Guns, Hollywood, and School Safety: Defining the School-Shooting Problem Across Public Arenas*

Regina G. Lawrence, *Portland State University*

Thomas A. Birkland, *University at Albany, State University of New York*

Objective. Research in agenda setting has demonstrated that dramatic news events can drive particular issues to the top of the media and governmental agendas. The objective of this study is to analyze how different *aspects* of an event-driven problem compete for attention in those arenas. *Methods.* The method is content analysis of media coverage and congressional legislative activity following the 1999 Columbine High School shootings. *Results.* The results show that while both agendas converged on the gun-control aspect of the problem, they substantially diverged on other understandings of what kind of problem the Columbine shooting represented and how to address it. *Conclusions.* We conclude that the differing institutional structure and incentives of the news media and Congress can create or inhibit interinstitutional positive feedback in the problem-defining process. Agenda divergences are amplified when prominent politicians cue the media to follow particular story lines that depart from actual legislative activity.

In April 1999, two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado shot and killed 12 students and a teacher before killing themselves. The Columbine shooting became one of the most closely watched news stories of the year (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1999) and figured into the 2000 presidential election campaigns as well (Seelye, 1999).

The incident at Columbine was troubling precisely because it was so difficult to comprehend. What problems in American society did that event signify? We examine how this troubling question was answered by journalists and by lawmakers, which offers an opportunity to build theory regarding issue framing and problem definition across different institutional arenas.

*Direct correspondence to Regina G. Lawrence, Division of Political Science, Hatfield School of Government, Portland State University, PO Box 751, Portland, OR 97207-0751 ⟨lawrencer@pdx.edu⟩. The first-named author will share all data and coding information with those wishing to replicate the study. The authors thank Maxwell McCombs, Liana Winett, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on early drafts of this research, and Anne Britton, Lisa Ferretti, and Kathie Legg for their research assistance.

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Public Arenas and the Social Construction of Problems

Scholarly studies have characterized the media agenda and the legislative agenda as the products of competition among issues for the limited resource of attention (Cobb and Elder, 1983; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Dearing and Rogers, 1996; Kingdon, 1995; McCombs and Shaw, 1993; Walker, 1977). A key factor in this competition can be the appearance of "triggering" (Cobb and Elder, 1983; Dearing and Rogers, 1996), "focusing" (Kingdon, 1995; Birkland, 1997, 1998), or "defining" (Lawrence, 2000b) events that spark intense media coverage and pressure policymakers to search for policy responses.

News making and policy making involve not only the competition among problems for attention, but also a competition among *aspects* of those problems. As Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) observe, the competition among problems usually proceeds on two levels: the competition for agenda space, and the competition for issue definition. In other words, journalists and policymakers decide not only which problems will occupy their respective agendas, but how to *define* those problems.

Many scholars from across disciplines agree that public problems are multifaceted constructs of social understanding that are shaped through politics (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Best, 1988; Edelman, 1993; Stone, 1997). Although many problems can be understood in a variety of ways (e.g., to what degree are crime and poverty problems of individual or of societal failure?), the attributes of problems that can be highlighted at any one time are limited (McCombs and Ghanem, 2001:70). Just as public institutions must limit the number of problems they attempt to grapple with at any one time, so must they limit their focus to particular problem attributes. The selection of problem attributes has been variously referred to as "problem definition" (Stone, 1997), problem "framing" (Entman, 1993), or as the "second level" of agenda setting (McCombs and Ghanem, 2001).

This study examines how the school-shooting problem was defined while it occupied a prominent place on the agenda of both the news media and Congress in the aftermath of the Columbine shooting. In particular, we examine to what degree those institutions converged on particular ways of defining the problem.

The existing literature on news making and policy making leads us to expect that key institutions will converge on the same problem definitions in the aftermath of dramatic news events. Hilgartner and Bosk theorize that competition among problem definitions is regulated by "principles of selection" that operate across all public arenas. Both the media and Congress, they suggest, pay most attention to problems that are inherently dramatic, that resonate with "deep mythic themes or broad cultural preoccupations," and that are promoted by powerful political and economic groups (1988:71). They also theorize that "problems that rise in one public arena have a strong tendency to spread into others," creating a "positive feedback" system in which a problem dominates the attention of several arenas at once

(1988:72), a dynamic empirically documented by Baumgartner and Jones (1993).

However, just because the media and Congress converge on the same event-driven issue—school violence after the Columbine shooting, for example—does not necessarily mean that they will define that issue in the same ways. Indeed, Hilgartner and Bosk suggest that organizational and cultural differences among institutions may allow certain problem definitions to thrive in one arena yet fail in another (1988:72). If so, then the dynamics of interinstitutional problem definition may be more complicated than has previously been supposed, and considerable divergence between the content of news and the content of congressional law making may exist even within periods of "positive feedback."

Moreover, the predicted direction of problem-defining influence between the media and Congress is not necessarily clear. Agenda-setting theory posits that the media influence the policy agenda both directly (by shaping policymakers' perceptions) and indirectly (by shaping public perceptions), but also posits a feedback loop from the policy agenda to the media agenda. Much of this literature concludes that "media coverage usually changes first and therefore largely causes subsequent government decisions" (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000:56). Studies of daily news construction generally predict, however, that official frames will drive media frames (Bennett, 2003; Entman, 1993), though at least one study has found an independent media role in framing issues being debated in Congress (Callaghan and Schnell, 2001), while others have indicated that particularly evocative events can shape the frames the media construct (Birkland and Lawrence, 2001; Lawrence, 2000a), with officials then responding to the media framing.

A final complication arises because the media are an arena of discourse, while the congressional arena involves both discourse and action. Congress both debates ideas and converts ideas into policies. Ideas that are prominent in media discourse are therefore not necessarily prominent in actual legislation. In fact, there is in a sense more than one congressional "agenda": the "institutional" agenda often includes wide-ranging debate, but that slate of ideas is narrowed when Congress moves toward actual decision making (Cobb and Elder, 1983). These factors suggest less convergence across arenas than we might expect, even in the aftermath of high-profile events that focus attention on a "single" issue.

Columbine generated far more media coverage than any other such event since at least 1996, and it precipitated the most intense period of legislative activity on school violence of the 106th or any prior Congress. Thirty-five percent of all bills introduced in the 106th Congress dealing with school violence were introduced in April and May 1999; no more than 9 percent of such bills were introduced in any other month of that legislative session. The Columbine shooting thus created the conditions for "positive feedback" between the media and Congress in which we are interested.

The data reported below indicate some overlap between the two arenas, but equally striking are the divergences. We find a classic example of positive feedback surrounding gun control in the aftermath of the Columbine shooting, and we carefully trace the lines of influence between those two arenas on that problem definition. However, the media also focused heavily on the influence of popular culture as an explanation for how something like Columbine could occur. Congress debated this problem definition as well, but focused its legislative energies primarily on beefing up school programs and security measures (which the media covered less closely) and, to a lesser degree, cracking down on juvenile crime (which the media virtually ignored). Evidence of specific differences in the "selection principles" of the mass media and Congress, we argue, help explain these differences: the crucial role of "policy streams" in congressional policy making; the importance of commercial and story-telling values in journalistic assessments of newsworthiness; and the constraints on Congress imposed by the U.S. Constitution.

Methods

The data are based on content analysis of media coverage, congressional debate, and legislation surrounding the issue of school shootings. The Lexis-Nexis database was used to retrieve coverage in two leading national newspapers (the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*), and the Vanderbilt University Television News Archives[1] to retrieve evening television coverage broadcast on ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC. Each story included in the media sample mentioned the Columbine shooting, "Littleton," or any other cognate in its headline or first few paragraphs.

The *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* published 675 such news and editorial items from April through August 1999. We first read and coded 135 of these, purposively sampling only from the thematic news and editorial items that treated Columbine as a lens on trends or problems in society. This allowed the capture of the full range of definitions of the school-shooting problem circulating at the time, while eliminating from the sample purely episodic stories that were less likely to contain problem-defining discourse. Following the notion that "causal stories" are key indicators of problem definitions (Entman, 1993; Stone, 1997), the full text of these 135 articles was coded for every claim made about the causes of or solutions for school shootings (claims were usually made by the sources interviewed in news stories, but were also made by journalists and editorial writers). The range of problem definitions found in these articles is shown in the first column of Table 1.

We then coded all 675 Lexis-Nexis story citations corresponding to every story mentioning Columbine. Based on its headline, each story was cate-

[1]Available at ⟨http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu⟩.

TABLE 1

News and Legislative Definitions of the "School-Shooting" Problem

	News Stories			Congressional Record			Legislation (Bills Introduced)		
Problem Definition	*N**	%	Rank	*N**	%	Rank	*N*	%	Rank
Guns: Inadequate gun-control laws, abundance/availability of guns	163	42	1	44	19	1	12	21	2
School programs and security: Inadequate anti-violence programs and security measures at schools	44	11	3	33	14	2	26	45	1
Criminal justice: Need for tougher law enforcement and programs to intervene with delinquent youths	3	<1	8	32	14	3	6	10	3
Parents, adults, and community: Lack of adult involvement with kids and schools; parents not being responsible	15	4	5	31	13	4	5	9	4
Pop culture: Content of TV, movies, video games, music, the Internet	109	28	2	28	12	5	2	3	6
Mental health: Need for evaluation and treatment of depression and other mental illness	14	4	5	23	10	6	4	7	5
Illicit drugs: As contributor to anti-social behavior, crime, alienation	2	<1	8	21	9	7	1	2	7
Social breakdown: Breakdown of civility, social norms, and responsible behavior (nonreligious)	9	2	6	9	4	8	—	–	—
Secularism: Lack of/hostility to prayer and religion in schools/society	5	1	7	6	3	9	—	—	–
Teen life: Social difficulties of adolescence (e.g., peer pressure, cliques, "jock culture," etc.)	21	5	4	5	2	10	2	3	6
Individual character: Lack of moral values	3	<1	8	2	1	11	—	—	—

NOTE: Some items in the sample exhibited no identifiable problem definition, and these categories are not mutually exclusive, reflecting the multifaceted nature of many news and *Congressional Record* items. The *N* reported here will therefore not equal the *N* of news stories in the media sample nor the total *N* of items analyzed from the *Congressional Record*.

gorized in terms of these problem definitions. These categories were not mutually exclusive, and while some headlines exhibited none of these problem definitions, others exhibited more than one (thus yielding an *N* of problem definitions that differs from the *N* of stories coded). For example, an article headlined "Clinton's New Gun Proposals Include Charging Parents of Children Who Commit Gun Crimes" was coded as focusing on both "guns" and "parents, adults, and community." When a headline did not clearly indicate any of the categories of problem definitions, we accessed the full text of the story and examined its lead paragraphs before concluding that it lacked relevant problem definitions. One of the authors performed this coding, with a subsample recoded by a graduate student unfamiliar with the hypotheses of the study, yielding a raw intercoder reliability score of 93 percent. This procedure was then repeated to code the 137 abstracts of evening news stories mentioning Columbine that aired in 1999, identifying problem themes from the abstract content.[2] Although coding headlines and news story abstracts does not reveal everything that was said about school violence in the news, it does reveal what the news focused on most prominently—what the Columbine story was primarily "about," according to these media.

Similarly, we examined two kinds of congressional data. We first coded 57 items of debate on school violence found in the *Congressional Record* (*CR*) for the 106th Congress using the Legislative Indexing Vocabulary keyword "school violence." From the 226 items retrieved by this search, we created a subset of items to code by focusing only on the April–August period, and by removing from the set any appropriations and authorizations debate and housekeeping items that were not directly related to the subject of interest; we also dropped any item that was only peripherally about school violence, such as debate about Kosovo that compared policy on that issue to issues related to school violence. The remaining items were then coded using the same categories created in the initial media coding described above; like the news stories, each *CR* item could be assigned to multiple problem definitions. The raw intercoder agreement among one of the authors and two other coders was 62 percent. The coders then met to review the coding protocol and resolve interpretive differences; the reliability score for the second iteration was 92 percent.

Congressional floor debates are an important indicator of public discourse, but the problem definitions debated there may or may not be the same as those highlighted in the media or those actually enshrined in legislation. Accordingly, we also coded all legislation introduced in the 106th

[2]We found, unsurprisingly, that television coverage focused much more closely on the details of the Columbine event and its aftermath, and was thus much more episodic than thematic. Whereas 41 percent of *Los Angeles Times* stories and 59 percent of *New York Times* stories focused narrowly on the Columbine event, 85 percent of television coverage displayed an exclusive or near-exclusive focus on events in Littleton. Problem-defining discourse was therefore more limited on TV.

Congress (1999–2000) that was returned by a search of the Library of Congress's THOMAS database (⟨http://thomas.loc.gov⟩) for the subject "school violence."[3] The full text of this legislation (58 bills, including substantive legislation and one-house resolutions, excluding amendments) was coded. Unlike the news and *CR* items, each item of legislation was assigned to only one problem-definition category. This methodological choice reflects the fact that assigning each bill to one dominant problem definition was generally quite straightforward, as the title of the legislation and, where present, the congressional findings gave ample evidence of what Congress saw as the problem being addressed by the bill; in contrast, news and *CR* items quite often involved *debate* over how to define the school-shooting problem. The entire set of legislation was also coded by two students unfamiliar with the hypotheses of the study, yielding raw intercoder agreement of 91 percent.

Findings

Table 1 lists the problem definitions that emerged in the news after the Columbine shooting. They ranged from the individualistic (*individual character*) to the systemic (*pop culture*, *social breakdown, secularism*), with at least one problem definition that fell somewhere in between (*mental health*). Some focused on public policies (or lack thereof) to address violence (*guns*, *criminal justice*, *school programs*, and *security*), while others focused on areas of life less amenable to governmental influence (*parents, adults and community*; *teen life*). Table 1 shows how prominently these various aspects of the school-shooting problem figured in news stories, in congressional debate, and in legislation.

Determining the degree of problem-definition convergence between the news media and Congress is a somewhat difficult and potentially subjective process. The most straightforward measure of the prominence and convergence of problem definitions is to compare the proportion of attention each received in each arena, and by comparing the rank order each occupied. Accordingly, Table 1 includes both measures for each arena.

The story these data tell is somewhat complicated, but the main storyline is clear: the *guns* frame was clearly predominant in media coverage and congressional debate, and gained considerable legislative action as well. Indeed, the story of school violence following Columbine became to a significant extent a story about the political struggle over gun control.

[3]Specifically, we searched the database using the term "school violence" as a key term in the Legislative Indexing Vocabulary (LIV), a feature of the THOMAS storage and retrieval system. Note that the legislative data therefore reflect a somewhat longer timeframe (the entire 106th Congress) than the congressional debate and media data (April–August 1999). News coverage of school shootings subsided after this five-month period, while, as is typical, the issue remained more persistent on the legislative agenda (Birkland, 1997:ch 4).

Despite this convergence across arenas, however, there are noteworthy divergences, particularly between post-Columbine *discourse* in the media and Congress and the actual *content* of legislation. Although popular culture's allegedly malign influence on teens was a heavy focus of news coverage and congressional debate, only two bills dealt with this aspect of school violence.

Moreover, divergence is evident regarding the other problem definitions Congress did act most vigorously on. Actual legislative action focused most on programs to improve school safety, yet that frame was a distant third in media coverage, gaining less than half the attention of pop culture. Criminal justice was the third-ranked problem definition in legislative bills and debate, while media coverage of this angle on school shootings was virtually nonexistent.

Explaining Convergent and Divergent Problem Definitions

Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) propose that drama, cultural resonance, and the support of powerful groups can explain which problems reach the top of any institution's agenda. However, these are insufficient to fully explain the convergent and divergent problem definitions identified here. The potential role in youth violence of widely available guns and of an increasingly insidious pop culture seem equally open to dramatization, for example, but one of these gained significantly more legislative action than the other. Political power also offers an unsatisfactory explanation, given the different amounts of legislative activity around guns and popular culture. Were gun-control opponents like the National Rifle Association less powerful than the Hollywood executives who also resisted fixing blame for Columbine on their product? Both groups are well-established, influential political constituencies (Bruni, 1999; Vizzard, 2000). Cultural resonance also proves an unsatisfactory explanation. Is gun control, which won heavy attention in both arenas, more resonant than the perennial American preoccupation with personal and parental responsibility, which won little? Polls taken immediately after Columbine (Newport, 1999), as well as one subsequent study (Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001:531), suggest that the public blamed parents at least as much as these other factors.

These anomalies suggest that unique institutional features of the media and Congress influenced their problem foci. In Congress, the dependence of policy making on "policy streams" (Kingdon, 1995) favors preexisting problem definitions. The media, in contrast, tend to define newsworthiness in terms of "newness" or, failing that, in terms of the heat generated by political debate; in other words, policy debates tend to gain media coverage when the political stakes for parties and politicians are high (Lawrence, 2000a). Meanwhile, Congress is constrained in ways that the media are not. Congress ultimately must act, whereas the media can merely talk; there are areas in which Congress is constitutionally not allowed to act, whereas very little is off limits for media exploration.

The *direction* of influence between the media and Congress presents a different question. Although heavy media coverage of Columbine undoubtedly pressured members of Congress to respond, further investigation suggests that policymakers largely drove media frames. Political leaders within and beyond Congress moved quickly to advance their favored frames and deny agenda control to their opponents by defining the Columbine shooting in terms of either gun control or popular culture. Thus, the two most prominent media frames bore the imprint of the early political maneuvering among President Clinton, congressional Democrats, and leading Republicans. Yet the fact that the media emphasized only two of the three problems Congress debated most heavily—guns, pop culture, and school safety, with the media covering only the first two prominently—suggests that some media selectivity was at work. As explored further below, it appears that the media responded more to the efforts of politicians to shape public discourse outside the halls of Congress than to their actual arguments and actions within Congress.

The Media and Congress Converge on Guns

A key factor that arguably favored the *guns* problem definition in the aftermath of Columbine was the status of gun control as a preexisting issue in the congressional "policy stream" (Kingdon, 1995). Stricter gun control has long been advocated as a solution to a range of social problems from robbery to assassination (Vizzard, 2000). As Kingdon (1995) predicts, when an event opens a window of opportunity for policy making, policy entrepreneurs can easily link a preexisting policy idea with a "new" problem. The Columbine shooting provided just such a window for proponents of gun control both inside and outside of Congress. In fact, several gun-control bills proposed by the Clinton Administration and congressional Democrats that had languished until the Columbine attack were quickly dusted off virtually the day after. That gun control was *not* a new policy idea arguably advantaged gun control as a problem definition.

Gun control was not a new news story, either (Callaghan and Schnell, 2001), and while that limited its "newness" appeal, the gun-control angle fit other key criteria of newsworthiness. Gun control promised a protracted, high-stakes contest among key political players, the sort of political debate that fits easily into the "game schema" favored by many Washington reporters (Patterson, 1994; Lawrence, 2000a). This dynamic is evident in the fact that over 85 percent of newspaper stories in our sample focusing on the *guns* theme were straight-from-the-beat accounts of the latest developments in the Washington gun-control debate.

Finally, the convergence of the media and Congress on gun control can be explained by the efforts of prominent politicians to frame the Columbine incident and thus to control its ultimate political impact. In his radio

address on April 24, just days after the Columbine shooting, Clinton announced his "Safe Schools Bill" that would include new gun-control measures. He was followed on the Sunday talk shows by a variety of administration officials and leading Democrats who pushed the gun-control message (see, e.g., Abrams, 1999). The gun-control frame was thus immediately suggested to news organizations by prominent politicians whose actions promised that gun control could become a major political showdown—and thus a newsworthy story.

Popular Culture in the Media and Congressional Debate

The divergence between media and congressional discourse and actual legislation with regard to popular culture also can be explained in part by key institutional features of each arena and in part by the influence of policymakers on the news. The key institutional difference in this case appears to be the sense of institutional constraint induced in Congress by the First Amendment—the widespread belief among policymakers that the Constitution sharply constrains Congress's ability to regulate media content (Cook, 1998), including objectionable content on the World Wide Web (Greenhouse, 2002). Members of Congress were thus willing to *talk* about popular culture as a cause of school violence (Bruni, 1999), but Congress collectively proved unwilling to regulate media content, at least in part because they believed themselves constitutionally unable to do so (Applebome, 1999; Seelye, 1999).[4] Indeed, popular culture ranked a distant sixth among aspects of the school-violence problem addressed in legislation, and the two bills produced simply established "study commissions," which generally serve more symbolic than practical roles. In contrast, as long as credible sources, such as members of Congress, were willing to *talk* about the malign influences of popular culture, the media were free to construct a pop-culture problem definition, which provided a fresh, commercially appealing angle on the school-shooting story.

But just as with the gun-control frame, the pop-culture frame also owed much to politicians' early efforts to frame Columbine in politically advantageous ways. For example, Colorado Governor Bill Owens, delivering the Republican response to Clinton's April 24 radio address, "urged parents to . . . pay more attention to what their children may be watching on television, what video games they play, what World Wide Web sites they log onto" (Kiker, 1999). Three days later, on the one-week anniversary of the Columbine shooting, Republican congressional leaders at a press conference

[4]In contrast, there is no evidence that Congress has felt similarly constrained by the Second Amendment with regard to gun control. Indeed, until very recently, "even the National Rifle Association [had] abandoned the legal challenge to gun laws based on alleged violations of the Second Amendment rights" (Spitzer, 1998:35).

called for a "national conference on youth and culture" that would, in the words of House Speaker Dennis Hastert, "examine important issues facing students and society" including "video games" and "Hollywood"; Hastert's list conspicuously did not include guns (Espo, 1999a). As one early headline summed it up, "Two-party Squabble: More Gun Control or Less-violent Culture?" (Espo, 1999b). President Clinton responded by organizing a White House "strategy session" on children, youth, and violence; Senators Joseph Lieberman and John McCain publicly chided movie and music executives, most of whom declined to attend (Lieberman and McCain, 1999).

Thus, policymakers cued the media early on that the post-Columbine political battle would center not only on guns but on popular culture. These were the major storylines the national media followed for the next several weeks—an example of the tendency of journalists to converge on their sense of what "the story" is, largely defined by political elites (Bennett, 2003; Hershey, 1992). However, the two problem definitions took very different paths. Guns became the center of a high-stakes congressional debate that lasted over two months, culminating in the House's defeat of a Democratic amendment tightening restrictions on sales at gun shows. Media coverage tracked closely with this debate. Two of the three peaks in media attention to guns (in the second and fifth weeks after Columbine) coincided with key battles in the congressional debate; this beat-centered reporting then subsided when the congressional debate ended.

In contrast, the pop-culture problem definition waned as gun control gained greater rhetorical traction. The White House summit of experts and industry executives ultimately could not sustain media attention because its political stakes and policy implications were unclear. Consequently, a different pattern of reporting emerged that was less tied to Washington beats and more thematic, but that also subsided more quickly; in contrast to the gun-control frame, the pop-culture frame all but disappeared after the White House summit.

School Programs and Criminal Justice

In contrast to the problem definitions explored above, two problem definitions that together received significant congressional attention were much less prominent on the media agenda: the quality of school programs and security, and the need for tougher criminal justice measures. School programs and security was the Number 2 issue in the *Congressional Record*, and over 40 percent of introduced legislation focused on this issue, overshadowing all other categories of legislation. Criminal justice ranked third in both congressional debate and legislation.

But what explains the media's relative inattention to the school programs and criminal justice frames? It clearly was not for lack of congressional activity to cover. Fifty-three percent of the school programs bills introduced

in the 106th Congress were introduced between April and August 1999, the same period as our media sample. It appears that, again, the institutional incentives of the media and Congress diverged. For many members of Congress, Columbine opened a window of opportunity to fit the "new" phenomenon of Columbine-style youth violence into the old bottles of federal aid to local schools—one of a number of popular distributive policies that allow federal policymakers to "bring home the bacon" (Lowi, 1964; Mayhew, 1974; Fiorina, 1989) while also circumventing state and other governments while targeting funds directly to school districts (Hills, 1999). Similarly, one observer noted that one of the post-Columbine criminal justice bills was "less the product of high-profile suburban mass shootings than the inner-city youth crime wave that hit in the mid-1980s" (Carney, 1999:1147). However, these problem foci did not offer the dramatic commercial appeal of stories about pop-culture products like *Natural Born Killers*, Marilyn Manson, or video "shooter" games, nor did it offer a high-stakes political showdown as in the gun-control debate.

These arena divergences also suggest, again, that media frames may be less influenced by what members of Congress say and do on the floor of that arena than by what political leaders tell reporters when they enter the media arena. The politicians who took to the airwaves immediately after Columbine did not emphasize a school security or a criminal justice response to the school-shooting problem in their strategic communications with the media, despite the ensuing wave of legislative activity. Politicians did not publicly stake their party's fortunes on these problem definitions, though it may have enhanced individual members' ability to claim credit for new resources in their local schools and more "get tough" anti-crime measures.

Conclusion

Consistent with the literature exploring the competition among different problems for agenda space, we have found that only some definitions of "the same" problem win prominent attention in the media and congressional arenas in the aftermath of a major defining event. More importantly, this study shows those arenas can define event-driven problems differently, with implications for the quality and coherence of public discourse and policy making. Put simply, what the news highlights as "the real problem" may or may not reflect the thrust of policy-making activity in Congress.

Each arena's institutional structures and incentives can create as much divergence as convergence between the media and Congress. Congress is institutionally predisposed to favor preexisting problem definitions that match preexisting solutions, as suggested by the Congress's linkage of school violence with school security and criminal justice. The media have stronger incentives to seek out "new" problem definitions (as in the pop-culture angle), or to follow those frames attached to high-stakes political showdowns

(as in the gun-control angle). These differing institutional incentives constitute limits on the interinstitutional feedback that accompanies dramatic events. Convergences and divergences are amplified when prominent politicians cue the media to follow particular story lines that either coincide with or depart from their actual legislative activity.

It is important not to overemphasize the divergence between the two agendas. Considering the wide range of problem definitions circulating in the media in the aftermath of Columbine, the convergence of media coverage with congressional action on even one problem definition is noteworthy. But the divergences are nevertheless striking, both for what they reveal empirically and for what they suggest normatively.[5] In an era of generally declining trust in government and increasing media focus on major event-driven stories, such disconnect between the ways a problem is defined in the media and in Congress may be cause for concern.

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[5]We set aside for another day one of the most troubling implications: that the intense attention generated by dramatic news events may distort the relative importance of public problems. The string of school shootings across the country since the mid 1990s may have distorted public perceptions of the nature and scope of youth violence and obscured the statistical reality that acts of violence in schools have declined since the early 1990s (Donahue, Schiraldi, and Zeidenberg, 1999).

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