

**Media and Mass Shootings: Second Level Agenda Setting in CNN News Coverage of the  
Columbine and Parkland Mass Shootings**

by

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Honors Thesis

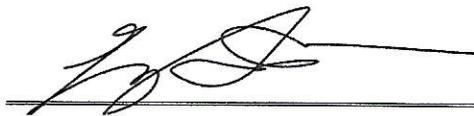
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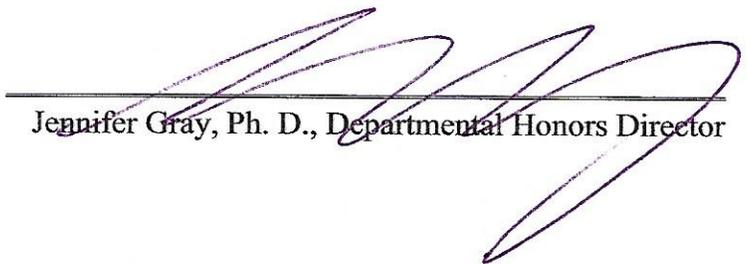
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### Abstract

Through discourse analysis, this article seeks to compare the cable news coverage of the Columbine High School school shooting and the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School school shooting using second-level agenda setting theory, with CNN broadcast transcripts as the unit of analysis. The research showed that the shooter was the dominant shaping force in the creation of the agenda for cable news coverage in both school shooting events.

**KEYWORDS:**

AGENDA SETTING  
MASS SHOOTINGS  
SCHOOL SHOOTINGS  
CABLE NEWS  
ELECTRONIC NEWS

## **Media and Mass Shootings: Second Level Agenda Setting in CNN News Coverage of the Columbine and Parkland Mass Shootings**

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

With the increasing number of school shootings, it is important to analyze the information that cable news media outlets select to disseminate to the American public. Cable news media is an important and influential source of news for the U.S. population, influencing the way political, social, and economic events are perceived and interpreted. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2018, watching the news is still the preferred method of news consumption for Americans, over reading the news or listening to it (Mitchell, 2018). According to Pew Research Center's Cable News Fact Sheet (Grieco, 2019), the average combined audience for primetime news of the three major networks (CNN, FOX, and MSNBC), increased by 8%, resulting in an average combined audience size of about 1.25 million. Even with the emergence of digital media, cable news media is a major source for news, with viewership increasing (Grieco, 2019). The Columbine High School shooting attracted the most public interest out of any other news

story in 1999, according to the Pew Research Center (1999). Additionally, 92% of Americans said they followed the shooting “very closely.” During the shooting, the mass media played an “integral role in the public perception of school shootings as a social problem” (Muschert, 2007, p. 65). The shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School only extended this perception, in that it was followed by an urgent call for policy change, which was notably spearheaded by the youth affected by the tragedy. The night of the shooting, the news media reported on the “unified message” of “remarkably poised and articulate teenagers” calling for gun control (Goodkind, 2019, para. 3).

This article compares the first- and second-level agenda setting in CNN news coverage in the two days following the events of the Columbine High School, or Columbine, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, or Parkland, shootings. A discourse analysis explores how the conversations following the Columbine and the Parkland school shootings set the agenda for the presentation of the event and the frames for the victims and the perpetrators. The objective of this discourse analysis is to examine the shift in journalistic frames surrounding school shootings across almost two decades by looking at two visible and robust cases. This article highlights the ways in which CNN’s reporting practices have remained static in regards to mass shooting events and discusses the possible need for systemic change in the way that such stories are disseminated.

The story of the Columbine shootings was the front page story of the *New York Times* for a week and a half after it occurred, which was, at the time, unprecedented in the amount of time a news cycle dedicated to one school shooting event (Neklason, 2019). Columbine inaugurated a frame-changing dynamic within the reporting: While initial news coverage focused on the actual events, the narrative shifted to the impact of Columbine on a societal

level over time. The shooting was so pivotal in American culture that the term the “Columbine effect” has been included in many discussions surrounding the aftermath of Columbine (Addington, 2003; Muschert & Peguero, 2010). The meaning of the term “Columbine” has increasingly lost connection with the actual event and has been adapted as a “shorthand to express a broad concern about violence in schools and other problems associated with youth” (Muschert, 2019, p. 359). The following section will review prior research on agenda setting, both first and second level, the relationship between second level agenda setting and framing theory, and news coverage of school shootings.

## **Literature Review**

### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

According to Rogers and Dearing (1988), traditional agenda setting is defined as “a process through which the mass media communicate the relative importance of various issues and events to the public” (p. 555). Broadly, agenda setting is the “transference of salience from the media to audience members” (Takeshita, 1997, p. 20). Agenda setting is the “story selection” of the mass media outlets as a “determinant of public perceptions of issue importance” (Ghanem, 1997, p. 7). Agenda setting is pertinent in discussions surrounding political and social issues that are reported on in the cable news media. Because the media select the issues the public finds most relevant, this can influence voting behaviors and opinions on public policy. A study by McCombs and Shaw (1972) comparing the public perception of important political issues to the issues that were reported in local news outlets showcased that there was a strong correlation between the two factors. The study also reported that voters’ opinions were a compilation of all the news outlets studied, suggesting

that voters pay at least some attention to the agenda of all news outlets, regardless of party affiliation or favor for a particular candidate.

The nature of the issue can determine whether or not the news media deems it worthy of being a part of the agenda that is being set. “Rapid onset issues” are more likely to be at the forefront of the news media’s agenda, while “slow onset issues” can lag behind in importance and have a smaller likelihood of being a part of the agenda (Perloff, 2018, p. 161). Birkland (1997) discusses how potential focusing events are influential in agenda setting. A potential focusing event is “an event that is sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, inflicts harms or suggests potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable geographical area or community of interest, and that is known to policy makers and the public virtually simultaneously” (p. 22).

A related theoretical framework to traditional, or first-level agenda setting theory, is framing theory. Most existing literature pertaining to school shootings uses framing theory as a lens through which to explore the media and their effects on the general public. While little research exists on school shootings related to either second-level agenda setting theory or traditional agenda setting theory, I intend to use previous research linked to framing theory as a guide to bridge the gap between using framing theory and second level agenda setting theories as a mode of analysis in reference to school shootings.

The relationship between framing and agenda setting is the subject of debate among scholars. Shah, McLeod, Gotlieb, and Lee (2009) argue that they are part of the “same broad tradition of research on how news can influence audiences through the choice of what stories to feature and how much prominence to give particular elements within these reports” (p.

83). The two elements that define framing are selection and salience (Entman, 1993).

Framing is “select[ing] some aspect of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Traditional agenda setting theory “highlights the media’s impact on the perceived salience of a particular issue, [but] the model’s failure to look within controversies means it cannot account for the significant role media play in shaping public opinion” (Shah et al., 2009, p. 85). So while framing theory and first-level agenda setting theory experience overlap in relation to salience, the element of “selection,” a key element in the current study, is missing from the definition of traditional agenda setting theories.

Second-level agenda setting, however, bridges the gap between framing and first-level agenda setting. Second-level agenda setting looks at “the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda regarding the salience of the *attributes* of these *objects* [of attention of the media agenda]” (McCombs et al., 2014, p. 782). The selection of these attributes that contribute to the attention of the media agenda provides the missing link between the traditional agenda setting theory and the framing theoretical framework, lending the research to operate in the sphere of second-level agenda setting theory.

## **Background on Events**

### **Columbine**

On April 20, 1999, 13 people died as a result of a school shooting at Columbine High School, located in Littleton, Colorado. The fatalities included 12 students and one teacher, and the shooting ended with both perpetrators committing suicide in the school library. The

students arrived separately on campus around 11:10 a.m. and went to the cafeteria where they placed two duffel bags containing bombs set to detonate at 11:17 p.m. The two individuals went to their cars to wait for the explosions, and when the bombs did not detonate, they began to shoot at around 11:19 a.m. The events ended at 12:08 p.m. after both teens committed suicide. At the time, the shooting was considered the worst high school shooting in U.S. history (History.com Editors, 2020).

### **Parkland**

On February 14, 2018, 17 people died as a result of a school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The fatalities included 14 students and three staff members, and 17 others were injured in the event. The shooter arrived on campus in an Uber and entered the freshman building around 2:21 p.m. Within the first 2 minutes, he had already murdered 11 of his 17 victims. After shooting six more individuals, he dropped his rifle and his backpack and fled the building at 2:27 p.m. The shooting lasted 6 minutes in total.

The 19-year-old perpetrator was a former student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas. He had been expelled for bad grades a little over a year before the shooting. The shooter had “a shockingly well documented history of depression and mental health issues, dating back to an early age” (Cullen, 2019, p. 31). In September of 2017, the shooter left a comment on a YouTube page saying, “I’m going to be a professional school shooter,” and the FBI confirmed that they had received a report about the post (Cullen, 2019; McLaughlin & Park, 2018). In November of 2017, the shooter’s adoptive mother passed away. The shooter moved in with the family of a friend, who had a child that was a current student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas on the day of the mass shooting.

## **News Coverage of School Shootings**

When comparing media coverage of school shootings between German and American news media, American news media coverage showed the greatest lack of discussion around policy. When policy was mentioned in American news media coverage, gun law restrictions were mentioned in all policy conversations, followed by few mentions of anti-bullying programs and even fewer discussions on violent video games (Barbieri & Connell, 2015, p. 38). Although Maguire et al. (2002) state that audiences should expect to see “extensive media coverage of school shootings” as a result of the fact that the media prefer to report on crimes that are “violent, unusual, and dramatic/sensational,” school shootings are actually covered by the news media for varying lengths of time, from “extreme” coverage to “zero” coverage, with the Columbine High School shooting receiving the most news media coverage out of all shootings observed in the study (p. 466 - 467). They found that the “dominant factor associated with the amount of coverage is violence,” as the four most violent school shootings from their sample accounted for 86% of the total time dedicated to coverage of school shootings (p. 468).

Columbine was covered extensively in the news media following the event, leading its salience to remain high amongst the public (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). Within the first week following Columbine, ABC, CBS, and NBC collectively aired 53 stories pertaining to the event, and all of the 53 stories added together took up around 4 hours of coverage (Maguire et al., 2002). According to Frymer (2009), “Following the shootings, the mass print and television media exploded onto the scene and out of the ambiguity and panicked confusion quickly but continually generated a major spectacle of alienated youth gone

horribly wrong” and that the “guiding narrative” portrayed by the news media was the “new phenomenon of white suburban youth alienation” (p. 1388).

Birkland and Lawrence (2009) supported the idea of focusing on youth as the guiding narrative for reform following Columbine, asserting that

the many different ways of framing the Columbine attack constituted their own lessons, although those lessons are often advanced to pursue disparate policy goals. Some therefore claimed that the lessons were “violent media are bad for kids” or that “lax parenting leads to youth violence” or that “more aid to schools is needed.” (p. 1421)

According to an article in *Washington Post*, over the course of a 2-week period, the coverage of the Parkland shooting on CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC was “relatively sustained” (Siegel, 2018, para. 6). The article also reported that “the sustained focus on Parkland wavered little as the surviving students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School vowed to push for harsher gun regulations until lawmakers chose to act” (para. 3). Erica Goode, a visiting professor at Syracuse University, observed that narratives covering a shooter profile, following Parkland, were becoming replaced by stories about gun-law reform and victim stories (Harris, 2018).

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

RQ 1: How does the cable news coverage by CNN discursively set the agenda for mass shooting events?

RQ 2: How are mass shooters framed in the cable news coverage by CNN?

RQ 3: How are mass shooting survivors framed in cable news coverage by CNN?

## Methods

Cable news media was selected as the medium for analysis because of the popularity of receiving news from television amongst Americans. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center reports that TV remains “the dominant screen” for Americans receiving their news, leading with 57% of U.S. adults reporting that cable, local, or network nightly news is the platform they most often turn to (Mitchell et al., 2016, p. 2).

Discourse analysis was selected as the method for research because discourse analysis focuses on how “talk constructs meaning” (Davis et al., 2010, p. 332) and how communication through language is used to create social realities (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Discourse analysis is valuable for analyzing the linguistics that are used to construct the proposed frames and the social implications that are linked to the creation of these frames.

[Social-political discourse analysis] attempts to relate structures of discourse with the structures of society. That is, social properties or relations of, e.g., class, gender or ethnicity, are thus systematically associated with the structural units, levels, or strategies of talk and text embedded in their social, political, and cultural contexts. (van Dijk, 1995, pp. 135-136)

The use of discourse analysis will allow for the deconstruction of the words used to communicate facts by cable news media in order to understand how they create the social realities for Americans on the causes, implications, and shortcomings in current political policy in relation to mass shooting events.

The date parameter selected for this study was the day of the event and the two days after the event occurred. For Columbine, this includes the day of the event, April 20, 1999, to April 22, 1999. For Parkland, this includes the day of the event, February 14, 2018, to

February 16, 2018. This date range was selected to include not only the basic fact reporting assumed to be disseminated in the first couple of days of reporting, but also the policy conversations that followed the events. This time frame allows for the evolution of conversational frames and agendas to be represented from the occurrence of the event.

The channel for analysis that was selected was CNN. This channel was selected because of its popularity nationally and its wide viewership. According to Statista (2020), CNN averaged 744,000 viewers per day, making it the fourth most watched channel in terms of daily viewers, behind Fox News, MSNBC, and ESPN, respectively. While Fox News was considered for inclusion in this data analysis to reduce any partisan bias, accessing equal amounts of Fox News coverage was not possible due to lack of access to a significant amount of data. Fox News was contacted and asked for alternative ways to seek access to their older broadcasts but could not provide any help in granting access to these older broadcast transcripts.

The unit of analysis for this research is the transcript. Each transcript was analyzed in the data collection process. The cable news media broadcasts for the reporting on Columbine were analyzed through transcripts accessed through the database Nexis Uni. A custom search was conducted, restricting news article types to “broadcast transcripts” and setting the custom date range from April 20, 1999, to April 22, 1999. The search term selected was “Columbine.” The total number of results was  $N = 94$ , with CNN ( $n = 60$ ).

The cable news media broadcasts for the reporting on Parkland were analyzed through transcripts using the database NewsBank. The results were filtered to produce only broadcast transcripts, with the customized date range set to produce only results from

February 14, 2018, to February 16, 2018. The key search term used was “Parkland,” producing a total of  $N = 483$ , with the CNN Newsroom segment ( $n = 21$ ).

The researcher undertook a process of etic coding, initially examining all transcripts for agenda-setting processes and labeling criteria that progressed in the news agenda (Fram, 2013). During this time, the researcher paid particular mind to the ways in which criterion manifested discursively. In a second coding examination, the researcher looked for elements of second-level agenda setting–labelling particular frames that emerged, focusing on the ways those frames delimited discourse on the topic.

## **Results**

### **RQ1: Second Level Agenda Setting**

The purpose of RQ1 was to explore how the cable news coverage by CNN discursively set the agenda for mass shooting events. The research showed that the cable news coverage of the Columbine shootings reflected an overarching theme of a lack of morality, which was extended to include a frame in which parents and child rearing were influential factors in the incident. In contrast, Parkland’s cable news coverage created an agenda around the issue of mental health and restructuring policies at a national government level in order to stop further tragedies from occurring.

The coverage of Columbine painted a lack of morality, especially pertaining to juvenile morality, as a key contributor to the incident. During a video tape clip that was broadcast during the newscast, then-Representative Jennifer Dunn asserted that the “solution is found with our children,” and that the parents of America need to “talk to [their] children, after they get home from school, every night at the dinner table, on weekends, to find out

what they're thinking and feeling" (in Woodruff et al., 1999). Dinner table conversation was mentioned again in a later newscast, highlighting research that reported that a significant majority of children between 6th and 12th grade had not had a 10-minute "conversation of substance" with their parents in the past year (Ferraro & Carlson, 1999). While Parkland created the framework for calling for a restructuring at the national political level, commentary on Columbine during coverage on April 21st created a stark contrast to this ideal, specifically stating that answers are "not in the state legislatures and city councils" and that "we really need to figure out how to change the human heart" (Woodruff et al., 1999). Then-Presidential candidate Gary Bauer expanded on the deficit in the hearts of children by connecting the issue to a lack of religious guidance. According to Bauer, children are not being told that they are "created by God" and argued this should be the central factor of the then-upcoming presidential campaign (in Woodruff et al., 1999). The need to emphasize children and how they are loved by God was discussed again in this news segment, alluding to the fact that the issue could be related to the fact that religious discourse had been de-emphasized in public schools. Bauer also discussed the glorification of death in Hollywood, including the vulgarity of current music and how it encouraged violence, specifically against women and police, calling these shortcomings a "virtue deficit" (in Woodruff et al., 1999). Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush suggested that the solution could be found in parents screening what their children watch on television (in Woodruff et al., 1999). One newscast even mentioned that the AOL profile of one of the shooters reflected a specific video game, highlighting that the video game "calls on players to use pipe bombs, frag bombs, and shotguns to kill other players" (Waters et al., 1999). One newscast included an interview conducted by Tucker Carlson with an actor who has played violent roles in movies,

questioning him on whether or not he would allow his children to watch his violent movies and discussed the influence of violent films on children; at one point in the conversation, Carlson even suggested that the film industry should set aside some of their profits from violent films for anti-violence campaigns (Ferraro & Carlson, 1999). CNN's coverage also referenced a culture of violence, specifically youth violence, when streaming a news conference where Janet Reno, the U.S. Attorney General at the time, asserted that witnessing abuse in the home leads children to accept violence as "a way of life" (in Woodruff, 1999).

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

having “a provision that would basically protect health care providers from any liability when they transmit mental health information to the instant check system” (in Cooper, 2018b). During the newscasts, individuals acknowledged the major role that mental health plays but asserted that the conversations need to occur in tandem with discussions on gun control (Cooper, 2018b). Emphasis in a different newscast, again, was placed on “not demoniz[ing] people with mental illness,” asserting that it is important to get people who need help into mental illness treatment, figuring out how to “get people the care they need,” and making sure that they “cannot get their hands on guns” if they are “dangerous to themselves or others” (Cooper, 2018a). Newscasts emphasized how the shooter had legally obtained the AR-15 he used in the shooting after passing an FBI background check with “no red flags, despite mental health treatment he had undergone in the past” (Foreman et al., 2018). Mental health was described by one CNN law enforcement contributor as “one brick in this wall,” with another brick being access to weapons such as AR-15s. He stated that the combination of mental health, high powered weapons, and threats result in “critical mass,” mentioning that “when you combine two or three [of these elements]” and a “declining life or a failure in life” then that is like “lighting the fuse on the bomb you already have” (in Cooper, 2018d). One broadcast included a clip of Donald Trump’s commentary on the event, showing him saying that the White House “is committed to working with state and local leaders to help secure our schools and tackle this difficult issue of mental health” (in Howell et al., 2018).

## **RQ2: Framing of Shooters**

According to a changing landscape of media ethics, it has become the new standard for American journalism to not give notoriety to those who commit mass shootings (Vincent,

2019). Giving notoriety to shooters can have consequences such as rewarding the shooters with the fame that they were seeking, shooters increasing the number of fatalities in order to receive fame, and sparking contagion of the behavior (Lankford & Madfis, 2018). While it is important to eliminate identification of the perpetrators, “the details of mass shooters’ lives, motives, and behavior are ... an essential topic of the media’s reporting” due to the fact that “scientific studies of mass shooters ... would be significantly inhibited [without their inclusion]” (Lankford & Madfis, 2018, p. 267).

Although the identification of the shooters is highly discouraged (Lankford & Madfis, 2018), CNN coverage of both mass shooting events includes mention of the names of the shooter(s). Both shootings had their perpetrators framed in tandem with the creation of the agendas of the media. The Columbine shooters were painted as troubled teens misguided by American pop culture, which reflected the previously described agenda of rectifying a lack of morality, while the Parkland shooter was framed as mentally unstable, following the agenda set forth for mental health reform.

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

Woodruff, et al., 1999). Bane communicated information she gathered from interviewing a soccer teammate of both the perpetrators, that “the families would attend the soccer matches and that although the boys seemed isolated, and of course dressed differently and were made fun of at school, they seemed [to be] fairly normal boys” (in Cossack & Van Susteren, 1999). Their membership in the “trench coat mafia” was discussed, saying that the members of this group “picked fights, elbowed kids out of the way in the hallways,” and that “kids complained about this [behavior] and that there were warning signs” (in Woodruff et al., 1999). The online activity of one of the perpetrators was detailed during a newscast, emphasizing his last post in an AOL chat room and how in his AOL profile he “used phrases that are used by people who use the computer game ‘Doom’” (Waters, et al., 1999). This particular newscast also discussed how he “used his computer to keep a web site through which he communicated with his buddies in the Trench Coat Mafia gang” to “post violent lyrics from a German techno music group” and a “scribbled drawing with a Satan like figure and features that seem to portray violence” (Waters, et al., 1999). Janet Parshall of the Family Research Council mentioned how she “look[ed] at the pictures, the high school pictures of th[ose] two boys” and thought that “from outward appearances they have all of the ambience of being normal, American kids” and it makes “you wonder what [it] takes that into a child whose heart was clearly so filled with darkness that they walk up to somebody and say, ‘do you believe in Jesus Christ?’” and then shoot them before they answer the question” (in Ferraro & Carlson, 1999).

The framing of the Parkland shooter was created by the emphasis placed on his mental health history. CNN correspondent Rosa Flores shared that “the police [were] called to his home 39 times since 2010 for things like domestic disturbance and [being a] mentally

ill person” and that he possessed a second Instagram account that “show[ed] pictures of him with a mask, [and] menacing photos of an arsenal of weapons” (Cooper, 2018c). A separate newscast expressed that the multiple trips to the home by the authorities and his social media “should have raised alarms” and that “we need to find out what happened and find out how we can use that kind of data to get people the care they need” (Cooper, 2018a). His behavior was described in one newscast as “erratic,” communicating that he had a “desire to kill,” and that his social media posts were “disturbing,” all language that supports the creation of the mental illness frame (Baldwin et al., 2018a). CNN correspondent Natalie Allen said that “his public defenders [were] painting a sad and disturbing picture of the teenager,” and a news clip was showed of Gordon Weekes, the executive chief assistant public defender, saying that the perpetrator “ha[d] been experiencing enduring mental illness his entire life” and that it had been “an ongoing issue that he ha[d] been dealing with” (in Howell, et. al, 2018). Kyung Lah, Senior CNN U.S. Correspondent, followed Weekes’s statement by informing viewers that Weekes also said the shooter had “lost his adoptive father more than a decade ago” and that he “suffer[ed] from brain development issues and depression” (in Howell, et. al, 2018). When a former coworker from his time at Dollar Tree was interviewed, he said that “you could tell he was a little off ... but there are people that are off that you wouldn’t say let’s lock him away because he is that dangerous” (in Howell, et. al, 2018).

### **RQ3: Framing of Mass Shooting Survivors**

In RQ3, the research sets out to address the different ways the survivors of the two mass shootings were framed in reference to their recovery and reactions to the events that had taken place in the day(s) prior. The research showed that the biggest dichotomy between

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

In coverage of Columbine survivors, tragedy and an element of helplessness and devastation to the community was emphasized. In news coverage of Parkland, the idea of thoughts and prayers is often discussed in a negative way, but this is one of the guiding themes throughout Columbine coverage. Rick Kaufman, Communications Director for Jefferson County schools at the time, opened his statements in one newscast by saying that “our hearts and our prayers go out to the families, to the students and our staff at Columbine High School that have witnessed and gone through this terrible tragedy” (in Cossack & Van Susteren, 1999). This sentiment was also communicated by then-Governor of Colorado Bill Owens, who communicated that “today our thoughts and prayers are with the families and the faculty and the students at Columbine High School” and that “no words can convey the grief” (in Woodruff, et al., 1999). The newscasts shared a hotline phone number that included 24-hour information as well as “numbers and people to contact to get victim assistance and grief counselors” (Cossack & Van Susteren, 1999). After the phone number was shared, it was communicated that the staff expressed in a meeting that they “need[ed] time ... time to grieve and they need[ed] some time to be together” (Cossack & Van Susteren, 1999). The newscasts emphasized the existence of a crisis response team and brought one of the team members, Norm Early, onto the newscast to communicate that they were “attempting to... help coordinate all of the grief counseling that [was] going on with the parents, with students, [and] with law-enforcement personnel” (Cossack & Van Susteren, 1999). CNN correspondent Charles Zewe interviewed Dr. Phil Mallory, a trauma surgeon who was

treating some of the students who had sustained injuries during the shootings. Zewe addressed the fact that Dr. Mallory was a Desert Storm veteran and asked him if “having treat[ed] soldiers in battle” was similar to “when these young people came into the E.R.” the night before. Dr. Mallory said that “it was strikingly similar” (Lin & Zewe, 1999). Zewe, reporting outside of a church that was holding a prayer service, reported that “grief counselors ha[d] spent a good part of an hour trying to help these people cope, trying to help them start to heal their emotional wounds that [ran] very, very deeply in the community” and that the service had “all been too much to take” for the kids who attended. Zewe reported that there were “girls gathered at a wooden cross in front of the church,” and they “shed a lot of tears and asked the question, over and over, why? Why?” (Waters, et al., 1999). The newscast mentioned there was “lots of hugging, lots of tears” outside of the Light of the World Catholic Church in Littleton and that “grief counselors, and perhaps some of the participants” were assumed to “emerge later to talk about some of their feelings” (Waters, et al., 1999). Another newscast mentioned the presence of church and religion in the healing process when CNN anchor Carol Lin interviewed Fritz Dale, the youth pastor at Southern Gables Church, who said that they “wanted to really capture [the students’] needs and provide a time where [the church] could minister to them and really provide God’s care to them in a very, very traumatic time” (in Lin, 1999). An exception to this frame—and one that bears more resemblance to the Parkland shooting reporting—was when then-Attorney General Janet Reno expressed that the students and the school “wanted to make sure that the people of America knew that Columbine High School would not be known for a tragedy” but instead be “known for its ability to overcome adversity” (in Woodruff, 1999). During the news conference, it was highlighted that “some of the students were very fearful of going

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

The frames created surrounding the survivors of Parkland had an action-based energy surrounding them, making the survivors seem mobilized in looking for policy change in addition to their feelings of grief and shock. Anderson Cooper reported that there were “so many students [there] who [he’d] talked to ... who seem mobilized, who seem to ... be angry, who seem to think ... that this time something [could] be done” (Cooper, 2018b). Later in the newcast, Cooper mentioned that there were “so many people” in Parkland who “do not want the school and this community to be defined by this” (Cooper, 2018b). In response to Cooper, Michael Udine, the then-Broward County Commissioner said: “Parkland’s an amazing city. This school is an amazing school. You’re seeing the kids that are going on TV. These are kids that are achievers, be it in drama, in business, in school and academics. We’re going to rebound because this is an amazing school and an amazing setting” (Cooper, 2018b). According to Cooper, family members were “asking for justice to be served,” reflecting an action-oriented response instead of passivity. Lori Alhadeff, mother of a child who was killed in the shooting, told CNN reporter Alisyn Camerota: “My child is dead. I can’t help her. But I can help all those other kids at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and all the other kids in America and around the world. We have to protect our children, we have to fight for them” (Cooper, 2018c). When asked by Camerota what she

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

We can’t ignore the issues of gun control that this tragedy raises. And so, I’m asking—no, demanding we take action now. Why? Because at the end of the day the students at my school felt one shared experience, that our politicians that abandoned us by failing to keep assault weapons out of our school. (Cooper, 2018c)

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

## **Discussion**

This manuscript utilized discourse analysis to compare how CNN news coverage discursively created frames through second level agenda setting between two widely known school shooting events, Columbine and Parkland. This purpose was broken into three research questions that set out to explore the different facets of the frame created for each event. In RQ1, the research showed that Columbine coverage discursively set the agenda to

be a morality deficit, while the Parkland coverage discursively set the agenda to be a mental health problem. In RQ2, the research showed that the shooters were framed in tandem with the overarching discussions surrounding policy reform and issues within the country and that the media has not evolved with suggested practices of not giving notoriety to perpetrators of school shooting events. In RQ3, the research showed that the discursive language created a frame of Columbine's victims to reflect devastation and loss, which contrasted with the action-based frame of Parkland victims'.

In second-level agenda setting, the focus is not only on the events the viewers are encouraged to think about, but also the "attributes" of the event that are the most relevant (McCombs et al., 2014, p.782). Here, in the cable news coverage detailed in the results, it is clear that first-level agenda setting occurred when CNN selected to cover each mass shooting event. When CNN decided to cover both events, it emphasized to the public that these events were urgently worth thinking about. Beyond this, second-level agenda setting occurred when the attributes, such as the morality connection vs. the mental health connection, were selected in reference to each research question. The news media has the power to select and guide the public's understanding of where there is a need for policy or social reform. It is also important to note that these attributes are often guided by the character profile of the perpetrator(s). As the Columbine perpetrators were framed as troubled teens from their run-ins with the law to their questionable choice of video games, the lack of morality became the overarching issue for all of America, not just the two perpetrators. This happened, likewise, with the Parkland shooting. The perpetrator had a history of mental illness— so the conversation transformed from focusing on how the mental illness of an individual might have influenced this particular event to an urgent need to reform mental health in the U.S. as

a whole. This gives way to the idea that the “broken” attributes in the shooter(s) themselves are the same as the “broken” attributes in society as a whole. With all this considered, it is important for Americans to notice which particular facts are being selected about an event when they are being reported on in the news media.

Moving forward, the media should seriously consider the new and evolving practices of “no-notoriety” that are suggested amongst the communications community (Lankford & Madfis, 2018 & Vincent, 2019). Although, as a communications community, we may believe we have evolved our reporting in tandem with emerging research and journalistic ethical considerations, this research proves otherwise. In addition, it is important for media practitioners to consider not generalizing the flawed character traits of a perpetrator or perpetrators to all similar criminals in the country. Media practitioners should take great care to acknowledge that they are in charge of shaping the public’s opinions and understanding of politics and society as a whole. As the intermediary between politicians and the public, the media must take responsibility for the weight of their words and how the selection of facts influences what the American people expect from their government.

It is important to recognize the limitations and opportunities that are rooted in this research. Because discourse analysis is a qualitative form of research, this research is not generalizable to all channels of media, or cable news coverage of all school shooting events. The research was intended to create a more descriptive picture of the two events comparatively, and meant to increase understanding— it in no way predicts, or intends to predict, future coverage of any such type of events. An additional limitation presented in this article is the specific date range that was selected for analysis. Including analysis of only the day of the event, and the two immediate days following, excludes any possible evolution of

agendas or frames that may have occurred from additional facts and discussions that arose following the date range selected. Also, it is important to note that the dataset only includes CNN and excludes a comparative cable news channel or channels from consideration. While efforts were made to include Fox News, the singular channel is still a shortcoming and should be considered while interpreting the data set forth. With that being said, this provides an opportunity for further research into the comparison of mass school shooting events across different channels of media to give a different perspective.

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