been formed around the topoi of school safety, gun control, and equal rights for the LGBTQ+.

Type of Analysis: Topoi

In order to see how these newspaper articles rhetorically influence these publics, I conducted my analysis at two different levels. Initially, I began with a content analysis of topoi in each of the articles I chose to study. Generally, “an Aristotelian *topos* (‘place’, ‘location’) is

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

an argumentative scheme that enables a dialectician or rhetorician to construe an argument for a given conclusion.”¹² On a slightly different note, past rhetoricians understood *topos* to mean a “complete pattern or formula that can be mentioned at a certain stage of the speech to produce a certain effect.”¹³ In analyzing news articles, I chose to include both interpretations of *topos*, and by following Corbett and Eberly, to view them most directly as places and paths-- places that have clear conclusions written out, and paths that lead to implied conclusions. Moore discusses how to complete both a quantitative and qualitative content analysis on newspaper content about crime. I followed much of her instruction in my qualitative aspects as I noted, in addition to *topoi*, the “use of metaphors in reporting, use of emotive language, juxtaposition of certain images or words, and motifs.”¹⁴

Explicit vs. Implicit

These *topoi* can be either explicit or implicit in writing. An explicit *topos* would be one that is clearly written out and the direct words can be found in the articles analyzed. An implicit *topos*, however, is still a path or place where invention begins, but is never clearly stated. An implicit *topos* in my analysis is more of idea or aspect that is present in the articles, and then leads to further analysis. This idea or aspect, however, is not written out in words. This idea of an implicit *topos* closely relates to the question written about by Cheryl Glenn— “How

¹² Christof Stan Rapp. “Aristotle’s Rhetoric.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2010. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2010. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Sarah Moore. *Crime and the Media*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

do we study silence?” In her book, Glenn discusses what impact silent rhetoric can have on its audience and how a lack of words can even say more than words themselves.¹⁵

Stasis

Beyond the content analysis of topoi, it is important to look at the stasis levels. The stases start at the most basic level of *fact or conjecture*,¹⁶ where journalists tend to stay; asking the question *what happened?* Fact and conjecture are seemingly indisputable; however, a fact can be both expressed and interpreted in several ways. Oftentimes a fact will be interpreted in a certain way based on causes and values, and therefore is arguable. The second stasis level is *definition*, in which you define the ideas being reasoned about to ensure all that all readers are on the same page. In a public news article, definition becomes an important element of reasoning because there is frequently no opportunity for further discussion after the audience reads the article. As Corbett and Eberly discuss, alternative definitions leave the possibility open for two entirely different paths of reasoning, and therefore, definitions must be clear from the start. The third and fourth stases are interchangeable, but for clarification purposes, I will use *cause and conjecture* as the third level. Cause answers the question of *how did this happen?* In order to make a causal claim, a narrative is put together with relationships forming between multiple facts or conjectures. The level of cause is often studied in hopes of recreating something again, or in hopes of avoiding a second occurrence. In the case of mass shootings, cause and blame are often connected in determining why the shooting occurred at all. The discussion of causes of events

¹⁵Cheryl Glenn. *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

¹⁶ Edward Corbett, and Rosa Eberly. *The Elements of Reasoning*. 2nd ed. Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

leads into the evaluation of an event, item, location, etc. Claims of quality and *value* are the fourth level of stasis. Something can be evaluated at two levels, according to Corbett and Eberly—by its consequences or by its nature. When evaluating an event, opinions come into play and adjectives are used as descriptors much more frequently than nouns. Evaluation is completed based on criteria that can be either explicit or implicit in order to give support to our evaluations. After looking at an event through its facts, definitions, causes, and values, an event can then lead to policy, proposal, and future procedures—essentially, it can lead to change. Through procedural arguments, a rhetorician (or in this case, journalist) can begin to take his or her past judgments based on the initial stasis questions and actualize them into future actions. This final stasis level includes advocacy and argues with the goal of implementing a certain policy or procedure that the rhetorician feels is most appropriate.¹⁷ In the case of newspaper articles in the aftermath of mass shootings, policies are often deliberated on, but whether or not they are always implanted cannot be clearly said without further analysis. While not being the only way to form an argument, reasoning at these five stasis levels encourages forming claims in a systematic way in order to end with a well-reasoned policy or proposal.

Methodology and Objects of Study

When searching the newspaper archives for articles written about Columbine, Sandy Hook, and the Orlando shootings, seemingly endless results appear. For the purpose of my studies, I needed to narrow down the search results in order to collect a reasonable sample of articles to study. However, I needed to make these selections in a systematic and non-biased

¹⁷ Ibid.

way. The first step I took in narrowing down the number of results was through search terms. With the local newspapers, for all three events I used the term “shooting” and then included the location of the shooting with either “Sandy Hook Elementary,” “Columbine High School,” or “Pulse.” For the national level, I again used the term “shooting,” along with the location, but I also added the name of the city in which the shooting occurred— “Newtown,” “Columbine,” or “Orlando.” In order to get the most direct results on the exact topics that I wanted, I searched for articles in which these key terms appeared in either the heading or the lead. In order to narrow down the number of articles even further, I intended to choose certain days in which the articles were published. Although the articles are not from Sundays only in every instance due to the frequency, most of them are. I chose to look at articles from the Sunday editions simply because these are often expanded versions of the paper and include a broader range or summary of events that have occurred. Outside of articles written on Sunday, I chose to analyze an article on the day after the shooting occurred and on the anniversary of the shooting for each event. Since the local papers had many more results than the national papers, I narrowed down my searches in the local papers to include only articles that appeared in section A as well. By sticking with only section A, there is a chance that I will miss out on articles that are not seemingly breaking news for the front page. For every event in all newspapers, I have chosen to study reports only, and to leave out commentaries and editorials that were published in the papers. Although I am aware that my search criteria has left out a large number of articles written about these events, in the interest of time, I needed to analyze fewer articles. Through my search terms in the title and lead of a paper as well as specific dates and sections, I narrowed my results in a way that was systematic and consistent among all local and national newspapers for each event.

This thesis includes the analysis of one of the three chosen events in each chapter. I analyzed the events in a chronological order. Chapter one begins with the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, followed by chapter two on the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, and then concludes with chapter three on the shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando in 2016. I chose to write about the events in a chronological order in order to see how changes in reporting happen over time, just as Schildkraut and Muschert discussed.¹⁸ The shooting at Columbine High School is often considered “one of the first” mass shootings in a school, and one that lead to many copycat events in the years that followed. Columbine is said to have set the standard for how mass shootings are reported in the media. Sandy Hook occurred thirteen years later and had not only print and news reports, but also the aspect of social media reporting as well. The shooting at Pulse Nightclub occurred less than a year ago from the time of writing this thesis, giving a more current representation of newspaper reports. By analyzing the articles and events in chronological order, I was able to see how information accrues over time, and the changes that occur in the media’s reporting style.

After the analysis of each individual article was completed, it became necessary to compare not only the local articles to one another, but also the local articles to the national articles—did they report in similar ways? Comparing articles to one another written about the same event showed that the journalists often were writing towards a certain public’s interest. The collective rhetorical influence that each of these articles had on the publics then lead to ideas of policy changes. Throughout each chapter, I address whether or not policies were suggested in

¹⁸Jaclyn Schildkraut, and Glenn W. Muschert. “Media Salience and the Framing of Mass Murder in Schools A Comparison of the Columbine and Sandy Hook Massacres.” *Homicide Studies* 18, no. 1 (February 1, 2014): 23–43. doi:10.1177/1088767913511458.

the articles, and then whether or not local or national governments enacted these policies within that first year.

Decisions Made: Theoretical Point of Departure

Rhetorical Influence is not a phrase chosen at random in which to center this entire thesis. The phrase came after careful consideration of what I truly wanted to study at a deeper level and of what I knew I did *not* want to study. Close, but not exact synonyms, might include, *cause, correlation, impact, effect*, etc. For both similar and different reasons, each of these terms was not the correct fit. Both the terms *cause* and *effect* lean much more towards the social sciences side of communication. Rhetoric impacts and influences people quite frequently, but direct effects will never come until numbers and facts are determined and publicized. Robert Roland touches on this concept when he says, “In contrast, social scientists, notably George Edwards, have critiqued rhetorical studies for failing to provide adequate evidence proving cause and effect in making claims of audience impact.”¹⁹ No matter how hard I might try, I will not find solid proof of the media’s direct effect on publics through a rhetorical analysis, since “rhetoric concerns probabilities rather than certainties; indeed, certainty eludes even the social and physical as well as theoretical sciences.”²⁰

The term *mass* shooting is one that deserves to be looked at a bit further too as the definition is one that has not been agreed upon. In her book, Moore supports this idea as she gives five golden rules for studying crime news, and reminds her readers that “a crime category

¹⁹Amos Kiewe, and Davis Houck. *The Effects of Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of Effects*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2015.

²⁰ Rosa Eberly. “Thesis feedback and comments,” October 23, 2017.

does not have a fixed meaning. We need to be alert to changes in the meaning of a category.”²¹

One common discrepancy among definitions of mass shooting is whether or not the shooter is included in the total count of victims. In his work, Serber chose to use the broader term of “targeted violence” in order to “allow those who study these [shooting, stabbing, bombing, violent] attacks to see broader patterns across them.” For Serber’s work, he was able to study the Boston Marathon Bombing since the phrase *targeted violence* did include this event.²² For the purpose of my study, I will continue to use the term *mass shooting* knowing that my three chosen events fit into the definition given by congress and the FBI. In Public Law No: 112-265, federal law defines a mass killing as “three or more killings in a single incident.”²³ I have narrowed this down for the purpose of my thesis to mean killings by gun.

Both the United States publics as well as global publics have familiarized each of the three events that I will be analyzing. Just as official news reporting in the aftermath changed after the shootings, so did what people referred to the events as. In April of 1999, the newspapers wrote about “the shooting at Columbine High School.”²⁴ Years later in 2017, we now can say the term “Columbine” and it is no longer just a location, but has become an event in itself. Sandy Hook is no longer only a small town in Connecticut; it is now the phrase used to remember the deadly shooting at an elementary school. Even less than a year out, there is no need to say “the shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando” anymore, when saying “the Orlando shooting” or “the Pulse shooting,” commonly refers to the specific event. As I look at each of

²¹ Sarah Moore. *Crime and the Media*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014

²² Bradley Serber. “Reaction Rhetorics: Targeted Violence and Public Security.” The Pennsylvania State University, 2016.

²³ Investigative Assistance for Violent Crimes Act of 2012, Pub. L. No. 112-265, Stat. 2435 (2013).

²⁴ Caitlin Lovinger. “The Nation: After the Madness; Violence, Even Before the Internet.” *The New York Times*, April 25, 1999.

these names given over time, I notice that the Orlando shooting is the only one with “shooting” still in the phrase. I am very curious to see if this changes over the coming years. In a few years, will the phrase, “Orlando happened on June 12, 2016” become entirely understandable to the modern publics? These three examples show how the names of these towns have become their own topoi. Eberly defines topoi as “literal and/or figurative places for invention to begin;”²⁵ the individual names of these towns have become a topos from which people can now see, reason, and invent from. The phrase “the shooting at Sandy Hook” makes people slow down and remember exactly what happened in this town of Sandy Hook. “Sandy Hook” on its own is simpler and to-the-point; however, it takes the violence out of the event and alters the memory altogether. Depending on the situation at hand, one might be more preferable than the other in what memory is desired. Therefore, throughout this thesis, I will refer to each event as both “the shooting at” or the familiarized phrased interchangeably.

²⁵ Edward Corbett, and Rosa Eberly. *The Elements of Reasoning*. 2nd ed. Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

Chapter 2

Columbine High School

Case Narrative

On the morning of April 20, 1999, the students of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado arrived for what they thought would be just another normal Tuesday. Meanwhile, Dylan Klebold, seventeen, and Eric Harris, eighteen, had entirely different plans as they arrived at school and placed two duffle bags with homemade propane bombs inside in the cafeteria. Although everyone else started their days as normal as ever, the events that began right at 11:19 a.m. would forever change the students and teachers of Columbine, as well as the entire town and the nation as a whole.

When the original plan of an explosion in the school cafeteria at 11:17 a.m. did not go accordingly, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris went on a shooting spree with assault weapons throughout Columbine High School. The two had been planning their attack for almost a year, complete with detailed descriptions and maps. They had intended for the bombs to go off in the crowded cafeteria; then while any survivors ran out of the building, the boys would open fire on the crowd and add to the madness. Just as the area would be filling up with emergency responders, two pre-set bombs in each of their cars would explode, killing even more people.

Upon the cafeteria bombs' failure to detonate, Klebold and Harris headed toward the school, dressed in trench coats concealing the assault weapons, knives, pipe bombs, and ammunition that lay below. The two began their attack on students enjoying lunch out on the

grass and then made their way into the cafeteria, hallways, and library. They seemed to be targeting certain students, particularly the jocks, but then opened fire on anyone in their path. The shooting spree continued for forty-nine minutes, while the boys laughed, joked, and yelled throughout the school. After taking the lives of thirteen and wounding twenty-one, the violence ended as Klebold and Harris took their own lives at 12:08 p.m.¹

Media Narrative

The direct violence of that day may have ended at 12:08 p.m., but the SWAT investigation and then the effects of the worst school shooting in history would continue much longer. Even before the suicides occurred, all forms of media were out reporting to get the earliest story; with all the broadcasting, “Columbine High School looked like a war zone,”² one *Denver Post* article said. The media “war zone” began just minutes after the attack began, and was broadcasted on local television only twenty-eight minutes after. The media started out in a frenzy. Just as King wrote about in *Guns*, the coverage began with confused reports, guesses on the number of casualties and injuries, as well as a mess of reporters arriving at both the shooting scene and local hospitals. Reporters began getting their stories from the students and witnesses who were calling in and sharing their perception of what occurred—often being mistaken due to the mayhem and distress. “For four hours rumors, confirmations, and embellishments bounced in and out”³ while the cops worried about students watching CNN while hiding in the school and

¹ Dave Cullen. *Columbine*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2009.

² Mark Obmascik. “High School Massacre Columbine Bloodbath Leaves up to 25 Dead.” *Denver Post*, April 21, 1999, WED1 edition, sec. 1A.

³ Dave Cullen. *Columbine*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2009.

potentially compromising the best witnesses. The cops begged the anchors to stop streaming calls with the students inside and for them to turn off the TVs. News anchors were crowded around trying to get answers and news choppers were circling the air above, but the sheriff's team demanded that coverage not be aired live due to the possibility of the shooters also watching from a TV inside the school. News of fatalities was held off as the public sat at home and wondered. At home, people were watching inaccurate live reporting of murders. The media, however, were not broadcasting a live depiction of what was going on nor following the shooters inside; they were speculating. The media as well as the SWAT teams believed there to be a hostage situation that would result in a standoff with the shooters. Between 1:00 p.m. and 2:30 p.m., victims were arriving to hospitals and the injury count was fluctuating, depending on the station watched. Around 3:15 p.m., SWAT teams discovered the truth-- that there was no hostage situation and that two (of the potential three) shooters were dead in the library. Around 4:00 p.m., the chief spokesman and the Sheriff held a press conference. Again, the spokespeople did not have all the facts, and were releasing news to the public with false information. President Clinton addressed the nation as well, asking for prayers for the students and teachers of Columbine. He then requested that the media refrain from jumping to conclusions before the facts were determined. Media continued coverage of students and reunions among families, then moved on to Harris and Klebold's friends' homes. Some stations, such as CNN, did not stop coverage of the event all afternoon. The stories hit print news first thing on Wednesday, with reports of what was suspected to have occurred along with many photographs from the day before.⁴ Overall, television coverage was constant for about a month after the attack. Reporters swarmed the town and relied on any interviews they could get in an attempt to find the newest

⁴ Ibid.

information to cover. As the media bombarded survivors and families of victims, the townspeople of Littleton became weary of the media in the days following the shooting.⁵

Exigence and Literature Connection

In his dissertation, Rood looks at responses to the shooting at Columbine through newspaper coverage in *The Denver Post*. He references Kristen Hoerl's analysis of articles that portrayed the shooters as "monstrous youth" who needed help, but were unable to be fixed. He then continues in his chapter to show that not everyone in the town felt this way. Rood goes on to discuss how in reality, many people engaged in what he calls "scenic blame." Rood discusses this scenic blame to include common frames such as mental health or gun control and more, all of which are topoi frequently discussed in the aftermath of mass shootings.⁶ Beyond these frames, I will use this chapter to analyze local and national newspaper responses to Columbine. I then will look further into additional topoi on which the journalists, and inevitably the people affected, focused on in the first year after the shooting.

Common Topoi

As television coverage on Columbine continued to occupy TVs all over the nation, both local and national newspapers were continuously covering the story as well. However, while television coverage began to slow down after about a month, newspaper coverage was still

⁵Mara Joffe. "An Analysis of the Media's Coverage of the Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School Shootings." Undergraduate, The University of Mississippi, 2014. <http://thesis.honors.olemiss.edu/35/>.

⁶ Craig Rood. "Deliberating in the Aftermath of Mass Shootings." The Pennsylvania State University, 2015.

continuing up to a year after the event. Of all the media coverage of the event, many of the articles written at both a local and national level cover both the shooting and the aftermath in similar ways. Through analyzing five local articles and six national articles, ranging from the day after the shooting until the one-year anniversary, the common topoi can be determined. Most frequently, the articles discussed the concepts of blame, gun control, memory, and the reactions and responses that followed. One topos that is present in every article, implicitly rather than explicitly though, is that of whether or not the shooters' names are mentioned, and if so, at what point in the article.

Blame

Blame is frequently deliberated on in the aftermath of a mass shooting, and in the case of Columbine, blame was looked at to attempt to figure out why two students would want to cause such harm. Janofsky, writing for *The New York Times*, says that in order to aid the healing process, victims often need to “take control of their lives, find reasons, and assign blame.”⁷ According to Rood, there are three frequently discussed explanations as to why youths commit these violent acts. The first explanation was that the two were simply “sick people” and that there really was not one specific aspect of their lives upon which to lay blame. The next possible explanation was that the shooters were mentally ill, and lastly that we live in an impactful “culture of violence.”⁸ Both local and national newspapers point out these same potential reasons behind the thoroughly planned out attack on Columbine High School. An article

⁷ Michael Janofsky. “Aftereffects of Columbine Are Claiming New Victims.” *The New York Times*. October 24, 1999, sec. 1.

⁸ Craig Rood. “Deliberating in the Aftermath of Mass Shootings.” The Pennsylvania State University, 2015.

published by *The Denver Post* on the day immediately following the shooting seemed to follow the idea of Klebold and Harris simply being “sick people” as it mentioned them being part of the “Trench Coat Mafia” with swastikas on their clothes. In class, they often wrote about death and talked about beheading people. While shooting their classmates, they were “hooting and hollering and getting a big joy out of [it].”⁹ On August 17, 1999, months after the shooting occurred, *The Denver Post* also mentioned the concept of blaming the shooters’ classmates as the principal said that slurs and harassment were factors that could have contributed to the vengeful rampage.¹⁰ On April 25, just five days after the shooting, *The New York Times* published an article entirely on the effects of music on youth, making claims that violently suggestive rock music of today helps to “communicate the anguish of victims and outcasts in a voice of vengeance and aggression, [while] theatricalizing rage.”¹¹ On the other hand though, *The New York Times* publish another article on that very same day that discussed how violent acts were occurring long before young adults were exposed to violent cultural elements such as video games and rock music.¹² With this point of view, the blame would not be put on the culture of violence but more likely on the other aspects of the boys themselves. When taking Roods’ mention of Klebold being “depressive and suicidal” and Harris being a “psychopath”¹³ into consideration, it is surprising that the articles published by *The Denver Post* and *The New York Times* did not mention the possibility of mental illness being the root cause of the shootings.

⁹ Mark Obmascik. “High School Massacre Columbine Bloodbath Leaves up to 25 Dead.” *Denver Post*, April 21, 1999, WED1 edition, sec. 1A.

¹⁰ David Olinger, Patricia Callahan, and Janet Bingham. “A New Challenge for Columbine; School’s Opening Day a Bittersweet Event.” *The Denver Post*. August 17, 1999, sec. 1A.

¹¹ Caitlin Lovinger. “The Nation: After the Madness; Violence, Even Before the Internet.” *The New York Times*, April 25, 1999.

¹² Ann Powers. “The Nation: The Stresses of Youth, The Strains of Its Music.” *The New York Times*, April 25, 1999.

¹³ Craig Rood. “Deliberating in the Aftermath of Mass Shootings.” The Pennsylvania State University, 2015.

Klebold and Harris had been planning the shooting for months and left behind many home videos and journals. These artifacts were able to help assign some sort of a reason for their attack; however, determining a definite answer as to why the shooters committed the act is much more difficult, and will most likely never be fully agreed upon in this case due to their suicides.

Gun Control

In 1999, Columbine was the worst and one of the first school shootings to grasp the attention of the nation. Now in 2017, gun control is a topic discussed daily on many news stations and relates closely to our politics. When did this concern over guns begin though? Have people been dedicated to the debate on gun control since the writing of the Constitution in 1787? Longley, a U.S. Government expert, said that the attack at Columbine “renewed debate on the need for more restrictive gun control laws.”¹⁴ In the aftermath of Columbine, both local and national newspapers reflected on gun control and possible policies for the future. The concern over gun control started immediately in *The Denver Post*’s first article the day after the shooting as the author Obmascik mentions that in the weeks leading up to the shooting, the governor of Colorado was working to liberalize the state’s concealed weapons laws.¹⁵ Previously, Colorado had been a “discretionary issue,” or more informally referred to as a “may issue” state, meaning the law “provides the government with some discretion over the issuance of a carry permit.”¹⁶ Governor Owens was working to liberalize these laws and make Colorado a “shall issue” state

¹⁴ US Gun Control Timeline.” *About.com News & Issues*. Accessed February 22, 2017. <http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/rightsandfreedom/fl/US-Gun-Control-Timeline.htm>.

¹⁵ Mark Obmascik. “High School Massacre Columbine Bloodbath Leaves up to 25 Dead.” *Denver Post*, April 21, 1999, WED1 edition, sec. 1A.

¹⁶ NRA-ILA. “NRA-ILA | Gun Laws.” *NRA-ILA*. Accessed February 22, 2017. <https://www.nraila.org/gun-laws.aspx>.

meaning that “upon completion of specified requirements, a law-abiding person shall be granted a permit to carry concealed firearms.”¹⁷ This bill was due to be debated on April 21, but “all legislative work was canceled because of the shootings.”¹⁸ The article did not mention though whether or not the cancelation was due to the fact that the shooting occurred on the same day, or if it was also due to the fact that people’s opinions on concealed carry laws very well might have changed after the shooting. Governor Owens was at the scene comforting families, but would not comment on the concealed carry legislation. By July 11 of the same year, *The Denver Post* published an article titled “2nd Amendment issue heading to high court” in which author Jules Witcover discussed the two sides of the Second Amendment debate coming from gun-control activists and gun lobbyists. Witcover initially noted the position taken by gun-control activists who frequently cite a Supreme Court ruling that a man was in violation of the law due to the fact that his possession of a gun did not have a reasonable relationship to promoting a well-regulated militia. She then included a position taken by the NRA-- that a right to bear arms is not merely a collective right—it is an individual right.¹⁹ This article did not discuss gun control in regard to the guns used at Columbine; it does, however, begin by stating that the shootings at Columbine put the “debate about guns on the front burner of American discourse” and that advocates of the right to own firearms were put on the defensive.²⁰ On April 12, 2000, just one week before the anniversary of the shooting, *The New York Times* published an article about the gun-crime bill being pushed through by the GOP. Often, gun control is a topic with a polar divide between the Republicans and Democrats, as noted in the article by Schmitt. The article included statements

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mark Obmascik. “High School Massacre Columbine Bloodbath Leaves up to 25 Dead.” *Denver Post*, April 21, 1999, WED1 edition, sec. 1A.

¹⁹ Jules Witcover. “Stick to Your Guns; 2nd Amendment Issue Heading to High Court.” *The Denver Post*, July 11, 1999.

²⁰ Ibid.

to express this opposition such as “The Republican Congress wants to make sure it is offering a clear, comprehensive, approach to reducing gun crimes at the same time when President Clinton is offering an approach based on rhetoric rather than results.”²¹ On the other side, displeasure is shown from Democrats, as Representative Robert Scott says, “it’s not a good policy” in regard to the gun-crime bill. This controversial bill was written by Republicans and passed just before the anniversary of Columbine; the bill would send \$100 million in block grants to states that imposed mandatory jail sentences for gun crimes. Just as with any bill, people supported and opposed this one, “but it works,” as Representative Ehrlich of Maryland said.²² This bill specifically encourages stricter punishment for gun crimes; however, other advocates of gun control, such as Al Gore, as noted in another *New York Times* article, supported tougher gun laws altogether. The gun control debate was separated further during the presidential race between Bush and Gore in the aftermath of Columbine with the “leading candidates suggesting starkly different solutions.”²³ When it comes to policies in the aftermath of school shootings, according to the articles I have studied, gun control is the most commonly deliberated on as a way to solve the problem of future attacks.

Memory

An event as gripping as a school shooting is bound to have different effects on different people; these after-effects, including traumatic responses and attempts to move on are additional

²¹ Eric Schmitt. “As Columbine Anniversary Nears, G.O.P. Leaders Push Through Gun-Crime Bill.” *The New York Times*, April 12, 2000, sec. A.

²² Ibid.

²³ Michael Janofsky. “A Year After Littleton, Services and Lawsuits.” *The New York Times*, April 21, 2000, sec. A.

topoi discussed by newspaper journalists in the aftermath of Columbine. In August 1999, *The Denver Post* wrote an article about Columbine High School's opening day, the ceremony that occurred and the reactions that the town felt. The article began with the positivity of the student body president and one student's "resolve to move on," and then continued to share comments made by one student whose best friend was shot and killed during the attack. Beachman, the student, is quoted saying "For all the people who 'moved on,' congratulations, but you have no right to tell anybody else where they should be."²⁴ Many people were unable to move on and return to the school where the grief and reminders of the day are all too present. One mother, who was written about in *The New York Times* on October 24, 1999, could no longer handle the heartbreak of her daughter being paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair after being shot. Carla Hochhalter showed one of the most traumatic responses to the shooting as six months later, she walked into a pawnshop with her own bullets, asked to see a revolver, and then shot herself in the head. The journalist, Janofsky, describes this reaction in order to show how Columbine was claiming new victims even months later. He refers to these people as "second victims."²⁵ Women like Beachman and Hochhalter both represent situations in which the people of Littleton were unable to move on in a successful way, as one would hope could occur. Rather than personal reactions, some people were attempting to come up with alternative solutions to help the community move on. According to Robin Finegan, quoted in a *New York Times* article on the anniversary of Columbine, when victims' families are unsure about why a shooting occurred, lawsuits are usually a natural response. In the two days leading up to the anniversary, there were nine civil lawsuits filed against the sheriff's department. These lawsuits came all at this time due

²⁴ David Olinger, Patricia Callahan, and Janet Bingham. "A New Challenge for Columbine; School's Opening Day a Bittersweet Event." *The Denver Post*. August 17, 1999, sec. 1A.

²⁵ Michael Janofsky. "Aftereffects of Columbine Are Claiming New Victims." *The New York Times*. October 24, 1999, sec. 1.

to the one-year deadline in Colorado for a lawsuit to be filed against a law-enforcement agency. These lawsuits were often filed in order to help assign blame in the aftermath of a shooting and to give grieving families closure.²⁶ One additional way in which community members were attempting to “fix” the problem was through posting the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms and mandating a moment of silence for reflection. This bill was intended to be a response to the shooting at Columbine and Rev. Michael Carrier, the chairman of the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado noted that in the aftermath, they needed to be careful to “do the right thing.” The bill’s sponsor, Senator John Andrews, said that the “commandments are educational and civic reminders of America’s moral heritage and are constitutional, nonreligious and noncoercive.”²⁷ As seen in responses written about in both the local and national news articles, the people of Littleton, Colorado all reacted in various ways to the shooting. Some dealt with the tragedy in more emotional and personal ways, while others made attempts to change policy or to get reasons and closure; these reactions and the way they are portrayed in newspapers have led to both support and disagreement over the ways in which a mass shooting can be handled.

Reactions and Responses

After people’s initial reactions to the shooting and their attempts to move on, there comes a time when the shooting becomes a memory. A school shooting, or any event for that matter, can be remembered on a more personal level or in a public way. After such a traumatic event, people tend to want one type of memory more than another. After the tower shooting at

²⁶ Michael Janofsky. “A Year After Littleton, Services and Lawsuits.” *The New York Times*, April 21, 2000, sec. A.

²⁷ Julia C. Martinez. “Clerics Oppose Posting of commandments ‘We Need to Do Right Thing, and This Bill Fails That Test.’” *The Denver Post*, February 11, 2000, sec. A.

UT Austin in 1966, there was much debate over what a physical memorial would mean. Would it glorify the shooter and continuously re-traumatize people every time they saw it? Or would it honor the victims and note a piece of the school's history?²⁸ A memorial was eventually put in place at UT Austin near their Turtle Pond on August 1, 2016—fifty years after the shooting occurred.²⁹ Memory was an issue of deliberation after the Columbine shooting as well. On August 16, 1999, Columbine High School re-opened its doors for the first time since the shooting. *The Denver Post* reported on the opening-day rally that was held in which students were welcomed back by their student body president, the school principal, as well as hundreds of parents there to support them. Students and parents were part of a cheering crowd as their principal addressed them and with pride said, “Columbine, we are back!” This event was one to celebrate the strength of the town's return to normalcy; however, it also was an event in which many parents became angry and upset. Parents who lost children that day “angrily questioned”³⁰ why there was no mention of those who died at the opening-day rally. This disagreement with the way the rally occurred shows the line that is frequently drawn between memories. On one hand, while addressing the crowd, the principal shared that images of the shooting haunted him. A student noted “You can't get over something when you're being constantly reminded of it.” On the other hand, parents and friends of the victims, such as Lauren Beachem who spent the entire day thinking about her best friend whom she lost, wanted the victims to be mentioned and

²⁸ Rosa Eberly. “Eberly: Consider an Educational Memorial for UT Tower Shootings.” *The Statesman*, March 25, 2016.

²⁹ “New Memorial Honors Victims of UT Tower Shooting - The Daily Texan.” Accessed February 26, 2017. <http://www.dailytexanonline.com/2016/07/31/new-memorial-honors-victims-of-ut-tower-shooting>.

³⁰ David Olinger, Patricia Callahan, and Janet Bingham. “A New Challenge for Columbine; School's Opening Day a Bittersweet Event.” *The Denver Post*. August 17, 1999, sec. 1A.

honored.³¹ These discrepancies have led to what one *New York Times* author referred to as families “squabbling over how to memorialize the victims.”³² In January of 2000, the Jefferson County School Board gave approval for Columbine High School to build a new library. The current library had been walled off for the first months of the school being re-opened since it was the site in which the most gruesome part of the rampage occurred.³³ If this library had not been replaced, it might have served as a negative memory and daily reminder for many students of the tragedy that occurred there. On the first anniversary of the shooting, a ceremony was held in a public park in Littleton in order to have a positive memorial for the shooting and to honor the victims. *The New York Times* published an article about the service the following day and reflected on the hour of songs and speeches and moment of silence.³⁴ As reported by the newspapers, these alternative ways of memorializing the shooting help to prove how people all react differently and in turn want to remember the event differently. The aftermath of a shooting leaves people traumatized and distraught, and sometimes more stressed as they are not sure what is the best way to remember the event. Eventually though, eight and a half years later, a physical memorial was put into place.³⁵

³¹ Ibid.

³² Michael Janofsky. “Aftereffects of Columbine Are Claiming New Victims.” *The New York Times*. October 24, 1999, sec. 1.

³³ “Columbine High Library Will Be Demolished.” *The New York Times*. January 23, 2000, sec. 1.

³⁴ Michael Janofsky. “A Year After Littleton, Services and Lawsuits.” *The New York Times*, April 21, 2000, sec. A.

³⁵ Dave Cullen. *Columbine*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2009.

Shooters' Names

While all of these topoi were explicitly stated within the articles written, there are additional topoi that are implicitly referred to throughout the articles. An implicit topos would be a place in which invention can begin, but only after being established and analyzed in a work of literature. An implicit topos that is worth looking at in each article is the location of the shooters' names within the article. Some articles fail to ever mention the names of the shooters, in an attempt not to glorify them. In the film *Zero Day*, directed and written by Ben Coccio in 2003, the two main characters planned and executed a mass shooting on their high school. These boys, closely modeled around the concept of Columbine, were hoping for fame. When discussing the self-recorded tapes, one asks the other, "What are the top three media people that you would enjoy willing this to?"³⁶ This question here expresses the desire that the boys have to gain instant fame and attention and to be known for the crimes that they will commit, whether they are alive to see it or not. By mentioning their names at the start of an article or honoring them with the victims of the shooting, these perpetrators are only getting even more of what they wanted. In a *Denver Post* article written almost entirely as the stasis of fact on the day immediately following the shooting, the shooters' names are mentioned only one time in an almost two-thousand-word article. This mention does not come until the fifth paragraph and also refers to the shooters as "suspects" rather than perpetrators.³⁷ On July 11, *The Denver Post* published an article in response to the Columbine shooting in regard to the Second Amendment. The "Colorado school shootings" are referenced multiple times throughout the article, but never

³⁶ *Zero Day*, directed by Ben Coccio (2003; Professor Bright Films), DVD.

³⁷ Mark Obmascik. "High School Massacre Columbine Bloodbath Leaves up to 25 Dead." *Denver Post*, April 21, 1999, sec. 1A.

the names of the shooters.³⁸ By leaving out the names here, the author, Witcover, is keeping the focus on the policies and procedures in regard to gun laws being discussed while never turning attention towards the shooters. Another local piece written on Columbine's opening day ceremony does mention the shooters on two separate occasions while conveying the facts of the case. In addition to the shooters' names, the reporter also mentions many students, victims and family members' names throughout the article while reporting on their opinions and reactions. During the ceremony, many parents were angered that there was no mention of the victims' names to honor them. The staff writers at *The Denver Post*, the authors of this article, chose to include a list of names and ages of each of the victims whose lives were taken that day.³⁹ Although this article did mention the shooters' names more than once, it is also important to note the emphasis and honor that was put on the victims' names as well. The same week of the Columbine shooting, *The New York Times* released an article delineating six situations in the past in which young adults had committed violent acts of murder. The reporter named each of the youths, along with their names and the date of the attack; however, the shooters at Columbine were referred to only as "two teen-aged boys."⁴⁰ Quite possibly this decision could have been made assuming that since it had been so recent, the publics of America were already well aware of Harris and Klebold's names. This decision to not name the shooters would have been less surprising if *The New York Times* had been a local newspaper, where not knowing about the event would have been extremely unlikely. However, just five days post-shooting, the chances of people on the national level not knowing the details of Columbine was more likely. The lack

³⁸ Jules Witcover. "Stick to Your Guns; 2nd Amendment Issue Heading to High Court." *The Denver Post*, July 11, 1999.

³⁹ David Olinger, Patricia Callahan, and Janet Bingham. "A New Challenge for Columbine; School's Opening Day a Bittersweet Event." *The Denver Post*. August 17, 1999, sec. 1A.

⁴⁰ Caitlin Lovinger. "The Nation: After the Madness; Violence, Even Before the Internet." *The New York Times*, April 25, 1999.

of naming here though gave absolutely no recognition to the shooters in the immediate aftermath and was most likely appreciated by many. In October of 1999, *The New York Times* published another article titled “Aftereffects of Columbine Are Claiming New Victims” in which recognition is given to both the immediate victims, as well as those who suffered in the aftermath of the shooting. The names of the shooters are not mentioned here until almost the very end of the article, therefore giving more recognition to the victims rather than the shooters.⁴¹ A final instance of taking away any credit from the shooters is mentioned in a *New York Times* article from the anniversary of the shooting. A ceremony in order to remember the event and honor a united and healing community was held at a local public park in Littleton, Colorado. Thousands gathered to remember as the “names of the thirteen who were killed were read twice but the names of the killers ignored.”⁴² The unsaid here becomes almost equally as powerful as what is said as the town and nation mourned thirteen and questioned two.

Security

All of these implicit and explicit topoi were present and discussed in both local and national articles; however, certain topoi were more present on the local level rather than the national. Seeing that Columbine was a shooting at a public high school, school safety became a large concern for people of the town. The national news articles tended to focus much more on national issues, such as the blame or cause of the shooting as well as the policies that could follow such as gun control. The personal aspect of it being in their town most likely had an

⁴¹ Michael Janofsky. “Aftereffects of Columbine Are Claiming New Victims.” *The New York Times*. October 24, 1999, sec. 1.

⁴² Michael Janofsky. “A Year After Littleton, Services and Lawsuits.” *The New York Times*, April 21, 2000, sec. A.

impact on the local concern about safety. One *Denver Post* article the day after the shooting mentions the calls for “tighter security” and “closer monitoring of troubled students,”⁴³ while an August 17 article mentions that “haunting images” over the news have caused people to question the state of their schools.⁴⁴ Almost a year after the shooting in February 2000, *The Denver Post* wrote about how school violence was still a critical concern facing public schools.⁴⁵ In addition to the school’s physical safety, local articles also expressed the concern of the mental safety of students. The principal at Columbine made an announcement at the opening-day rally that there would be “zero tolerance for cruelty, harassment, excessive teasing, discrimination, violence, and intimidation”⁴⁶—factors that quite possibly lead to Harris and Klebold lashing out in the way they did. Although a shooting such as Columbine has the potential to occur anywhere, the citizens of Littleton focused much more on the possibility that greater measures of school safety could prevent further school shootings.

First-Hand Account

The print media tell a similar story with similar topoi on both the local and national level; however, what type of narrative is told by someone who was present during the shooting? After arriving to the scene, reporters gather their information through word of mouth and first-hand interviews. Throughout the course of my research for this thesis, I was put in

⁴³ Mark Obmascik. “High School Massacre Columbine Bloodbath Leaves up to 25 Dead.” *Denver Post*, April 21, 1999, WED1 edition, sec. 1A.

⁴⁴ David Olinger, Patricia Callahan, and Janet Bingham. “A New Challenge for Columbine; School’s Opening Day a Bittersweet Event.” *The Denver Post*. August 17, 1999, sec. 1A.

⁴⁵ Julia C. Martinez. “Clerics Oppose Posting of commandments ‘We Need to Do Right Thing, and This Bill Fails That Test.’” *The Denver Post*, February 11, 2000, sec. A.

⁴⁶ David Olinger, Patricia Callahan, and Janet Bingham. “A New Challenge for Columbine; School’s Opening Day a Bittersweet Event.” *The Denver Post*. August 17, 1999, sec. 1A.

contact with Semih Altinay, a Turkish immigrant who was in the cafeteria of Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. I spoke with Semih to get his first-hand account of not only the tragic day, but also to hear about the two shooters beforehand, and the town after.

Semih moved to the United States as a junior in high school and joined the school football team. Although he was friends with many groups, he spent most of his time with the jocks. Even being part of the team, Semih was bullied (in non-physical ways) by the bigger football players, and he often witnessed these same “big guys” bullying other kids in the school. These other kids that were constantly teased and pushed around included Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, as well as the other students who walked around in trench coats. Although some news outlets did mention the bullying that occurred, Semih noted that it was not focused on enough. He mentioned that in the aftermath of a tragic event, nobody should ever blame the victims, but that bullying in conjunction with mental illness often has an unfortunate outcome.

On the day of the shooting, Klebold and Harris entered through the cafeteria where Semih was waiting to buy lunch. Upon hearing gunshots in the parking lot, a few students were yelling that somebody had a gun, but the students’ immediate reactions were disbelief and that it might have been part of a senior prank. As more gunshots rang out, students began to take cover and Semih saw Klebold and Harris enter the room from the far side. Semih noted that for him, as well as many of his classmates, “At that moment, it wasn’t real. We did everything on instinct” as they hid in classrooms and barricaded the doors.

Just as both the local and national newspapers reported, Semih agreed that the people of Littleton all reacted in diverse ways. Being one of the first shootings of its kind in 1999, people were in shock and didn’t know how they were supposed to act. For Semih, many of the thirteen victims were his friends, and seeing their pictures and memorials was the most difficult part.

Being from Turkey where much of the news is not censored, Semih felt a bit desensitized to the news, whereas other students were unable to talk about it for weeks. Semih noted in particular that graduation was a bittersweet time; as the seniors celebrated their big day, there was still a remembrance of those who were not there as the song “Columbine, Friend of Mine” was sung.

Semih has since moved away from Littleton, but has been back to visit the school. He told me about the drastic changes at the school with the library closed off and new lockers installed, as well as the memorial that is now present.⁴⁷ Completed in 2007, this physical memorial was not written about in the articles I analyzed. It sits across from the school and includes a Ring of Remembrance with a reflection from each of the victims’ families as well as a Wall of Healing to all that were injured or touched by the events.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Semih Altinay. Columbine Experience Interview. Phone, October 13, 2017.

⁴⁸ “Columbine Memorial.” Accessed October 15, 2017. <http://www.columbinememorial.org/Design.asp>.

Chapter 3

Sandy Hook Elementary School

Case Narrative

Similar to April 20, 1999, in Columbine, December 14, 2012, started out just the same as most other Fridays in Newtown, Connecticut. If anything, the biggest abnormality of the day was the excitement that filled the halls of Sandy Hook Elementary school with all of the children knowing that winter break and Christmas were just around the corner. Moms and dads sent their children to school that morning, expecting to pick them up at the end of the day. In actuality though, these same parents would be the ones frantically searching for their young sons and daughters after hearing reports of a shooting at the elementary school. At 9:34 a.m., Adam Lanza would begin what would later become the “worst shooting at a primary school in US history.”¹ After taking his mother’s life in their Yogananda Street home earlier that morning, Lanza headed out armed with a shotgun, Glock, Sauer, Bushmaster rifle, seventy rounds of ammunition for the shotgun, and ten magazines carrying thirty rounds each for the rifle. He first drove to Newtown High School, where his car was believed to have been seen circling the parking lot, but then drove down the road to his old elementary school. He then entered the school by breaking a window with eight shots from the rifle, made his way into the main office, the nurse’s offices, and then into hallway. Both the principal and school psychologist were the first to die in an attempt to take down the gunman. As Lanza made his way spraying bullets

¹ Matthew Kauffman. “A Gunman Bent on Carnage.” *The Hartford Courant*, December 15, 2012, sec. MAIN.

throughout the school and taking more lives, the first officers arrived at the scene at 9:38 a.m.

Right at 9:40 a.m., less than five minutes after entering the school, Lanza sat in a corner and took his own life with a bullet to the head. Next, came an eerie silence. Seventeen minutes after the initial shots, “It’s okay. It’s safe now.” was heard over the school intercom. In total, Lanza took the lives of twenty-six innocent students and teachers.²

Media Narrative

Even in small town Newtown, Connecticut, the media was out to report at the scene immediately. *Newtown Bee*, the local weekly paper, got news of the shots being fired and immediately sent an associate editor to the scene. At 10:30 a.m., the story became breaking news on CNN: “Connecticut State Police are responding to reports of a shooting at a Newtown elementary school in southwestern Connecticut, according to police spokesman Lt. Paul Vance.” At the scene, a CNN live truck, the *Hartford Courant* and the *Stamford Advocate* were reporting. Once released, these reports then led to many other reporters, photographers, and television stations coming in from New York City. News quickly began hitting publics all over the country, as CNN kept updates coming much ahead of other news outlets. As usual with breaking news, the facts came slowly and gained accuracy as time went on. Within ten minutes of CNN reporting that Ryan Lanza was the shooter, Fox News and MSNBC were sending out incorrect reports that included false information about dead siblings of Ryan’s and that his mother had been one of the teachers at the school that had been killed. By 3:15 p.m., President Obama was delivering his statement of condolences to the victims over live television. At 5:45 p.m., news

² Matthew Lysiak. *Newtown: An American Tragedy*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2013.

sources began to correct themselves that Adam was the true shooter; however, much information was still left to be discovered about who he was, and why he would commit such an act. Three days later, on December 17, the town was full of reporters trying to get the latest comment or the latest story as the media was still flocking to Newtown and the surrounding towns. The *Newtown Bee* took to social media to ask all fellow journalists to please stay away from the victims' families in order to allow healing. After a few weeks, the reporters slowly started to leave Newtown. After twenty days, the students returned to school at their new temporary location. Even after a year, newspapers were still reporting on the day, and the people of Newtown were still trying to encourage change.³

Exigence and Literature Connection

In her book, *Crime and the Media*, Sarah Moore discusses the concept of news values, which are more formally known as professional imperatives of journalism. These news values are sometimes specific to a certain news outlet, but as I found throughout my own research, often span across many outlets and organizations. Moore references British criminologist Yvonne Jewkes' words on news values when she says "but others, like the news value of child-victims and perpetrators, are culturally and historically specific."⁴ The concept of child-victims is one that caught my attention and encouraged my study of Sandy Hook in particular—to see how both the local and national sources value this topos. Jewkes introduces children as a news value; I also plan to look at how child-victims are a news value that may change the way in which

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sarah Moore. *Crime and the Media*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

newspapers report and how the cultural effects may be referenced by the papers.⁵ An additional concept specific to the Sandy Hook shooting is conspiracy theories, as Serber mentions in his dissertation, that are “at best delusional and at worst insensitive and retraumatizing to victims’ families.”⁶ Serber’s mention of the conspiracies also encouraged me to look at local and national news reports and to see if they reference these Sandy Hook theories as well.

Common Topoi

Following the attack at Sandy Hook Elementary school, the children, families and entire town were on the minds of people all over the world. For one year after the shooting, both local and national newspapers were continuously reporting on the event while also analyzing the aftermath and policies that would follow in response. Explicitly, both local and national articles covered the aftermath and responses to the shooting, as well as memory and references to past shootings and discussion of the impact on parents. Implicitly, both sources include the conceptual topoi of the shooter’s name in the article as well as the ways in which Nancy and Adam Lanza are characterized. Each news source also includes a few unique topoi that I had not come across in articles on Columbine or the other shootings being analyzed here in this thesis. Some of these less common topoi include negative responses to the shooting as well as discussion of the creation of new topoi in the town. In general, the local articles tended to focus much more on reporting the narrative of the event and letting the people of Newtown know

⁵ Ibid, 30.

⁶ Bradley Serber. “Reaction Rhetorics: Targeted Violence and Public Security.” The Pennsylvania State University, 2016.

exactly what had happened; whereas the national articles focused more on analyzing where to put the blame and the causes behind the shooting.

Aftermath

In addition to the most basic topoi of location, death tolls, date and time, etc., many of the local and national articles discuss what is happening with the town as well as the victims and families in the days following the shooting. A local article in *The Hartford Courant* from the day following the shooting mentions immediate reactions and responses from the people of Sandy Hook. As soon as news of the shooting spread, all other schools in Newtown and many others surrounding the district were put on lock down and many local businesses closed for the day. Local churches such as Newtown United Methodist Church opened its doors on Friday after hearing about the tragedy. Outside of the small town, “impromptu vigils” were held, flags were flown at half-staff, and President Obama addressed the nation and offered condolences.⁷ About six months after the shooting, *The Hartford Courant* published an article about the community’s decision to build a replacement school for Sandy Hook Elementary.⁸ In order to help the grieving process, the school was demolished, rebuilt with an entirely new floor plan, and opened on July 2016.⁹ By reporting on the after-effects of the shooting, *The Newtown Courant* is able to show what happens beyond the doors of the school. With national articles reporting very

⁷ Matthew Kauffman. “A Gunman Bent on Carnage.” *The Hartford Courant*, December 15, 2012, sec. MAIN.

⁸ Daniela Altimari. “Vote Approves \$750K for New School - Sandy Hook.” *The Hartford Courant*, June 22, 2013.

⁹ “The New Sandy Hook School Project Website.” Accessed April 3, 2017.

<http://www.sandyhook2016.com/index.html>.

little on the town's everyday actions in the aftermath, it shows that the local audiences connected much more with these smaller changes.

Memory

After the initial media rush and stages of grieving began to slow down, the citizens of Newtown began to consider memorials for the victims and their families. Local paper, *The Newtown Courant*, reported on a large online memorial that was set up to document all of the “letters, cards, banners, and gifts encouraging stricken Newtown to smile, stay strong and hope.” With this memorial, people were able to periodically view and treasure all the support that was received, without having to find a place to store the physical items.¹⁰ *The New York Times*, however, reported on instances of memory and tributes in which people were almost being forced to “remember.” In July, about seven months after the shooting, *The New York Times* article titled “Ready for Less-Tearful Future, Newtown Is Declining Tributes” discussed the idea of these tributes actually hindering Newtown's citizens' ability to heal. The article asked, “Where is the line between respecting the magnitude of what happened last December and being engulfed by it? And when do events and observances become an unwelcome public reminder of private grief?”¹¹ On the one-year anniversary of the shooting, *The New York Times* again mentioned the idea of a public memorial through sharing the citizens' message of “We are not holding a public anniversary ceremony. Please stay away.” Again noting the importance of healing rather than being constantly reminded, Newtown's first selectman is quoted saying “If

¹⁰ Alaine Griffin, and Josh Kovner. “They Sent Love.” *The Hartford Courant*, December 14, 2013, sec. MAIN.

¹¹ Peter Applebome. “Ready for Less-Tearful Future, Newtown Is Declining Tributes.” *The New York Times*, July 10, 2013, sec. A.

we build it, they will come. So we have to not build it.”¹² In the same way that the people of Newtown do not want constant reminders of the tragedy to be created, other “memorials” such as the school itself already stand. As mentioned, the decision was made to demolish the school in order to avoid the negative memories that came along with it and reminders the violence that occurred there.¹³ My analysis of the topoi in these articles shows that the national papers, more often than the local ones, have been blatantly reporting on their desire to avoid a physical memorial whereas the local papers don’t mention much at all about a memorial. Quite possibly, the local audience of *The Newtown Courant* already knows the overall opinion on a memorial, but on the national level, it needs to be made clear to those who are questioning.

Past Shootings

According to the FBI, mass shootings have been on the rise since 2000.¹⁴ With more shootings occurring, it is inevitable that the media refer to previous shootings. The situation, location and shooters are then all compared to those shootings that have occurred prior. On the day immediately following the shooting, a local newspaper article said, “The toll of Friday’s shooting brought memories and comparisons to other tragedies, including the shootings in Columbine and Aurora in Colorado, the Petit family killings in Chesire, and the 9/11 attacks.”¹⁵ In another *Hartford Courant* article about the push for stricter gun control, there is mention of

¹² Michael Wilson. “A Year of Painful, Daily Reminders in Newtown.” *The New York Times*, December 14, 2013, sec. A.

¹³ Daniela Altimari. “Vote Approves \$750K for New School - Sandy Hook.” *The Hartford Courant*, June 22, 2013.

¹⁴ Michael S. Schmidt. “F.B.I. Confirms a Sharp Rise in Mass Shootings Since 2000.” *The New York Times*, September 24, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/us/25shooters.html>.

¹⁵ Matthew Kauffman. “A Gunman Bent on Carnage.” *The Hartford Courant*, December 15, 2012, sec. MAIN.

mass shootings in Aurora, Colorado, Tucson, and Virginia Tech.¹⁶ In a third *Hartford Courant* article, a reporter writes about a group of citizens from Columbine that came to visit Newtown. Rather than comparing the two shootings here, the reporter mentions that the Columbine group intended to help give the Newtown residents advice on “how to manage the outpouring of letters and gifts.”¹⁷ On the national level, in March after the shooting, *The New York Times* reported on findings in Lanza’s home. Previous shootings were mentioned a few times in regard to a shooting at Northern Illinois University and a Norwegian mass murder.¹⁸ The mention of this topos here then also leads into the concept of the copycat effect. Articles on these two mass killings were found in Lanza’s bedroom—giving the authorities and journalists reason to believe that Lanza used them as inspiration. In mentioning previous mass shootings and making connections, reporters here are reminding the audience that this current shooting is not the only one of its kind.

Impact on Parents

Contrary to previous shooting reports, after Sandy Hook, local and national papers focused much more on the parents of the victims. *The Hartford Courant*’s article published the day after the shooting quoted a parent responding to what it is like coming to a school where there’s a shooting— “it’s the most terrifying moment of a parent’s life” the father replied. This

¹⁶ Jenny Wilson. “Newtown Group Renews Gun-Control Lobbying.” *The Hartford Courant*, September 18, 2013, sec. MAIN.

¹⁷ Alaine Griffin, and Josh Kovner. “They Sent Love.” *The Hartford Courant*, December 14, 2013, sec. MAIN.

¹⁸ N. R. Kleinfield, Ray Rivera, and Serge Kovalski. “Newtown Killer’s Obsessions, in Chilling Detail.” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2013, sec. A.

same article also touched on the immediate concern for the town to care for the families of the victims.¹⁹ Parents are also referenced in *The Hartford Courant* as a part of the gun-control advocate group frequently visiting Washington to pass stricter gun-control laws.²⁰ Another instance of parent involvement after the shooting is discussed in *The New York Times* article about memorials and tributes in the town. One set of parents, Francine and David Wheeler sang and performed comedy at a memorial for Ben's Lighthouse Fund, named after their son who was killed in Newtown.²¹ An anniversary article in *The New York Times* reported on the ways in which people interact with the parents of Sandy Hook victims. The article mentioned ways the town has adapted to these parents, their grief, and how to interact with them in the year since the shooting.²² This fact of parents being mentioned much more in these articles most likely relates to the fact that the victims at Sandy Hook were such young children.

Implicit Topoi: Shooters' Names and Characterization

In addition to the topoi that are explicitly stated, there again are topoi within the Sandy Hook articles that are much more implied. The two that I have chosen to look at include the shooter's name within the article as well as the way in which Nancy and Adam Lanza are characterized. In the local news that I analyzed, Adam Lanza's name is only directly stated in news articles in instances in which the article focused on the narrative of the shooting. In articles

¹⁹ Matthew Kauffman. "A Gunman Bent on Carnage." *The Hartford Courant*, December 15, 2012, sec. MAIN.

²⁰ Jenny Wilson. "Newtown Group Renews Gun-Control Lobbying." *The Hartford Courant*, September 18, 2013, sec. MAIN.

²¹ Peter Applebome. "Ready for Less-Tearful Future, Newtown Is Declining Tributes." *The New York Times*, July 10, 2013, sec. A.

²² Michael Wilson. "A Year of Painful, Daily Reminders in Newtown." *The New York Times*, December 14, 2013, sec. A.

discussing memory, tributes, or policy changes, Lanza's name is not mentioned. The findings in national articles were very similar in that Lanza's name was not mentioned in regard to memory or policy. However, *The New York Times* went as far as to even leave his name out of the article published December 15, 2012—the day after the shooting.²³ *The New York Times* may have chosen to leave his name out in order to avoid glorifying the shooter; however, it also may not be included because the facts were not yet confirmed at the time of publishing. Up to four days after the shooting, many media sources were still stating Ryan Lanza, Adam's older brother, as the shooter.²⁴ The second implicit topos that I looked at was the way in which the articles characterized Nancy and Adam Lanza. In two local articles published on December 15, 2012, and March 14, 2013, Adam Lanza is described as an outcast who "never really talked at all,"²⁵ had a "mind for destruction,"²⁶ who was "definitely kind of strange,"²⁷ and so "painfully shy"²⁸ that he was "hard to talk to."²⁹ It is mentioned that Adam continuously researched several mass murders and had documents and articles relating to other mass killing sprees in his room.³⁰ Adam's mother Nancy Lanza, however, is characterized in an entirely different light within these same local articles. Nancy is said to have been a "kind woman with a sense of humor" who was "slender with short hair" and present at almost all neighborhood events. Nancy lived on Yogananda Street "in a hilly, affluent neighborhood" which was "children- and family-

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Matthew Lysiak. *Newtown: An American Tragedy*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2013.

²⁵ Dave Altimari, Edmund Mahony, and Jon Lender. "Lanza Studied Mass Murders - Researched Multiple Killers - Sources Say:" *The Hartford Courant*, March 14, 2013, sec. MAIN.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Matthew Kauffman. "A Gunman Bent on Carnage." *The Hartford Courant*, December 15, 2012, sec. MAIN.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Dave Altimari, Edmund Mahony, and Jon Lender. "Lanza Studied Mass Murders - Researched Multiple Killers - Sources Say:" *The Hartford Courant*, March 14, 2013, sec. MAIN.

friendly.”³¹ Essentially, these local papers painted Adam as a sort of monster, but Nancy as a mother who cared, raised her child in a well-off area, and had from the outside, what one might call a “picture-perfect” lifestyle. The national *New York Times* however, characterized Nancy Lanza in an entirely different light. A March 29, 2013, article discusses that Nancy raised Adam in a home “amid a stockpile of disparate weaponry and macabre keepsakes: several firearms, more than 1,600 rounds of ammunition, eleven knives, a starter pistol, a bayonet, three samurai swords.”³² This same article also points out that investigators suggested that money found in a birthday card from Nancy to Adam had been “intended for [Adam] to buy a gun.”³³ On a more personal level, the national article includes that Nancy herself was a “gun enthusiast who often took her son to shooting ranges” and that she was divorced from Adam’s father.”³⁴ The direct characterization of Adam and Nancy Lanza found within these implicit topoi show how a news source can clearly shape the way readers view a person.

Uncommon Topoi: Negative Responses and Newtown Specific Phrases

Throughout my analysis of articles on these three shootings, many of the topoi have been somewhat similar or related to one-another. However, throughout the articles on Sandy Hook I came across two topoi that were much more uncommon: negative responses to the shootings and new phrases that popularized as a result of the shooting. In an anniversary article published by *The Hartford Courant*, I, for the first time in my analysis, found mention of

³¹ Matthew Kauffman. “A Gunman Bent on Carnage.” *The Hartford Courant*, December 15, 2012, sec. MAIN.

³² N. R. Kleinfeld, Ray Rivera, and Serge Kovaleski. “Newtown Killer’s Obsessions, in Chilling Detail.” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2013, sec. A.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

negative responses that came in the aftermath of a school shooting. As the journalists here discuss the outpouring of support from around the nation to the people of Newtown, they also mention that “not everything was positive and supportive by any means.”³⁵ They mention the conspiracy theorists, just as Serber did, and the need for the bad as well as the good to be included to tell the complete story. As the people of Newtown came to comprehend what occurred and learned how to mourn, new topoi themselves were inadvertently created. An anniversary article published by *The New York Times* discusses “The Newtown Handshake” where a hug to a parent becomes inevitable, the phrase “she’s a mom” which is understood to mean the mother of a victim, and the mention of “12/14” rather than using the term *shooting*.³⁶ In his dissertation, Serber discusses this same phenomenon of a new vocabulary and refers to it as “redefining their own action rhetoric” in order to “alleviate some of the pain.”³⁷ Through reporting on these newly originated phrases and terms on a national level, *The New York Times* is sharing how the local residents of the town have been shaped by the events at Sandy Hook Elementary.

Through analysis of the local and national newspaper articles written on Sandy Hook, it can be seen that many of the topoi overlap while reporting on more than one school shooting. A bit differently from Columbine, as seen in the analysis of Sandy Hook articles, parents of both the victims and the shooter are discussed prevalently in the aftermath of the shooting. This focus is quite possibly due to the fact of Sandy Hook having child-victims and the way in which our American society perceives this. Culturally, Americans react to the concept of children and

³⁵ Alaine Griffin, and Josh Kovner. “They Sent Love.” *The Hartford Courant*, December 14, 2013, sec. MAIN.

³⁶ Michael Wilson. “A Year of Painful, Daily Reminders in Newtown.” *The New York Times*, December 14, 2013, sec. A.

³⁷ Bradley Serber. “Reaction Rhetorics: Targeted Violence and Public Security.” The Pennsylvania State University, 2016.

childhood in a unique way, thus putting a strong focus on the parents. With these strong reactions, Sandy Hook encouraged people all over the nation to take action, and from this, many policies were fought for and action groups were developed. Sandy Hook is often regarded as the first time that Americans came together and said “we need to do something about this problem.” “This problem” meant school shootings to some, meant gun use to others, or even meant the many possible causes behind such an event. In December 2016, four years after the shooting, a PSA about knowing the warning signs of gun violence done by *Sandy Hook Promise* went viral.³⁸ The video avoids the policy issues of gun control and simply creatively sets the scene of a high school in which a student who is planning a school shooting goes unnoticed. Groups such as *Sandy Hook Promise* have been taking steps towards ending gun violence in schools through education of the public.³⁹ Joe Biden was another huge supporter in the efforts to pass stricter gun control laws during his time in office.⁴⁰ Biden was pushing for expanded background checks, and with the Sandy Hook shooting of young children fresh in the minds of Americans, Biden thought that for sure the legislation would be passed. The primary bill introduced towards gun control was the Manchin- Toomey Amendment, which pushed for stricter background checks at gun shows and over the Internet. This bill failed at the Senate receiving only 54 of the required 60 votes. Policy changes at the state level were more effective, as fifteen states and Washington D.C. all enacted laws making it harder for people to acquire guns and restricting access to certain

³⁸ Sandy Hook Promise Launches Powerful PSA on the Warning Signs of Gun Violence.” *FOX 61*, December 2, 2016. <http://fox61.com/2016/12/02/sandy-hook-promise-launches-powerful-psa-on-the-warning-signs-of-gun-violence/>.

³⁹ Sandy Hook Promise.” *Sandy Hook Promise*. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://www.sandyhookpromise.org/>.

⁴⁰ Sarah Wheaton. “Biden’s Misfire on Gun Control.” *POLITICO*. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://politi.co/1MnaUEU>.

weapons altogether.⁴¹ In the aftermath of Sandy Hook, local and national newspaper reports both discussed and influenced these policy changes mostly regarding gun control. Since initiating policy changes in 2012, many professional, political, and public groups are still working today to enact changes and hopefully put an end to public mass shootings.

⁴¹Jon S. Vernick, and Mark Stevenson. “Comparing the US and Australian Experience Following a Mass Shooting.” *Injury Prevention* 21, no. 5 (October 1, 2015): 363–64.
doi:10.1136/injuryprev-2015-041832.

Chapter 4

Pulse Nightclub

Case Narrative

For six years, Sandy Hook was the deadliest mass shooting in United States history; that descriptor changed on June 12, 2016, as a gunman opened fire inside of Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. On the evening of June 11, an estimated 300 people gathered for Latin night at Pulse, a gay nightclub. Right around 2 a.m., gunshots were heard throughout the club, initially being mistaken by many as part of the music. As debris started ripping off the walls and bullets flying throughout the club, people realized what was happening; club-goers dropped to the ground, ran out of the club, or tried to find a bathroom to hide in. Omar Mateen, a twenty-nine-year-old U.S. citizen, had entered the club with a handgun and semi-automatic rifle and began randomly firing. An off-duty Orlando police officer saw Mateen from the parking lot and attempted to fire at him before the officer realized he was outgunned. Upon re-entering the club, Mateen continued to make rounds firing bullets at those running as well as those already wounded on the ground. As backup officers and SWAT team members arrived, they began to rescue wounded and hiding victims from the club moments before a hostage situation developed. About half an hour after the first shots were fired, Mateen spoke to a 911 operator and claimed credit for the crime while praising Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State. He then spoke with crisis negotiators on two separate phone calls while hinting that a bomb was planted in a vehicle outside and that he was wearing a bomb as well. At that point, hostages inside the club

had been in contact with friends and family and all were sharing differing versions of what was occurring. As the night continued, community members showed up to the scene in search of loved ones. Just after 5 a.m., police and experts set off an explosion to partially penetrate the wall to the club in order to rescue more hostages from a bathroom. Police then used an armored vehicle to break down additional walls and threw stun grenades into the club. As the shooter exited the bathroom firing his rifle, the police fired back and successfully shot and killed Mateen. Days later the confirmed news came out-- Mateen took the lives of forty-nine innocent people that night, and injured another fifty-eight.¹

Media Narrative

Because the attack began at 2 a.m., it took a longer than usual for reporters to show up at the scene of the shooting. Even having a “usual” amount of time that it takes for the media to cover a mass shooting shows that these events happen far too often. The first reporters began to arrive to the scene around 3 a.m., getting news of the shooting in more unusual ways such as through social media posts from victims, friends and families. One *Orlando Sentinel* reporter, Christal Hayes, was sitting at home watching *Grey’s Anatomy* when she received a Twitter message from a reader asking her for updates. Rather than getting a call from her editor about the shooting, Christal scrolled through her personal Twitter feed and soon realized she needed to be at the scene.² Another journalist for the *Associated Press*, Josh Replogle, got a call from his

¹ “3 Hours In Orlando: Piecing Together An Attack And Its Aftermath.” NPR.org. Accessed September 13, 2017. <http://www.npr.org/2016/06/16/482322488/orlando-shooting-what-happened-update>.

² Christal Hayes. “Covering the Pulse Nightclub Shooting: I Was the First Sentinel Reporter There.” *OrlandoSentinel.com*. Accessed September 13, 2017. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com>

boss at 3 a.m., asking him to head over to the scene of shooting in downtown Orlando; turns out, that shooting was at Pulse Nightclub, where Replege had worked to put himself through college.³ As Americans awoke on Sunday morning and flipped on their TVs, the breaking news about the shooting began to spread and the death toll was confirmed. For days there were reports about the shooting and speculation as to why it happened that entertained the idea of terrorism; however, news stations were reluctant to talk in depth about the potential motivation of homophobia.⁴ As news articles were printed and released the following day, further discussions of the topoi developed, topoi that had not been typically discussed in the aftermath of mass shootings such as homophobia and terrorism.

Exigence and Literature Connection

In his dissertation, Serber touches on the concept of terroristic mass shootings, or targeted violence as he refers to it.⁵ As I will go into more thoroughly shortly, newspapers on both the local and national level immediately noted the Pulse shooting as an act of terrorism, most simply because Mateen claimed ties to ISIS, a terroristic group. On the other hand, this shooting was considered a hate crime towards the LGBTQ+ community because Pulse was well-known as a

/news/pulse-orlando-nightclub-shooting/os-pulse-reporter-christal-hayes-20170310-story.html.

³ “He Found a Loving Community at Pulse — Then as a Reporter Came back to Cover the Carnage.” *Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 2016. <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-orlando-shooting-reporter-20160616-snap-story.html>.

⁴ Sonia Saraiya. “Media Coverage of Orlando Tragedy Follows Familiar Scripts.” *Variety*, June 12, 2016. <http://variety.com/2016/tv/opinion/media-coverage-orlando-shooting-networks-news-1201793981/>.

⁵ Bradley Serber. “Reaction Rhetorics: Targeted Violence and Public Security.” The Pennsylvania State University, 2016.

gay nightclub. In shootings throughout history though, the distinction for the type of crime has not been as clear-cut. As Serber notes, Dylann Roof (the shooter at a historically black church in Charleston) was never considered a terrorist, although he claimed to have intentions of starting a race war. Instead, Roof was charged with thirty-three counts of hate crimes.⁶ Similar to Mateen, Fresno, California shooter Kori Ali Muhammad shouted “Allahu Akbar” after killing three white men, but this shooting was not considered terrorism.⁷ These few instances here show that not only is the concept of a hate or terroristic crime one that is difficult to categorize, but also is difficult to openly discuss. This lack of comfort with discussing certain topics unfortunately supports just another roadblock in the deliberation and discussion of these mass shootings.

Common Topoi

Any mass shooting is challenging to discuss in the aftermath, but seeing that the Orlando shooting had certain topics that were avoided, I have specifically chosen to analyze this event rather than another. Few of the common topoi that were found in the Orlando shooting reports as well as the previous cases included the concepts of cause and blame, the mention of past shootings, as well as security during and after the shooting. The topoi of the LGBTQ+ community and terrorism were two that appeared throughout most reports about the Orlando shooting, in addition to the use of social media and technology as well as first responders as

⁶ Bradley Serber. “Reaction Rhetorics: Targeted Violence and Public Security.” The Pennsylvania State University, 2016.

⁷ PM, Jason Le Miere On 4/19/17 at 5:59. “The Fresno Shooting Highlights a Disturbing Increase in Mass-Homicide Hate Crimes.” *Newsweek*, April 19, 2017.

<http://www.newsweek.com/fresno-shooting-hate-crime-rise-586518>.

victims. These topoi were unique to the Orlando shooting and demonstrate how mass shootings bring up certain discussion points among publics.

Past Shootings

Before diving further into these issues that made the Pulse shooting reporting stand out from past mass shootings, I first will analyze aspects in these local and national articles that have come up previously in the aftermath of other mass shootings. In addition to common topoi among the articles, the reports of more recent shootings frequently refer back to those from the past. For instance, a *New York Times* article published the day after the attack compares the much higher casualty rate to those at Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook while also mentioning recent mass shootings in “a school or a house of worship or a movie theater.”⁸ This simple but unfortunate connection from one shooting to another shows how they are increasing in frequency and even severity in some cases. As mass shootings are publicized more widely, the shooters themselves often become glorified in a sense. This glorification of past shooters might very well be causal too. Similar to Adam Lanza copying past shootings at Sandy Hook, Mateen also was “inspired” by past acts of violence. One local *Orlando Sentinel* article reported on the 911 call transcripts from the night of the shooting where Mateen idolized other shooters by saying things such as “My homeboy Tamerlan Tsarnaev did his thing on the Boston Marathon...so now it’s my turn, OK?” in reference to the bombs planted at the marathon in 2013. Mateen also referenced the 2015 suicide bombings in Paris when he said that he too had a vest “like what

⁸ Lizette Alvarez, and Richard Perez-Pena. “Praising Isis, Gunman Attacks Gay Nightclub, Leaving 50 Dead in Worst Shooting on U.S. Soil.” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2016, sec. A.

they used in France.”⁹ Seeing the infamy that these attackers received, Mateen appears to have felt a connection and developed a desire to have his own “fame.”

Cause and Blame

This copycat mentality and a desire to be publically known can contribute to the cause of a shooting. A *New York Times* article mentions the violent tendencies that might have influenced Mateen to commit the shooting as they quoted a coworker saying, “Mateen had talked often about killing people and had voiced hatred of gays, blacks, women and Jews.”¹⁰ The same article also mentions the search for Mateen’s connection to an American suicide bomber and that fact that he is believed to be on government watch lists.¹¹ In my analysis of Columbine and Sandy Hook, I found newspapers reporting on the parents of the shooters and what part they played; with Pulse, it is Mateen’s wife who is looked at to place blame upon. *The New York Times* quotes his wife Noor Salman saying, “I knew when he left that he was going to commit the attack” and then continues to report on the debate of whether or not it is just for Ms. Salman to be charged with assisting with the attack.¹² One more potential cause of the shooting is discussed in an *Orlando Sentinel* article—Mateen is quoted in the 911 transcript saying he committed the attack “to stop the airstrikes on Iraq and Syria” and then confirmed the statement

⁹ Caitlin Doornbos. “Transcripts of 911 Calls Reveal Extent of Pulse Shooter’s Terrorist Moves.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, September 24, 2016, sec. A.

¹⁰ Lizette Alvarez, and Richard Perez-Pena. “Praising Isis, Gunman Attacks Gay Nightclub, Leaving 50 Dead in Worst Shooting on U.S. Soil.” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2016, sec. A.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Erin Marie Daly, and Alan Blinder. “U.S. Prosecutor Says Widow of Orlando Nightclub Killer Knew of His Attack Plans.” *The New York Times*, February 2, 2017, sec. A.

with, “that’s what triggered it, OK?”¹³ Unlike some other shooters in the past, Mateen left no information as to his direct motives other than the information his wife knew and what he revealed during the hostage situation that night.

Security

Before the hostage situation began, Mateen was able to enter Pulse nightclub with two deadly weapons, which led to security becoming a discussion point in the aftermath. At a six-month anniversary memorial event outside Pulse Nightclub, the local *Orlando Sentinel* specifically noted that attendees could get no closer than the parking lot and that security guards were in place to both check bags for any weapons and to scan all bodies with a metal detector.¹⁴ Outside of Orlando, people all over the country were taking extra security measures to avoid any future or copycat attacks. Shortly after the shooting, *The New York Times* reported, “Fears of violence led to heightened security at lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender events and gathering places around the country.”¹⁵ Another local article published in March 2017, quoted a Republican senator saying that gun free zones are only beneficial if “every single person is going through a metal detector and there’s law enforcement on the scene.”¹⁶ This quote brings up possible deliberation on whether or not both civilian guns and security measures could help prevent mass shootings.

¹³ Caitlin Doornbos. “Transcripts of 911 Calls Reveal Extent of Pulse Shooter’s Terrorist Moves.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, September 24, 2016, sec. A.

¹⁴ Gal Tziperman Lotan, Stephen Hudak, and Christal Hayes. “Hundreds Gather to Remember Pulse Victims- Candles, Songs and Tears Mark 6-Month Anniversary of Massacre.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, December 13, 2016, sec. A.

¹⁵ Lizette Alvarez, and Richard Perez-Pena. “Praising Isis, Gunman Attacks Gay Nightclub, Leaving 50 Dead in Worst Shooting on U.S. Soil.” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2016, sec. A.

¹⁶ Gray Rohrer. “GOP Gun Bills Stall in Capitol.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, March 27, 2017, sec. A.

LGBTQ+ Community

While security was increased at LGBTQ+ events throughout the country, this particular community overall was put in the spotlight after the shooting. In the previous shootings I have analyzed, there has not been one particular group of people impacted, which is where the concept that this attack was a hate crime enters the discussion. The shooting at Pulse was the worst terrorist attack in the U.S. since 9/11 and the “deadliest attack on a gay target in nation’s history.”¹⁷ In his address to the public, Obama sent his condolences to “our fellow Americans—who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.”¹⁸ The local Orlando papers were more inclined to discuss the LGBTQ+ community support than the national papers, such as *The Orlando Sentinel*’s mention of the 6-month anniversary memorial that included the Orlando Gay Chorus along with rainbow colored clothing and lights.¹⁹ One local article discussed the fund started by Equality Florida, the statewide gay and transgender civil rights group.²⁰ The LGBTQ+ community rallied together to support the victims through the creation of a comic book made by a collection of writers and artists titled “Love is Love,” the proceeds of which went to Equality Florida.²¹ The targeting of the LGBTQ+ community brought gay rights to the forefront of American minds. A few positives came in the aftermath—an increased open dialogue about

¹⁷ Lizette Alvarez, and Richard Perez-Pena. “Praising Isis, Gunman Attacks Gay Nightclub, Leaving 50 Dead in Worst Shooting on U.S. Soil.” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2016, sec. A.

¹⁸ Gal Tziperman Lotan. “A Timeline of the Pulse Mass Shooting.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, June 13, 2016, sec. A.

¹⁹ Gal Tziperman Lotan, Stephen Hudak, and Christal Hayes. “Hundreds Gather to Remember Pulse Victims- Candles, Songs and Tears Mark 6-Month Anniversary of Massacre.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, December 13, 2016, sec. A.

²⁰ Kate Santich. “OneOrlando Begins Funds Distribution.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, September 27, 2016, sec. A.

²¹ George Gene Gustines. “Comic Book Aims to Help Orlando Survivors.” *The New York Times*, September 22, 2016.

sensitive issues surrounding the gay community, in addition to providing more access to mental health services and increasing efforts to end bullying against LGBTQ+ students.²²

Social Media and Technology

The “Love is Love” comic book that was put together to honor the victims came about through one man trying to help. Marc Andreyko, a comic book author and screenwriter, took to social media platform Facebook to suggest his comic book idea and to receive feedback.²³ In comparison to Sandy Hook, a deadly school shooting just four years prior, social media and technology were much more prevalent both during and in the aftermath of the attack. Just as the reporter Christal Hayes found out about the Pulse shooting via Twitter, so did many other people not only in Orlando, but also around the world. In *The Orlando Sentinel* article detailing the timeline of the shooting, the reporter includes the message that was posted on Pulse’s Facebook page, just minutes after the initial gunshots: “Everyone get out of pulse and keep running.”²⁴ Some family and friends saw this post before showing up, others were informed via text messages from loved ones held hostage in the club, such as Eddie Justice’s texts to his mother while he hid in the bathroom: “Mommy I love you. In club they shooting.”²⁵ Also showing the

²² “After Pulse Shooting, Orlando’s Faith and LGBTQ Groups Opened Dialogue.” *PBS NewsHour*. Accessed September 21, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/pulse-shooting-orlando-faith-lgbtq-groups/>.

²³ George Gene Gustines. “Celebrities Honor Orlando Victims in Comic Book.” *The New York Times*, December 26, 2016.

²⁴ Gal Tziperman Lotan. “A Timeline of the Pulse Mass Shooting.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, June 13, 2016, sec. A.

²⁵ Gibson, Gal Tziperman Lotan, Charles Minshew, Mike Lafferty and Andrew. “Orlando Nightclub Shooting Timeline: Four Hours of Terror Unfold.” *OrlandoSentinel.com*. Accessed September 11, 2017. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/pulse-orlando-nightclub-shooting/os-orlando-pulse-nightclub-shooting-timeline-htmlstory.html>.

use of technology in the aftermath of the shooting, *The New York Times* noted that a city website was immediately created to list the victims²⁶ and *The Orlando Sentinel* mentioned that websites such as GoFundMe were used to raise record-setting amounts for the victims.²⁷ Through the newspaper's inclusion of social media and technology use, it becomes apparent that the way we find out about, react to, and remember mass shootings is changing drastically with the times.

Terrorism

Just as social media's prevalence in the aftermath of this shooting was different than in the past, the reports on this being an act of terrorism and the shooter's allegiance to the violent and extremist Islamic State were also specific to the Pulse shooting. Months after the shooting occurred, *The New York Times* reported on the ISIS connections behind the attack and mentioned that Mateen had been radicalized online rather than having received specific assistance from ISIS.²⁸ Hours after the attack, however, ISIS released an encrypted statement claiming responsibility for the shooting and referring to Mateen as an "Islamic State fighter."²⁹ To share background from the side of the shooter, *The Orlando Sentinel* also reported on the released call transcripts. In these, Mateen is quoted saying "I pledge my allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Badhdadi

²⁶ Lizette Alvarez, and Richard Perez-Pena. "Praising Isis, Gunman Attacks Gay Nightclub, Leaving 50 Dead in Worst Shooting on U.S. Soil." *The New York Times*, June 13, 2016, sec. A.

²⁷ Kate Santich. "OneOrlando Begins Funds Distribution." *The Orlando Sentinel*, September 27, 2016, sec. A.

²⁸ Erin Marie Daly, and Alan Blinder. "U.S. Prosecutor Says Widow of Orlando Nightclub Killer Knew of His Attack Plans." *The New York Times*, February 2, 2017, sec. A.

²⁹ Lizette Alvarez, and Richard Perez-Pena. "Praising Isis, Gunman Attacks Gay Nightclub, Leaving 50 Dead in Worst Shooting on U.S. Soil." *The New York Times*, June 13, 2016, sec. A.

of the Islamic State.”³⁰ The local paper added credibility to these claims by including that President Obama declared that the shooting was both “an act of terror and an act of hate.”³¹ Since this shooting was both terroristic and a hate crime, the local and national newspapers were able to put some of their focus on these more sensitive topics that impacted publics outside of the specific Orlando area.

Secondary Victims

While the immediate victims in the nightclub were severely impacted by the shooting, both local and national papers chose to also report on those who were affected in a more indirect way. The local *Orlando Sentinel* mentioned the 299 families and survivors³² which included the forty-nine slain in addition to the sixty-eight hurt and the physically and mentally wounded.³³ Just as secondary victims were reported on in the aftermath of Columbine, these families were second victims as well and reporters paid their respects to all affected parties. More specifically, the national *New York Times* focused on the negative effects to the first responders at the scene. Taking an alternate route from the discussion of hurt family and friends, this October *New York Times* article discussed the trauma that police officers from the scene went through and the

³⁰ Caitlin Doornbos. “Transcripts of 911 Calls Reveal Extent of Pulse Shooter’s Terrorist Moves.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, September 24, 2016, sec. A.

³¹ Gal Tziperman Lotan. “A Timeline of the Pulse Mass Shooting.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, June 13, 2016, sec. A.

³² Kate Santich. “OneOrlando Begins Funds Distribution.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, September 27, 2016, sec. A.

³³ Gal Tziperman Lotan, Stephen Hudak, and Christal Hayes. “Hundreds Gather to Remember Pulse Victims- Candles, Songs and Tears Mark 6-Month Anniversary of Massacre.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, December 13, 2016, sec. A.

PTSD that they experienced after having been present through the shootings.³⁴ This common issue of officers having PTSD after responding to an attack is currently being taken to legislators in hopes of first responders gaining more support in the aftermath of violent events.

In addition to legislation regarding PTSD victims, just as with each of the other shootings there is also legislation in the works regarding gun laws; local and national newspapers have reported efforts on both sides of the debate. Soon after the shooting occurred, there was a push to ban gun sales to any persons currently or previously on the FBI terror watch list and the government's no-fly list; however, this bill did not pass.³⁵ In addition to the usual gun control efforts, in the case of Pulse, *The Orlando Sentinel* reported on Senator Steube's thoughts that "Florida needs fewer gun-free zones" and his plans to support measures that will allow concealed carry permit holders to legally carry in many more public places. Just as the gun-control legislation has not been passed, these gun rights measures have also stalled at the governmental level.³⁶ As Matt Cowdock notes in his dissertation, Obama's remarks post-shooting imply that America is obsessed with guns. Cowdock then references NRA Vice President Wayne LaPierre's statement that "the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."³⁷ Mateen was a "bad guy" who legally purchased a gun. Although he happened to be an off-duty officer, the man who first confronted Mateen outside of Pulse was a "good guy with a

³⁴ Frances Robles. "Orlando Officers Grapple With Shooting Trauma." *The New York Times*, October 28, 2016, sec. A.

³⁵ Gray Rohrer. "Gun Control Groups Claim Victory in Florida - for Now." *OrlandoSentinel.com*. Accessed September 25, 2017.
<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/politics/political-pulse/os-legislature-guns-bills-20170512-story.html>.

³⁶ Gray Rohrer. "GOP Gun Bills Stall in Capitol." *The Orlando Sentinel*, March 27, 2017, sec. A.

³⁷ Matt Cowdock. "Caught in the Crossfire: Examining the Problems of Gun Discourse in the United States." 2017.

gun;” in an alternative situation, this man might have been able to prevent the attack from continuing. This situation here only furthers the debate of whether or not all guns are bad, and if they could be used for positive prevention methods. Although this is a topic that needs to be deliberated upon, just as Cowdock notes in his work, “nobody appears able or ready to engage in a productive discussion about it”³⁸

³⁸ Ibid.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Throughout my time analyzing newspaper articles and constructing this thesis, mass shootings have continued to occur throughout America. Each time, I have questioned whether or not to include them in my analysis for a more recent comparison. Each time, however, I have had to realize that, unfortunately, mass shootings will likely continue to occur. And regardless, at some point, I had to select a specific focus. At the time of writing this concluding chapter, another mass shooting happened just days ago: eight people were shot and killed in a home in Plano, Texas.¹ The details, along with the motive, shooter's name, weapon and more still have not been released. The first reports on the shooting followed closely with the typical immediate reaction by the media—the race to report first with any new details found. If this shooting in Plano follows a similar trend to the three cases I analyzed, there can be a strong prediction made as to which topoi will appear in both local and national newspapers now and throughout the upcoming year.

Case Comparison

Across all three cases: Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Pulse in Orlando, newspapers have seemingly reported in similar ways. In the first articles published after the events, reporters

¹ “8 Dead, Including Gunman, after Shooting in Plano, Texas.” *USA TODAY*. Accessed September 26, 2017. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/09/10/reports-deadly-shooting-8-plano-texas/652379001/>.

tended to focus on the narrative of the shooting—the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, but more often than not, left the *why* to later articles. The articles written weeks or months after the shooting more often summarized the facts, while focusing on the memory of the attack, or on how the family, friends and victims were handling the grief. The anniversary pieces were often a reflection of the past year, including memorial services as well as any policy changes that were in process or had been attempted.

Reoccurring Topoi

These reporters from *The Denver Post*, *Hartford Courant*, *Orlando Sentinel*, and *The New York Times* each influenced publics through what they chose to report on. As seen in the analysis of each case, newspaper articles in the aftermath will never be exactly the same for two shootings; however, they will often follow similar paths. The topoi that came up in one way or another after each event included the concept of cause and blame, memory in the aftermath, gun legislation, security measures, and references to past shootings. These similar topoi show that although the shootings themselves had many dissimilarities between the location, the victims, and the years, what news reporters feel is important for publics to know does not vary much. Indirect topoi such as characterization of people involved and the shooter's name in the article needed to be acknowledged as well since they too change the way that publics interpret an event. Although the articles contained many similar points, each shooting had its own aspect that distinguished it from the others. Some of these differentiating topoi included negative responses, specific phrases in the town, equal rights or hate crimes, social media involvement and terrorism.

When choosing my three cases to study, I intentionally included the Orlando shooting to see how the media would change its reporting styles with the shooting not being at a school. Surprisingly to me, even though the Orlando shooting was at a nightclub and not a school, the reporting was still very similar. There was still a strong focus on where it occurred, who the shooter was, what might have caused it, and policies that followed. Regardless of being at a nightclub with adults rather than schools with children, both the local and national newspapers reported just as much on the families and friends of the victims and the memorials that followed.

Local vs. National

Unfortunately, none of the shootings I chose to analyze were the first of their kind, nor were they the last. Because of this sobering fact, national newspapers begin to report similarly on each one, while typically, a local paper has its first experience with reporting on a mass shooting. In regard to the local vs. national reporting, the greatest variation was seen among the Sandy Hook articles. As noted, the two characterized Adam and Nancy Lanza in contrasting ways, most likely due to the fact that Sandy Hook was a small town where everyone knew each other. Outside of the Sandy Hook shooting, the local and national newspaper journalists reported in similar ways with agreeing facts for both Columbine and the Orlando shooting.

Gun Policy

In the aftermath of a mass shooting, policies on both ends of the spectrum are pushed for and possibly even voted upon. Many gun control supporters use the time immediately following a mass shooting to gain support for their policies in hopes that the emotions people are

currently feeling will play a role. More often than not though, these policies on both ends of the spectrum are not passed into laws due to disagreement within government and citizens in general. American citizens cannot seem to agree upon whether or not guns are good, if people should be allowed to own guns, if guns should be carried on school campuses, if there should be background checks before buying guns, and a multitude of other issues regarding guns in our country. One thing, however, that a majority of Americans can agree on, is that these mass shootings must end. Innocent lives need to stop being taken and we as citizens should not be so accustomed to hearing that another shooting has occurred in another seemingly safe place.

Las Vegas, Nevada

Just three pages earlier I wrote about drawing the line and choosing a cut-off point in which to stop analyzing new mass shootings. However, the events of October 1, 2017, were too important to conscientiously complete my thesis without discussion. Just after 10 p.m. on that Sunday, Stephen Paddock opened fired from the thirty-second floor of a hotel-casino into the twenty-two thousand audience members of the Route 91 country music concert below. Leaving at least fifty-nine people dead and 527 people injured,² this massacre has become the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history. Paddock was found dead in his hotel room along with twenty-three guns. In addition to those twenty-three guns, he had fifty pounds of explosives and over 1,600 rounds of ammunition. This mass shooting was not a random occurrence; Paddock had to have been planning his attack and gathering supplies for months. The narrative of this event is

² News, A. B. C. "At Least 59 Killed, 527 Injured in Las Vegas Shooting." ABC News, October 4, 2017. <http://abcnews.go.com/US/las-vegas-shooting-death-toll-rises-59-apparent/story?id=50223240>.

one that is both traumatizing and violent; however, the narrative is not what I plan to focus on here. This recent shooting refers to a topos mentioned in only one of the cases I analyzed for this work: that being the topos of terrorism.

The scale of the attack at hand has brought both the media and publics to deliberate on whether or not Paddock's actions were terroristic. Federal law defines terrorism as “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.”³ In cases such as the Orlando and San Bernardino shootings, all three shooters had ties to extremist terrorist groups⁴ with both political and social agendas, making it quite simple to label the attacks as terrorism, more formally categorized as international terrorism. Attacks by U.S. citizens, on U.S. citizens on the other hand, become much more difficult to categorize. The concept of domestic terrorism is then brought up, which is defined by Title Eighteen of the U.S. Code to include “activities that (A) involve acts dangerous to human life... (B) appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, to influence the policy of a government by intimidation, or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping, and (C) occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.”⁵ The difference here between domestic and international terrorism lies in the fact that domestic terrorism is planned, trained for, and acted upon inside the United States.

³ Aaron Blake. “Analysis | Terrorism or Not? Las Vegas Reignites a Real — and Really Important — Debate.” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/10/02/terrorism-or-not-las-vegas-reignites-a-real-and-really-important-debate/>.

⁴ “Everything We Know about the San Bernardino Terror Attack Investigation so Far.” *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 2015. <http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-san-bernardino-shooting-terror-investigation-htmlstory.html>.

⁵ “18 U.S. Code § 2331 - Definitions.” LII / Legal Information Institute. Accessed October 25, 2017. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2331>.

Immediately following the Las Vegas attack, President Trump was sure to avoid the use of the term *terrorism* and the White House press secretary discussed the lack of a known motive and that it was premature to discuss political decisions regarding gun control. The attack has not officially been categorized as any type of terrorism due to a lack of understanding the shooter's motive at this point in time. The formal terrorism definitions include that the violence is politically motivated or intended to impact the government, but again, Paddock's motive is still unknown. With this attack not being clearly categorized, it makes terrorism not even an implicit topos, but one that is entirely absent. Without a clear cause or motive here, reporters are lost as to how to label the attack, and therefore have been avoiding a specific stance on the topos altogether. In fact, discussion of the Las Vegas shooting has nearly disappeared not even a month afterward.

Even before this shooting will be formally categorized or not as domestic or foreign terrorism, it can be agreed upon that this attack did produce terror; however, it would be premature to label it as a terroristic act before determining a clear, and most likely, political motive. As political author Gessen notes, "the fact that people are terrorized doesn't necessarily mean that an act of terror has been committed."⁶ By labeling all large-scale violent events immediately as terrorism, the term is sure to lose its intentionally significant meaning.

Just as Fresno, California, shooter Kori Ali Muhammad was charged for a hate crime and not terrorism due to his lack of political motive, the same could happen in the Las Vegas case. If Paddock's motives do turn out to be political and his act was entirely premeditated in the United States, this would be a case of domestic terrorism. The issue here lay in the loose definitions of

⁶ Masha Gessen. "Why We Should Resist Calling the Las Vegas Shooting 'Terrorism.'" *The New Yorker*, October 3, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/why-we-should-resist-calling-the-las-vegas-shooting-terrorism>.

domestic and international terrorism. With strong connotations to the publics, reporters and public officials are currently wary to label the attack with one topos or the other. However, might the thought of categorizing these American mass shootings as terrorism be just the wake-up call America needs? Might the more drastic term help Americans to start opening up for productive discussion and deliberation on the topic? If *mass shootings* are becoming too commonplace to encourage change, maybe frequent occurrences of *terrorism* in our nation will do just that.

Is *Same* Always Good?

Throughout this thesis, it has been taken as a positive that each of the newspapers have reported on each of the shootings in a similar way. This similarity shows that the newspapers have consistency and, for the most part, care about reporting on the same topoi. However, as I began to question the use of the term *terrorism*, I would also like to begin to analyze the alternative side to this repetitive reporting. What if all newspapers reporting on all mass shootings in the same way is not beneficial? What if we as Americans are falling into the redundant trap of reading about these shootings, and feeling no new emotions than what we felt the last time one occurred? What if in order to bring about the much-needed change to end mass shootings, we need a change in the media's reporting style? Cowdock wrote in his dissertation, "deliberation and discussion on the subject still suffers from the monotony of repetition, the perils of normalization and the perverseness of glamorization."⁷ I also wonder, however, if the

⁷ Matt Cowdock. "Caught in the Crossfire: Examining the Problems of Gun Discourse in the United States." 2017.

suffering of monotony, normalization, and glamorization is not only an issue with deliberation, but also an issue in the reporting of the shootings.

What is Next?

With each newspaper reporting on generally the same few topics in the aftermath of a shooting, might it be possible that the publics are simply becoming immune to the news articles themselves? Citizens reading these articles might be looking at them from a singular lens, and concluding that one article about blaming mental illness and a culture of violence is just the same as another. Is this downward spiral of mass shootings “blending” together, leaving people less inclined to make a change? Do people need to see a new side of the media that grabs their attention? As of now, newspapers are asking a set of questions, and giving a set of answers; this set of answers being what is now “normal” for readers. The media have therefore created one singular narrative around mass shootings. If the media changed the way in which they report on mass shootings, would readers react in a more significant way and strive for more changes? Seemingly, the unique topoi that are occasionally included such as LGBTQ+ in the aftermath of the Orlando shooting would be seen as disrupting this singular narrative. However, does the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community simply fit into another narrative that the media has been pursuing lately—that of gay and lesbian rights in America? These questions cannot be easily answered; however, as part of the publics being affected by these mass shootings, we must attempt to answer them. My thesis has suggested how newspaper coverage of mass shootings rhetorically affects publics. It is for future U.S. publics to determine whether this method is truly the most beneficial way to encourage positive change in our nation moving forward.

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EDUCATION: The Pennsylvania State University

Schreyer Honors College

Majors: Supply Chain Management and Communication Arts and Sciences

Minor: International Business

Honors: Communication Arts and Sciences

International Education: IES Abroad: Rome, Italy, January 2016- May 2016

Thesis Title: The Rhetorical Influence of the Media on American Publics in the Aftermath of Mass Shootings

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Rosa Eberly

INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE:

Under Armour- Global Sourcing Intern, Baltimore, MD

May 2017 – August 2017

- Conducted a rainwear fabric and garment analysis to reclassify duty rates and found \$2 million in savings
- Streamlined the buying process for the PGA promo line order of 300+ products and saved \$25,000
- Completed detailed costing and margin analysis for the golf product line which consisted of ~500 styles
- Worked with regional sourcing team in Hong Kong on a weekly basis to obtain costing and allocation information
- Used SAP BI reporting tools on a daily basis to run forecast, purchase order, and style reports
- Collaborated with fellow interns to organize, prepare, and run the UA Sample Sale and earned \$1.3 million

DuPont – Business Process Specialist, Wilmington, DE

June 2016 – August 2016

- Improved detailed and master planning roles by creating and implementing Job Cycle Checks
- Established a risk assessment of 10 third party products with an annual spend of over \$188 million
- Communicated on a weekly basis with international employees; conducted global conference calls
- Presented methods and findings to over 30 contributors and stakeholders across many functional groups

GRANTS RECEIVED AND AWARDS

- Attorney James R. and Dr. Deborah A. Anzalone Trustee Scholarship in the College of the Liberal Arts- Fall 2017
- Pechter Family Scholarship in the Department of Communication Arts & Sciences- Fall 2016
- James A. and Karen D. Bodnar Trustee Scholarship – Fall 2015, Fall 2016
- A. Whitney Frankenberry Scholarship in International Programs – Spring 2016
- College of the Liberal Arts Enrichment Award – Spring 2016
- Harold O'Brien Memorial Award – Spring 2016
- Dean's List– Fall 2013 through Fall 2017

COMMUNITY SERVICE INVOLVEMENT:

- Penn State Lion Scout (tour guide)
- State College Area High School volunteer tutor
- Under Armour Give Back Day and Field Day for Baltimore City schools
- Charm City 5k Volunteer
- All American Lacrosse Tournament Volunteer