An Epitaph in 140 Characters: TV Journalists' Twitter Use Following the Roanoke Shootings

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This study uses qualitative methods to analyze the use of the #WeStandWithWDBJ hashtag following the deaths of two journalists in Roanoke, Virginia. The hashtag emerged on Twitter as a rallying point for broadcast journalists as they attempted to process the murders of Alison Parker and Adam Ward in August of 2015. Using the Uses and Gratifications Perspective and Terror Management Theory, 330 tweets with the hashtag were analyzed. Four distinct themes emerged, which explained how broadcast journalists used the hashtag to fulfill their eudaimonic need for solidarity in the wake of the tragedy. By focusing on memorializing and grief, support for WDBJ, their profession, and in-group boundaries, broadcast journalists found meaning and managed their fear through solidarity with their fellow television professionals.

On Wednesday, August 26, 2015, television journalists Alison Parker and Adam Ward were shot to death live on the air while on assignment for WDBJ in Roanoke, Virginia. A third victim, Vicki Gardner, was also shot, but survived. It was the first time any journalist had been killed on assignment in the United States in more than a decade (CNN Money, 2015). Following the murder, the killer, Vester Flanagan, posted video he had taken of the shootings on his Twitter feed. Flanagan later died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound after fleeing from police (Castillo, 2015).

Within 24 hours of the incident, television journalists from around the world were tweeting their support, changing their profile photos to television test patterns and hashtagging their comments with #WeStandWithWDBJ. An investigative reporter from Austin, Texas, Vicki Chen, is credited with initiating what became a long stream of digital eulogies by posting a photo of herself and her photographer using the hashtag just a few hours after the shooting (Pelletiere, 2015). The hashtag became an online memorial to the two slain journalists filled with posts by people who had never known them and a rallying call for solidarity among television news workers everywhere tied together only by their shared profession.

In this paper, we will examine the social-media-based mourning rituals that united those in the television news community to express both grief for and solidarity with the murdered journalists. We will bridge the uses and gratifications perspective with elements of terror management theory to explicate the eudaimonic (i.e., a type of enjoyment associated with meaning or self-actualization) motivations for communication following this highly mediated tragedy, focusing on TV journalists' Twitter use via the #WeStandWithWDBJ hashtag. Ultimately, we hope to expand the use of the uses and gratifications perspective by providing insight into how groups utilize social media during times of crisis and trauma and the specific ways in which social media serve their needs.

Social Media and Grief

The explosion of social media platforms has created new and easy ways for people to grieve and memorialize the dead (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013; Falconer, Sachsenweger, Gibson, & Norman, 2011). The shared spaces created by social media platforms allow people to come together in a process of shared grief and mourning of both loved ones and public figures (Bailey, Bell, & Kennedy, 2014; Harju, 2014).

Klastrup (2015) argued that social media profiles are an immediate go-to place for those affected by a sudden loss or tragic death. These profiles are usually public, giving anyone the right to mourn. As a result, social media platforms are a diverse hub of social interaction that allow for all forms of expressions of grief, even those that are anonymous and less structured (Harju, 2014).

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Additionally, social media provide much the same benefit as more traditional expressions of grief such as erecting roadside shrines. Comments on memorial social media pages and memorial Twitter feeds are the verbal and virtual equivalent of leaving flowers or candles at the site of an accident or tragedy (Harju, 2014; Klastrup, 2015). These virtual shrines have the advantage over their real-world equivalents in that anyone with an Internet connection can contribute. This not only allows people who are far away to share their condolences but also brings the once-private mourning space very much into the public sphere (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013; Klastrup, 2015).

This process of public grief is unique to the social media platform (Brubaker et al., 2013; Kern et al., 2013), and is a new and important form of grief expression (Carroll & Landry; 2010). That is, grief online turns the highly private matter of death into a highly mediated and public event (Klastrup, 2015). On social media, anyone (and everyone) can grieve someone's death, even if he or she did not know them personally (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). Additionally, memorial pages or feeds allow for the formation of communities or subcultures tied together by feelings of grief over the deceased. The page serves as a hub of communication for the group (Carroll & Landry, 2010).

Hjorth and Kim (2011) argued that the "intimate publics" that emerge on social media following a crisis reflect a greater capacity for personalization than traditional modes of communication, creating a deeper feeling of connectedness. As a result, social media and virtual grief are altering our rituals of mourning by creating an ever-changing practice of collective grief that is not possible in real contexts (Morehouse & Crandall, 2014).

It is not uncommon for people to share reflections and reactions following a tragedy (Kitch & Hume, 2008). However, the advent of social media has made it possible for the public to do so in a user-structured space (Gloviczki, 2012; Smith & McDonald, 2011). In other words, social media platforms allow for collective grief to be structured in a way that suits the needs of those who are participating. This study suggests that the #WeStandwithWDBJ hashtag served such a purpose. The hashtag served as a user-structured space for television news workers to congregate and take part in the collective grief for someone they did not know and were only connected with through their shared profession. The hashtag allowed for a community of grief to form around the deaths of Parker and Ward that was exclusive to those working in local TV news. Despite the fact that they were geographically separated from each other and the deceased, the hashtag allowed for grief and mourning to be expressed as if the users were there or had personally known the victims.

Given that social media channels have become a place where the public can go to discuss the implications of tragic and traumatic events (Robinson, 2011), an analysis of the outpouring on Twitter regarding the WDBJ shootings can shed light on how one specific group—broadcast journalists—chose to structure that space to meet their needs. Broadly, this study attempts to answer two primary research questions:

RQ1: How did professional broadcast journalists use Twitter to respond to the WDBJ shootings?

RQ2: To what extent does broadcast journalists' use of #WeStandWithWDBJ indicate conceptual linkages between the uses and gratifications theoretical perspective and terror management theory?

Uses and gratifications

The uses and gratifications (U&G) perspective assumes that people use communication content and/or channels purposefully to gratify individual needs determined by psychological and social factors (Klapper, 1963). Psychological needs and motives guide individuals' selection of communication channels and active consumption of media content (Rubin & Martin, 1998). Thus, the theoretical perspective is valuable for identifying motives for use of specific media or interpersonal communication channels to help interpret patterns of exposure, predict relevant outcomes, and contextualize unintended effects (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974).

In the modern media environment, people are not only active consumers but also engage in content creation and collaboration (Cotrău, 2015; Lee & Ma, 2012). Platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube allow for gratification of various motives, as well as the potential for innovating diverse uses of each channel. This is because in contrast to traditional media, newer communication channels hold the capacity for interactivity, demassified control, and asynchronous communication (Ruggiero, 2000).

Studies have shown social media users can experience a variety of gratifications including obtaining information or entertainment (Cotrău, 2015), socializing and status-seeking (LaRose & Eastin, 2004), or sharing news (Lee & Ma, 2012). Social media users may also experience pleasure from socializing openly with other users or even by observing their communicative acts voyeuristically (Cotrău, 2015). In her analysis of Twitter use, Chen (2011) found that extended use (i.e., tweeting and sending @replies) gratified an essential human need to connect with other people.

Perloff (2015) argued that the U&G perspective is uniquely positioned for the study of new media because of its focus on active audience members who are both senders and receivers of messages. Related to the present study, the U&G perspective is applicable because broadcast journalists (i.e., the audience) actively chose Twitter and the hashtag as the platform necessary to meet their specific needs. In other words, the self-agency of a platform like Twitter tends to draw users who are motivated by the need to build community (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Therefore, we argue that broadcast journalists, who are essentially professional content creators, were motivated to choose Twitter as an appropriate platform to meet their needs for reflection and community following the WDBJ tragedy.

Terror Management Theory and Mortality Salience

Psychological literature also provides a useful framework for understanding the use of social media during tragedy. Terror Management Theory, and specifically the concept of mortality salience, can be useful to help explain broadcast journalists' motivations following the WDBJ shootings and the phenomenon of the #WeStand… hashtag.

Terror Management Theory argues that as humans, we are uniquely aware of our own vulnerability and mortality (Pyszczyski, Greenberg, Solomon, & Hamilton, 1990). This awareness creates the potential for ever-present anxiety surrounding thoughts of our own deaths (Greenberg, Pyszcynski, & Solomon, 1990). To survive the weight of this knowledge, we turn to culture and shared symbolic conceptions of reality (Pyszczyski et al., 1990). This becomes especially evident during times of tragedy, when people cling to the values of their in-groups and gain a sense of symbolic immortality by feeling part of something that is more meaningful than their own daily lives (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, & Johnson, 1999).

Specifically, the concept of mortality salience suggests that the more we become aware of the possibility of our own death, the more we feel the need for identification with an in-group (Routledge, Juhl, Vess, Cathey, & Liao, 2012). The in-group serves as a temporarily enduring system that can be used as a self-defense mechanism against the terror of our own mortality by symbolizing immortality (Herrera & Sani, 2013). In other words, individuals may die, but a group lives on. Therefore, connecting to a broader group allows members to maintain a sense that they can (symbolically, at least) transcend death (Routledge et al., 2012). This provides a buffer for the anxiety caused when people are confronted with their own mortality (Fritsche, Jonas, & Fankhänel, 2008; Pyszczynski et al., 1996).

Motivation and Mortality Salience

Professional journalism is often a high-risk occupation. Internationally, 42 journalists, nine citizen journalists, and two media assistants were killed in connection with their work in the first half of 2018 (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). The Committee to Protect Journalists (2018) reported deaths with confirmed motives for 1,418 journalists and media workers, all of whom had either been murdered or killed in crossfire/combat or while on dangerous assignment between 1992 and 2018. The International Press Institute (2018) reported that 1,830 journalists and media staff were killed between 1997 and 2018, either while on assignment or because they were targeted due to their profession.

Hohman and Hogg (2015) argued that when people are made to fear death, they are motivated to identify with their in-groups in order to assuage that fear. Therefore, combining U&G with the concept of mortality salience provides an opportunity to study the motivations for use of social media during tragedy, specifically within a given group. It stands to reason that the #WeStand… hashtag became a means through which to gratify the need to manage fear and anxiety associated with mortality salience amongst broadcast journalism professionals after two of their own group members were shot and killed on the air.

This motivation to cope with tragedy is a eudaimonic motivation, as suggested by Oliver and Raney (2011), who argued that media can be consumed, not just for pleasure, but to find meaning in tragic or somber times. Eudaimonic motivations reflect a broader need for insight into the human condition. Additionally, Oliver and Raney (2011) added that eudaimonic motivations are born from wistful, nostalgic, or brooding affective states that trigger awareness about vulnerability and the fleeting nature of one's life. This is similar to assertions regarding terror management theory and mortality salience by Goldenberg et al. (1999). They argued that tragedy is an appealing form of entertainment because it helps people assuage fears of their own vulnerability while contemplating the death of someone other than themselves. Additionally, Kim and Oliver (2013) argued that discrete affects, such as sadness or anxiety, can drive people to seek general media messages or value information that focuses on meaningfulness rather than engaging in distracting messages. In other words, people seek out messages that remind them of their negative experience in order to better contemplate the meaning of it.

It can be argued, then, that the #WeStandWithWDBJ hashtag was attractive to those experiencing sadness and fear over the Roanoke shootings because it allowed them to find meaning in a tragic event over which they had no personal control. As Fritsche et al. (2008) suggested, seeking out connections with in-groups serves as a way to restore control in the face of mortality salience. Also, consuming media messages related to tragedy or sadness allows individuals to acknowledge and cope with the fragility of human life (Kim & Oliver, 2013), an assumption that is supported by terror management theory (Goldenberg et al., 1999). Thus, this study argues that eudaimonic motivations drove broadcast journalists to communicate with their in-group via the #WeStandwithWDBJ hashtag to alleviate the fear and anxiety associated with mortality salience following the WDBJ shootings.

Both U&G and mortality salience are most often studied with quantitative survey methods. However, given the immediacy of social media posts, a qualitative analysis of the tweets associated with the hashtag #WeStandwithWDBJ provides an opportunity to add to the body of research in both areas by revealing insights from the moment the sentiment was expressed, rather than asking participants to recall their thoughts after the fact in a survey (Gloviczki, 2012; Riffe & Stovall, 1989). By explicating the themes among the messages communicated in the moment, this study will attempt to shed light on how in-groups use social media to alleviate fear and anxiety associated with the death of one of their own.

Method

While the Roanoke shootings were discussed on multiple social media platforms, this study focuses specifically on Twitter and the hashtag #WeStandwithWDBJ. Twitter stands apart from other popular social networks because it has emerged as a valid news source (Moon & Hadley, 2014) and a constant information stream (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). Journalists are notably more active on Twitter versus other social media sites (Larrson & Moe, 2011), with television journalists being the most avid Twitter users (Moon & Hadley, 2014). Additionally, the use of hashtags on Twitter has become a common practice for disseminating and generating sentiment about an event (Wexler, 2014). Hashtags, like #WeStandWithWDBJ, develop organically and provide an interesting combination of news and opinion (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012), and they allow for the rapid creation of discursive communities around a given event (Bruns & Burgess, 2012).

To understand how TV journalists used Twitter in the days following the Roanoke tragedy, Tweets using the hashtag #WeStandWithWDBJ were stored for analysis with the website Storify. Storify allows users to search specific social media sites based on hashtags or other terms and topics, and then store them for later use. Twitter was searched using the hashtag #WeStandWithWDBJ, and also the same wording without the hashtag symbol. Some tweets included images portraying the "WeStand…." phrase, but were not specifically hashtagged with it. These tweets were still included in the analysis because they used the key phrase being investigated and served the same purpose of grief expression as those tweets that were specifically hashtagged. For this analysis, only tweets by broadcast news workers were used. The Twitter account for each tweet was checked to verify that the user was a member of a broadcast news organization based on their profile picture and description. Any tweets from non-broadcast workers were not included in the analysis. Any user with an ambiguous profile that did not clearly indicate a job in broadcast news was also excluded.

Tweets were gathered from the week between August 26, 2015, and September 4, 2015. The tweets expressing grief were concentrated in the first seven days following the shooting, with a dramatic drop off after

September 2. Therefore, the period of analysis was confined to the first seven days following the shooting. After deleting retweets and duplicates, this process yielded 330 unique tweets, 278 of which included images.

A directed discourse analysis was conducted on the data. This analysis involved constant comparison of data to identify categories and over-arching themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), using the lenses of terror management and eudaimonic motivations. This approach is useful for refining, supporting, validating, enriching, or extending a theory/theoretical framework, particularly when descriptive evidence would enhance existing research of a particular phenomenon (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researchers did not begin the study with existing themes; rather, the themes emerged from the coding of the content contained in the tweets (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). The goal of this type of analysis is to take apart the data, conceptualize it, and develop concepts and themes based on their properties in order to determine what those parts can reveal about the whole (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Discourse analysis was appropriate for this study because it allowed the authors to explore the situational meanings being developed around the murders and the relationships being developed and communicated among the social group using the hashtag (Gee, 2018). Additionally, as Gee (2014) noted, discourse analysis can be used to discover how members of a group use language and values associated with their group to enact their specific socially recognizable identity as well as engage in a common activity within the group. Therefore, this approach fit the goal of the study to investigate how broadcast journalists used language through Twitter to communicate grief regarding the tragedy amongst their peers.
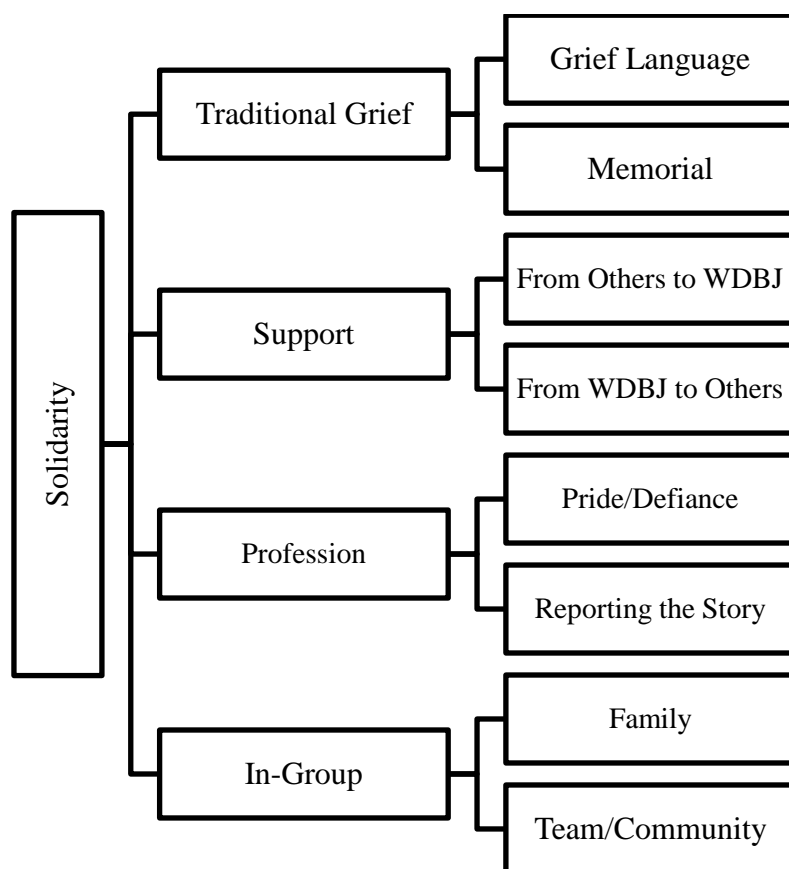

Figure 1. Hierarchy of themes derived from directed approach to qualitative discourse analysis of broadcast journalists' tweets using #WeStandWithWDBJ

The themes emerged from the analysis of the content contained in the tweets (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). Given the complexity of analyzing myriad forms of expression presented in each tweet and the need to consider manifest and latent meanings in this exploratory study, we used a negotiated agreement approach to enhance intercoder agreement (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013). The authors hand-coded the data separately, then compared findings, such that a shared perspective emerged that was informed by the literature (Brubaker et al., 2013). An independent coder was then given a sample of tweets (*n = 54,* 16%) and asked to code them based on the existing categories that had emerged from the analysis. The independent coder's categorizations matched the researchers' categorizations at a rate of 81%, which suggests strong intercoder agreement for this analysis, based on the standards established in other qualitative studies utilizing similar methods (Campbell et al., 2013). The analysis revealed an overarching theme of solidarity, which manifested through four secondary themes and eight sub-themes. Figure 1 illustrates the hierarchy of themes identified in this analysis.

Results

Primary Theme: Solidarity

At the time of the shooting, a small group of hashtags began to emerge in connection with the event such as #WDBJ, #WeAreWDBJ and #WDBJStrong. However, the one that took hold and served as the primary rallying point was #WeStandwithWDBJ. The fact that this particular wording emerged as the preferred avenue for expression regarding the shooting supports the overarching theme of solidarity that emerged from the analysis. As Fritsche et al. (2008) argued, when a person feels a threat to their existence or is reminded of their mortality, they turn to their in-group to reestablish a feeling of control. In this way, congregating around the #WeStand... hashtag served as a rallying point for in-group members to gather, feel solidarity, and circle the wagons against an existential outside threat that reminded them of the possibility that they could die on the job (Robinson, 2011).

Analysis of the text and images in each tweet revealed four secondary themes that supported the primary theme of solidarity (see Figure 1). These themes included: traditional grief, support, profession, and in-group. Within each of these thematic categories, messages were further codified into sub-themes (see Figure 1) that more specifically illustrate how each need was expressed and gratified communicatively in response to this traumatic event. Tables 1-4 provide examples of tweets in each secondary theme, specified by subtheme. In some cases, a tweet could express numerous sentiments in various ways. Therefore, the thematic categories these brief yet complex messages yielded should not be construed as mutually exclusive. Collectively, these themes suggested several needs that use of the #WeStand… hashtag fulfilled for journalists as they attempted to connect to their fellow broadcasters and make sense of the unexpected deaths (Wisman & Koole, 2003).

Secondary Theme 1: Traditional grief

Broadcast journalists used the hashtag to express their grief, sympathy, or anxiety, and they engaged in communicative practices that bore resemblance to mourning rituals in offline contexts. A motif of color bars predominated the visual imagery in this category. The color bars, or TV test pattern, are a universally recognized symbol among TV broadcast workers because it is unique to the television industry. Using this as a profile picture served as the first step toward forming a community of grief built around a shared occupation. Vicary and Fraley (2010) found similar behavior among students who changed their Facebook profile pictures to an image of Virginia Tech or the Northern Illinois memorial ribbon in the wake of shootings on those campuses.

Many of the photographs also displayed #WeStandWithWDBJ, either as part of the photo or in a caption beneath it. This secondary theme included 137 tweets, or 47% of the tweet total. It was the largest group of tweets among all four secondary themes, suggesting a strong need among the users to grieve the loss of the two victims. See Table 1 for examples of tweets in this thematic category, specified by subtheme.

Sub-theme: Grief language. Within the theme of traditional grief, messages revealed use of traditional grief language to express sorrow for the loss of Parker and Ward and recognition of the tragic circumstances surrounding their deaths. This language appeared in images as well as in accompanying captions. For example, many users offered "condolences" or included "RIP" ("rest in peace") in a hashtag or as part of their message. Phrases such as "praying for…," "thinking of…," or "heavy hearts" allowed users to express sympathy or sorrow in much the same fashion as a mourner would write in a sympathy card or guest book at a funeral (Harju, 2014;

Klastrup, 2015). Images included ribbons in the favorite colors of the deceased or black ribbons juxtaposed against a screen of color bars and accompanied by the station's call letters. Other images showed the victims either alone or together. The majority of images consisted of group photos of staffers in the newsroom (often holding signs displaying the hashtag) or posed images of reporters and videographers in the field, again often holding signs displaying the hashtag. In these images, journalists literally stood with WDBJ and used traditional grief language to underscore the symbolic meaning of their actions as well. A total of 37 tweets fit this theme. Twenty-six of those included images. Almost half (*n* = 11) of those images were posed station shots featuring the hashtag and including messages of grief.

Table 1

Traditional Grief: Subthemes with Explanations and Exemplars

Traditional Grief	
Grief Language	**Memorial**
Traditional language used to express grief and/or sorrow. Much the same as what would be expressed in person. • Condolences • Thinking of • Praying for • RIP • Heavy Hearts	Language used to memorialize or honor the victims. Images served the same purpose as a teddy bear at a roadside memorial. A way to say, "I was affected by this." • In honor of • In memory • Never forget • Hashtag only • Ribbons and color bars
Examples	
[Image of field reporter and camera operator] MT @ShannelDouglas: Today was really hard getting through live shots! Our hearts are heavy! pic.twitter.com/wKystuqdlZ #WeStandWithWDBJ #PJNET	*[Image of broadcaster wearing memorial ribbons]* The @WTKR3 team is wearing these in honor of Alison and Adam. #WeStandWithWDBJ pic.twitter.com/iUj24JyCHY
[Still shot of hearse linking to short video of funeral procession] Rest in Peace Adam Ward… Your shift is over. #WDBJ #WeStandWithWDBJ #NEWSFAMILY pic.twitter.com/gVQ42YMQXq	*[Image of camera operator, news van, and field reporter looking into camera]* #WeStandWithWDBJ @WDBJ7 pic.twitter.com/eZMstcpdT3
Donna Harris @DonnaABC7 Rest in Peace Adam #WeStandWithWDBJ	*[Replaced profile picture with image of color bars superimposed with black memorial ribbon]* Susan Phillips @Starbuck 1004 #WeStandWithWDBJ

Note: For tweets that included images or videos, brief descriptions of visual content are noted to help contextualize the written text of each message.

        Sub-theme: Memorial. In a similar vein, users employed memorializing language and images to honor Ward and Parker and their memory. The images and words posted on Twitter allowed mourners to participate in group grieving without requiring intimate interaction. It was a way to connect with the tragedy in the absence of any real and tangible connection. Journalists were able to convey the sentiment that they had been affected by the deaths of Parker and Ward, despite not having known them personally. Harju (2014) found similar behavior among online mourners of Apple founder Steve Jobs. Social media allowed these mourners to recognize each other as belonging to the same community, thus legitimizing their feelings of loss for someone they never knew.

Posts included phrases such as "in honor of" or "in memory of," as well as references to remembering/never forgetting the victims, moments of silence, and acknowledgements of the one-week anniversary of the deaths. Images included pictures of actual memorials erected in honor of the victims in Roanoke, ribbons and/or color bars, and posed field or station shots accompanied by memorial messages or solely by the hashtag.

Of the 330 total tweets, 100 of them fit into this theme, with 90 of those including images. Sixty-one of those tweets including images were posed field or station shots of broadcast journalists accompanied only by the hashtag and no other words. This combination of posed field shot and hashtag with no other message seemed to serve as the most significant way for the journalists to not only memorialize the victims, but also to gratify the need for identification with fellow broadcasters. The need for strong connection with an in-group is often increased with mortality salience (Castano, Yzerbyt, & Bourguignon, 2003), which may have motivated the journalists to participate in this particular way, versus tweeting the more "traditional" memorial images of ribbons, colors bars, or the victims themselves, which comprised only 14 of the images in this theme.

Secondary Theme 2: Support

In-group support is an important means of restoring a sense of control following morality salience (Fritsche et al., 2008), so it makes sense that the next largest secondary theme was Support. A total of 115 tweets (35%) included elements of this theme. The wording of these tweets seemed to offer and acknowledge support during the grieving process. This type of communication reflects the messages that one would typically express to someone experiencing a loss. This theme also highlights respect for the mourners' need to withdraw from interaction during the bereavement process, with the recipients of support politely recognizing the condolences of others while still requiring a certain degree of solitude to grieve. As a result, this theme allowed local broadcast journalists to satisfy their need to offer support and feel connected with WDBJ and each other, transcending geographical boundaries, but without invading the private mourning space of those who were actually involved in the incident. This theme was especially important to the feeling of overall solidarity that the use of the hashtag embodied. Pervasive throughout the messages in this theme was a feeling of "oneness" and the idea that only other television journalists could truly understand the emotions those at WDBJ were going through. See Table 2 for examples of tweets in this thematic category, specified by subtheme.

Sub-theme: From others to WDBJ. Messages in this sub-theme involved sending thoughts, love, prayers, and other expressions of emotional support to WDBJ. The use of words such as "sending," "to you," "with you," "from ours to yours," "we are with you," or "we're all with you," allowed journalists from across the country to express support when they were unable to take any other tangible action. Group photos of staffers at other stations seemed to solidify the notion that journalists in other markets shared in the grief of those who worked at WDBJ. Of the 115 tweets sent in support, 106 of them fell into this sub-theme. Roughly 77% ($n = 86$) of those included images, and the majority of those images ($n = 62$) were of posed station groups with a message sending support. Much like within the Memorial sub-theme, these station images seemed to emerge as the most effective way to express solidarity and to say "we are one" and "we are with you."

Sub-theme: From WDBJ to others. While WDBJ did not use the #WeStand… hashtag often, it was clear from images included in the few tweets they did send that they were monitoring the string. They posted photos of a memorial wall in the WDBJ newsroom exhibiting printed pages of the tweets they had received. They also shared photos of journalists from other stations who came to WDBJ to help with day-to-day operations during the crisis. Posts from WDBJ staffers acknowledged that they had seen the outpouring of support from other journalists and were grateful. There were only nine tweets in this sub-theme, supporting the assertion that WDBJ was not participating actively in the outpouring of support and solidarity being shared amongst other local TV markets. However, these few tweets did seem to serve as an acknowledgement of the feelings of solidarity and oneness being expressed.

Table 2

Support: Subthemes with Explanations and Exemplars

Support	
From Others to WDBJ	**From WDBJ to Others**
Sending of prayers, thoughts, and feelings directly to WDBJ. Solidifying the feelings of "oneness." Mentions of other stations going to help WDBJ. • To you • With you • Sending thoughts, love or prayers	WDBJ using hashtag to acknowledge outpouring of support. Expressed thanks but asked to be left alone to grieve. Typically language of someone experiencing a loss. • Shots of memorial wall at WDBJ • Expressions of thanks
Examples	
[Image of Ward and Parker accompanied by WDBJ station logo, with FOX 46 Charlotte station logo beneath hashtag] MT @FOX46News: Our thoughts and prayers are with @WDBJ7. pic.twitter.com/MzcON705lP #WeStandWithWDBJ #PJNET	*[Image of printed tweets from the hashtag pinned to the wall inside the WDBJ newsroom]* So beautiful…our wall of tributes to Adam and Alison. Thank you. #WeStandWith WDBJ pic.twitter.com/XcSX6Vc8mh
[Image of News12 New Jersey crew in studio standing at news desk, holding a white board bearing the handwritten hashtag] MT@News12NJ: The @News12NJ evening staff offers our support to the staff at @WDBJ7. pic.twitter.com/Amil5dhBpQ #WeStandWithWDBJ #PJNET	*[Image of member of a rival news team helping to edit the WDBJ broadcast]* THANK YOU Andrew Freiden NBC12! This means a lot to us all. #WeStandWithWDBJ facebook.com/RachelDePompaN… pic.twitter.com/UuogjloRz2
Margaret Kreger @margaretk22 @KimberlyWDBJ we're thinking about you guys this week at @myfox8. Proud of all the strength you are showing. #WeStandWithWDBJ	Kimberly McBroom @KimberlyWDBJ So grateful for the kindness and encouragement you have given me this week. It means more than you know. #WeStandWithWDBJ #WeAreWDBJ7

Note: For tweets that included images or videos, brief descriptions of visual content are noted to help contextualize the written text of each message.

Secondary Theme 3: Profession

The next largest secondary theme following Support was Profession. Ninety tweets (27%) embodied elements of this theme, which diverged widely from the two previous themes by focusing less on grief and more on identification as journalists. In times of tragedy members cling to the values of their in-group in order to alleviate mortality salience (Goldberg et al., 1990), especially those members who define themselves based on that group membership (Routledge et al., 2012). Tweets in this theme seemed to embody that.

The tweets highlighted a spirit of tenacity and duty in carrying out their work in the face of danger, fear, or other stressful conditions. Journalists typically strive to keep themselves out of the story, but through their messages on #WeStandWithWDBJ, journalists were able to show and tell their own stories about their guiding principles and sense of service to their communities.

While the two previous themes seemed to express a feeling of solidarity through oneness, with this theme, journalists seemed to be fulfilling a need to assert exactly "who" they were "one" with. As terror management theory suggests, those experiencing fear over tragedy find solace in the norms and values of their own groups (Pyszczynski et al., 1996). These tweets seemed to establish the boundaries of who they are and what it means to be a part of this group. See Table 3 for examples of tweets in this thematic category, specified by subtheme.

Table 3

Profession: Subthemes with Explanations and Exemplars

Profession	
Pride/Defiance	**Reporting the Story**
Expressions of pride for their profession. A need to work through fear and/or sorrow. A way to establish that this is who they are and this is what they do. • Candid and posted field images. • Working "for" victims • Working while "thinking of" victims	Use of hashtag to report information about the story. • Standard broadcast style language • Links to articles • Links to articles with commentary
Examples	
[Image of reporter getting ready to go on camera in the field] We do this for Alison and Adam. #WeStandWithWDBJ pic.twitter.com/rbqVAjet5j	Stephanie Susskind @StephanieWINK Funeral today for cameraman #AdamWard, gunned down in Virginia last week. More than 1,000 mourners paid respects Monday. #WeStandWithWDBJ
[Image of reporter outside the newsroom with news vehicle in background] Headed out on my assignment for the day. Thinking of Alison and Adam. #WeStandWithWDBJ pic.twitter.com/pOZV3TFHAL	*[Portrait photos of Parker and Ward]* Officials say both journalists were shot in head in on-air shooting. #WeStandWithWDBJ bit.ly/1lp15DX pic.twitter.com/wHpwXOWRY9
Tonight was my first outdoor LIVE shot since last week's shooting…I don't know if I'll ever look at this aspect of my responsibilities the same way…but I refuse to let the tragedy dictate how I do my job and get information to our viewers. Some of my best friends stand in front of the camera, and behind them on a daily basis…It's a labor of love for us…but tonight I have a heavy heart for Alison and Adam from WDBJ… *[Image of microphone with station logo in foreground, camera and light in background]* Feeling a little uneasy tonight, but filled with confidence. This is what we do. #WeStandWithWDBJ #AlisonAndAdam Ben Hutchison @BennyHutch	*[Image of church exterior, taken from street]* The funeral for Adam Ward has started at First Baptist Church in Roanoke. #WDBJ #WeStandWithWDBJ #NEWSFAMILY pic.twitter.com/YsHDxTrKCk

Note: For tweets that included images or videos, brief descriptions of visual content are noted to help contextualize the written text of each message.

Sub-theme: Pride/Defiance. The tweets in this category included language that defined who they are and expressed pride for what they do. This seemed to echo Hohman and Hogg's (2015) assertion that when faced with mortality salience, group members will feel the need to defend their group, or as Vaes, Heflick, and Goldberg (2010) suggested, maintain the perception of their group as meaningful. To do this, they posted images of themselves working in the field, with or without accompanying text. When text was used, journalists made references to working "for" the victims (i.e., in their honor), while "thinking of" the victims, or expressing admiration for WDBJ, whose staffers were working under emotionally draining conditions. Even journalists who were not affiliated with WDBJ described their commitment to carrying out their professional responsibilities despite feeling fear or sorrow. In other words, they seemed to be saying, "We will go on because this is who we are and what we do."

There were 42 tweets in this category, and 41 of them included images. The majority (*n* = 24, 58%) were posed images of reporters in the field with accompanying messages most often expressing that they were working for the victims or thinking of them as they worked. Thirteen (32%) were candid images taken of reporters working in the field (e.g., doing interviews or preparing for live shots). These were most often accompanied by messages expressing the need to work despite fear.

Sub-theme: Reporting the Story. Part of demonstrating their commitment to journalism meant covering the shootings and subsequent newsworthy events, just as they would any other story. So journalists also used #WeStandWithWDBJ to disseminate information about this tragedy even though it affected their own industry. Because the hashtag originated after the shootings, there was no breaking news coverage or retweets of stories related to the shootings themselves. Topics included Ward's funeral and Parker's vigil, the growth of public memorials as news viewers and community members reacted to the incident, and reports of journalists from other stations helping WDBJ. Another prominent angle to this coverage included stories about the Virginia Tech football players wearing stickers with teal and maroon ribbons on their helmets to honor Ward (a Virginia Tech alum) and his colleague.

Because Ward had a public funeral and Parker's family held a private service, there were more references and images related to Ward's death. In covering his funeral via #WeStandWithWDBJ, journalists showed restraint. They posted photos of the exterior of the church from a distance, with no images of the interior of the building and very few images of the mourners in attendance. Furthermore, coverage of the incident and its aftermath on this hashtag was restricted to public expressions of grief and official displays of tribute.

Unlike coverage of other violent crimes, any reporting using #WeStandWithWDBJ was decidedly positive or commemorative. The platform allowed journalists to exercise their commitment to journalism and their need to spread information as they are trained to do; however, the reports did not illustrate traditional news reporting practices in covering similar crimes, such as identifying the killer and his or her motivations or capturing emotional reactions of family and friends of the victims, which suggests the motive of preserving this hashtag as a safe space for remembrance and solidarity. Additionally, the lack of tweets about the killer, Vester Flanagan, or the other non-journalist victim, Vicki Gardner, suggests a preference for the in-group versus the out-group that is amplified by mortality salience (Harmon-Jones, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & McGregor, 1997).

These tweets were written in standard broadcast news language and conveyed details of whatever latest development was being communicated. As would be expected, the images used corresponded with the news item being tweeted. Forty-eight tweets fit this theme. Twenty-eight (58%) included images.

Secondary Theme 4: In-group

The final secondary theme, In-group, serves some of the same purposes as the Profession theme, such as helping to establish the boundaries of their community and delineating the shared unique experiences among its group members. However, this theme also shares some of the same purposes as the Traditional Grief and Support themes. Tweets in this theme continued to help establish a connection with WDBJ and unite the group in a shared space of mourning by the repeated use of words such as "family," "team," and "community."

In this case, references to family, team, and community all helped establish the "one big happy family" narrative that transcended the often fierce competition amongst local TV stations. This difference seems to reflect the need for pro-social behavior toward the in-group (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002) and the desire for the group to be "one" and very much "real" (Vaes et al., 2010) often enhanced during times of mortality salience. The "we are one" message was pervasive throughout tweets in this category. There were 72 tweets in this theme, which amounted to 22% of all tweets studied. See Table 4 for examples of tweets in this thematic category, specified by subtheme.

Sub-theme: Family. Tweets to #WeStandWithWDBJ established an emotional connection between journalists at other newsrooms and the staff at WDBJ, satisfying a need to be bound together in grief and a shared experience at having witnessed the tragedy itself from the unique vantage point of being professional journalists. This sense of unity was apparent in the repeated use of the word "family" as well as other familial terms such as "brother" or "sister" to describe co-workers in the news industry. Messages also included references to a sameness with the victims or WDBJ and references to personal and/or actual connections to WDBJ. Some messages expressed caring and appreciation for co-workers—suggesting journalists who posted to the hashtag looked at the people in

their own newsrooms in a new light because they empathized with staffers at WDBJ who had lost their co-workers, or with Parker and Ward, who worked and died together.

Thirty-five tweets fit this sub-theme, and all of them included images. The majority (*n* = 18) were posed images of station staff accompanied by messages expressing a feeling of family or gratitude. Other images included shots of reporters in the field, color bars, and the staff of WDBJ. Unlike other themes, images in this theme (*n* = 6) also included personal photographs of reporters when they were young, reporters' children, and photographs from when users had actually worked at WDBJ earlier in their careers. These types of images further supported the family theme and suggested an element of self-reflection that often accompanies tragedy (Kitch & Hume, 2008).

Table 4

In-Group: Subthemes with Explanations and Exemplars

In-Group	
Family	**Team/Community**
Tweets establishing a connection with WDBJ. Establishing an in-group and creating an emotional tie. They are one despite competition. Using the familial terms to reference: • The industry • Coworkers • WDBJ • Fellow journalists	Further establishes the in-group by suggesting they can all work together. Suggests unification based on common characteristics. • Team • Community • Crew • Colleagues • References to competing stations working together
Examples	
[Black and white image of broadcaster during previous employment at WDBJ] MT @CecilyTynan: Proud to start my career @WDBJ a newsroom where coworkers are like family. pic.twitter.com/16MpR62rKi #WeStandWithWDBJ #PJNET	*[Image of microphones with station logos from competing networks in the same community]* MT @SBarrettWFTV: From Orlando. pic.twitter.com/qWzwnnjXdz #WeStandWithWDBJ. #PJNET
[Image of on-air talent and crew standing in studio for posed group photo] MT @thetopstoryWYFF: We are all one family. pic.twitter.com/rJBl0b9mYZ #WeStandWithWDBJ #PJNET	*[Image of field reporter and camera operator]* I relate to the teamwork between Alison & Adam as Tim and I rely on each other every night, #WeStandWithWDBJ @WDBJ7 pic.twitter.com/1JNj060lJM
Derek Petersen @Derek_Photog RIP Adam, please watch over your brothers in photography from heaven #WeStandWithWDBJ	Floyd Hillman @FloydHillman While this industry may seem massive, it is a tight, TIGHT community! #WeStandWithWDBJ #Roanoke #media

Note: For tweets that included images or videos, brief descriptions of visual content are noted to help contextualize the written text of each message.

Sub-theme: Team/Community. Group identification was also expressed through references to teamwork and community. In these messages, users seemed to put aside competition in favor of collaboration and connection through the television news profession as a whole. The word "team" was expressed 24 times in reference to station staff such as "From one news team to another," or "The Newschannel 6 morning team is keeping the #WDBJ morning team in their thoughts and prayers." The words "community" and "colleagues" were used five times each, mostly in reference to their own station or working with other stations. For example, "While this industry may seem massive, it is a tight, TIGHT community!" and "Thinking of our colleagues @WDBJ7 in Roanoke."

There were 37 tweets in this category, and 36 included images. The majority (*n*=26) were of posed station shots accompanied by messages referencing news team, colleagues, and news crews. Ten images were posed field shots, three of which showed multiple stations working together. There was one personal image—an old photo from when the user previously worked at WDBJ.

Discussion

This study attempted to shed light on how professional broadcast journalists used Twitter to respond to the WDBJ shootings and the extent to which analysis of their tweets using the #WeStandWithWDBJ hashtag might indicate conceptual linkages between the uses and gratifications theoretical perspective and terror management theory. In the wake of a senseless and tragic event that resonated solidly within their profession, television journalists flocked to Twitter in an effort to connect with each other and manage the fear of death ignited by the murders of two of their own.

The growing collection of photos and words associated with the hashtag served to collectively memorialize the two fallen journalists in a relatively disparate community, similar to what Kern et al. (2013) found in their study of Facebook memorial pages. They argued that this collective memorialization satisfies the needs of remembrance for both the group and the individual. Similar to what Harju (2014) and Kern et al. (2013) found, solidarity was clearly evident among those using the hashtag, despite the fact that none had met the deceased. As Caroll and Landry (2010) suggested, the comments associated with the hashtag served as virtual black armbands, veils, or flowers left at a gravesite. They were symbolic expressions of solidarity in the face of loss.

The tweets fell into four distinct themes, all supporting the overarching idea of solidarity in the face of crisis. By expressing feelings of traditional grief and support, by reiterating the values of their profession, and by establishing the boundaries and values of their in-group, the broadcast journalists actively chose Twitter as the platform through which they could connect with each other and satisfy their need to make sense of what happened and reestablish a sense of control, in order to alleviate the very real fear that it could happen to them as well (Fritsche et al., 2008). This affirms previous research (Dworznik, 2006) suggesting that despite many journalists' outward displays of detachment and veneration of stoicism as a professional norm, honest communication about their emotions might allow them to make sense of traumatic experiences.

Given this, the #WeStandWithWDBJ hashtag served as an online gathering place where television journalists could unite in solidarity with others like them who felt the need to find solace and comfort in the face of the death of someone they knew only as a fellow reporter. The repetition of photos and captions reflected a quickly formed sense of community among television news workers who used social media to satisfy their need for in-group structure and values as a way to alleviate their feelings of mortality ignited by the murders of Parker and Ward (Goldberg et al., 1990).

As Terror Management Theory suggests, the hashtag #WeStandwithWDBJ allowed TV journalists to manage their feelings of mortality salience by focusing on solidarity and connecting with others from their in-group who would understand their fear of death (Pyszczyski et al., 1990). The community formed around this hashtag allowed for a safe discussion of the tragedy that served to reduce the anxiety caused by knowing that they, too, could die on the job (Goldenberg et al., 1999). As Oliver and Raney (2011) suggested, the hashtag in this case became a useful platform for TV journalists to satisfy their eudaimonic need for meaning. It can be argued that the focus on solidarity through grief, support, and established boundaries was based on a eudaimonic desire for meaning and truth motivated by mortality salience. The poignant comments and emotional reflection allowed these journalists to be introspective and outwardly empathetic at the same time, all while working to satisfy the need to understand what had happened and what it meant for their own longevity.

This study contributes to the literature on U&G in new media environments by bridging the theoretical perspective with research on terror management and eudaimonic motivation. Ruggiero (2000) argued that scholars "must be prepared to expand our current theoretical models of U&G" for more modern and illuminating applications to research (p. 29). To that end, the present study provides needed insight into social media use in a way that considers this admonition. Qualitative methods may be used to expand and refine theories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and are particularly valuable for providing insight into newer areas of inquiry (Sutu, 2017). In this study, the qualitative discourse analysis of the language and imagery used in the #WeStandWithWDBJ tweets allowed for

interpretations of motives and reactions based on how users were feeling in the moment, which provided insight into how a given in-group can use a platform like Twitter to satisfy their needs related to a tragedy or disaster. Analyzing Twitter posts to #WeStandWithWDBJ not only addressed the common criticism of U&G researchers' overreliance on self-report data (see Ruggiero, 2000) but also provided a wealth of descriptive detail based on immediate reactions to tragedy, not reactions recalled later (Gloviczki, 2012; Riffe & Stovall, 1989). Furthermore, the findings of this study might allow researchers to generate survey items (e.g., evaluative interval scales tied to motive statements) for quantitative studies of eudaimonic motivation or empirical investigations of trauma-related communication in a range of different contexts.

This research also contributes to the study of journalism by focusing on reporter reactions to tragedy versus the typical focus on viewer or media user reactions. The analysis opens the door for further discussion about reporter safety, journalistic norms, and how reporters respond to stories directly tied to themselves and their profession. Aside from the murder of Parker and Ward, other recent examples of violence directly impacting journalists include the terrorist attack on the Charlie Hebdo magazine offices in Paris, France (Rayner, Samuel, & Evans, 2015), and the targeted shooting of staff at the Capital Gazette, a daily newspaper in Annapolis, Maryland (Rector & Bogel-Burroughs, 2018). However, journalists are routinely exposed to dangerous and/or traumatic events during the course of their reporting (e.g., covering stories related to violent crime, fatal accidents, natural disasters, war, terrorism) (Dworznik, 2006). As a result, they often suffer symptoms of emotional distress, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or compassion fatigue (Dworznik, 2006). Considering these professional hazards, this study informs and affirms efforts to enhance trauma training initiatives in journalism education (Dworznik & Grubb, 2007).

Ultimately, this study contributes to scholarship regarding social media's impact on society by illuminating how a platform like Twitter can function as a virtual gathering place during unusual or tragic events beyond its typical daily functions of news and information sharing. As Marwick and Ellison (2012) pointed out, social media are unique public memorial spaces that allow individuals to share information, express positive and negative sentiments, and commiserate with one another. While particular messages following a tragedy may showcase a variety of emotions and communicative styles, collectively, they underscore the human need to make sense of death and in doing so, assign meaning to life.

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