

# Written All Over Their Faces: Neutrality and Nonverbal Expression in Sandy Hook Coverage

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## Abstract

During crises, it's challenging for journalists to keep their emotions out of reports. While broadcast journalists try to keep linguistic messages neutral, nonverbal behaviors are difficult to conceal. Graber's stages of crisis coverage theory discusses routines of covering crisis and preventing verbal bias but doesn't examine nonverbal bias. This study examines the neutrality of nonverbal expressions conveyed during the 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School through the lens of the stages of crisis coverage theory. This study provides insight for understanding the responses news organizations should have in terms of crisis coverage. By examining the ways that the influence of emotional events have on the nonverbal expressivity of journalists during crisis, researchers can better understand the ritualization of the nonverbal neutrality standards of the profession and make recommendations on potential ways that the field could adapt their current crisis plans to consider nonverbal communication displays more explicitly. Further, by combining crisis planning, media ritualization practices, and journalistic nonverbal expression, this research provides further insight into how performance by media during a crisis can influence cultural meaning about the event for viewers. The findings in this study also suggest the stages of crisis coverage theory was not upheld by broadcasters in this context, calling for reexamination of the theory's uses and applications to all crisis coverage.

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A key paradigm in the field of broadcast journalism is impartiality while reporting. While many broadcast journalists believe they do not inject their personal beliefs or emotions into their reports, many do not consider the impact their unintentional nonverbal behaviors may have on the neutrality of their messages. Because television journalists have the additional responsibility of controlling visual aspects of their reports, particular attention needs to be paid to their nonverbal cues to decrease the potential influence over the audience through biased displays. This is especially critical during coverage of national crises when audiences rely on reporters for the latest news and information.

The majority of previous research on nonverbal behaviors of broadcast journalists and the influence such expressions have dealt with political coverage. One of the first research studies to look at nonverbal behaviors in nonpolitical news reports was Coleman and Wu in their 2006 study, "More Than Words Alone: Incorporating Broadcasters' Nonverbal Communication into the Stages of Crisis Coverage Theory—Evidence from September 11." Their work focused on live breaking news coverage by network television journalists during the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The present investigation adapts Coleman and Wu's work by studying the nonverbal behavior of broadcasters from five major networks covering the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, which took place on December 14, 2012. However, the findings of this study suggest that the expected neutrality levels in each stage of coverage do not correlate with the expectations of the stages of crisis coverage theory.

**Expectation of Neutrality**

American journalists are expected to remain neutral in their reporting. A majority of Americans, 78%, say the news media should never show bias; 61% of people in the United States believe that journalists cover most important news events without bias (Mitchell, 2018). This expectation to remain neutral is not just on the part of the audience, either; journalists are taught that remaining neutral is an ethical norm of the profession (Cohen, 1987; Cunningham, 2003). Even while covering dangerous or emotional events, journalists are expected to appear calm, detached, and unemotional (Coleman & Wu, 2006). When this ethical norm and expectation is not met, the reporter's credibility suffers (Cunningham, 2003; Sward, 1999). It is important for a journalist's personal reputation, as well as their network's credibility and ratings, to maintain neutrality in their reports. This is why journalists strive to hide their emotions from the public while reporting (Cunningham, 2003). Professional journalists believe this is particularly important for crisis reporting and live coverage (Casey, 2003).

While journalists strive to remain unbiased in their reports, they do have natural biases, emotions, and personal beliefs, regardless of their attempts to hide them.

Viewers and the broadcast industry demand neutrality for reporters, but this ethical code may not always be possible to uphold. Some level of bias is inherent. Journalists filter information in ways that affect an audience's understanding or interpretation of issues, stories, or events (Lowrey & DeFleur, 1988). Even through their selection of particular facts, journalists have the ability to influence beliefs, attitudes, and behavior (Li et al., 2002; McCombs et al., 1997). This shows complete unbiased journalism may not be possible. There are some journalism scholars who believe the need for unemotional, unbiased reporting may be hindering the profession, and some researchers suggest intentionally injecting bias in reports could improve journalistic methods (Sillesen et al., 2015). While most scholars are not suggesting the type of "unbridled partisanship found in much of the European press" (Cunningham, 2003, p. 4), many argue that in the age of digital media and 24-hr news cycles, complete neutrality is not a feasible expectation for reporters. However, the fact remains that the public and many news outlets still hold this expectation as a tenet of journalism.

Another issue with the expectation of neutrality is that journalists cannot always control whether they communicate bias or emotions in reports. Journalists say that they experience many types of emotions while working on reports (Minarcin, 2003). This is especially true during crisis events. Reporters are continually exposed to graphic images that may lead to them showing emotions during broadcasts (Himmelstein & Faithorn, 2002). Like first responders, journalists are often the first ones on the scene, and they experience many traumatizing events while completing their work. Research shows both emergency workers and reporters can perform their jobs for long periods of time in a rational manner, as if nothing was wrong (Duckworth, 1991). Yet eventually the workers have to experience the emotions of the situation (Himmelstein & Faithorn, 2002; Pyevich et al., 2003). In fact, they not only experience the emotions of their personal experience, but they begin to empathize with and take on victims' trauma or symptoms. This is called *vicarious traumatization*, and research shows first responders are susceptible to this (Phipps & Byrne, 2003). Since emergency workers and journalists share many of the same experiences during crises, it is likely that journalists also experience vicarious traumatization (Coleman & Wu, 2006). This trauma can affect professional performance (Gal, 1998), and quality of work, such as investigative work for police officers and triage protocol for emergency medical responders, can suffer (Collins & Long, 2003; Duckworth, 1991). For journalists, this could mean a lack of attention to journalistic practices and norms. Coleman and Wu (2006) postulated that these overwhelming emotions would likely show up in a reporter's nonverbal behavior during reports. This is likely since generally speaking, nonverbal communication is difficult to control (Nowick & Duke, 1992). While emotions and facial expressions can be masked with facial techniques, such as actively working to manipulate facial muscle movements that could convey affect (e.g., forcing oneself to not smile when doing so would be considered inappropriate) (Buck & VanLeer, 2002; DePaulo, 1992; Ekman & Friesen, 1975), journalists are often not

trained to control their nonverbal behaviors. This is why it is especially important for reporters to be aware of the impact nonverbal communication can have so they do not transfer their emotions or bias in their reports unintentionally.

## **Effects of Nonverbal Communication on Broadcasting Audience**

Many journalists believe they do not show bias in their reports, yet most do not understand the effects of nonverbal communication on their viewers. The majority of research shows journalists do transmit nonneutral nonverbal messages, and these nonverbal cues have the potential to negatively or positively influence viewers, even when the reporter is unaware of transmitting a bias (Englis, 1994; McHugo et al., 1985). In fact, studies show the majority of people exhibit unconscious bias during communication interactions, and reporters are no exception (Ross, 2008). Studies show these effects can transfer through the communication channel of television (Haley et al., 1984; Pfau, 1990). Researchers have found that nonverbal cues that transmit a reporter's personal preference for a candidate have been present during political reports (Babad, 1999; Friedman et al., 1980). In addition, research found that reporters' nonverbal communication patterns influence viewers in matters of public opinion and political campaigns, even having the potential to shape the way viewers vote (Kepplinger & Donsbach, 1987; Moriarty & Garramone, 1986; Moriarty & Popovich, 1991). Demonstrations of emotions by a reporter also can affect the receivers' feelings. In his study of political reporting and bias, Englis (1994) found that journalists' projections of anger, fear, or stress induced the same emotions in viewers. These findings also transferred to emotional nonverbal displays of newscasters with anger (Kanihan & Gale, 2003), stress (Schuster, 2001), depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and sleeplessness (Pew Research Center, 2002). Since network reporters have the ability to influence a wide audience with potential biases (Nacos, 2003), it is critical for journalists to be aware of any behavior that could communicate non-neutrality, including nonverbal behaviors.

While most journalists are trained to control their bias in their verbal or written reports, few understand the influential power their nonverbal behaviors can have. Research shows that nonverbal behaviors have the ability to influence others (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). Emotional expressivity has been linked to trustworthiness, reliability, integrity, and good character by researchers (Boone & Buck, 2003). This is important for journalists who need to be seen as credible and truthful for their messages to be believed by viewers. Nonverbal communication also has been linked to credibility and persuasion, another trait upon which journalists rely (Burgoon et al., 1990). Broadcasters' nonverbal communication is a critical transmitter of trustworthiness: "It is likely that the critical component involved in communicating trustworthiness operates on a nonverbal level" (Boone & Buck, 2003, p. 174). To remain reliable, journalists must be aware of their nonverbal communication and work to control the influence it could have on the viewers. The transmission of nonverbal communication

happens quickly, especially during broadcast reports. Nonverbal cues are transmitted and decoded in milliseconds, even when the behavior is brief or seemingly insignificant (Burns & Beier, 1973; Izard, 1977). Researchers found that emotional expressions are especially easy for audiences to accurately interpret and decode (Ekman, 1983). Some researchers believe nonverbal messages can be even more important for receivers than verbal communications (Richmond et al., 1991). In fact, Meyrowitz (1985) writes, "On television, expression usually dominates words" (p. 103). Coleman and Wu (2006) suggest that viewers could decode both factual information and emotions from reporters during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Since nonverbal communication is at least equally important to verbal communication (Argyle et al., 1971; Graber, 1990), reporters need to better understand nonverbal cues, especially during crisis events.

## The Media During Crisis

The media play a major role during crisis events. The National Research Council Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media says the functions of the press during a crisis include (a) warning of predicted and impending disasters, (b) conveying information to officials and the public, (c) charting progress of relief and recovery, (d) dramatizing lessons learned for future preparedness, (e) taking part in a long-term public education, and (f) defining the problems that led to the disaster (Sood et al., 1987, p. 10).

Using these functions and studying how the media acted during coverage of national crisis events, Graber developed the stages of crisis coverage theory. Graber's (2002) theory states there are three main stages that journalists follow when reporting during a national crisis. The first stage occurs when journalists focus on describing what has happened. In this stage, the media are the main source of information, even for public officials: "Media reports serve to coordinate public activities and to calm the audience" (Graber, 2002, p. 142). There is often pressure to speculate about the cause of the disaster, and this may lead journalists to insert their own prejudices or stop relying on the normal processes of checking sources and information (Graber, 2002). Journalists are not likely to show emotion in their reports during this stage, according to research, because reporters can compartmentalize their feelings and focus on collecting information (Himmelstein & Faithorn, 2002; Simpson & Boggs, 1999).

The second stage of Graber's theory occurs when reporters turn toward making sense out of the situation, correcting past errors, putting things into perspective, and offering guidance and consolation for viewers. In other words, the audience turns to the media to interpret the situation (Graber, 2002). However, it is important to note that other studies have argued that the media cannot serve as a guiding and consoling source during a crisis because the media can only act as an information source:

There is a clear order in media priority during a crisis situation. The findings suggest that providing facts is the fundamental task of media in a crisis, especially during the first stages of the crisis, depending on the length and magnitude of the crisis. (Li et al., 2002, p. 16)

Graber's third stage occurs when the media prepare the audience to cope with the aftereffects of the event and attempt to sustain morale. In this final stage, the media try to relieve uncertainty as well as to reassure people that their grief and fears are shared (Graber, 2002). This may seem odd given that reporters are not supposed to show emotion, but Graber (2002) says, "If the news gives people the sense that authorities are coping appropriately with the disaster, this, too, is reassuring" (pp. 233–234). Again, some researchers disagree with this role: "The findings suggest that in a crisis of national magnitude, the need for guidance and consolation is likely to be overridden by the need for more accurate and informative facts" (Li et al., 2002, p. 17). Despite some disagreement among scholars, Graber's theory is widely accepted by news organizations and communicators focused on crisis coverage.

While Graber's stages of crisis coverage theory has been widely used in communication studies, nonverbal communication is not mentioned in it except during one instance where a public relations spokesperson did not show the proper emotion during a crisis and how that negatively influenced perception. Coleman and Wu (2006) believe nonneutral nonverbal cues of journalists differ by the three stages of crisis coverage. They define nonneutral nonverbal cues by the degree to which a journalist is moving their facial expressions (including eyebrows, lips and mouth, head position, overall face) and gestures (overall body posture and arm movement) from the neutral expression, as defined by nonverbal scholars (Ekman, 1983; Knapp & Hall, 2002). For example, a journalist that is nodding his or her head at a source during an interview would be displaying nonneutral nonverbal cues since the head is not in the neutral, horizontal position, and this cue has been shown to have the potential to communicate preferential treatment by the journalist for that interviewee to the audience (Babad, 1999).

Coleman and Wu (2006) suggest that the likelihood of journalists expressing nonneutral nonverbal cues changes within each of Graber's three stages. In the first stage, journalists are looking for information that is likely scarce, and the need to provide information on a deadline may lead to reporters unconsciously conveying their personal biases by nonverbal means. In the second stage, when the audience turns to the media for interpretation, researchers believe nonverbal communication has the potential to influence these explanations. Since the media become a source of reassurance and calm for the public in the third stage, nonverbal cues could easily impact the emotional components of these reports (Coleman & Wu, 2006). Because of the lack of emphasis on nonverbal communication in Graber's theory, Coleman and Wu focused on nonverbal cues during crisis reports to see if they matched with Graber's findings.

Coleman and Wu (2006) wanted to understand the presence of nonverbal communication in the 9/11 coverage. They looked at how many nonneutral nonverbal cues were present during broadcasts, and whether the nonverbal patterns correlated with Graber's stages of crisis coverage theory (Coleman & Wu, 2006). They found broadcasters did communicate significantly more positive or negative nonverbal expressions, or nonneutral nonverbal cues, than neutral expressions during the first 24-hr

coverage period. Findings from their research also suggest a significant difference in the number of nonverbal expressions depending on the stage of coverage:

- First stage: 9a-5p—40.6% of nonverbal expressions were positive or negative.
- Second stage: 5p-1a—45.6% of nonverbal expressions were positive or negative.
- Third stage: 1a-9p—13.8% of nonverbal expressions were positive or negative.
- Most negative only expressions occurred during the first stage (46%), followed by the second period (44%; Coleman & Wu, 2006).

In other words, journalists showed the most nonneutral nonverbal cues during the second stage of reporting. “In this second period, they lost their professional demeanor and began to feel, and uncontrollably express, emotions. This phenomenon resembles the work with other professionals in vicarious traumatization” (Coleman & Wu, 2006, p. 11). Coleman and Wu (2006) point out that most journalists believe that they are successful in controlling emotions in their delivery, but the researchers’ findings show that goal of being neutral is not being met. Interestingly, the second phase is when the audience seeks the most emotional reassurance (Graber, 2002), yet this is the time when journalists showed the least amount of neutral expressions (Coleman & Wu, 2006). This suggests journalists could potentially have a high level of influence in an emotionally sensitive time for the audience through their nonverbal communication. Researchers say nonverbal expressions can influence viewers (Moriarty & Garra-mone, 1986), stir viewers’ emotions or influence opinions (Graber, 1988), or affect their attitudes and behaviors (Sullivan & Masters, 1988). Because theirs was the first study to examine broadcasters’ nonverbal communication during crisis news coverage, Coleman and Wu (2006) suggest replicating their study for other crisis events to see if the findings stay the same in other scenarios.

## **New Context of School Shootings**

This study will extend the Coleman and Wu study by analyzing the stages of crisis coverage theory in the context of school shootings. Instead of using the 9/11 coverage, this study examines the broadcast coverage of the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. When surveying American millennials, the Pew Research Center found the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School is considered one of the top 10 significant historical events of all time (Deane et al., 2016). Sandy Hook currently has the highest death toll of all American school shootings, with the deaths of 20 children and six adults (CNN, 2017). The event was covered by the national networks in a 24-hr news cycle, similar to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The event is unique from the 9/11 terrorist attacks in a few ways. First, in 2012, when the shooting occurred, live coverage was already heavily used by national networks, and other forms of digital media reporting, such as Twitter and bloggers, were more common (Matsa, 2017). Second, in the hours following the shooting, there were not a lot of accurate facts to report about the incident; the flow of information was confusing, and there were many

errors made by reporters (Dailey, 2012). Thirdly, the event was extremely sensitive because there were so many children affected and killed (Folkenflik, 2012). Therefore, it did not warrant the same levels of network coverage. While the events are certainly different, Graber (2002) and Coleman and Wu (2006) suggest that journalistic patterns of coverage should remain the same regardless; this study seeks to provide empirical testing of that claim.

This study is critical to understanding the responses news organizations should have in terms of crisis coverage. Due to the prevalence of school shootings and other national crises, experts say news organizations need to have plans for how to cover crisis events like school shootings, both for organizational efficiency and for protection of individual journalists (DePaulo, 1992) since they are one of the primary sources of information to the public and a place for official sources to deliver updates. The ability to deal with journalistic uncertainty of the crisis and provide information quickly and reliably requires crisis planning (DePaulo, 1992), and scholars suggest ritualization through crisis planning can create further adherence to professional norms and standards for future crises (Cottle, 2012). Psychologists believe journalists need to develop emotionally neutral ways of interpreting the events they deal with to maintain impartiality as well (Duckworth, 1991). By examining the ways that the influence of emotional events have on the nonverbal expressivity of journalists during crisis, researchers can better understand the ritualization of the nonverbal neutrality standards of the profession and make recommendations on potential ways that the field could adapt their current crisis plans to consider nonverbal communication displays more explicitly. Further, by combining crisis planning, media ritualization practices, and journalistic nonverbal expression, this research provides further insight into how performance by media during a crisis can influence cultural meaning about the event for viewers. Through the review of previous studies, the researcher has developed a hypothesis and two research questions for this study to examine:

**Hypothesis 1:** Broadcasters communicated more nonneutral nonverbal cues (positive and negative combined) than neutral expressions during the first 24 hr of the Sandy Hook school shooting coverage.

**Research Question 1:** Was there a significant difference in broadcasters' total nonneutral nonverbal cues and neutral expressions, according to the three stages of crisis coverage? That is, were broadcasters more likely to show neutral nonverbal behavior in the first, second, or third 8-hr period of coverage of Sandy Hook?

## Gender and Nonverbal Expression

Gender has often been considered a moderating factor of nonverbal expression. Meta-analysis has shown a strong tendency for females to be more facially expressive than males (Hall, 1984), but other research has shown these findings to be inconclusive



(Hall et al., 2000). In their study, Coleman and Wu (2006) found that while female broadcasters were more likely to have slightly higher neutrality scores than male journalists, the results were not statistically significant. Because of the uncertainty of the moderating effect of gender on nonverbal expression, the researcher asks the following research question:

**Research Question 2:** How does the display of total nonneutral nonverbal cues vary based on the broadcasters' gender in the first 24 hr of the Sandy Hook shooting coverage?

## Method

To study the nonverbal behaviors of journalists during the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting, the researcher replicated the content analysis methods of Coleman and Wu (2006), only altering sampling methods in order to provide a randomized sample based on the use of a digital archival site not available to researchers in 2006 and the addition of a third coder to adhere to stricter intercoder reliability standards.

## Sample

The researcher used clips of the first 24 hr of coverage, from ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and Fox News, the highest rated national networks in 2012. The historical broadcasting video clips were gathered and viewed from the website Internet Archive (2018), which allowed coders to access digital clips independently. The 24 hr were divided into 15-min increments, and 25% of the 15-min units were randomly selected. The unit of analysis was the clip of the broadcast journalists. A clip was only analyzed if there is no break in action; that is, it does not contain editing cuts, such as a cutaway to video or sources. The clip also had to include the broadcaster from the waist up, so the coder was able to see all six nonverbal dimensions listed below. The clips also had to be at least 4 s long to help the coders have context of the nonverbal cue (Gianetti, 1982; Rosenthal et al., 1979; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). Both live and recorded clips were included, but they were coded as such. No difference was found between live and recorded units so they were analyzed together. The total units was 469 with 82 total broadcast journalists represented.

## Coding Categories

Once the clips were selected, coders evaluated the video and its reporter for six factors—eyebrows, mouth and lips, head, overall face, overall body, and overall gesturing (Coleman & Wu, 2006). The study trained three independent coders, another difference from Coleman and Wu (2006) who only used two. The coders did not try to determine which emotion the reporter showed, in an effort to reduce coding bias. Instead, they judged movements along a three-point dimension—positive, negative, and neutral; this was done to increase intercoder reliability and measurement

validity (Ekman, 1983; Knapp & Hall, 2002). The volume on each clip was turned off to reduce potential bias from verbal cues (Burns & Beier, 1973). Coders were allowed to pause the video to consider the expression further and reduce confusion.

While the researchers acknowledge that this study does not focus on other important aspects of nonverbal behavior, such as vocalics, it is important to hone in on just the physical appearance and movements of these six nonverbal signals to limit the variables and make the study manageable. Visual nonverbal behaviors are considered the most effective at conveying nonverbal messages, making these relevant subcodes on which to focus (Knapp & Hall, 2002). Coders used a six-dimension pattern, which has been proven effective in other studies of gesture and appearance (Ekman, 1983; Knapp & Hall, 2002) and was used in the Coleman and Wu (2006) study. Here are the dimension patterns used by the coders:

- Eyebrows

- Negative if lowered or furrowed toward middle
- Positive if raised up or not furrowed
- Neutral if normal or expressionless

- Mouth and lips

- Negative if corners contracted or pulled back as if in a grimace, tight, or frowning
- Positive if raised, or retracted and raised as if smiling/laughing
- Neutral if normal or nonexpressive

- Head

- Negative if head turned facing downward as if dejected or tired
- Positive if head or chin pointed up
- Neutral if normally positioned or straightforward

- Overall face

- Negative if serious, intense, unhappy, or worried
- Positive if happy, lighthearted, calm, or peaceful
- Neutral if normal or expressionless

- Overall body

- Negative if stiff or tense
- Positive if relaxed
- Neutral if normal or expressionless

- Overall gesturing

- Negative if journalist engaged in a lot of gesturing, hand-waving, or so forth at shoulder level or above
- Positive if small expressions with hands at waist level or below shoulder level
- Neutral if none (Coleman & Wu, 2006, p. 8)

This resulted in an interval-level variable called the nonverbal dimension score, which serves as an index of the total amount of nonneutral nonverbal cues (2006). If a unit was coded as positive or negative in one nonverbal dimension (e.g., eyebrows), the researcher later transformed that code into a score of 1 for that category; if the unit was coded for neutral expression in a nonverbal dimension, it was transformed to a score of 0 for that category. The six categories, or nonverbal dimensions, were combined to form an overall nonverbal dimension score that ranged from 0 to 6, 0 meaning all six categories were neutral and 6 meaning all six categories had nonneutral nonverbal cues.

Coders also coded the network and time of day when each clip occurred to measure it against Graber's (2002) stages of crisis coverage theory. This allowed the researchers to determine whether Graber's theory and Coleman and Wu's (2006) findings correlated with the coverage of the Sandy Hook school shooting.

### *Intercoder Reliability*

The three coders coded 100% of the clips so that every unit of analysis was coded by all three coders. Intercoder reliability using Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  was from a range of .957–1 across all variables (eyebrows:  $\alpha = .994$ ; mouth and lips:  $\alpha = .957$ ; head:  $\alpha = .995$ ; overall face:  $\alpha = .973$ ; overall body:  $\alpha = .985$ ; gestures:  $\alpha = 1$ ; gender:  $\alpha = 1$ ; stage of coverage:  $\alpha = 1$ ).

### **Findings**

In total, there were more nonneutral expressions than neutral expressions in the first 24 hr of coverage of Sandy Hook. The average mean six-dimension nonverbal score for the 467 clips coded was 3.2 ( $SD = 1.96$ ). This means on average a clip displayed nonneutral nonverbal cues in three categories of the six. Less than half (46%) of the total nonverbal cues were neutral ( $n = 1,275$ ). Over half (54%) of all total coded nonverbal expressions ( $n = 2,772$ ) were nonneutral, that is, positive or negative ( $n = 1,497$ ). Of the nonneutral expressions, 64% were coded as negative ( $n = 958$ ), and 36% were coded as positive ( $n = 539$ ). Hypothesis 1 is supported.

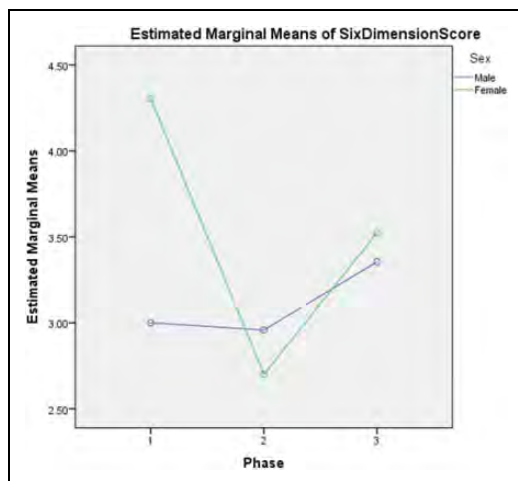
The most interesting finding was the difference in neutrality across stages of coverage. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test whether there was a difference in neutrality across stages of coverage. In the first stage of coverage, there were a total of 76 clips coded ( $n = 76$ ,  $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ); in the second stage, 208 clips coded ( $n = 208$ ,  $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ); in the third stage, 183 clips coded ( $n$

= 183,  $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ). These results were statistically significant  $F(2, 1) = 3.77$ ,  $p = .024$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ . Tukey post hoc tests revealed that Stage 1 had significantly higher nonverbal dimension scores compared to Stage 2 ( $3.43 \pm 2.91$ ,  $p = .045$ ); Stage 3 had significantly higher nonverbal dimension scores compared to Stage 2 ( $3.39 \pm 2.91$ ,  $p = .012$ ); there was no statistical difference between Stages 1 and 3 ( $3.43 \pm 3.39$ ,  $p = .878$ ). This means the most nonneutral expressions occurred in Stage 1, followed very closely by Stage 3, and the most neutral expressions in Stage 2, answering Research Question 1.

These findings are interesting in light of the stages of crisis coverage theory, which suggests that the second stage of coverage should be the most nonneutral. This suggests that there are limitations to Graber's initial statement that these stages are likely to predict neutrality across all types of crisis coverage, including school shootings. This is also an important finding because it contradicts the original Coleman and Wu (2006) findings where nonneutral nonverbal cues were highest in Stage 2, followed by Stage 1, and then 3. In this study, the opposite was found with Stage 1 having the highest levels on nonneutral nonverbal cues, followed by the third and second stages. This suggests a change in coverage patterns between these events, which needs to be further explored.

When measuring the difference in use of expressions by gender, there was no statistical difference. An independent-samples  $t$  test was run. Male reporters had an average nonverbal dimension score of 3.10 ( $n = 361$ ,  $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ), while female reporters had an average score of 3.51 ( $n = 105$ ,  $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ). However, these results were not statistically significant,  $M = 0.29$ , 95% confidence interval  $[-.13, .72]$ ,  $t(466) = 1.346$ ,  $p = .179$ . There was no statistical difference between gender expressivity when measured by the total expressions in the first 24 hr of coverage. These results are congruent with previous studies (Coleman & Wu, 2006).

However, when expressivity is measured by Gender  $\times$  Phase, there was a statistically significant difference between neutrality and gender according to the stages of coverage as determined by two-way ANOVA,  $F(2, 1) = 3.505$ ,  $p < .031$  (see Figure 1). A Tukey post hoc test revealed females had higher nonverbal dimension scores ( $M = 4.30$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ) than men ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ) in the first phase of coverage; in the second stage, men had higher total nonverbal dimension scores ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ ) than females ( $M = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ); in the third stage, females had higher total nonverbal dimension scores ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ) than males ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 1.98$ ). This suggests that in each stage, men and women displayed significantly different levels of nonverbal neutrality, even though gender alone across the entirety of coverage was not significantly different; this suggests that there may be something inherent in the aspects of the stage of coverage that affect female and male reporting practices differently that are washed out when all three stages are looked at together. Previous studies have not explored this additional dimension, Expression  $\times$  Gender  $\times$  Stage, and more research needs to be done to understand the findings (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Nonverbal dimension scores: Gender  $\times$  Stage.

## Discussion

Findings from the coverage of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School did not align with Graber's (2002) stages of crisis coverage, and they also differed from the findings of Coleman and Wu (2006). While previous research has found the most nonneutral expressions during the second phase, the researcher found the most nonneutral expressions in the first and third phases. There could be multiple reasons for these differences.

First, 9/11 and Sandy Hook were very different types of crisis events. While 9/11 was unique and the first of its kind, Sandy Hook was in a series of mass shootings in the United States during the period. 9/11 was such a shocking event as the most massive terrorist attack on U.S. soil that no one was prepared for how to deal with coverage of this nature; this led them to rely on the more traditional standards of reporting, what Graber (2002) refers to as the stage of compartmentalization and fact checking. Sadly, broadcasters had become familiar with covering mass school shootings in 2012 when Sandy Hook occurred after covering similar events like Columbine and Virginia Tech. While this was the first time children of such a young age were killed in a U.S. mass shooting, broadcasters had some historical perspective on which to base their information gathering and coverage plan. This difference in routines and practices due to a uniqueness factor of news could have affected the neutrality differences within the various stages.

In addition, the events were different in terms of what types of news was being reported in each stage. During 9/11 coverage, many journalists did not know the full extent of the crisis being a terrorist attack until the later part of the first stage, and the potential death toll would not be fully understood until late in the second stage. The

time elapsed from the moment the first plane alerted authorities of the hijacking to the total collapse of the World Trade Tower was almost 9 hr (History.com, 2011). This extended time line in information confirmation, length of event changes, and delayed understanding of the crisis extent could explain why previous researchers found the second phase to have more nonneutral expressions. On the other hand, the actual shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School was a relatively short event, lasting only 10 min from the time Adam Lanza opened fire on a classroom to the time he killed himself (History.com, 2013). Officials gave reporters a good estimate of how many children and teachers had died in the shooting soon after the event occurred (Folkenflik, 2012). Therefore, the shock of the atrocity may have worn off earlier in the time line for broadcasters covering the shooting. This gave them time to process their personal emotions faster and focus on the stories of the families and children.

On top of this, external sources of news may influence the application of stages of crisis coverage theory. The time line for the Sandy Hook shooting was affected by the misinformation police provided journalists in the first stage of coverage; because officials provided reporters with the wrong information for things like the shooter's identity, the number of fatalities, and so on and rescinded many confirmed details in the second stage, broadcasters were forced to focus on information gathering and fact checking much more in the second phase than usual crisis coverage. When analyzing the clips, the researcher also found that while broadcasters were not readily interviewing civilians or victims until the second phase of the 9/11 coverage, journalists were already interviewing survivors and community members, and telling personal stories in the first phase of the Sandy Hook coverage. These personal stories and interviews are inherently more likely to be nonneutral since they involve emotional testimonies of the crisis. In addition, journalists who were accustomed to school shooting coverage used experts on gun control and mental illness as early as Stage 1 during Sandy Hook, something Graber predicted would happen in the third stage. Because broadcasters had reported on other school shootings prior to Sandy Hook, they knew what topics could be used to extend their coverage, such as political issues like gun control and mental illness. These political topics tend to be more opinion-charged, and research shows the political topics often cause journalists to portray nonneutral expressions (Babad, 1999; Friedman et al., 1980). In fact, while not a part of the coding process of this study's design, the researcher and coders did note, using visual cues of lower third graphics and types of sources being used, that the most nonneutral nonverbal dimension scores occurred when broadcasters were discussing politics of the school shooting, not the victims of the tragedy. The researcher plans to include topic codes in future iterations of this study so that a more quantifiable finding can be generated. However, the initial observations would suggest something disturbing to most journalists and perhaps viewers as well: Broadcasters are not showing nonneutral behavior because they are reacting emotionally to the deaths of young children, but rather they are showing the most nonneutral behavior because they are discussing the politics of mass shootings, including gun control and mental health regulations. This is a clear violation of most professional norms of neutrality and bias; where some might argue

that a broadcaster should show nonneutrality when discussing victim loss to empathize with the community, there are few journalists who would support the idea of sharing biased expression on political topics. Because of the routineness of the coverage of school shootings, these issues likely come up earlier in the coverage, skewing the predictions of nonverbal neutrality in terms of stages of coverage theory.

While the stages part of the theory does not accurately predict neutrality in this case, the total nonneutral expression findings are similar to the theoretical underpinnings, as well as previous studies. Nonneutral expressions were more prevalent than neutral communication expressions. It is important to note that overall, Sandy Hook had larger totals of nonneutral expressions than 9/11. It would be interesting to explore the reasons for this in future content analysis studies. This finding suggests that journalists are not as neutral in their communications as they intend and are expected to be. In order to provide a better adherence to neutrality values in the news, broadcasters may need to consider their nonverbal communication as well as their written or verbal communication. This is a relatively new concept in the industry, and it could start with a greater emphasis on nonverbal neutrality training in journalism programs and training organizations.

In addition, the researcher found statistical significance in Neutrality  $\times$  Gender when measured by stage, which had not been previously studied by either Graber (2002) or Coleman and Wu (2006). These findings suggest female and male reporters may display nonverbal communication differently in the various stages of crisis coverage. This finding could also benefit from an exploration of topic coding since previous nonverbal communication research shows that women tend to express stronger emotions about people and sadness more than men (Fischer & Manstead, 2000), while men tend to show more aggressive levels of nonverbal expression in anger over politics (Dittmann, 2003). While significant, more research needs to be done to explain this variance.

## Limitations of the Study

This study needs to be completed in other contexts to measure its efficacy. Because these events are so different in time lines and political implications, it would be helpful to see crisis events that are similar in nature, such as Columbine and Sandy Hook. This could help us determine whether the findings that contradict the stages of crisis coverage theory are particular to Sandy Hook or if this same finding would apply across school shootings.

Future studies could also look into the effects of other types of nonverbal dimensions, such as haptics or vocalics. In addition, individual- and macro-level factors (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) could help to determine what influences various levels of adherence to nonneutral nonverbal communication. These additional variables could be added to future studies.

In studying Sandy Hook specifically, it should be noted that this was an unusual crisis in the way information was being translated from authorities to reporters.

There were many instances where the police told reporters something as fact, and it turned out to be a rumor or entirely false. For instance, journalists misidentified the shooter as Ryan Lanza, when the shooter was actually his brother Adam, based on the information from authorities (Dailey, 2012). While reporters have gotten key details wrong on important national stories throughout history (Shafer, 2013), UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism dean Edward Wasserman says this particular incident was unique in “how quickly and effortlessly this wrong information is published. The scale of error that is quietly becoming tolerable among the media is new” (Dailey, 2012, p. 2). This unusual amount of misinformation and reporting error during the Sandy Hook school shooting should perhaps be considered when evaluating the nonverbal patterns of reporters for this incident. Also, only two networks covered the event live for the full 24-hr period (Fox News and CNN); ABC, CBS, and NBC had intermittent live coverage throughout the day. This may have skewed some results, but the researcher felt a representative sample was found.

Finally, there is always the chance of coder bias or inaccurate coding when using human coders. However, the training of coders should have greatly reduced this risk, and the intercoder reliability of the coders was high.

## **Conclusions**

It is critical for broadcast journalists to understand their ability to send messages through nonverbal behaviors. While many are trained to recognize bias transmission through verbal communication, few understand the power and potential impact their nonverbal cues can have on viewers. During national crisis events, large audiences are relying on the media to provide information, guidance, and reassurance. While some expression of nonneutrality may be inevitable during these crisis reports, it is important for journalists to be aware of their potential influence and to try, as much as possible, to control any behavior that could transmit unnecessary emotion or bias. This study hopes to encourage news outlets to include nonverbal communication training and protocols in their crisis coverage plans.


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