



## #NEVERAGAIN: Framing in Community and National News Coverage of the Parkland Mass Shootings

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the salience and valence of frames in community and national newspaper coverage of the 2018 Parkland shootings, after which several survivors became well-known activists. Of the most common frames found in previous coverage of mass shootings (gun control, popular culture, school safety), only gun control was prominent following the shootings in Parkland. Newer frames (partisan divide, activism, mental health) instead followed gun control in popularity, likely because these were utilized by the activist Parkland survivors themselves. With a few important exceptions (e.g., community newspapers used community change, law responsibility, and family responsibility more; national used gun control, activism, and partisan divide more), local and community newspapers were similar in their use of frames. Perhaps most importantly, the findings indicate the survivors' activism seemed to disrupt the "settling" of news coverage into well-established frames for mass shootings. This suggests the ongoing conversation about mass shootings remains complicated and more dependent on shootings' specific circumstances than may have been previously assumed.

### KEYWORDS

Content analysis; framing; mass shootings; news coverage; Parkland; school shootings

On February 14, 2018, the deadliest high school shootings in US history took the lives of seventeen people and injured seventeen more at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida (*Sun Sentinel* 2018). The number of victims and their young ages meant the shootings were likely to attract news attention (Brezenski 2018; Maguire, Weatherby, and Mathers 2002; Schildkraut, Elsass, and Meredith 2018; Silva and Capellan 2019b). Though mass shootings are increasingly common in the US, the Parkland shootings held particular salience. Typically, shooters kill themselves or are killed by police, but the Parkland shooter was arrested peacefully following the shootings. After previous shootings, such as the high school shootings in 1999 in Columbine, Colorado that left 13 dead and the Sandy Hook Elementary shootings in 2014 in Newtown, Connecticut that left 27 dead, victims' parents became activists. After Parkland, the survivors themselves became news figures, with many participating in news stories immediately

following the shootings, then later becoming activists and organizing the March for Our Lives protest in Washington, DC one month after the shootings (*New York Times* 2018).

While examining news coverage of any mass shootings is important because of its potential to influence public understanding, it is all the more so here because the survivors themselves sought, contributed to, and received news coverage of the shootings and their activism. Survivors of the Parkland shootings kept their message in 2% of all news stories for one month following the shootings, hitting 9% by the day of the March for Our Lives (Cullen 2019, 208). In a mass shootings news cycle that was becoming increasingly normalized (Dahmen et al. 2018; McCluskey 2017), the young survivors attempted through their activism to interrupt the “settling” of how mass shootings are framed in news coverage.

The present study examined the *salience* and *valence* of specific frames in news coverage of the Parkland shootings by *community* (local and regional newspapers surrounding Parkland) and *national* newspapers. Traditionally, research suggests, news coverage at *local/community* levels tends to follow trends set by *national* organizations (Gans 1979; Golan 2006; Harry 2001; Trumbo 1996). However, Holody, Park, and Zhang (2012) and Holody and Daniel (2016) found this trend does not always occur following mass shootings, perhaps because the events begin locally before reaching national attention. If this trend is found in the present study, it furthers understanding of how framing theory works and what influences news coverage of similar issues and events (Entman, Matthes, and Pellicano 2009; Holt and Major 2010). Specifically, it furthers understanding of how the *subjects* of news stories (e.g., the student activists) might be able to disrupt established ways news organizations cover events like mass shootings.

This study also expanded upon Holody's (2020) agenda-setting analysis of the salience and attributes of news coverage of the Parkland shootings, which found that coverage tended to focus more on the future and on individuals, rather than on the present and society, as in news coverage of previous shootings, likely because of the survivors' then-current activism. These findings, and that the Parkland shootings' news cycle lasted longer than the 30-day lifespan typically associated with mass shootings news coverage (Chyi and McCombs 2004), indicate the Parkland shootings may be exceptional in terms of the amount and type of news coverage they received. The present study specifically examined if established or more-recently identified frames were used in news coverage of the shootings, and if these differed between community and national newspapers, in part because of the exceptional characteristics related to the survivors and their activism.

## Literature Review

McCluskey (2017) suggests news coverage of each new mass shooting relies on existing assumptions and frames that were used to define previous shootings. However, the frames used may be unique to this type of event. For example, in the review of previous research below, only one of the five most common frames Semetko and Valkenbuerg (2000) found in general news coverage was found in coverage of mass shootings. This suggests events like mass shootings may be covered differently than other news issues or events. It is possible that journalists have settled on a specific, unique set of frames to use when covering mass shootings (Holody and Daniel 2016). However, because research on this coverage also indicates this unique set of frames has changed over time, the present study examined news coverage of the Parkland shootings for frames

McCluskey (2017) and other previous research studies have identified as *established* in news coverage of mass shootings, comparing their use to frames that have *developed* following more recent shootings.

## Frames

This study utilized McCluskey's (2017) framing definition, which is that news frames construct social reality for audiences and explain who shoulders the responsibility for, in this case, creating and preventing mass shootings (Ryan 1991; Scheufele 1999). In other words, frames in news coverage define what the problems are in a mass shooting, what led to those problems, how the problems and causes should be evaluated, and how the problems should be remedied and prevented from occurring again (Entman 1993). As an example, a news story framing the Parkland shootings through a violent *popular culture* frame could suggest their primary cause was violent video games, as opposed to relating the shootings to *gun control* or *mental health*. Thus, the onus on preventing future shootings would be through censorship rather than other policy change.

Some of the most frequently used frames in news coverage of mass shootings include *gun control* and violent *popular culture* (Lawrence and Birkland 2004; Scharrer, Weidman, and Bissell 2003). Such frames are identified here as *established*, indicating only that they have been found salient in coverage of previous shootings. This review also identifies frames found through more recent research or considered through initial reading of coverage of the Parkland shootings as especially relevant to the event. Frames that may be unique to the Parkland shootings or were more recently identified were labeled as *developed* frames.

A few additional frames were included in data collection, but removed from analysis because too few cases were found. These included the established frame *copycat crime* (or *contagion*), which argues news coverage of mass shootings inspires new shooters seeking notoriety (Dahmen et al. 2018; DeFoster and Swalve 2018; Lankford and Madfis 2018; Murray 2017; Muschert 2007a; Newman et al. 2004; Pescara-Kovach and Raleigh 2017; Sumiala and Tikka 2011; Towers et al. 2015), as well as the developed frames *bullying* and *alternative narratives*. Previous news coverage highlighted *bullying* or alienation of perpetrators as potential inspirations for shootings (DeFoster and Swalve 2018; Lawrence 2001; Muschert 2007a; Newman et al. 2004). The frame *alternative narratives* (Berkowitz and Liu 2016; Starbird 2018), also known as *fake news framing*, gains salience through social media following mass shootings by emphasizing conspiracy theories about what "really" happened (e.g., shootings being staged by crisis actors).

## Established Frames

### Race

This frame was found in news coverage of the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings that left 32 dead (Holody, Park, and Zhang 2012; Park, Holody, and Zhang 2012), because that a mass shooter was not White was treated as newsworthy (Lankford 2016). Additionally, Weissman (1999) and Frymer (2009) questioned why news coverage of the Columbine shootings did not mention the shooters' racism, much like how the perpetrator of the Parkland shootings, who self-identified as White, expressed multiple racist beliefs before

the shootings (McLaughlin and Park 2018). The race frame was included because of this and to account for potential assumptions about the shooter having a Latinx surname. Both race and racism (Lawrence 2001; Leavy and Maloney 2009) have been linked to mass shootings and were included as a single frame.

### *Mental Health*

Public opinion and state legislation changed in favor of mental health care after the Parkland and Sandy Hook shootings (Barry et al. 2013; Brezenski 2018; McCluskey 2017), in part because the perpetrators of both events had documented, unaddressed mental health problems before the shootings (Healy Eagan et al. 2014; Schulte and Craig 2007). Because news coverage tends to link mass shootings to mental illness more than to weapons (McGinty et al. 2014), and to White shooters in particular (Duxbury, Frizzell, and Lindsay 2018), opinions of people with mental illness can become negative (Wilson, Ballman, and Buczek 2016). Research (Cappellan and Anisin 2018; Kalish and Kimmel 2010; Langman 2017) suggests mental illness, hypermasculinity, or extremism can be predictors for mass shooters. Metzl and MacLeish (2015) argue this oversimplifies mental illness (and that it is brought up only to distract from *gun control*), while acknowledging mental health is now part of debate and news coverage about mass shootings (DeFoster and Swalve 2018; Lawrence 2001; Muschert 2007b; Newman et al. 2004; Schildkraut and Muschert 2014).

### *Gun Control*

Public opinion of *gun control* tends to become more positive following mass shootings (Barry et al. 2013; Barry et al. 2018; Brezenski 2018). Opinion and news coverage also tend to identify gun access as leading to mass shootings (Altheide 2009; DeFoster 2010; DeFoster and Swalve 2018; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Holody and Daniel 2016; Lawrence 2001; Lawrence and Birkland 2004; Leavy and Maloney 2009; McCluskey 2017; Muschert 2007a, 2007b; Newman et al. 2004; Schildkraut and Muschert 2013). Stroebe, Leander, and Kruglanski (2017) found intention to purchase guns is less influenced by mass shootings than might be expected, though handgun carrying permit applications often increase following news coverage of mass shootings (Turchan, Zeoli, and Kwiatkowski 2017). While gun control opinions following mass shootings depend on individual characteristics, such as gun ownership (Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2017), public understanding of mass shootings and gun control are strongly influenced by news coverage.

### *Popular Culture*

Violent movies and video games were listed in public opinion as likely causes for the Columbine shootings (McCluskey 2017), and have been linked in news coverage to multiple other mass shootings (DeFoster 2010; DeFoster and Swalve 2018; Duggan, Shear, and Fisher 1999; Lawrence 2001; Leavy and Maloney 2009; Newman et al. 2004; Smith et al. 2004). Langman (2017) and Evans (2016) also suggest mass shooters find role models in violent or hypermasculine media content. At the same time, De Venanzi (2012) suggests violent *popular culture* is blamed for mass shootings as a form of manufactured risk (distracting from other methods of prevention, apart from censorship), even if it remains a risk factor.

## Developed Frames

### Activism

Though no previous research examined *activism* as a frame in news coverage of mass shootings, the frame was examined here because of its relevance to the Parkland shooting survivors (Hayes 2018; Lopez 2018; Witt 2018) and its potential continued use in future news coverage.

### Community Change

Dahmen et al. (2018) and Muschert (2007a) found journalists focus on youth social dynamics (e.g., conflicts leading young people to feel ostracized or commit crimes), school contexts (e.g., poor student-to-faculty relationships or administrative failure to act on potential threats), and community resilience, cohesion, and climate (e.g., communities preventing or inspiring at-risk students to commit crimes) following mass shootings.

### Law Responsibility

There is a tendency in public opinion and news coverage to place blame on specific rather than general entities during crises (An and Gower 2009; Semetko and Valkenbuerg 2000; Smith and Hollihan 2014). For example, prior to the Columbine shootings, a parent repeatedly warned police about the shooters' threats to her family (Cullen 2009). News coverage thus focused on why such warnings were not heeded, rather than how the shooters were able to access guns, etc. This tendency is in part so news audiences can express shock and concern about mass shootings without feeling they are likely to happen near them, as the specific circumstances resultingly seem unique to where the shootings occurred (McCluskey 2017).

### Family Responsibility

McCluskey (2017) identified *familial responsibility* as placing blame for mass shootings on parents or other adults associated with shooters. Muschert (2007a) and Newman et al. (2004) also found troubled family upbringing is a contributing factor for school shootings, especially if a shooting occurs in a town in which many traditional nuclear families live (Turner and West 2018). Because the Parkland shooter was an orphan living in foster care when the shootings occurred, in what had just been named Florida's safest city (Reilly 2018), news coverage was examined for this frame.

### School Safety

Lawrence and Birkland (2004) found *school safety* was the third most popular frame in news coverage of school shootings, after *gun control* and *popular culture*. McCluskey (2017) explained news articles using the frame hold specific school programs (or lack thereof), school resource officers, or guidance counselors responsible for failing to prevent shootings, rather than discussing societal-level influences on mass shootings.

### Partisan Divide

Following mass shootings, Republicans tend to argue it is not time to talk about gun control, as this would politicize tragedy (Killough 2018; Lima 2017). Further, political climate has direct effect on news coverage of shootings (Joslyn and Haider-Markel

2013; Muschert 2007a). For example, McCluskey (2017) found newspapers in Republican states more often framed mass shootings in terms of *school safety*, those in Democratic states emphasized *gun control* and *drugs*, and those in battleground states emphasized *criminal justice reform*. Furthermore, Joslyn and Haider-Markel (2013) found party affiliation combined with education had a severe impact on public perception of mass shootings.

### **NRA Power**

In 2001, the National Rifle Association (NRA) began to argue *school safety* and arming school officials — as opposed to *gun control* — are the answers for preventing mass shootings (Kimmel and Mahler 2003), in alignment with Republican beliefs (McCluskey 2017). The NRA also significantly contributed to Republican campaigns in 2016 and 2018 (“National Rifle Association contributions,” 2019). Because Smidt (2012) found journalists often frame the Republican party in coverage of mass shootings as having been “bought” by the NRA, framing of the organization’s influence was examined.

## **Frame Salience & Valence**

### **Frame Salience**

*Salience* refers to how prominently a frame is utilized in a news article and how frequently it is used across multiple news articles. When journalists use a frame with high *salience* — for example, by using it frequently or by including it in an article’s headline — this suggests the perspective the frame represents is especially important (Holody and Daniel 2016; Kiousis 2004; Manheim 1987; McCombs 2005; Park, Holody, and Zhang 2012; Trumbo 1996). A similar concept in framing theory is *emphasis framing*, or the idea that journalists use frames to direct audiences to a particular perspective by highlighting information that supports that perspective (Goffman 1974; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997; Sun et al. 2016), while also providing additional context through the inclusion of other, less salient frames. If, for example, a majority of news articles utilize the *gun control* and *activism* frames when covering the Parkland shootings, this limits audiences from information not related to those perspectives. If the articles use *gun control* with greater *salience* than they do *activism*, this further suggests to audiences that the one element of the issue holds greater importance than the other. The present study utilized this operationalization of framing, which suggests a single news story can feature multiple frames (Carpenter 2007; Dimitrova and Stromback 2005; Kerbel, Apee, and Ross 2000; McCluskey 2017), each used with varying degrees of salience.

### **Frame Valence**

A frame’s *valence* refers to whether it is used by journalists to emphasize positive or negative qualities (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2003; McCluskey 2017). This can lead the news audience to not only consider mass shootings from a particular perspective (i.e., a frame) but also to further limit their understanding of the shootings to the positive or negative aspects of that perspective or frame. For example, an audience member who reads an article that limits the Parkland shootings to be only about the positive results of the survivors’ *activism* may think about the shootings in terms of effective changes brought about by the March for Our Lives. Alternatively, an audience member who has only read articles emphasizing the survivors’ *activism* as, for example, inappropriate for

their ages or politicizing a tragedy would be more likely to consider the shootings from that perspective (de Vreese, Boomgaarden, and Semetko 2010).

### **Community and National News Coverage**

News trends tend to begin at the national level, with the *New York Times* tending to have the most influence (Althaus and Tewksbury 2002; Benoit, Stein, and Hansen 2005; Blakely 2003; Denham 2014; Landriscina 2012; Lule 2001), which is why that particular newspaper is included in many analyses of news coverage of mass shootings (e.g., Chyi and McCombs 2004; Muschert and Carr 2006; Schildkraut, Elsass, and Meredith 2018; Schildkraut and Muschert 2014; Silva and Capellan 2019a, 2019b; Silva and Greene-Colozzi 2019). These trends then guide what and how regional and local news organizations cover issues and events (Gans 1979; Golan 2006; Harry 2001; Trumbo 1996). However, recent research (e.g., Holody and Daniel 2016; Holody, Park, and Zhang 2012; Holt and Major 2010) suggests this tendency may not occur for some issues. Rather, local news coverage of crimes that begin at a local level tends to either influence later coverage at higher levels or develop independently of national trends. As a result, national and local news audiences could develop dramatically different understandings or perspectives on what occurred, who is responsible, and how it can be prevented if they do not have direct experience with the issue (Entman 1993; Holody, Park, and Zhang 2012; Scheufele 1999).

It is likely that journalists at local news organizations covering crimes representing significant danger to surrounding communities, such as when the investigation of a mass shooting is still ongoing, will cover that crime differently than journalists whose audiences are more removed. The reasons for this include that the crime is simply more relevant to the community audience, local journalists may have easier access to community authorities, and the local news organizations may be able to identify a wider variety of ongoing effects on the community (Holody, Park, and Zhang 2012; Holt and Major 2010). That the number of community news organizations continues to decrease makes it all the more important to understand differences between local and national news coverage, for it allows researchers to understand what might be missing in coverage that occurs only at the national level.

### **Hypotheses**

Based on the above review of literature suggesting that differences in frame salience and valence do exist between local/community and national newspaper coverage (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2003; Holody and Daniel 2016; Holt and Major 2010; Kioussis 2004; Manheim 1987; McCombs 2005; Park, Holody, and Zhang 2012; Trumbo 1996), that the established frames for mass shootings may change over time (McCluskey 2017), and that the Parkland survivors actively sought to influence news coverage (Cullen 2019), the following research questions were examined:

*RQ1:* Are there differences in frame *salience* between community and national newspapers regarding coverage of the 2018 Parkland shootings?

*RQ2:* Are there differences in frame *valence* between community and national newspapers regarding coverage of the 2018 Parkland shootings?



RQ3: Can differences be explained by the student activism that followed the 2018 Parkland shootings?

## Method

### Sampling

Newspaper articles from February 14 (the day of the shootings) through March 31, 2018 (45 days later, one week after the March of our Lives protests) were collected using the search term “Parkland NOT Kentucky,” as an initial search revealed articles about Parkland, Kentucky not relevant to the shootings, while nearly all other articles mentioned the shootings. Articles from all newspapers in localities surrounding Parkland (including Broward, Miami-Dade, and Palm Beach counties) — *Broward-Palm Beach New Times* ( $N = 4$ ), *Miami New Times* ( $N = 76$ ), *Sun Sentinel* ( $N = 495$ ), and *Miami Herald* ( $N = 707$ ) — were pulled from NewsBank to represent *community* newspapers. Articles were pulled from NewsBank for *USA Today* ( $N = 91$ ) and ProQuest for *New York Times* ( $N = 215$ ) to represent *national* coverage, with these newspapers chosen to keep in line with sampling done in previous research (e.g., Holody and Daniel 2016; Holody, Park, and Zhang 2012) and because of the newspapers’ influence on other, more local news organizations (Gans 1979; Golan 2006).

In sum, 1,588 articles were found, from which 25% were sampled systematically, choosing every fourth article in reverse date order to create a sample size in line with previous research (e.g., Chyi and McCombs 2004; Park, Holody, and Zhang 2012). If an article was coded as “not central,” meaning the shootings were mentioned but only in passing (Park, Holody, and Zhang 2012), it was removed. After removal of such articles, 359 (291 *community*, 67 *national*) were included in final results: *Broward-Palm Beach New Times* ( $n = 1$ ), *Miami New Times* ( $n = 16$ ), *Sun Sentinel* ( $n = 114$ ), *Miami Herald* ( $n = 160$ ), *USA Today* ( $n = 21$ ) and *New York Times* ( $n = 46$ ). *Broward-Palm Beach New Times* is an alternative weekly newspaper, which conceivably could offer different frames from the other *community* newspapers. However, it was included because the sample was designed to represent all news frames presented by all newspapers surrounding the Parkland community. This same dataset was also used in a previous study examining agenda-setting in news coverage of the Parkland shootings (Holody 2020).

### Intercoder Reliability & Coding Categories

First, the two authors independently coded a randomly chosen subsample of 40 articles to establish intercoder reliability. Using an SPSS macro created by Hayes and Krippendorff (2007), the lowest Krippendorff’s  $\alpha$  was 0.86 for nominal variables (e.g., whether a frame was present), 0.91 for ordinal (e.g., a frame’s salience or valence), and 0.89 for ratio (e.g., the number of words in a news story), indicating high reliability for all coding categories. Following establishment of high intercoder reliability, the authors independently coded the remaining 319 articles, which were distributed at random.

### Salience of Frames

Each frame was coded for its *salience* (from lowest to highest: in *body text*, *first paragraph* or *quotations*, *headline*) in line with previous research (e.g., Holody and Daniel 2016;



Holody, Park, and Zhang 2012). Salience refers to how prominently a frame was used (Holody and Daniel 2016; Kioussis 2004; Mannheim 1987; McCombs 2005; Park, Holody, and Zhang 2012; Trumbo 1996). For example, presence in an article's headline meant a frame had high salience. Each article could contain multiple frames (Carpenter 2007; Dimitrova and Stromback 2005; Kerbel, Apee, and Ross 2000; McCluskey 2017), each with its own salience or valence.

### Valence of Frames

*Valence* refers to whether a frame was used to describe a topic as being negative or positive (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2003; McCluskey 2017). A frame coded *negative* (or *positive*) was not necessarily invariably *negative* (or *positive*) but was coded based on which valence was used most often or substantively. Each frame's valence was determined by how it was used to advocate for a particular interpretation. As an example, the *gun control* frame was coded as positive if a news story argued that easy access to guns led to the shootings (thus positively advocating for gun control, as opposed to if this frame had been identified as "*gun rights*"). Advocacy was determined based on word choice and tone, as well as the number of quotations or arguments used in support of a frame. Valence was not operationalized as a moral judgment of the frame use, but rather as a description of how the frame was utilized, and thus could be operationalized differently in different studies. See Tables 1 and 2 for operational definitions for each frame's *negative* and *positive* valence. *Neutral* valence indicated a frame was presented as neither or equally negative and positive.

## Results & Discussion

Community articles about the Parkland shootings varied widely in regard to frame salience. *Race*, *mental health*, *popular culture*, *law responsibility*, *family responsibility*, *school safety*, *partisan divide*, and *NRA power* were all used with low salience. Only *community change* was used most frequently at the middle-level of salience, suggesting it was presented as an important perspective in news articles but not the *most* important perspective from which to consider the shootings. National articles used almost half of their frames only in body text, while the few frames used with highest salience were among the most infrequently used. The frame most frequently used in both community and national articles, *gun control*, was used with equal frequency at all levels of salience — suggesting the frame was frequently used as the primary frame in news articles but was also mentioned frequently in other articles that focused more on a different frame.

The majority of frames utilized by community newspapers were used with negative valence, with the only exceptions being *gun control* and *activism* (which were most often used positively). The majority of national articles also used frames negatively, with the exceptions of *gun control* and *activism* (which were most often positive); *school safety* (which was both negative and positive); and *family responsibility* (which was not used at all). See Table 3 for the number of community newspaper articles that utilized each frame, as well what percentage of these articles used the different levels of frame valence and salience. See Table 4 for the same information for national articles.

**Table 1.** Operational Definitions of Established Frames by Valence.

Established Frames	Positive Valence	Negative Valence
Race	Shooter's, victims', or survivors' race or racism presented as <i>not</i> causing shootings	Shooter's, victims', or survivors' races or racism presented as causing shootings (e.g., the shooter held Nazi-related and racist beliefs)
Mental Health	Shooter's mental health presented as causing shootings and/or mental health care was argued to prevent future shootings (e.g., advocating for mental health care reform)	Shooter's mental health presented as <i>not</i> causing shootings (e.g., advocating against mental health care reform)
Gun Control	School officials or students were presented as not wanting guns at schools and/or the Second Amendment as having limits (e.g., advocating for gun control)	Shootings presented as preventable if school officials were armed or guns were allowed at schools and/or Second Amendment presented as protecting open access to guns or gun accessories (i.e., advocating against gun control)
Popular Culture	Entertainment media content presented as <i>not</i> causing shootings and/or not leading to mass shootings by the vast majority of audience members (e.g., advocating for freedom of speech)	Media content, such as violent video games, movies, or music lyrics, presented causing shootings (e.g., advocating censorship)
* Copycat Crimes	Previous shootings or news coverage presented as <i>not</i> causing shootings (e.g., advocating for freedom of the press)	News coverage of previous shootings presented as <i>contagion</i> causing shootings (e.g., advocating press censorship)

**Table 2.** Operational Definitions of Developed Frames by Valence.

Developed Frames	Positive Valence	Negative Valence
Activism	Survivors' activism presented as appropriate (both in tenor and approach) or likely to prevent future shootings (e.g., advocating for activism)	Survivors' activism response and goals (e.g., the March for Our Lives protest) presented as overdramatized, inappropriate (e.g., because of the survivors' ages), or unlikely to prevent future shootings (e.g., advocating against activism)
Community Change	Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Parkland, or surrounding communities presented as better after shootings	Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Parkland, or surrounding communities presented as worse and/or residents have left because of shootings
Law Responsibility	Inaction by law enforcement presented as <i>not</i> a causing shootings and/or law enforcement presented as having acted appropriately (e.g., advocating for law enforcement)	Inaction by law enforcement was presented as causing shootings (e.g., advocating against law enforcement)
Family Responsibility	Shooter's familial life presented as <i>not</i> causing shootings (e.g., advocating for family's behavior before shootings)	Shooter's familial life presented as causing shootings (e.g., advocating against family's behavior before shootings)
School Safety	Inaction by school officials presented as <i>not</i> a causing shootings and/or school officials presented as having acted appropriately (e.g., advocating for school officials)	Inaction by school officials presented as causing shootings (e.g., advocating against school officials)
Partisan Divide	Policy reform presented as necessary and/or appropriate (e.g., advocating for policy change)	Policy (or discussion of) reform presented as unnecessary and/or inappropriate following a tragedy (e.g., advocating against policy change)
NRA Power	NRA presented as only concerned with protecting citizens' rights (e.g., NRA presented as <i>not</i> causing shootings)	Inaction by politicians "bought" by NRA presented as causing shootings (e.g., advocating against NRA)
* Bullying	Bullying presented as <i>not</i> causing shootings and/or not leading to mass shootings by the vast majority of bullying victims (e.g., advocating for victims, survivors' behavior before shootings)	Bullying of the shooter by victims or survivors presented as causing shootings (e.g., advocating against victims, survivors' behavior before shootings)
* Alternative Narratives	Conspiracy theories condemned and/or countered (e.g., advocating for truth)	Conspiracy theories presented as having credence (e.g., advocating against truth)

\* = Removed from final analysis because too few cases were found.

## Established Frames

### Race

Community articles used this frame *negatively* most often and national equally *negatively* and *neutrally*. Community articles used it in *body text* most often, as did national.  $\chi^2$  tests for differences in valence and salience were not possible because greater than 20% of cells in both comparisons had expected counts less than 5. Unlike in coverage of the Virginia Tech shootings (Holody, Park, and Zhang 2012; Park, Holody, and Zhang 2012) and despite racism being relevant to the shooter's motivations (Lawrence 2001), the race frame was used relatively infrequently and with low salience, perhaps because the shooter identified as White. If so, this trend could further connect race with mass shootings only when perpetrators are people of color, supporting incorrect beliefs that violence and race are related (Mastro et al. 2009). The few instances of *race* being used with positive or neutral valence were in quotations from white supremacist groups who claimed the shooter had emulated or been active in their membership.

### Mental Health

Community articles used this frame *negatively* most often, as did national. Community articles used it in *body text* most often, as did national. Differences in valence ( $\chi^2(2) = 2.195, p = .334$ ) and salience ( $\chi^2(2) = 3.169, p = .205$ ) were not significant. Overwhelmingly, both community and national newspapers discussed *mental health* negatively and with low salience, suggesting, like in coverage of previous shootings (DeFoster and Swalve 2018; Duxbury, Frizzell, and Lindsay 2018; Lawrence 2001; McGinty et al. 2014; Muschert 2007b; Newman et al. 2004; Schildkraut and Muschert 2014), the shooter's mental health was presented as related to but not the most salient cause of the shootings. While the relationship between mental illness and violence is complicated (Metzl and MacLeish 2015), it is important mass shootings are not primarily linked to mental illness, as this can cause harm to others with mental illnesses who are not dangerous (Wilson, Ballman, and Buczek 2016).

### Gun Control

Community articles used this frame *positively* most often, as did national. Community articles used it relatively equally between salience levels, while national most often did so with highest salience. Differences in valence ( $\chi^2(2) = 3.983, p = .136$ ) and salience ( $\chi^2(2) = 2.720, p = .257$ ) were not significant. A majority of articles from both newspaper types used this frame, although national did so significantly more often. Both newspaper types also most often used this frame positively, suggesting to readers *gun control* (as opposed to gun rights) could prevent future shootings. That this frame was utilized overwhelmingly positively and with consistent salience is similar to news coverage of previous mass shootings (Altheide 2009; DeFoster and Swalve 2018; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Holody and Daniel 2016; Lawrence 2001; Lawrence and Birkland 2004; Leavy and Maloney 2009; McCluskey 2017; Muschert 2007a, 2007b; Newman et al. 2004; Schildkraut and Muschert 2013) and may explain consistent public support for gun control (Barry et al. 2013; Barry et al. 2018; Brezenski 2018; McCluskey 2017).

**Table 3.** Presence, Valence, and Salience of Frames in Community Newspaper Articles.

Established Frames	Presence	Valence			Salience		
		Negative	Neutral	Positive	Body Text	First Para.	Headline
Race	5.5% ( <i>n</i> = 16)	87.5%	0.0%	12.5%	56.3%	12.5%	31.3%
Mental Health	33.3% ( <i>n</i> = 97)	62.9%	11.3%	25.8%	57.7%	35.1%	7.2%
Gun Control	56.4% ( <i>n</i> = 164)	2.4%	18.9%	78.7%	31.1%	30.5%	38.4%
Popular Culture	2.1% ( <i>n</i> = 6)	100%	0.0%	0.0%	100%	0.0%	0.0%
* Copycat Crimes	0.7% ( <i>n</i> = 2)	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
Developed Frames							
Activism	33.7% ( <i>n</i> = 98)	2.0%	14.3%	83.7%	36.7%	24.5%	38.8%
Community Change	19.9% ( <i>n</i> = 58)	55.2%	27.6%	17.2%	29.3%	56.9%	13.8%
Law Responsibility	27.1% ( <i>n</i> = 79)	77.2%	15.2%	7.6%	53.2%	19.0%	27.8%
Family Responsibility	8.9% ( <i>n</i> = 26)	92.3%	7.7%	0.0%	84.6%	15.4%	0.0%
School Safety	6.9% ( <i>n</i> = 20)	90.0%	0.0%	10.0%	80.0%	5.0%	15.0%
Partisan Divide	43.6% ( <i>n</i> = 127)	74.0%	24.4%	1.6%	53.5%	18.9%	27.6%
NRA Power	19.2% ( <i>n</i> = 56)	80.4%	14.3%	5.4%	78.2%	10.9%	10.9%
* Bullying	2.1% ( <i>n</i> = 6)	83.3%	16.7%	0.0%	66.7%	33.3%	0.0%
* Alternative Narratives	2.7% ( <i>n</i> = 8)	100%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%

\* = Too few cases were found for statistical comparison between community and national newspapers.

**Table 4.** Presence, Valence, and Salience of Frames in National Newspaper Articles.

Established Frames	Presence	Valence			Salience		
		Negative	Neutral	Positive	Body Text	First Para.	Headline
Race	6.0% ( <i>n</i> = 4)	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	75.0%	25.0%	0.0%
Mental Health	32.8% ( <i>n</i> = 22)	59.1%	22.7%	18.2%	59.1%	22.7%	18.2%
Gun Control	76.1% ( <i>n</i> = 51)	7.8%	23.5%	68.6%	31.4%	30.5%	38.4%
Popular Culture	1.5% ( <i>n</i> = 1)	66.7%	16.7%	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
* Copycat Crimes	0.0% ( <i>n</i> = 0)	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Developed Frames							
Activism	53.7% ( <i>n</i> = 36)	5.6%	19.4%	75.0%	41.7%	36.1%	22.2%
Community Change	6.0% ( <i>n</i> = 4)	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	75.0%	25.0%	0.0%
Law Responsibility	13.4% ( <i>n</i> = 9)	77.8%	11.1%	11.1%	55.6%	11.1%	33.3%
Family Responsibility	0.0% ( <i>n</i> = 0)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
School Safety	3.0% ( <i>n</i> = 2)	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%
Partisan Divide	64.2% ( <i>n</i> = 43)	79.1%	14.0%	7.0%	32.6%	27.9%	39.5%
NRA Power	26.9% ( <i>n</i> = 18)	61.1%	16.7%	22.2%	77.8%	11.1%	11.1%
* Bullying	1.5% ( <i>n</i> = 1)	0.0%	0.0%	100%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
* Alternative Narratives	1.5% ( <i>n</i> = 1)	100%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100%

\* = Too few cases were found for statistical comparison between community and national newspapers.

### Popular Culture

Community articles used this frame *negatively*, as did the national article. Community articles used it in *body text* most often, while the national article did so in the *headline*.  $\chi^2$  tests were not possible. While universally used negatively, the frame was seldomly used by either newspaper type despite having been linked in public opinion and news coverage to previous mass shootings (DeFoster 2010; DeFoster and Swalve 2018; Duggan, Shear, and Fisher 1999; Lawrence 2001; Leavy and Maloney 2009; McCluskey 2017; Newman et al. 2004; Smith et al. 2004). Sources for frames were not coded for here, but it was noted, similar to a finding by Lawrence and Birkland (2004), that violent media content was invoked as a potential cause almost exclusively by conservative politicians, letters to the editor, or gun rights advocates as a *counter-frame* in opposition to gun control.

### Copycat Crimes

A small number of community articles utilized this frame, despite it being commonly linked to previous shootings (DeFoster and Swalve 2018; Lankford and Madfis 2018; Murray 2017; Muschert 2007a; Newman et al. 2004; Pescara-Kovach and Raleigh 2017; Sumiala and Tikka 2011; Towers et al. 2015) and the fact someone with a YouTube screen-name the same as the shooter's name was reported to the FBI for commenting "I am going to be a professional school shooter" prior to the shootings. Perhaps the explanation for why the shootings were not framed as *copycat* is the shooter was inspired by mass shootings in general, rather than by specific shootings.

## Developed Frames

### Activism

Community articles used this frame *positively* most often, as did national. Community articles used it in equally in *body text* and *headline*, while national used it most often in *body text*.  $\chi^2$  tests for differences in valence were not possible and differences in salience were not significant:  $\chi^2(2) = 3.558, p = .169$ . This was a common frame, despite being newly associated with mass shootings in news coverage; national articles utilized the frame significantly more often. Both newspaper types overwhelmingly used the frame positively, but also utilized it with least salience. It was typically seen when politicians, public officials, or community members responded to other elements of the shootings, while passingly (though likely sincerely) supporting the survivors' causes.

### Community Change

Community articles used this frame *negatively* most often and national equally *negatively* and *neutrally*. Community articles used it in *first paragraph or quotations* most often, while national in *body text*.  $\chi^2$  tests were not possible. It is perhaps not surprising community newspapers focused more on how the shootings affected Parkland's surrounding community (Dahmen et al. 2018; Muschert 2007a), as this is most relevant to those audiences (Park, Holody, and Zhang 2012). Neither newspaper mentioned how the community was affected by the influx of journalists and news coverage (McCluskey 2017), and thus only mentioned *community change* from within. This was one of few frames to be used most often by either newspaper type (community, in this case) at the middle salience level.

### Law Responsibility

Community articles used this frame *negatively* most often, as did national, and both used it in *body text* most often.  $\chi^2$  tests were not possible. The salience with which this frame was used may be an attempt by news coverage to find specific entities to blame for shootings (An and Gower 2009; McCluskey 2017; Smith and Hollihan 2014), allowing both explanation for why *these* shootings occurred and hope some unique set of circumstances here would not be found elsewhere. The FBI or local police departments who did not follow up on leads regarding this specific shooter could be blamed, relieving community audiences from accepting blame or national audiences from fearing for their own communities.

### Family Responsibility

Community articles used this frame *negatively* and in *body text* most often. As no national articles used this frame,  $\chi^2$  tests were not possible. This frame was perhaps difficult to utilize in news coverage here, as the shooter's parents were both deceased and the shooter had lived with several neighbors, family friends, or foster homes by the time the shootings occurred. While the shooter's actions could be blamed on this inconsistent home life (Muschert 2007a; Newman et al. 2004; Turner and West 2018), especially in contrast with the relative safety found in Parkland (Reilly 2018), it is likely this frame was not utilized as often because it was difficult to point to what *specific* circumstances in the shooter's family life could have led to the shootings.

### School Safety

Community articles used this frame *negatively* most often, while national equally *negatively* and *positively*. Community articles used it in *body text* most often, while national equally in *body text* and *headline*.  $\chi^2$  tests were not possible. Unlike Lawrence and Birkland's (2004) finding it as one of the three most-used frames in news coverage of school shootings, this frame was used relatively infrequently here. While the school had been warned about the shooter's previous behaviors, its resource officer had determined the shooter was not a danger to others. Despite McCluskey's (2017) argument school resource officers fit within the school safety frame, the resource officer's inaction here was more often put in contrast to his police training and associated with poor reactions by the local sheriff's office (i.e., *law responsibility*) than with the school. This frame was used most often by politicians after the shootings occurred, who argued future shootings would be prevented if schools are outfitted with more armed employees, metal detectors, and bulletproof glass, although most teachers, survivors, and victims' parents opposed these ideas and suggested they were distractions from the more important *gun control* topic.

### Partisan Divide

Community articles used this frame *negatively* most often, as did national. Community articles used it in *body text* most often, although national used it equally in *body text* and *headline*.  $\chi^2$  tests for differences in valence were not possible, while differences in salience approached significance:  $\chi^2(2) = 5.670$ ,  $p = .059$ . Both newspaper types used this frame frequently and almost exclusively negatively, to argue against politicians



asking only for thoughts and prayers or saying “now is not the time” for gun law reform (Killough 2018; Lima 2017). Many survivors argued *for* law reform and *against* these kinds of remarks from politicians, typically Republicans such as Senator Marco Rubio, and framed such talk as distractions from *gun control*.

### **NRA Power**

Community articles used this frame *negatively* most often, as did national, and both used it most frequently in *body text*.  $\chi^2$  tests were not possible. Brown (2009) found the NRA is often spurred to political action by mass shootings, while Smidt (2012) and others (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; McCluskey 2017) found Republican politicians are frequently considered as “bought” by the organization (several such arguments were made here about Senator Rubio). These findings likely explain why this frame was frequently used here, especially to explain inaction regarding gun control. It should be noted, however, this frame was most often used with low salience, meaning news coverage treated it as important but less so than other frames.

### **Bullying**

Despite being linked in news coverage with previous mass shootings (DeFoster and Swalve 2018; Lawrence 2001; Muschert 2007a; Newman et al. 2004; Schildkraut 2012), the frame was used infrequently here. The frame was almost exclusively used by public officials as a counter-frame to *gun control*, with one notable exception: One survivor explained, in response to public figures suggesting the shootings would have been prevented if victims had treated the shooter with kindness, that she *had* reached out to the shooter, despite having been bullied by the shooter, and yet this kindness did not prevent the shootings. The survivor further suggested this frame distracts from discussions of *gun control* and *mental health* and blames victims for their own murders.

### **Alternative Frames**

While few articles used this frame, they exclusively rebutted the idea anything except mass shootings had occurred (e.g., rebutting that the student activists were actually “crisis actors” and had not been present at the shootings) and did so with high salience. Starbird’s (2018) *fake news frame* seems to now be part of news coverage of mass shootings, although its use may be tied to specific circumstances. For example, while *alternative narratives* are still incorrectly associated with the Sandy Hook shootings, the few news articles here exclusively used the frame to *rebut* social media and Donald Trump, Jr. for suggesting any conspiracy theories had merit.

### **Implications & Areas for Future Research**

The present study found that, although news coverage was similar between the community and national newspapers, there were notable differences. For example, the frequency with which some frames were used differed: community newspapers used the *family responsibility* and *school safety* frames several times, whereas the national newspapers rarely used them at all. Further, while both used frames like *NRA power* and *gun control* with similar valence, a greater percentage of the community articles used the frames, respectively, with negative and positive valence. Thus, as previous research found

differences in how events are covered between levels of news organizations (Holody and Daniel 2016; Holody, Park, and Zhang 2012; Holt and Major 2010), the present study found further evidence that how mass shootings are framed is continuing to evolve.

Lawrence and Birkland (2004) found *gun control*, *popular culture*, and *school safety* the most used frames in news coverage of mass shootings. The present study, however, found both community and national newspapers most often framed the Parkland shootings as being about the established frame *gun control* and the developed frames *partisan divide*, *activism*, and *mental health*. It is notable that all three of these *developed* frames were utilized as *counter-frames* to the *gun control* frame.

For example, Republican politicians and NRA spokespeople tended to frame mass shootings as an issue of *mental health* or to say policy changes ought not be discussed so soon after a tragedy, arguments which the survivors and Democrat politicians argued were intentional distractions from meaningful change. The Parkland survivors also tended to argue, not from a partisan divide perspective, but rather to say that the *partisan divide* frame was only serving to distract from *gun control*, *mental health* reform, and their own *activism*. Thus, an important finding is not only that the frames used to describe the Parkland shootings differed from the more established frames that were used to describe previous mass shootings, but also that those frames themselves were identified as frames or communication tactics designed to distract. Although few articles used the terminology associated with framing theory, these results suggest that framing is not only part of news coverage but also something a wider variety of news sources and subjects are aware of and try to influence.

One of the most important findings of the present study is that frames used in news coverage of mass shootings continue to develop and evolve, despite a previously found “settling” into a limited number of frames (McCluskey 2017). Holody and Daniel (2016) suggested this settling likely stemmed from journalists assuming audiences understand mass shootings generally, as they are perhaps, and unfortunately, used to them occurring in the US. However, the mass shootings examined by Holody and Daniel occurred before the Parkland shootings and, more specifically, before Parkland survivors sought and maintained news attention on the shootings, the victims, and their activism. This new source of intentional influence on news framing of mass shootings (Entman, Matthes, and Pellicano 2009) — meaning news coverage was not just *about* the victims but rather included their active participation — is an important development in this line of framing research. People who might have only been the subject of news coverage following a mass shooting appear now more likely to be frame-builders for that coverage.

This study offers important practical implications for journalists. As noted for several frames, there were multiple instances of sources arguing frames were being used intentionally to distract from other perspectives, such as gun rights activists blaming *popular culture* as an acknowledged counter-frame to *gun control* or student activists pointing to *school safety* or *mental health* as intentional distractions from meaningful discussion about *gun control*. Journalists should be aware of when frames are intentionally utilized by their sources to emphasize some aspect of mass shootings as opposed to others, especially regarding how to acknowledge when such attempts are identified by other sources. Politicians and organizations have long attempted to influence framing (Entman, Matthes, and Pellicano 2009), but additional sources, such as survivors, are

now aware of that potential and, further, are seemingly successful at influencing news coverage of mass shootings.

A final area presented for future research was that the majority of frames were used either negatively or positively. As McCluskey (2017; McCluskey and Kim 2012) has suggested, when news coverage favors one valence or another on a news issue, this could suggest to audiences there is no “middle ground” for an issue like *gun control* — potentially leading to further polarization in political beliefs. While people’s personal experiences, beliefs, characteristics, and news choices all together influence their perspectives on issues like mass shootings, it is important to consistently understand how much the influence represented by news frames is itself being influenced and what effects this leads to. Future research should examine how common this tendency to extremes is in news framing of any issues, as well as the effects such simplification of complex issues can have on audiences’ beliefs.

Because several of the frames coded for in this study were not used frequently by one or the other newspaper type, full statistical comparison between community and national newspapers was not always possible, so descriptive results discussed above should be interpreted with caution. The changes in salience and valence found here compared to in previous news coverage indicate continued research on mass shootings frames is necessary, as established frames may change as more shootings continue to occur and as more reactions from survivors develop. Likely because of the survivors’ activism, news coverage of the Parkland shootings resisted almost all attempts to “settle” into familiar frames for mass shootings. The ongoing conversation about mass shootings appears to remain complicated and more dependent on shootings’ specific circumstances than may have been previously assumed.

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