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Network news coverage of school shootings

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Abstract

School shootings have become a subject of intense national debate. The present study is a content analysis and interpretation of television evening newscast coverage of these crimes. The focus is on ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly newscasts. Findings from this research support two propositions: that the most violent school shootings receive the most media coverage, and that the reporting of school shooting cases on network newscasts reflect the “herd mentality” nature of the media.

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1. Introduction

In recent years school shootings have received significant media attention. Through content analysis of school shooting reports on evening network newscasts, we hope to shed light on two generally held research-based axioms relevant to media coverage of crime and social problems. The first axiom, one that is widely accepted by social scientists and journalists, is the view that media news is driven by violence and gore. Roughly stated, this notion is captured in the popular expression: “If it bleeds, it leads.” Indeed, research has consistently shown that crime stories are a popular and significant element of total news (Bailey & Hale, 1998; Chermak, 1997; Dominick, 1978; Graber, 1980; Surette, 1998). Not all crime stories are of equal interest to the media. Researchers have documented that the media is highly selective with regard to crime coverage, preferring to report on crimes that are violent, unusual, dramatic, and sensational (Bohm, 1986; Maguire, Sandage, & Weatherby, 1999; Roshier, 1973; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981). The second axiom that is relevant to the present analysis of reports on school shootings is the notion that media news reflects a “herd mentality.” The selection and reporting of crime news and social problems is generally dependent on the same sources: news agencies

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and government (Gans, 1980; Gordon & Heath, 1981). Further, as noted by Ehrlich (1995, p. 205), as the news business has become more competitive and increasingly tied to corporate interests, the result has been to “homogenize the news rather than diversify it.”

2. Data and methods

Data for this study come from the Television News Archive housed at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN. This archive contains video tapes of network news broadcasts as well as special news reports. The archive has video tapes of all ABC (American Broadcasting Company), CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System), and NBC (National Broadcasting Company) evening newscasts going back to 1968. The present research is a content analysis of a sample of these tapes. The sample consists of stories involving 14 school shootings. The shootings are of relatively recent origin and were selected for examination on the basis of their national interest (having appeared somewhere in the national media, for example, national television or national newsmagazines). For each of these school shootings, commencing with the day of the shooting (unless the shooting occurred at night in which case the analysis began the next day), we analyze an entire week’s coverage of ABC, CBS, and NBC newscasts. In short, the main aim was to document number of stories and amount of time allocated to each report.

3. Findings and analysis: “If it bleeds, it leads” and media herd mentality

Crime reports constitute 10–20% of all stories on television news (Dominick, 1978; Graber, 1980; Johnson, 1998). There are several reasons that explain why crime is such a common topic of television newscasts (Katz, 1986). First, crime news is relatively cheap and readily accessible (Chermak, 1995). Second, providing information about crime can be seen as serving a useful purpose (Maguire et al., 1999). Third, and perhaps most important, crime news generates viewer interest which in turn spikes program ratings. The “commodification of crime,” as Tunnell (1992) refers to it, reflects a purposeful strategy used by media outlets to maximize their business goals.

The media is highly selective with regard to crime coverage, preferring to report on crimes that are violent, unusual, and dramatic/sensational. How do school shootings rate on these criteria? To begin with, school shootings are by definition violent. Second, they certainly are unusual. In fact, a recent federal government report notes that children are more likely to be victims of violent crime away from school than at school (Riley & Reno, 1999). This report estimates that children have less than a “one in a million chance of suffering a school-associated violent death” (Riley & Reno, 1999, p. 8). And, finally, school shootings are dramatic, sensational events. In addition to all of the reasons just noted, we should expect to find extensive media coverage of school shootings because they fulfill the ideals of “periodicity” and “consonance” (Cohen & Young, 1981). Periodicity refers to the time cycle of a story, while consonance has to do with establishing a connection to previous accounts. School shootings are choice stories in both respects. Generally, a school shooting retains interest over several days, and the most recent school shooting can always be connected back to a previous case.

Table 1

Television evening newscast coverage of school shootings by ABC, CBS, and NBC for 1 week commencing with the day of the shooting

Site	ABC (stories:time)	CBS (stories:time)	NBC (stories:time)	Total (stories:time)
Moses Lake, 2-2-96	1 (0:10)	1 (0:10)	1 (2:30)	3 (2:50)
Bethal, 2-19-97	Zero	Zero	Zero	Zero
Pearl, 10-1-97	1 (0:30)	2 (2:40)	3 (9:20)	6 (12:30)
W. Paducah, 12-1-97	6 (12:10)	6 (16:40)	6 (21:20)	18 (50:10)
Jonesboro, 3-24-98	7 (25:50)	6 (28:30)	10 (42:40)	23 (97:00)
Edinboro, 4-24-98	3 (7:10)	2 (5:50)	1 (2:30)	6 (15:30)
Springfield, 5-21-98	7 (23:00)	7 (23:00)	5 (19:40)	19 (65:40)
Richmond, 6-15-98	1 (0:10)	1 (2:10)	1 (2:10)	3 (4:30)
Littleton, 4-20-99	17 (81:20)	21 (69:40)	15 (80:30)	53 (231:30)
Conyers, 5-20-99	3 (10:30)	3 (5:20)	2 (5:30)	8 (21:20)
Deming, 11-19-99	Zero	1 (0:20)	Zero	1 (0:20)
Fort Gibson, 12-6-99	2 (1:30)	2 (6:00)	2 (5:00)	6 (12:30)
Mount Morris, 2-29-00	1 (1:50)	1 (2:10)	1 (4:40)	3 (8:40)
Savannah, 3-10-00	Zero	Zero	Zero	Zero
Total	49 (164:10)	53 (162:30)	47 (195:50)	149 (522:30)

Table 1 shows that there is considerable variability in national television newscast coverage of school shooting cases. Time allotted to school shootings ranges along a continuum of “extreme,” “substantial,” “modest,” “slight,” and “zero.” Reports of the Columbine school massacre in Littleton, Colorado, overshadow all other cases. This is the one example of what might be termed extreme coverage. In total, ABC, CBS, and NBC aired 53 stories for the first week following the Columbine violence. These 53 stories constituted nearly 4 hr of coverage on evening newscasts. Columbine was the lead story for all 20 newscasts that week (NBC had no newscast on Sunday due to a sports entertainment commitment). Remarkably, on Tuesday, the first night of reporting this case, ABC, CBS, and NBC devoted 7 min 30 s, 11 min 20 s, and 16 min, respectively. The next evening drew even more expanded coverage with ABC, CBS, and NBC committing 17 min 10 s, 13 min 50 s, and 17 min, respectively. This is an extraordinary level of coverage given the fact that evening newscasts run 30 min in length with only 21 min actually set aside for news (commercials and promotions account for the remainder of time).

Table 1 shows that three school shootings received “substantial” coverage. There were 23 stories for a total of 97 min devoted to the Jonesboro case. Eighteen of the reports were lead stories for that evening’s newscast. The Springfield and West Paducah cases received nearly equal coverage. There were 19 reports on the Springfield shooting and 18 for Paducah. Total time was 65 and 50 min, respectively.

Four school shooting cases garnered “modest” national evening newscast interest: Conyers, Edinboro, Pearl, and Fort Gibson. In the order just noted, there were 8, 6, 6, and 6 reports filed. Minutes (rounded) devoted to these cases were as follows: 21, 16, 13, and 13, respectively. Moses Lake, Richmond, Deming, and Mt. Morris incidents received “slight” attention. Each network presented one story on each of the shootings, with the exception of the Deming case which only CBS covered. Combined coverage added to just under 3 min for Moses Lake, 4.5 min for Richmond, 20 s for Deming, and 8 min and 40 s for Mt. Morris. Finally, there was “zero” coverage of the shootings that took place at Bethal, Alaska, and Savannah, Georgia.

Table 2
Bleeds and leads: association of deaths and injuries with time and number of stories

Variable pair		Variable pair		Variable pair	
Total stories with deaths	.4083 ^a N (14)	Total stories with injuries	.8996 N (14)	Total stories with total harm	.8369 N (14)
Total time with deaths	.4040 ^b N (14)	Total time with injuries	.8660 N (14)	Total time with total harm	.8082 N (14)

^a Spearman’s rho.
^b Littleton accounts for slightly over one-third of the total deaths and one-quarter of the injuries. Its removal from the data set reveals a substantive drop only in the association between deaths and the number of news stories (.2533) and between deaths and amount of news coverage time (.2494). All other associations remain very strong.

The finding that evening newscasts do not allocate equal time and resources to each school shooting incident is not shocking, but the wide differences are noteworthy. What can explain this? Without question, the dominant factor associated with amount of coverage is *violence*. As indicated by Table 2, the data offer extreme support for the “If it bleeds, it leads” proposition.

In terms of total newscast coverage, out of the 14 school shootings examined, Littleton, Jonesboro, Springfield, and West Paducah accounted for 76% of all news reports ($N = 113$) and 85% of total time ($N = 443$ min). These four cases were the most violent. Together they accounted for 25 out of 37 deaths (68%) and 56 out of 85 non-fatal shooting injuries (66%). The pattern is clear: more violence generally translates into more coverage. The data in Table 2 reveal the relationship between deaths and injuries, and the number of news stories and amount of news coverage time. There is a moderately strong association of .4040 and .4083 between deaths and the number of news stories and between deaths and amount of news coverage time respectively. However, there is an extremely high association between injuries and the number of news stories (.8996) and amount of news coverage time (.8660). Similarly, the conjoining of injuries and deaths into “total harm” reveals remarkably strong associations between “total harm” and the number of news stories (.8369) and amount of news coverage time (.8082).

Although there is exceptionally strong support for concluding that violence is the decisive factor in determining amount of media coverage, other considerations might include the unusual quality of the act, weapons used, the setting, strategy employed, age of offenders and victims, family background of the offender(s), other news stories of the day, and media accessibility. The Bethal, Alaska, shooting is an apt example of media accessibility. Not only is Bethal located in Alaska, a state far removed from mainland media outlets, but it is also a town situated several hundred miles away from a major city (e.g., Anchorage). The facts of the case, taken on its face, were violent, unusual, and dramatic: a 16-year-old boy with a troubled past hatched a plot to kill his school principal, among others, and have the action video taped by confederates. The principal and one student were killed and two other students were wounded. Nonetheless, there was not a single report of this incident on ABC, CBS, or NBC during the sample week of our analysis. Media accessibility should not be confused with population of the site, for there is no clear pattern between site population and amount of coverage.

Table 3

News herding: association of number of news stories, amount of coverage among ABC, CBS, and NBC

Variable pair		Variable pair		Variable pair	
Number of news stories					
ABC with CBS	.9125 ^{a, b} N (14)	ABC with NBC	.8199 N (14)	CBS with NBC	.8447 N (14)
Amount of coverage time					
ABC with CBS	.8864 N (14)	ABC with NBC	.8046 N (14)	CBS with NBC	.7728 N (14)

^a Spearman's rho.

^b Littleton accounts for slightly over one-third of the total deaths and one-quarter of the injuries. Surprisingly, its removal from the data set reveals a marginal strengthening of the association in the number of news stories by each major network and in the amount of news coverage time by each major network.

In short, there is a limited amount of time to cover all breaking stories including big political events, crime reports, and school shootings. And, though there are a number of factors that may contribute to editorial decisions regarding how much time to spend on particular school shooting stories, the dominant factor is degree of violence.

One of the best examples of the “herd mentality” of the media concerns the Pope's visit to Cuba in January 1999. This was a big story and all of the network anchors were in Cuba to broadcast the event on site. Before this story unfolded, however, a news report broke in Washington, DC—the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal. Immediately, all of the anchors returned from Cuba and the networks re-focused their news reporting.

With respect to school shootings there appears to be a considerable degree of similarity in terms of amount of coverage. The data in Table 3 reveal very strong associations between news networks and the number of stories and amount of coverage. The associations between major news network and the amount of news coverage time is only marginally less strong than the associations between major news networks and the number of news stories. These data suggest a “herd mentality” in the major news network coverage of school violence whether by incidence or amount of coverage.

4. Conclusion

The media has an undeniable influence on social life and is, arguably, the most important socializing force in society. Among the research findings in this area, for which there is a general consensus, are the following: that news coverage of crime tends to be driven by the tenet, “If it bleeds, it leads” and that media coverage of news is characterized by a “herd mentality.” The present analysis, perhaps not surprisingly, has found support for each of these findings. What is surprising is the strength or degree of support, which is extraordinarily strong. Moreover, there appears to be a general recipe for how the stories are presented. Initially there is a description of events, followed by attention to reactions, and concluding with analysis as to why this case, and others like it, have taken place.

Are there negative consequences to the network coverage of school shootings? There may be. First is the possibility of copycat crimes (see, Wittekind, Weaver, & Petee, 2000). Second, the focus on school violence distracts attention from a far greater threat to children: domestic violence. Third, unwarranted fear in the schools produces a less than ideal learning environment. Finally, national media attention has, in part, contributed to a vast proliferation of new school security measures. Additionally, many schools have implemented a “zero tolerance” plan that sometimes results in extreme measures. If school districts have “over-reacted,” perhaps it is partly because of media attention to tragic but uncommon school shooting cases.

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