COVERING MASS SHOOTERS: A QUALITATIVE REVIEW OF JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE AND PERSPECTIVE

by

SAMANTHA EDGE

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Approved: 

Nicole Dahmen

As the issue of frequent mass shootings continues to plague America, increased attention is being given to the way shootings are covered in the press. Within the last five years, concern has arisen that news coverage about shooters could actually incentivize future shootings, which raises a major point of concern for journalists who seek to minimize harm resulting from their duty to inform the public. Through a series of qualitative interviews, this thesis examines the opinions of news reporters and editors related to that hypothesis in order to identify the purpose and potential consequences of covering a shooter from a journalistic perspective. This research unveils a number of reporting obligations and ethical considerations to be deliberated when covering future mass shootings. This research clearly establishes that reporters and editors across the country are constantly striving to improve their coverage of mass violence, but also highlights the need for more investigation into the effects of different types of news coverage on the public, in order provide a basis of research from which decisions about future news coverage can be made.

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Introduction:

San Bernardino. Colorado Springs. Roseburg.

These American cities have all been in the news in the last nine months for sharing a common experience: lives lost and threatened by a mass shooting. Without warning, gunmen started shooting people at work, in school, or going about their daily lives. The assaults killed 26, wounded 39 and left this nation again debating why the United States sees so many mass shootings. [1]

Mass shootings are happening three times as frequently as they have in the past. According to a study by the Harvard School of Public Health using data collected by Mother Jones magazine, the standard frequency of mass shootings has climbed from once every 200 days, to once every 64.[2] And this is by the most conservative estimates of what a "mass shooting" is – the study only counted shootings where four or more people were killed at random, in public, and with no relation to one another or the shooter.[3]

As these events happen more often, so too does the conversation about how we should stop them. Journalism, as a means of disseminating information, fostering common understanding and setting the agenda for pressing issues,[4] plays a significant role in this drive toward change.

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[1] Follman, Aronsen, and Pan, "US Mass Shootings, 1982-2016."
[2] Cohen, Azrael, and Miller, "Rate of Mass Shootings Has Tripled since 2011, New Research from Harvard Shows."
[3] Mother Jones data does not count gang shootings, domestic violence shootings or shootings that happen in private places. In comparison, counters like the Gun Violence Archive, count mass shootings as any shooting where four or more victims were shot or killed at the same time and place.
[4] McCombs, "Building Consensus."

To address mass shootings, the public has to know how and why they happen, as well as what steps might be possible to prevent them. Knowledge of the event informs social response, and shapes political decision making. Providing this information, contextualizing it, and helping the public understand it has long been held as a primary function of the press.

The "press," or "news media" as defined for the purpose of this thesis are journalistic bodies specifically dedicated to disseminating truthful content, for the purpose of informing society. In fulfilling this duty in the wake of a mass shooting, news media typically respond with full-blown coverage of the event. Reporters from major news outlets all over the country fly to the affected community, and for days news of the event permeates radio waves, television screens, print headlines and the web. After reporters clear up what has happened and who was involved, they turn their focus toward the questions of how and why a shooting happened – two questions that help the public understand the situation at hand.

As the rate of shootings has increased, a growing fraction of the public are asking journalists to rethink that strategy. Their predominant argument is that news coverage itself could be a motivating factor for potential shooters [5]

Groups such as No Notoriety, founded by the parents of a 2012 shooting victim, and the Don't Name Them campaign by the FBI, argue that news outlets should reduce coverage of shooters to minimize the incentive to carry out an attack. "Notoriety serves as not only a reward for these murderers, but also as a 'call to action' for other like-

[5] Healy, "A Plea to Deny Gunmen Their Quest for Infamy."

minded individuals who seek to gain a similar amount of publicity, motivating them to create and carry out copycat acts" the No Notoriety website reads.[6]

Traditional journalistic practice dictates that reporting "who" committed a mass shooting is an essential part of breaking news coverage.[7] Journalists like the Poynter Institute's Kelly McBride[8] and the Washington Post's Erik Wemple[9] argue that naming a shooter provides important context, prevents misinformation and allows reporters to dig into factors that contributed to the shooting in the hopes of helping prevent repeat occurrences. On the other hand, some prominent news personalities have gotten behind this idea of minimizing shooter coverage in order to dissuade copycats. Fox News' Megyn Kelly[10] and CNN's Anderson Cooper[11] have at times refused to name shooters. The question has also been covered from a research perspective in major news outlets: Ari Schulman wrote about media coverage on mass shooters for the Wall Street Journal[12] and Mother Jones researched the copycat effect, and published a guide on how to minimize shooter publicity, while still covering the news.[13]

The debate over whether or not to name a shooter began in earnest in 2012, and peaked once again in October 2015, after 26-year-old college student Chris Harper-Mercer killed nine and injured nine others at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon. Afterward, Douglas County Sheriff John Hanlin refused to name him during press conferences. Hanlin told reporters that saying the man's name would give him

[6] "Q&A with our Founders," No Notoriety.
[7] Harrower, *Inside Reporting: A Practical Guide to the Craft of Journalism*.
[8] McBride, "Why It's Important to Name the Shooter."
[9] Wemple, "Media: Please Ignore Oregon Sheriff's Appeal Never to Mention Shooter's Name."
[10] Gold, "Kelly Refuses to Use Fort Hood Shooter's Name."
[11] Cooper, "Transcripts: Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees."
[12] Schulman, "What Mass Killers Want—And How to Stop Them."
[13] Follman, "Here's the Troubling New Evidence on How the Media Inspires Mass Shooters."

"credit he probably sought prior to this horrific and cowardly act," and urged news outlets to withhold the shooter's name as well.[14]

Despite his efforts, the Roseburg killer's name appeared on the front page of newspapers across the nation the next day.[15]

This thesis attempts to help illuminate the reasons for discrepancy between the suggestions against naming a shooter and the ongoing identification practices of most news media. It is not intended to justify or vilify the practice of identifying shooters, but to help contextualize it, and to push beyond the impasse it presents. The following research examines professional journalists' opinions on the topic of shooter coverage and illuminates a number of alternative methods of covering shootings and shooters that those journalists believe could improving the meaningful impact of the coverage. This research is intended to help inform debate and to indicate alternative avenues of inquiry regarding how mass shooting coverage could improve the next time a mass shooting occurs. If nothing else, this thesis aims to broaden understanding of journalistic practice, opinion and suggestion related to mass shooter coverage – and to help convey those considerations to the public.

Literature Review:

Journalism and News Media:

The role of a journalist, according to the book "The Elements of Journalism" written by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, is "to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing." [16]

[14] "Oregon Sheriff: "I Will Not Name the Shooter," Al Jazeera America.
[15] "Today's Front Pages," Newseum.

In the internet era, the availability of information has grown increasingly widespread, whether it's been reported by news media or comes directly from citizens or authorities. Within this flood of information, journalism fulfils a unique purpose: questioning, verifying and contextualizing information that is presented as fact. The American Press Institute explains this as the duty to "provide people with verified information they can use to make better decisions, and its practices, the most important of which is a systematic process – a discipline of verification – that journalists use to find not just the facts, but also the "truth about the facts." [17]

This is a nuanced responsibility.

In the newsroom, this responsibility includes deciding which information should be shared with the public and how it should be presented. The job also includes collecting information in a sensitive manner and presenting it in a way that entices the public to pay attention.

The process of accomplishing these goals is riddled with ethical considerations. Best practices for journalists, as compiled by the Society of Professional Journalists, include maintaining truth and accuracy, minimizing undue harm in all aspects of news gathering and production, explaining ethical decisions to the audience, and encouraging discussion around those choices.[18] This "code" of ethics set forth by SPJ is widely understood by journalists in the industry, yet it is a guiding set of principals - not a mandate. Except in cases where libel and slander laws apply, each newsroom is free to make autonomous operational and moral decisions.

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[16] Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*, 17
[17] "What Makes Journalism Different than Other Forms of Communication?" American Press Institute.
[18] "SPJ Code of Ethics," Society of Professional Journalists

The job is tricky, but important. The news is critical as a primary source of information about current events, and in this way functions as a fundamental pillar of society. As explained by media theorist Denis McQuail, "The media to a large extent serve to constitute our perceptions and definitions of a social reality and normality for the purposes of a public, shared social life and are a key source of standards, models and norms."[19]

The Impact Philosophy of Journalism:

That journalism is a tool for change is an inherent, yet largely unspoken, principal within the industry.

Jonathan Stray, a journalist and fellow at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, wrote in 2010 that journalists largely reject a "theory of change" because asking the question "what change should journalism produce?" makes journalists uncomfortable. When Stray would ask journalists what change they wanted to effect in society, their general response would be "we aren't here to change things. We are only here to publish information," he says. Stray argues that's not enough: "Journalism without effect does not deserve the special place in democracy that it tries to claim." [20]

Though the word "change" is rarely used in journalism, helping inspire it is a key role of the trade. Kovach and Rosenstiel explain that "in older models of journalism, the news spoke for itself, and what citizens did with that news and information was beyond the sphere of the news provider." Today, however, effective

[19] McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*., 83
[20] Stray, "Does Journalism Work?"

journalism goes beyond providing information to acting as a community-builder and a catalyst for progress. “The purpose of news is to help people self-govern, but that only begins with giving them the information they need to do so,” Kovach and Rosenstiel write. “News must also be about solving the problems that confront individuals and the community. There are lines between news and advocacy, but helping solve problems is different from advocacy.”[21]

Kovach and Rosenstiel cite the work of reporter Gil Thelen in order to explain this distinction. Journalists should help resolve major issues by playing the role of a “committed observer,” Thelen says.[22] This includes verifying facts, and providing context about the issues at play and examining what others are saying and doing. In this way, journalists don’t dictate the direction of a solution – but provide the information necessary to catalyze change and provoke discussions that evolve into action.

This thesis stems from the theory that journalists strive to fulfill the duties of the “committed observer” in reporting on mass shootings. The premise for this research is that ideal role of journalism after a mass shooting is to help explain and contextualize the situation, in the hopes that providing true, rounded and insightful reporting, both on individual shootings and the problem as a whole, can help solve the troubling problem.

In journalism, reaching this goal is called achieving “impact.”

Unfortunately, impact is not particularly easy to measure. Lindsay Green-Barber, who analyzes the impact of stories reported by the Center for Investigative Reporting, explains that impact can be quantified as most anything that results in “real world change.” She tracks everything from policy changes to the number of people who

[21] Kovach and Rosenstiel, 29
[22] Kovach and Rosenstiel, 165

engage with a story to participation in community discussions that stem from CIR's investigative reporting as a way to quantify the impact of their work. [23]

Impact, as related to reporting in-depth on shooters, might mean unveiling the legal loophole that allowed the shooter to acquire a gun, so that it can be closed. Or it might mean reporting on ways that mentally troubled potential-shooters might be reached through interpersonal connection or psychology, in order to give readers the tools they need to connect with someone troubled in their own life. Those are only a few examples of real world change that reporting might inspire.

Tracking and evaluating and reflecting on the impact of news reporting is necessary both for individual publications to understand their reach, but also for the industry of journalism to improve overall.[24] Just as the press holds public bodies accountable for their influence on the world, so too should journalists apply that responsibility to themselves.

News Media and Mass Shootings:

Understanding how reporters respond to mass shootings is crucial to understanding how coverage might be adapted in the future.

Industry standard news values help journalists decide what makes a situation newsworthy. These include: impact, immediacy, proximity, prominence, novelty, conflict and emotion.[25]

A mass shooting fits most of these criteria. The impact of a shooting on a community is unquestionable, both in terms of the lives lost and the fear and confusion

[23] Green-Barber, "How Can Journalists Measure the Impact of Their Work?"
[24] Clark, "5 Needs and 5 Tools for Measuring Media Impact."
[25] Harrower, *Inside Reporting: A Practical Guide to the Craft of Journalism*.

that those events inspire. There is a clear conflict at play between a shooter and the community or people that were targeted. They remain novel, because despite becoming more frequent, they remain unpredictable. Emotions – from sadness to anger, confusion and loss – run high in these scenarios. Though shootings share a similar narrative, the characters and details of each make the individual stories unique and compelling.

In all newsworthy events, journalists are taught to answer six basic questions: *What* happened? *Where* did it happen? *When* did it happen? *How* did it happen? *Who* was involved? *Why* did it happen?[26] The idea is that these facts all provide information valuable for the public to know. This information is typically first reported as breaking news as soon as possible, then carried into longer-term enterprise and investigative news stories that further elaborate on the issue.

At the core of the difference of opinion between journalists and groups like No Notoriety and the FBI, is a valuation of which of these facts are important, and how in-depth they should be reported. The journalistic pursuit of information means decoding the six questions listed above in order to provide an in-depth understanding of a news event. Advocates for limiting a shooter's name would argue that withholding some of this information is beneficial to the public, which goes against the initial instincts that journalists are taught to develop.

Ethical Considerations:

The bigger a news event, the higher the demand for information. But after a mass shooting, the boundary between reporting pertinent facts and accidentally

[26] Harrower, 36

inflicting harm becomes difficult to walk, making mass shootings one of the most difficult news situations to cover.

The following are a few of the ethical dilemmas faced when reporting on mass shootings and mass shooters.

Minimizing Harm:

The ethical responsibility of minimizing harm is an established standard in the journalism industry.[27] As explained in the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, reporters should strive to balance the "public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort" caused by that information. Furthermore, SPJ suggests that journalists treat people affected by the news with respect by weighing their right to privacy, not "pandering to lurid curiosity, even if others do," and "(considering) the long-term implications" of publishing stories and details.

Adhering to the above guidelines requires intense thought in any reporting story. But complicating mass shooting scenarios is the added sensitivity toward the trauma families and communities affected by this experience are likely experiencing. Although eyewitnesses are crucial to understanding exactly "what happened," approaching them for an answer to that question (and essentially asking them to recount that experience), can be traumatic for them.

Beyond even considering the potential for harm among sources, the No Notoriety argument argues that reporting on shooters might be harmful in and of itself by inspiring others to do the same.[28] This outcome, if true, is directly opposite of what

[27] Steele, "Guiding Principles for the Journalist."
[28] No Notoriety website, www.nonotoreity.com

journalism itself is trying to accomplish. Clearly, the possibility adds an additional level of importance to measuring the outcome of reporting produced about mass shootings.

Seek Truth and Report It

After a mass shooting, journalism clarifies what happened, and helps relieve fear and confusion inspired by the event. However, the fast-paced and competitive news environment that follows a shooting also increases the risk that reporters get things wrong and violate the very first standard set forth by the SPJ Code of Ethics: "seek truth and report it." [29] The severity of this breach of trust is further compounded by the widespread attention that mass shootings generate and the large numbers of people paying attention to the news.

According to the Pew Research Center, 57 percent of Americans surveyed said that they closely followed the news of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, after teenager Adam Lanza killed 26 first graders and their teachers in December, 2012. It was the second biggest news event of the year, garnering more public attention than any event but the 2012 presidential election.[30]

Unfortunately, Sandy Hook coverage was also an example of many news outlets getting things wrong. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, outlets including CNN, BuzzFeed and Gawker falsely identified the Sandy Hook shooter as his brother, misreported the shooter's connection to the school, his weapons and attire and other facts.[31] Whether these errors were reported as a result of time pressures – such as

[29] "SPJ Code of Ethics | Society of Professional Journalists | Improving and Protecting Journalism since 1909."
[30] "Mass Shootings Rivet National Attention," Pew Research Center for Excellence in Journalism
[31] Rogers et al., "These Are The Worst Errors Reported After The Sandy Hook Massacre."

competing with other media outlets or beating a deadline to print – or simply because of a failure to verify information, they are an example of the high stakes of reporting breaking news. Especially in the age of social media where information bounces around at a breakneck pace, the potential negative outcome of falsely reporting facts is that a large-scale audience receives bad information without any guarantee they see a correction, if or when it runs.

Research on Mass Shooter Coverage:

Research is slim regarding the way news coverage affects mass shootings or the people involved in those events. The following is a review of academic studies that lend themselves to understanding the typical news coverage produced after mass shootings and the potential consequences of that coverage.

After a 2011 shooting rampage in Tuscon, Arizona the Pew Research Center for Excellence in Journalism analyzed news coverage for seven days after the event. They found that 20 percent of coverage during that week was devoted to profiling the shooter, making it the second most prevalent theme of news stories behind the "role of political rhetoric."[32] In comparison, 12 percent of reports were "straight news accounts" of the attack, and five percent discussed gun control.

This study has not been replicated by Pew, so it is not possible to draw the conclusion that shooter profiles make up 20 percent of coverage after every mass shooting scenario. However, this study does provide some background understanding about why shooter profiles have become a major topic of discussion when it comes to news media coverage of shootings.

[32] A Special Report On the Media and the Tuscon Shooting," Pew

Whether the news contributes to copycat violence is also a new area of study. The idea can largely be traced back to a movie theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado where a lone gunman killed 12 and injured 70 others during a screening of a Batman movie. Following that tragedy, parents of victim Alex Teves started speaking out about the idea that news media might be contributing to this phenomenon. Caren and Tom Teves, founders of the "No Notoriety" organization were in Hawaii when their son was shot in the theater. After their son's girlfriend called, the Teves turned on the television to find out what had happened. "We tried turning to the major networks and all we kept seeing was photos of the shooter and information about the shooter," Tom Teves told Newsweek.[33]

After this, the Teves came to believe that news coverage of a shooter provides an extra motivation for future shooters to commit the act: fame. This perspective has been bolstered by a number of findings regarding shooters' motives: the Sandy Hook shooter kept a bank of article clippings related to past shootings,[34] the college gunman who killed 32 at Virginia Tech sent a manifesto and pictures to news outlets in preparation for his attack,[35] and the UCC shooter wrote a blog post noting the infamy garnered by mass shooters.[36] These findings don't confirm that shooters were copying one another, but rather that they were aware of the media attention they would garner after their act.

[33] Kutner, "Aurora Victim's Parents Say Stop Naming Shooters."
[34] Pilkington, "Sandy Hook Report – Shooter Adam Lanza Was Obsessed with Mass Murder."
[35] Johnson, "Gunman in Massacre Contacted NBC News - US News - Crime & Courts - Massacre at Virginia Tech | NBC News."
[36] Zavadiski, "Umpqua Gunman Chris Harper Mercer Hated Religion Online - The Daily Beast."

In October 2015, investigative reporters at Mother Jones published research on a phenomenon they called the "Columbine Effect," which explored the scale of copycat killings related to that one mass shooting. (The Columbine massacre, in which two high school students killed 12 students, a teacher and themselves, happened in 1999 and is one of the most notorious mass shootings in American history). Mother Jones found 74 plots copying Columbine, 21 of which were carried out. FBI agents studying these phenomena told Mother Jones that news coverage of shooters plants ideas among people who identify with the perpetrators, and are drawn by the prospect of infamy. One unnamed law enforcement source told the magazine that the Columbine school shooting has "a cult following unlike anything (he has) ever seen before."[37]

In 2015, research at Arizona State University found that mass shooting events seem to be "contagious" in occurrence. In an analysis of "high-profile" shootings, where four or more people were killed, researchers established a 13 day period where further shootings were more likely to happen. They called this a "contagion period." During that time "each incident incites at least .30 more incidents," they found. They also discovered that the state rate of firearm ownership was correlated strongly with the frequency of mass shootings, and that once firearm ownership was taken into account the strength of gun laws, and prevalence of mental illness within the state were statistically insignificant.[38]

Those who fear that media coverage of mass shootings inspire copycats have pointed to similarities between mass shooter coverage and coverage of suicides.

[37] Follman and Andrews, "Here's the Terrifying New Data on How Columbine Spawned Dozens of Copycats."
[38] Towers et al.

Compared to mass shooter coverage, more research has been done looking into the suicide-copycat effect. One such study, a 2009 analysis from the journal Social Science and Medicine, tracked 179 suicides reported on by 13 Australian newspapers and conducted regression analyses to determine if there was an increase in suicides similar to the one reported on. They discovered that "only a limited fraction" of news media reports on suicides were followed by a subsequent increase in suicides. This is in keeping with research that indicates only 35 percent of research papers dedicated to the subject found evidence of "imitative effects," the report says. [39] Authors did, however, find that suicides increased after news reports about celebrity suicides.

In 2014, the first ever controlled study of suicide clusters and their relationship to media coverage found a strong correlation between certain types of media coverage and teen suicides. Researchers studied 48 teen suicide clusters in the United States between 1988 and 1996 and discovered that media coverage of suicides that made up a cluster was more likely to be on the front page, provide detailed descriptions of suicide methods, have photos or use the word "suicide" in the headline than similar non-clustered deaths. It's impossible to determine whether these characteristics of press coverage had a causal relationship to the deaths, researchers point out, but it does imply a strong relationship between certain types of media coverage and suicide patterns among young people.[40] It is important to note, however, that this research was conducted using newspaper content produced prior to the era of modern internet news

[39] Niederkrotenthaler et al., "Copycat Effects after Media Reports on Suicide."
[40] Gould et al., "Newspaper Coverage of Suicide and Initiation of Suicide Clusters in Teenagers in the USA, 1988-96."

consumption, which may impact the way that teens receive information or process external pressures related to suicide.

A cross-national study of American and German coverage of school shootings published in 2014 indicates that press response to these tragedies differs between the two countries. In America, news coverage focused mostly on individual and family factors that could have contributed to the event, including individual problems of aggression or isolation, and familial disruption. The most common individual theme cited as a factor in German articles was exposure to violent video games. German articles cited social factors more often than American articles, and "reflected heavily" on previous school shootings. In comparison, previous shootings were the second to least common theme in American news articles of the 18 contributing factors included in the analysis. In terms of response to these events, the researchers found that German news media were "more likely to call for state sponsored changes" than in America, where suggestions focused primarily on "target hardening" policies like placing metal detectors in schools.[41]

Using the press as a measure of cultural response, it seems that American culture places more responsibility on individuals whereas German media places responsibility on law and society. The researchers in this cross-national study advocated future research related to the difference in cultural response to school shootings in order to further evaluate how "events shape policy and policy shapes events."

Shortly after data was gathered for the German cross-national comparison, the Sandy Hook shooting shook the United States. According to a 2014 study from the

[41] Barbieri and Connell, "A Cross-National Assessment of Media Reactions and Blame Finding of Student Perpetrated School Shootings."

journal Homicide Studies, this particular shooting may also have shaken the pattern of how news media approach the events. After the Columbine shooting, the news media focused on the funerals of the victims, the study says. After Sandy Hook, that coverage was driven primarily by debating gun restrictions and ownership researchers found. Furthermore, their sampling of articles – which included only New York Times coverage in the 30 days after the news event – found that the news media focused more on "heroic educators and the losses of innocent children" than they did on shooters, which researchers say was a departure from the Columbine coverage.[42]

According to these findings, Sandy Hook was either an anomaly in coverage or it constituted a change in direction for subsequent patterns of mass shooting coverage. This question that has yet to be addressed by more research following up on instances that happened after Sandy Hook.

Other research about shooter profiles calls into question how news practices might impact the criminal justice system and stereotypes of mental illness.

According to an article published in the journal of Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, the framing of shooter profiles impacts the way violent offenders are treated by the criminal justice system.[43] After studying portrayals of juvenile offenders, the authors found that the attributes highlighted by the news media – typically things that explain why the young perpetrator is different than his or her peers – can "dehumanize" the perpetrator of that action and lead to increased "anger, fear and increased support for retributive juvenile punishment."

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[42] Schildkraut and Muschert, "Media Salience and the Framing of Mass Murder in Schools A Comparison of the Columbine and Sandy Hook Massacres."

[43] O'Toole and Fondacaro, "When School-Shooting Media Fuels a Retributive Public An Examination of Psychological Mediators."

News articles "skew(s) public perceptions of crime by portraying offenders as unquestionably evil – a trait rarely noted with such certainty in society," the study says. Instead of focusing on firearm availability, video game violence, mental disorders, evil spiritedness and/or bullying, the news should focus on "more reliable" factors that could also influence violence, such as abuse, conduct disorder, neighborhood environment and family support, they argue.

A similar perspective from a study published in the American Journal of Public Health notes that news coverage of shooters tends to cast them as examples of the mentally ill, instead of explaining that their violence makes them outliers in their diagnoses. This results in stereotypes and fear of the mentally ill – most of whom are nonviolent – according to the authors.[44]

Though removed from the question of whether or not news media portrayals of shooters inspire similar acts of violence, these arguments augment compelling reasons to examine the overall extent, purpose and consequence of coverage of mass shooters.

Purpose of this Research:

Too often after a mass shooting, the discussion about improving news coverage degrades into a back-and-forth argument about whether or not news media should name shooters. There are such a wide array of factors that play into mass shootings that it would be unquantifiable to say that news coverage is the sole cause. That is not the intent of this thesis. Rather, this thesis attempts to help journalists reflect on their role in mass shooting scenarios, for the sake of adapting and improving coverage in the future.

[44] Metzl and MacLeish, "Mental Illness, Mass Shootings, and the Politics of American Firearms."

Guiding Questions:

Interviews for this thesis aimed to reveal each journalist's opinions on mass shooter coverage, to collect their response to viewpoint that shooters should not be named and to gather their suggestions about ways the media might improve aspects of mass shooting coverage. The following questions were used to guide this research:

Q1: What is the role of journalism in reporting on perpetrators of mass shootings?

Q2: Where does the news industry have room for improvement, in light of the expectations proposed in Q1?

Q3: What is the perceived impact of the shortcomings discussed in Q2?

Q4: What is ideal coverage of mass shooting scenarios?

Q5: What is the potential impact of the suggestions in Q4?

Research Methods:

In keeping with the purpose of this research to stimulate discussion and awareness related to covering shooters, this thesis is presented with careful consideration about when a shooter's name needed to be used.

Interviews for this research were conducted using a snowball sampling technique. First, local journalists with an established opinion on shooter coverage were identified and interviewed. Then, secondary sources were identified based on recommendations from primary interviewees. The Washington Post editors interviewed in this research are the exception to this rule: multiple national news outlets were contacted for an opinion on this issue, and The Washington Post was the only publication that responded.

After IRB approval was obtained for this research, participants were recruited via email, interviewed and recorded over the phone. Though the set of questions asked were not standard among the reporters and editors interviewed (due to lack of time, their differing areas of expertise and natural flow of conversation, the attempt was made to use the same set of questions to guide each interview. Those questions can be found in Appendix I.

Because of the non-random sampling method used, the data do not constitute a representative sample of the media. There is the potential that the snowball sampling method resulted in the research pool being limited to only with journalists who have progressive ideas about how the topic of mass shootings might be better addressed, and who are willing to do something to change that coverage. A larger and more representative sampling pool would be ideal for a statistically accurate understanding of how the press as a whole responds to this topic.

The following research is presented in a narrative format. It is intended to stand alone, and thus may repeat information established in the introduction.

Media Perspectives on Mass Shooter Coverage:

On the afternoon of October 1, 2015, Douglas County Sheriff John Hanlin hosted a press conference to address the hundreds of reporters gathered in the town of Roseburg, Oregon.

Facing expectant stares and the flash of cameras, Hanlin conveyed his condolences for the victims of a shooting at Roseburg's Umpqua Community College, where earlier that day nine were killed and nine more were injured.[45]

Then, he made an unusual statement for a law enforcement official.

"I will not name the shooter. I will not give him the credit he probably sought prior to this horrific and cowardly act," Hanlin said. "We would encourage media and the community to avoid using the name. We encourage you not to repeat it. We encourage you not to glorify and create sensationalism for him. He in no way deserves this."

The response from journalists was immediate, and mixed.

Justin Peters, a reporter for Slate, wrote a column titled "It doesn't matter 'what he wanted.' Chris Harper Mercer Murdered 9 people and we need to name him," in which he argued that repressing the shooter's name was "smarmy and wrong." [46]

Fox News' Megyn Kelly took the opposite approach and refused to name the shooter during her show The Kelly File. "We the news media need to be more

[45] *Oregon Sheriff: "I Will Not Name the Shooter" | Al Jazeera America*.
[46] Peters, "It Doesn't Matter 'What He Wanted.' Chris Harper Mercer Murdered 9 People and We Need to Name Him."

responsible and more careful and more aware of our own role in fanning these flames," she said the night of the shooting. "We make these men infamous." [47]

Hanlin's refusal to provide a piece of information in the aftermath of a shooting, stoked the flames of a mounting debate about the consequences of reporting on a mass shooter. At its most basic, the purpose of journalism is to inform the public. The argument has raged since before the Sandy Hook shooting, championed by public and law-enforcement activists, but has been largely ignored in the daily practice of news outlets.

In the most basic of scenarios, reporters are taught to answer the questions of "who," "what," "when," "where," "why" and "how." These questions apply both in the immediate aftermath of a news scenario, and in longer term "enterprise" stories where news reporters attempt to unveil previously unknown details related to these six questions. The goal behind answering these questions is that they contribute to the basic purpose of journalism, summed up by the American Press Institute as "to provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies, and their governments." The first loyalty of the press is to "citizens" and their wellbeing.

By these definitions, the rise of the "no notoriety" argument indicates that covering the "who" behind a news scenario violates the public interest.

Tom and Caren Teves are largely credited with rallying the public cry around news coverage of shooters' identities after their son was killed during the Aurora

[47] Gold, "Kelly Refuses to Use Fort Hood Shooter's Name."

Theater shooting. After they launched a public outreach campaign called "No Notoriety," the FBI started a similar effort called "Don't Name Them."

"Some shooters are motivated by a desire for fame, notoriety and/or recognition. When the media focuses on the shooter, they provide this fame, notoriety and recognition," the Don't Name Them homepage reads. [48] "Some shootings may be prevented by removing one of the incentives."

Increased scrutiny of the way news media cover mass shootings has followed an increase in their frequency. Since about September of 2011, the rate of mass shootings has tripled.

In late 2014, investigative news magazine Mother Jones released a data set of "mass shootings," that they had been tracking since after the same Aurora shooting that prompted "No Notoriety." One of the difficulties of counting shootings is that they're tracked differently according to nearly every agency keeping tabs on them. The FBI defines "mass killings" as three or more killed, but does not publish public data on these events. A website that does, "ShootingTracker.com,"[49] uses the definition of "four or more shot and or killed in a single event, at the same general time and location." Opting for a definition closer to the kind that often make news headlines as a "mass shootings," Mother Jones counted the number of times a shooter targeted victims in a public place, and killed four or more of them (domestic violence and gang shootings not included).

An analysis of the Mother Jones research conducted by Harvard Researchers showed a dramatic spike in the frequency of these attacks, starting in 2011. Between

[48] "Don't Name Them," ALERRT at Texas State University.
[49] Gun Violence Archive, "Mass Shootings."

1982 and 2011, there was one mass shooting an average of every 200 days. Between 2011 and 2014 that average spiked to one every 64 days.[50]

Though there's little doubt that mass shootings have happened more often, the evidence that news outlets are to blame is not as strong.

On their websites, both the Don't Name Them and the No Notoriety campaigns cite a study about contagion in mass shootings out of Arizona State University. The author, professor Sherry Towers, found that mass shootings (again defined as instances with four or more people killed), are typically bunched together in time, indicating a "contagion effect." Statistically, shootings prompted .3 follow-up incidents in the 13-days after they happened, the study found. [51]

When asked about the news media's impact on mass shootings, and whether "they push up the numbers," Towers said that "yes, national media coverage does end up increasing the frequency of these tragedies." [52]

However, that's never been tracked unequivocally. Towers' study tracked mass that she thinks get heightened news media attention. The news attention itself was not a causal variable in her research.

As the study itself points out:

"While our analysis was initially inspired by the hypothesis that mass media attention given to sensational violent events may promote ideation in vulnerable individuals, in practice what our analysis test is whether or not temporal patterns in the

[50] Cohen, Azrael, and Miller, "Rate of Mass Shootings Has Tripled since 2011, New Research from Harvard Shows."
[51] Towers et al., "Contagion in Mass Killings and School Shootings."
[52] "Q&A.: Sherry Towers on the Contagion Effect of Mass Shootings," ASU Now

data indicate evidence for contagion by whatever means. In truth, and especially because so many perpetrators of these acts commit suicide, we likely may never know on a case by case basis who was inspired by similar prior act, particularly since the ideation may have been subconscious."[53]

Of course, some shooters have left evidence that news attention was a motivating factor.

The UCC shooter, for example, had obviously contemplated the magnitude of notoriety that a public murder might bring. A few weeks before the shooting at UCC, Chris Harper Mercer wrote a blog post reflecting on Vester Flanagan, a shooter in Virginia, who killed his colleagues Alison Parker and Adam Ward on live T.V.

"So many people like him are all alone and unknown, yet when they spill a little blood, the whole world knows who they are," Harper-Mercer's blog read. "A man who was known by no one, is now known by everyone. His face splashed across every screen, his name across the lips of every person on the planet, all in the course of one day. Seems the more people you kill, the more you're in the limelight."[54]

And further research from Mother Jones on the "contagion effect" of the Columbine shooting illustrates that where the copycat motivation does exist, its magnitude might be monumental. Their research identified 74 attacks based off the Columbine mass shooting of 1999. Of those, twenty-one attacks were carried out and 89 people died as a result.

But there are also a number of other factors that contribute to mass shootings. The ASU Contagion study used to decry news coverage of shooters also discovered that

[53] Towers et. al
[54] Zavadiski, "Umpqua Gunman Chris Harper Mercer Hated Religion Online - The Daily Beast."

"state prevalence of firearm ownership is significantly associated with state incident of mass killings with firearms," for example.[55]

On the flipside of the No Notoriety argument, it's possible that the press might actually help prevent subsequent death, according to Mike Fancher, former Executive Editor of The Seattle Times. Unfortunately, he thinks that the potentially helpful impact of good reporting on potentially contagious scenarios is harder to track than the negative consequences.

At The Seattle Times, Fancher ran up against this dilemma when leading coverage on suicides, particularly among teens.

"Sadly, we can see the evidence where there is a contagion effect when there is a copycat incident," Fancher said. "What we can't see is the number of children who don't commit suicide because the coverage helped parents, or others, deal more effectively with what (the teens) were going through that put them at risk."

Fancher thinks the press has a responsibility to tell compelling, constructive stories about an issue of relevance to the community in a way that captivates their attention and helps them learn something. Deciding what to cover can be tricky. But the right coverage, Fancher says, can have a positive impact on communities facing an epidemic of suicides - or mass shootings for that matter.

"The right story may in fact save lives, but we can't know that as readily as we can know that the wrong story had a copycat effect," Fancher said. "Given that, the question isn't 'should we or shouldn't we.' It's that we should - but we should do it in the smartest way possible."

[55] Towers, et al

Within the media, differences of opinion around the smartest way to cover a shooter are complex. In interviews with a handful of professionals across the industry, a number of theories present themselves about how the press should approach the subject. Some journalists think that the press should agree to a blackout of shooters' identities. Some think the press should focus less on individual shooters and more on the phenomenon as a whole. Still others think that the only way to help prevent future shootings is to provide more information than the media ever has before. Despite varied solutions, there is a sentiment among some local news reporters, national editors and media observers there is an acknowledgement that coverage of mass shooters could be done better.

Deny Identity to Deny Impact:

Steve Buttry, a journalist for over 40 years and a current media observer, is a vocal advocate against publishing the names and images of shooters. He's been blogging about the topic since the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012.

"My desire here is to stimulate some thinking about how we give into their desire for attention," Buttry said. "Beyond the attention seeking nature of the crime itself, they do things to get out their point of view."

As evidence, he points to examples like the UCC shooter idolizing the Virginia man who shot his colleagues on live TV, and the Sandy Hook shooter who kept clippings of past massacres in his bedroom.

If a shooter isn't running from the police or endangering the public, Buttry doesn't think that publishing the identity of a shooter is worthwhile reporting coverage.

Yes, he thinks that reporters should be given the name of a killer, so that they can do background stories about why a shooting happened and help the public understand if anything could be done to prevent the shooting, but he thinks their names should be withheld from wide media circulation so as not to give them the "call for attention" he thinks they were seeking.

Buttry says it wouldn't even be that unusual for the media to leave out the shooter's identity, considering that press already writes about unnamed sources all the time. For example, victims of sexual assault are often given a pseudonym to protect their privacy, and secret government sources often go unnamed in stories because they wouldn't share information otherwise.

Whether or not to withhold information is not an easy decision, Buttry concedes, and it's a choice that depends on the indicated intent of the killer. Did he fly off the handle and commit a terrible act without warning? Name him. Did he indicate that he wanted publicity by writing about it online or sending in propaganda to a news station? Don't.

"Plagiarism is an easy ethical issue: 'you shouldn't rip stuff off, and if you do you should get fired. But confidential sources and naming mass shooters are matters of weighing conflicting ethical issues that are both very valid," he said. "There's a real parallel because it's not an easy case, and it's actually an exception to our normal journalism rules. But, so is using confidential sources - and we do it a lot."

Though his primary reason for denying shooters coverage would be to thwart a shooter's attempt to get famous, Buttry also thinks it could have some other positive

consequences - thwarting what he thinks are phony “psychoanalysis” of these individuals, for example, and directing more coverage toward a community.

“I’m just trying to get (the media) to think about, to acknowledge the fact that you’re getting played,” he said. “Because to me that’s a fact.”

Leaving Out the Motive:

Carolyn Adolph, a radio reporter for Seattle’s KUOW, has been on the scene of three major shootings in the span of her career. Most recently, she covered the Marysville Pilchuck and Seattle Pacific University shootings in the Seattle area and before that one in Montreal, Canada.

In her opinion, shooting coverage would be better if reporters focused their attention away from “why” someone would chose to commit such a terrible act.

“There is no legitimate motive for killing others. There isn’t - especially the mass murders.... You can’t expect people of good mind, of good intentions to think the same way as people who are lost. It’s not a productive thing,” she said. “It doesn’t lead to the broader public discussion of ‘what do we do about all this violence?”

Instead, Adolph thinks reporting should be more focused on “how” a shooting occurred. What were the conditional circumstances of this killer’s life? How did they get their weapon? Were there warning signs? Adolph thinks that newspapers and broadcast outlets with enough resources typically do a good job following-up on these questions of how. And she hopes that even as these events continue, reporters keep showing up, and that newsrooms keep investing their time in long-term follow up around these events.

"Every time this happens, new people are involved, new people suffer that trauma of bearing witness or loosing someone," she said. "Journalists have been seeing this for a long time without seeing change. But that can't change the work."

Adolph has "no tolerance" for the argument that reporting shooters could inspire copycats. Reporting on how a shooter accessed weapons, who knew about the shooter's motives, if that shooter had anyone to turn to for psychological support, and other details helps illuminate ways to prevent future attacks.

"Society can't do anything without facts," she says. "(Not naming a shooter) is another way to keep the story quiet and anonymous and bland."

When she's on the ground in the aftermath of a shooting, Adolph's focus is

"For me, the story is always about people who are living this big and terrible moment about how horrible violence is," she says. "If we don't understand how truly awful these events are in our bones, we will just push them out of our consciousness and not deal."

Reconsidering News Values:

In 2013, Ari Schulman, a freelance journalist and an editor for The New Atlantis (a journal on technology and society), wrote an article for the Wall Street Journal titled "What Mass Killers Want and How to Stop Them."

In it, he advocated that the media adopt some needed restraint in writing about mass shootings – namely, withholding names of shooters, choosing not to report on biography, motive or particular details, decreasing the magnitude of coverage surrounding these events and avoiding publishing photos of the event.

Schulman knew even then that they wouldn't be adopted seamlessly by the media. His hope was to call attention to the routine of mass shootings - and the role conventional journalism has in those events.

He sees shootings as an established "cultural script," and it goes like this:

Someone with a lot of pent-up hatred toward their situation in life sees or hears about a mass shooting committed by someone in the same state of mind. He sees the panic and hatred generated as a result of that act, and recognizes it as a way to translate hatred toward the world. He starts to contemplate the idea himself. His goal becomes gaining the recognition he wants from the world by committing a heinous crime and becoming a notorious villain. Then he carries out his act, and the news media perpetuates the cycle by giving him the exact sort of coverage he was seeking, and dispersing the fear and hatred these events inspire. Then, the cycle restarts.

In the years since he wrote the article, Schulman has seen more widespread recognition of this idea.

"That people feel the need to respond to that narrative pre-emptively suggests the narrative is out there much more," Schulman said, pointing to a Gawker article defending the use of shooter images, and an interview he conducted with former New York Times ombudswoman Margaret Sullivan about shooter coverage. "There are a lot of things that suggest people are paying more attention to this."

But, for the most part, he thinks the press is missing the argument he intended to convey. He thinks the conversation about shooters revolves too much around the question of whether or not the press should censor themselves about the details of a shooting, like a shooter's name.

“The marginal value added when reporting on each new shooting, it's almost like nothing,” Schulman said. “There have been so many of these already and the pattern is so clear that the need to get that information out, at least in the immediate days after a shooting, is just not really there.”

Instead, Schulman would like to see the news shift focus away from individual shooters – both because they’re not a new phenomenon and because it might help reduce copycat killings – and instead focus more on the cycle of shootings and the patterns of the broader phenomenon.

By shifting the reporting focus more toward this phenomenon, journalists could come move past the “expressed bafflement” type of coverage that he sees in the press. Instead of acting surprised and chasing a shooter’s motive and biography after one of these events, Schulman thinks a deeper look at shootings as a phenomenon could reveal that this behavior isn’t so out of the ordinary. Then, coverage could focus less on shootings as surprising events, and dig down deeper into their true causes.

“If you look at the ordinary psychology of people who are bullied, or who are bullies in school…. and the kind of rage that can come out against the world. I think everybody has known somebody who has been like that or has been touched by that themselves,” he said. “ If we can kind of look at the psychology of something that is an extreme, amplified version of something that is not actually that out of the ordinary, then that might help to defuse it a little bit.”

Schulman points to coverage by Mother Jones as an ideal news media standard. Mother Jones national editor Mark Follman has conducted a number of investigations

into the increasing prevalence of mass shootings, the causes behind them and the ways people are working to prevent them.

The magazine has also produced a set of guidelines for reporting on shootings that Schulman thinks strike the right balance between informing the public and preventing undue notoriety for the shooter. Among their suggestions are: Don't use shooter created propaganda (manifesto, photos, etc.). Use the name of the shooter only when relevant, don't put the name in headlines and avoid language like "lone wolf."

"Not all of these ideas will go over well in newsrooms, and as journalists, we can see arguments for and against these practices," Follman wrote when introducing the Mother Jones guidelines.[56] "But given the scope of the copycat problem, they are worthy of serious consideration and debate."

Covering Shooters like a Health Crisis:

Lee van der Voo doesn't want to cover the next mass shooting unless she can do it differently.

The west-coast based investigative reporter has covered three as a stringer for national outlets. Over time, she's watched as police, and the press, caught the swing of how to handle these tragedies. As they became "business as usual."

The first shooting van der Voo covered was in 2012 at the Clackamas Town Center mall outside of Portland. The scene was chaotic as reporters and law enforcement alike tried to navigate a very out of the ordinary scenario. But when she was called in to cover the Reynolds High School shooting in northeast Portland only a year and a half later, "everyone had figured out what to do."

[56]Follman, "Here's the Troubling New Evidence on How the Media Inspires Mass Shooters."

There was a staging pit for videographers and photographers to capture images of kids running off of buses at the drop-off point. The police knew exactly how to deal with the news reporters. And van der Voo's colleagues suddenly knew a stunning amount of technical detail about guns - at press conferences, she was amazed by the depth of detail they asked about the weapons and ammunition used by the shooter.

The problem is, she doesn't think that the playbook for shooter-coverage does any good. In each shooting that she's covered, her editors are more interested in pursuing stories about shooters than victims, she says. After the Clackamas shooting, van der Voo was asked to drive all over the state to try and get interviews with the killer's ex-girlfriends. That kind of coverage is "super glorifying," and not particularly useful, van der Voo says.

"We're not covering this as a public health crisis, which I think it is. If we were covering it like cancer or smoking, we would spend a lot more time talking about cause - and I don't mean "did his mother love him enough,"' van der Voo said. "I mean that how is it in society we're producing these people that are so alienated and not attached to anything?"

She points to Roseburg as an example. Overnight, the nation knew that the killer had been denied admittance to the army and liked to visit the shooting range. But what the nation didn't know, she says, is that the Roseburg unemployment rate is nearly double the national average. What kinds of prospects did this man have upon graduating from community college? How do economic factors contribute to disenfranchised individuals? These are only a few of the questions that have been overlooked, in her

opinion. With the exception of gun access, van der Voo thinks the press looks past a number of questions critical for understanding the scenario beyond surface level.

"If we spent more time looking at 'how did we produce this person' than 'who was he, what was he all about, what did he read, what did he have for breakfast,' we'd be doing something except for navel gazing, which is what we're presently doing," she said.

In the immediate aftermath of a shooting, van der Voo thinks the press should focus more on victims. At the Reynolds shooting, they were forced to do so because the police were slow to give out the name of the shooter. It was a different kind of reporting experience than the shootings she had covered in the past.

"I had a day to be with this kid who was dead and try to figure out who he was, and I never get that," van der Voo said. "It certainly turned things around for me and made me realize that we should be doing this every time."

The next time she gets called out, those will be her terms.

"If I'm really doing the right thing I'll go to the next one and I'll just be upfront about 'if you're going to send me to this thing I'm going to do it differently," she said. "I don't know how it's going to play. We'll see if they send me."

Giving up on the Shooter Profile:

Tim Gleason, a faculty member at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication isn't convinced that the press should take fault for copycat killings. But, he doesn't think that current coverage of mass shootings is doing anything to help deter the problem, either.

"My bet is that if you were to look at coverage over time, you could put together a very clear formula with a certain number of pieces that would drive 90 percent of the coverage," Gleason said. "It's not advancing anything. It's simply like (reporting on) another car accident – that's not solving the problem and there's some evidence that it exacerbates the problem."

Like Schulman, Gleason thinks that because the pattern of mass shooting is so well established, continuing to cover shooters in the conventional way – writing a profile about their biographical information and their possible motives – is no longer serving the journalistic purpose of "informing the public in a way that is useful."

Reporting the name and biographical information of a shooter is useful to a degree, he says. For example, the story of the Thurston High School shooting where Kip Kinkel killed two high school classmates and wounded 25 others in 1998 is incomplete without the information that Kinkel had been suspended pending expulsion for bringing a loaded handgun to school, and other details. But he thinks the press should stay away from the "deep-dive" profiles on every aspect of a shooter's life that "give more attention to the shooter than is needed or healthy for society."

Like van der Voo, he suggests that we spend more time looking at the societal factors that lead into mass shootings.

"I don't think we need to be spending an enormous amount of time and energy digging deep into the life of a particular person, I guess under the presumption that we're going to discover what made him do it," Gleason said. "These deep dives that are done with good intentions, but I don't think they accomplish much...And I think they begin to give more attention to the shooter than is needed or is healthy for society."

Gleason doesn't doubt that newsrooms across the country are attempting to re-think their coverage. But he worries that economic and instinctual factors stand in the way to innovating new attempts at coverage.

"It's more challenging when everybody is looking for viewers everybody is competing for viewers everybody is trying to think about "how do we get them to click through to what we're doing? And these stories draw eyeballs," he said. "There is no doubt that in serious newsrooms across this country there are discussions going on about 'how do we do this better?' My concern is, does that intent ultimately drive what happens?"

"The drive for ratings, the drive for click throughs, the economic imperative of the industry these days - those two forces compete with 'let's think about this and how do we do it responsibly.'" He said. "You've got countervailing forces that make it hard to do it right."

Taking Time:

Mitch Pugh, editor of the Charleston Post & Courier, decided that his obligation as a local editor was to prioritize coverage of his community over coverage of the perpetrator when a shooter opened fire at a historic Methodist church in July 2015.

"We saw our role as trying to tell the whole story and not just focus on the act of violence," Pugh said. "Being the home newspaper... you have a different responsibility and I think that informed our reporting. We're going to be here after the media leaves town and our community is still trying to put the pieces back together."

From the national media, Pugh perceived a tendency to focus coverage on the shooter, since “that’s where the drama is.” At The Post & Courier, pictures of the shooter didn’t make the front page until after the last victim’s funeral, Pugh said.

One factor the press will have to reconsider is the importance of speed.

In the early days of digital news, Pugh thinks there was a “feeling like we had to report on everything we knew immediately,” which took precedence over accuracy too often. He points to the misidentification of the Sandy Hook shooter and the Boston bombers as examples of this. Instead, he stresses the importance of thoroughness and accuracy. At The Post & Courier, he and his staff opted to take the time they needed to analyze the shooter’s motivations before reporting on them.

“There was a story about who this person was and what led them to do this, but trying to put that together in the day after for two days after the attacks is almost always going to be wrong in some ways,” Pugh said. “Race was an issue here for this person. It’s possible that mental health was too. But that's not something I’m going to be able to understand and to report quickly. There are whole host of factors that go into this that I don’t think we still understand. I’d like to see (the media) more cautious in how they report it.”

Pugh is “torn” about how much attention the shooter should be getting from media coverage. He doesn’t like to see the faces of shooters staring out at him from newsstands, but he also doesn’t buy Buttry’s argument that withholding the identity of the shooter would make a positive difference.

“It’s something to think about whether or not we have an impact (on perpetuating shootings). I tend to think that there’s some truth to the fact that there is so

much media out there has to play a role because they know they're going to get the attention," he said.

Because of the internet and social networks, he doesn't really think there's any way to keep a shooter's identity quiet. Journalists, at least, can bring some professional training to how that information is spread, Pugh says.

"If anything, what we can bring to (mass shooting coverage) is an ethical approach and a responsible approach to how we report these things," Pugh said. "(We can) try to put everything in context and make it, as best we can, an educational experience for our readers so they understand why these things happen and how they maybe could have been avoided."

Paying Attention to Community Needs:

Three years before the Charleston shooting, Matt DeRienzo was tasked with covering the killing of 27 elementary school children and their supervisors as editor of the New Haven Register.

Like Pugh, DeRienzo is proud that he prioritized verification over speed while covering the Sandy Hook shooting, which happened about an hour away from New Haven. His team held off on reporting facts that they couldn't immediately confirm – including the identity of the shooter, his attire, and his relationship with the elementary school – all areas where many national outlets misreported details.

But in hindsight, DeRienzo wishes he would have paid a bit more attention to what the people of Connecticut were feeling.

DeRienzo is a proponent of reporting on shooters. He thinks that explaining why a tragedy like Newtown happened, and the factors that led up to it, is essential for

getting to the heart of the problem. He doesn't agree at all with Buttry's idea that the media should observe a "blackout" of the killer's name.

Yet, after the initial days of covering Sandy Hook, DeRienzo and his team took "great pains" to avoid of using the name of the killer where it wasn't necessary. But it wasn't for the sake of future killers - it was for his audience.

'We felt like the name itself and his picture were terrorizing the community," DeRienzo said. "It affected not only the family of those kids, it affected not only the other children in that school and the teachers and the first responders, it affected not only the community of New Haven and Sandy Hook – but it really psychologically affected the whole state of Connecticut."

Even then, he didn't back off on the details of the shooter's life.

"Maybe one of the most important things to focus on when you're writing about something like this is why it happened," DeRienzo said. "How can you write about that without understanding who the shooter is and what led to this?"

In hindsight, he doesn't think that he, or anyone else for that matter, ever answered the question of "why" the shooting happened. But he does think the details reported after Sandy Hook helped the community learn from the experience. Following Sandy Hook, the Connecticut department of education bolstered behavioral health and counseling programs in high schools to better address the needs of troubled young adults. They have seen widespread use, according to media reports.[57]

"I don't know how you can write about that lesson without talking about who the shooter was," DeRienzo said. "Humanizing them."

[57] Mozdzer-Gil, "School Mental Health Programs See Increased Use In Connecticut - Hartford Courant."

If he had to do it again, DeRienzo says he would make an effort to engage his community early on to discuss existing coverage, and to ask their suggestions. But those suggestions, he says, still need to be balanced with the necessary facts.

“We did that in kind of a reactive way when we realized that this was hurting people because they were so loudly complaining about it,” DeRienzo said. “So, if that’s the complaint, the conversation is ‘what information would help you work through this?’ And sometimes the answer is ‘Well I kind of just want to bury my head in the sand.’ As journalist, that's kind of off the table.”

Considerate Reporting:

Courtney Sherwood, a Portland based freelancer who spent nearly two weeks straight covering the UCC shooting in Roseburg for Reuters and other outlets, doesn’t see it as her responsibility to take on the issues of the press as a whole.

Instead, she focuses on how she can improve her own reporting efforts. In Roseburg, this meant putting aside pre-existing stereotypes about the rural Oregon community and prioritizing sensitivity.

Soon after the shooting, Sherwood was among a group of journalists in the UCC parking lot when students came to pick up their cars. She asked one woman about the shooting - and then stopped her when she started to answer.

“It was so obvious that just the act of talking about what she’d been through was re-traumatizing her, that she hated it, and yet she felt like she had to do it because everybody was asking,” Sherwood said.

Sherwood asked if she could give the woman a hug. Then she suggested the source walk away.

"'If other people ask you to talk to them and you don't want to, don't feel guilty. It's our job to ask, but it doesn't hurt my feelings if you say no,'" Sherwood remembers telling her.

"You care about getting the story," she said, "but only when that doesn't cause harm to other people."

Amid the hundreds of reporters on the ground in Roseburg, Sherwood says there was "the best of it and the worst of it" all on display in terms of media ethics. Some, she says, came in with existing stereotypes about the town and its particular relationship with guns, and it colored their reporting. Others, like her, tried to accurately describe the complex story about a deadly massacre in a town where "kids take their first gun safety class at age 9, and there are more hunting grounds than bowling alleys or movie theaters."

Roseburg was also an exercise in balancing journalistic values and outside pressures.

After Sheriff Hanlin confronted the media about avoiding the shooter's name, Sherwood and some colleagues at Oregon Public Broadcasting spent some time evaluating the argument. Her conclusion – and the conclusion she thinks many journalists made – was that naming a shooter is an important piece of context in the story. But that there's value in downplaying it.

"There's something to be said for not glorifying a person's name, and not letting a person's name live on in history, but you can't ignore this person's name all together because that's part of trying to understand what happened…We do want to know about this life, we do want to know what access he had to guns, what his relationship to others

was like, were there warning signs," she explains. "But once we are past the first day or two of 'Oh My God, what happened?' Let's call him 'the shooter' on second reference. Let's refrain from naming him in any way that boosts google hits and the notoriety and prominence of the name of this person."

Part of the problem with giving too much attention to shooters stems from a "structural flaw" in the media, Sherwood thinks. After a shooting, multiple competing news outlets all chase the same story about who the killer was. It would be nice if fewer reporters had to chase that story since the facts would come out anyway, she says, but that's nearly impossible without creating a consolidated media environment that would threaten the autonomy of the press.

Ultimately, it's important that the information gets out, she says.

"So much of our discourse is based on opinions and assumptions and biases and preconceived notions," she said. "I have to believe that there is a value in having factual information out there."

Personally, Sherwood doesn't try to fix the problems of "the media" as a whole. At the end of the day, she focuses on improving her own approach.

"I (can) aspire to be a better individual reporter, even if I can't make this institution, which is so critical to our democracy, a profitable one or an ethical one across the board or an effective one. I could fix myself," she said. "For me, it's be kind, be open minded, it's be generous but also be competitive be brave ask hard questions of people in authority who can handle those questions and ask gentle questions of the people who are suffering and require some delicacy."

Looking Deeper, Learning More:

At the Washington Post, editors Cameron Barr and Scott Wilson agree with Sherwood that a wealth of information makes for a stronger society. To inspire a healthier society in the wake of increased mass shooting scenarios, they plan to report more information than they ever have before.

They've assigned a beat reporter to the subject, and they plan to track occurrences of mass shootings in a database – both to get an accurate count of the events and to search for new insights related to the phenomenon. The project will be similar to a database the Washington Post built to track fatal police shootings after violence in Ferguson brought national attention to that issue, editors say.

Breaking news coverage of the scenarios will continue. The Post's editors strongly believe that covering the "who and the "why" behind each individual breaking news scenario is critical to performing the ultimate journalistic duty to inform the public.

"Our job in these situations is to surface as much relevant detail as we possibly can. It's really up to other institutions in our society to decide what to do with that information, and whether that information may or may not be part of constructing solutions," Barr said. "Our job really is to inform - and a key component of that is to tell people who the alleged attacker is, and to the extent we're able, why he or she carried out the attack."

Without understanding motivations, it's difficult to identify the problem at its core, Wilson says.

“We’re trying to answer is the media culture, is the celebrity culture part of the problem behind this? Is it the access to guns that’s involved? Is it mental illness that’s the problem?” Wilson said. “Everyone is different in some ways, but if there are similarities, if there are ways for us to bring that to light so that either the government or society at large can do something to prevent them - that’s why we believe motivation is critical to understanding why children are being killed, why adults are being killed, and what we can do to prevent these things.”

Though Wilson “has strong opinions” about the purpose of journalism in covering these scenarios, he thinks it’s worth asking whether the press has had much of an impact on this phenomenon overall. He’s not sure that it has, but he’s hopeful that continuing to uncover new information about the issue will “be enlightening and lead to more constructive ways to try and stop them.”

He points to the motivations of Dylann Roof and Nidal Hasan, the men behind the shootings at the Charleston church and a shooting that killed 13 at a Fort Hood naval base. Hasan’s motivation had to do with the issue of radicalization and Islamic terrorism - a motivation that brings up questions about American foreign policy and the foreign press. Roof’s horrible act surfaced the issue of the “disaffection of certain classes of white Americans,” and the factors that can lead to radicalization in that community, he said.

“Those are things that the country needs to face up to,” Wilson said. “I think that’s part of the need to do this in detail and not anonymously.”

In spite of (and in some ways because of) how often these killings occur, it's the constant duty of the media to report on them in a way that keeps the news relevant, says Barr.

Michael Rosenwald, the reporter newly assigned to the mass shootings beat, will interview experts and dig through research to explain the phenomenon of mass shootings beyond the breaking news.

"We can't let ourselves be dulled to inactivity because these things happen frequently," Barr says. "How can we sustain our inquiry in a way that's sort of high altitude and systemic and sort of sees (the topic) as something big?"

"My answer to everything," he said, "is reporting."

Staying Alert, Relevant and Useful:

On October 1st, 2015 - the day of the Umpqua Community College shooting - President Obama held a press conference to address the event.

Like Hanlin, he started by expressing his condolences for the community affected. Then, like Hanlin, he made a comment that provoked discussion around the nation.

"Somehow this has become routine. The reporting is routine. My response here at this podium ends up being routine. The conversation in the aftermath of it. We've become numb to this," the president said.

For Mike Fancher, that statement hit home.

"It occurs to me that it's as routine for reporters as it is for everybody else. And that's where engagement slips," Fancher said. "When we act out of routine we stop thinking critically and stop being able to do the job to the best of our abilities."

Fancher thinks that doing the best job covering shootings means including information about how citizens can help intervene when they think someone might be exhibiting the desire to pursue a similar act.

"For whatever reason, we don't really deal effectively as a society with those moments of opportunity that maybe change a bad path," Fancher said. "I think that good reporting should always include information that says 'if you've got concern, chances are you've got to act on it… and here are the ways you can act, the resources available, the questions you can ask, things like that."

To decide what information is most important in the aftermath of each and every breaking news situation, Fancher thinks reporters need to take a step back to clarify what their roles and responsibilities are. Reporters and editors should play devil's advocate to help make the coverage as good as it can be at every point. Newsrooms should strive not for routine reporting, but for a routine habit of critical reflection.

"In terms of a routine, we have this opportunity to stop and think about what's possible now: what can we do in this instance that we've never thought of before? How can we tell this story differently? Who else can help us tell this story differently?" Fancher said.

"If you're always saying to yourself: 'What are we learning that would tell us how to write about these sorts of incidents before they happen, and what is that telling us about how to be compassionate in the moment?'" That would be an instance of creating a thread, thinking of this coverage as a feedback loop - and we should get better at it."

Conclusion:

Findings:

Reporters across the industry seem to feel the need for change in some aspect of covering shooters. As shootings increase, journalists across different newsrooms are questioning the effectiveness of their coverage. Though newsrooms across the country have been covering mass shootings for the last three decades, no one is sure what impact their coverage has on the mass shooting phenomenon, if any. In discussing the topic with everyone from practicing reporters to their editors and those watching the field from afar, it has been established that this question of how journalists can optimize constructive journalistic impact is widespread.

Potential suggestions about how to improve it are varied.

On a local level, concern for community wellbeing drives suggestions that shooter coverage should take a backseat to covering the impact of the shooters actions. Journalists concerned about the copycat effect argue that it is time to put more effort into understanding and reporting out the cultural phenomenon behind these individual rampage attacks, in the hope of pivoting attention to the issue as a whole. Some say that the media could have maximum impact by pulling back - withholding names and facts from the public to dampen the desire potential shooters might have to pursue this act. And some argue the exact opposite - that instead of withholding information, journalists could do a better job by providing more: by covering the breaking news event, digging into the “who,” “why” and “how” behind the act, and also compiling all data that exists

regarding this phenomenon to push coverage farther than it has gone before and, hopefully, uncover meaningful insight that could lead to a cultural change.

Regardless of the underlying opinion, the desire to try changing some aspects of coverage was universal among the journalists interviewed. This indicates that the time is ripe for a widespread discussion about how this might be done better.

Another key commonality is that each one of the varied perspectives toward improving coverage relied on a single factor: information.

Journalists in favor of stepping back from individual shooter coverage to analyze and report on the broader cultural phenomenon of mass shootings first need details about individual cases to establish understanding of that trend.

Those in favor of denying coverage to shooters will need that information as well. Creating a more qualitative and more convincing argument that the media should withhold names of shooters to prevent copycat attacks requires conducting more analysis about what has inspired shooters in the past. An interesting conundrum is that much of the information used in existing research has come directly from the media reports that allegedly provide too much information. This necessity to rely on media accounts for historical details of shootings implies some concern about the ability to conduct future research should the media withhold previously publicized details.

None of the journalists interviewed were of the opinion that reporters shouldn't seek out relevant facts related to mass killings. As is clear in the point above, digging into information about who committed these acts and why it was done seems to be an essential part of understanding them individually as part of a larger phenomenon.

The primary difference of opinion was about which of these facts are considered newsworthy and worth publication. This cuts to the very heart of what is "news" in shooting situations, and what is not. Given the increased availability of information online – both on web sources and from social media – the question about "how much information does the news actually contribute?" is an important one to ask. However, this should be contrasted with the understanding that there is currently no government database about these shootings, and therefore no single place to find relevant details necessary for research into mass shootings as an American phenomenon without relying on media reports for that factual information.

Areas for Future Research:

The lack of established research around the influence of news media is a significant barrier for journalists to improve their practices. The following areas of research could provide valuable insights.

TV News

The most notable limitation of this study is that it focused on a specific subset of news media – print and in one instance radio – and did not address the habits or opinions of TV broadcasters. Considering the narrow focus of this study, there is room for – and need for – considerable research into the attitudes of TV news outlets regarding this issue, the affect that they have on citizens given their large reach, and how the competition between TV and print news affects this conversation.

The Copycat Effect

More research into the cause and extent of the copycat effect is essential to informing this conversation about shooter coverage as it develops. As is, there is limited understanding of the phenomenon, other than the fact that it seems to exist to some degree.

That shooters are sometimes inspired by past acts and past shooters is undeniable. We've seen shooter after shooter highlight this idea for themselves. Mother Jones' research into copycat attacks stemming from the Columbine Shooting hints that where this effect exists, it might have an incredibly potent, and devastating, reach. That 74 attacks were planned with Columbine in mind, and 89 people killed in those attacks, is sickening. Certainly, this consequence should not be taken lightly.

What still isn't incredibly clear, however, is to what extent shooters are seeking notoriety for themselves, or seeking notoriety for their act. This might be impossible to track in previous circumstances where killers committed suicide and are unavailable for interview, but interviewing and compiling motivations of people who were thwarted from committing a mass shooting might shed light on what weight the personal infamy might carry.

Future research mimicking the Mother Jones study of Columbine copycats would also be useful in determining whether the "Columbine Effect" is a standalone phenomenon following that one event, or whether that conscious imitation of a mass murder translates to other shooting scenarios as well. Because Columbine was one of the first widely known mass shootings, there is a question of whether or not it holds a

unique influence. Replicating this research would help us understand if that influence has decreased as shootings have gotten more commonplace.

Ultimately, understanding more about how this phenomenon works would allow newsrooms to make more educated decisions about whether and how to minimize their potential contributions to it.

Patterns in Mass Shooting Coverage

More longitudinal research about the types of coverage produced in the wake of mass shootings would also be beneficial for informing how things could change moving into the future. More comprehensive research of coverage that happens after a mass shootings (including how long that coverage lasts in the news cycle, what percentage of stories go to covering shooters versus covering victims or gun politics, and where names and photos of shooters are used) would help establish a more concrete connection between coverage and social impact, and help journalists find which areas of coverage have typically been ignored.

Positive Media Impact

Whereas studying the prevalence of copycat shooting occurrences would help track any negative impact the media has on mass shootings, it is important to track the positive outcomes of stories as well. This is not an easy thing to do, but there are impact-tracking systems in place at places like the Center for Investigative Reporting that could be adapted to nearly any situation, if newsrooms started to understand tracking their influence as part of their role. This would help journalists understand the real world implications of articles that are thought to lend themselves meaningfully to

understanding of mass shootings, including profiles of mass shooters and attempts to answer the question of "why" a shooter committed the crime. Comparing the difference in media coverage across borders with a cross-national analyses could cast further insight into practices unique to the American media, and with further analysis of impact related to both American and foreign media, the effectiveness of various types of coverage could be evaluated according to its actual public response.

Statement of Importance:

To echo the sentiments of Mike Fancher, journalism can only get better if we talk about it. And considering the nation-wide reach of news about mass shootings, this conversation is one that needs to happen not just in one or two newsrooms, but in media outlets around the country.

There might never be any proof that news coverage is a leading motivator for mass shooters. However, there is anecdotal evidence that media attention could provoke future killers. And this should be of serious concern to the news media, in keeping with their responsibility to "do least harm."

Considering that the first loyalty of the press is "to citizens," and an increasing number of citizens are raising concerns about this issue as each new shooting happens, this thesis argues that it's time the press devote serious effort to examining their role in shooting scenarios. There is the expectation that journalists abide by the same high standards they expect of others, and in the event that another industry had been blamed for contributing to shootings, journalists would proceed to cover that topic until all questions about this connection had been addressed. There is no academic research that

can answer this question for journalists. Particularly because of this lack of information, journalists should seek to answer this question for themselves.

Perhaps, in researching this trend, reporters find that each shooter has been directly influenced by news coverage of another shooter, and recognize the need to change their reporting. Perhaps they discover that information is so readily available on the internet and social media that news coverage itself doesn't determine whether a prospective shooter is inspired to commit violence. Perhaps there is an altogether different outcome. In any event, the journalistic mandate to provide information that contributes to the improvement of society demands that reporters address this gap in scientific and public knowledge. Instead of ignoring critique from outside the press, news institutions should embrace the opportunity to examine their own reporting practices, for the self-improvement.

It should be made clear that the press is only one of many factors that contribute to the social and political environment that likely fosters these attacks. Changes made in journalism alone will not eradicate this phenomenon. However, ignoring the issue, or focusing solely on the polarized "do-we-name-him-do-we-not" debate, is not conducive to helping this discussion evolve. Unless we can continue the conversation with fresh insights and perspectives, in a way that respects legitimate opposing viewpoints and recognizes the autonomy of individual newsrooms in crafting their own policies, we will never overcome the defensive reflex that surrounds any criticism, in order to make progress.

This thesis is an effort to help move that conversation forward.

Appendix I: Questions for Interviewees

Tell me about your background as a journalist. Have you ever covered a mass shooting?

What is the responsibility of the media to report on mass shooters?

What do you think of the media's reporting on the perpetrator of mass violence?

What is going well, what isn't?

Do you think we need to cover it differently?

When did you first come to that realization? Exactly what led you there?

Who is doing it better?

How do we deal with research that says media is partly to blame for copycat attacks?

Do you think the media focuses so intently on shooters that it ignores more broad social issues related to mass shootings?

What are your hopes for future reporting on these incidents?

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