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What's to Blame and Whose Voices are Heard: How *The New York Times* Covers School Shootings

By
Lindsay Jensen Finman

A Thesis Presented to
The Department of Political Science
Maxwell School
Syracuse University

In Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Designation of Distinction in Political Science
May 2019

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Though not the first, this is certainly not the last study on how the media covers school shootings, and studies such as this must continue into the future. This study could not have been accomplished without the dedication of my advisor, Professor Emily Thorson—you have supported this project from the very beginning and taught me to find the joy in research—for that I will be forever grateful, thank you for everything. To my readers, Professors Shana Gadarian and Dimitar Gueorguiev—thank you for the feedback you provided from the very first draft to the very last, I am amazed at what I have accomplished and certainly could not have done it without your guidance. To my Distinction peers, thank you for the support and encouragement throughout this entire process. To my friends, thank you for always listening to me talk about my research, and providing constant support as I finished this project. Finally, to my family, thank you for your never-ending love and support in all that I do.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to children and educators who lost their lives in the Newtown and Parkland school shootings, and to the survivors, parents, and politicians who are continuing to push for commonsense gun reform. I hope that in the future, their efforts will prove to be successful, and that I will see the day where school shootings, and all mass shootings for that matter, will cease to exist.

Abstract

This study examines how *The New York Times* covered the Newtown, Connecticut and Parkland, Florida school shootings, with specific attention to whose voices are heard and how media attention changes over time. A content analysis of 576 *New York Times* articles found that more articles were published on the Newtown shooting than on the Parkland shooting. In the first six months of coverage for both shootings, politicians were quoted more often than victims or parents, and stories largely discussed the shooting using a thematic frame; focusing on the issue of gun control. The evidence also suggests that activist-planned events helped to increase media coverage. These findings are important because they show that when it comes to the issue of school shootings, readers of *The New York Times* will largely see these events through the lens of the political debates surrounding gun control, rather than via the voices and opinions of parents and victims of either shooting.

Introduction

Five minutes. 154 bullets. In this short span of time, twenty first grade students and six educators lost their lives on December 14, 2012 in Newtown, Connecticut. (Clark & O'Donnell, 2013; Lysiak, 2013, p. 98). Six years later in Parkland, Florida, it was a “six-minute rampage” that took the lives of fourteen students and three educators (Mazzei, 2018). Two schools, two communities forever changed by senseless acts of gun violence—all because two individuals had access to assault-style rifles.

A debate often emerges in the aftermath of these tragedies regarding who or what should be responsible for the mass loss of life: the gun itself or the individual who possessed the gun (Philpott-Jones, 2018, p. 7). Included in this debate are the statements from victims, parents, and politicians who are calling for change in the hope that no one will ever have to experience the atrocity that ravaged their community. In addition to these individuals, pro-gun activists also make statements calling for measures such as arming teachers to protect individuals in the future. In the midst of this debate, the media plays the role of gatekeeper, deciding what information and viewpoints to include in their coverage. This includes the decision to discuss the gun control and/or mental health debate, as well as the decision about whether or not to include stories of parents and victims. It is critical to understand how school shootings are covered in the media, particularly to determine how the shootings are framed, whose voices are prioritized, and how media attention to the shootings changes over time. These factors all shape the content of news coverage of mass shootings, which in turn can affect public opinion on the issue. This thesis examines how the Newtown and Parkland school shootings were framed by *The New York Times*, whose voices were prioritized in the coverage, and how media attention to both shootings changed over time.

The decisions the media make on how to cover an issue shapes both public opinion, and potentially, policy. Media executives and journalists, otherwise known as gatekeepers, have the

power to determine not only what they cover, but also how they cover it (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007, p. 49; Jashinsky, Magnusson, Hanson, & Barnes, 2016, p. 2). When issues are covered in the news, journalists must make decisions about how much and what kind of context to provide—a process often referred to as framing (Pavelka, 2014). In addition to selecting which frame to use, the media decides which aspects of an event receive coverage, particularly whose voices to feature in the coverage. These decisions about how to frame an issue and whose voices to prioritize are critical as they inform not only what information the public sees, but also what information they think is important and will use to inform their opinions. This next section draws on three theories to explain some of the factors that shape media coverage of school shootings: episodic and thematic framing, indexing, and agenda-setting.

Theory and Literature Review

Episodic and Thematic Framing

Framing has been defined by scholars as how the media “...focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning.” (Pavelka, 2014, p. 626). Journalists employ both episodic and thematic frames. An episodic frame is the media’s decision to cover an issue by focusing attention on one particular example or aspect of the story (Gross, 2008, p. 171). In terms of school shootings, employing an episodic frame would mean that the story is focused on the shooter, likely implicating their mental health as a cause of the shooting. On the other hand, a thematic frame focuses attention on the broader societal concerns regarding the issue being reported (Gross, 2008, p. 171). A thematic frame for school shootings would be an article focused on the need for stricter gun control, implicating the easy access to deadly weapons as a cause of the shooting. Episodic frames can be more persuasive and more emotionally engaging than thematic frames (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 494). Framing matters because it shapes how the public chooses to attribute responsibility when presented with news coverage of an issue. In

other words, it “...defines the problem, diagnoses the cause, and offers or justifies solutions for the problem.” (Jashinsky et al., 2016, pp. 1–2).

The media can use either an episodic or thematic frame in covering school shootings, and this affects how the public sees the issue—in particular, who is responsible. Iyengar (1996) expands on episodic and thematic frames and connects them to the concepts of causal and treatment responsibility. Causal responsibility, associated with the use of an episodic frame, has to do with the cause of the problem: which in this case would be the perpetrator and their mental health condition. Treatment responsibility, associated with a thematic frame, is also important because it has to do with the focus on “...who or what has the ability to alleviate the problem.” (Iyengar, 1996, p. 60). In this case, the treatment responsibility would fall on the politicians and their ability to enact new legislation. Essentially, “...episodic frames produced individual attributions for political problems and thematic frames produced societal attributions for political problems.” (Gross, 2008, p. 173; Iyengar, 1996, p. 62).

The frame used in coverage of a school shooting may also shape what the public thinks should be done to address an issue. When an episodic frame is employed, placing the blame on an individual, it can suggest that there is nothing to be done as the shooting already took place. On the other hand, using a thematic frame may also suggest that increasing spending on mental health treatment could potentially help to solve the problem. However, if a thematic frame is employed, placing the blame on the government for allowing easy access to deadly weapons, this could lead the public to believe that something can actually be done to prevent future shootings. As a result, the public might be more likely to hold their politicians responsible for enacting stricter gun control legislation.

Jashinsky et al. (2014) analyzed over 2,000 newspaper articles from three major outlets in order to determine how the media reports on issues such as gun violence both prior to and after a

mass shooting. They found that in news coverage before Newtown, a causal responsibility and episodic frame was utilized when discussing issues related to gun violence—placing the blame on the individual responsible for the tragedy. However, after Newtown occurred, the focus shifted to utilizing a treatment responsibility and thematic frame, placing the blame on politicians for the lack of stricter gun control (Jashinsky et al., 2016, p. 4). This shift in focus is crucial, as it shows just how important the issue of gun control was in the immediate aftermath of Newtown. A similar pattern was found in the work of DeFoster & Swalve (2017), who found that overall, when reporting on gun violence, the media first utilized episodic frames when reporting a shooting, but then over time, shifted to the use of a thematic frame.

In the debate over mass shootings, mental health has either been to blame for a shooting, or it is viewed as a potential solution through enacting mental health reform (Luna, 2017). However, blaming school shootings on mental illness is particularly problematic for individuals living with a mental health condition, especially since events like school shootings are committed by a very small percentage of individuals with mental illness (Rosenberg, 2014, p. 109). McGinty, Webster, & Barry (2013) found that: “The aftermath of mass shootings is often viewed as a window of opportunity to garner support for gun control policies, but it also exacerbates negative attitudes towards persons with serious mental illness.” (McGinty, Webster, & Barry, 2013, p. 494). If the media utilizes an episodic frame and attributes responsibility to the perpetrator’s mental health, it will impact how the public thinks about the shooting and what can be done to preventing another one from occurring. Overall, framing is a critical aspect of media coverage, as it impacts how an issue is covered, and subsequently, how the public perceives the information presented to them.

Indexing

The theory of indexing predicts that the media will focus their attention on a given issue to the viewpoints of elites, particularly elite debate on an issue—when elites agree on an issue,

that is what the media will cover. When elites disagree on an issue, the media will "...fall more or less within the contours of their disagreement." (Bennett, 1990, p. 118; Bennett, 2016, p. 16; Lawrence, 2014). Essentially, this means that politicians have the power to influence how the media will cover an event. This is supported by the research of Amber Boydston, who argues that: "...policymaker attention indeed has a significant influence on media attention." (Boydston, 2013, p. 204). As a result, the news will disproportionately focus on elites, thereby making politicians and their views seem more important than the views of any other individual relevant to the event being reported. Indexing is problematic because when the media prioritizes the voices of only elites (i.e. politicians) it deprives the public of alternate viewpoints.

The theory of indexing matters for understanding media coverage of school shootings for several reasons. First, by only reporting the views of elites, something important is lost: the experiences and opinions of non-elites who may have witnessed or survived the event being covered by the media. In terms of legislation, indexing suggests that the public is only being exposed to the policy preferences of legislators and other elites. In this case, what is lost is the opinions of non-elites, such as victims and their parents, who may have preferences or opinions that differ from that of politicians. In addition, non-elites may offer information and perspectives other than what politicians are discussing, such as the deeply personal accounts of what happened during the shooting. In an opinion piece in *The New York Times* written by Emma González, a Parkland survivor and student leader in the March For Our Lives movement, wrote: "On the 16th, I was asked to speak at a gun control rally by a woman on the school board. For what seemed like the first time, adults were treating me and my peers as though they cared about what we had to say." (González, 2018). This statement illustrates the importance of listening to voices other than those of politicians and other elites.

One potential method for non-elites to overcome indexing is through “outsider counterspin.” This is the concept that “...ordinary citizens...make the news in ways that offer journalists other sides to the official story line.” (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 68). Journalists may utilize ‘ordinary citizens’, or exemplars, in their stories to “...make their reports more interesting and understandable for the audience.” (Andersen, Skovsgaard, Albæk, & de Vreese, 2017, p. 490). Since these individuals may have personally experienced the event, they have the ability to add a unique perspective to the story (Dekavalla & Jelen-Sanchez, 2017, p. 455).

Outsider counterspin is often used as a deliberate strategy by advocacy movements as “...activists [can] package themselves in line with journalistic values and offer up well-prepared spokespeople who provide catchy sound bites to help journalists write simple stories.” (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 68). Thus, outsider counterspin can be a useful tactic for the parents and victims of school shootings to gain media attention in order to have their voices heard. In the aftermath of Newtown, parents took action. They formed various non-profit organizations, such as Sandy Hook Promise and Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, as well as worked closely with Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy to lobby Congress in order to enact stricter gun control legislation. In the aftermath of Parkland, the students formed March For Our Lives—working in the days, weeks, and months following the shooting to bring attention to the issue of gun violence.

Agenda-Setting

Agenda-setting explains that the media are “...successful in telling us what to think about, [and] ... successful in telling us how to think about it.” (McCombs, 2005, p. 546). In other words, the media has the ability to keep issues salient in the minds of the public. Agenda-setting can also be connected to Anthony Downs’ concept of the issue-attention cycle, which explains that: “American public attention rarely remains sharply focused upon any one domestic issue for very long—even if it involves a continuing problem of crucial importance to society.” (Downs,

1972, p. 38). So, when one issue receives a great deal of media coverage, it will lead to the public believing that it is more important. However, once an issue leaves the news cycle, people stop thinking about it because they believe that the issue is no longer important.

Agenda-setting can also be connected to the work of activists and advocacy groups as “...agenda-setting is the arena where advocacy organizations will have their greatest influence. Through demonstrations, education campaigns and lobbying, advocacy organizations attempt to bring greater attention, raise awareness, and create urgency around claims.” (Andrews & Edwards, 2004, pp. 492-493). The more media attention activists receive, the more salient the issues they are advocating for will seem to the public (Ragas & Kiouisis, 2010, p. 561). This explains why the activists worked tirelessly after both Newtown and Parkland, as they needed to remain both in the news cycle and the minds of the public. Once a shooting stops being covered in the media, the issue of gun control will not seem important to the public, which will then result in politicians prioritizing other issues over gun control. By continuing to organize events, this gives activist groups the upper hand, as they are providing the media with new events to cover, which will subsequently increase the salience of their efforts. Receiving media coverage is crucial for advocacy groups (De Bruycker, 2018, p. 1), hence the reason why in the aftermath of a shooting, activists strive to have their voices heard, so the media will give them the attention they deserve. Protesting, having vigils, organizing walk-outs and rallies creates new content for the news networks to report on. The more events the media has to report, the longer a shooting will remain in the news, which will keep the issue at hand salient in people’s minds. News organizations are more likely to cover events that are currently happening rather than just repeating the same information for multiple news cycles—in other words, activism generates novelty.

These concepts will be readdressed in the discussion section to understand how *The New York Times* framed the Newtown and Parkland school shootings, whose voices were prioritized in the news coverage of these shootings, and how media attention to Newtown and Parkland changes over time.

This thesis draws on the theories of framing, indexing, and agenda-setting to examine media coverage of school shootings. I ask three specific research questions:

RQ1: How are school shootings framed in *The New York Times*?

RQ2: Whose voices are heard in *The New York Times* coverage of a school shooting?

RQ3: How does media attention to school shootings change over time?

Methods

Case Selection

The New York Times has been used by many scholars as their source of analysis to understand how the media covers events, including how the media covers school shootings. For example, DeFoster and Swalve (2017) point out that *The New York Times* is "...among the top three newspapers by total average circulation, including print and digital content, with 2,135,150...subscribers..." (DeFoster & Swalve, 2017, p. 1215). As of November 2018, *The New York Times* has over four million subscribers (Peiser, 2018). So, due to this high volume of readership, the influence of this news organization is far-reaching, extending to communities both within the United States and abroad. Subsequently, this means that *The New York Times* has the unique ability to set the agenda both for other news organizations and for the public (Boydston, 2013, p. 11). In her book about the news-making process at *The New York Times*, Nikki Usher argued that: "*The New York Times* is a formidable institution with tremendous journalism muscle that has staying power, as well as the eyes and ears of decision makers, the elite, and increasingly the ordinary public." (Usher, 2014, p. 8). The selection of *The New York*

Times as a news source in the works of the scholars above was influential in its selection for this thesis.

I analyze coverage of both Newtown and Parkland because each shooting has unique characteristics. Regarding the Newtown shooting, Shultz et al. argue that “The media focus was instrumental in elevating the profile of the Sandy Hook shooting to “tipping point” status. ... the mass media framing brought unrelenting focus to this episode.” (Shultz et al., 2013, pp. 67-71). Another reason for the selection of the Newtown shooting is the fact that a majority of the victims were six-year old children, who had their entire lives ahead of them, which could have contributed to the sheer amount of media coverage this shooting received. The Parkland shooting is also unique because of the activist movement started by the surviving students. In an article published in *The Washington Post*, Rachel Siegel writes that “In contrast to the victims of the mass shooting at Sandy Hook in 2012, the survivors of Parkland are old enough to talk about their experience to demand change.” (Siegel, 2018). Another factor that led to the selection of these two shootings is the individuals at the forefront of the activism. For Newtown, those leading the fight for change were the parents who lost their six-year-old children to a senseless act of violence. These were also the parents who stood beside President Obama in the Rose Garden when he announced that stricter gun control legislation would not become a law. President Obama referred to this day as both one of his biggest disappointments while in office, as well as “...a pretty shameful day for Washington.” (NBC News, 2017; O’Keefe & Rucker, 2013). After Parkland, the activists were the high school students who may have lost their best friend, teacher, or coach in the shooting. These young individuals, some of whom are not even old enough to vote in an election, continue to lead a nationwide fight to make meaningful change in how one goes about purchasing a weapon.

Research Design

I coded each article published in *The New York Times* located via ProQuest in the first six months following the Newtown and Parkland school shootings. For Newtown, I used the search terms ‘Newtown’ and ‘shooting’ and constricted the timeframe to December 14th, 2012 through June 14th, 2013, which resulted in 389 total articles. For Parkland, I used the search terms ‘Parkland’ and ‘shooting’ and constricted the timeframe to February 14th, 2018 through August 14th, 2018, which resulted in 326 total articles. In order to be selected for the sample of articles to be analyzed, each article must include both search terms: the name of the shooting (i.e. Newtown or Parkland) and ‘shooting’.¹ For both shootings, the search was restricted to only include full text articles, as well as ‘New York Times’ was selected as the publication title on the ProQuest database. By limiting the articles to only those that are full text, this means that a short quote featured on one of the pages or a caption to a picture does not count towards the total number of articles. In addition, neither a correction to an article nor a duplication of an article were included in the sample of articles to be analyzed. Some of the articles were weekly television schedules that featured programming on either shooting and were not be included in the sample of articles. Articles completely unrelated to either shooting, such as articles about other mass shootings that merely reference Newtown or Parkland, were not included in the sample of articles to be analyzed. However, articles published to the sports desk of *The New York Times* were relevant as long as the article discussed an athlete taking a stand after either shooting or honoring the victims—as athletes can also be activists. After eliminating all of the irrelevant articles, the sample for the Newtown shooting was 308 articles and the sample for the Parkland shooting was 268 articles, resulting in 576 total *New York Times* articles to be analyzed.

¹ It should be noted that due to my choice of search terms, there were potentially 38 articles on the Newtown shooting that were missed and not included in this data set.

Coding Framework

After counting and tracking the 576 articles, each was coded based on the general article context, as well as the content of each article. In terms of article context, data was collected on the following items: the section and page number of each article, as well as the type of article. This was useful because the placement of an article should have a significant effect on the perceived importance of the issue at hand. According to Nicole Dahmen, the "... front-page can even influence people who do not subscribe to or purchase newspapers, because these photos are visible in public places where many people see only the front page..." (Dahmen, 2018, p. 165). If an individual is just scanning the newspaper to gain a general understanding of the day's top stories, they will be more likely to see a story published on the first page rather than an article located towards the end of the newspaper. This relates to the concept of agenda-setting—when an issue, such as an article about Newtown or Parkland is on the front page, people will think it is important and tend to think about it more frequently. As such, receiving front page coverage is crucial because "Each day the issues captured on the front page send signals to politicians and citizens alike about which problems are important and which are not." (Boydston, 2013, p. 12). The significance of a front-page story and the impact it has on readers is critical to the understanding of how school shootings are discussed in *The New York Times*.

Coding for this information was useful when looking for general patterns in the news coverage for both Newtown and Parkland—specifically the percentage of articles published on the front page of the paper for both shootings. Coding for article type was also important as it should have effects on the audience of *The New York Times*. For instance, a general news article was operationally defined as any article that provides information about either shooting and related events: legislation efforts, mental health discussions, protests, lobbying movements, etc., rather than sharing the author's opinion. To put it simply, the author's opinion was not invoked in a general news article. However, opinion pieces and editorials were also effective pieces of

writing, as they provide journalists with the opportunity to share their opinions on the issue at hand. In her work, Selina Kerr argued that: “‘Feature’ or ‘editorial’ articles have the greatest potential to have influence, given their opinionated and detailed nature.” (Kerr, 2018, pp. 15-16). In some cases, these pieces were written by parents who lost their children to a shooting or even by survivors of the shootings, which could have an even greater effect on the readers.

Coding for the content of the articles was important in understanding what *The New York Times* chooses to include in each paper regarding the events surrounding these shootings. The general article content, as well as the page numbers of each article assisted in understanding how media attention to school shootings changes over time. By first looking at the number of times the shooter’s name was mentioned in an article, it provided insight into whether or not the journalist sensationalized the shooter and his actions. This is a common point of concern for some activists, parents, or victims of the shootings, as there seems to be a contagion effect of mass shootings. Research has found a “...growing body of evidence [that] indicates a connection between news media coverage and subsequent mass shootings.” (Dahmen, 2018, p. 165). In other words, some individuals choose to commit a mass shooting because they want to become famous due to the incessant amounts of news coverage shootings receive. The next portion of coded data regards the presence of activism in the articles: specifically, if an activism-related event is mentioned in an article and if so, the type of event—such as a vigil, protest, rally, or individuals lobbying politicians. Even though the National Rifle Association is strongly against stricter gun control legislation, it was still important to recognize if their members or organization in general were included in the news coverage because they play a major role in the gun control debate. I also coded for whether or not memorials for the victims are mentioned in the articles. This could include discussing plans for a vigil, laying flowers outside of the school,

building a memorial playground, etc.—while the latter is more relevant to Newtown, it is still considered a memorial for the victims.

The next portion of data to be coded was especially relevant for understanding how these shootings are framed in *The New York Times*. In order to do this, it was important to code for whether or not legislation is included in the news coverage—if legislation is mentioned at all in the article, whether it is proposed or current laws, it will be analyzed. In addition, the presence or absence of mental health being mentioned in an article was also coded. In the case of analyzing the collected data, legislation and mental health were considered proxies for episodic and thematic coverage. This is due to the fact that coverage in the immediate aftermath of a shooting, an episodic frame is likely to be used, with a focus on the perpetrator and their mental health that some may argue led them to commit the shooting. However, as time passes there will be a shift to thematic coverage, which has been found in research—meaning that societal issues such as legislation will be more prevalent in the news coverage. Mental health and legislation were selected as proxies for episodic and thematic frames since episodic frames have to do with singular aspects of a story—in this case, the shooter—and thematic frames have to do with the broader societal concerns of the story—which in this case would be legislation.

The next set of data to be analyzed helped to explain whose voices are heard in *The New York Times* coverage of a shooting. In order to do this, I coded for whether a supporter or opposer of gun control is quoted in an article. Next, it was coded for whether or not a victim was quoted in the article. A victim was operationally defined as someone on the scene of either Newtown or Parkland. In other words, a victim was someone who directly witnessed and survived the attacks, whether they were a student or an educator. Seeing as the victims of Newtown were likely too young to share their experiences, their parents may have stepped in and provided a statement to a journalist. So, if a parent of a victim was quoted in any of the articles,

this was also coded. Finally, it was coded for whether or not a politician was quoted in the article, as they have the all-encompassing power to enact new legislation. Overall, it is important to recognize what gets covered and what does not, as this can have lasting effects on the salience of the issues related to school shootings, which could subsequently impact people's motivations to take action in the aftermath of a shooting.

Results

Of the 308 articles analyzed for the Newtown shooting, 20% were on the front page, meaning that they appeared on page A1. 65% of the overall articles qualified as a news article—these articles did not invoke the journalist's opinion, simply reporting on the shooting itself and any related events. Ten percent of the articles were opinion pieces, in which journalists and other op-ed contributors shared their own thoughts on the shooting and any related issues. Seven percent of the articles were editorials and four percent of the articles were letters to the editor, where the public had the opportunity to voice their opinions related to issues surrounding the Newtown shooting. Finally, 14% of the articles were coded as 'other'—these were articles published in the sports section, business section, science section, etc., but were still discussing issues related to the Newtown shooting. Regarding the Parkland shooting, 16% of the 268 overall articles were published on the front page. 68% of the overall articles were news articles and 11% of the articles were opinion pieces. Similar to the Newtown shooting, the percentage of editorials and letters to the editor were low, with only one percent of the overall articles being editorial, and four percent of the articles were editorials. Finally, 15% of the coded articles fell under the 'other' category. Overall, the breakdown of article type is relatively similar for both shootings.

The figures below visualize crucial patterns seen in the sample of *New York Times* articles generated for the Newtown and Parkland school shootings and will aid in understanding the three research questions guiding this thesis. With the exception of Figures 1 and 3, the

articles utilized for each figure were coded utilizing dichotomous variables—with zero corresponding to the absence of a variable and one corresponding to the presence of a variable.

How media attention changes over time

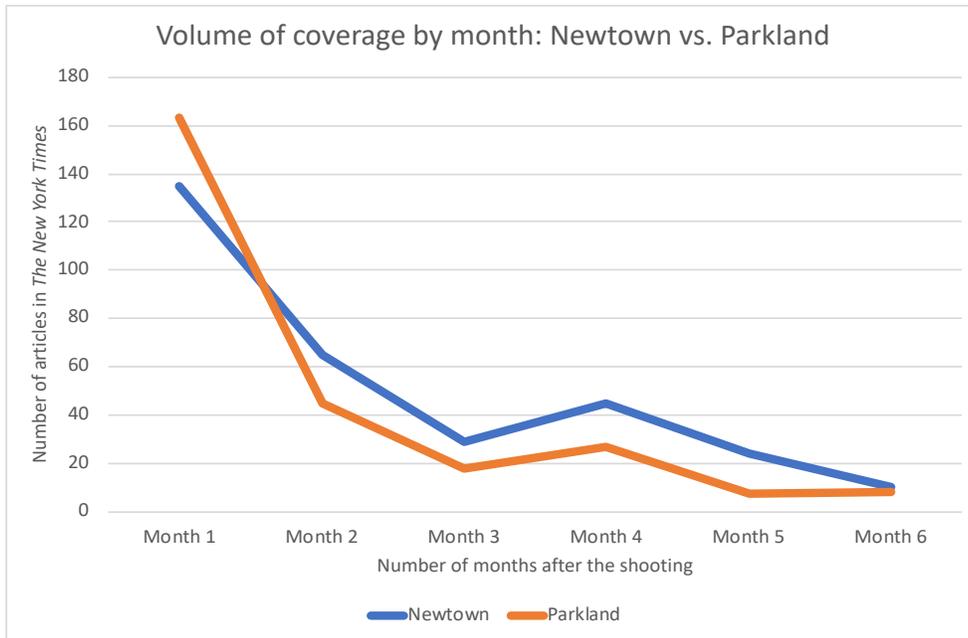


Figure 1: *Volume of news coverage for Newtown and Parkland by month*

Figure 1 shows the total volume of the articles published in *The New York Times* in the first six months after both the Newtown and Parkland school shootings. According to Selina Kerr, Newtown was: “...the second top news story of the year, eclipsed only by the 2012 presidential elections.” (Kerr, 2018, p. 12). Kerr further explains that this claim is based on how closely the public followed this shooting, finding that “...57% follow[ed] it ‘very closely.’” (Kerr, 2018, p. 12). With the exception of the first month, Newtown received more news coverage than Parkland in *The New York Times* over the first six months of coverage. Seeing as Connecticut is closer to New York than Florida is, this is one potential explanation as to why Newtown received more coverage in *The New York Times* than Parkland. This figure is an important measure of agenda-setting, as it demonstrates how media attention to both of these shootings sustains over time—as other issues enter the news cycle, attention to both of these shootings will decrease as time goes on. The increase in coverage at month four for both

Newtown and Parkland is further explained in Figure 2, as two major events were occurring around this time that kept both shootings present in the news.

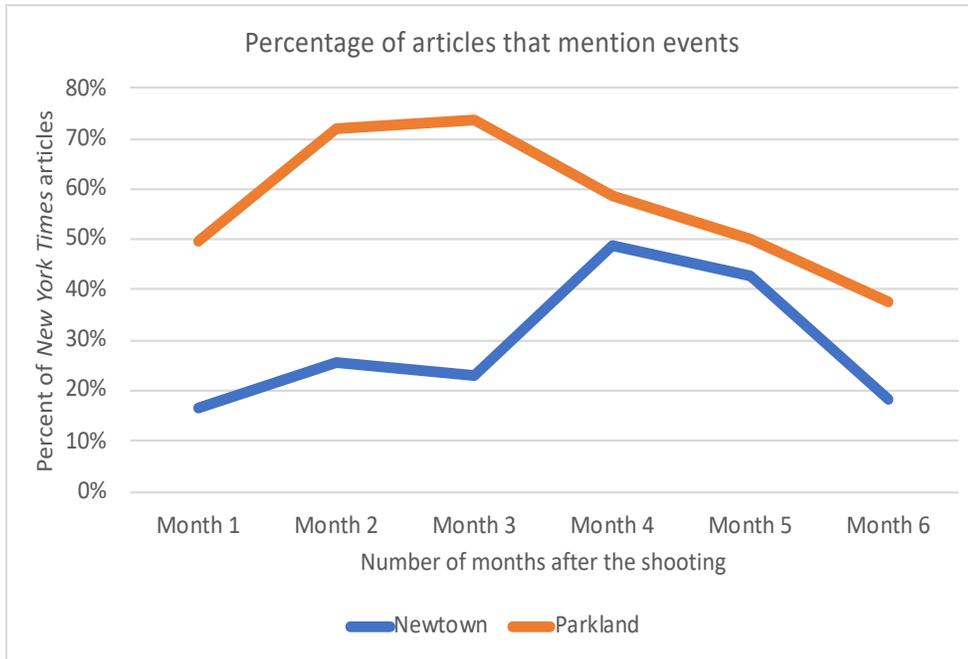


Figure 2: *Percentage of articles that mention events over time*

Figure 2 represents the percentage of articles on Newtown and Parkland that mentioned events over the six months of coverage. The presence of an event was coded as a dichotomous variable, with one corresponding to an event being mentioned in an article and zero corresponding to no events being mentioned in the article. These findings expand on those in Figure 1, as while the overall media attention to school shootings may decline as a result of other issues entering the news cycle, events are a method of keeping these shootings in the news by providing the media with new information to report. This is particularly true in the case of the Newtown shooting between months three and four as this was the time leading up to Congress voting on new gun reform. At this point in time, the parents and their non-profit organizations were very active, holding many events in support of this new bill.

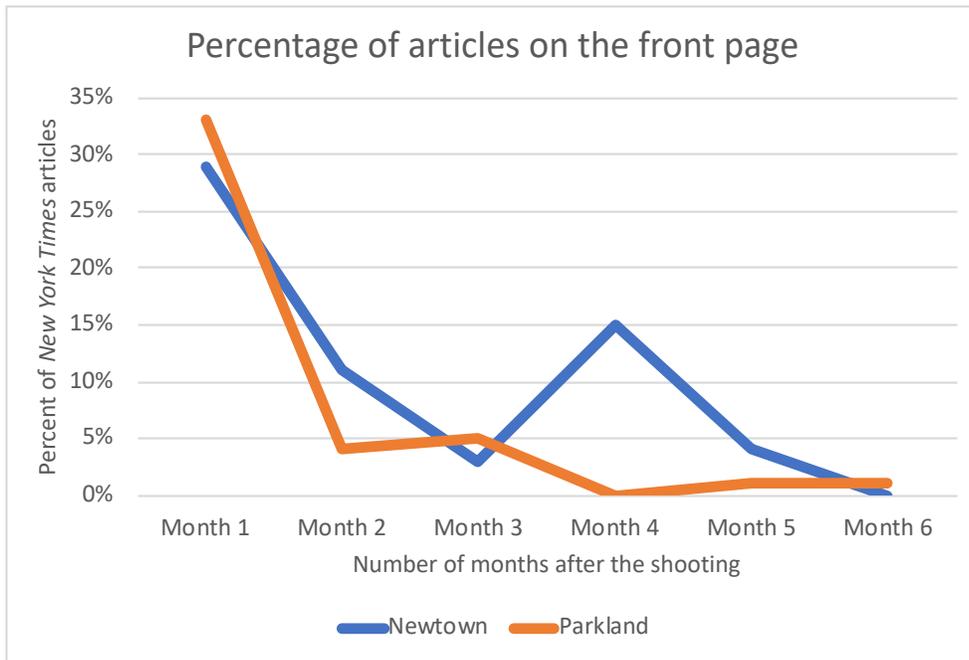


Figure 3: *Percentage of articles on the front page over time*

Figure 3 represents the percentage of articles for both the Newtown and Parkland school shootings in which an article was published on the front page over the six months of coverage. In order to be included in this data, an article must have appeared both in the A section and on page 1. This is also a measure of agenda-setting as receiving front-page coverage is critical to any issue, since this is the first thing readers will see upon opening a newspaper. Unlike Figure 1, in which both shootings had an overall increase in coverage at the four-month mark, there was only an increase of front-page articles for the Newtown shooting. This leads to the question if an issue like legislation is more likely to garner front-page attention than survivors of a school shooting organizing nationwide events.

Analysis

Agenda-setting theory argues that the volume of coverage that the media devotes to an issue influences public perception of the issue's importance. This matters for understanding the potential impact of coverage of school shootings because in order for the public to think that issues surrounding school shootings, like legislation, are important—the media must report on

these issues. Figure 1 indicates that while the overall pattern of coverage is the same for both shootings, the fact that Newtown received more coverage—even though the Parkland victims organized nationwide walk-outs and frequently spoke to the media—is surprising. The spike in coverage for Newtown is at month four, or April 2013, when the push for stricter gun control legislation ultimately failed. The spike in coverage at month four for the Parkland shooting was when the students involved with March For Our Lives began their nationwide tour to start the voter registration process for the young Americans eligible to vote in the midterms, as well as encourage them to vote for gun-sense candidates in order to prevent mass shootings from occurring in the future. Overall, what this means is that major events such as a push for wide sweeping gun reform or planning a nationwide tour to mobilize youth voters have the power to keep shooting prevalent in the news and salient in the minds of the public.

Figure 2 shows that for Parkland, events were heavily mentioned over the first three months of coverage, when students focused their efforts on lobbying politicians. Even though mentions of events began to decrease for Parkland after this point, events are still a useful way to keep shootings in the news. For Newtown, mentions of events were highest at month four, aligning with the major push for new gun control legislation. While there was more of a sharp decrease after this point, like Parkland, holding events are useful ways for keeping these shootings prevalent in the news as they provide the media with new material to cover. Finally, Figure 3 represents the number of articles published on the front page (A1) over the six months of coverage for Newtown and Parkland. An interesting pattern is that there is only a spike in front page articles at the four-month mark for Newtown, while the percentage of front-page articles for Parkland hovers close to zero for the last three months in terms of front-page articles. What this means is that even though this was the point at which the Parkland students began their nationwide tour, this effort was not receiving any front-page coverage, which could mean that

individuals who only scan the front page of the newspaper each day did not even know this was occurring. What this implies is that while events can garner news coverage, it appears that only legislation is deemed important enough by media gatekeepers to deserve front-page coverage.

Agenda-setting explains that as other issues enter the news cycle, attention geared towards these two shootings may decrease, but holding events such as protests and rallies are useful mechanisms of keeping these shootings present in the news. In one *New York Times* article on the Newtown shooting, a rally which occurred outside the Connecticut state Capitol was discussed.

The chants echoed from more than 5,000 proponents of gun-control legislation who were gathered on the plaza and on 15-foot-tall mounds of snow...The rally...was a reminder of how much momentum for gun control has been created in a state still grieving from the killing of 20 children and 6 adults. (Applebome, 2013, p. A24)

This one quote demonstrates just how powerful this post-Newtown activist movement was—even fifteen feet of snow did not stop these individuals, parents of Newtown victims included, from advocating for their cause. In addition to organizing events such as this, some Newtown parents went so far as to address the nation in order to ensure that new gun control legislation is enacted. Francine Wheeler, who lost her son Ben in the shooting, used the platform of President Obama's weekly address to make her appeal to the American public—which was successful at garnering media attention and keeping Newtown in the news ahead of the vote on new gun control legislation. She powerfully stated that: "I've heard people say that the tidal wave on anguish our country felt on 12/14 receded—but not for us. ...Please help us do something before our tragedy becomes your tragedy." (Wheaton, 2013, p. A17). Even though the push for legislation was not successful, these parents used every possible resource to keep their tragedy present in the news and in the minds of the public.

In order to ensure that Parkland did not lose media attention, the students immediately began their activist work. First, they traveled to the state Capitol in Tallahassee to lobby

legislators: “They shouted into a microphone until their voices became hoards. They waved handmade signs. They chanted. And sometimes, in the middle of it all, they choked up.” (Turkewitz, Stevens, & Bailey, 2018, p. A13). After this event, the students then began organizing their own non-profit, culminating in the nationwide March For Our Lives movement, in an effort to keep the gun control debate present in the news. “The students, as they seized the nation’s attention...with raised fists and tear-streaked faces, vowed that their grief about school shootings and their frustration with adults’ inaction would power a new generation of political activism.” (Shear, 2018, p. A1). These students knew what happened in the aftermath of previous shootings—people called for change, but then eventually the shooting will leave the news cycle. Keeping this in mind, they continued holding events, some on a national level, with a similar goal to that of the Newtown parents: keep their tragedy present in the news, and thus keeping it salient in the minds of the public.

Framing

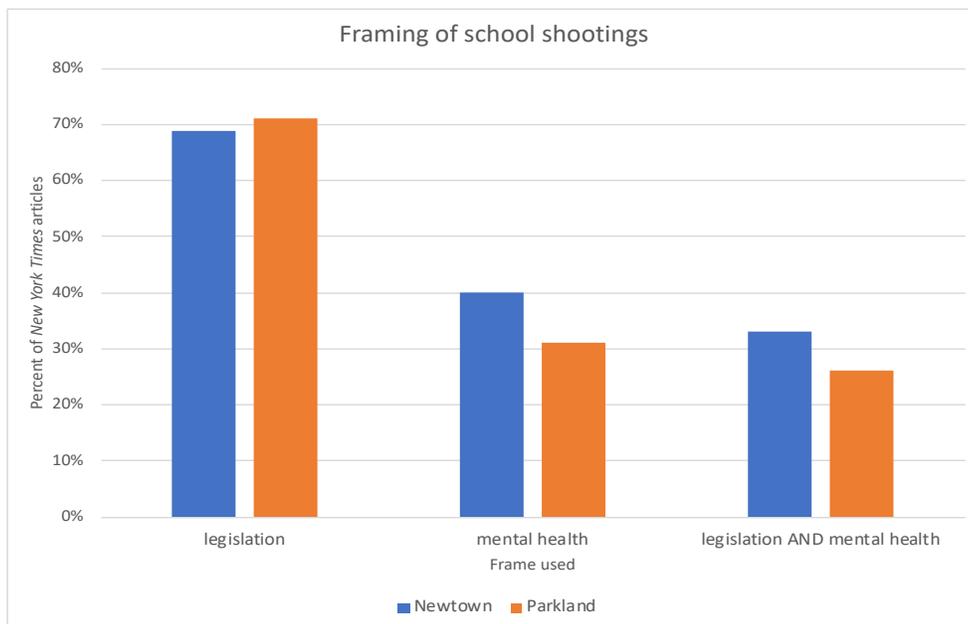


Figure 4: *Percentage of articles that mention legislation and mental health*

Figure 4 represents how the Newtown and Parkland school shootings were framed in *The New York Times*—with legislation representing a thematic frame and mental health representing

an episodic frame. This relationship has been utilized in other research on the media coverage of school shootings. For instance, Jashinsky et al. (2017) defined societal issues like gun control as thematic frames and mentions of the shooter as episodic frames since talking about the shooter is one individual aspect of the story as opposed to the larger issue of gun violence prevention.

This was coded as a dichotomous variable, with one corresponding to mentions of legislation or mental health and zero corresponding to no mentions of legislation or mental health. It is also important to code for the presence of mental health in news coverage as there are serious implications when school shootings are associated with mental health. In her work on the relationship between the media and mass shootings, Delaney Luna argues that "...many people blame mental illness for gun violence. The assumption that most mass shooters are mentally ill is rhetorically supported by media coverage, and repeated by anti-gun control proponents, but is also demonstrably false." (Luna, 2017). What this figure shows overall is that for both shootings, legislation was discussed more than mental health, suggesting that a thematic frame was used more than an episodic frame—keeping the focus of the coverage on broader issues like gun control as opposed to focusing solely on the shooter and his mental health.

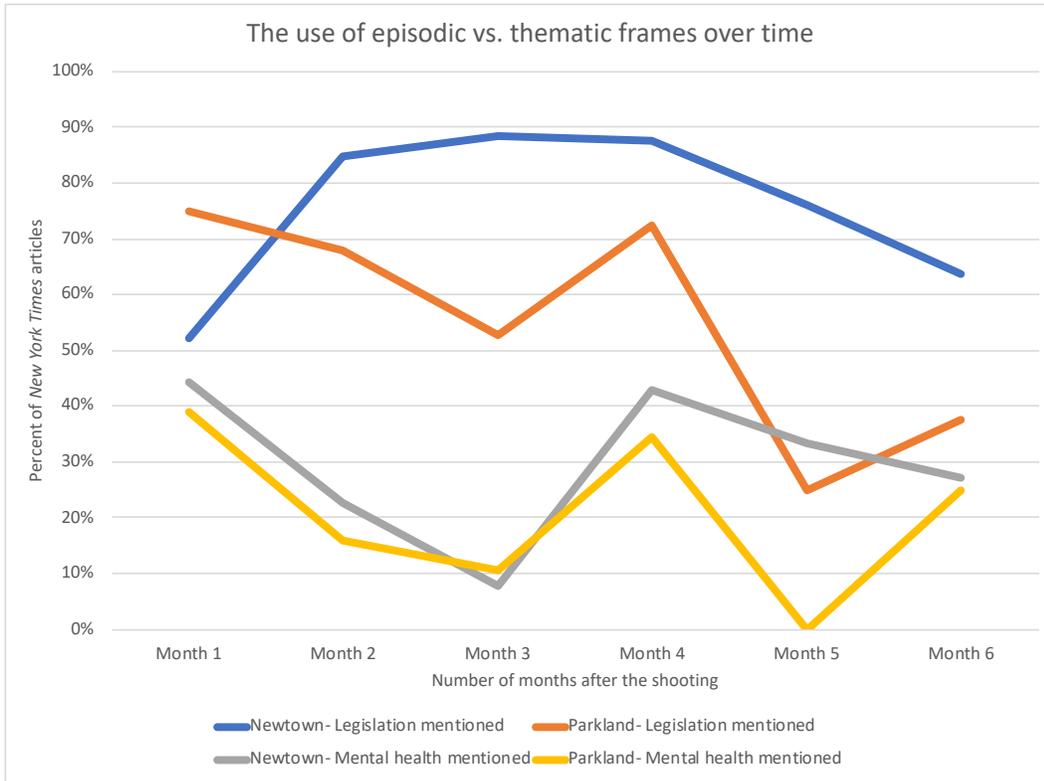


Figure 5: Percentage of articles that utilize episodic vs. thematic frames over time

This figure represents the percentage of articles that mention legislation over time, in order to demonstrate the power of the thematic frame. This data was coded in the same way that the data in Figure 4 was coded, the only difference being that the data is spread out over the six months of coverage in order to determine how the use of these frames changed over time. In this figure, mentions of legislation are indicated by blue for Newtown and orange for Parkland and mentions of mental health are indicated by gray for Newtown and yellow for Parkland. This figure shows that over the six months of coverage, a thematic frame was the primary frame for Newtown and Parkland, which aligns with legislation being mentioned more than mental health in the articles published on both shootings.

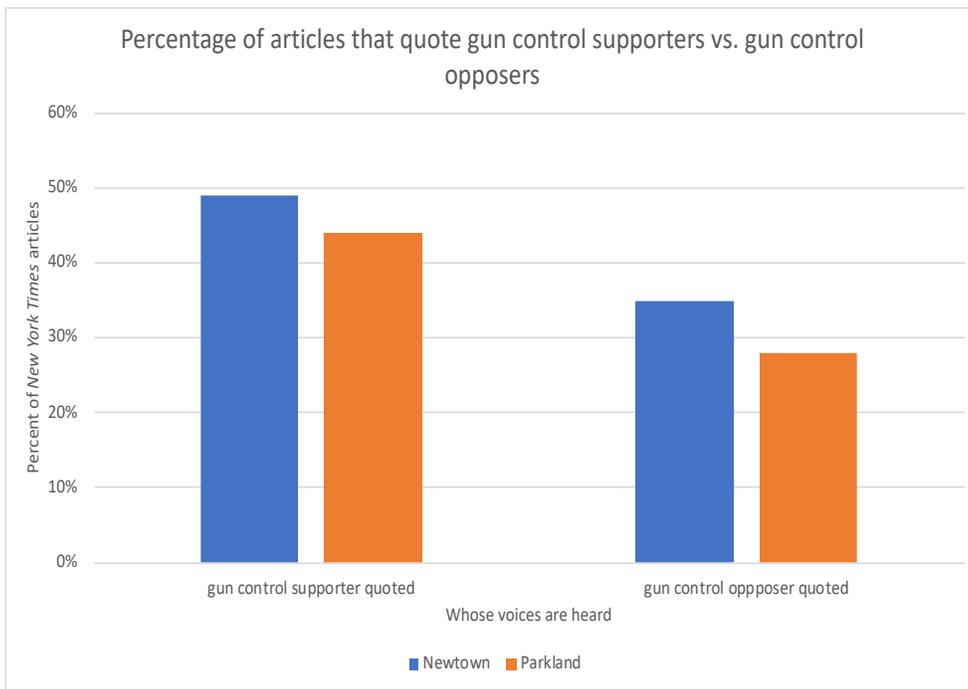


Figure 6: *Percentage of articles that quote gun control supporters vs. gun control opposers*

This figure represents the percentage of article that quote supporters and opposers of gun control for both the Newtown and Parkland school shootings. Figure 6 expands on thematic framing by showing that when legislation is discussed, a supporter of gun control is more likely to be quoted in an article than an opposer of gun control. This is important as it also demonstrates that when a thematic frame is utilized, or in other words, when legislation is discussed, it is more likely to be framed in a manner that supports new gun control legislation compared to opposing it.

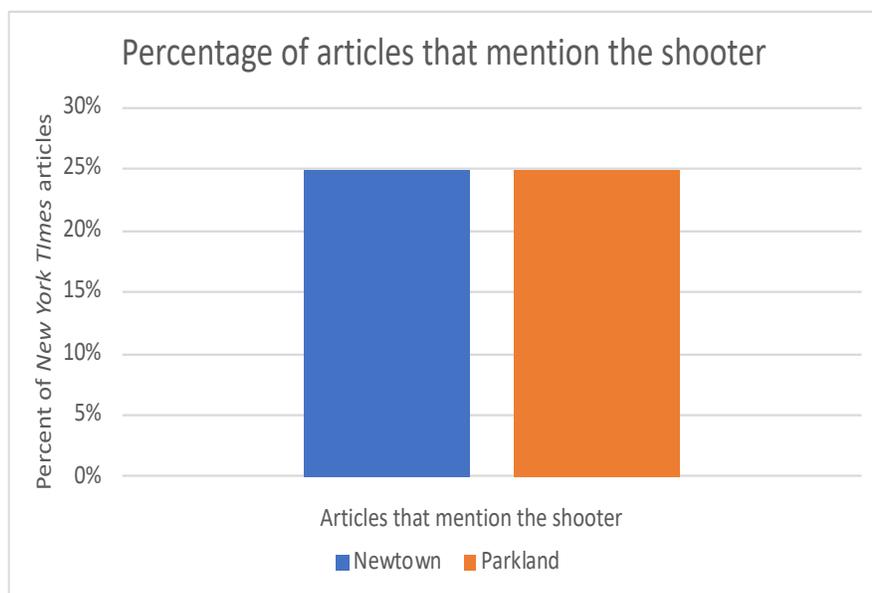


Figure 7: *Percentage of articles that mention the shooter*

Figure 7 represents the percentage of articles for Newtown and Parkland that mention the shooter. Mentions of the shooter for both Newtown and Parkland are relatively low, further supporting the data shown in Figure 5 that a thematic frame was used more consistently than an episodic frame over the six months of coverage.

Analysis

Framing is a critical aspect of media coverage, as it explains how the media chooses to cover an issue. In the case of school shootings, episodic frames and thematic frames are commonly used. Figure 4 indicates that legislation was mentioned in approximately 30% more articles on both the Newtown and Parkland school shootings than mental health was mentioned. What this means is that a thematic frame was utilized more than an episodic frame when covering the two shootings. This pattern is further explained in Figure 5, which shows how episodic and thematic frames were incorporated over the six months of coverage. Figure 5 indicates that over the first six months, a thematic frame was utilized when covering both the Newtown and Parkland school shootings. This is critical since legislation is a proxy for a

thematic frame, meaning that not only is a thematic frame used, but also that legislation is mentioned more frequently in these articles than mental health is mentioned as a cause of the shootings. Related to this, Figure 6 indicates that when a thematic frame is employed, a supporter of gun control is more likely to be featured in an article than an opposer of gun control.

While episodic frames are utilized, they were found in less than 50% of the articles published on Newtown and Parkland over the six months of coverage. One aspect of an episodic frame found in the coverage of school shootings are mentions of the shooter. This is shown in Figure 7, which found that for both shootings, the shooter's name was mentioned in only 25% of the articles. This finding shows that journalists at *The New York Times* worked to contextualize the issue rather than simply placing blame on the shooter, potentially in an attempt to avoid glorifying the shooter and their actions. Overall, Figures 4-7 explain that over the first six months of coverage following the Newtown and Parkland school shootings, a thematic frame was consistently used. This means that the focus was primarily surrounding issues related to legislation and making the process of obtaining a gun stricter as opposed to placing a majority of the emphasis in coverage on the shooter, their mental health condition, and their actions.

Just days after the Newtown shooting, President Obama stated that he would use the power of his office to: "...stop massacres like the slaughter at the school here that shocked the nation, hinting at a fresh effort to curb the spread of guns..." (Landler & Baker, 2012, p. A1). So, even in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, it became clear that legislation was going to become a priority. This was further shown in a statement that Neil Heslin, who lost his son Jesse, made to Congress: "...I'm really ashamed to see that Congress doesn't have the guts to stand up and make a change and put a ban on these types of weapons..." (Rivera, 2013, p. A25). This shows that the use of a thematic frame continued to persist throughout the Newtown coverage, and was exemplified by parents calling for stricter gun control. The framing of Parkland became

very clear in the immediate aftermath, demonstrated by this quote from Senator John Cornyn: “I am personally unwilling to face another family member who’s lost a loved one as a result of one of these mass shootings that could have been prevented by making sure that the background check system works as Congress intended.” (Fandos & Kaplan, 2018, p. A19). In just this one statement, the frustration in Congress failing to enact new legislation is particularly evident, setting the stage for the rest of the Parkland coverage, which continued to prioritize legislation. This frustration was further highlighted in the following statement, written in a piece published by The Editorial Board: “After 20 first graders and a half-dozen adults were slaughtered in Newtown, Conn., in 2012, it seemed that a line would be drawn in the sand. Enough was enough, people said. But nothing was done.” (The Editorial Board, 2018, p. A28). When the Newtown shooting failed to result in stricter gun reform, Parkland became the next source of hope for gun control supporters. In other words, it seemed that the inaction that came out of Newtown would restore a sense of urgency across the country and among legislators in order to prevent any more mass shootings from occurring in the future.

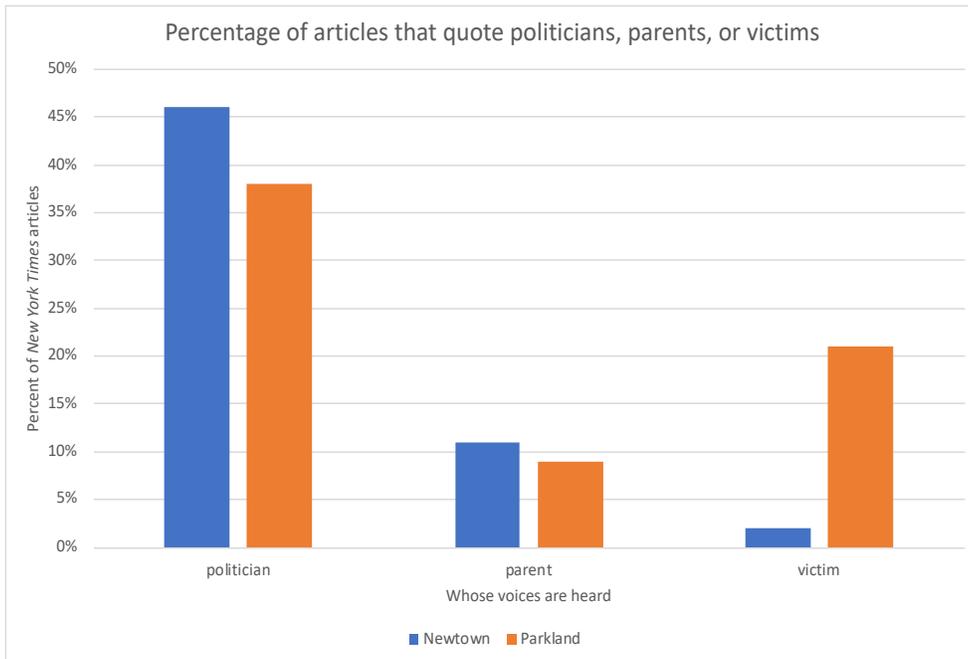
Whose voices are heard

Figure 8: *Percentage of articles that quote politicians, parents, or victims*

Figure 8 represents which individual: a politician, a parent, or a victim is quoted in an article on the Newtown or Parkland school shootings. Figure 8 shows that overall, politicians were more likely to be quoted in an article than a parent or victim—highlighting the power of indexing in the coverage of both Newtown and Parkland. This is crucial, as it shows that parents and victims are not given equal coverage in the news, even if they have personal and very emotional accounts about the tragedies which took place. When politicians are given more attention, it makes it seem like what they have to say is more important than what parents and victims have to say, which is not the case—their voices are critical and deserve more attention from the media.

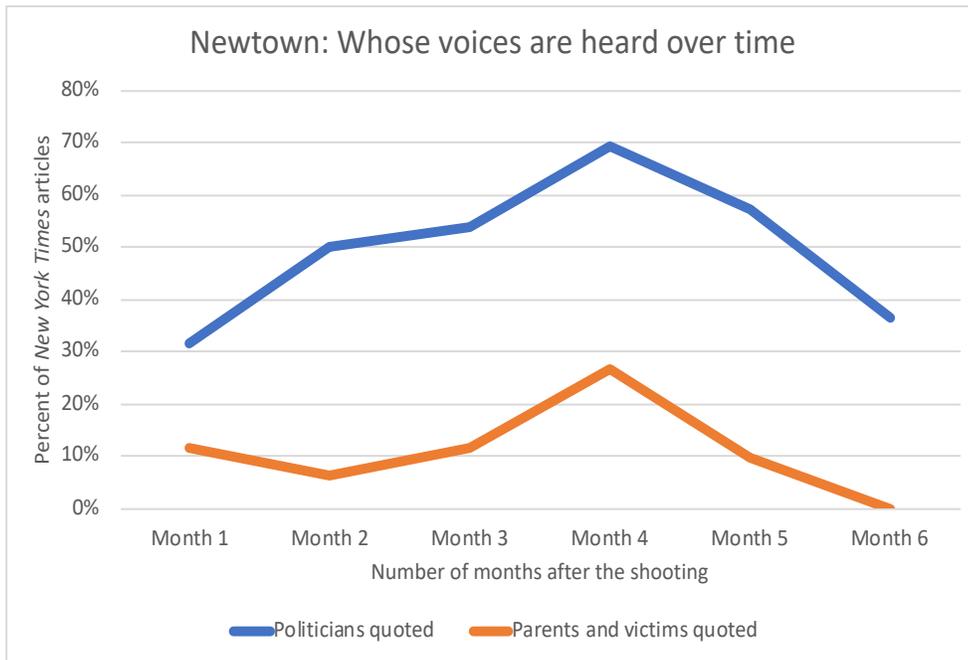


Figure 9: *Percentage of Newtown articles that quote politicians vs. parents and victims*

Figure 9 expands on the data represented in Figure 8 by comparing whose voice is heard the most over time in the coverage of the Newtown shooting. This data was coded by utilizing dichotomous variables, with one representing a politician, parent, or victim being quoted in an article, and zero representing a politician, parent, or victim not being quoted in an article. Over the six months of coverage, this figure demonstrates that politicians had their voices heard the most when compared to parents and victims, supporting the data shown in Figure 8. The difference is most profound at month four, aligning with the time at which the push for stricter gun control legislation ultimately failed. This is crucial since even though politicians' voices were heard the most the new gun reform did not pass, which means that just because a politician is quoted by the media, does not necessarily mean that their efforts will be successful. In other words, the work of a politician extends far beyond just receiving media coverage on a given issue.

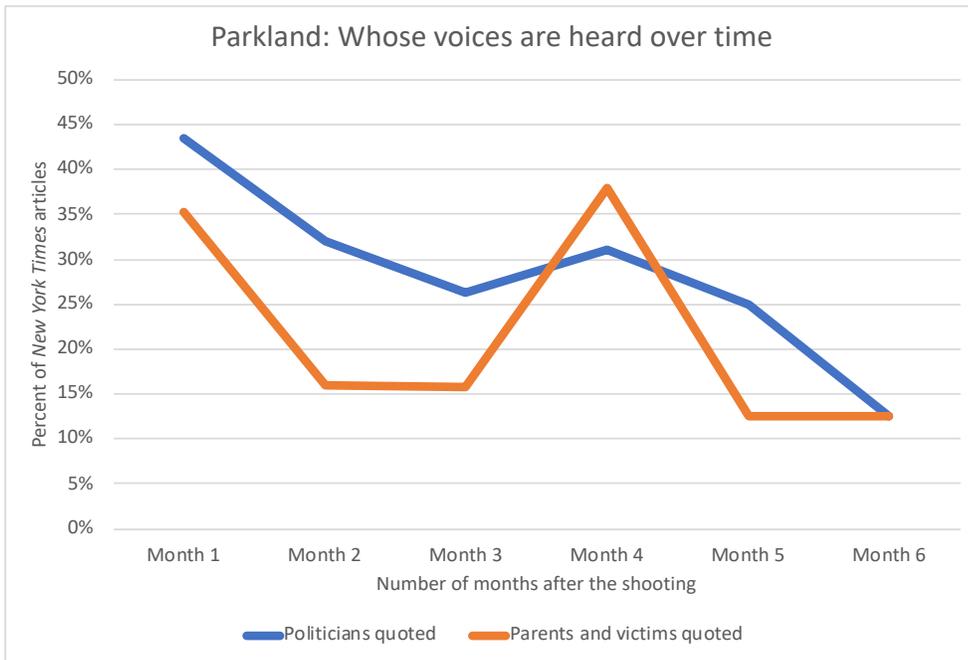


Figure 10: *Percentage of Parkland articles that quote politicians vs. parents and victims*

Similar to Figure 9, this figure expands on the data represented in Figure 8 by comparing whose voice is heard the most over time in the coverage of the Parkland shooting. This data was coded by utilizing dichotomous variables, with one representing a politician, parent, or victim being quoted in an article, and zero representing a politician, parent, or victim not being quoted in an article. This data is different from that shown in Figure 9, as the victims of Parkland were high school students, meaning that they were old enough to share their experiences with the media, which was not the case in the Newtown shooting since many of the victims were only six years old. While politicians' voices were heard the most over the first three months and at month five, unlike Newtown—parents and victims were able to have their voices heard more than politicians at month four. This is the point at which the Parkland students began their nationwide tour mobilizing youth voters and encouraging people to vote for gun-sense candidates in the midterm elections. In addition, unlike Newtown, the voices of politicians, parents, and victims were heard the same amount at the six-month mark, which may just be unique to this shooting, but is an idea that should be taken into consideration in covering shootings in the future.

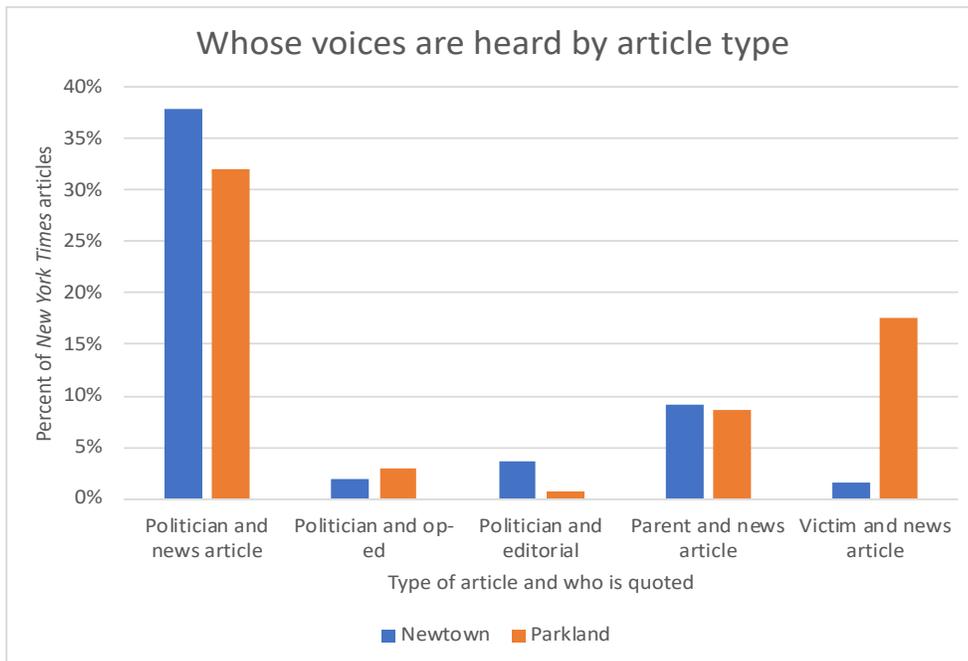


Figure 11: Percentage of articles that quote politicians, parents, and victims- by article type

Figure 11 expands on the data shown in Figure 8 by adding which type of article the politicians, parents, and victims were quoted in. It should be noted that the data collected for parents quoted in op-eds and editorials, as well as victims quoted in op-eds and editorials was found to be negligible, which is why it is not included in this figure. This figure explains the type of article that grants politicians, parents, and victims the most opportunity to have their voices heard. In the case of both Newtown and Parkland, politicians had their voices heard the most in the form of a news article—meaning that their voices are more likely to be heard when a journalist is sharing general information about either shooting as opposed to an article in which the journalist is invoking their own opinion on issues related to either shooting.

Analysis

Indexing is an important feature of media coverage since it explains that gatekeepers are likely to prioritize the voices of elites in their coverage of an event. This concept is crucial to the media coverage of school shootings as it explains that politicians are more likely to be quoted in an article than a victim or parent. Figure 8 shows that for both the Newtown and Parkland school

shootings, politicians are quoted in more articles than are parents and victims, clearly demonstrating the power of indexing in the coverage of an event. Figures 9 and 10 expand on these findings by spreading them out over the six months of coverage to determine whose voices are heard the most over time for both shootings. Similar to Figure 8, these two figures indicate that over six months of news coverage, politicians were quoted the most when compared to parents and victims. The spike in Newtown parents being quoted at the four-month mark is when there was a major push for new gun reform in April of 2013. The spike in Parkland victims being quoted at the four-month mark is when the students began their nationwide Road to Change tour. However, this was the point for Parkland when parents and victims were successful in having their voices heard more than politicians.

Once again, this shows the power of indexing seeing as over the six months, politicians were quoted the most. Finally, Figure 11 further expands on Figure 8 by showing the type of article that politicians, parents, and victims were most frequently quoted in. For both the Newtown and Parkland school shootings, politicians, parents, and victims were quoted the most in news articles compared to op-eds or editorials. What this means is that journalists are less likely to quote these individuals in pieces when they invoke their own thoughts and opinions on the issue at hand. Even though research has found that pieces such as editorials can be very influential (Kerr, 2018, pp. 15-16), journalists are not using these articles as a measure of highlighting the voices of key individuals in the media coverage of a shooting: politicians, parents, and victims. There is the possibility, that these pieces could be even more influential and persuasive if they include statements from the survivors of these shootings, their parents, and also the politicians who are working to enact new laws to ensure that a shooting of this level will not happen again in the future. Each of these figures show the power that indexing has in *The New York Times* coverage of school shootings, since politicians consistently have their voices

heard the most in the news coverage of Newtown and Parkland. The only exception was month four of the Parkland shooting, in which politicians' voices were outnumbered by the voices of parents and victims, the point at which the Parkland students began a nationwide movement to mobilize youth voters and support gun-sense candidates in the midterm elections. Though important, this demonstrates that outsider counterspin does not do enough for parents and victims to be quoted more than politicians both in terms of overall coverage but also over six months of coverage.

The day after the horror in Newtown, a parent made the following statement: "It's sick that something like this could happen at an elementary school." (Applebome & Wilson, 2012, P. A1). In that same article, a quote from President Obama's press briefing was included, it stated: "Our hearts are broken...I know there is not a parent in America who does not feel the same overwhelming grief that I do...beautiful little kids...entire lives ahead of them..." (Barron, 2012, p. A1). This one instance shows that within twenty-four hours of the shooting, how parents have their voices juxtaposed within what elites are saying. However, as time progressed, quotes from politicians began to outnumber quotes from parents or victims, even though the statements made by parents and victims were incredibly powerful and moving. Given the fact that the Newtown students were too young to share their experiences, one eight-year-old boy made the following statement after leaving the funeral of one of his friends: "I used to do everything with him...We liked to wrestle. We played Wii. We just played all the time. I can't believe I'm never going to see him again." (Barry, 2012, p. A1). It is statements like this that should have been given a greater presence, as they are so emotionally charged, and come from the only individuals who truly know what happened when the shooting took place. This is not to say that politicians should not be quoted by the media, but in order for the public to have a better idea of the

atrocities that took place and potentially be more inclined to support new legislation, allowing victims and their parents the opportunity to have their voices heard is necessary.

Unlike Newtown, many Parkland students became very vocal, addressing the media immediately after the shooting took place. David Hogg, one of the primary student leaders, made the following plea to legislators in one of the first articles published on this shooting: “We need to do something. We need to get out there and be politically active...Congress needs to get over their political bias with each other and work towards saving children’s lives.” (Turkewitz, Burch, & Stack, 2018, p. A1). Shortly after one of America’s most deadly mass shootings, it became apparent that these students would stop at nothing short of having their voices heard, wanting to make a change so no one else would ever have to experience what they did. This same sentiment was highlighted months later in a statement from Delaney Tarr, another surviving student: “We will take action every day in every way until they simply cannot ignore us anymore.” (Shear, 2018, p. A1). This is yet another example of why it is so important for media coverage to grant victims and parents the opportunity to have their voices heard, as these powerful statements from teenagers who witnessed and survived the unthinkable brings another perspective to each article that is written. When non-elites are featured in the news, it allows the public to hear a side of the story that is different from politicians—for no matter how dedicated politicians are to making a change in the law, only the victims and their parents know exactly what happened, and they should use their experience to make it known to the public why these changes are necessary to prevent future tragedies such as the one they survived.

The Critical Point in Coverage: Four Months After the Shooting

As seen in Figure 1, there is a spike in the number of articles published on both the Newtown and Parkland school shootings four months after each shooting occurs—because two major events were occurring at this time. For the Newtown shooting, this is the point in time when stricter gun control legislation was debated, but ultimately failed to become a law. For the

Parkland shooting this is the point in time when the students are beginning their nationwide tour to register and mobilize youth voters, as well as support gun-sense candidates prior to the midterm elections. While legislation is discussed prior to this four-month mark, it takes time for the initial shock of the tragedy to subside, and for calls of ‘thoughts and prayers’ to dissipate. As time passes, the focus shifts towards preventing a future mass shooting from occurring in the future. However, as shown in Figures 12 and 13, politicians are more likely to be quoted in an article when discussing mental health than legislation—for both the Newtown and Parkland shootings. This is supposed to be the point in time where policy is being debated, yet the focus remains on the issue of mental health. Figure 12 shows that even the Newtown parents were more likely to discuss mental health than legislation, which was surprising given the fact that they were so adamant about enacting stricter gun control legislation. While the Parkland parents and victims were more likely to be quoted discussing legislation, politicians were still more likely to be discussing mental health four months after the shooting.

Connecting these figures back to the concept of agenda-setting, when the individuals capable of enacting new legislation (i.e. politicians) are more likely to be discussing mental health, this is the issue that will seem more salient to the public. While mental health is an important issue, when perceived as the blame for the shooting, it appears that mental health caused the shooting, not the gun—especially in a critical period of time for policy discussions.

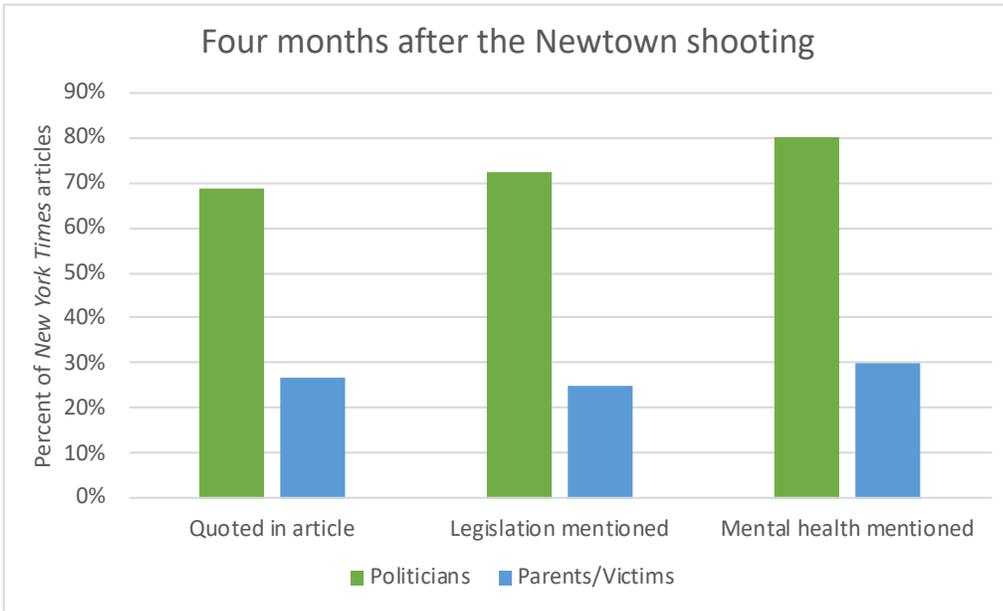


Figure 12: Percentage of articles at four months that quote politicians vs. parents/victims, mention legislation, mention mental health

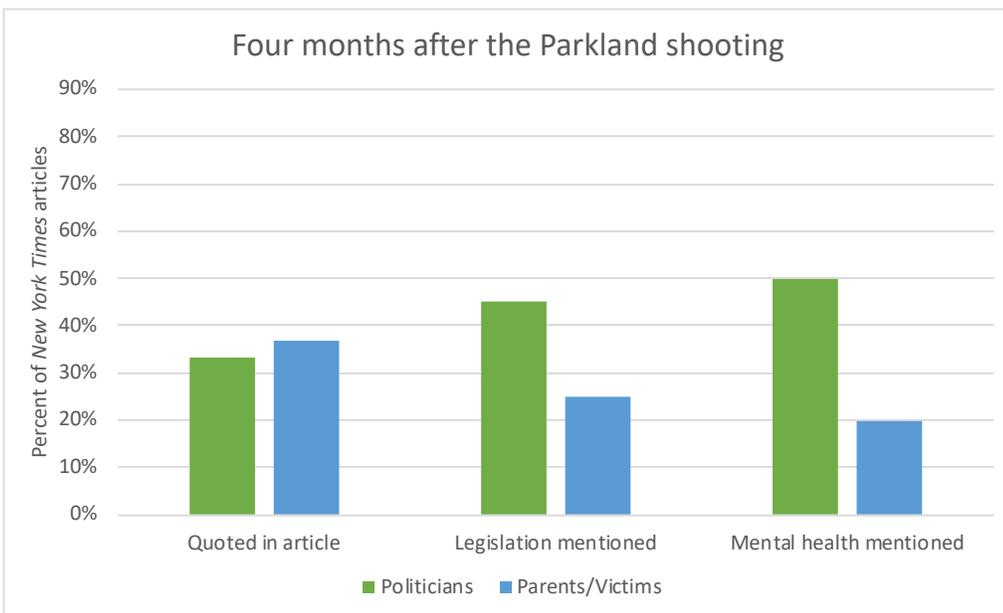


Figure 13: Percentage of articles at four months that quote politicians vs. parents/victims, mention legislation, mention mental health

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how the media covers school shootings. In doing so, I sought to understand how the Newtown and Parkland school shootings were framed by *The New York Times*, whose voices were heard in the coverage, and how media attention to these shootings changed over time. Overall, the collected data has found that a thematic frame was used consistently by *The New York Times* over the six months of coverage, politicians' voices were heard the most, and that events are a useful mechanism for keeping these shootings present in the news.

However, this study has limitations, the first of which being that the news coverage was only analyzed for the first six months following both shootings. The reasoning behind this is that it was enough time to begin to see patterns in the news coverage but also it was just enough time to do a thorough content analysis. Adding on to this, a second limitation is the fact that Newtown and Parkland were the only shootings that were analyzed. Similar to the justification for only looking at six months of coverage, I only analyzed these two cases in order to do a complete content analysis as well as I wanted to keep the focus on just school shootings. A third limitation is that *The New York Times* was the only news outlet used for this analysis, meaning that the findings analyzed in the discussion only apply to this newspaper, and there was no way to know how any other newspaper would have covered these two shootings. Related to this, one downfall to only analyzing how *The New York Times* covers school shootings is that this is a liberal-leaning outlet with a liberal-leaning audience (Pew Research Center, 2014, p. 9). This also means that the articles I analyzed reach a particular audience that is not representative of the U.S. public as a whole. Therefore, the coverage in *The New York Times* is not generalizable to the coverage of these shootings found in other outlets, such as Fox News, where the coverage may have looked completely different. A fourth limitation is the fact that the selection of search terms

resulted in missing nearly 40 articles on the Newtown shooting, which could have negatively impacted the data analysis process.

Related to this, another impact of the choice of search terms is that this data does not fully capture the activist movement which occurred after Newtown. In addition, this data may make it seem that parents and victims are not heard in the media, but it does not mean that they are not heard in society. The parents from Newtown were, and still are, very active in the community, continuing to organize events like speaking tours, and are very present on social media. The same logic applies to the Parkland students, who are still incredibly active, vocal, and continue their efforts to lobby for stricter gun control legislation. Since the search terms were more focused on the shooting itself, and the fact that the data only consisted of the first six months of news coverage, it does not provide a full picture of what these activists—both for the Newtown and Parkland shootings—have accomplished in the aftermath of these tragedies. With these limitations in mind, I would have liked to analyze more shootings and more news outlets over a longer period of time to have an even greater understanding of how the media covers mass shootings in general (i.e. not just school shootings). Since indexing was one of the main concepts that guided this thesis, it also would have been useful to code for the political ideology of the politicians being quoted in order to determine whether or not Democratic politicians were being prioritized over Republican politicians in the news coverage.

Expanding upon the above limitations, this study sparked interest in what future research could find on this topic. First, I would be interested to see how other news outlets covered these two shootings in order to determine the frames used and whose voices were prioritized—and if they differ from the decisions made by the gatekeepers of *The New York Times*. In addition, it is necessary to analyze how a variety of news outlets, both print and television, covers all mass shootings in order to understand the broader implications of the media coverage of these

tragedies. An additional suggestion for future research would be to match these findings to public opinion data in order to see how public opinion changes over time. This is critical as the media has profound effects on how the public perceives the information presented to them. So, analyzing public opinion in addition to media coverage will aid in understanding how public opinion of gun control is impacted by the media coverage of a shooting. An experimental way to measure this would be to analyze how hearing different people's voices, such as politicians vs. victims affect how people think about issues—are they more likely to support gun control when they are exposed to politicians' voices rather than victims' voices, or do victims have the power to influence public opinion.

This study, does however, have several implications regarding what journalists should do in terms of covering school shootings, as well as how activists can influence the media coverage of a shooting. First, it shows that even though via a thematic frame, legislation was prioritized in news coverage for both Newtown and Parkland, it was not enough in order to lead to the enactment of stricter gun control legislation. This leads to the question of whether or not journalists are doing enough to make it clear that gun control is necessary. However, journalists can only do so much in this regard, for politicians are the only individuals with the power to pass this legislation. So, what journalists can and should do is explicitly make the argument that the politics should be put aside in order to make the most informed decision for how to prevent further mass shootings. Gun control is a critical issue, and when legislators blame the other side for inaction, nothing gets accomplished. One potential way to do this is by journalists making their stories more emotionally compelling and persuasive, which scholars have attributed more to episodic frames than to thematic frames. This does not mean that journalists should continue to focus on the shooter, but a story that makes more emotional appeals to the public may have more profound effects on how they view issues such as gun control.

In addition to how to approach gun control, journalists also need to grant equal attention to the voices of victims of school shootings, as well as their parents. This is critical, as these individuals have the unique opportunity to share their deeply personal stories about the tragedy that took place. However, as seen with the Parkland shooting, the students' activism did not succeed in gaining more media coverage, potentially due to the fact that more attention was granted to issues surrounding the presidency. However, this did not stop these activists from their impactful work, for Emma González wrote in her op-ed that: "This isn't something we are ever going to forget about. This isn't something we are ever going to give up on." (González, 2018). Rather than changing the number of articles published on the Parkland shooting, what did change is how the articles were framed. Through the tireless work of the young Parkland activists, they kept the focus on the need for stricter gun control rather than blaming their tragedy on the mental health of the shooter. So, a lesson for activist organizations moving forward is that while it may be hard to increase the overall media coverage of an issue, what they can do is change the *type* of media coverage that an issue will receive. This is critical, as activists can have the power to not only shape media coverage, but also have a profound influence on public opinion on the issue being reported. When victims have the opportunity to have their voices heard, it is incredibly emotional and moving, and can have the potential to sway public opinion towards supporting new gun control legislation, which is why their voices should continue to be prioritized well into the future.

Time and time again, this country has come together to mourn the lives lost in a shooting tragedy. New gun control policies are often discussed, but nothing has been enacted at a federal level in order to prevent another deadly mass shooting from occurring in the future. America needs to realize that now more than ever, it is time for a change. The last mass shooting was one too many, enough is enough.

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Appendix

Code Book

ARTICLE CONTEXT

- 1 What is the article headline?
- 2 What is the ProQuest Document ID Number?
- 3 Who is the author of the article?
- 4 What date was the article published?
- 5 In what section is the article located?
- 6 What is the page number of the article?
- 7 What type of article is it?
 - 1: general news article (just sharing information about the shootings/related events—not the author’s opinion) Example: articles published to the Metropolitan Desk, National Desk, etc.
 - 2: opinion piece
 - 3: editorial
 - 4: letter to the editor
 - 5: other (sports article, business, arts, etc.—doesn’t fall in first 4 categories, but is still necessary to utilize)
- 8 What words are used to describe the shooting? Example: utilizing the following words when describing Newtown and/or Parkland: massacre, horror, atrocity, tragedy, mass shooting, school shooting, etc.

ARTICLE CONTENT

- 9 How many times is the shooter’s name mentioned in the article? For this question, the article must reference the shooter directly (i.e. referring to the suspect as ‘gunman’ or ‘shooter’ will

not be included). Also, the shooter's name will need to appear in the main text of the article, rather than in the caption of a picture, to be included in the data. Finally, some articles may refer to the suspects' mother as "Adam Lanza's mother"—these mentions will also not be included as this refers to the mother, *not* the shooter. The same goes for mentions of any other member of the shooter's family.

10 Is an activism-related event mentioned in the article?

- 0: no
- 1: yes

11 What is the event type?

- If no event is mentioned in the article: n/a

12 Is an activist organization mentioned? By organization, I mean organizations such as: March For Our Lives, Sandy Hook Promise, Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, etc., the NRA would be considered an organization, even though they are not in support of stricter gun control—these organizations should be related to the issue of gun control or gun rights.

- 0: no
- 1: yes

13 What is the organization?

- If no organization is mentioned: n/a

14 Is legislation mentioned? Any mention of legislation, whether it is current gun laws or proposed gun laws, is relevant. Legislation regarding mental health will also be relevant—essentially, if legislation is mentioned at all in the article, (regardless of type) it will be coded in the "yes" category.

- 0: no
- 1: yes

15 Is mental health mentioned?

- 0: no
- 1: yes

16 Are memorials for the victim mentioned? Example: discussing plans for a vigil, a victim's funeral, or memorial playground—more relevant to Newtown, but still acts as a memorial for the victims. Memorials can also include other displays of support such as: flowers laid outside the schools, signs displayed in a storefront, etc.

- 0: no
- 1: yes

QUOTES/VOICES

17 Is an activist quoted in the article? An activist can be defined as any individual speaking out in the aftermath of Newtown and Parkland—they can be parents, students, politicians, celebrity figures, etc. It should be noted that the activist the article is quoting *must* be calling for change in the aftermath of the shooting—an activist can either support or oppose stricter gun control legislation.

- 0: no
- 1: yes

18 Is a gun control supporter quoted? It should be noted that in order to be coded 'yes', the quote must specifically call for stricter gun control measures.

- 0: no
- 1: yes

19 Is an anti-gun control opposer quoted? It should be noted that in order to be coded 'yes', the quote must be speaking out against gun control legislation (stating that it is not necessary, would not have prevented the shooting, calling for arming teachers, etc.)

- 0: no
- 1: yes

20 Is a politician quoted? If any level politician—the President, member of Congress, state legislator, governor, etc.—it will be coded in the “yes” category.

- 0: no
- 1: yes

21 Is a victim quoted? A victim is defined as someone on the scene of Newtown or Parkland—a student or educator—someone who directly witnessed the attacks. The individual quoted must be a victim of only the Newtown or Parkland shootings to be included in the data, not a victim of a different mass shooting.

- 0: no
- 1: yes

22 Is a parent quoted? A parent is defined as a parent of an educator or student that was either killed or survived the Newtown or Parkland shootings. While individuals unrelated to a victim (for example a family friend of a victim, or a parent who lost a loved one to a different mass shooting) may be quoted in an article, only parents who had a child *directly* impacted by either of these shootings will be included in the data. Also, a Newtown parent quoted in an article about the Parkland shootings will be included in this data.

- 0: no
- 1: yes

23 The final section will serve the purpose of storing relevant quotes from each of the articles to later refer to in the data analysis section.

Data collection questions (utilized to generate initial data)

- **Descriptive questions**

- General questions
 - What percentage of the articles are published on the front page (A section AND page 1)?
 - Break down of percentages of types of articles (i.e. news, opinion, editorial, letter to the editor, other)
- In what percentage of the articles is/are: (answers whose voices are being heard research question)
 - Activists quoted?
 - Gun control activists quoted?
 - Anti-gun control activists quoted?
 - A politician quoted?
 - A victim quoted?
 - A parent quoted?
- In what percentage of the articles is:
 - An event mentioned?
 - An activist organization mentioned?
 - Legislation mentioned?
 - Mental health mentioned?
 - The shooter mentioned?
 - Could be an interesting comparison b/w Newtown and Parkland
 - A memorial for the victims mentioned?
 - Could also be interesting comparison

- What percentage of the articles (2 sets of data)?
 - Mention legislation AND mental health?
 - Is a gun control activist quoted AND legislation mentioned?
 - Is a gun control activist quoted AND mental health mentioned?
 - Is an anti-gun control activist quoted AND legislation mentioned?
 - Is an anti-gun control activist quoted AND mental health mentioned?
 - Is a politician quoted AND legislation mentioned?
 - Is a politician quoted AND mental health mentioned?
 - Is a parent quoted AND legislation mentioned?
 - Is a parent quoted AND mental health mentioned?
 - Parkland-only questions
 - Is a victim quoted AND legislation mentioned?
 - Is a victim quoted AND mental health mentioned?

Data to analyze—these questions were used to generate the graphs included in this thesis

RQ1: Framing

- Percentage of articles that mention legislation
- Percentage of articles that mention mental health
- Percentage of articles that mention legislation AND mental health
 - **Over time:** how does the use of these frames change over time?
- Percentage of articles that mention the shooter
 - Episodic because blame is being placed on the shooter rather than focusing on other factors

RQ2: Indexing

- Percentage of articles that quote activists
 - First, just activists, then break down by pro-gun control or anti-gun control activists
- Percentage of articles that quote a politician
 - Percentage of articles that quote parents and victims
- **Over time:** percentage of articles that quote politicians, parents, and victims (whose voices heard the most over time)
- What kinds of articles are politicians quoted the most in (news articles vs. op-eds or editorials)
 - Same for parents and victims

RQ3: Agenda-setting

- Total articles over time: compare Newtown and Parkland
- Percentage of articles that mention events—over time
- Number of articles on the front page