Chapter 6

Media Salience and Mass Murder:
Examining Frame Changing Across Mass Shooter Events, 2000–2012

Jaclyn Schildkraut
State University of New York at Oswego, USA

Glenn W. Muschert
Miami University, USA

ABSTRACT

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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

The Issue-Attention Cycle

The "issue-attention cycle" concept originally was introduced by Downs (1972) as a way to illustrate how social problems appear and disappear rapidly from the public's consciousness. Downs (1972) posited that most issues were introduced by media, temporarily built salience among members of the public, and then almost as instantly faded out of the discourse, only to be soon replaced by another issue or event that captures the attention of audiences. To understand how media can perpetuate the concerns over a particular issue, he introduced a five step cyclical model: (1) the pre-problem stage; (2) alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm; (3) realizing the cost of significant progress; (4) gradual decline or loss of intense public interest, and; (5) the post-problem stage (Downs, 1972). This cycle largely is driven by media and, indirectly, by politicians and pundits who use media as a vehicle for prioritizing certain issues (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010). Rarely does this cycle focus on more than a single issue or a few key concerns at a given time, despite the vast number of issues competing for salience among the public (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010; Downs, 1972; McCombs & Zhu, 1995).

Agenda-Setting, Claims Makers, and Social Problems

As noted, the media play a critical role in the social construction of reality for many different types of crime, mass shootings being just one. Given the tendency for the media to focus only on a select few issues at any one time, certain problems or stories must be prioritized over others. This process is known as agenda setting, which Sacco (1995) describes as:

The ways in which the news media collect, sort, and contextualize crime reports help to shape public consciousness regarding which conditions need to be seen as urgent problems, what kinds of problems they represent, and, by implication, how they should be resolved. (p. 141)

Agenda-setting emphasizes the way in which the media portray issues and highlight particular facets of a given story (McCombs, 1997; Surette, 1992; Weaver, 2007). This is done to achieve consensus about the importance of that topic and to generate support for related policies (Barak, 1994; Entman, 2007; McCombs, 1997; Reese, 2007). As more media coverage is devoted to the issue, that issue becomes more salient for the public, eventually becoming a priority on its agenda (McCombs, 1997; Reese, 2007). Simultaneously, however, other issues or events either are deemphasized or ignored completely (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; see also Entman, 2007; McCombs, 1997; Weaver, 2007).

Before an issue can reach the public's agenda, however, it must be designated as important, and this often is determined by those who have the power to shape and promulgate their ideas. This group is referred to as "claims makers," and these people often are responsible for declarations or objections towards a particular social issue (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). Claims makers have the ability to influence public perception and policy with relation to "social problems" (Best, 1987; see also Schildkraut, 2016). According to Spector and Kitsuse (1977), social problems are "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances or claims with respect to some putative conditions" (p. 75). Essentially, then, "social problems" are a product of those with the power or resources to define them as such and typically reflect the interests of those who are making the claims. Once claims makers have convinced others of a problem, they then offer solutions to the problem or policies aimed at deriving such a solution (Best, 1987).

One of the main problems of claims making is that often these problems are not put into context, but instead blown out of proportion (Best, 1987). Yet, given the standing of the claims maker, these assertions often are taken as accurate (Best, 2006). Claims making can make atypical problems seem typical, and typical problems seem atypical (Best, 1987). Not only does this shape public perceptions of these social problems, but the broader reach extends to policy implementation, including those aimed at increasing social control, prevention, and awareness (Barak, 1994; Best, 1987; Sacco, 1995). These inconsistencies are furthered through the language that is used by claims makers to propagate their agendas, and ultimately affect the social construction of social problems. As Jones, McFalls, and Gallagher (1989) have noted, claims makers have the ability to make "subjective mountains" out of "objective molehills" and vice versa (p. 341).

Claims makers conceptually have been subdivided into two groups – primary and secondary claims makers (Best, 1989). Primary claims makers are those individuals who have some sort of exclusive or intimate knowledge about the problem (Best, 1989; Ogle, Eckman, & Leslie, 2003; O'Neal, 1997). This group may include victims, witnesses, or experts in a particular area who call attention to a particular issue and offer potential solutions or simply bring awareness to the problem (Best, 1989; Ogle, Eckman, & Leslie, 2003). Secondary claims makers, on the other hand, are further removed from the issue and simply interpret or disseminate the claims made by the primary claims makers (Best, 1989; Ogle, Eckman, & Leslie, 2003; O'Neal, 1997). According to Best (1989), the media are considered to be secondary claims makers despite their often reinterpreting of claims made by the primary group (see also Ogle, Eckman, & Leslie, 2003; O'Neal, 1997).

Media Framing

The manner in which the stories are framed also can influence public opinion about a particular issue (Entman, 2007; Gans, 1979; Reese, 2007; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Framing first was introduced by Erving Goffman (1974) as a way to explain how members of society make sense of the world around them. This concept later was linked by researchers (e.g., Entman, 2007; Gans, 1979; Reese, 2007; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) to agenda setting by the media, particularly within the context of political agendas. The process of framing has been described by Ghanem (1997) as "the construction of an agenda with a restricted number of thematically related attributes in order to create a coherent picture of a particular object" (p. 10). Specifically, the media use framing as a way to simplify otherwise complex social issues and repackage them in a way that is both relatable and accessible to news audiences (Gans, 1979; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Accordingly, a media frame can be conceptualized, according to Tankard (2001), as "a central organizing idea for news content that supplies context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selected emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration" (pp. 100-101).

By highlighting certain aspects of a story and ultimately prioritizing them over other related issues (e.g., gun control after mass shootings), this can generate increased salience among audiences (Gans, 1979; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Over time, the manner in which issues are framed also may change, thereby taking complex issues and presenting them in a way that is both accessible and relatable to news consumers while simultaneously highlighting different facets of a particular story (Gans, 1979; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This process, however, can lead to a distorted reality and understanding of the problem for audiences. As Cohen (1963) has astutely noted, the media "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling people what to think *about*" (p. 13, emphasis added).

Methodology

To date, several studies (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014) have examined the role of frame changing in the context of school shootings. More specifically, Chyi and McCombs (2004) explored how the narrative of the 1999 Columbine shooting developed over the first month of coverage in the *New York Times.* Muschert and Carr (2006) expanded this prior study by comparing the framing of Columbine to eight other shootings that occurred in the same temporal proximity. Collectively, however, the other shootings drew less coverage combined than Columbine did on its own (Muschert & Carr, 2006). In an attempt to address comparably salient events, Schildkraut and Muschert (2014) analyzed the framing of

the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, which drew nearly equitable coverage (though not surpassing that of Columbine) by the media. Still, given that less than one-third of mass shootings occur in schools (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016b), an examination of the media framing of the phenomenon more broadly is warranted and thus is the focus of the present study.

Measurement Scheme

The way in which news stories are framed, and how these frames change over time, is a central point of examination when considering the agenda-setting function of the media. The theory of agenda-setting, according to McCombs and Bell (1996), focuses on "any set of objects – or even a single object – competing for attention," and mass shootings, both as individual events and a collective phenomenon, certainly are such objects (p. 105). In examining how news articles are framed, Chyi and McCombs (2004) argue that, of the five W's of media, the two most important aspects of a story are *space* (where) and *time* (when). Further, these also are the most direct organizational measures of how such stories are framed (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). A visual representation of this analytic framework is presented in Figure 1.

The space dimension is comprised of five different levels. These levels exist across a continuum, ranging from micro (individual) to macro (societal or international). In the present study, and consistent with previous research (e.g., Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014) employing this

Figure 1. Chyi & McCombs' Two-Dimensional Measurement Scheme Table[5]

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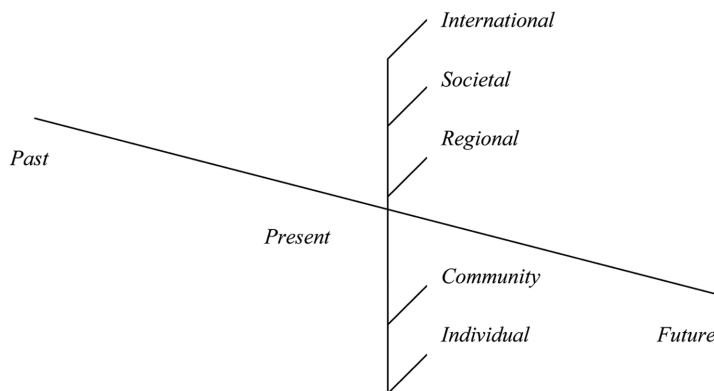
analytic framework, the *individual* level focuses on people who were involved in the event, such as the shooters or their victims. The *community* level is used to examine how the stories impact a particular group. In the present study, such groups may include the actual community (e.g., a town or city) or the groups in which these events occurred (e.g., an individual school or workplace community). The next level is *regional*, which examines the story's impact on a broader audience, such as a metropolitan area or a single state. The *societal* level considers the reach of the story to the nation at large, while the *international* level emphasizes the stories' impact on a global audience, or draws comparison between the event in focus and an international incident.

The time dimension also exists on a continuum, and provides the opportunity to examine the media's temporal focus by situating the event in either the past, present, or future context. While the focus of the media often is telling the story in the present (what is happening "now"), they also may rely on the other temporal dimensions to provide a fuller, more robust account of the event. In the present study, the *past* level includes any discussion that provides backstory or events leading up to the shooting. The *present* frame encompasses coverage within the first 30 days of the event, to allow for examination of the event itself, as well as any short-term implications stemming from it. Finally, the *future* frame allows for examination of the more long-term implications of the event.

Research Questions

This research is guided by questions proposed by Chyi and McCombs (2004) in their examination of the frame-changing in the news coverage of Columbine. As Schildkraut and Muschert (2014) further posit, examining frame-changing, particularly of mass shootings in a post-Columbine era, allows for these events to be considered in the context of a broader disaster narrative. Thus, in order to assess the level of frame changing in the present study across time and space, three research questions are proposed:

RQ1: How were the *space* frames distributed across time? Were there any emerging changes in the framing over the events' life spans?

RQ2: How were the *time* frames distributed across time? Were there any emerging changes in the framing over the events' life spans?

RQ3: What was the relationship between the use of space and time frames?

Data Collection, Coding, and Analytic Strategy

The present study examines the frame-changing in newspaper coverage of 91 mass shootings that occurred between 2000 and 2012.[1] For the project, *The New York Times*, which has been identified by previous researchers (e.g., Altheide, 2009; Leavy & Maloney, 2009; Muschert, 2002; Schildkraut, 2012; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014; Wigley & Fontenot, 2009) as the national standard for print news, was selected as the main news source. *The Times* is the third most circulated newspaper, reaching over 1.15 million readers weekly and nearly 1.65 million readers with its Sunday edition (Edmonds, Guskin, Rosenstiel, & Mitchell, 2012).[2] Its readership is exceeded only by *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*, each of which take a different approach (e.g., business and economics, infotainment) to news reporting (Muschert, 2002).

Articles were collected through the Lexis-Nexis database using a full-text keyword search using the term "shooting" coupled with the city or institution name (see Schildkraut, 2014). The city or institution name is used in lieu of the shooters' names, which likely would lead to false positives and missing data (Deacon, 2007; Soothill & Grover, 1997), particularly as initial reports often exclude this information. Articles were collected on each of the 91 events for 30 days, including the day of the actual shooting. Despite that McCombs and Zhu (1995) previously have found that coverage of public issues has an average lifespan of 18.5 months, others (e.g., Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut, 2014, 2016; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014) have found a shorter coverage span for school and mass shooting events. After culling the articles and excluding letters to the editors, opinion pieces, blogs, and sports articles (e.g., containing the word "shooting"), the final dataset, containing only news stories and editorials, included 564 articles and 489,638 printed words.

It is important to caution, however, that this coverage does not include all events. Of the 91 shootings included in the study, 21 of these (23.1%) received no mention in print news coverage. Of the remaining 70 shootings, 5 specific events – Virginia Tech (2007), Fort Hood (2009), Tucson (2011), Aurora (2012), and Sandy Hook (2012) – dominated the coverage, accounting for 57% of the total number of articles and 62% of the total word count of the original stories (see Table 1). These shootings later were categorized as "high salience" due to their prevalence of coverage. The remaining 65 shootings, classified as "low salience," garnered between 1 and 19 articles each, with an average of 3.7 articles and 2,881 words per event.

Each article was coded discretely for both space and time frames, meaning that the article only could be coded for one level within each dimension. Determinations were made as to which level the article was coded by examining the body lead, or

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Table 1. Most Prominent Cases by Coverage

Event	Date	Articles	Total Words
Sandy Hook Elementary School	12/14/2012	130 (23.0)	118,354 (24.2)
Tucson / Gabrielle Giffords	01/08/2011	89 (15.8)	91,715 (18.7)
Fort Hood Military Base	11/05/2009	36 (6.4)	35,097 (7.2)
Virginia Tech Shootings	04/16/2007	36 (6.4)	33,473 (6.8)
Aurora, CO Movie Theater	07/20/2012	31 (5.5)	23,715 (4.8)
TOTALS		**322 (57.1)**	**302,354 (61.8)**

NOTE: For both article and total words, results are presented as counts with percentage of total data set (N = 564 articles / 489,638 words) in parentheses.

first paragraph, of each story. Analysis of frame changing was conducted for the rampage shootings phenomenon as a whole (e.g., all 91 cases), as well as being further disaggregated by the amount of coverage (high and low levels). This enables the researchers to account for any influence the higher salience cases may impose on the coverage patterns.

ANALYSIS

In order to better understand the framing of mass shooting events in a post-Columbine era, it is important to analyze the available data within the framework of each research question.

Space Frames

The first research question pertains to the changing in distribution of space frames for the phenomenon of mass shootings. In order to evaluate such a question, analysis is conducted examining the full 91 cases. The 30-day distributions of the articles covering the shootings are presented in five-day increments, as shown in Figure 2. In examining the overall distribution across spatial levels, the individual frame is the most predominant. Specifically, nearly 56% of articles coded were focused on individuals. An additional 23% of articles were framed at the societal level, which situates the discourse in a national context. Framing at the community level occurred 14% of the time, and about 5% of articles were framed in the regional context, meaning that the articles focused on the state or metropolitan area. Just under 2% of articles were framed at the international level.[3]

Figure 2. Distribution of Space Frames by Five-Day Period, All Cases
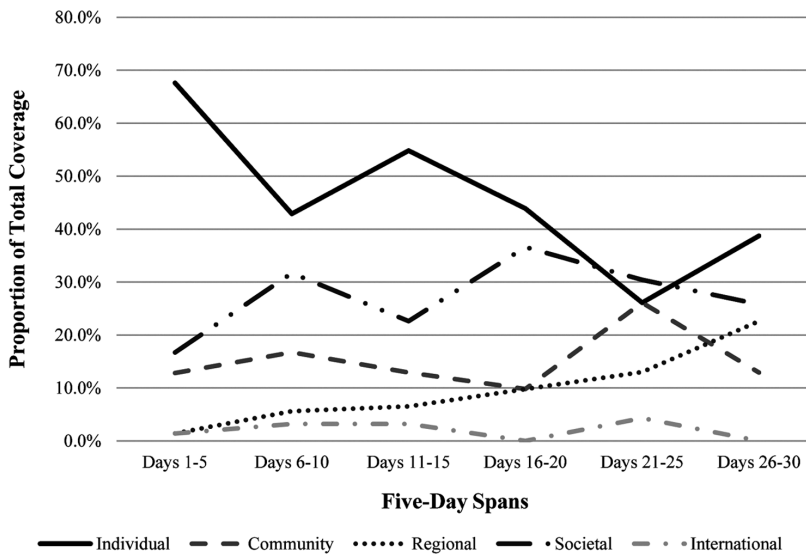
The distribution of coverage across the space frames reveals an interesting pattern. In three other studies (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014) examining school shootings, the societal frame was found to be the most prevalent. In the present study, however, the individual frame is more common. This is particularly interesting, since Schildkraut and Muschert's (2014) research examined the coverage of Sandy Hook, which is the most covered event in the present study, yet the propensity for framing this event at a societal level did not overtake the overall framing of all rampage shootings at an individual level. Thus, the analysis suggests that when examining the framing of a set of objects (e.g., mass shootings) as compared to a single object (e.g., Columbine or Sandy Hook), focusing on the impact of the event on the individual participants rather than the nation at large is more common.

In addition to variations in framing for the aggregate coverage, the distribution of these frames across five-day increments reveals that frame-changing did take place in the reporting of rampage shootings. The initial coverage most heavily was framed at the individual level, presumably to tell the story of those who were involved in the event. Over time, however, the use of the individual frame gradually decreases. Nearing the end of the coverage period, between Days 21 and 25, the individual-level coverage is matched by the community frame and exceed by the societal frame. This suggests that, in constructing the narrative of mass shooters as a whole, the focus is first on who was involved in the attack and then shifts to the broader meaning of the events, both locally and for the nation at large.

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Given the considerable amount of coverage (57%) garnered by only five of the shootings, it is possible that the dynamics of framing, when examining the aggregate, are being driven by these select events. As such, it is important to consider how the frame-changing compares only among highly salient events, as well as across those of lesser coverage. Figure 3 illustrates the framing across the most salient cases – Sandy Hook, Aurora, Virginia Tech, Fort Hood, and the Tucson shooting. Figure 4 charts the framing of the remaining 65 cases that received coverage in *The Times*.

Comparing these two figures provides a number of interesting observations. First, the coverage patterns of the highly salient cases (Figure 3) appear to be more similar to the framing of the total aggregate of cases (Figure 2), thus suggesting that it is these five cases that are driving the overall framing patterns of the phenomenon of rampage shootings. Further examination of the separate levels of space reveals additional disparities in the framing of these events. The pattern of coverage at the individual level, for example, appears to be the complete inverse. Specifically, in the highly salient cases (Figure 3), just over 50% of coverage in the first five days is framed at the individual level, whereas nearly 80% of the articles for the lower saliency cases (Figure 4) are framed at this level. While both sets of cases plunge to between 25% and 30% of coverage in this frame, the decline is much more gradual for the higher saliency cases, while the drop in individual framing for the lesser salient cases is more drastic, as is the rebound in the last five-day period.

Figure 3. Distribution of Space Frames by Five-Day Period, High Saliency Cases
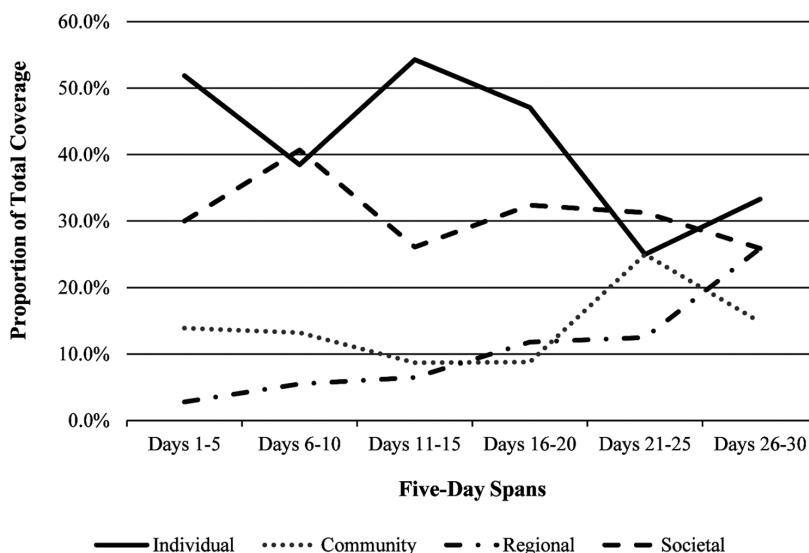
Figure 4. Distribution of Space Frames by Five-Day Period, Low Saliency Cases
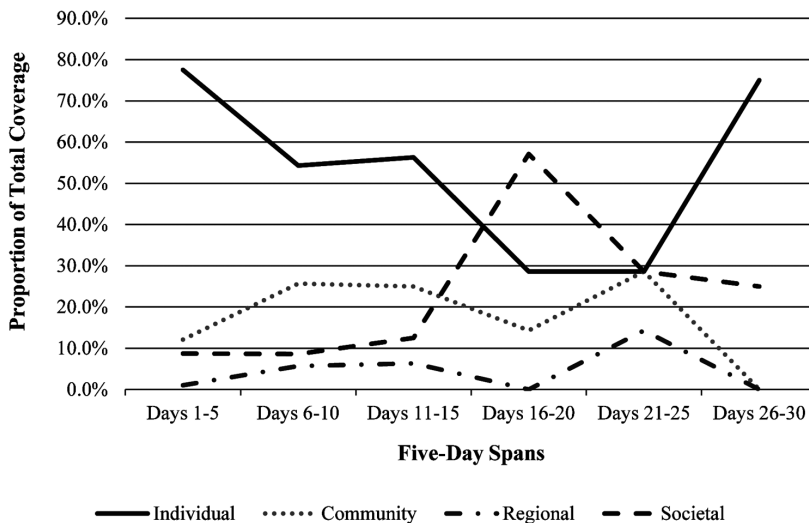
Noticeably, both sets of cases exhibit spikes in the societal framing of the coverage. In the highly salient cases (Figure 3), this peak comes sooner – between Days 6 and 10, as opposed to Days 16 and 20 in the frame-changing of the lower saliency cases. Additionally, the use of the societal frame in the higher saliency cases is more sustained, as opposed to the drastic increase and decrease in the lower saliency cases (Figure 4). The latter, however, reveals a more consistent use of the community frame than the former, suggesting that the higher saliency cases are used to address societal concerns, while the lower saliency cases are framed in a discussion of what the events mean for the local communities.

Time Frames

The second research question focuses on the frame-changing of the coverage of mass shootings over the different levels of the time dimension – past, present, and future. As with the examination of frame-changing across space, the aggregated set of 91 cases was charted across five-day increments, as shown in Figure 5, to examine changing across the various levels. The results indicate that unlike the frame-changing across space, which was a clear departure from other studies employing this two-dimensional framework (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014), the use of framing across the different time levels was more consistent with prior research.

Figure 5. Distribution of Time Frames by Five-Day Period, All Cases
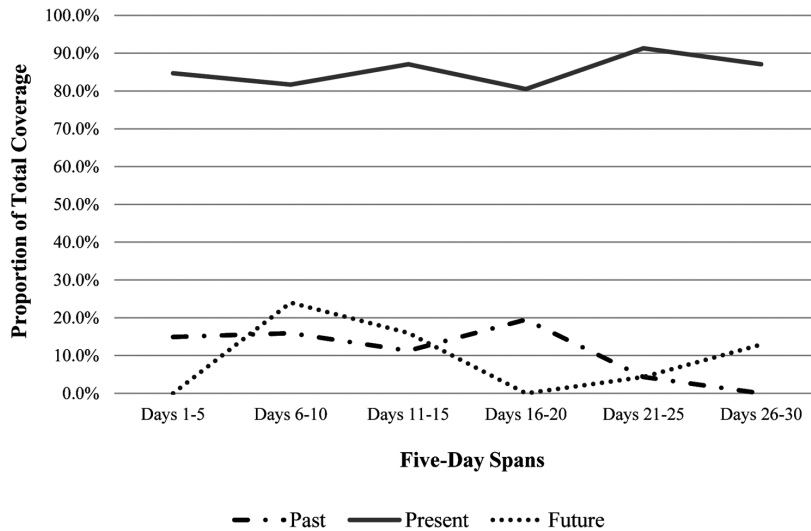
Specifically, in first examining the framing of each level of time as a whole, it is clear that these stories are most commonly framed in the present. In fact, nearly 85% of the total coverage is framed at the present level. Schildkraut and Muschert's (2014) study found that the Sandy Hook shooting alone was framed at this level approximately 83% of the time. The use of the past frame accounted for just under 14% of coverage. The biggest departure, however, is in the use of the future frame. In the present study, the future frame was used in just under 2% of the total coverage. In Chyi and McCombs' (2004) study, this frame was utilized 13% of the time; it was used 12% of the time in Muschert and Carr's (2006) study, and in just 8% of the coverage of Sandy Hook by Schildkraut and Muschert (2014). Thus, when examining mass shootings as a whole, particularly in a post-Columbine era, consideration of the long-range impact of these events is not needed when a significant precedent already exists, whereas in the other studies, specifically those by Chyi and McCombs (2004) and Muschert and Carr (2006), coverage of Columbine called for this distant speculation as no such antecedent was available.

Similarly, the actual frame-changing across five-day increments both confirms and departs from these studies' prior findings. As noted, the pattern of use of the past and present frames mirror the findings of previous research nearly identically. The changes in framing across five-day increments, however, departs from these previous results. Presumably due to the low use of the future frame as a whole, there is no major peak at any of the increments for this level. Incidentally, the previous studies reported spikes of 40% to 80% of coverage, particularly near the end of the 30-day coverage.
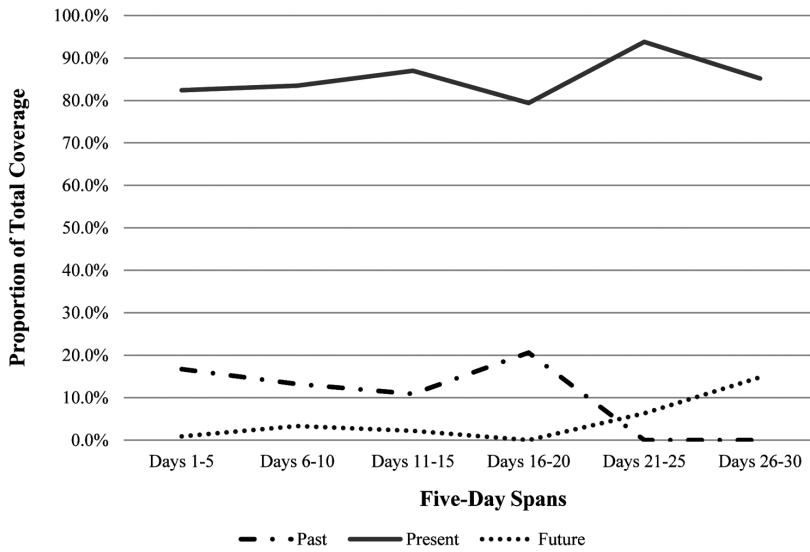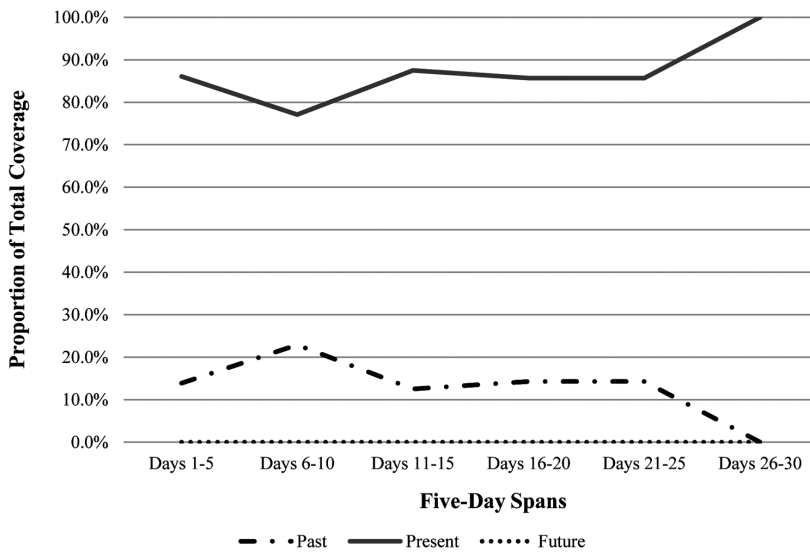
Figure 6. Distribution of Time Frames by Five-Day Period, High Saliency Cases

Figure 7. Distribution of Time Frames by Five-Day Period, Low Saliency Cases

Given these disparities from previous research, consideration again must be paid to whether or not the highly salient cases are influencing the overall framing pattern. Figure 6 charts the frame changing of the highly salient cases across time levels, while the lower saliency cases are charted in Figure 7. When examining the present frame, both figures follow similar patterns, though the lesser salient cases do gradually increase to full coverage at this level, while the pattern for more salient cases remains mostly stable. Both also exhibit fairly gradual declines across the past frame throughout the coverage period, waning to no coverage in the last five-day period. This is not entirely unexpected, in that most coverage of the backstory of an event typically comes at the beginning of the story's life when people are looking for answers. The biggest departure between the two groups of cases, however, relates to the use of the future frame. While the future frame is used in a limited capacity, the framing at this level is done exclusively in the high saliency cases. The cases of lower saliency, and lower article counts, do not offer any speculation for what the events mean long term, whether in terms of response strategies, gun control, or other similar issues that focus on the near or distant future.

Framing Across Space and Time

In addition to examining how framing is conducted over space and time frames independently, it also is important to examine the relationship between the two, which Chyi and McCombs (2004) call "core frames" (Research Question 3). Table 2 compares the core frames for the aggregate of cases in the present study to Chyi and McCombs' (2004) findings to examine whether changes in the use of core frames have changed since Columbine. Though the results again indicate that core frames situated in the present are more common for both studies, there are several differences in the post-Columbine shootings.

Table 2. Space Frame by Time Frame, Comparing Columbine[4] / All Shootings

		Time Frame		
		Past	*Present*	*Future*
Space Frame	*Societal*	2% / 1%	39% / 23%	13% / 1%
	Community	4% / 1%	24% / 14%	1% / 0%
	Individual	10% / 12%	7% / 47%	0% / 0%

NOTE: Cell entries for all shootings are percent of total (n = 524). Total percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding.

Table 3. Space Frame by Time Frame, Comparing High / Low Salience Shootings

		Time Frame		
		Past	*Present*	*Future*
Space Frame	*Societal*	1% / 0%	33% / 11%	2% / 0%
	Community	2% / 1%	13% / 15%	0% / 0%
	Individual	11% / 14%	39% / 58%	1% / 0%

NOTE: Cell entries for all shootings are percent of total (n = 291 for high salience cases; n = 233 for low salience cases). Total percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding.

In Chyi and McCombs' (2004) examination of Columbine, the use of the societal-present frame was the most common (39%). While 23% of the articles in the present study also utilized this core frame, the employment of the individual-present frame was considerably more common (47%). In fact, the use of this frame in the present study was found to occur nearly seven times more than in the study by Chyi and McCombs (2004). Additionally, their study also utilized the societal-future frame considerably more than the present study, 13% of the time as compared to 1%. As previously noted, this supports the hypothesis that Columbine as an event called for more long-range speculation of its meaning for the nation at large as there was no real precedent for how to understand the shooting. In the present study, however, Columbine acts as this precedent for all mass shootings that followed it and therefore these events do not require such long-term considerations.

As with examinations of the space and time dimensions individually, it is important to compare cases of both high and low saliency to determine whether the former is driving the pattern of coverage. The results of this comparison is presented in Table 3. As the findings indicate, articles about the more salient cases are three times as likely to be framed in the societal-present frame (33% to 11%). Conversely, the use of the individual-present core frame (58%) is more common with articles about the lower saliency cases than with those receiving more media attention (39%). Additionally, as previously noted, only the highly salient cases were framed in any permutation of the future level, as also evidenced in the results comparing them with the coverage of the lesser salient cases.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to examine the framing of mass shootings in a post-Columbine era in an attempt to understand how the narrative of these events and, more broadly, the phenomenon itself changes over the lifespan of the story. Such a goal is particularly important, given the media's broad reach and prominent role in agenda-setting. As researchers (e.g., Graber, 1980; Surette, 1992) have noted, the media often acts as the main source of information about crime for upwards of 95% of individuals; this role encompasses mass shooting as well, considering that most people never will directly experience such an event (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016a). The manner in which such stories are framed further influences public opinion not only about these events, but also about related responses, including those centering on gun control, mental health, and violent media (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016a; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Muschert, 2016; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013). In the same vein, the way in which these events are framed in the media also cultivates public attitudes consistent with a moral panic over mass shootings and perceptions that such incidents, while statistically rare, are considerably more likely to occur (Elsass, Schildkraut, & Stafford, 2014; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Stafford, 2015; see also "Washington Post-ABC News Poll," n.d.).

The manner in which stories about mass shootings are framed has the ability to impact the aforementioned public attitudes. In the context of the spatial level, the impact of emphasizing the individual frame is two-fold. On one hand, the emphasis on the individuals involved in the mass shooting allows the media, and claims makers by extension, to make examples out of both the shooters and their victims. Following the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, for example, one article in *The New York Times* led with the headline "'Who would do this to our poor little babies'" to highlight the 20 first graders who were killed in the attack (Applebome & Wilson, 2012). Conversely, another article published the same day highlighted the shooter using the lead "A gunman, recalled as intelligent and shy, who left few footprints in life" (Halbfinger, 2012). Aside from emphasizing these and other parties, framing at the individual level also provides news audiences an outlet with which to compare themselves, whether that is as a parent of a school-aged child, a movie theater patron (e.g., the 2012 Aurora, Colorado shooting), or attendant at a local church (e.g., the 2015 Charleston, South Carolina church shooting).

Not only is the framing itself important, but consideration also should be given to how it changes throughout the discourse. While initial stories typically were found to be contextualized at the individual level, the framing shifts to a more societal focus as the coverage progresses. Such a transition allows for these mass shootings to be considered in a bigger picture, moving from what it means for the individuals directly impacted by the event to what the attack means more broadly for the nation. It is at this level that policies, such as those aimed at gun control or addressing mental illness, often emerge in the discussion by and through the media (see also Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016a).

Framing across the dimension of time, however, yields little variation. As the results indicate, the majority of the stories are framed in the present. As such, the primary focus of the narrative is to address the immediate impact and aftermath of these events. This finding, however, departs from earlier research conducted by Chyi and McCombs (2004), who found that while the present dimension was the most used in the framing of the Columbine coverage, early articles placed greater emphasis on the backstory of the case while later stories (in the last third of the coverage period) shifted to nearly equal coverage of the present and future dimensions. Columbine, however, had no significant precedent in terms of how such stories are covered. Conversely, the cases in the current study rely on Columbine and its related disaster narrative (see Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014) to guide its framing. As such, when examining mass shootings as a whole, particularly in a post-Columbine era, the need for considering the long-range impact of these events is not required when a significant precedent already exists, whereas in the other studies, particularly those by Chyi and McCombs (2004) and Muschert and Carr (2006), the coverage of Columbine called for more distant speculation as no such antecedent was available. The greater consistency in the use of the present frame also may represent the immediate demand for action that typically follows a mass shooting.

Examining the intersection of time and space further yields important findings. In the present study, the use of the individual-present frame was the most common. Chyi and McCombs (2004), however, found that the coverage of Columbine primarily was framed at the societal-present frame, followed by the community-present frame. It also was found that the societal-future frame was used liberally (13% of articles) in the coverage of Columbine (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). By comparison, this same frame was used in just 1% of stories in the current study. This again highlights the importance of Columbine as a precedent-setting case while simultaneously reinforcing the patterns of coverage for subsequent shootings. At the same time, these latter shootings lead to markedly less discussion of the impact of such events, which, in turn begs the question of whether this phenomenon is reflective of deeper sociological conflicts or pathologies.

Finally, beyond these findings related to framing of mass shootings as a collective phenomenon, there are additional considerations regarding the disparities in coverage of high and low salient cases. When examining both space and time frames and disaggregating analysis by the amount of coverage cases received, the findings reveal that, by and large, the general framing of the phenomenon of mass shootings is driven by the highly salient cases. Such a finding is not entirely surprising, given the amount of coverage (57% of articles and 62% of word counts) these cases elicited. Still, the fact that the lower saliency cases exhibit virtually no use of the future frame on their own and a low employment (just 11% of articles) of the societal-present frame indicates that all mass shootings are not equal in terms of their media coverage or perceived impact (see also Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2017). As such, only those cases deemed to be the most important have the potential to generate consideration or concern about the impact the event and even the phenomenon as a whole has on society.

Like most research, this study is not without its limitations. Though the *New York Times* has been shown to be *the* agenda-setting paper, it still is a single news source, and future research can benefit from expanding our analysis to compare the framing of mass shootings among multiple sources, particularly those with different political slants. Additionally, though we disaggregated cases by high and low salience, the overall goal of this project was to examine the aggregate phenomenon of mass shootings, rather than considerations of specific events that had been the focus of previous studies (e.g., Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). Due to the variation in coverage among the cases, however, further analysis into the coverage disparities themselves would be beneficial in further understanding the impact (or lack thereof) of the media coverage of the lesser salient shootings.

Understanding the way in which stories about mass shootings are framed is critical to understanding how, at least in part, policies about such events unfold. As mass shootings do not occur in a vacuum, attempting to generate policies in one fails to adequately address the issue at hand. As we have illustrated, the manner in which mass shootings are framed by the media is problematic in that it helps to cultivate and perpetuate myths about these events, irrational fears of such crimes, and impractical demands for action (see also Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016b). It also stunts a meaningful and protracted discussion about the socio-cultural causal factors of such events, which we have argued is necessary in working towards a resolution, or, at the very least, a better understanding of these events (see Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013). This study provides an important first step in overcoming these obstacles and paving the way towards such a discourse.

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ENDNOTES

1   The study originally examined 2000 to 2010, representing the "post-Columbine era," during which journalistic practices of covering these events shifted. The study was expanded to include 2011 and 2012, after several high profile shootings, including the attempted assassination of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, AZ (2011); the Aurora, CO movie theater shooting (2012); and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting (2012).

2   Circulation estimates as of September 2011.

3   Due to the low number of articles framed at the international level, and that these were split among high and low salience cases, analysis of the disaggregated article sets excluded this level of the space dimension.

4   Values for Columbine are drawn from Chyi and McCombs (2004, p. 28).

5   Adapted from Chyi and McCombs (2004).