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**MEDIA FRAMING IN THE LIFECYCLE OF SCHOOL SHOOTINGS:  
A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE PARKLAND HIGH SCHOOL SHOOTING**

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## ABSTRACT

On Feb. 14, 2018, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, FL became the next school shooting in American history to spark the gun control debate. High school students led the way with the March for Our Lives movement, which became a national school walk-out advocating gun control and the removal of NRA-backed politicians during the midterm elections in November 2018. Mainstream media framed these events as pivotal points in the U.S. history of mass shootings and in the gun control debate. This study analyzes prior school shootings at Columbine High School in 1999, Virginia Tech University in 2007, and Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 as references to how the media coverage of school shootings has changed, if at all, in the last two decades. Using a thematic content analysis of *New York Times* media coverage in the 30 days following the Parkland shooting, this study adapts methodologies from the Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook shootings to understand how the media tells the story of a school shooting. In a comparison of the four shootings, these results indicated that the media has remained mostly stable in its school shootings news cycles, changing mainly to incorporate gun control policies.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	iii
LIST OF TABLES .....	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction .....	1
Background .....	1
Chapter 2 Literature Review .....	6
Shift #1: Issue Frame Effects on Public Discourse .....	6
Shift #2: Shooter-Centered Media to Victim-Centered Media .....	12
Shift #3: Incorporating Social Media as a Source of Information .....	18
Summary .....	21
Chapter 3 Methodology .....	22
Thematic Analysis of Content .....	22
Scope of Study .....	25
Chapter 4 Findings .....	29
Research Question 1 .....	29
Research Question 2 .....	32
Research Question 3 .....	34
Chapter 5 Discussion .....	36
Time .....	36
Space .....	37
Theme .....	39
Source .....	40
March for Our Lives Movement .....	41
Limitations and Recommendations .....	43
Chapter 6 Conclusion .....	45
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	47

## LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Figure 1: History of Mass Shootings (Washington Post, 2019)</i> .....	2
<i>Figure 2: Two Dimensional Measurement Scheme (Chyi and McCombs, 2004)</i> .....	7
<i>Figure 3: Time Magazine, 1999</i> .....	14
<i>Figure 4: Four Dimensional Measurement Scheme</i> .....	23
<i>Figure 5: 30-Day Coverage of Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Parkland Shootings</i> .....	26
<i>Figure 6: Distribution of Time Frames</i> .....	30
<i>Figure 7: Distribution of Space Frames</i> .....	31
<i>Figure 8: Major Themes in Parkland, FL Coverage</i> .....	32
<i>Figure 9: Distribution of Themes</i> .....	33
<i>Figure 10: Major Sources in Parkland, FL Coverage</i> .....	35
<i>Figure 11: Distribution of Sources</i> .....	35
<i>Figure 12: Distribution of “March for Our Lives” Keyword (Feb. 14 – Nov. 8 2018)</i> .....	43

**LIST OF TABLES**

<i>Table 1: Frame Coding Scheme .....</i>	28
<i>Table 2: Coding Outline .....</i>	28

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

On Feb. 14, 2018, a gunman killed 13 students and 3 faculty members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The shooter, Nikolas Cruz, who was 19 years old at the time of the shooting, used an AR-15 assault rifle with multiple magazines to commit the crime and injure dozens of others (Almukhtar et al, 2018). Of the ten deadliest shootings in recent U.S. history, Cruz is the only living perpetrator and, after confessing to the crime on video, faces the death penalty (Karimi, 2019). Following the shooting, students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas started the national March for Our Lives (MFOL) movement to support gun control and oppose politicians who receive donations from the National Rifle Association (NRA). The movement culminated on March 24, 2018 with a student-led demonstration in Washington D.C. and continued through the Nov. 2018 midterm election.

With an interest in social justice and nonprofit public relations, I was drawn to the Parkland shooting initially because of the MFOL movement. This kind of student activism offers an impetus for change in gun control legislation that seemed unprecedented among other incidents of school shootings across the United States.

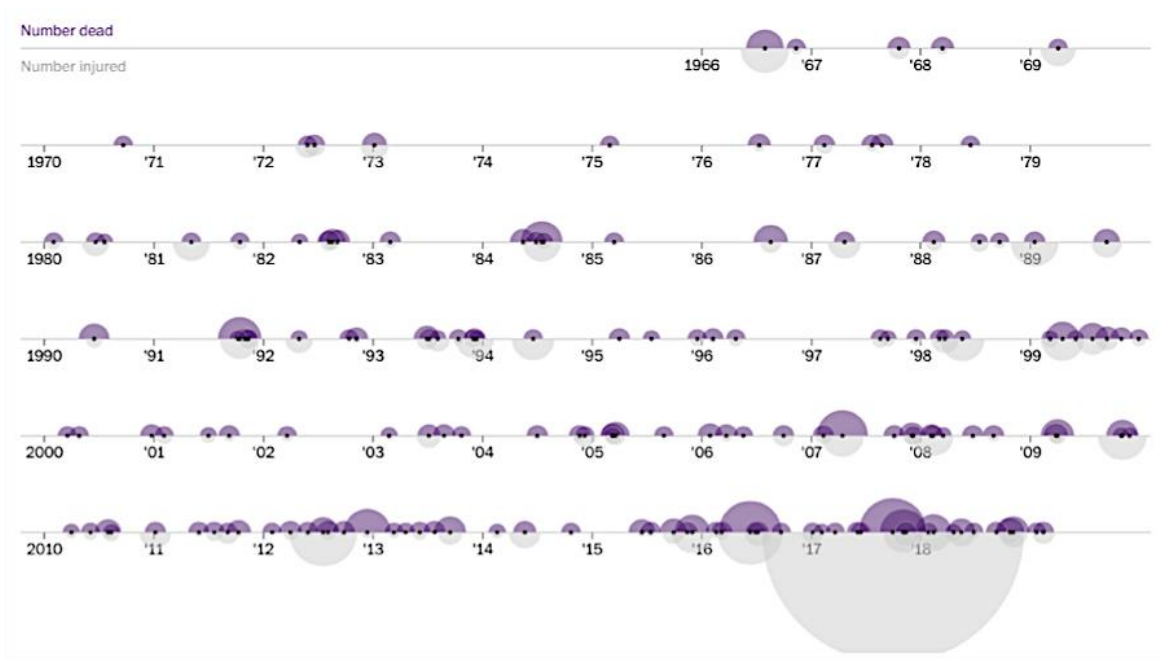
### **Background**

A mass shooting is defined by the FBI, as well as conventionally in research on mass shootings, as four or more murders occurring within the same incident and timeframe. The recent

history of the United States is fraught with public mass shootings in settings like religious spaces, office buildings, restaurants and bars, concerts, and schools.

*The Washington Post* (Berkowitz, Lu, & Alcantara, 2019), using this definition of a mass shooting, collects and updates data on mass shootings to show escalating trends. *Figure 1*, which goes as far back as the University of Texas tower shooting in 1966, shows a timeline of the last almost 65 years of shootings in the U.S. Black dots represent shootings, purple half-circles represent the number of deaths, and gray half-circles represent the number of injuries. In the last decade, since the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, the frequency of mass shootings has increased from 1-2 every year to between 3-5 on average. From 2016-2018, this became more than 7 per year. As of Feb. 16, 2019, there had already been 2 mass shootings—one in Florida in January and one in Illinois in February. This suggests that the number of mass shootings in 2019 will not be any less than that of the past few years without significant change.

**Figure 1: History of Mass Shootings (*Washington Post*, 2019)**



School shootings are included in the list of mass shootings, accounting for some of the deadliest and most publicized mass shootings of their time. In 1999, the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado is remembered as a turning point for school shootings because of how much public interest it attracted. The two shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, killed 12 students and 1 teacher before killing themselves, capturing the attention of 68% of the American public (Birkland and Lawrence, 2009). It was the third-most followed story of the 1990s, behind the 1992 Rodney King verdict and the 1996 flight 800 crash, and the “number-two” story of 1999, after President Clinton’s impeachment trials (Kostinsky, Bixler and Kettl, 2001; Chyi and McCombs, 2004). Although the majority of policy change regarding gun control was deflected to school security and surveillance, the incident represented a sentiment in U.S. culture that school shootings should not be treated as isolated events.

Subsequent media and research on later school shootings reference the events and impacts of Columbine. The Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, where the shooter Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people before shooting himself, was the deadliest mass shooting at that time. Five years later, the Sandy Hook shooting in Newtown, Connecticut on Dec. 14, 2012, marked another change in the history of school shootings when the shooter Adam Lanza killed 20 elementary school children, as well as 6 staff members, himself, and his. Although it was not the deadliest mass shooting at the time, or even the deadliest mass shooting at an elementary school, the Sandy Hook shooting was the second most-reported story of the year, following the presidential election (Schildkraut and Muschert, 2014).

The Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook shootings are also connected by their shooters. Murray (2017) studied documents left by killers of mass shootings to understand why they made their decision to perform a mass killing. He concluded that the unintentional result of

media reporting the way it does glorifies killing for these shooters who are looking to cause destruction and be a part of the glorification they see in the news. Specifically, the study cites Adam Lanza, the Sandy Hook shooter, as having been influenced by the Virginia Tech and Columbine shooters. He wrote three days before the Sandy Hook shooting, “The enthusiasm I had back when Virginia Tech happened feels like it’s been gone for a hundred billion years. I don’t care about anything. I’m just done with it all.” This sentiment does not just come from a place of excitement, but from a desire to learn from past shootings.

These three shootings also represent the various political and presidential phases in the last two decades since Columbine. This is especially important when considering the kind of policies (or lack thereof) that followed each shooting. Despite nationwide ideological shifts occurring since the Columbine shooting in 1999, the gun control debate has remained relatively stable. The typically conservative argument can be categorized as “gun rights” as opposed to the liberal argument that can be categorized as “gun control” (Benton et al 2016). Gun rights refers to the protection of the Second Amendment and our citizens’ rights to bear arms; gun control refers to the rejection of the Second Amendment as it pertains to modern-day U.S. culture or to at least restrict the rights of those who can bear arms.

Key legislation, mainly from a gun control stance, is generally proposed right after a shooting. For example, after Columbine, President Clinton sued gun companies and proposed the enforcement of funding for photo identification for gun purchases and safety locks on handguns. After Sandy Hook, the bipartisan Manchin-Toomey background check legislation proposed that there be more checks at gun shows and Internet sales. Most federal legislation fails, including these proposals, leading to localized legislation like state laws and school surveillance protocols. Advocacy groups from both sides are also likely to pop up after shootings, such as the Million

Mom March on the first year anniversary of Columbine, the Students for Concealed Carry on Campus group after Virginia Tech, and the Moms Demand Action group after Sandy Hook. This was the case for the March for Our Lives movement after Parkland, as well.

The gun control debate resurfaces after more than just school shootings, though. The top two deadliest mass shootings are the Las Vegas shooting in 2017 where 58 people died and the Pulse Nightclub shooting in 2016 where 49 people died (Karimi, 2019). Neither of these are school shootings, but they did attract attention from the media and led to legislation of its own. To name a few, the Aurora, Colorado movie theatre shooting in 2012, the Sutherland Springs church shooting in Texas in 2017, the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting in 2018 and others have also greatly impacted the gun control debate.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

In the reoccurring gun control debate, there are four stakeholders who control the conversation: the media, the public, politicians, and special interest groups (like the NRA). Each contributes to issue frames in the media, which purposefully make specific attributes of the conversation accessible in order to influence public opinion to understand an event in a particular way (Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001). In general, media coverage has changed in the last few decades, but from Columbine in 1999 to Sandy Hook in 2012, the issue frames have changed as well. These developments can be explained by three major shifts, evident from the body of research surrounding the Columbine, Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook shootings.

#### **Shift #1: Issue Frame Effects on Public Discourse**

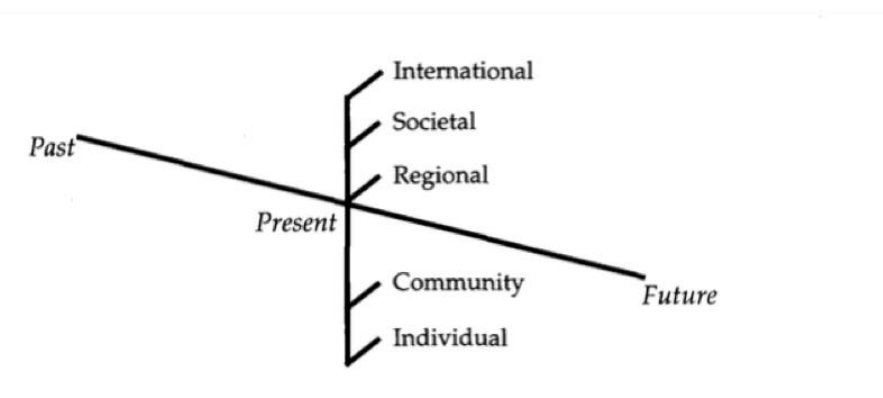
Although Columbine was not the first school shooting in U.S. history, experts recognize it as a focusing or inciting event, meaning that many of the issue frames associated with the gun control debate, like violence in the media and mental health's role, can be traced back to media coverage of Columbine (Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001; Birkland and Lawrence, 2004; Muschert and Schildkraut, 2013). As researchers try to understand the media effects on public discourse and legislature from subsequent school shootings like Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook, they reference these issue frames and news cycles from Columbine media coverage. Since Columbine, though, the national conversation shifted from what and who causes a school

shooting during coverage of Columbine and Virginia Tech to how gun control policies could be a solution during coverage of Sandy Hook.

This trend in issue framing developed as gun control drew more public concern with each shooting. Researchers began their inquiries with the Columbine shooting by trying to understand its issue frames in order to understand its effects on public opinion. Chyi and McCombs (2004) developed a standardized methodology to analyze time and space as issue frames used in *The New York Times* in the 30 days following the shooting. As shown in *Figure 2*, time is measured as past, present, or future and space is measured as individual, community, regional, societal, and international. Each of these issue frames, when cross-examined with each other, can reveal the kind of issue framing used during the Columbine coverage.

Chyi and McCombs concluded that the frame-changing pattern shifted from individual to societal and from past to future throughout the first month of coverage following the Columbine shooting. Cross-examination showed that the “societal present” frame was dominant, which means that most of the articles discussed the current environment in the U.S. The frames “individual past” and “societal future” were also highly correlated, meaning that articles also discussed individuals’ (like the shooters) pasts and the future of U.S. culture.

*Figure 2: Two Dimensional Measurement Scheme (Chyi and McCombs, 2004)*



This methodology is later used to compare school shooting media coverage of later shootings like Muschert and Schildkraut (2013) compare Sandy Hook to Columbine. For the Parkland shooting this raises the following question:

*Research Question: How were the time and space frames distributed across the Parkland shooting's news cycle?*

Other Columbine researchers took different approaches to examine the media effects on public opinion. For example, imitation effects, like threats of violence, would demonstrate that consumers of Columbine media were more likely than usual to act as the Columbine shooters had (Bixler et. al, 2001). In Pennsylvania, during the first 10 days after Columbine, there were heightened imitation effects, including bomb threats and other weapon threats. The same year, Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2001) studied how different issue frames used in the media impact public support for concealed handguns and blame attribution, defined as who or what the public blames for the shooting. They found that Democrats and high political-knowledge participants are not as impacted by frames as Republicans, Independents, and low political-knowledge participants, whose views on public safety and the Second Amendment compete with each other. This means that predisposition to frame exposure, through political knowledge and party affiliation, directly influences the effect that media frames have on public opinion—a finding prevalent in later research on public opinion of policy, as well (Seate, Fujioka, and Hoffner 2012; Wozniak 2015). McGinty et. al (2016) calls this finding motivated reasoning, which is when an individual with an existing, coherent opinion is less likely to be influenced by the presentation of

new information and instead subconsciously interprets the issue in a way that conforms to their established attitude.

Motivated reasoning helps explain the effect of media issue frames on public opinion as much as it explains the effect on congressional issue frames. Birkland and Lawrence (2004) studied media issue frames in connection with congressional issue frames to determine how the two impact each other. They call the cycle of impact “positive feedback”—as a problem arises in one area, it tends to dominate the attention of other arenas as well. This study concluded that “gun control” was the dominant issue frame in media coverage and congressional debate after Columbine, in part because the frame already existed from earlier debates about gun control and gun violence. The media and Congress also diverged in their issue frames, though, as the media highlighted popular culture as a problem and Congress focused on school safety as a problem.

In 2009, after the Virginia Tech shooting and on the 10-year anniversary of Columbine, research on the Columbine shooting resurfaced and started to incorporate how gun control policy became a national concern. Studies by Altheide (2009) and Muschert (2009) discussed how the media framed Columbine as an act of terrorism to increase fear. “The ultimate salience of the Columbine coverage lay in the reactions it sparked elsewhere in America,” wrote Muschert, meaning that Columbine remained active in the news cycle because of how the country responded. Altheide qualified these reactions as the implementation of better school security and surveillance because “the focus on terrorism [promotes] taking direct action ‘before it is too late,’ even when ‘it’ is not clear.” In fact, the majority of policy change to come out of the Columbine shooting was preventative actions in schools. In 2004, Birkland and Lawrence found this to be the case, citing then-President Clinton’s efforts with the “Safe Schools Bill” and the then-Colorado Governor’s statement to parents about paying more attention to what their

children see in pop culture. Five years later, Birkland and Lawrence (2009) concluded that if gun control policy change were to happen, it would have happened in the wake of Columbine, since other school shootings up until 2009 had not garnered the same amount of media coverage or public interest. This conclusion ignores special interest group effects on the media, though, like the NRA's financial investment in political candidates or movements like the Million Mom March and Students for Concealed Carry on Campus that independently generate media attention in the wake of school shootings.

In the scope of school shootings research, the findings from the Virginia Tech shooting contribute to implications of media effects on public feelings about gun control policies. For example, Fallahi and Lesik (2009) found that, among college students, the more time someone spent viewing television media on Virginia Tech, the more likely the person was to show symptoms of acute stress. Therefore, the media should consider the kind of content viewers take in and the negative effects it can have on them. These findings suggest that the media is creating “distorted” fear among the public that ‘ideally’ would lead to an interest in gun reform—although Muschert (2009) and Altheide (2009) did not see this occurring in concurrent studies. Seate, Fujioka, and Hoffner (2012) also conducted research about the Virginia Tech shooting to understand how news coverage impacts perceptions on the self and others, and they discovered that people believe that the media influences others more than themselves. They looked specifically at perception effects on gun owners who were “adamant that coverage did not affect their own opinions”—a conclusion that perpetuates the theories on predisposition of ideas and motivated reasoning (Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001; McGinty et. al, 2016). By defining gun ownership as a social identity, Seate, Fujioka, and Hoffner set a precedent for referring to other

group identities, like NRA-supporter or gun control advocate, as a different way of understanding media effects.

Sandy Hook media, on the other hand, did drive public discourse about gun control (Muschert and Schildkraut, 2013). In the first half of 2013, almost 2,000 state and federal firearm bills were proposed. This corresponded in the media with 76% of news stories in the two weeks following the shooting mentioning gun policy proposals, which is distinctly different from previous shootings (McGinty et. al, 2014). States like Nevada, Colorado, Delaware, New York, Illinois, and Connecticut—a mix of states impacted by mass shootings and not—were successfully passing gun control laws, despite the fact that national laws were being defeated at the federal level in the House and the Senate (McGinty et. al, 2016).

Research on the Sandy Hook shooting, therefore, showed how issue frames affected public opinion about gun control policies. Similar to Seate, Fujioka, and Hoffner's (2012) research on group identity effects on gun control stance, Wozniak (2015) broke the country up into groups to study gun control policy opinions. Groups included race/ethnicity, gun owners, people expressing concern for "the state of society's morals," those with a positive opinion about the NRA, registered voters, and more. Findings enhanced Haider-Markel and Joslyn's (2001) theory from Columbine on predispositions that political affiliation is a predictor for opinions on gun control to conclude that a respondent's opinion about the NRA is "the single strongest predictor" of the respondent's opinion about gun control policies. Exploring the effects of media messaging on opinions showed that, "News media messages in support of universal background checks were fact-based and used rational arguments, and opposing messages often used rights-based frames designed to activate the core values of politically engaged gun owners" (McGinty et. al, 2016). In other words, the media tailored messages to affect its particular audiences. This

supports Wozniak's findings because it means that people are not likely to change their opinions because of media, but also that the media is not trying to challenge people's opinions. Instead, the public is receiving media messaging about issue frames that are designed for their existing opinions. This explains why Wozniak found that, "The Sandy Hook shooting did not dramatically alter the distribution of support or opposition to gun control among the American people—just as previous mass shootings also failed to alter the overall state of public opinion."

Sandy Hook was the second-most reported story of 2012, following the presidential election (Muschert and Schildkraut, 2013), meaning it had a similar level of coverage to Columbine (Birkland and Lawrence, 2009). Over 10 years later, though, the national policy results are still the same—limited. People experience media the way that they are predisposed or motivated to based on their established beliefs and political affiliations, and are therefore not likely to change their opinions on gun control policies because of a school shooting (Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001; Seate, Fujioka, and Hoffner, 2012; Wozniak, 2015). After the Parkland shooting, this finding would impact the outcomes on midterm voting, no matter if the March for Our Lives movement was able to keep the shooting relevant in the news.

## **Shift #2: Shooter-Centered Media to Victim-Centered Media**

The purpose of understanding media framing from Columbine to Sandy Hook is to understand what information peaks audience interest throughout a news cycle. This is called salience. Chyi and McCombs (2004) define salience as the relative importance of an object or, in this case, a story. In other words, by offering new angles to the public, the media can increase the story's salience. Research shows that there are typically five stages of frame-changing used in

the issue-attention cycle: the pre-problem, alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, realizing the cost of significant progress, gradual decline of intense public interest, and the post-problem (Chyi and McCombs, 2004; Muschert, 2009; Muschert and Schildkraut, 2013). Each stage demonstrates a different level of situational understanding on the part of the media, and builds from one to the next as reporters learn more about a story. Even still, the standard lifecycle of a school shooting has been continuously proven to end around 30 days after the shooting (Chyi and McCombs, 2004).

The general trend in the media cycle of school shootings, displayed during coverage of Columbine, shows a change of attention throughout the 30 days from the individual level to the societal level. At the individual level of attention, Chyi and McCombs (2004) note that, “Such stories focused on the life history of the gunmen or the victims.” This means that at the beginning of the news cycle for a school shooting, the media chooses to cover the story from the angle of the shooters’ and victims’ lives. At this point in the story, individual-level information might be the only known information available to reporters before police reports are released and press conferences are held. After that, the media reframes the story at the societal level to reflect on what this shooting means for society, whether that be gun reform, mental illness, race, or otherwise. Muschert and Schildkraut (2013) find that by the time of the Sandy Hook shooting, there was more coverage at the individual level than there was for Columbine and instances of individual-level coverage were victim-centered rather than shooter-centered. Shooter-centered stories were used during Columbine and Virginia Tech coverage to analyze how and why the shooter(s) committed such an act of violence. Instead, media following the Sandy Hook shooting told the victims’ stories as a way of remembering their lives and the way they died. This orientation change has implications for the way school shootings are perceived by the public.

Figure 3: *Time Magazine*, 1999



Early Columbine coverage is especially focused on the act itself as it pertained to “what” the shooters did (Muschert, 2009). The cover of *Time* magazine in December 1999, in *Figure 3*, is a perfect example of this kind of shooter-centered, individual-level attention. The photo is of the Columbine shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, in the Columbine High School cafeteria in the middle of the shooting, with a caption that reads, “The killers tell why they did it” (*Time Magazine*, 1999). This kind of rhetoric is the media’s attempt to provide a reason for what happened. Muschert’s thematic analysis of Columbine coverage concluded that over one third of articles were similar to this *Time Magazine* cover story, focusing on the “exploration of probable causes,” which generally referred to guns and pop culture. In this context, pop culture generally referred to entertainment media like violent video games, movies, television shows and media.

Gun control and violent popular culture were determined as probable causes during Chyi and McCombs' initial research about Columbine in 2004, as well. Birkland and Lawrence (2009) accounted for violent popular culture as an alternative frame to the gun control debate because "the pop culture frame offered a way of deflecting attention to guns," which in turn benefits gun-owners and conservative-leaning, Second Amendment activists. Similarly, framing the conversation around the shooters and what caused them to commit the Columbine shooting tells the public that it is an isolated issue that does not require immediate action.

Coverage of the Virginia Tech shooting also focuses heavily on the shooter, Seung-Hoi Cho, and why he carried out the shooting. Media following the Virginia Tech shooting references Columbine and frequently compares the mental health of Cho to that of the Columbine shooters (Birkland and Lawrence, 2009). This follows the trend laid out by Murray's (2017) findings on media reporting stages in the coverage of mass killings, where the "Identification of Shooter" phase generally compares the current shooters mental health to previous shooters. With Cho in particular, though, the media talked about him in the context of his race more than in the context of his mental health. Holody, Park, and Zhang (2013) analyzed coverage for a race frame in comparison of local and national newspapers, concluding that national outlets used the race frame more often and suggested that Cho's race played a significant role in the shooting. One of the researchers' hypotheses for this finding is that, "The local newspaper might have been both obliged and equipped to cover the incident more frequently with a wider scope beyond the perpetrator." While this makes sense theoretically, from a national media outlet's perspective, a national audience is less likely to take interest in a specific individual unless that individual is brought into a scope relevant to them. During Columbine coverage, as well, the "extended salience" of the event occurred at the national level

of media (Muschert, 2009). Nationally, an audience is less likely to find the individual attributes of a shooter relevant to them unless it somehow impacts their lifestyle. The race frame, and the less-common mental health frame, acts as the Virginia Tech shooting's alternative frame, like the pop culture frame was to the Columbine shooting.

Media framing of the Sandy Hook shooting demonstrates a trend away from shooter-centered media toward victim-centered media. Muschert and Schildkraut (2013) found this when they repeated Chyi and McCombs (2004) methodology, used to study Columbine, to compare frame-changing differences between Columbine and Sandy Hook. When it comes to victim-centered media in Sandy Hook coverage, Muschert and Schildkraut (2013) note that, “[V]ery little significant information was released in the media about Adam Lanza [the shooter] or the investigation... Instead, the media focused on telling the stories of the heroic educators and the losses of innocent children.” They hypothesize that Sandy Hook is the start of a “departure” from the Columbine model of coverage, which has reshaped the way future school shootings play out in the media. In this case, future coverage would be victim-centered and predominantly discuss the gun control debate, rather than the causes of an individual shooting.

This trend in Sandy Hook coverage corresponds with other research aiming to determine the media's impact on public perceptions of gun control policies. For example, the shooter-centric frame associated with Columbine and Virginia Tech was quick to compare Cho's mental state to Harris and Klebold's, as previously noted (Birkland and Lawrence, 2009). McGinty et. al (2014) combat media framing of the correlation between serious mental illness (SMI) and gun violence as not only a factor, but as a cause of mass shootings. By examining coverage from 1997-2012—excluding Sandy Hook— McGinty et. al were able to determine that “dangerous people” framing was more likely than “dangerous weapons” framing to appear in relation to gun

violence, where dangerous people places blame on SMI and dangerous weapons places blame on society. The researchers believe that this kind of rhetoric in the media, along with the general public's lack of experience with SMI, leads to a disproportional amount of policy restricting "dangerous people" instead of "dangerous weapons." This conclusion aligns with Birkland and Lawrence's (2009) extended analysis that shooter-centered media isolates the shooting instead of connecting it to the gun control debate.

To fully examine media effects, researchers consider the media's motives for gaining audience salience. Murray (2017) hypothesizes that shooter-centered media, whether it is about SMI or otherwise, was developed to attract audience attention and, therefore, bring in more money to the media outlet. In other words, it is in the media's best interest to increase salience however it can to keep the public engaged. From the perspective of a potential shooter, Murray (2017) also acknowledges that, "Media which sensationalizes mass killers provide them with a comradery-focused fantasy, someone to relate to, justify their own actions, and have an ego boosting fantasized goal to out-do them." Murray's point is that shooter-centered media is, in itself, a threat because it encourages potential shooters to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. If this is the case, then victim-centered media following Sandy Hook and future incidents of school shootings would be less likely to entice potential shooters, while still taking audience salience into account.

The shift from shooter-centered media to victim-centered media changes the conversation from one that isolates each shooting to one that frames each shooting as a part of the culture of mass shootings currently present in U.S. society. Gun violence—rather than alternative frames like pop culture, race, or mental illness—is a more commonly associated theme in victim-centered media, and it further leads to gun reform policies. This, in turn, could increase national

salience in future school shooting coverage because audiences are likely to relate to a societal problem over a localized problem.

*Research Question: What were the major themes throughout the Parkland coverage, and how were the themes distributed with varying frequency over time?*

### **Shift #3: Incorporating Social Media as a Source of Information**

Spanning the time from Columbine to Sandy Hook came the rise of social media around the turn of the century. People began using social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat, as technologies developed, to speak to each other across the country and the world, as well as to post about their lives. The media capitalized on this trend by using social media as a source of information—especially at the start of breaking news cycles, like school shootings.

Before social media took off, including during Columbine, the media did not have access to this kind of live footage and information. Instead, the media relied on nonofficial eyewitnesses and official sources like government officials and school departments as information subsidies, or sources interviewed to help break a story (Wigley and Fontenot, 2009). Although Wigley and Fontenot note that technology first started to change the process of a news cycle as early as the 1970s, the kind of technology used during coverage of the Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook shootings did not play a role in coverage of the Columbine shooting. If any new technology sources were used as information subsidies during Columbine, researchers did not report on it as a noteworthy change in the news cycle.

To understand the media coverage of the Virginia Tech shooting, though, Wigley and Fontenot studied the impact of “new technology sources” in a pilot study of information subsidies. Technology sources were categorized as either official (Virginia Tech University, government or police website) or nonofficial sources (Facebook, MySpace, personal blogs, or cell phone videos). They found that reporters were still relying heavily on nontechnology sources, specifically nonofficial sources, during coverage of the Virginia Tech shooting. The media was more likely to use technology sources during the first two days after the shooting: “Reporters were quick to turn to students’ MySpace or Facebook pages to find out more about the victims.” This finding also suggests the role that new technology sources played in the shift from shooter-centered reporting to victim-centered reporting, as journalists might have gotten more access to victims’ information through social media. Wigley and Fontenot warn that this new use of user-generated content as an information subsidy could lead to faulty reporting on behalf of the media and less control on behalf of public relations professionals whose job it is to control what kind of information gets to journalists and the public.

*Research Question: What role did sources play in the coverage of the Parkland shooting, and how were the sources distributed over time?*

During coverage of the Sandy Hook shooting, it is no surprise that the media’s use of new technology sources did lead to misinformation. In the days following Sandy Hook, the media incorrectly identified the shooter as Ryan Lanza (the shooter’s brother), wrongly stated that his mother Nancy Lanza was a teacher at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and inaccurately claimed that Lanza was let into the school rather than shooting his way through the doors.

Berkowitz and Liu (2016) discuss how this might be due to media pressure to report quickly in order to keep up with the “information culture” our society lives in now. When it comes to errors especially, “Media audiences...are able to fact-check stories and hold news media accountable for errors that have been committed in a way that past generations of journalists, did not have to deal with” (pg. 168). With the media and its audiences alike having access to more information than ever before, journalists have to shift the reporting process to happen both quickly and accurately.

New technology also acted as its own media platform during Sandy Hook. Benton et. al (2016) piloted a study that developed a methodology for opinion analysis on Twitter using tweets relating to the gun control debate in the year following the Sandy Hook shooting. The researchers separated the two sides of the argument as “Control”—the typically liberal, Democratic stance—versus “Rights”—the typically conservative, Republican stance relating to the Second Amendment. Each tweet they analyzed was categorized as one side or the other, and the results showed that the Twitter conversation correlated mainly with legislative action. The general patterns Benton et. al found were that “Control” advocates are more vocal before national legislation goes to a vote and “Rights” advocates are more vocal after national legislation fails. This makes sense because it is the “Control” group that is advocating for a change in legislation and the “Rights” group that is voting against the proposed laws. After Sandy Hook, these policies were about assault weapons bans and background check legislation.

With research going forward, it is difficult, if not dishonest, to ignore the social media conversation surrounding national issues and its effects on public opinion. Benton et. al (2016) self-identifies their study as a form of “polling technique” that could hypothetically be used to understand how much control the media has over public opinion.

## Summary

These three shifts in the national conversation about school shootings in the U.S. represent a piece of the media's role in the gun control debate. Understanding the media landscape sets the stage for understanding the specific interests that the public, politicians, and special interest groups have following each shooting. As a result, there is a clear distinction between the Columbine model of coverage and the Sandy Hook model of coverage, characterized by gun control issue frames, victim-centered reporting, and the utilization of social media. Occurring less than two years after Sandy Hook, the Parkland shooting should continue to follow this trend, as its coverage is a product of the shootings that came before it. It is the unique circumstances of each individual school shooting that contextualizes that media conversation and, in turn, public discourse and legislative action.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of my study is to determine the kind of media coverage that the Parkland shooting received, as it relates to other major prior school shootings—Columbine, Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook. Carrying out a thematic media analysis of the Parkland shooting will help me to understand the impact of the Parkland shooting on the national conversation about gun control and, most importantly, on the nature of media coverage.

The following three research questions follow the movement of the news story in terms of media framing:

**Research Question 1:** How were the time and space frames distributed across the Parkland shooting's news cycle?

**Research Question 2:** What were the major themes throughout the Parkland coverage and how were the themes distributed over time?

**Research Question 3:** What role did sources play in the coverage of the Parkland shooting and how were the sources distributed over time?

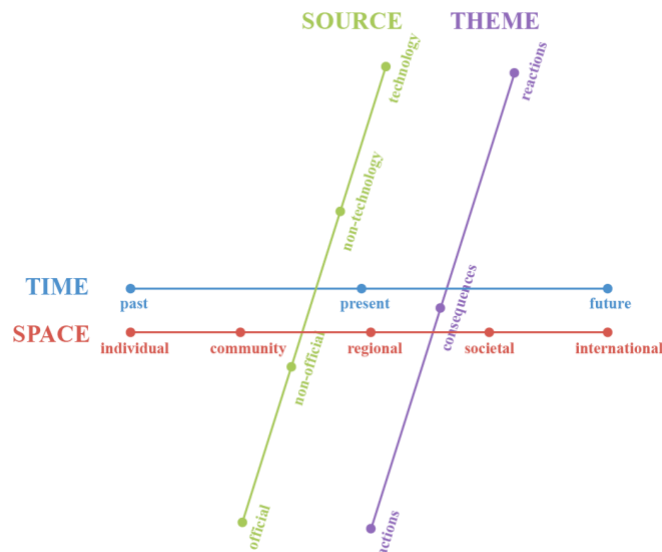
### **Thematic Analysis of Content**

Each research question examines a specific media frame—time and space, theme and source. In RQ1, for example, this question is derived from Chyi and McCombs (2004) and

Muschert and Schildkraut’s (2013) two-dimensional methodology that analyzes time and space frames both separately and in relation to each other. *Figure 2*, previously cited in my Literature Review, presents these two frames graphically to demonstrate their relationship. In this study, my methodology will expand the two-dimensional measurement scheme to incorporate themes and sources—RQ2 and RQ3, respectively—as equally relevant and necessary media frames to analyze. This will result in a four-dimensional measurement scheme, which is represented in *Figure 4* to show how the four frames are interconnected.

For example, an article about the shooter’s childhood based on his social media profile would be coded for time as “past,” for space as “individual,” for theme as “background,” and for source as “nonofficial-technology.” Some explanations overlap, such as the code for “present” and for “actions,” but their distinction is the frame to which each relates. For example, “present” could refer to the event itself or to the present scenario two weeks after the event, while “actions” refers specifically to what occurred during the event.

***Figure 4: Four Dimensional Measurement Scheme***



I removed elements from some of the original studies, like Muschert's (2009), which originally included "actors" and "commentary" as themes. This limits any redundancy—"actors" is the same as the space element "individual"—and excludes the kind of documents coded as "commentary" like opinion columns and letters-to-the-editor.

These additive frames have guided research on school shootings since Chyi and McCombs' (2004) original two-dimensional measurement scheme developed for the Columbine shooting. My goal is to substantiate the abundance of research following Columbine to enhance the level of understanding that researchers are able to garner from individual school shootings—like Parkland. Therefore, each article focused on the Parkland shooting will be coded by time and space, theme, and source.

To complete the desired qualitative analysis—as opposed to a quantitative analysis that would count specific word appearances—I will identify which code is suitable per article based on the lead paragraph. I am choosing to do a qualitative analysis because the amount of times a keyword appears in an article does not give me information about the way a keyword is referenced in terms of time, space, theme and source. For example, an article was published on Feb. 18, just 4 days after the Parkland shooting, titled "Trump's Evolution From Relief to Fury Over the Russia Indictment." It is about the Trump administration's involvement and possible collusion with Russia, but because it references his visit to Parkland, FL as interfering with the indictment, it comes up as a result in my research. If I were to do a quantitative analysis of my articles, I might cite this article as research because the keyword "Parkland" comes up twice. Since I'm doing qualitative analysis, I removed this article from my dataset because it is not providing any news about the Parkland shooting. Therefore, by using a qualitative method of

analysis, I will be able to understand and analyze each article in terms of how the media is using it to explain a certain aspect of the Parkland shooting.

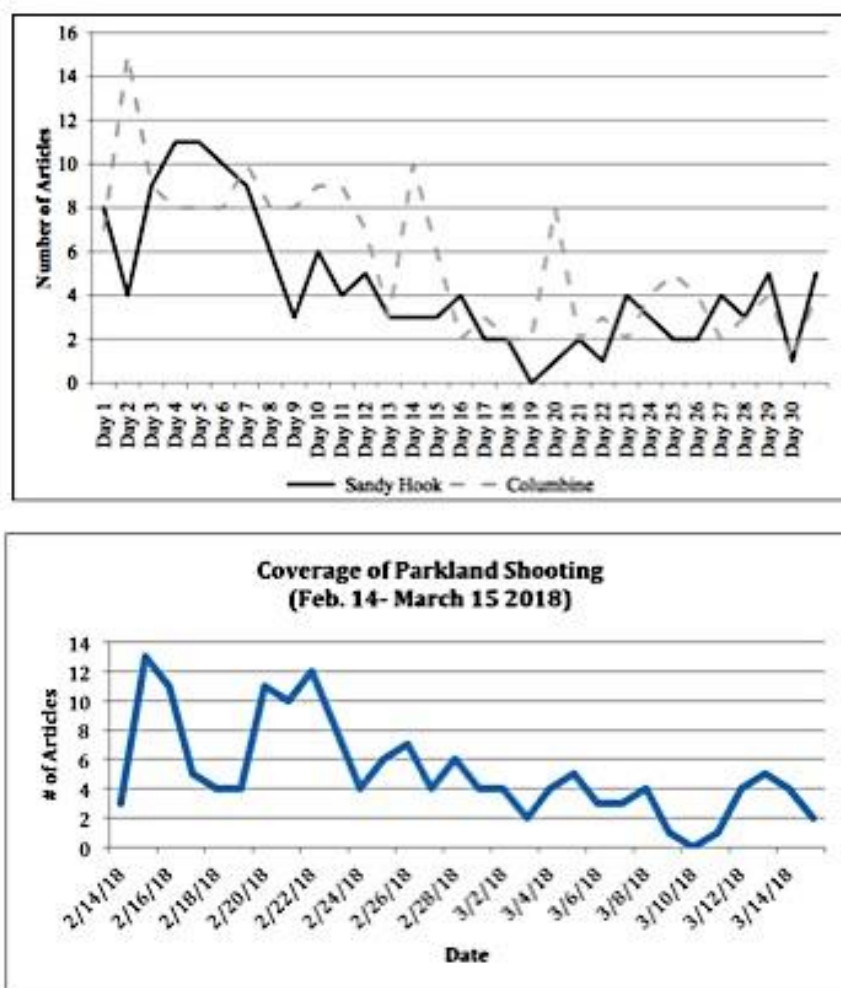
### **Scope of Study**

My thematic analysis will cover news articles published by the *New York Times* for the 30 days following the Parkland shooting, that is, Feb. 14-March 15, 2018, including the day of the shooting and weekends. This structure has been the standard for analyzing media coverage of school shootings since research showed that the *New York Times* is a national-level agenda-setting news outlet, that the standard news cycle for a school shooting is 30 days, and that print media is understood as more compatible with framing analysis than broadcast media (Chyi and McCombs, 2004; Muschert, 2009; Wigley and Fontenot, 2009; Schildkraut and Muschert, 2014). *Figure 5* shows data from of the 30-day news cycles for both Columbine and Sandy Hook (Schildkraut and Muschert, 2014). The pattern shows that right after the shooting, there were around 8-10 news articles per day, with Columbine hitting the most at 15 articles and Sandy Hook hitting the least at 4 articles. This peak number of articles drops off for Sandy Hook at Day 11, never going above 5 articles again, and at Day 15 for Columbine, with most days below 5 articles per day and one day at 8 articles per day.

Also included in *Figure 5* is the 30-day data following the Parkland shooting, which shows a similar pattern to the data collected by Muschert and Schildkraut (2013) on coverage of the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings. For reference, there were 170 articles covered in the 30 days following the Columbine shooting and 132 articles following Sandy Hook, which is also similar to the 154 articles in this study on the Parkland shooting. This style of research was not

completed following the Virginia Tech shooting so it cannot be referenced. Throughout the 30 days of data, the majority of articles were posted in the first 10 days after the shooting, with the most number of articles per day being 13. After Day 10, or Feb. 24, there were never more than 6 articles per day being posted, with an average closer to 4 articles per day until the end of the dataset. The similarities between Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Parkland—especially how the number of articles declines around Day 10-15—demonstrates that the research on the lifecycle of a school shooting is accurately represented in the 30 days following the shooting.

*Figure 5: 30-Day Coverage of Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Parkland Shootings*



To collect data, I used the NYTimes.com Academic Passes database to generate articles using the keywords “Parkland”, “Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School”, and “March for Our Lives”. Initially, these lists came up with a total of 381 articles, not double counting articles that came up for more than one keyword. It also includes articles where Parkland is only covered in passing, like news briefings and news that refer to the Parkland shooting having occurred; letters to the editor and opinion pieces; and pieces of media, such as video clips, quotes of the week, radio shows, and submission forms. After excluding these articles, which accounted for 227 articles, the final data set is composed of 154 articles.

Each article was coded from the lead paragraphs, based on an inverted pyramid media structure, and trickled to the rest of the article only when more information was necessary and available. This includes articles with non-informative leads like quotes or stories meant to capture the audience’s attention before providing the who, what, where, when, why of a typical lead sentence. In the case of an article that contains a lead with one subject and changes the directionality of the story further into the article, I continued to code based off of the information available in the lead.

Finally, I had another coder read 10% of my final sample, or 15 articles, to test for inter-rater reliability. This second coder was given *Table 1* as a coding guide for each article and *Table 2* as an outline for how to code each article based on my methodology. The articles were chosen using a random number generator and then cross-checked with my coding of the articles. Using the percent agreement method, I determined that the coder and I had 80% agreement, which ensures that my results are reliable based on the ability of my methodology to be reproducible to other researchers in the future.

*Table 1: Frame Coding Scheme*

<b>Frame</b>		<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Parkland Example</b>
Time	Past	Focusing on previous events (before the shooting)	History of school shootings; victim's life history
	Present	Focusing on actions/developments surrounding the event	Immediate consequences; currently occurring social phenomena
	Future	Focusing on the long-term effects of the event	Suggested solutions; actions to be taken in the future
Space	Individual	Focusing on a single person	Shooter; victim; family
	Community	Focusing on the town or school within it	Parkland, FL; Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School; organized group
	Regional	Focusing on the county or state	Broward County, FL; Florida
	Societal	Focusing on the nation	United States/President Trump; national organization
	International	Focusing on the world	Involvement or comparison of the U.S. and another country
Theme	Background	Focusing on an individual or thing's past	Shooter's life history; history of school security
	Actions	Focusing on what happened during the event	Number of victims; police intervention
	Consequences	Focusing on the event's later repercussions (positive or negative)	Shooter's sentence; injuries/funerals; enacted policies and legislation; donors
	Reactions	Focusing on theoretical responses to the event	Police, community, media, or elsewhere reactions
Source	Official	From an elected or reputable person	Government; police; school official; professional
	Nonofficial	From a member of the public	Eye witness; student; teacher; celebrity
	Technology	From an online or virtual platform	Cell phone video; social media post (Twitter, Facebook, etc.)
	Non-technology	From an in-person report	Eye witness testimony; quotes from an interview

*Table 2: Coding Outline*

<b>Article #</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Space</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Source</b>
Code				
Lead/Relevant Quote				

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

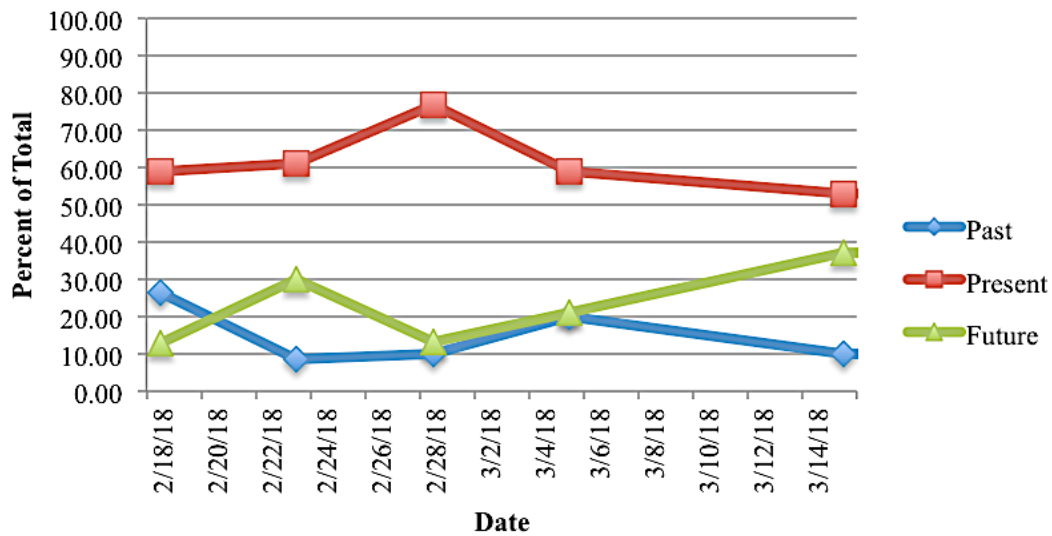
My findings in this study are the result of the coding of each article during the 30-day news cycle. In order to take into account the number of articles per day that have the same frames, the distribution results are displayed by percent of the total number of articles per day. This means that rather than showing that the “past” time frame was used 2 times one day and 5 times the next, the data shows that it was used in 20% of the articles on one day and 40% the next day. Analyzing the data this way balances out the fact that there is a different amount of articles each day. Then, I took the average of this data for every 5 days. This allows for me to clearly show the distribution of each frame in relation to the other frames.

### **Research Question 1**

**How were the time and space frames distributed across the Parkland shooting’s news cycle?**

This question can be broken down into two parts—one examining time and the other space. Time was divided into past, present and future; space was divided into individual, community, regional, societal, and international. Each article was coded as one of each of these frames. For example, present and societal or future and community. The time and space frames were originally adapted from Chyi and McCombs (2004) analysis of the Columbine shooting, which was then used again by Muschert and Schildkraut (2013) to compare Columbine to Sandy Hook. I will analyze the results of the time frame patterns, and then I will analyze the results of the space frame patterns.

*Figure 6: Distribution of Time Frames*



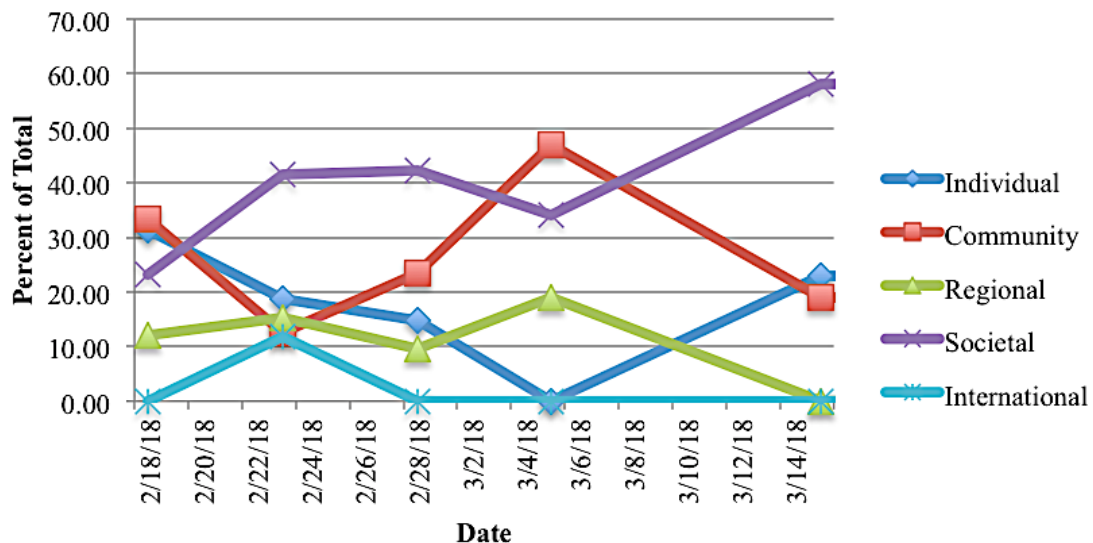
*Figure 6* shows the varying trend lines for past, present and future frames used throughout the news cycle following the Parkland shooting. The past frame is used consistently infrequently throughout the 30 days, with its peak at just below 30% in Week 1 and its average around 10% for the rest of the news cycle. The present frame is dominant throughout the entire news cycle, always remaining above 50% per week. The future frame remains under 30% until the end of the news cycle, when it approaches 40% in the last week. Starting at Week 3, though, the future frame increases, first by 10% from Week 3 to Week 4 and then by almost 20% from Week 4 to Week 5. These trends demonstrate a clear distinction between the past and future frames and the present frame, where the present frame is relatively stable as the majority frame and past and future fluctuate around 10-30% of the frames. In the last week of coverage, though, the present frame declines and the future frame increases.

*Figure 7* shows the varying trend lines for individual, community, regional, societal, and international frames. The individual frame begins the news cycle at its highest point around 30%, declines to 0% by the fourth week and then increases up to 20% during Week 5. The community

frame fluctuates throughout the news cycle, staying between 10-30%, except for Week 4 when the community frame reached its highest point at 50%. The regional frame remains stable between 10-20% each week, declining to 0% by Week 5. The general trend line for the societal frame is increasing throughout the 30 days, beginning at 20% and ending at 60%. Finally, the international frame is only used during Week 2, bringing it up to 10% from 0% the remainder of the news cycle.

The two frames community and societal are the only ones that ever reach or surpass 50% (or the majority) of articles in that time span. This is different from time—which only had the three frames past, present, and future—because only having three time frames left more likelihood of having a dominant frame—like present. Since space has five frames, these results make sense. All five frames stay between 10-40% throughout the news cycle, with variations occurring per frame rather than as a whole, which was the case with time.

*Figure 7: Distribution of Space Frames*



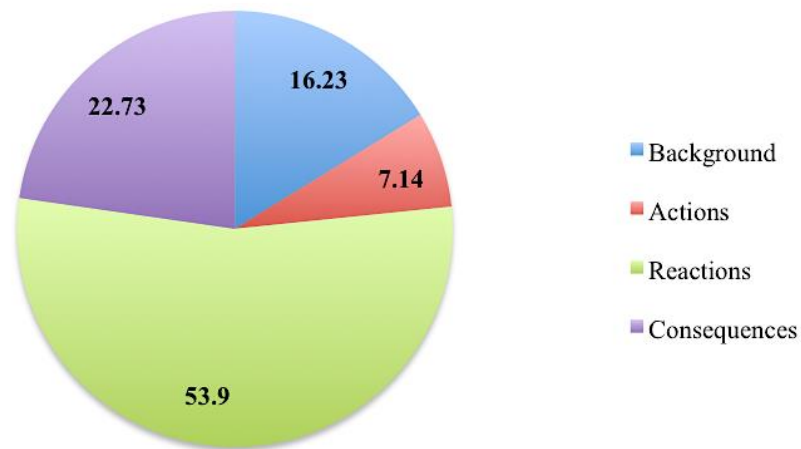
## Research Question 2

**What were the major themes throughout the Parkland coverage and how were the themes distributed over time?**

I coded according to one of the following four theme frames: background, actions, reactions and consequences. The research question was adapted from Muschert (2009) analysis of thematic frame-changing during the Columbine shooting coverage.

*Figure 8* shows how frequent each of these frames are throughout the news cycle as a whole. Based on my data, the 30 days following the Parkland shooting was dominated by ‘reactions,’ then ‘consequences,’ ‘background,’ and ‘actions.’ This trend is also visible in the distribution of articles, as ‘reactions’ never interacts with the other three, ‘consequences’ and ‘background’ hover around each other, and ‘actions’ sits along the bottom.

*Figure 8: Major Themes in Parkland, FL Coverage*



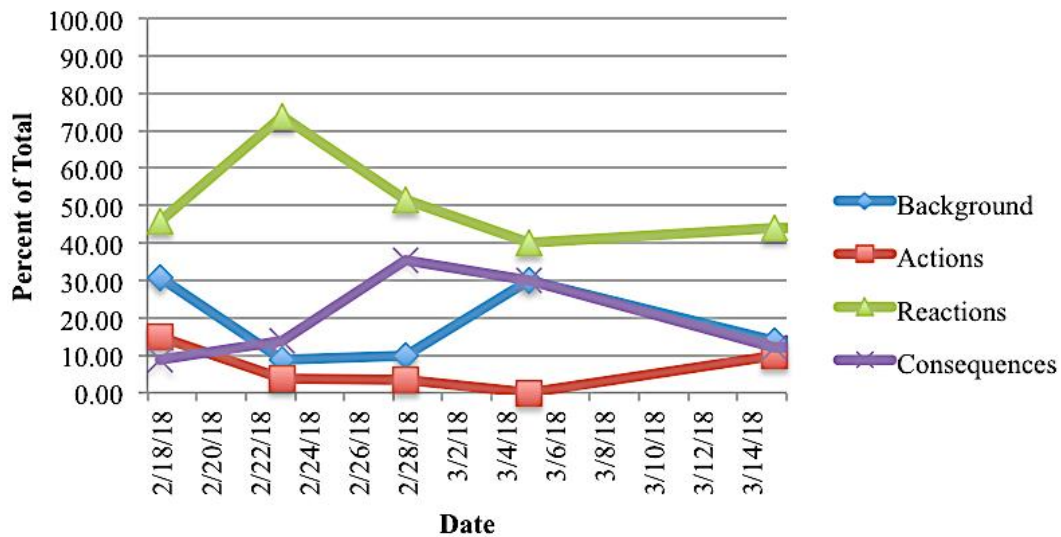
*Figure 9: Distribution of Themes*

Figure 9 shows the distribution of these themes. The background frame fluctuates between 10% and 30% throughout the news cycle, at its highest during Week 1 and Week 4. During Week 1, articles are still setting up the story and its actors. At Week 4, the frame returns as the gun control debate ramps up and articles come out about the background of gun control and President Trump's stance on the issue. The actions frame is the least prominent of the four frames, starting at 20% during Week 1 and then hovering between 0-10% throughout the rest of the news cycle. This makes sense because it refers directly to actions surrounding the event. The slight increase at the end of the cycle is due to released footage of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School's security guard, similar to the increase in the individual space frame. As the reactions frame is the majority frame, it is also the most dominant during every week of the news cycle. Its stable state is around 40% of the themes that week, although its peak is during Week 2 at just over 70% of the frames. The final frame, consequences, starts at 10%, which was the lowest of the four frames during Week 1, and then increased until Week 3 to about 35% as articles focused on the victims of the Parkland shooting. After Week 3, it decreases for the rest of

the news cycle like the background frame, as they both converge with the action frame at 10% of the articles in Week 5, while reactions is still the majority at its stable point of 40%.

Additionally, ‘reactions’ is the only frame that ever goes above 40% throughout the 30 days. It is also the only frame to never drop below 40% throughout the 30 days.

### **Research Question 3**

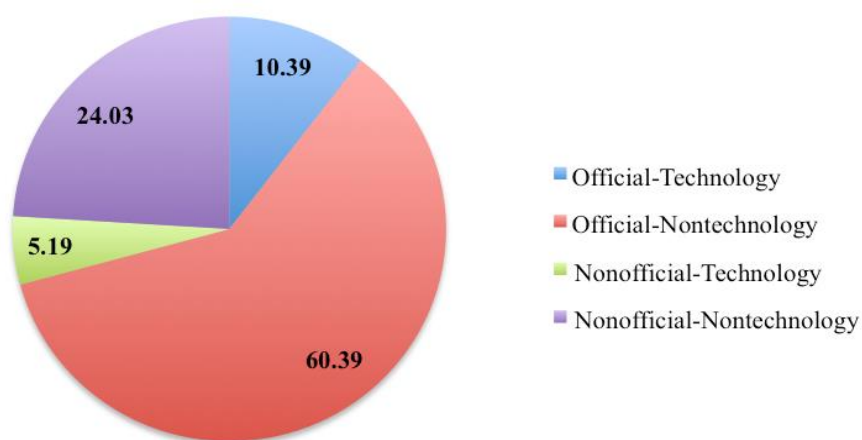
#### **What role did sources play in the coverage of the Parkland shooting and how were the sources distributed over time?**

Compared to time, space, and theme, the source data is different because I coded each article based on two sets of frames and because I correlated these two sets of frames to each other. Each article was coded as ‘official’ vs. ‘nonofficial’ and ‘technology’ vs. ‘nontechnology.’ For example, one article might be ‘official-nontechnology’ and another might be ‘nonofficial-technology.’ This research question is adapted from Wigley and Fontenot (2009) data from the Virginia Tech shooting.

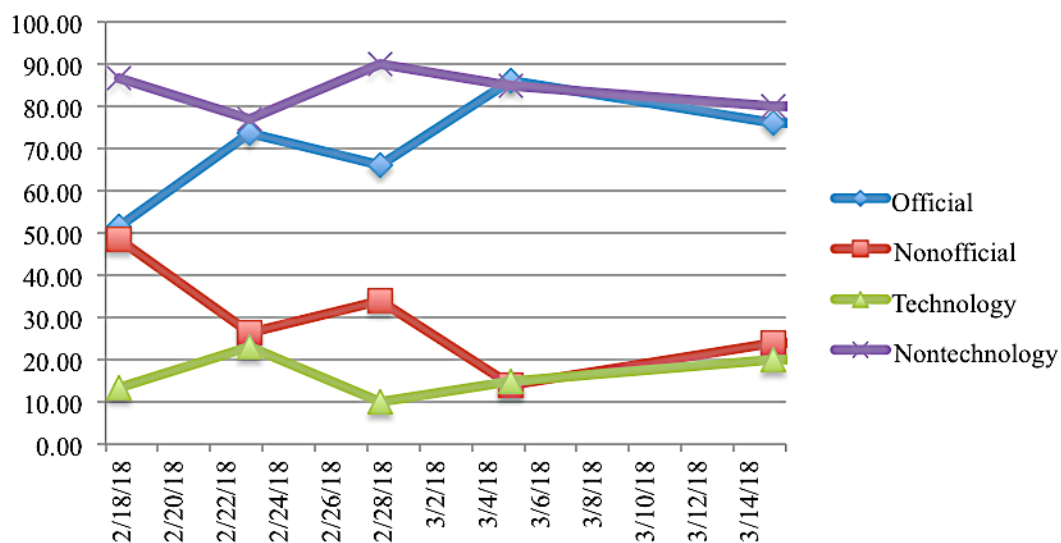
To analyze the role of sources during the Parkland shooting coverage, I looked at the majority cross-frame in *Figure 10*, which showed that the ‘official-nontechnology’ frame was dominant, followed by ‘nonofficial-nontechnology,’ ‘official-technology’ and ‘nonofficial-technology.’ Then, I broke down these four frames individually as ‘official,’ ‘nonofficial,’ ‘technology,’ and ‘nontechnology’ to measure their distributions across the news cycle, as shown in *Figure 11*. Since the trend lines are direct opposites of their counterparts, they directly show how the two sets relate to each other. The ‘official’ frame starts at a low of 50% and generally increases throughout the news cycle, declining to just below 80% during Week 5. Meanwhile,

the ‘nonofficial’ frame starts at a high at 50% and then generally decreases throughout the news cycle, increasing to around 20% during Week 5. The ‘technology’ frame fluctuates between 0-10% throughout the news cycle, as opposed to the ‘nontechnology’ frame which fluctuates between 80-90% throughout the news cycle. In sum, the ‘official’ and ‘nontechnology’ frames are dominant throughout the news cycle, always above 50%, while the ‘nonofficial’ and ‘technology’ frames are always at or under 50%.

*Figure 10: Major Sources in Parkland, FL Coverage*



*Figure 11: Distribution of Sources*



## Chapter 5

### Discussion

My data following the Parkland shooting cannot be considered on its own, though. The shooting, as well as the way that the media responded to it, is a reflection of previous school shootings. Each research question was designed based on previous research from either the Columbine, Virginia Tech or Sandy Hook shootings, meaning that my results can be directly compared to prior results on the same frame as it relates to similarities, differences and explanations of change.

### Time

The distribution of time frames during the Parkland shooting (*Figure 6*) looks relatively similar to the distribution during the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings, although more similar to Columbine than Sandy Hook. In all three, the ‘present’ frame is always the majority of articles. During coverage of the Sandy Hook shooting, the ‘present’ frame stays as high as 80-90% throughout the 30 days, rather than between 60-80% as it was for Columbine and Parkland. Also, all three sets of data see a decline in the ‘past’ frames throughout and a spike in the ‘future’ frame in the last week of coverage. This change is most exaggerated with Sandy Hook.

Despite the minor differences, the similarity in time frame trends from 1999 through 2018 suggests that the way that the media utilizes time is relatively stagnant. At the beginning of a news cycle, journalists want to talk about background to give readers context about the

shooting, victims, and community. As the news cycle continues, the ‘present’ frame remains constant as journalists want to report new information and current trends to keep the story relevant. Muschert and Schildkraut (2013) attribute how the ‘future’ frame peaks near the end of the news cycle to journalists discussing long-term effects of gun control, legislation and reactions. This was the case of the ‘future’ frame during the Parkland shooting, as most “future” articles were policies about gun control, school surveillance and arming teachers. Distributing time frames like this provides a natural progression for how the media can keep the story salient.

### Space

Unlike the way the time frames resembled the past two shootings almost perfectly, comparing the Parkland shooting in terms of space, as in *Figure 7*, shows bigger differences between Parkland and Sandy Hook than it does Parkland to Columbine.

This is especially true of the ‘societal’ frame. The ‘societal’ frame starts as the majority and decreases throughout the Sandy Hook coverage, but throughout the coverage of Columbine and Parkland, it increases steadily and ends as the majority frame. Despite this different trend, the ‘societal’ frame was the most predominant frame overall throughout all three shootings.

On the other hand, the Columbine shooting stands out from the Sandy Hook and Parkland shootings because the ‘regional’ frame made up less than 2% of the articles during Columbine coverage (Chyi and McCombs, 2004). During the Parkland coverage, the ‘regional’ frame, which refers to state- or county-level articles, was more prevalent. Muschert and Schildkraut (2013) attribute the volume of articles using the ‘regional’ frame to the proximity of the Sandy Hook shooting in Newtown, CT to New York, where the *New York Times* is published. I would

attribute the larger volume of ‘regional’ coverage during the Parkland shooting to be due to Florida legislation on gun control that was introduced in the 30 days following the shooting. This line of thought explains how frames affect each shooting differently because of the history of different policies that come out of each shooting. Another example of this is the ‘individual’ frame during the Parkland shooting, which resurfaces in the last two weeks because video footage of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas security guard was released. This is a situation unique to the Parkland shooting. In all three shootings, though, the ‘community’ frame varies throughout the news cycle with the exception that it increases near the middle or end of the news cycle. As seen in the coverage of Parkland, this spike represented the time when students returned to class for the first time since the shooting and when industry communities like Wal-Mart and Dick’s Sporting Goods started to restrict gun sales. The spike in ‘community’ articles after the Sandy Hook shooting was also related to students returning to school.

The only true similarity between the three shootings’ coverage was the lack of articles with an ‘international’ frame. During Sandy Hook, Muschert and Schildkraut (2013) attributed the ‘international’ articles to a shooting in China that occurred on the same day. During Parkland, the ‘international’ articles referred to gun control policies around the world as an example that the U.S. could follow. Even though these cases are different, they signify that the U.S. media understands that there is not a reason to frame U.S. school shootings internationally, as it tends to be a uniquely American problem.

Muschert and Schildkraut (2013) dedicated a bulk of their findings to the idea that the ‘individual’ frame shifted in its use from the Columbine shooting to the Sandy Hook shooting. They theorized that school shootings media moved from shooter-centered to victim-centered, meaning that the ‘individual’ frame was more likely to discuss a victim’s life rather than the

shooter's. This argument stemmed from the fact that the Sandy Hook coverage included 3 times more 'individual-present' articles than the Columbine coverage did (Muschert and Schildkraut, 2013). Since I do not have correlated data, I have no conclusive way of knowing if the 'individual-present' was correlated around the same amount or different from the Sandy Hook data, but I can add that the Parkland shooting offered a different scenario. In the Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook shootings the shooter(s) committed suicide at the end of the shooting. In the Parkland shooting, the shooter survived and continues to face the death penalty a year later. Had I been able to correlate issue-frames, I likely would have found that the 'individual' frame referenced the shooter more frequently than the Sandy Hook shooting did because the shooter's story offered current news trends. Additionally, the March for Our Lives movement distracted the media from the story of the victims and emphasized the story of the survivors.

### **Theme**

Although Muschert (2009) did not display the Columbine data in terms of a distribution as in *Figure 9*, he did conclude that, throughout the news cycle, the coverage moved from what happened at Columbine to how the country was reacting to the event. This data can also be compared and interpreted based on the proportion that each theme appears throughout the news cycle (*Figure 8*). To compare these results to Muschert (2009), I must also take into account the fact that Muschert had 6 themes, including 'commentary' and 'actors' that I did not use.

Both my data from Parkland coverage and Muschert's data from Columbine coverage showed that 'reactions' was the majority theme. In Columbine, 'reactions' dominated at 72.1%

of the articles, and in Parkland ‘reactions’ was just over half of the articles. Muschert (2009) found that of these articles, the dominant aspect was “what caused the event.” During Parkland, most of these ‘reaction’ articles discussed kinds of policies like arming teachers, banning bumpstocks and assault weapons, and Second Amendment rights. This tells me that the story following the shooting has, in fact, changed. Rather than discussing the events leading up to the shooting, the Parkland shooting media cycle revolved around the gun control debate. Even if the legislation presented referred to deflective policies that would not benefit gun control, the debate itself dominated the news cycle. This tells me that Shift #1, which I found present in the Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook shootings, continued into the Parkland shooting.

The next most frequent frames during the Columbine shooting were ‘commentary,’ ‘consequences,’ ‘actors,’ ‘action’ and ‘background.’ Had I coded for commentary, it likely would have been a prevalent frame considering how many opinion articles were removed from my dataset. Of the differences between the major themes, the ‘background’ frame is most distinct between the two shootings—at 7.0% during Columbine to 16.23% during Parkland. This is likely due to the fact that the Columbine shooting was framed as the first of its kind, whereas the Parkland shooting is referenced as “another” in the line of school shootings. Therefore, a lot of articles following the shooting compared it to shootings like Columbine, Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook.

### Source

In reference to *Figure 10*, Wigley and Fontenot (2009) also found that ‘nontechnology’ sources were consistently dominant, but found that ‘nonofficial’ sources were more dominant

than ‘official’ sources. This change since Virginia Tech can be considered relative to the false reporting during the Sandy Hook coverage—the shooter was misidentified as Adam Lanza’s brother, Ryan Lanza; the shooter’s mother was labeled as a teacher at the school; and the media reported that the shooter was let into the school, rather than having shot his way into the school. Berkowitz and Liu (2016) concluded that this occurred at the start of the news cycle while social media was still being developed as a journalistic news source. In the media that I examined following the Parkland shooting, I did not find evidence of initial reporting errors. If this is the case, then it could be the result of the media learning how to use social media effectively.

Wigley and Fontenot (2009) did not do a distribution analysis, but Berkowitz and Liu’s (2016) data on false reporting suggests that ‘nonofficial-technology’ sources are more likely to occur at the start of the news cycle. These are the kinds of sources that tended to correlate with misinformation, as well. During the Parkland coverage, ‘nonofficial’ sources were more prevalent at the beginning of the news cycle, but there was no noticeable difference in the amount of ‘technology’ sources from the beginning to the end of the news cycle.

### **March for Our Lives Movement**

Most media commentators perceived a difference between national reactions to the Parkland shooting than to other shootings that had come before it. They attributed this difference to the way that a younger generation took charge of the March for Our Lives movement. To understand the impact of the March for Our Lives movement, I had to consider the “March for Our Lives” keyword beyond the scope of this study because the goal of the movement was to vote out NRA-backed politicians in the 2019 midterm elections in November. I did this by

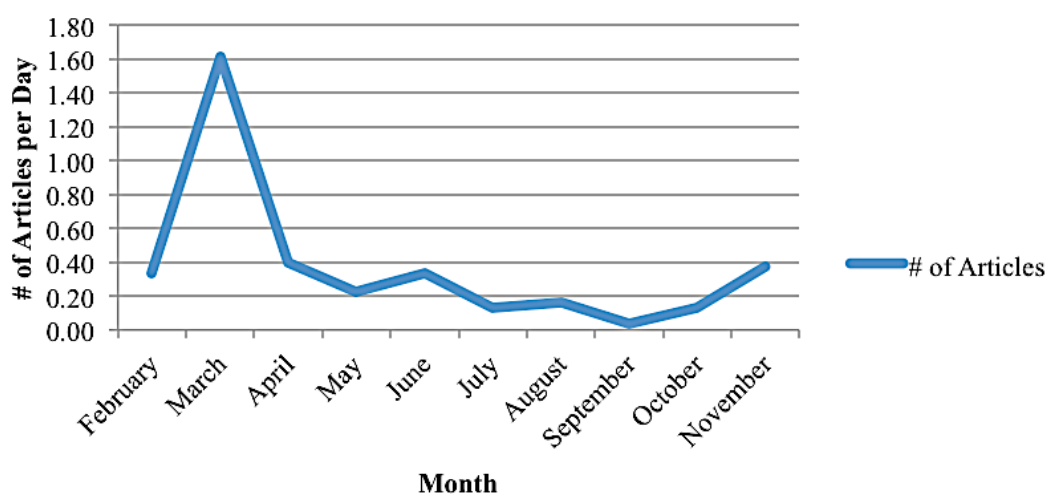
counting the number of articles that appeared per day from the day of the shooting up until the midterm elections on Nov. 8, 2018. This graph in *Figure 12* shows that the “March for Our Lives” keyword was most prevalent in mid-March, around the time that the march on Washington occurred. Even then, this only meant an average of 1-2 articles per day. From April to October, this dropped to below 0.2 articles per day, which would mean only 1-2 per week. The keyword seemed to resurface near the elections in November, but never as prominent as it was in March. This would suggest that the Parkland shooting and the March for Our Lives movement did not have as substantial an impact as people had assumed because it was not salient in the news.

The best analysis I can offer is that of the Pew Research Center’s U.S. Politics and Policy information from the midterm elections. Their data showed that the most important, and polarizing, issues in U.S. politics at the time of the midterm elections were health care, immigration, the economic system and global relationships with the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2018). In other words, not gun control. This suggests that the lack of news presence that the March for Our Lives movement had in the press is related to a lack of pertinence among U.S. voters in November, as shown by the election results. The *New York Times* reported after the midterm elections that the NRA-backed politicians specifically targeted by the March for Our Lives movement were mostly re-elected to office, including Ron DeSantis and Rick Scott in Florida. Outside of Florida there were 2 dozen NRA-backed politicians who were not re-elected to the House, but that 88 of the 129 total NRA-backed candidates won their races (Burch, 2018).

Apart from the midterm elections, the March for Our Lives movement saw more success in policy across the country in 2018. At the end of the year, NPR reported that there were 26 states that enacted gun control legislation during 2018, as opposed to only 7 states that enacted

gun rights legislation. Interestingly enough, Florida is only one of two of those states that enacted both gun control and gun rights legislation—the other was South Dakota (Block, 2018). In Florida, though, the gun control legislation was considered monumental for a state known as “The Gunshine State” for its lenient gun laws.

*Figure 12: Distribution of “March for Our Lives” Keyword (Feb. 14 – Nov. 8 2018)*



### **Limitations and Recommendations**

One limitation to my study is that I did not complete any cross-frame correlations, which means that I do not have data about which frames appeared frequently with each other. For example, the ‘future’ frame might have been highly correlated with ‘societal,’ but I do not have the results to analyze what any of this could mean.

Another limitation of my study was my decision to only analyze articles from the *New York Times*. Even though this methodology draws on other research on school shootings and media, the way this story is told likely varies depending on the medium. For example, during the Virginia Tech shooting, Holody et al (2013) found that local news channels have better access to

information and are more invested in the story, so their news cycles last longer than 30 days.

This research also showed that, for the Virginia Tech shooting, the local news was less likely to racialize the shooter because of the varied information they had. In the case of Parkland, this might mean that the story did extend as far as the midterm elections (or longer), and that some of the key themes and causes cited are different. Additionally, my analysis of the “March for Our Lives” keyword was likely stunted because the leaders of the March for Our Lives movement used Twitter as their platform to promote ideas about gun control and the NRA. This means that a majority of the conversation existed on social media. If I had been able to compare local and national news sources or reviewed the social media conversation, I might have been able to further understand whether or not public opinion shifted after the Parkland shooting or because of the March for Our Lives movement. To do this, I would also have to look into policy changes at the state- and national-level.

I would recommend that future research shift their methodology to take social media into account more than my study was able to, because I believe that the legislative and cultural shift brought about by the Parkland shooting is rooted in the March for Our Lives movement on Twitter. This study sets a foundation for future research to build off of in relation to the Parkland shooting, as well as non-school shootings that may or may not have contributed to the media hype on the gun control debate in 2018.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

On Feb. 14, 2018, the Parkland shooting became another in the history of school shootings in the U.S. The mainstream media discussed the Parkland shooting as if it had created monumental change in the gun control debate and altered the course of school shootings. Therefore, I designed this study to analyze the Parkland shooting media coverage in the context of the shootings that came before it—Columbine, Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook—to understand how similar or different this shooting was to those before it.

My findings showed that, in the media, the story of school shootings has not changed much since the Columbine shooting in 1999. This is what other researchers have found, as well. The life cycle of the school shooting story is still only 30 days, despite the tie to the November 2018 midterm elections. The issue-frames are reactionary, although the reactions during Sandy Hook and Parkland coverage focused on gun control more than the Columbine coverage did. The distribution of issue-frames throughout the 30 days still follows similar patterns. In other words, the media told the story of the Parkland shooting in the same way that it did the Columbine shooting in 1999, the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, and the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012.

And yet, the Parkland shooting accomplished major change in Florida legislation on gun control, as well as it sparked major change across the country among youth, adults, and corporations who were inspired by the March for Our Lives student initiative. But, as is evident from the handful of mass shootings that have occurred since the Parkland shooting last February

2018, it was not the last. If this was the shooting that created “monumental change,” then that had little to do with the media.

In March 2019, more than a year after the shooting, two Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School survivors took their lives in response to the trauma that the Parkland shooting caused them. They too are victims of the shooting as much as the 17 individuals who lost their lives in Feb. 2018. Reading those breaking news stories should remind our country, and our media, that the lifecycle of a school shooting—of an atrocity such as this—cannot be summated in the course of an article, an interview, a news cycle. As long as the story of a school shooting is told the same way, the conversation surrounding the gun control debate will remain in stalemate following major shootings like Parkland. Our media’s best chance at making a change to gun control legislation is to tell a new story—one that people have not heard yet.

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# ACADEMIC VITA OF SHAYNA FARMELANT

## EDUCATION

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**The Pennsylvania State University, Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications and Schreyer Honors College**

- ❖ B.A. in Public Relations; minors in Digital Media Trends & Analytics, Sociology, and International Studies
- ❖ Honors thesis in Media Studies examining the effects of national media on the gun control debate following the Parkland, FL shooting in Feb. 2018

## PUBLIC RELATIONS EXPERIENCE

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**Dini von Mueffling Communications (DVMC)**

*Public Relations Intern*

**New York, NY**

*Summer 2018*

- ❖ Ideated, wrote, and distributed a media pitch to targeted media lists for client, Families vs. Assault Rifles, Political Action Committee made up of parents from Parkland, FL shooting
  - Set up interview between reporter and client; created briefing book for the client
  - [Article](#) placed in *Working Mother* magazine online on Sept. 10, 2018
- ❖ Developed a strategic campaign based on current goals for nonprofit client UNTied to be executed
- ❖ Responded to crisis situations on Facebook and Twitter for client, Wag!
- ❖ Researched prospective clients, current client opportunities, and built media lists

**The Penn State Thespian Society**

*Public Relations Chair, Marketing Committee*

**University Park, PA**

*August 2017- May 2018*

- ❖ Developed a marketing strategy utilizing media relations, fundraising, merchandise, graphic design, and social media to be used by future marketing committee chairs
- ❖ Wrote and distributed community news releases; held press nights before each production
- ❖ Sent letters of appeal to alumni and families to generate program advertisements

**The Turn Out Film**

*Public Relations Student Intern*

**University Park, PA**

*Fall 2017*

- ❖ Worked with “The Turn Out” film director to create a complete marketing strategy
- ❖ Created a press kit including a news release, cast and crew biographies, and a media advisory for the film preview

**Restore Justice Illinois (RJI)**

*Communications and Operations Intern*

**Chicago, IL**

*Summer 2016*

- ❖ Built a list of Illinois media relations contacts interested in activism and criminal justice
- ❖ Wrote a blog post on [Medium](#) about my experience at RJI and designed a corresponding graphic using Canva
- ❖ Generated a social media presence on Facebook with daily news updates about criminal justice reform