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Framing mass shootings as a social problem: A comparison of ideologically and non-ideologically motivated attacks

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ABSTRACT

Typically regarded as separate phenomena, recent events suggest that mass shootings and terrorism may not be as distinct as previously believed. Given that most members of the public never will directly be impacted by either of these types of tragedies, news media play a critical role in shaping perceptions about these events as social problems. To date, however, there has been little empirical research on the similarities and differences in news coverage of mass shootings and terrorism events. Therefore, the current study analyzes *New York Times* coverage of 18 mass shootings, both ideological (extreme far-right and radical Islamic) and non-ideological (e.g., school, workplace), in the context of Joel Best's model of social problems creation. Findings indicate that although the basic structure of this model (defining the problem through headlines, using examples and statistics to offer context) is employed across mass shooting types, the way these events are framed diverges based on the motivation of the shooter. Specific disparities exist related to the rhetorical devices used to frame headlines, the way in which shooters and victims are emphasized, and the solutions offered. These differences can have broader implications for shared understandings and policy responses to mass shootings as a social problem.

1. Introduction

Mass shootings remain statistically rare, episodic events within the broader landscape of the social problem of deadly violence in the United States. The amount of concern that these events generate among the public, policymakers, and the media alike, however, may lead to beliefs that mass shootings are actually occurring at epidemic-like rates. Given that the majority of people will never be directly impacted by a mass shooting, public impressions – like those for violent crime more generally – are largely shaped by and through news media coverage (Surette, 2015).

Prior studies have found that news coverage of serious violent crimes like murder overshadow coverage of less serious types of crime (Chermak, 1994; Duwe, 2000; Graber, 1980; Gruenewald et al., 2009). Moreover, researchers (e.g., Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2018) have established that the media disproportionately provide attention to the most lethal of mass shooting events, including the 2016 anti-LGBTQ shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, FL (49 killed), the 2017 Route 91 Harvest Festival concert in Las Vegas, NV (58 killed), the 2017 First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, TX (26 killed), 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL (17 killed), and the 2019 anti-immigrant shooting in Walmart in El Paso, TX (23 killed).[1] Elevated media coverage of high-profile events plays a pivotal role in the construction of social problems, including mass shootings, in some instances pushing issues onto the national policy agenda (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 2010; Chermak, 2002; Schildkraut & Carr, 2020; Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014; Soraghan, 2000). In addition to serving an agenda-setting function, news coverage of high-profile events also can indicate to the public how to think about social problems by how they are "framed," emphasizing some aspects and interpretations of issues while downplaying or ignoring others (Entman, 2004).

Yet, despite all of the aforementioned events having particularly high death tolls, mass shootings more generally are not always framed in the same ways. For example, mass shootings often are perceived to be crimes perpetrated almost exclusively by White males (see, for example, Hesse, 2015), but the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting departed from this

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[1] The fatality count for the El Paso shooting at the time of incident was listed at 22; however, a 23rd person died of their injuries more than eight months after the shooting, leading to the count to be revised (Smith, 2020).

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profile in a particularly remarkable way: during his rampage, the perpetrator called 9–1-1 and pledged his allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS; Mina, 2017). This action, coupled with him identifying as Muslim and associated with Middle Eastern extremism (Bauerlein et al., 2016), led to the shooting being labeled as an act of terrorism in addition to being considered another mass shooting.[2]

Terrorism in America historically has been associated with either politically motivated bombings, such as the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, or complex plots by radical Islamic terrorists, with of course the most notable being the orchestrated hijackings of September 11, 2001 on New York City, Washington D.C, and Pennsylvania. Further, terrorism historically has been considered conceptually distinct from the more "routine" mass shootings, despite key similarities in modus operandi (including weapons selection), likely based on perceived differences in the mindsets and motivations of the perpetrators. Mass shooters are assumed to be carrying out their attacks in response to personal grievances and vendettas, whereas terrorist attacks seek to protest broader injustices and bring about radical socio-political changes. Importantly, it is not only the public that thinks about these two types of events differently; with rare exception (e.g., Lankford, 2013), the scholarly community often analyzes these phenomena separate from one another as well.

As a result, events like the Pulse nightclub shooting reflect a blurring of the definitional boundaries ostensibly dividing forms of extreme mass violence and highlight the need to better investigate these deadly attacks in the context of *both* mass shootings and terrorism. Simultaneously, the media's ability to frame mass shootings, regardless of such context, as a form of social problem plaguing the nation underscores the need for scholars to examine the coverage and its patterns to begin to assess how this construction impacts audiences' understandings about the phenomenon of mass shootings.

The present study seeks to address both considerations – analyzing mass shootings based on motivation (ideological [extreme far-right, radical Islamic] vs. non-ideological) and exploring the way events are framed by the media in the context of social problems using Best's (1987, 2006) three-stage model. More specifically, we analyze how news media help the public make sense of mass shootings by labeling them and providing reference points and statistics to shape audiences' understandings of these tragic events. Utilizing 747 print news stories stemming from 18 shootings occurring between 1999 and 2016, we ask (1) *how is the social problem of mass shootings in the U.S. constructed* and (2) *does this construction differ based on whether the attack is ideologically or non-ideologically motivated*?

1.1. Media coverage of mass violence events

Similar to the public discourse, much of the scholarly literature analyzing the media coverage of mass shootings and domestic terrorism has focused on each phenomena individually. Several studies have explored factors that predict the newsworthiness of events related to whether they are featured by the media and, if they are, how much coverage they receive. Chermak and Gruenewald (2006), for example, conducted a media distortion analysis on more than 4000 news articles across 412 incidents between 1980 and September 10, 2001. Their findings indicated that terrorist attacks were more likely to be covered when they resulted in death, were domestic rather than international, were prevented rather than just being suspected to have occurred, and involved hijackings as the method compared to sabotage; these same characteristics also largely predicted greater newsworthiness in the form of more articles and increased space (word counts of stories; Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006). Similarly, in their employment of the same technique to analyze more than 560 articles of 90 mass shootings occurring between 2000 and 2012, Schildkraut, Elsass, and Meredith (2018) determined that only two factors – the death of the perpetrator and location type – influenced whether the shooting was likely to be covered. Several other factors, however, predicted greater prominence of coverage (e.g., more articles and greater total word counts) including race/ethnicity of the perpetrator (with shooters identified as Asian or other racial and ethnic descents – including Middle Eastern – receiving more prominent coverage than whites), higher victim counts (totals as well as when disaggregated between fatalities and injuries), the median income of the locality where the shooting took place, and the location (with schools being the most newsworthy; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2018).

Other researchers have explored the way in which the media frame stories about these events, which can provide insight to what facets of the events or the phenomena as a whole are highlighted for the audiences. Scholars examining framing in the news coverage of terrorism have repeatedly found that the media diverge in their presentation based on whether the attacks are perpetrated domestically (e.g., homegrown terrorism) or internationally, which can have implications for how the public responds to these events (Brinson & Stohl, 2012). In a pair of studies examining more than 2500 news stories about 22 terrorist attacks post-9/11,[3] between October 2001 and the end of 2016, Powell (2011, 2018) found that domestic terrorists often are portrayed as less of a threat to American citizens than international terrorists. Domestic terrorists, who were most commonly white, were portrayed as "troubled, mentally ill loners" who were unstable (Powell, 2018, p. 260). International terrorists, who typically were of Middle Eastern descent, instead were characterized as extremists and outsiders to emphasize the threat posed; their acts similarly were more likely to be connected to Islam, terrorist organizations like al Qaeda and ISIS, and their Muslim faith (Powell, 2011, 2018). Even in instances where the perpetrator was of Middle Eastern descent but born in the U.S., such as with the 2009 Fort Hood mass shooter, they still were not identified as "domestic terrorists" (Powell, 2011).

Media framing research conducted in the context of mass shootings has focused largely on identifying frame-changing patterns used by the media to highlight different facets of the story at different times. This two-dimensional model, which assesses shifts in coverage across space (the "where" of the story, as well as the "who," "what," and "why") and time (the "when"), was first employed by Chyi and McCombs (2004) to examine the coverage of the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Jefferson County, CO; their findings later were compared to other similar attacks happening in the same temporal period (Muschert & Carr, 2006) and later the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). These studies consistently found that across space, mass shootings were most likely to be framed as a societal issue; temporally, they were most likely to be discussed in the immediate time period rather than considering the background of the case or the long-range impacts of the attack (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). Additionally, each of these studies found that across a 30-day coverage period, the media continually used frame changing to highlight different facets of the story in order to keep the content fresh and the audiences engaged (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). Schildkraut and Gruenewald (2019) further replicated this research using a sample of 18 mass shootings

[2] Notably, the December 2, 2015 mass shooting at a San Bernardino, CA business also was labeled an act of terrorism after it was revealed that both perpetrators, a husband and wife, were radicalized Muslims. Additionally, around the time of the attack, the female perpetrator pledged her allegiance to ISIS on Facebook (Engel, 2015).

[3] Notably, a number of the incidents included in Powell's study (Overland Park, Charleston, San Bernardino, Orlando, and Chattanooga) appear in the present study; Powell, however, did not differentiate between incidents based on method (e.g., bombing, mass shooting) in her study and instead categorized all as terrorist attacks.

disaggregated based on whether the motivation was ideological (far-right or jihadi) or non-ideological in nature; while frame-changing also was used in the coverage of these attacks, the patterns were markedly different based on which category the incident fell within.

1.2. Constructing social problems

Social problems have been defined as "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (Spector & Kitsuse, 2017, p. 75). In this context, the conditions that underlie social problems are alleged, rather than confirmed, to exist; instead, the emphasis is placed more on the way in which the claims are created rather than the claims themselves (Spector & Kitsuse, 2017). Social problems may be either real or perceived, but their construction by claims makers, or those individuals with the power and resources to shape the public agenda (including the media), may be used as a way to influence policy (Best, 1987). In other words, once a claims maker has convinced the public that a social problem exists, they then are able to offer either solutions or policies aimed at finding such a solution (Best, 1987). In order to establish the existence of the social problem, claims makers typically rely on a process that involves three key steps: (1) defining the problem, (2) providing examples, and (3) using statistics (Best, 1987, 2006).

1.2.1. Give the problem a name

Claims makers identify a social problem to the public by giving it a name (Best, 1987, 2006). By defining the problem, the claims maker creates an appearance of originality, even in instances where the problem may not actually be new but was not necessarily in the forefront of public consciousness, which can entice people to be concerned over its existence (Best, 1987). In crafting such definitions, claims makers may opt for vagueness or broader definitions as a technique to give the appearance of originality (Best, 1987). For example, when the media cover a story of social importance, they may report details in generalities rather than emphasizing hard-and-fast facts as a way to keep audience members interested and seeking out more information, which can help the media outlet maintain their ratings and audiences.

1.2.2. Provide examples

Examples can be used by claims makers to underscore the seriousness of the social problem (Best, 1987, 2006). Oftentimes, the most extreme examples are chosen for this purpose because they also are the most well-recognized by the public (Barak, 1994; Best, 1987). By using examples that are easily identifiable for and relatable to citizens, it serves to reinforce the idea that they also should be concerned over the existence of the social problem (Best, 1987). Simultaneously, examples can be used as a metric for the relative seriousness of the event at hand or the broader social phenomenon.

1.2.3. Use statistics

Finally, Best (1987, 2006) notes that the magnitude of the social problem also can be determined through the incorporation of numerical estimates or statistics into the discourse (see also Barak, 1994; Mayr & Machin, 2012; Sacco, 1995). These figures are able to provide some type of context through which the problem can be understood: the larger the figures, the greater the problem and the more attention it is likely to receive by extension (Best, 1987). Additionally, incorporating numerical estimates allows claims makers not only to identify the magnitude of a particular social problem, it also enables comparisons between different events that exist under that larger umbrella (Best, 1987). Oftentimes, however, the estimates incorporated, much like the examples, are the most extreme and atypical (Best, 1987), yet they may be viewed as accurate given the standing of the claims maker (Best, 2006). Consequently, social problems that are largely atypical, like terrorism and mass shootings, are made to seem typical, which can have considerable implications both for the public's understanding of the issue and the associated policy responses offered or implemented to address it (Barak, 1994; Best, 1987; Sacco, 1995).

1.2.4. Applying Best's model to mass shootings

Schildkraut (2016) examined the media coverage of mass shootings post-Columbine (2000–2012) to better understand how the social problem of mass shootings are constructed. Analyzing more than 560 articles in *The New York Times* across 70 shootings,[4] several important patterns emerged. First, when the problem was "given a name" or defined by the headline, the media most commonly emphasized the perpetrators rather than the victims or the event itself; the perpetrators were disproportionately referenced as "gunman" while the victims were identified as an aggregate number (e.g., X killed). Next, when examples were used to offer context to the event being featured, the media typically relied on Columbine as a referent. Finally, when statistics were incorporated to offer context to the coverage, the victim count of the event was most commonly used to describe the magnitude of the attack, while references to national statistics to situate mass shootings in the larger crime picture were noticeably absent. In sum, Schildkraut's (2016) study shed important light into how the disproportional framing of coverage of mass shootings has contributed to the belief that these events are a social problem in the U.S. Given, however, the aforementioned differences in the media coverage of terrorism and mass shootings independent of one another, consideration for how this framework applies based on whether the attack is ideologically or non-ideologically motivated is warranted.

2. Methods

The present study sought to determine not only how the social problem of mass shootings was constructed through the news media discourse (see also Schildkraut, 2016), but how this framing differed, if at all, among ideologically (radical Islamic and far-right extremism) and non-ideologically motivated shootings. To achieve this end, Best's (1987, 2006) three-step model was used as a framework to analyze the coverage of 18 mass shootings. First, we analyzed how the problem is defined based on the manner in which it is given a name, conceptualized as the headline of the article. Second, we examined the way in which examples are used to compare these shootings with each other and with other mass casualty events. Third, we considered the way in which statistical references are used as a way to quantify the magnitude of the problem. Although numerous frameworks exist through which to examine the media's construction of crime, Best's (1987, 2006) model emphasizes the process by which claims are made rather than focusing on the claims themselves (see also Spector & Kitsuse, 2017). Moreover, the model prioritizes examination of the rhetoric used to create and support the claims being offered (Best, 1987), which can provide greater insight into the process of constructing social problems.

2.1. Case identification

Ideological and non-ideological crimes share a number of similarities. First, both are often violent in nature (Smith, 1994). Additionally, perpetrators of both types of crimes often prepare ahead of their attack, which enables them to methodically execute their plan (Clarke & Newman, 2006). Moreover, both types of events are themselves social constructions (LaFree & Dugan, 2004; Schildkraut, 2016). There are, however, also differences between these two conceptually distinct crimes. By definition, ideologically motivated attacks are symbolic of broader political and/or social causes (Nacos, 2003). Comparatively, non-ideological attacks are more random in nature and associated motivations often are broader and more diverse in range (Capellan, 2015).

[4] Schildkraut's (2016) original data set included 91 shootings; however, 21 incidents received no coverage in *The New York Times*.

As such, our cross-case comparative approach provides an opportunity to both examine the social construction of the problem of mass shootings based on motivation and further analyze specific subsets of each.

Based on the work of Freilich et al. (2014), ideologically motivated mass shootings were divided into two categories of extremist violence – extreme far-right and radical Islamic.[5] Non-ideological mass shootings were disaggregated into four categories: K-12 schools (or those that are most commonly characterized as "school shootings"), higher education (college and university rampages), workplace, and other shootings that include highly covered attacks not falling within the other three categories (see also Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2018). Drawing on Schildkraut (2018) and colleagues' (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016) comprehensive reviews of mass shootings, three events were selected for each subcategory based on pre-defined selection criteria (Muschert & Carr, 2006, p. 751): (1) each event was characterized as a public mass shooting; (2) each was among the most lethal to occur during the study period; and (3) each received national media attention, albeit at varying frequencies.

2.2. Data collection

Data for the present study were drawn from the *New York Times* (NYT), which is considered by researchers (Altheide, 2009b; Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006; Leavy & Maloney, 2009; Wigley & Fontenot, 2009) to be a leading national source for agenda-setting news. The NYT serves not only as an indicator of issue salience based on what it chooses to cover (Weiss & Chermak, 1998), but also as a news source for other outlets that reprint its stories (Muschert, 2002). The paper has a particularly impressive reach and is the third most circulated paper in the nation behind *USA Today* and *The Wall Street Journal* (Milosevic, 2016; Watson, 2020), though their approaches are more heavily skewed toward infotainment and business news, respectively (Muschert, 2002). Moreover, the NYT has been utilized in other studies examining the framing of media coverage of mass shootings (e.g., Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut & Gruenewald, 2019; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014), and Altheide (2009a) notes that the newspaper format more specifically is particularly compatible for analyzing media framing due to a wider variation in views offered.

Articles were retrieved through Lexis-Nexis, a database with access to more than 300 papers circulated across the nation (Weaver & Bimber, 2008) that has been credited as a leading media archive and one of the most widely used for social science research (Deacon, 2007). Full-text keyword searches were conducted using the institution and city name where the shooting took place with the term "shooting",[6] rather than the perpetrators' names, to minimize false negatives – the omission of articles due to limited search terms that otherwise should have been included (Deacon, 2007; Soothill & Grover, 1997) – and missing data (Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2018). Relying on the perpetrators' names also can be problematic based on the timing of the shooting in relation to the news cycle, such that articles published within the first 24 h of the attack may not be captured if they have yet to be publicly identified in the investigation. Results were limited to the day of the shooting and first 30 days thereafter, as previous research (e.g., Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2018; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014) has demonstrated that the coverage period for mass shootings often is limited before another story takes the lead.

A total of 1953 news stories were returned across all events using the aforementioned search parameters. The articles then were reviewed and culled to be consistent with previous research, meaning that the data set included only news articles and editorials; sports articles (e.g., captured due to basketball stories containing the word "shooting"), letters to the editor, and other pieces were excluded. Once cleaned, the final data set included 747 articles and more than 745,000 words of combined coverage for the 18 events. The distribution of the coverage (number of articles and respective total word counts) based on the cases (identified by location and date) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for news coverage of mass shootings by category.

Incident	Date	Articles	Words
Ideological: far-right			
Oak Creek, WI	8/5/2012	7	7265
Overland Park, KS	4/13/2014	5	5132
Charleston, SC	6/17/2015	53	61,576
Ideological: jihadi			
Chattanooga, TN	7/16/2015	20	22,002
San Bernardino, CA	12/2/2015	45	50,865
Orlando, FL	6/12/2016	96	108,856
Non-ideological: K-12 schools			
Littleton, CO	4/20/1999	115	108,190
Red Lake, MN	3/21/2005	18	17,479
Newtown, CT	12/14/2012	130	120,573
Non-ideological: higher education			
Blacksburg, VA	4/16/2007	50	46,409
DeKalb, IL	2/14/2008	15	9290
Roseburg, OR	10/1/2015	23	25,985
Non-ideological: workplace			
Wakefield, MA	12/26/2000	10	7687
Huntsville, AL	2/12/2010	12	11,362
Manchester, CT	8/3/2010	7	7146
Non-ideological: other			
Tucson, AZ	1/8/2011	94	93,688
Aurora, CO	7/20/2012	34	26,412
Isla Vista, CA	5/23/2014	13	15,674
Totals		747	745,591

[5] Far-right extremists "are fiercely nationalistic, anti-global, suspicious of federal authority, and reverent of individual liberties, especially their right to own guns and be free of taxes. They believe in conspiracy theories involving imminent threats to national sovereignty or personal liberty and beliefs that their personal or national 'way of life' is under attack. Sometimes such beliefs are vague, but for some the threat originates from specific racial or religious groups. They believe that they must be prepared to defend against this attack by participating in paramilitary training or survivalism" (Freilich et al., 2014, p. 380).Radical Islamic militants or jihadists "believe that only acceptance of Islam promotes human dignity. Islamic extremists reject the traditional Muslim respect for 'People of the Book' (i.e., Christians and Jews). They believe that 'Jihad' (i.e., to struggle in God's path like the Prophet Muhammad) is a defining belief in Islam and includes the 'lesser Jihad' that endorses violence against 'corrupt' others. Islamic extremists believe that their faith is oppressed in nominally Muslim Middle-Eastern/Asian corrupt governments and in nations (e.g., Russia/Chechnya) that occupy Islamic populations. The U.S. is seen as supporting the humiliation of Islam and exploiting the region's resources. They believe that America's hedonistic culture (e.g., gay rights, feminism, etc.) negatively affects Muslim values. Islamic extremists believe that the American people are responsible for their government's actions and that there is a religious obligation to combat this assault. They believe that Islamic law—Sharia—provides the blueprint for a modern Muslim society and should be forcibly implemented" (Freilich et al., 2014, p. 380).

[6] As an example, the majority of the coverage of the Columbine High School shooting consistently references the name of the school rather than Littleton, CO, where it is located. Conversely, the July 20, 2012 movie theater shooting in Colorado is most commonly referenced as the Aurora shooting, rather than the shooting at the Century 21 movie theater. The Pulse shooting, however, is commonly referred to either by the club name or Orlando, so using the "or" operator helped to ensure no articles were missed. The final search command was structured as "shooting AND ([institution name] OR [city name])."

2.3. Coding and data analysis

Qualitative content analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013) was used as the primary analytic tool as it provides an opportunity to critically analyze the products (e.g., texts, language) put forth by newsmakers (see also Berg, 2007). Content analysis as a process is both systematic and reliable (Berg, 2007; Muschert, 2002); at the same time, it is unobtrusive and non-reactive, meaning that the researcher has no impact on the object (news stories) or its creators because they are examined once their production has been completed (Bell, 1991; Riffe et al., 1998). Researchers also can use content analysis to draw out meaning from the product by identifying themes and patterns for further categorization and examination (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; Berg, 2007).

The NVivo 12 software package was used as both an organizational and analytic tool in the present study, as qualitative software can be particularly useful for identifying information that may have gone unnoticed when coding by hand (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). The codebook mirrored a previous application of Best's (1987, 2006) model to mass shootings (see Schildkraut, 2016), and the coding structure (e.g., parent and child nodes) were established in NVivo when the news articles were loaded into the program. In the present study, full sentences served as the unit of analysis to ensure that context was included in the coding (Berg, 2007). Smaller units of analysis, like words, can lead to a loss of context or meaning, while larger units, such as paragraphs, can lead to research "clutter" with too many ideas being conveyed in a single part (Berg, 2007).

Once organized, a random sample of 75 articles (approximately 10% of the total data set) was coded in NVivo by two independent coders. The program then was used to compute Kappa coefficients to determine intercoder reliability, with 0.6 used as the threshold for acceptable agreement (see Landis & Koch, 1977). All but three coding references exceeded the benchmark; three separate articles were found to have disagreement related to statistical references.[7] The coders met and discussed the discrepancies before the coding for the three articles was cleared and redone. A follow-up check revealed that all Kappa coefficients subsequently exceeded the benchmark, and the remainder of the sample was coded, with each researcher coding approximately half of the articles.

3. Analysis

3.1. Give the problem a name

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Schildkraut, 2016), the "name" was conceptualized as the headline of the story in the present study. In print news, the headline typically is more pronounced (e.g., bold and/or larger font) than the body text in an effort to catch readers' attention. How the headlines are framed not only may influence whether someone reads the story, it also can signify the focus of the article based on how terms are ordered. Accordingly, headlines for each story were coded based on the leading word into one of three categories – shooter, victim(s), and event – to assess the intended focus of the article. Each headline was coded discretely, meaning that it could only be assigned to one of the three categories, though not all headlines met the criteria for coding.

Of the 747 articles analyzed, 157 (21.0%) of headlines were found to lead with one of these three attributes. The most common focus was on the shooters for both the total sample (41.4%) as well as when disaggregated by type of mass shooting, as illustrated in Table 2. The event itself was the second most common focus across both shooting types and the full sample (33.1%). Conversely, the victims were least likely to be the focal lead of the headlines, accounting for just one out of every four headlines in the full sample. Notably, while headlines about both types of shootings were more likely to focus on the perpetrators than the victims, the disparity was more pronounced among ideologically motivated attacks (50% vs. 15.9%) than those that were non-ideologically motivated (38.1% vs. 29.2%).

Table 2
Article headlines by main themes and lead qualifiers.

Theme	Ideologically motivated		Non-ideologically motivated		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Shooter(s)	22	50.0	43	38.1	65	41.4
Gunman	10	45.5	16	37.2	26	40.0
Suspect	1	4.5	12	27.9	13	20.0
Killer	3	13.6	5	11.6	8	12.3
Other	8	36.4	10	23.3	18	27.7
Victim(s)	7	15.9	33	29.2	40	25.5
Job title[a]	2	28.6	11	33.3	13	32.5
Victim	2	28.6	5	15.2	7	17.5
Numeric	1	14.3	5	15.2	6	15.0
Survivor	0	0.0	4	12.1	4	10.0
Proper name	0	0.0	4	12.1	4	10.0
Other	2	28.6	4	12.1	6	15.0
Event	15	34.1	37	32.7	52	33.1
Shooting	2	13.3	12	32.4	14	26.9
Rampage	2	13.3	7	18.9	9	17.3
Attack	4	26.7	4	10.8	8	15.4
Massacre	3	20.0	3	8.1	6	11.5
Killing(s)	1	6.7	3	8.1	4	7.7
Other	3	20.0	8	21.6	11	21.2

Note. Frequency percentages may not total to 100.0% due to rounding error.
[a] Ex: soldier, student, educator, mother.

When further disaggregating these three foci into subthemes, a number of interesting findings emerge. In first considering the perpetrators, who were most likely to be the prominent feature of the headlines, they were most commonly referred to as "gunmen" across both ideologically (45.5%) and non-ideologically (37.2%) motivated shootings, as well as the full sample (40.0%). Notably, however, while the coverage of non-ideologically motivated shootings were then most likely to frame the perpetrators as a "suspect" (27.9%) and least likely to refer to them as killers (11.6%), the opposite was true for opposingly motivated attacks. Specifically, headlines in this ideological shootings coverage were more likely to frame the perpetrators as "killers" (13.6%) rather than as "suspects" (4.5%), thereby inferring guilt rather than a presumption of innocence that was seemingly afforded to the shooters in the non-ideologically motivated attacks.

Despite that the victim of a shooting may be more relatable to audiences than the perpetrator (Cerulo, 1998), the former was the least likely to be referenced in the headlines. Moreover, among ideologically motivated shootings, there was no predominant way in which the victims were framed; instead, references were evenly distributed between their job title and directly labeling them as victims (28.6% each). Conversely, although these two labels were the most commonly invoked in headlines about the victims of non-ideologically motivated shootings, referring to these individuals by their title (33.3%) was more than twice as common as just referring to them as a victim (15.2%), as well as collectively as a numeric representation of fatalities (15.2%). Importantly, however, in only one instance across any of the 18 shootings was a victim specifically named – Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who was injured in the 2011 shooting in Tucson, AZ alongside 12 others wounded and 6 killed. Thus, the manner in which headlines about victims were framed highlighted more of "what" they were (e.g., student, soldier, victim, number) rather than "who" they were.

Disparity also exists in the language choices made to describe the event itself in the headlines. Non-ideologically motivated incidents were most likely to be described simply as "shootings" (32.4%), whereas those that were ideological in nature were most commonly identified as

[7] Notably, the reported agreement ranged from 94.8% to 97.2% for the three articles, despite the computed Kappa coefficients, which were influenced by disagreement in the coding (ranging from 2.8% to 5.2%).

"attacks" (26.7%). The term "rampage" was the second most commonly used to describe non-ideologically motivated shootings, but one of the least common (13.3%) for ideologically motivated events. Conversely, "massacre" was used nearly as often as "attacks" to reference those incidents that were ideologically motivated (20.6%), yet among the least employed, with the term "killing," to describe non-ideological events (8.1% each). Interestingly, a recent article by Whaley (2020) differentiates sanctioned massacres, a term used by Kelman (1973), to describe mass violence perpetuated on behalf of organized groups against civilians (much akin to the ideological shooters who pledge their allegiance to governments), and rampages that are common in the context of school shootings and other non-ideologically motivated attacks.

3.2. Provide examples

Examples may be used as a way to highlight or draw attention to a particular event (Best, 1987, 2006; Mayr & Machin, 2012), either broadly or by creating a point of comparison through which the magnitude of that event can be quantified (Barak, 1994; Best, 1987). The examples offered may be context-specific (e.g., comparing mass shootings to other similar incidents) or may rely on extreme cases (inclusive of other forms of mass violence, such as terrorism) to reinforce the seriousness of the focal event. Further, as Schildkraut (2014) notes, offering comparison between mass shooting events not only allows for ranking based on seriousness (e.g., fatality counts), it also allows readers to draw parallels between relatedly salient issues, such as the gun control-gun rights debate, mental health, and/or violent media (see also Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013). In the present study, references to other mass casualty events were coded non-discretely, meaning that more than one event may be included within each sentence, and included mentions of the event name or location (e.g., Columbine, the Boston Marathon bombing) or the perpetrators (e.g., Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, Tamerlan Tsarnaev). The results of the coding of references to other mass casualty events are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
References to other mass casualty events.

Theme	Ideologically motivated		Non-ideologically motivated		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Domestic	213	36.0	378	64.0	591	100.0
Columbine (1999)	15	7.0	101	26.7	116	19.6
September 11th (2001)	22	10.3	21	5.6	43	7.3
Sandy Hook (2012)	35	16.4	6	1.6	41	6.9
Oklahoma City (1995)	6	2.8	19	5.0	25	4.2
Charleston (2015)	5	2.3	6	1.6	11	1.9
Tucson (2011)	3	1.4	7	1.9	10	1.7
Virginia Tech (2007)	7	3.3	16	4.2	23	3.9
AL Bombings (1963)	11	5.2	1	0.3	12	2.0
San Bernardino (2015)	20	9.4	0	0.0	20	3.4
Boston Marathon (2013)	8	3.8	0	0.0	8	1.4
Jonesboro (1998)	0	0.0	27	7.1	27	4.6
Other	81	38.0	174	46.0	255	43.1
International	64	59.3	51	44.3	115	100.0
Bataclan (2015)	21	32.8	0	0.0	21	18.3
Paris (General)[a]	15	23.4	0	0.0	15	13.0
Charlie Hebdo (2015)	4	6.3	0	0.0	4	3.5
Oslo/Utøya (2011)	0	0.0	4	7.8	4	3.5
Dunblane (1996)	0	0.0	6	11.8	6	5.2
Chenpeng (2012)	0	0.0	13	25.5	13	11.3
Port Arthur (1996)	0	0.0	5	9.8	5	4.3
Pan Am 103 (1988)	0	0.0	4	7.8	4	3.5
Eaton Mall (2012)	0	0.0	3	5.9	3	2.6
Montreal (1989)	0	0.0	2	3.9	2	1.7
Other	24	37.5	14	27.5	38	33.0

Note. Frequency percentages may not total to 100.0% due to rounding error.

[a] Includes references to "Paris attacks" broadly but not able to identify if related to Charlie Hebdo, the Bataclan, or both.

Mentions of other mass casualty events were categorized based on whether the reference event occurred in the U.S. or internationally, and the analysis reveals several interesting patterns. In first considering domestically-occurring mass violence events, the shooting at Columbine was the most commonly referenced incident in the coverage of non-ideologically motivated mass shootings and fourth most utilized in the stories about the ideological attacks. Although there were several other referent mass shootings that were more lethal (Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, San Bernardino), Columbine often is considered to be a watershed cultural moment and a point to which all other attacks, both in and out of schools, are compared as it was perceived to be the first due to the nature of its breaking media coverage (see, generally, Schildkraut & Muschert, 2019).

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks were the second and third most referenced event for ideologically and non-ideologically motivated mass shootings, respectively, but for different reasons. In nearly 64% of the references made in the coverage of the ideologically motivated shootings, 9/11 was used as a comparison with jihadi-inspired mass shooters like those in Orlando and San Bernardino, suggesting that the perpetrators of each committed their attacks as ISIS-sympathizers. Conversely, among non-ideologically motivated mass shootings, 9/11 was most commonly referenced in conjunction with the 2011 shooting in Tucson, AZ – one of the victims, 9-year-old Christina Taylor-Greene, was born on the day of the attacks. Sandy Hook, the most referenced event among ideologically-motivated shootings, also took place before five of the six shootings in this category; comparatively, just two of the non-ideological attacks took place after it. In most instances, references to Sandy Hook were made to highlight the lethality of the event (with 20 first-grade students and 6 of their educators killed), but also to call attention to the assault-style rifle used – and also employed by the perpetrators in the three jihadi-inspired shootings – for which legislative efforts in the attack's aftermath directed toward a ban on them was unsuccessful.

Other examples utilized in the course of the coverage tied to the race and ethnicity of either the perpetrators or their victims. The 2013 bombing at the Boston Marathon, for example, was only referenced in stories about ideologically-motivated attacks, though was evenly split between far-right and jihadi shootings. The perpetrators of that attack were Muslims like the jihadi shooters, but there also were people who knew details about their plans in advance, a point raised in the coverage of the 2015 Charleston, SC church shooting when it was revealed that investigators determined others knew about the perpetrator's racist beliefs ahead of the attack. The race of the victims of the Charleston shooting, all of nine whom were black, as well as the church's long history as a target of racially-motivated attacks, also served to tie in other events, such as the 1963 bombing of a Birmingham, AL church and recent officer-involved shootings of unarmed black men, as a point of reference.

Interestingly, while most of the domestic incidents were referenced in the coverage of each type of mass shooting, no international incidents were covered in both. Related to ideologically-motivated shootings, the 2015 attacks in Paris, France at the Bataclan concert venue (the primary scene of a series of coordinated attacks around the city on November 13 that left 130 people dead in total) and the *Charlie Hebdo* newspaper (January 7) were the most cited examples of international mass violence attacks. Both were perpetrated by Islamic extremists – two brothers operating as an Al Qaeda cell were determined to be liable for the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, while the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) claimed responsibility for the November attacks – which led them to be incorporated into the coverage of the San Bernardino and Orlando attacks, perpetrated by individuals with similar allegiances, shortly after the ISIL-led incident.

The use of international examples in the coverage of non-ideologically motivated mass shootings was primarily determined by the type of location where the attack occurred. References to the 1989 shooting that occurred at the École Polytechnique university in Montreal

appeared in a story about the 2015 attack at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, OR. The most cited international incident, a knifing at a primary school in Chenpeng Village in the Henan province of China, occurred on the same day as the Sandy Hook shooting, leading to comparisons being drawn in the coverage between the victims (predominantly children in both instances) and the relative casualties of the two events – although 24 people were injured in the attack, none were killed due to the weapon used. Similarly, comparisons were drawn between Sandy Hook and the 1996 shooting at a Dunblane, Scotland primary school, which left 16 students and a teacher dead, as well as the 2011 attacks in Oslo and Utøya, Norway, in which both perpetrators were alleged to have trained for their attacks using the video game *Call of Duty*. Finally, among the references to other events included in the coverage of the 2012 shooting at an Aurora, CO movie theater was the 2012 Eaton Centre mall shooting in Toronto. Jessica Ghawi, who was at the mall and left the food court minutes before the shooting began, was killed seven weeks later in Aurora.

3.3. Use statistics

Like examples, the incorporation of statistics or numerical estimates of some form into the coverage of a particular event or phenomenon can help to offer additional context for the reader (Best, 1987). Numerical estimates can be used to underscore the magnitude of a particular problem or be ranked in some type of order against other similar events (Barak, 1994; Best, 1987, 2006; Mayr & Machin, 2012; Sacco, 1995), such as with the inclusion of victim counts or number of weapons present. Statistics also can be used to situate the event within the broader national crime picture, describe the response to the events (such as how many first responders were present or the number of mourners used to highlight the community-level impact), and/or illustrate how much worse the event could have been (including how many people were present at the scene but not physically impacted by the attack). As with the examples, the articles were coded non-discretely for such references, as sentences could contain more than one numerical estimate. Table 4 presents the analysis of statistical references by major theme included in the coverage of both ideologically and non-ideologically motivated mass shootings.

Collectively, 2996 statistical references were coded within the 747 articles. Just over three out of every ten mentions (30.5%) were offered in the course of the coverage of the ideologically motivated mass shootings, with an average of 4.05 numerical estimates included in each story. The remaining statistical references were included in the coverage of the non-ideologically motivated mass shootings, with an average of 3.99 references per article. In other words, for both types of mass shootings, multiple statistical references were included in each story (on average) to provide added context for the reader.

Table 4
Statistical references by major theme (top 10 most commonly referenced themes).

Theme	Ideologically motivated		Non-ideologically motivated		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Victim count of event	270	29.5	569	27.3	839	28.0
Victim count of other events	92	10.1	186	8.9	278	9.3
National statistics	91	9.9	180	8.6	271	9.0
Community statistics	55	6.0	104	5.0	159	5.3
Number of weapons	32	3.5	69	3.3	101	3.4
Rounds fired	21	2.3	54	2.6	75	2.5
Spatial proximity	30	3.3	59	2.8	89	3.0
Magazine capacity	9	1.0	47	2.3	56	1.9
Mourners/volunteers	12	1.3	30	1.4	42	1.4
First responders	15	1.6	15	0.7	30	1.0

Note. A total of 2996 statistical references were coded across the full data set (ideologically motivated: 915 references; non-ideologically motivated: 2081 references). The coding percentages reported above are based on respective column totals. The remaining categories accounted for less than 1% of coding each and are not presented.

The most commonly incorporated statistical reference for both ideologically and non-ideologically motivated mass shootings was the victim counts (covering both injuries and fatalities); this collectively occurs nearly three times as often as the use of the next frequently included numerical estimate. In the coverage of ideologically motivated mass shootings, the victim counts of the respective events are included in 73% of the articles ($n = 270$ mentions in 165 of 226 articles), averaging 1.64 mentions per story. References to the victim counts are featured in just over 62% of the articles ($n = 569$ references in 324 of 521 stories) of non-ideologically motivated attacks at an average of 1.76 mentions per piece. References in articles to victim counts of other mass casualty events were the second most commonly reported statistic, representing approximately 10% of numerical estimates within the stories about the ideologically motivated shootings and 9% of those in the coverage of the non-ideological attacks.

Numerical estimates of victim counts, both of the focal event and others referenced, reported the injured and killed as numerical aggregates, either directly or indirectly (e.g., referencing the number of funerals taking place, which serves as a proxy for the number of fatalities), rather than telling the individual stories of the casualties. Moreover, as noted, presenting victim counts of the focal incident and as well as other events allows for a ranking in terms of severity (number of fatalities) to give the reader context about "how bad" the shooting was. For instance, in one article about the 2000 Edgewater Technologies attack in Wakefield, MA (Goldberg, 2000), the author included a list of 11 other workplace shootings with their respective fatality counts to let the reader know how bad the Edgewater event was comparatively. Similar comparative lists were included in stories about shootings at Umpqua Community College (Kleinfield et al., 2015), Virginia Tech (Dewan, 2007), Sandy Hook (Hu, 2012), Columbine (Lovinger, 1999), and Charleston (Shane, 2015).

Also contributing to the context of how bad the featured mass shootings were or could have been were references to three other categories of statistics – the number of weapons present, the number of rounds fired, and magazine capacities. Not surprisingly, the number of weapons present was only referenced in cases where the perpetrators brought more than one firearm to the scene, including San Bernardino (4 guns), Columbine (4 guns), Virginia Tech (2 guns), Aurora (3 guns), and Umpqua Community College (5 guns). Similarly, descriptions of magazine capacities – how many bullets a gun could fire before the perpetrator needed to reload – were used to highlight how such catastrophic damage could be carried out in such a short time span. For instance, the Aurora perpetrator, who killed 12 and injured 58 others, initially used a gun with a 100-round drum (which jammed during the shooting), suggesting that he was able to cause catastrophic damage with little interruption. At the same time, references to large-capacity magazines, or those that typically hold more than 10 rounds, indicate an absence of opportunity for victims to flee to safety when the perpetrators stop to reload, leading to lawmakers to routinely call for their ban. Further, the number of rounds fired – both generally and relative to the number of times victims were shot (e.g., each victim at Sandy Hook was struck by multiple shots, with some being hit by as many as 11 rounds each) – served to underscore how heinous the act was.

The theme of "community statistics" represents references to the size of the broader community and/or how many individuals were present at the specific location where the shooting took place. By situating the event in a broader numerical estimate, it provides the reader with an opportunity to gauge how much worse the casualty count could have been. For instance, one story (Saulny & Davey, 2008) covering the 2008 shooting at Northern Illinois University referred to the "university's more than 25,000 students" as well as the "162 students registered for the course" in Cole Hall, where the attack took place, as a way to suggest that not only were there numerous others in the lecture hall impacted

beyond the five killed and seventeen injured, the effect of the attack likely spanned a broader audience vicariously by being members of the campus and also could have been more lethal had the shooting not been contained to the single space. Similar references were made about the "400 worshippers" who attended the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, WI (Yaccino et al., 2012), the "estimated 320 people in the club" in Orlando (Alvarez & Pérez-Peña, 2016), or the "670 staff members" at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, CA (Nagourney et al., 2015). Additionally, referencing the number of both first responders and mourners of an event can serve to highlight the broader impact of these different shootings.

While the community statistics theme was used to contextualize the broader impact or potential for a worser outcome, the incorporation of national statistics was done in a more varied way, as evidenced in Table 5. Notably, although the most commonly referenced national statistic collectively is U.S. crime rates, serving as the most referenced for ideologically motivated attacks and second most common for non-ideologically motivated shootings, this accounts for less than 2% of all statistical references coded. In other words, these stories largely fail to situate mass shootings in the context of the national crime picture, which can contribute to public perceptions that these events are occurring at epidemic-like proportions rather than underscoring their statistical rarity. Notably, references to the prevalence of firearms in the U.S. are most frequently made about non-ideologically motivated attacks, typically suggesting that there are so many guns in circulation that passing any related restrictions would be ineffective at preventing future shootings. This is further supported by references to background checks and screenings that failed to disqualify mass shooters from obtaining their weapons either because disqualifying records were not submitted to the background check system (e.g., Virginia Tech), they were too young to undergo a background check (e.g., Columbine), they were able to secure their weapons from their homes (e.g., Red Lake, Sandy Hook), or there were no disqualifying factors present (e.g., Wakefield, Isla Vista).

Table 5
Disaggregation of national statistics theme (five most commonly referenced sub-themes).

Theme	Ideologically motivated		Non-ideologically motivated		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
U.S. crime rates	23	25.3 (2.5)	35	19.4 (1.7)	58	21.4 (1.9)
Gun prevalence[a]	7	7.7 (0.8)	39	21.7 (1.9)	46	17.0 (1.5)
Legislation and restrictions[b]	7	7.7 (0.8)	14	7.8 (0.7)	21	7.7 (0.7)
Number of mass shootings	2	2.2 (0.2)	13	7.2 (0.6)	15	5.5 (0.5)
Background checks, screenings, and traces	6	6.6 (0.7)	22	12.2 (1.1)	28	10.3 (0.9)

Note. Results for coding percentages are reported as percentages of each category's total number of references to national statistics (ideologically motivated: N = 91; non-ideologically motivated: $N = 180$) with the proportion to each category's total number of statistical references (ideologically motivated: $N = 915$; non-ideologically motivated: $N = 2081$; total references: $N = 2996$) in parentheses. All remaining sub-themes accounted for less than 5% of coding for each category and are not presented (available upon request from the authors).

[a] Gun prevalence statistics include mentions of number of firearms in circulation, sales and/or transfers, and guns manufactured nationwide.

[b] Legislation and restrictions refers to the number of states with policies such as universal background checks, assault weapons bans, limitations on sales to categories of prohibited persons, and other such regulations in place.

4. Discussion

While terrorism and mass shootings have long been social problems, both public and scholarly attention to these types of events have increased since around the turn-of-the-21st-century (LaFree et al., 2015). Ideologically motivated criminals, or terrorists, historically have been associated with targeted bombings in foreign nations, but they have increasingly engaged in mass shootings on American soil to express their grievances and seek political and social change (Gruenewald, 2011). At the same time, non-ideologically motivated mass shootings targeting schools, workplaces, and other venues have become more deadly over the last two decades (Schildkraut, Formica, & Malatras, 2018). The news media continue to serve as the platform for the public to learn about these relatively rare events, but yet, and despite the increased public relevance of mass shootings, little was known prior to this study about the similarities and differences in how news media portray ideological and non-ideological mass shootings.

Our study revealed similarities worth noting in news media coverage of ideological and non-ideological mass shootings. In particular, we found that headlines of the *New York Times* articles often provided the names of shooters and details about their personal lives and horrific crimes. News stories were more likely to highlight and explicitly name shooters, regardless of ideological motivation, more so than victims. Unless victims were prominent political figures (i.e., Gabrielle Giffords, former U.S. Representative), victims usually remained unnamed, represented by numbers, general titles (e.g., employees, students, etc.), or not at all in headlines. In other words, victim names were not considered critical elements to news stories (i.e., the "who, what, when, where, how, and why") worthy of being underscored in headlines. The practice of emphasizing shooters over victims is likely due in part to the need to catch audience attention through shocking headlines. There is simply not enough space in a headline to list the names of victims of mass shootings. It also is likely that reporters had available to them much more information about offenders from official sources (e.g., law enforcement agencies) in contrast to victims, whose identities are not revealed until days or weeks after the shooting out of respect for their and their family's privacy.

Another commonality between the stories of ideological and non-ideological attacks is in the use of statistics by news media and claims makers to define the scope and seriousness of mass shootings, both generally and also specifically for how one incident compares to other similar events. Regardless of ideological motive, statistics most commonly are used in news stories to count victims and compare body counts to emphasize the heinousness of a mass shooting or downplay its lethality. Rarely are numerical estimates used to remind audiences of the statistical rarity of mass shootings and place them into a broader context of deadly violence in the U.S.

The findings from our study also resulted in some new insights into how ideological and non-ideological mass shootings are uniquely portrayed in mainstream news media. First, ideologically motivated mass shooting are relatively more likely to be framed using rhetorical devices that evoke acts of war in contrast to non-ideologically motivated shootings that often are framed similarly to more routine types of murders. Terms like "massacres" and "attacks" are used to describe ideologically motivated mass shootings, while non-ideologically motivated shootings are described as "rampages" or simply as "shootings." This finding is important given terrorists' belief that their deadly crimes are part of a bigger war between races or religions and the U.S. government's decision to use the military in response to terrorist attacks against Americans and their interests abroad. As such, it appears that news stories contribute to the framing of acts of terrorism as not just crimes, but also as an issue of national security.

Second, the pattern of focusing on shooters and less on victims in headlines is even more pronounced for ideological mass shootings than those that are fueled by non-ideological motives. This is especially concerning as one of the key imperatives of committing an act of

terrorism is to gain publicity for their social or political grievances and recruit others sympathetic to their cause. These broader goals are achieved not only through sensationalized headlines but also by inadvertently ensuring that terrorist shooters will live on in infamy, and in the eyes of some, as celebrated martyrs.

Third, news stories tend to more likely to label ideologically motivated shooters using harsher terms in comparison to non-ideological mass shooters. For example, ideological shooters are more likely to be referred to as "killers" very soon following mass shootings, suggesting offenders are ultimately responsible for the deadly crimes. In this way, findings suggest that the presumption of innocence is afforded less to terrorists than to non-ideological mass shooters, at least in news media stories. Identifying this manner of labeling ideologically motivated mass shooters is important because it suggests, at least symbolically, that terrorists do not have same civil liberties and rights as other types of non-ideologically motivated mass shooters. This finding aligns with broader debates about whether terrorists, particularly those who are not American citizens, should receive the same legal protections as other routine murderers. Based on our findings, headlines seem to suggest that, in many instances, they do not.

Fourth, and finally, we found that claims makers disproportionately use examples to define social problems and recommend solutions for non-ideological mass shooting stories in comparison to stories about ideological mass shootings. More specifically, non-ideological mass shooting news stories focused on issues of gun prevalence, especially in relation to ownership of assault-style rifles and the need for background checks, screening, and traces. This disproportionate attention on weapons may be explained in large part by the fervent debates over the constitutional rights of gun owners and restrictions aimed to increase gun safety in the U.S. There are few other social problems in which moral entrepreneurs and other claims makers (e.g., National Rifle Association, Brady Campaign) have developed sophisticated media strategies for defining issues and events. It seems that ideological mass shootings do not open up policy windows for increased public debates over gun rights and safety debates to the same degree. A possible explanation for this discrepancy is that ideological mass shootings continue to be framed around official labels of terrorism, issues of shooters' motives, how they prepared for and trained for attacks, and their ties to domestic and foreign terrorist groups and extremist movements. As a result, there are less opportunities for claims makers to use news stories to advance their gun-related agendas in the days and weeks following ideological mass shootings.

In sum, differences in how news media frame ideological and non-ideological mass shootings have broader implications for shared understandings and policy responses to this serious social problem. For example, non-ideological mass shootings become defined largely as an issue of gun availability and lethality, thus feeding critical debates over gun rights and public safety, but opportunities for such debate tend to be lost on ideological mass shootings where the focus centers on motives and affiliations. In addition, framing ideological mass shootings as acts of war committed by perpetrators who are not afforded the same constitutional protections as other Americans could have dangerous consequences. Examples of such deleterious consequences could plausibly include the reinforcement of stereotypes and backlash against particular racial, ethnic, or religious groups, harsher legal outcomes for those with political motivations, and rushed legislation to create laws that can be used discriminately against certain segments of the population.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we comparatively examined how mass shootings were constructed through Best's (1987, 2006) three-stage model of naming problems and using examples and statistics to define the nature of social problems. Although the *New York Times* is well established as a data source for research, future studies should extend our study by examining additional sources and types of media to see if our findings hold consistent. Additionally, future studies should extend our work by also content analyzing the sources of news frames in a broader range of news media outlets that are local, regional, and national in scope. While we are cognizant of the constraints on the crime newsmaking process, key findings suggest a need to increase attention on issues of victimhood for direct victims and the communities shaped by these events for years to come. Given the implications for shared public (mis)understandings and policy responses to mass shootings, focusing less on offenders and their (in)ability to incur high death tolls during their shootings could reduce the likelihood of unintentionally glorifying mass shooters (see, e.g., Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Schildkraut, 2019). Finally, news media should be cognizant of and avoid scripts that rely on harsher rhetoric to describe mass shooters who are motivated by ideology to ensure that coverage does not unintentionally reinforce culturally-specific negative stereotypes.

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