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Frame-changing in the media coverage of a school shooting: The rise of Columbine as a national concern

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Abstract

This essay explores the media frame-changing process in the news coverage of the 1999 Columbine shootings, clarifying the news discourse focus on Columbine's national importance. The study applies the van Dijk/Bell scheme of media analysis to 683 news articles from print and broadcast media published within 30 days following the incident. Insight is offered into the thematic content of the Columbine coverage, including the school shooting event itself, reactions, and commentaries. Analysis indicates that the initial focus of the coverage was what happened at Columbine, but over time the news increasingly highlighted Columbine's national salience.

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1. Introduction

The 1999 Columbine High School (Littleton, Colorado) shootings exerted great influence on public discourse about youth social problems and juvenile delinquency, largely through its coverage in the news media. This essay explores the frame-changing process observed in the news coverage of Columbine, ultimately clarifying the emergence of Columbine-type violence as salient to a broad segment of the U.S. Concretely, this essay reports the findings of the application of the coding scheme advanced by [van Dijk \(1988, pp. 17–94\)](#) and [Bell \(1991, pp. 147–211\)](#) to the Columbine coverage. Themes within the Columbine story are identified, including the proportions and timing of their appearance. Analysis indicates a frame-changing process at work in the news media's coverage of Columbine.

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2. Literature

2.1. *Media framing*

The present research contributes to the scholarly literatures on mass media framing and studies of media coverage of school shooting incidents. News coverage of issues ebbs and flows, and this process was described by Downs (1972) as the “issue-attention cycle,” the process through which issues emerge in the news, briefly dominate attention, and then decline. In general, the framing literature examines how media producers select an interpretive framework for the story, which facilitates the discourse about an issue as well as the public understanding. Framing has a long-standing history in sociological research, most notably influenced by Goffman (1974). A media frame is a “central organizing idea for news content that supplies context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (Tankard, 2001, pp. 100–101). By selecting and changing frames of coverage among and within news events, mass media producers influence the nature of reality presented to the public. Empirical study facilitates understanding the evolution of media focus over the life-course of a news event.

2.2. *Media and school shootings*

Few news stories have attracted as much media attention as Columbine. As measured by Cable News Network (CNN) ratings, Columbine was the largest U.S. news story of 1999, and the seventh highest rated media event of the 1990s (Muschert, 2002, pp. 96–97). Sixty-eight percent of Americans closely followed the Columbine story, and only the 1992 Rodney King verdict/L.A. riots and 1996 crash of TWA flight 800 generated more public interest, as these stories were followed by 70% and 69% of the public, respectively (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1999). The Columbine story was rated by journalism executives as the second most important event of 1999 (Levinson, 1999). Relative to any other school shooting incidents in U.S. history, Columbine garnered significantly higher media coverage (Maguire, Weatherby, & Mathers, 2002, pp. 466–468).

Lawrence (2001) examined the sources of these frames of reference for reportage about Columbine, arguing that the dramatic quality of the events led to a high level of media coverage. Since Columbine was so shocking, it became a “defining event” in two senses: First, journalists were unable to draw on previous media frames in covering Columbine, and therefore were forced to develop new frames of coverage for this incident. Second, despite its unusual nature, Columbine came to typify the school shooting problem, and to a lesser extent, the juvenile delinquency problem as a whole.

Chyi and McCombs (2004), in their study of media framing at Columbine, discovered an underlying frame-changing dynamic. While the initial coverage focused on what happened at Columbine, over time the frame changed to Columbine’s impact on the societal level. In the Columbine coverage, 24% of the articles maintained a “community-present” frame, which is a discussion of what happened at Columbine. Another 39% of the articles were categorized in the “societal-present” frame, which is a discussion of the news event’s importance to the society as a whole. Chyi and McCombs (2004), unconcerned with the thematic elements of the

Columbine coverage, limited their analysis to demonstrating the frame-changing dynamic of salience maintenance. While the present study similarly identifies the frame-changing process in the Columbine study, it provides deeper insight into the thematic discourse about Columbine.

3. Methods

The Columbine shootings sparked intensive media coverage, and any analysis of such a large media event must employ a framework for interpreting the content. [van Dijk \(1988, pp. 17–94\)](#) and [Bell \(1991, pp. 147–211\)](#) suggested a structure for analysis of news text similar to sentence diagramming. To examine the changing mass media frames in the Columbine coverage, the analysis applied the van Dijk/Bell scheme to the reportage of the 1999 high school shooting incident. Empirical analysis was guided by the following questions:

- What were the major themes in the Columbine coverage, and in what proportion did these frames appear?
- Did the frames of coverage appear with varying frequency over time?

Data were collected using a search of the Lexis–Nexis database for the keywords “Columbine” and “Littleton.” The search returned 683 documents from print and broadcast sources, including the *New York Times* ($n = 152$), Associated Press ($n = 251$), ABC news ($n = 112$), CNN news ($n = 114$), and PBS news ($n = 54$). Data were managed in electronic format using QSR NUD*IST 4.0 software, a qualitative analysis tool.

The study covers the 30-day period following the 20 April 1999 Columbine shootings, designed to exclude coverage of the subsequent school shooting at Conyers, Georgia, that occurred in the afternoon of 20 May 1999. Limiting the study period to the 1-month following Columbine allowed the examination of the Columbine story discrete from the subsequent shooting. The study period also makes conceptual sense. While most public issues endure in the media an average of 18.5 months ([McCombs & Zhu, 1995](#)), the life span of the Columbine story appears to have been 1-month ([Chyi & McCombs, 2004](#), p. 23).

In coding, lead paragraphs of documents were reviewed, the portions [Cerulo \(1998\)](#) and [Bell \(1991, p. 176\)](#) argue are the most influential. Coding was conducted by the author who received training in thematic discourse analysis prior to engaging the data. News documents were assigned as belonging to one or more of the story elements of the Columbine event. Thematic categories included actors, actions, consequences, reactions, commentaries, and background elements. Coding was non-discrete, and the document was the unit of analysis. Throughout the essay, proportional findings are reported in terms of the analysis conducted on lead sections, however when examples are provided, they are drawn from more concise headlines.

While the coding scheme employed and the method of coding are consistent with methods of analysis of news, the present study is not without a limitation: the study merges multiple media. This may be problematic for two reasons: First, the structural conventions utilized in one medium may not apply to another. Second, media are subject to differing news cycles. In the present study, variability between media types has not been tested.

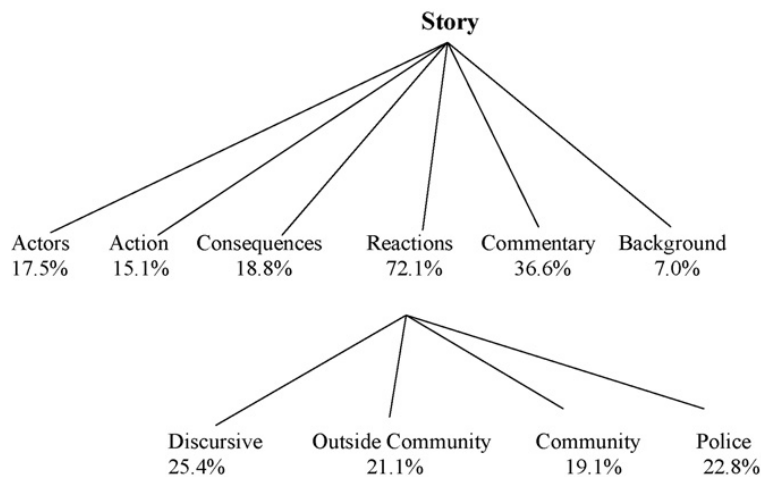


Fig. 1. Distribution of themes of covering Columbine.

4. Findings

4.1. Thematic analysis

Analysis revealed the primary thematic elements present in the Columbine story. Fig. 1 illustrates the distribution of the thematic elements appearing in lead sections. The most prominent theme, in 72.1% of leads, consisted of the various reactions to the shooting. A little more than one third were about discursive reactions to the Columbine event, the most significant of which was the exploration of possible causes. Some mentioned specific causes for the Columbine shootings, especially guns, social/cultural factors, and entertainment media. Typical headlines included:

In America; Addicted to Violence

(*New York Times*, 4/22/1999)

Columbine High School Shootings and How the Internet, Video Games and Violence on TV and in the Movies May Contribute to Teen-Age Violence

(*NPR All Things Considered*, 4/28/1999)

The significance of these was that they signaled a social process at work: the exploration of what caused the behavior, and to a lesser extent, an effort to discuss methods to detect and prevent such behavior in the future. The sociological implication of this was that the Columbine event was similar to dropping a stone in a pond, in that it caused a splash at impact, and sent ripples emanating outwards. The dominant aspect of the reaction theme was the discussion of what caused the event.

However, there was more to the reaction than discussion of possible causes. The Columbine shootings motivated responses in the form of actions and meetings in the Columbine community and beyond. Analysis indicated that the community reactions to the event occupied 19.1% of lead sections. The major topic covered in the community reactions theme had to do with the various funerals for the victims and the other memorials. A second topic dealt with the status of the Columbine High School students, such as when they would return to school. These sorts of events are expected following such dramatic events such as a school shooting. The news media

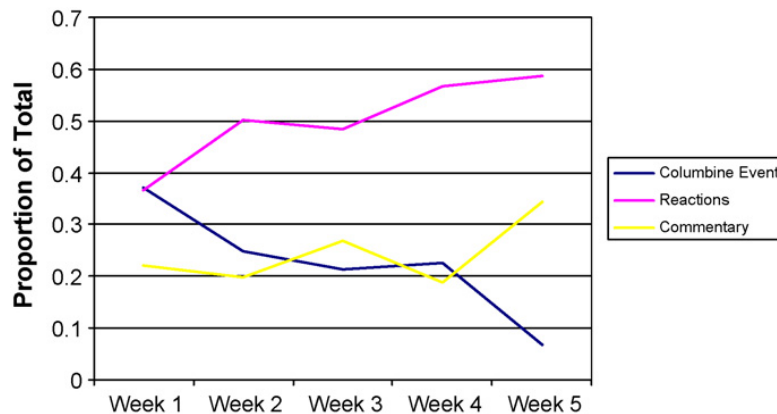


Fig. 2. Proportion of themes, by week.

covered the community's responses at the point of impact, although the effects were also felt elsewhere across the country. News coverage of reactions elsewhere appeared in 21.1% of leads, focusing on three major topics: political meetings, sports-related issues, and reactions at schools in other communities.

The second major theme concerned the coverage of the Columbine event, and this issue appeared in 40.2% of leads. This proportion was determined by the union of the three thematic areas: the actors (in 17.5% of leads), actions (in 15.1% of leads), and the consequences themes (in 18.8% of leads). Taken together, these three themes of coverage constitute the total reportage of what happened at Columbine. The police, in the context of the on-going investigation of the Columbine shootings were the dominant source of information regarding the Columbine event, although it was also the case that the media contacted witnesses in the community.

4.2. *Timing the themes of coverage*

Temporal analysis revealed that the themes of coverage changed over the life course of the Columbine story. Early on, the Columbine story was more specifically focused on the shooting event, while over time coverage focused more strongly on reactions elsewhere and commentary. Immediately following the event, the media coverage primarily concerned what was being done to respond to the shooting. In the first week, coverage of reactions appeared in over one-third of documents, and this increased to nearly 60% by the fifth week following the shootings. Commentaries about the shootings initially appeared in about 20% of leads, but increased over time to comprise approximately one-third of the discussion. In the early weeks of the story, coverage of the Columbine event, comprised about 37% of the total, but this decreased over the life of the story to less than 10% by the fifth week (Fig. 2).

Since the reactions theme accounted for such a large proportion of coverage, analysis was undertaken of the sub-themes of reactions present throughout the story. Analysis revealed that the four sub-themes occurred at similar levels at the beginning of the story, but that the two sub-themes relating to reactions local to Columbine (community reactions and police reactions) generally decreased over time (Fig. 3). In contrast, discussion of reactions in other communities ultimately increased to comprise over 40% of the total. Discursive reactions remained consistently between 10% and 15%.

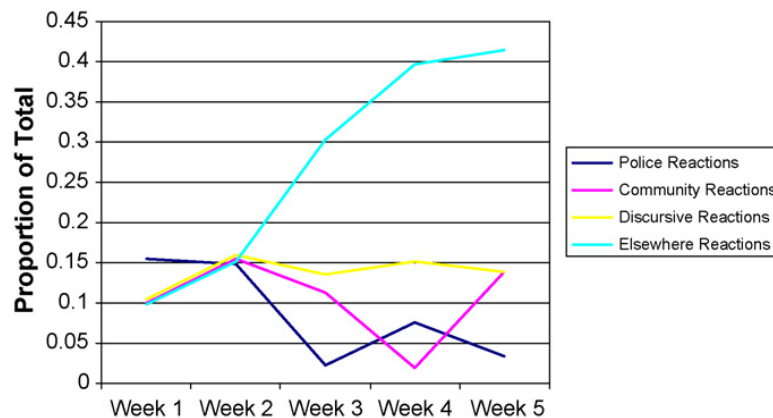


Fig. 3. Proportion of sub-themes of reactions, by week.

5. Discussion

The analysis suggests that the coverage was initially about what happened at Columbine, but over the life span of the story, the media frame changed to focus on reactions occurring elsewhere in the U.S. This finding is consistent with that reported in [Chyi and McCombs \(2004\)](#) who pointed out that the dominant core of the Columbine coverage evolved from a local space frame early in the coverage to a later discussion of the future societal import of Columbine. The findings generated using the van Dijk/Bell scheme similarly suggested that the frame-changing process is present in the maintenance of story's salience.

What the present study adds is a sense of what themes were employed in this process of frame-changing. Painted in a broad brush stroke, this analysis has revealed that the ultimate salience of the Columbine coverage lay in the reactions it sparked elsewhere in America. Although the story started as a discussion of what Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold did on 20 April 1999, the Columbine story ultimately evolved into a discussion of what people were doing all across the U.S. to deal with Columbine's effect on the nation. While the Columbine incident undoubtedly had a strong impact on its local community, the extended salience of the story relied on the discussion of such events as potentially occurring at any suburban high school. For example, the news media covered following varieties of this theme: how suburban schools no longer seemed safe, the meaning of Columbine for the national culture, and the institution of prevention strategies.

In general terms, this study revealed something about how high profile crimes are framed in the news media. The news media do have an interest and obligation to cover the details of horrible crimes such as Columbine; however this research confirms findings of earlier studies that the news media engages in frame-changing as part of maintaining the salience of a story. In the Columbine story, the salience was maintained through the expansion of the sphere of concern about Columbine-type crimes to include the wider national import of the crime.

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