



## VB Strong: how local news stations created a platform for a community to mourn victims of a mass shooting

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### ABSTRACT

Mass shootings have become increasingly prevalent in the United States. News coverage of the shootings often catalyzes an emotional environment of fear, uncertainty, and, ultimately, grief. However, news can sometimes serve a different role, one that is cathartic to viewers in a time of anguish. This paper explores how local broadcast news stations in Virginia Beach provided a platform for people to process their emotions after the May 31, 2019 shooting. This study was informed by symbolic convergence theory and ritual sense-making research. Using a Qualitative Content Analysis approach to analyze the data, I examined broadcasts that aired during the first week after the Virginia Beach tragedy. The analysis revealed that local news stories and interviews provided a symbolic ritual space for viewers to grieve and allowed viewers to connect as a community.

On May 31, 2019, Virginia Beach officials announced heart-shattering news: an employee of a Virginia Beach Municipal Building had killed 12 people and injured three others. It was the largest shooting that had ever taken place in Hampton Roads, the seven-city area in which Virginia Beach resides. News media quickly dubbed the tragedy “Virginia Beach’s Deadliest Day.” The somber days that followed saw a community in deep mourning.

During the first week after the tragedy, broadcast news media aired stories about the shooting around the clock. Local outlets interviewed witnesses, families, and coworkers of the victims, as well as local leaders, to get their responses to the event. These functions constitute the primary purpose for news in situations like this – the news media warn others of immediate danger and propagates information as the situation develops (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011; Quarantelli, 1991). However, Virginia Beach media may have fulfilled another role as well. During tragedies, local news serves a ritual function for some viewers, allowing them to make sense of these events by interacting with news media in a participatory manner. It also allows groups of viewers to symbolically converge, or develop shared meaning using symbolic cues, through the news media (Bormann, Knutson, & Musolf, 1997; Riegert & Olsson, 2007). Using Qualitative Content Analysis, this paper will explore messages in news broadcasts that positioned news viewing as a potential method of processing trauma immediately after the mass shooting in Virginia Beach.

### *The Current Study*

This paper contributes to existing research in two ways. First, recent studies suggest that news reporting of mass shootings and other tragedies could strongly affect viewers (Coonfield & Huxford, 2009; Dayan & Katz, 1992; Riegert & Olsson, 2007). Scholarship details how media coverage incite fear and trauma, as people are often afraid that similar instances will affect them. Research has also found

that mass shooting news coverage can create contagion effects, which occurs when viewers imitate the violent shootings that are reported. This paper contributes to research that highlights the positive impact news media can have, even when the focus is a devastating topic like mass shootings. It adds to the body of research that suggests news media coverage may be situated to help viewers process trauma caused by the shootings.

Second, this research contributes to the literature on the fluctuating level of audience trust in news media. Recent studies indicate trust in news is declining. Fake news (Nielsen & Graves, 2017), sensationalism (Kleemans & Hendriks Vettehen, 2009; Newman & Fletcher, 2017), and a decline in journalistic accuracy (Ward, 2014), all contribute to audiences' lower level of trust in news media in recent years. However, this paper points to a departure from that paradigm, suggesting that in instances of sadness and tragedy, news performs a ritual, parasocial role, and also serves as a virtual space for convergence.

## Literature Review

The theoretical framework in this study is rooted in literature from two areas: ritual viewing of media and symbolic convergence theory. Both areas contribute to an understanding of how media can be used in the mourning process and both will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

### *Guiding Theoretical Frameworks*

**News Viewing and Ritual Sense-Making.** Historically, the primary purpose of news has been to keep people informed (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011). Broadcasts update viewers about the state and nature of an incident. Moreover, they give viewers access to people directly affected by disasters, such as victims, relatives, and first responders. Viewers rely on news media to inform them about how they should respond to incidents and what the police are doing (Quarantelli, 1991). However, journalism's function has expanded in the new media environment. While still maintaining the primary role of disseminating information, media are often used to make sense of events for those viewing, reading, and watching (Myerhoff, 1984). Previous literature on ritual media describe how viewers use media to process trauma (Coonfield & Huxford, 2009; Dayan & Katz, 1992; Riebert & Olsson, 2007).

After a mass tragedy, communities usually process trauma by holding public events (Doka, 2003). For instance, after the shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007, the Blacksburg community held vigils and convocations which increased the level of comradery (Hawdon, Ryan, & Agnich, 2010). Public events promote communal mourning and provide a way for unconnected yet affected community members to grieve. They are constructed through physical spaces, such as Yankee Stadium after the 9/11 tragedy, but spaces can also be virtual and symbolic, like when the city of Littleton, Colorado created a website for people to visit and mourn after the Columbine murders (Benke, 2003).

Just as it is common for people to converge in a physical setting to honor victims and gain closure in the aftermath of a tragedy, people often turn to news to help process information and emotions (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Since news reporters often cover memorial events in real-time and news broadcasts narrate these events in a way that connects viewers to incidents, viewers frequently interact emotionally with the stories as they would at a live worship or memorial service (Coonfield & Huxford, 2009). Viewing "transforms one's living room into a public, ritual space" (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 121). Viewing is also interactive in that it reproduces the public, ceremonial space in which the memorial or other event occurs (Coonfield & Huxford, 2009). As a symbolic mourning environment, mediated public ceremonies, such as televised memorials or remembrance services, create a space for people to pour out emotions and solidify feelings of pride and oneness. While allowing the feelings of grief and loss to resonate in the hearts of viewers, the mass of people shown on screen joining together provides reassurance and hope of overcoming the tragedy (Hawdon & Ryan, 2011).

Through ritual, news stories make emotionally difficult ideas and concepts understandable to the audience during a time when they might find it difficult to accept the situation (Gans, 1979). In this

way, the news serves a pastoral role for the audience (Schudson, 2002). Media frequently perform this “ritual” function. According to Myerhoff (1984), “Ritual is prominent in all areas of uncertainty, anxiety, impotence, and disorder. By its repetitive character, it provides a message of pattern and predictability” (p. 151). News allows viewers to gather, to express a sentiment, and to process their feelings about what happened. They often reflect on the proximity of the tragedy to their own lives and think of how they could have been the victims (Kitch, 2003).

**Symbolic Convergence Theory.** In addition to ritual sense-making research, this study draws from symbolic convergence theory as a theoretical framework. Symbolic convergence is a process through which audiences find collective meaning through media so that all viewers may have a generally shared experience of the situation being presented. Bormann (1982) posits that:

Symbolic convergence creates, maintains, and allows people to achieve empathic communion as well as a meeting of the minds . . . If several or many people develop portions of their private symbolic worlds that overlap as a part of symbolic convergence, they share a common consciousness and have the basis for communicating with one another to create community, to discuss their common experiences, and to achieve mutual understanding. (p. 102)

This theory offers insight into how groups perceive the world. (Bormann, 1982). It revolves around the assumption that people who interact with a media text will collectively “construct social reality through rhetoric,” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2014, p. 253). In symbolic convergence theory, experiences are communicated through symbolic cues such as words, phrases, visual representations, characters, artifacts, and other audible or visible communicative expressions (Foss, 2017). Viewers recognize themes that become communal even with asynchronous viewing of a media text. These themes encompass dramatizing messages that describe and interpret human experience (Bormann, 1982). Bormann, Cragan, and Shields (1996) state, “when events become confusing and disturbing, people are likely to share fantasies that provide them with a plausible and satisfying account that makes sense out of experiences” (p. 3). Stories bring people together in moments that become ceremony and build a shared identity among the audience (Ehrlich, 1996).

**News Media Coverage of Mass Shootings.** Mass shootings have increased in the U.S. over the past several decades (Silva, 2019). These violent crimes have occurred almost everywhere large crowds gather: in schools, in the workplace, and at entertainment venues like movie theaters. Though several scholars have conceptualized the term *mass shooting*, a definition proposed by Schildkraut and Elsass (2016) is appropriate for this study, as it corresponds with the elements being examined. They define a mass shooting as:

An incident of targeted violence carried out by one or more shooters at one or more public or populated locations. Multiple victims (both injuries and fatalities) are associated with the attack, and both the victims and locations are chosen either at random or for their symbolic value. The event occurs within a single 24-hour period, though most attacks typically last only a few minutes. The motivation of the shooting must not correlate with gang violence or targeted militant or terroristic activity. (p. 28)

In the United States, mass shootings occur more commonly than in any other country (Lankford, 2016). Audiences turn to news media in the wake of a mass shooting for information about public safety, to reduce uncertainty, and out of pure curiosity (Croitoru et al., 2020). In general, most recent research surrounding the news effects of mass shootings focuses on sensationalism, trauma, and how mass shooting coverage spreads contagion responses.

### **Sensationalism**

Research on mass shooting news coverage has revealed considerable effects on audiences and viewers. One way mass shooting news coverage affects audiences is through sensationalism. Most news coverage of mass shootings hinges on financial motivations (Mayr & Machin, 2011). These mass shooting events garner news attention at a greater rate than other types of stories, including everyday violence. A 2012 AP poll ranked mass shootings as the leading stories for the year (Associated Press, 2012). According to the New York Times, mass shooting stories topped readership in three

consecutive years, from 2015–2018. As a result of this sensationalism, mass shootings are often overrepresented in news coverage in comparison to the frequency of their actual occurrence. There is a connection between news reporting of sensational events such as mass shootings and an increase in ratings (Schildkraut, 2014).

Immediate access to emotionally charged programming through digital media and streaming networks have conditioned audiences to expect overcharged wording, images, and video (Pescara-Kovach & Raleigh, 2017). News organizations not only provide this stimulating material, but also engineer elements of the newscasts such as promotional videos, news stories, and interview, and other news video to heighten it. For instance, headline-grabbing is a practice where sensational terminology is purposely used to grab attention (Kipfer & Chapman, 2007). A recent study found that “terms such as “massacre,” “death toll,” “deadliest ever,” “get revenge,” “riddled with bullets,” “laughing,” “jocks,” and “blood” were used in video and print coverage of Columbine (Pescara-Kovach & Raleigh, 2017).

Researchers have recommended that journalists move away from sensational reporting by covering events at a more complex level. For instance, they might situate events within communities, center stories of victims and survivors rather than perpetrators, and explore the background motivations of shooters without sensationalizing or glorifying them. Further, they should refrain from using one-dimensional accounts of what happened or why (Dahmen, Abdenour, McIntyre, & Noga-Styron, 2017).

### **Trauma**

News media coverage of mass shootings also affects audiences by proliferating trauma. Several scholars have written about the distress that people experience in the wake of coverage of mass shootings (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004; Garland, 2008). News media effects can be paralyzing, like the PTSD suffered by 15% of the community after news of the mass shooting at Virginia Tech aired (Hughes et al., 2011), or the anxiety and depression described after terrorist attacks were reported (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009; Lawrence & Mueller, 2003; Miguel-Tobal et al., 2006; Van Griensven et al., 2006). Coverage of mass shootings can produce cultural trauma- a phenomenon tied to significant events that incite deep distress in individuals and societal response (Alexander et al., 2004). This cultural trauma tends to affect those in close physical, emotional, or situational proximity to the mass shooting. For instance, a local mass shooting would produce fear in the surrounding community. School shootings produce fear in parents and school-age children (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016).

In addition to cultural effects, news media can also cause individual trauma. The lack of gang, militant, or terroristic activity in mass shootings (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016) is of particular concern to viewers since it indicates the shooting was random and could happen to anyone (Lankford, 2016). Since viewers turn to news to make sense of mass shootings, fear and trauma can develop when news media audiences perceive these events as being both random and widespread (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016).

### **Contagion Effects**

Another effect produced by news coverage of mass shooters is contagion. Often, would-be perpetrators seeking fame become copycats after seeing the nonstop coverage devoted to gunmen in the aftermath of a shooting (Lankford, 2016). Contagion also occurs when news organizations report intimate information about perpetrators from diaries and social media posts that describe the gunmen’s ideologies. Viewers who connect with shooters’ worldviews and motivations are more likely to repeat the crime. The copycat phenomenon is well-documented in connection with news coverage of suicides. The CDC, WHO, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Poynter Institute, and Society of Professional Journalists have all published guidelines for reporting in a way that reduces the likelihood of suicide copycatting (Lankford & Madfis, 2017). Although no similar guidance exists for mass shootings, (Beard et al., 2019) recent research has emphasized the need for unified guidelines to reduce the probability of mass shooting

contagion and suggestions for current and future implementation (Meindl & Ivy, 2017). Mass shooting scholars recommend that news organizations “focus on the complexity of these events, avoid sensationalism or graphic images, and share victims’ stories” (Beard et al., 2019).

Research has revealed how news media coverage of mass shootings can spread sensationalism, cause trauma, and facilitate contagion effects. However, as this study will show, news media coverage of mass shootings can promote additional processes. News stories may do this by acting as 1. a ritual space, or a space that facilitates representational interaction for the individual viewer, and 2. a space for the local community to symbolically converge, or share meaning as a group through media, after the event. In this way, news media may serve as a symbolic space for viewers to process trauma. Therefore, the following research questions were formed:

RQ1: How did messages in Virginia Beach local news broadcasts present news as a potential ritual space through stories aired in the first week after the tragedy?

RQ2: How did messages in Virginia Beach local news broadcasts present news as a potential space for the community to symbolically converge through stories aired in the first week after the tragedy?

## Methods

In order to address the above research questions, this study analyzes broadcast news coverage of the first week following the Virginia Beach mass shooting. Ploughman (1997) notes news media reflect the “social, economic, and political struggles in which they operate” (p. 119). Similarly, Pantti (2009) notes researchers should consider news stories as a means of understanding social reality. Qualitative Content Analysis is an analytic tool that is appropriate for examining television news, as it “becomes the foundation for a rigorous, holistic ‘account of accounts’” when used systematically (Fields, 1988, p. 183). Therefore, this article applies critically informed qualitative content analysis (Fields, 1988; Hijmans, 1996). Specifically, the study employs a modified version of Fields’ (1988) methodology for the analysis of television news which will be explained in more detail in the next paragraphs. This technique was used to explore ways in which news provided avenues for viewers to process the trauma from the shooting.

## Sample

For the critiquing of local news in the Virginia Beach area, components from the top two highest-rated local evening news broadcasts in the Norfolk-Portsmouth-Newport News market (which includes the Virginia Beach area) were selected. These stations are named WAVY-TV10 and WVEC-TV 13. The news broadcasts from the first week following the shooting were located in the web archives of two of the aforementioned local news stations. On the WAVY and WVEC sites, I downloaded and analyzed the 120 available segments that aired during the first week following the tragedy. The first week for sample because of the constant news coverage of the tragedy during that time. After the first week, coverage was more sparse.

## Analytic Approach

Fields (1988) highlighted eight steps of Qualitative Content Analysis for television news, though he noted “the actual research process will not be so tidily linear” (p. 184): (1) unitizing content; (2) transcription, (3) developing and using categories, (4) verbal analysis, (5) vocal and expressive analysis, (6) scene composition analysis, (7) describing the interplay of components, and (8) explanation. This framework was used to analyze the 120 news segments stored on the WAVY and WVEC websites. The basic unit of analysis in this study was a segment. In broadcast news, a segment refers to a complete

section of a news broadcast which could be described as a package, an intro, or a live studio production, such as an interview, a song, or a period of banter between anchors on set. Each news segment was transcribed. In this study, the analysis of textual, visual, and contextual elements such (such as production choices) was examined. I viewed the entire catalog of segments and thoroughly reviewed the accompanying transcripts three times total. On the first viewing of each story, I recorded the focus and content of the story. I noted information about each narrative including the interviewees, settings, and actions. I also focused on the functions of the stories and how viewers might connect to each one. Then on the second viewing, I identified patterns in the script and video, then recorded themes that emerged. I created a code sheet based on the themes that emerged from the first viewing. On the third viewing, the broadcasts were coded. Since I worked alone, I viewed the broadcasts a fourth time and coded the data a second time with a significant (4 week) break in between to ensure reliability. Next, the data were analyzed and divided into several categories based on the theme. Finally, the findings were extrapolated. I detailed the evidence that supported each theme, noting particular phrases, events, and visual cues that supported possible themes.

## Findings

Broadcasts that aired during the first week after the Virginia Beach shooting were analyzed for messages and themes that highlighted the stories' and reports' ritual, sense-making characteristics as well as instances of likely symbolic convergence. Both of these theoretical frameworks center on how participation in these processes "promote a sense of social collectivism" (Pantti & Sumiala, 2009, p. 121).

### *Ritual s Sense-Making after the Mass Shooting*

The following ritual, sense-making themes were found: (1) News segments were positioned as counselors for the audience, (2) Resource information was offered to help viewers once the broadcast ended, and (3) Public memorials were positioned as a space that allowed helped people to mourn at home.

**Broadcast Segments as Counselors.** The first indicator of potential ritual function was that in 15% of the 120 segments, the broadcast is situated as a counselor for the audience. While the term counselor is not present as a category for ritual involvement in current literature, previous studies on the subject have discussed how news media serve as a guide to the public. For instance, Schudson (2002) argues that news media can sometimes serve a "pastoral" role. In this study, broadcasts contained the elements one would expect to be present when encountering a counselor, allowing audiences to use the news as a proxy. For instance, a counselor explains complex emotions, including "why we have them, and what makes up an emotional experience," which "allows clients to become more aware of their emotional experiences" (Ehrenreich, Fairholme, Buzzella, Ellard, & Barlow, 2007, p. 423). In seven segments, anchors and reporters explained stress-based emotional responses that result from viewing mass shooting news media coverage and conversations with neighbors or coworkers about the coverage. "Even if you did not know one of the victims, watching this unfold can trigger emotion," said a WAVY reporter (WAVY TV, 2019b).

In addition to explaining the structure and function of emotions, counselors often advise about how to navigate them, teaching clients to "detect and focus on key aspects of the emotional environment, to access in memory and draw inferences based on past emotional experiences, and to possess the linguistic and verbal capacity to label and express emotional experiences" (Ehrenreich et al., 2007, p. 424). In four of the broadcasts, journalists gave such advice, sometimes while utilizing actual counselors in the broadcast. In one segment, WVEC featured a counselor to discuss the effects of emotion caused by the tragedy. "Grief is sneaky," the counselor said. "If you try to stuff it and not deal with it that's when it becomes problematic . . . so talk" (Gooding, 2019). In another segment, the hosts and guests of an interview segment noted that children are especially vulnerable since they would



encounter details of the story at school and in other places, with no way to contextualize it. A third segment featured a counselor who taught different ways to discuss tragic events with children. Acknowledging the difficulty of the subject for both children and adults, the anchor asked the rhetorical question, “How do you explain something to a child that you don’t understand yourself” (Gooding, 2019)?

These examples show how viewers could interact in the same way with the news broadcasts as they would with a face to face counselor. By providing information to help viewers understand and navigate their emotions the local news media served the ritual function of a counselor (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011; Schudson, 2002).

**Resource Information for Viewers.** Not only did broadcasts serve a counseling function, but they also served as a resource center. News is the first source of information about a tragedy when it happens, usually covering the traditional 5 W’s. In the case of the broadcasts in the week following the Virginia Beach shooting, a sixth W was covered: What next? In response to that question, WVEC and WAVY aired messages encouraging viewers to seek counseling to deal with repercussions of repeated exposure to the shootings. Six of the news broadcasts featured information on how to locate a counselor in the Hampton Roads Area. Both stations aired lengthy explanations as to why in-person counseling may be necessary, even for people who were not directly affected by the shooting. After running packages that promoted grief counseling, both stations also aired stories that provided resources to help people find counselors. The broadcasts included websites and phone numbers of centers where therapists had specifically been trained to serve those who had been affected by the shooting. This act constitutes the second method of potential ritual sense-making: The resource information for the counselors provided the means to help viewers process emotions long after the broadcast ended. In this way, the broadcast served a ritual function as the people had the opportunity to seek resources and guidance from the broadcast in the same way that they might with a trusted authority (Schudson, 2002). While the transmission of information alone is not necessarily sufficient to qualify this act as a ritual function, research does show that, in an emotionally driven state, viewers are more likely to fulfill informational needs as opposed to entertainment needs from the news (Perse, 1990). In times of tragedy, news reporters and anchors transform from mere information disseminators to authorities and leaders (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011), and the resources constitute guidance rather than simply data. Since news is often viewed as a reliable authority (Carlson, 2017), any sources presented by these broadcasts would likely be trusted by viewers.

**Public Memorials in Viewers’ Living Room.** The final way that broadcast news functioned in a ritual capacity was by airing mediated public memorials. Out of 120 total stories viewed, roughly 25% were about people mourning at sites and/or memorial services. Both news stations aired footage from several mourning ceremonies including interviews from pastors and guests. In mediated memorial services like these, as Coonfield and Huxford (2009) note, “Viewing is seen as simply reproducing the wider public space in which the ritual occurs—the living room . . . such media coverage simply reflects the form and contents, meanings and values encoded in the ritual in question” (p. 460).

The most poignant example of these memorials as ritual was when WAVY aired an entire memorial ceremony live. The service was held at Rock Church, one of the largest churches in the area. This ceremony was the most widely attended service in Hampton Roads, with local pastors, politicians, and representatives from several surrounding cities attending. This presentation was particularly significant because the live format of the airing allowed viewers to experience the memorial in real-time. Dayan and Katz (1992) argue that live news is most ritual in instances like these, which they term as “Media Events” (p. 199). These events are comprised of “the contests, conquest, and coronations which have relevance for one or more of the core values of society” (p. 199). By allowing the viewer to engage in these memorials, newscasts provided a way for members of the community to be encouraged by their government leaders, led by their spiritual mentors, and to participate in the uplifting experience of the service, thus allowing the newscast itself to fulfill the void of in-person attendance.

### ***Symbolic Convergence in News Coverage of the Virginia Beach Mass Shooting***

The following symbolic convergence themes were found: (1) News segments minimized the shooter and maximized the community, (2) Segments focused on community solidarity, and (3) Broadcasts promoted community/viewer involvement. Evidence for these themes was not mutually exclusive. Some of the soundbites and narratives referenced could also apply to a separate theme. However, evidence for these themes was employed where it was most strongly applicable.

**Minimize the Shooter, Maximize the Community.** The first theme revealed through the symbolic convergence of news was that news coverage highlighted the community and the victims while minimizing the focus on the shooter. Of the 120 stories aired during the first week of the tragedy, none of the stories centralized the shooter. While some of the stories that offered general information about the shooting also included information about him, such as his name, age, and job description at the municipal center, overall, there was little information about his background, hobbies, or interests. Conversely, in news media coverage of previous shooting situations, there were full stories dedicated to the shooter. In fact, news organizations spend hours of footage looking into the shooters' backgrounds. There is usually information about the perpetrators' families, suspects' popularity, the schools they attended, their interests, and their mental health (Kleinfeld, 2007; Lagorio, 2007).

In the case of previous mass shootings, the shooters often said that the reason they commit the atrocities is so that they can become famous. In 2015, a perpetrator who murdered two people on-air said, "[s]eems like the more people you kill, the more you're in the limelight" (Perez, Fears, & Musumeci, 2015, para 11). Some shooters even cite previous mass shooters, like the Columbine murderers, as a role model (Gladwell, 2015). Indeed, it is a common trope that people who are bullied later go on the "shoot up the school" to simultaneously gain notoriety, end the bullying, and get public revenge on bullies. In the case of the Virginia Beach shootings, it might be that the news media organizations made a conscious effort to present the stories in a way that highlighted the victims and the community, whom they may have chosen as the most important "characters" in the story rather than the shooter.

Another way the news coverage minimized the shooter was by airing stories that focused on the victims. When generalized stories about the incident mentioned the victims, the details included the 12 victims' names, their jobs, and how they were involved in the community. Moreover, between WVEC and WAVY, 16 stories focused solely on the victims. The most comprehensive coverage of the victims came in the form of an extensive series of stories aired by WAVY. The news organization produced an in-depth package for each victim, with a run-time of 1–3 minutes each. These detailed packages profiled the victims' lives and their legacies. Reporters interviewed friends, family, and loved ones. The stories allowed people who did not know the victims to join in together with other viewers who had never met the victims, in order to virtually meet and mourn them simultaneously. These packages aired at every news broadcast and were later featured on the website for viewers to revisit.

Just as the theme was underscored by stories about the victims, it was also emphasized by the number of stories centered on the community. Nine stories focused on ways the community helped raise money for donations to the victims' families. Another five centered on the Virginia Beach businesses that honored the victims by creating unique, Virginia Beach-themed merchandise, providing them to the public free of cost. None of these stories even mentioned the shooter. By refusing to present the tragedy in a manner that emphasizes the shooter, news media organizations nullified his voice in the coverage and minimized any fame he might have received subsequently. Not only could this discourage would-be shooters, but it may also help viewers deal with the trauma by shifting the focus from the sorrow of the tragic event to the hope of rebuilding the community.

**Community Solidarity.** The second theme presented by news coverage of the Virginia Beach mass shooting was community solidarity. This theme was communicated in several ways. The first way was through coverage of people exhibiting solidarity through visual unity. After a mass tragedy, communities often unite through visual symbolism. For instance, after 9/11, there was an increase in displays



of American paraphernalia. Coonfield (2007) observed an increase in displays of American flags, pro-American bumper stickers, and other symbols of unity after the tragedy (Coonfield, 2007).

Similarly, for the first several weeks after the tragedy, Virginia Beach and the surrounding communities wore the color blue to show solidarity. The movement began the day after the tragedy when Virginia Beach public school superintendent Aaron Spence tweeted that the entire school system would wear blue to honor the victims. "I'm encouraging everyone in our @vbschools family to wear blue on Monday, June 3, as we honor those who lost their lives on May 31," he said. Local news stations swiftly reported about the tweet and, before long, all of the school systems had pledged, through Twitter, to join in by wearing blue.

Moreover, WAVY and WVEC reporters wore blue not only on Monday but also during the entire first week of reporting. Nearly every story dealing with the tragedy was reported by a journalist in blue. This simple act of solidarity catalyzed viewer participation. By June 3, four days after the shooting, WVEC was airing segments that presented various viewers wearing blue shirts.

Physical demonstrations of unanimity are instrumental after a tragedy because they provide survivors and those connected with emotional reassurance and affirmation of the indivisibility of the group (Eyre, 2007; Turkel, 2002). Consistent with cultivation theory literature (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994), when viewers saw the physical displays aired on the news, they joined in, helping the movement tangibly spread through the community. When local news reported on the movement, the theme of solidarity was clear.

Solidarity was also communicated through the airing of stories focused on the phrase, "VBSTRONG." The "VBSTRONG" slogan began to appear around Hampton Roads shortly after the shooting, and local news played a vital role in helping the phrase gain momentum on and offline. There are several speculations about the slogan's origin. According to *the Virginian Pilot*, the "Strong" portion of the slogan may have come from the "LiveStrong" cancer support bracelets of the early 2000s, or it may have mirrored the "Boston Strong" phrase that rose in popularity after the Boston bombing in 2013 (Parker, 2019).

In Virginia Beach, the phrase emerged in myriad forms. It was used as a hashtag that allowed people to encourage one another online. It also appeared on a billboard near three roads and tunnels in Hampton Roads. Moreover, the Virginia Department of Transportation displayed VBSTRONG on about 20 tunnels. Restaurants, school and church signs, and tee shirts also displayed the slogan.

Research shows that slogans like this one are another popular way to show solidarity after mass shootings. For example, Blacksburg, the location of the Virginia Tech shootings, and surrounding cities showed their solidarity through similar semantic reminders of oneness. "Banners, car magnets and signs proclaiming, 'We will prevail'" were seen all over the city and illustrated the community's determination to cling to hope. (Hawdon & Ryan, 2011, p. 1364).

In Virginia Beach, local news stations highlighted viewers who donned or created artwork featuring the slogan. Both stations aired a call for viewers to submit photos showing how they had creatively implemented the slogan. During the newscasts, "#VBSTRONG" was prominently featured on the lower thirds during stories and interviews about the shooting. By disseminating the expression on the air in several forms, news media perpetuated the sentiment of solidarity, a strong fantasy theme in the first week following the shooting.

**Community/Viewer Involvement.** The final theme present was community/viewer involvement. After the tragedy, local news helped viewers to get involved by highlighting ways to give to others. Then, when news outlets ran stories that encouraged viewers to give money, attend memorials, and display their blue paraphernalia and VBSTRONG phrases, viewers were more than happy to participate. The stories that were aired emphasized people joining in to help one another.

Most poignantly, people who did not know the victims were moved to get involved. For example, one story showcased students who created VBSTRONG bracelets and donated to proceeds to the families of victims. "It broke my heart when I saw it on the news," Callie Dunham, one of the students, said. "I just wanted to do something" (Arevelo, 2019). Another story chronicled the planning, implementation, and ultimate success of a memorial walk at Mount Trashmore, a popular Virginia

Beach location. Angel Perkins says, although she did not know any of the victims, she organized the walk because she wanted to honor and remember the twelve lives lost. “After hearing about the tragedy that shook our community, my family and I went to bed with very heavy hearts. We woke up with tears. We knew at that time it was imperative to somehow bring our community together,” she said (Toliver, 2019).

Businesses also joined in. Back Bay, a local Virginia Beach brewery, created a new beer called VB Strong Pilsner in honor of the victims and gave 100% of proceeds to the families of the victims. Travis Powell, who had been at Virginia Tech at the time of the 2007 mass shooting in Blacksburg, said he was moved to sell the beer because Virginia Beach news reports helped him remember the overwhelming sadness experienced by the community during the Virginia Tech tragedy. “The second that I saw the reporters getting on there, I saw the pain in their eyes, cold and steady, it did bring me back to that April morning” (Mechanic, 2019). Similarly, Sandbridge Tattoo, a tattoo parlor in Virginia Beach, created a new tattoo featuring the VBSTRONG slogan below an anchor or a heart and gave it to community members at a reduced cost, with proceeds being donated to the victims’ families.

Most of these efforts grew from individuals and local businesses organizing small but impactful initiatives after watching the tragedy on the news. This process is a circular one in that, when these efforts are seen, especially in a mass media context, they energize other people to act similarly. One of the most influential sources of persuasion is social proof (Cialdini, 2009). Cialdini argues, “This principle [of social proof] states that we determine what is correct by finding out what others think is correct . . . we view a behavior as correct in a situation to the degree that we see others performing it” (p. 99). Cialdini’s definition tells us why we might accept, take comfort in, and even mimic actions we see praised on televised news. When we see that the actions are deemed as being acceptable to reporters, anchors, and others placed in a position of parasocial authority, we take the action as assurance that we should accept the worthiness of it (Cialdini, 2009).

## Discussion

This study sought to discover how messages in Virginia Beach local news broadcasts presented news as a potential ritual space through stories aired in the first week after the mass shooting. Through qualitative content analysis, it was found that news presents ritual messages by (1) positioning news segments as counselors for the audience, (2) offering resource information to help viewers once the broadcast ended, and (3) airing public memorials to help people mourn at home. While these broadcasts followed the traditional pattern of serving an informative role about the mass shooting incident and aftermath, the coverage served an additional, ritual role as viewers were able to immediately connect with the coverage in the same way that one might connect with a counselor, a means of resources, and a public memorial. As with news media research on national disasters, the findings identified ways in which the broadcasts facilitated a process of healing from trauma and provided emotional support for those affected by deep community loss (Kempe, 2007; Rentschler, 2010). Coverage reinforced the message that WVEC and WAVY were central structures in the lives of VB residents and the Hampton Roads community as a whole. The stations presented themselves as primary sources of information about the community and its efforts to heal. Additionally, 24/7 airing of stories about the tragedy positioned the stations as trusted friends that were consistently available to “discuss” the incident. Anchors were sympathetic and emotionally transparent, remarking that they, too, were devastated by the event. The overarching messages in the stories and newscasts aired the week after the tragedy are clear. The stations were not telling the audience things would be okay. Instead, they were saying that the Virginia Beach community, including WVEC and WAVY, will make it through the tragedy together.

The ritual components in these broadcasts are also significant because these narratives stand in contrast to historical news broadcasts that were often presented in a straightforward manner that lacked emotion. These broadcasts highlight trends in news research that show news personalities having an increased interpersonal tone on-air (Pantti, 2010). By allowing the reporting to take an

emotional tone, these mediated memorials provided an outlet for viewers to experience and express grief and loss, affirm the loss faced by the community as a whole, and give hope that the community was still strong and could move on.

Viewers almost instinctively understand how to utilize news media as ritual. The narrative function of news creates a vivid story which is a format that viewers can understand since society's collective memory is accustomed to the values purported by the news (Ettema, 2005; Kitch, 2003). Through the repetitive pattern of telling and retellings, audiences know how to respond to, react to, and use news media in a variety of ways, including as a ritual space (Zelizer, 1998). As a result of the news narrative forming a "script" in our minds, viewing these televised events acts in the same manner that attending them live would. Mediated public rituals function in situations where members of a community may feel lost and scared (Doka, 2003, p. 180). They restore "feelings of control" (Eyre, 2007, p. 442) and therefore increase solidarity in the community (Doka, 2003).

The study also sought to discover messages in Virginia Beach local news broadcasts presented news as a potential space for the community to symbolically converge through stories aired in the first week after the tragedy. A qualitative content analysis examined messages that created space for viewers to symbolically converge. The symbolic space included the following themes: (1) Minimize the shooter, maximize the community, (2) community solidarity, and (3) community/viewer involvement. These themes align with similar findings about mass shootings within disaster journalism. The theme of minimizing the shooter is likely the manifestation of years of work by news media scholars and practitioners who urged journalists to refrain from centering the shooter in stories (Silva, 2019). An example of such work is the "No Notoriety" campaign, which emphasizes the goal of decreasing the recognition of the shooter by calling for journalists to limit the use of the shooters' name and image in coverage (Beckett, 2018). By limiting the focus on the shooters, news coverage realigned the focus to target the victims and community.

Community centered discourse in the news broadcasts spoke to the theme of community solidarity. Traumatic incidents can fracture a community. Often the biggest priority after such an event is reestablishing unity, order, and camaraderie (Kitch & Hume, 2007). The theme of community solidarity encapsulates the overall sentiment portrayed by Virginia Beach news outlets, which was "We will rebound from this." Thus, the central theme focused on the idea that with everyone's help life could return to normal and that the Virginia Beach community was strong enough to sustain itself throughout the communal hardship. The overall tone of the stories was one of strength and hope for the future. This finding underscores research on disaster journalism and shows how reporting can have a vital function in uniting communities by confirming central communal ideals and tenets (Robinson, 2009).

Finally, the theme of community/viewer involvement was illustrated in segments that showed images of people coming together to plan community events, the stories highlighting the community's efforts to raise funds and supply other needs for victims' families, and the reverence and honor for the victims by people who had never even met them. With these narratives, news media producers portray the victims, family members, and the community itself as whole, emotional beings. They use the power of story to develop a rhetoric of "we" in terms of the community (Schudson, 2002). News media can enact a sense of unity when relaying information during a disaster. By utilizing emotional discourse in reporting, journalism can serve as a visual goalpost as communities move toward cohesion (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, & Cottle, 2012). In fact, an abundance of emotional news coverage in the wake of a traumatic event can lead to audience identification, a process by which viewers believe they experience the same level of suffering as those directly affected by the incident. On a different level, news media help communities build shared identities (Rahman & Mallick, 2007). The clear goal of the broadcasts was to unify the surrounding community by providing hope and a wider perspective of the issue.

## Limitations

There are several limitations of this study that need to be considered in interpreting my results. An analysis of other types of media coverage (such as print or radio coverage) could have provided a broader perspective on the symbolic space provided by news media for viewers to mourn. In addition, this study is useful in that it discussed the ways in which news media can facilitate symbolic mourning. However, as a Qualitative, Content Analysis, it cannot provide information about viewers actual response to the news media. Overall, this analysis has shown that broadcast news organizations can play a large role in a mourning community and act as a unifying agent during traumatic events.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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