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Covering Mass Murder: An Experimental Examination of the Effect of News Focus—Killer, Victim, or Hero—on Reader Interest

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Abstract

Journalists often assume that consumers are drawn to stories of mass murder because of their morbid curiosity. As a result, cable television reports and news stories tend to focus on details of the killer's biography and modus operandi, possibly neglecting aspects of an incident that could provide consumers with practical knowledge for preventing a massacre and, at the same time, would not inspire future killers looking for fame and celebrity. For this study, we manipulated the news focus of a story about a high school rampage—putting it on the killer, the first victim, or a heroic figure who ended the violence—in an experiment conducted via Qualtrics survey software with a sample of 212 U.S. adults. Additional independent variables in the analysis included respondents' gender, age, and degree of fear. The dependent variable consisted of a measure of respondents' interest in reading a news story about the school shooting. Results from a four-way analysis of variance indicated that subjects were significantly more interested in the school shooting when the focus of attention was on a courageous bystander who stopped the onslaught than when the focus was on either a victim or the killer. Moreover, fearful subjects were significantly more likely than their fearless counterparts to express interest in a news story about mass murder. Age also made a significant difference, with respondents in their early 40s (who may be particularly likely to have children in school) indicating more interest in mass murder news stories than those in their mid-30s. No significant interactions were obtained.

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In an effort to stop inspiring future killers who seek fame and celebrity, there has been growing pressure on the American news media recently to change how they report mass murder incidents. Instead of primarily covering the perpetrators of mass killings, news outlets have been encouraged to focus more of their coverage on other people involved in these incidents, such as the victims and/or heroic bystanders. Lankford and Madfis (2017) have proposed that media organizations should no longer publish the names and photos of mass killers except during ongoing searches for escaped suspects. Similarly, the No Notoriety (2012) campaign, which has been endorsed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (2015), urges news media to stop publishing the names and photos of murderers, as well as the self-serving statements, photos, videos, and manifestos made by perpetrators.

Prior research has shown that many mass murderers are desperate to achieve fame (e.g., Coleman, 2004; Fox, Levin, & Fridel, 2018; Schmid, 2005; Wiest, 2011). Some killers have even reached out to media organizations to get it, sending their photos and videos to television networks and writing lengthy manifestos for media consumption. Yet, despite widespread knowledge of mass killers' interest in making the headlines, news media accounts continue to focus primarily on the killers (Robinson, 2014). In the immediate aftermath of the Newtown shooting spree at Sandy Hook Elementary School, for example, 20-year-old killer Adam Lanza was named in 1,780 news stories, the majority of which were published without any details about the victims (Levin & Reichelmann, 2017).

One reason media corporations may hesitate to reduce coverage of mass killers is a fear of declining sales. Although news consumers say that they would like to see fewer crime stories and more positive stories (Pew Research Center, 2007), crime continues to be one of the most closely followed news topics (Miller, Purcell, & Rosenstiel, 2012). If the media attention to these incidents is not aligned with consumer demand and public interest, the for-profit news media could face declining revenue. Currently, however, the nature of the public's interest in crime news remains largely unknown and a matter of speculation. Are news consumers interested in detailed information about perpetrators, or are they interested in crime stories despite the focus on perpetrators? Perhaps news consumers are actually more interested in victims or heroic bystanders, or maybe fear of victimization rather than fascination with mass killers influences public interest in crime news. To better understand news consumers' interest in crime stories, this study employed an innovative experimental design to compare public interest in three almost identical mass killing articles, which varied by focusing on the perpetrator, a hero, or a victim. The results provide empirical evidence that could help shape future news coverage of these deadly events.

Literature Review

Crime stories have long dominated U.S. news coverage, particularly at the local level (Jurkowitz et al., 2013; Katz, 1987; Trautman, 2004), and crime coverage is consistently

out of proportion compared with actual crime rates (Katz, 1987; Tiegreen & Newman, 2009). In fact, the rarest types of violent crime, such as cases of serial murder, mass murder, and so-called "active shooters," tend to receive the largest amounts of news coverage (Fox et al., 2018; Wiest, 2017) and are viewed as especially terrifying by members of the public (Foster, 2009).

While there is evidence that news consumers are generally interested in crime stories (Reber & Chang, 2000; Schaudt & Carpenter, 2009), Reber and Chang (2000) found that consumers also say that news media devote far too much attention to crime. This apparent contradiction—that news consumers express both interest in and weariness of crime coverage—raises questions about what motivates people to consume crime news.

Some scholars argue that public interest in crime stories is less likely due to personal fascination and more likely driven by a desire for knowledge. In particular, high levels of consumption of crime stories may serve a protective role for people seeking strategies to avoid victimization. Browder (2006), for example, suggested that the popularity of true-crime books among female readers is not explained by women's greater interest in crime accounts, but instead by their greater desire (compared with men) for information that could help keep them safe. Similarly, Vicary and Fraley (2010) found that female readers of true crime are more drawn to books that include defense strategies and guidelines for avoiding victimization.

Research investigating the role of uncertainty and efficacy in news stories provides additional insight. In a study examining public responses to news stories about the threat of bedbugs, Goodall and Reed (2013) found that stories framing bedbugs as a certain (i.e., serious and widespread) threat with an uncertain (i.e., possibly unreliable or ineffective) solution more often prompted information-avoidance behaviors among subjects. In contrast, stories framing bedbugs as an uncertain threat with a certain solution more often prompted information-seeking behaviors (Goodall & Reed, 2013). In an examination of news consumers' responses to stories about the H1N1 virus, Goodall, Sabo, Cline, and Egbert (2012, p. 353) also found that subjects "will engage in adaptive behavior if they perceive a significant and relevant threat, and perceive that the proposed solution will effectively avert the threat." In a study of journalistic framing techniques in stories about sex trafficking (stories either included realistic solutions for addressing the issue or offensive details meant to shock readers into action), McIntyre and Sobel (2017) found that subjects who read solution-based stories were more likely to read additional stories about the issue, compared with subjects who read shock-based stories.

Regarding crime news specifically, Reber and Chang (2000) determined that consumers expressed a desire for more reporting about the larger context of crime, such as information about the ordinariness or unusualness of a particular incident. Altogether, these studies appear to suggest that information-*seeking* behaviors are most likely in cases of an uncertain threat with a certain solution, while information-*avoidance* behaviors are most likely in cases of a certain threat with an uncertain solution. This would appear to support the notion of a protective role of crime news consumption, especially as consumers tend to seek instructive stories and avoid grotesque ones, the latter of which may enhance uncertainty. Perhaps a news story that

appears to provide a practical solution to a dire situation would be especially appealing to concerned consumers.

Scholars have long reported a relationship between consumption of crime news and fear of victimization. Studies related to cultivation analysis, for example, found that people who consume large amounts of crime news not only tend to report high levels of fear of crime but also tend to overestimate both the amount of crime in their community and their own likelihood of victimization (e.g., Gerbner, 1998; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980, 1986). Heath (1984) also found that public fear of crime is influenced by the amount of local newspaper coverage of crime, as well as the framing of crime news. In particular, consumers expressed greater fear of crime when news outlets featured a high proportion of local criminal activity, framed criminal behavior as randomly occurring, or emphasized sensational elements (Heath, 1984). Moreover, fear developed from consumption of crime news may influence public opinion and lead to the development of counterproductive activities. Trautman (2004) found, for example, that consumption of crime news on television is positively related to support for heavy-handed tough-on-crime policies (which may appear to be a certain remedy to a presumably certain threat).

It is clear from the literature that crime is widely covered by U.S. news outlets and receives intense public interest. What is less clear, though, are the reasons behind news consumers' interest in these crime stories. Some evidence suggests a public fascination with the sensational details of these events, while other evidence indicates that people are more interested in the positive and/or practical side of an otherwise tragic episode. Perhaps they seek to find a glimmer of hope by acquiring knowledge to avoid or reduce the worst sorts of future victimization. There also are consistent links between consumption of crime news and heightened levels of fear, particularly when coverage is sensational, excludes relevant context, or fails to offer realistic solutions, but little is known about possible behavioral effects of that fear.

The present study seeks to enhance understanding of public interest in crime news, as well as the potential influences of news story framing and consumer fear. The following research questions are explored:

Research Question 1: Are respondents who are presented with a news story about a mass murder event more interested in reading details about the killer, a victim, or a heroic bystander who successfully stopped the attack?

Research Question 2: Do respondents' reported levels of fear influence their desire to read a news story about a mass murder event?

Method

To address the research questions, we designed an experiment that was administered electronically via Qualtrics survey software to a sample of 212 U.S. adults. Respondents were drawn from Qualtrics panels using the quota sampling method for representation by gender (50.5% female and 49.5% male). The sample was limited to respondents aged 35 to 44 years (M = 38.98, SD = 2.695) in an effort to obtain a homogeneous

sample and reduce the likelihood that any differences found could be explained by individual differences in the sample. This particular age-group was selected because previous research found consistent interest in violent media content among U.S. adults of this age, while respondents of other ages demonstrated more varied interests related especially to their gender (Wiest & Levin, 2017).

Subjects were initially presented with a vague description of the study's purpose, which was stated to be an examination of public views about crime news. This was intentional so as not to reveal the true purpose of the study and risk influencing subjects' responses. After agreeing to participate, subjects were asked their age and gender, followed by a question meant to gauge their level of fear of mass murder: "In the last year, how often have you felt anxious or afraid that you or someone you love could become a victim of a mass killer?" Response options on a 5-point rating scale were "never," "rarely," "sometimes," "pretty often," and "almost constantly." Once data collection was complete, the fear and age variables were split at the median, creating two attributes for each: (1) not fearful and fearful and (2) younger respondents (ages 35-38) and older respondents (ages 39-44).

Next, subjects were asked to examine one of three randomly distributed news reports about "a mass murder event" before answering "a few questions on the next page."[1] The news report appeared to be a follow-up story about a mass shooting at a high school. The layout, photos, font sizes, main headline ("Mass murder at school") and included pull-quote ("He was always so reserved and quiet. No one could have ever guessed that this would happen," which was attributed to a 10th-grade student) are identical in all three versions, which only differ by the focus of the story. The young man pictured[2] next to the story is named Daniel Morrison in all versions but is variably depicted to one third of respondents as the killer (see Figure 1), a victim of the killer (see Figure 2), or a "hero student who stopped the attack" (see Figure 3). Along with relevant changes to the first paragraph and photo captions, each version included a different secondary headline: "Details emerge about life of killer," "New information about first victim," and "Meet hero student who stopped it." The words "Full story inside" appeared in bold immediately after the first paragraph to emphasize the notion that there was more to the news story. The three versions represent three different news frames about the mass murder event: Respondents could surmise that the killer-focused version would likely include details about his personal life and possible motivation, that the victim-focused version would likely include grim details about the attack, and that the hero-focused version may provide an instructive model for stopping a mass shooting in progress and avoiding victimization.

After examining the news report, subjects were asked to select one of three options: (1) answer the questions now and skip the rest of the story; (2) answer the questions now, then decide whether to read the rest of the story; or (3) read the rest of the story now, then answer the questions. These options were used to approximate a 3-point rating scale—uninterested, neutral, and interested—in order to gauge respondents' extent of interest in reading the news story. Those who wanted to skip the story were recorded as *lacking interest* (coded as 1), those who wanted to decide later whether to read the story were recorded as *neutral* (coded as 2), and

"Please take a moment to examine the following news story of a recent mass murder event. Be sure to read the headlines, photo captions, and first paragraph so that you can answer a few questions on the next page."

Associated Press
Center City High School students leave the school building shortly after the shooting began on April 30.

Mass murder at school

Details emerge about life of killer

"He was always so reserved and quiet. No one could have ever guessed that this would happen."

■ **Melanie Brooks, 10th grader**

By Rachel Juniper
Associated Press

Days after the savage school shooting that claimed the lives of 30 students and teachers, new details have emerged that shed light on the life of Daniel Morrison, the student-turned-mass murderer that struck Center City High School on April 30.

Full story inside

Daniel Morrison killed 30 students and teachers at Center City High School on April 30.

Figure 1. Experimental news article focused on the killer.

those who wanted to read the story right away were recorded as *interested* (coded as 3). There were no subsequent questions to answer, but that wording was included to encourage respondents' attention to the story. Once subjects made a selection, they were presented with a debriefing statement explaining that the story was fictional and why deception was employed (i.e., it allowed for candid information

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Center City High School students leave the school building shortly after the shooting began on April 30.

Mass murder at school

New information about first victim

"He was always so reserved and quiet. No one could have ever guessed that this would happen."

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By Rachel Juniper
Associated Press

Days after the savage school shooting that claimed the lives of 30 students and teachers, new details have emerged that shed light on the life of Daniel Morrison, the first victim of the shooter that struck Center City High School on April 30.

Full story inside

Daniel Morrison was the first of 30 people killed at Center City High School on April 30.

Figure 2. Experimental news article focused on a victim.

about subjects' interest that could not be reliably collected by asking them outright to gauge their interest).

In this way, we were able to measure actual behavior—whether the subjects chose the option to read (or not read) a story about a school shooting—rather than measuring subjects' self-reported attitudes or anticipated behavior.

"Please take a moment to examine the following news story of a recent mass murder event. Be sure to read the headlines, photo captions, and first paragraph so that you can answer a few questions on the next page."

Associated Press

Center City High School students leave the school building shortly after the shooting began on April 30.

Mass murder at school

Meet hero student who stopped it

"He was always so reserved and quiet. No one could have ever guessed that this would happen."

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Days after the savage school shooting that claimed the lives of 30 students and teachers, new details have emerged that shed light on the life of Daniel Morrison, the hero student who stopped the attack at Center City High School on April 30.

Full story inside

Daniel Morrison heroically stopped the shooting at Center City High School on April 30.

Figure 3. Experimental news article focused on a heroic bystander.

Findings

Overall, the majority of subjects demonstrated interest in reading more of the news story, as 60.4% of subjects selected the option to read the rest of the story right away and only 13.2% selected the option to skip the story entirely ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 0.718$). This is consistent with previous findings of this age-group's interest in violent media

Table 1. Results of ANOVA of Subjects' Decision.

Variables	"Skip story" (uninterested)	"Decide later" (neutral/unsure)	"Read story" (interested)	*F* value
Story focus				3.829*
Killer	14.3%	30.0%	55.7%	
Victim	14.5%	33.3%	52.2%	
Hero	11.0%	16.4%	72.6%	
Subjects' level of fear				8.102**
Fearful	8.0%	23.0%	69.0%	
Not fearful	17.9%	29.5%	52.7%	
Subjects' age				3.623*
35-38 years	16.3%	24.5%	59.2%	
39-44 years	10.5%	28.1%	61.4%	
Subjects' gender				0.343
Female	13.1%	26.2%	60.7%	
Male	13.3%	26.7%	60.0%	

Note. ANOVA = analysis of variance.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

content. Respondents were fairly split on their reported level of fear of mass murder ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.279$), with 52.8% saying they rarely or never felt anxious or afraid during the last year that they or someone they love could become the victim of a mass killer, and 47.2% of respondents saying they felt anxious or afraid at least sometimes during the last year. About a fifth of respondents said they either felt anxious or afraid "almost constantly" (9.4% of respondents) or "pretty often" (12.3% of respondents).

To answer this study's research questions, we conducted a four-way analysis of variance to examine any effects of the four independent variables (the story version presented, plus subjects' age-group, gender, and reported level of fear of mass murder) on the dependent variable (subjects' interest in reading the news story). The analysis yielded three significant main effects (see Table 1) for the story version presented, subjects' reported level of fear of mass murder, and subjects' age-group. There were no significant interactions.

First, for the story version, $F(2, 164) = 3.829$, the mean interest score for the hero-focused story ($M = 2.664$) was significantly higher than the mean interest scores for the killer-focused story ($M = 2.404$) and the victim-focused story ($M = 2.334$), while the latter two mean scores were not significantly different from each other. In post hoc analysis, Duncan's multiple-range test confirmed that subjects were significantly more interested in reading the story about the hero, compared with the stories about the killer or victim.

Second, for subjects' reported level of fear of mass murder, $F(1, 164) = 8.102$, the mean interest score for the fearful group ($M = 2.616$) was significantly higher than the mean interest score for the not-fearful group ($M = 2.318$). Subjects who reported personal fear of mass murder victimization were significantly more interested in reading the story compared with those who reported little or no fear.

Third, for subjects' age, $F(1, 164) = 3.623$, the mean interest score for the older group (ages 39-44; $M = 2.567$) was significantly different from the mean interest score for the younger group (ages 35-38; $M = 2.367$). Subjects on the older end of the age range demonstrated significantly more interest in reading the story compared with those on the younger end of the range.

The nonsignificant main effect for gender is not surprising. There is an almost equal gender split for mass murder victimization in the United States—56% for males and 44% for females—unlike serial murder and domestic homicide in which female victims are overrepresented (Fox et al., 2018). Furthermore, this finding lends support for the homogeneousness of the sample, as the age range of respondents was selected precisely because prior research (Wiest & Levin, 2017) found similar levels of interest in violent media content among U.S. men and women aged 35-44 years.

Discussion

The findings contribute in several ways to the literature on crime news and public interest in mass murder events. First, the study provides strong support for the protective role of crime news. Subjects' greater interest in the hero-focused story may be interpreted as an information-seeking behavior, as it presumably would provide information about how to stop a mass murderer and avoid future victimization. Although all stories suggested a certain threat, those that focused on the killer and victim offered uncertain solutions (i.e., those versions would not necessarily provide practical information to avoid or avert the threat), which may explain why they were less interesting to subjects. This suggests that fascination with details about the crime or the killer does not wholly explain subjects' interest in this type of news. Respondents were more attracted to "the silver lining"—a chance to gain certain positive knowledge from an otherwise tragic situation.

Researchers have noted that the copycat phenomenon thrives on excessive publicity and that the media provide at least some of the inspiration for would-be killers to imitate mass murderers who make the headlines, appear on the cover of celebrity magazines, and blanket the cable news coverage (e.g., Helfgott, 2015; Langman, 2017; Levin & Reichelmann, 2017). Crime scholars overwhelmingly agree that widespread coverage of mass killers in broadcast, print, and online news provides the ingredients for copycat violence (Coleman, 2004; Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi, & Castillo-Chavez, 2015). Based on our results, however, there could possibly be a more positive sort of copycat inspiration as well; namely, imitation by would-be crime-scene victims and professionals who are inspired not by killers, but by heroic figures who make the headlines, appear in celebrity magazines, and blanket cable news coverage. If the copycat phenomenon applies to increasing the prevalence of mass killers, why would it not also apply to increasing the prevalence of heroes who take an active role in ending a mass murder?

Our findings also establish a link between subjects' reported level of fear of mass murder and their desire to read about a mass murder event. This is consistent with previous research and, again, corresponds to the notion of a protective role of crime

news. Although the study did not uncover a significant interaction between fear and age, it is possible that fear (or some related emotion) may have influenced the finding that subjects aged 39-44 years demonstrated more desire to read the news story compared with their younger counterparts aged 35-38 years. Those in their early 40s are more likely to have children in high school, where the hypothetical mass shooting took place, and their interest may have reflected parental concern for the safety of their own children rather than for their own personal safety. (Although this study did not measure parental status, many people in their late 30s and early 40s are likely to have children in their lives whom they care about, e.g., their own offspring, nieces/nephews, and the children of close friends.)

This study also suggests important lessons for journalists and news outlets related to crime coverage. Although there is some evidence that sensational and shocking coverage of crime events may increase news consumption (likely by way of inducing fear), news outlets that employ such tactics may not be giving consumers what they want. It seems clear that news consumers seek crime stories that reduce uncertainty, offer practical solutions, and include relevant contextual information that suggests the possibility of an effective response to violence. On the other hand, sensational stories that contain grisly or shocking details of a crime are more likely to turn away consumers who look for hope rather than hype.

News reporters may assume that consumers prefer stories that focus on killers rather than victims (Chermak, 1994; Jewkes, 2004). Our study found no support for this assumption. Moreover, with respect to school shootings, a story that focused on the heroic efforts of a bystander was significantly more appealing to both fearful and fearless subjects. Apparently, the heroic version of the article appealed to respondents, across the board, who sought practical information about ending a school rampage rather than only to those subjects seeking to reduce their fear of mass murder. At the same time, fearful subjects were drawn more than their fearless counterparts to read the details of the story, regardless of its news focus.

In reality, courageous bystanders have helped end a number of potentially large-scale rampage school shootings, including the following examples. In September 2016, a volunteer firefighter tackled to the ground a 14-year-old rampage shooter outside an elementary school in Townville, South Carolina, subduing him until the police came on the scene and took him into custody. The perpetrator had already shot to death his father and had wounded a teacher and two students. In June 2014, the perpetrator of a rampage shooting at Seattle Pacific University had already left one dead and two more injured when he was pepper-sprayed and then subdued by a courageous student. In February 2012, a 17-year-old student opened fire in the cafeteria of a Chardon, Ohio, high school, killing one and injuring another four. The defensive coordinator of the school's football team confronted the gunman and then chased him from the building. In April 1998, a 14-year-old student shot and killed a teacher and wounded three others at a school dance in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, before he was subdued by the owner of the dance venue.

Notwithstanding such heroic incidents, broader data suggest that the presence of heroes at a crime scene who have been willing or able to end a rampage have been

relatively rare. In January 2014, the Federal Bureau of Investigation released a report that tracked 110 mass public shootings from 2000 to 2012 in which the gunman's purpose was apparently to kill multiple victims. In 28% of the incidents, a victim or solo police officer was able to subdue or shoot the assailant prior to the arrival of a SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) team—which represents a significant proportion, but far from the majority of cases (Blair, Martaindale, & Nichols, 2014).

It should be noted that only one type of mass murder event—school shootings—was examined here; future research should examine the effects of story framing and subjects' fear on other kinds of mass murder events (e.g., shootings in shopping malls or workplaces, or within families). Moreover, future research might study differences in public interest in response to various types of heroes: those who stop an active shooter before he opens fire, those who save lives while they are under fire, and those who attempt to intervene but fail. It is hoped that there will be a larger proportion of such heroic acts to study in the years to come.

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Notes

1. We included the suggestion that there were subsequent questions as a way of encouraging subjects to pay sufficient attention to the news report, as well as to complement the options subjects had for proceeding.
2. The photo of the unidentified man used was under a Creative Commons license; no attribution was required.

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