

# Media Salience and the Framing of Mass Murder in Schools: A Comparison of the Columbine and Sandy Hook Massacres

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Jaclyn Schildkraut<sup>1</sup> and Glenn W. Muschert<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Several high-profile school shootings have emerged as significant discursive markers in a longer “disaster narrative.” This study applies the two-dimensional analytic framework introduced by Chyi and McCombs to examine the frame-changing differences between two highly salient school shootings. A content analysis was conducted using the *New York Times* coverage of the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. The findings of this study indicate that while Columbine set the precedent for how the media covers school shootings, the coverage of Sandy Hook illustrates a departure from this model and potentially reshapes the way that these events are covered.

## Keywords

school shootings, subtypes, comparative, methodology, media, Columbine, Sandy Hook

On April 20, 1999, Columbine High School seniors Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold carried out what many consider to be the worst school shooting in history. After killing 12 students and a teacher, they turned their guns on themselves. Despite other stories that occurred in the same year (e.g., rising tensions between the United States and Iraq

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<sup>1</sup>Texas State University, San Marcos, USA

<sup>2</sup>Miami University, Oxford, OH, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Jaclyn Schildkraut, School of Criminal Justice, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666, USA.

Email: j\_s9@txstate.edu

or the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton) or even the same decade (e.g., the 1992 Rodney King verdict and the 1996 crash of Trans World Airlines [TWA] Flight 800) as the shooting, Columbine was and still is regarded as one of the biggest news stories of its time (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1999). Since the Columbine shooting, other school shootings have occurred, some with higher body counts (e.g., Virginia Tech) and some seemingly taking place as copycat crimes (e.g., the May 20, 1999, shooting in Conyers, Georgia), but none have garnered a comparable level of media attention, until Newtown.

On December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and opened fire. Before taking his own life, Lanza shot and killed 20 first-grade students and six educators, including the school's principal. It was later revealed that Lanza also had killed his mother, Nancy, as she slept in their home. As with many school shootings, the media immediately descended on Newtown and around-the-clock coverage began instantly. Similar to Columbine and unlike other (less salient) school shootings, the media's focus on the "Sandy Hook tragedy" did not wane for quite some time. In fact, it was several weeks before the media even vacated Newtown.

Mass murders, and in particular those that involve children in schools, generate high levels of media coverage, as audiences have a desire to learn the facts of the events, and, in a more sustained way, to understand the social implications and deeper meaning of such events. The ensuing discussions often reflect ongoing value conflicts within society, and indeed the discourse (and at times discord) heard following school massacres seem to reflect the deeply latent social value conflicts frequently at tension below the surface of social life.

The 1999 Columbine and 2012 Sandy Hook school massacres struck deep psychic blows, not only in citizen's individual psyches, but also in the collective sentiment. Sociologically, we can note that collective moral sensibilities were activated by these events, and such emotion bubbled up (as moral effervescence) in various forms of public expression (see Durkheim, 1915). At such times of crisis, normative expectations can be reaffirmed and/or redefined. From this point of view, the media provide a record of the moral discourse surrounding these noted mass homicides, and as such, the *New York Times* reportage is reflective of the media's effort to satisfy the public curiosity (and right to know) and its role as a major agenda setter in the public discourse. The media, as Cohen (1963) has noted, "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling people what to think *about*" (p. 13).

In a nutshell, this article discusses how these tragic events were framed, which is reflective of some aspects of social life that did not change despite intense debate (such as gun policies in the United States) and others that seem to have changed (such as the increasingly victim-focused nature of news coverage, which decreases the focus on the offenders). Of course, we must point out that our analysis of news discourse following school massacres is distinct from historical (or other direct) study of such events, and therefore, we point out that our analysis speaks more about the social discourse following such events than it does to the events themselves. Nonetheless, our

study of the Columbine and Newtown media events, as a study of media framing of crisis events, can reveal a lot about how the topics being covered are understood and characterized (in this case as mass killings in schools) and also about the deeper social conflicts and circumstances within which these debates occur.

The process of “frame changing” refers to the journalistic practice of presenting news coverage through different topic frames over the life span of a news event. The continual reframing of the story allows the media to highlight different facets of the narrative, which typically results in fresh content and increased viewer interest. Viewer interest often translates into an increase in the volume of coverage, which is a key indicator of the salience of a particular news story (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006). In a 2004 article, Chyi and McCombs introduced a two-dimensional model for assessing frame changing in the media coverage of the Columbine High School shootings. This model was designed to assess the spatial and temporal angles of a news story to better understand its salience. In 2006, Muschert and Carr replicated this study, incorporating an additional eight school shootings occurring between 1997 and 2001. Many of their findings, interestingly, mirrored that of Chyi and McCombs (2004).

While the Muschert and Carr (2006) study extended the application of Chyi and McCombs’ (2004) analytic framework, it did so by comparing a highly salient event (Columbine) with those of less salience (e.g., Pearl, Mississippi; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Springfield, Oregon; Santee, California). Columbine, as has been noted by researchers (Altheide, 2009a; Lawrence, 2001; Muschert, 2007b; Muschert & Larkin, 2007), emerged as a problem-defining event, reshaping the way that the media and its consumers perceived school shootings. No other school shooting, including the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre, had garnered such attention.<sup>1</sup> This, however, changed with the December 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Given the coverage that Sandy Hook garnered, and the length of time between this event and Columbine, a renewed application of Chyi and McCombs’ model to similarly salient events is warranted.

The present study provides such an analysis by examining the media coverage of the Sandy Hook school shooting. Specifically, news articles were collected from *The New York Times* for the 30 days following the shooting (the same parameters as the original study assessing Columbine). Once the analytic framework was applied, comparisons between the coverage of Sandy Hook and Columbine could be discerned. This extension of Chyi and McCombs’ (2004) and Muschert and Carr’s (2006) studies illustrates not only the difference in frame changing between similarly salient events but also the impact such likeness has on other events to redefine a particular phenomenon. The coverage of Sandy Hook illustrates a number of changes in the way these two massacres were framed in media reportage, which also are discussed in the context of this highly publicized event and as a basis for understanding future media events.

## A Review of the Literature

While the present study builds upon the research applying Chyi & McCombs’ (2004) analytic framework, it is also situated in a greater discourse about media salience

among high-profile events. This growing body of research is typically subdivided into three groups of literature.

### *Issue-Attention Cycle*

In a 1972 article, Downs introduced the “issue-attention cycle” to explain how events or social problems are introduced in the media, gain interest from the public, and then fade away while being replaced by a new story to capture viewer interest. What is perhaps the most noteworthy about such a cycle is that it focuses on a single issue or few issues at a given time (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010; Downs, 1972; Henry & Gordon, 2001; McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Peters & Hogwood, 1985). Although attention to such an issue rarely will last for an extended period of time and the issue itself may remain unresolved when it is replaced by a different story, there seldom is, if ever, a significant overlap in the attention given to two major problems. Furthermore, as Downs (1972) noted, “Public perception of most ‘crises’ in American domestic life does not reflect changes in real conditions as much as it reflects the operation of a systematic cycle of heightening public interest and then increasing boredom with major issues” (p. 39). This systematic cycle most often is driven directly by the media, though politicians and pundits also may manipulate it indirectly via the media (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010).

According to Downs (1972), this cycle has five key stages (see also Baumgartner & Jones, 2010; Henry & Gordon, 2001; Peters & Hogwood, 1985). The first is the “pre-problem stage,” which occurs before the issue gains a considerable amount of public attention. Next is the phase involving the combination of alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm. In this second phase, the public becomes suddenly informed about a particular problem or issue and responds through heightened alarm and a demand for a solution. During the third phase, which Downs (1972) identified as “realizing the cost of significant progress” (pp. 39-40), the public becomes aware that the cost of fixing the problem or issue is rather costly, which can lead to the fourth phase—the gradual decline or loss of interest by the public (see also Baumgartner & Jones, 2010; Henry & Gordon, 2001; Peters & Hogwood, 1985). The cycle concludes with the “post-problem stage,” whereby the issue is replaced by another of greater importance at the time. As a result, this problem remains unresolved and instead just fades into the background with no real resolution.

Downs’ (1972) article introduced this cyclical model to understand how environmental concerns were perpetuated in the public discourse. Since his article, a number of other scholarly works have examined key issues, such as politics (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010; Peters & Hogwood, 1985), terrorism (Hall, 2002), and public health epidemics (Shih, Wijaya, & Brossard, 2008), through this same model. Not all major issues will go through this cycle—to capture the public audience’s attention, a social event must be dramatic and somewhat unique in who is affected (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010; Downs, 1972). More importantly, however, those problems or events that do reach the issue-attention cycle do so because claims makers, or those with the power to define social issues as such, have identified them as such (Baumgartner &

Jones, 2010; Downs, 1972; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). This process is known as agenda setting.

### *Attribute Agenda Setting*

McCombs and Shaw first introduced the term “agenda setting” in their 1972 article examining how the media influence reader perceptions on certain political issues. In its simplest explanation, “agenda setting” referred to the process by which certain issues or events are selected and highlighted by journalists or other groups of claims makers, such as politicians (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; see also Entman, 2007; McCombs, 1997; Weaver, 2007). By singling out such topics, the media have the ability to define and shape issues and events, as opposed to reflecting what is occurring in society at a particular time (Barak, 1994; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). The concept of agenda setting also has been expanded in more recent studies to examine the shift from an object or issue to specific attributes of that object (McCombs, 1997; McCombs & Bell, 1996; Surette, 1992; Weaver, 2007). This has been commonly referred to as the second level of agenda setting, and examines which attributes of an issue are covered and which are not (Ghanem, 1997; Kiouisis, Bantimaroudis, & Ban, 1999; Kiouisis & McCombs, 2004; McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997; Weaver, 2007).

One of the main goals of agenda setting, according to McCombs (1997), is to achieve consensus among members of the public about the importance or salience of a particular issue or topic. News producers may call attention to issues that either directly or indirectly affect a given community by highlighting certain issues or stories as important or, more specifically, more important than others (Barak, 1994; Entman, 2007; McCombs, 1997; Reese, 2007). An additional effect of agenda setting, which either may be intentional or unintentional, is that the public may adopt the presented agenda as their own (Cohen, 1963). Specifically, over a period of time, the issue may become a priority for the public’s agenda as the media coverage allocated to the issue increases, which is likely to increase the salience of that issue for the public (Cohen, 1963; Entman, 2007; McCombs, 1997; Reese, 2007).

The media, as well as the public, rarely focus their agendas on more than a few key issues at a time, particularly because few issues have the ability to command the consensus needed to maintain salience (McCombs, 1997). As such, those issues or events that are the most serious or atypical in nature (Barak, 1994; Sacco, 1995; Schildkraut & Donley, 2012) or those that threaten society’s perceived stability (Gans, 1979) are the focus of such agendas. The media agenda is impacted as the demand for information increases when an issue is of perceived importance (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). As such, the way in which the public receives, interprets, and understands these issues is also affected by the mass media portrayal of them (Barak, 1994; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Still, by focusing on only a few key issues at a time, these agendas allow for a more complete and full-bodied dialogue to occur in the public and media discourses.

Manheim (1987) has distinguished three separate dimensions of the media agenda. The first, visibility, refers to how prominent an issue is (Kiouisis, 2004; Manheim,

1987; McCombs, 2005). The greater the prominence of the issue, the more likely it is to garner attention from the media and incite policy action. The second is the audience salience, which refers to how important a particular issue is to news consumers (Kiousis & McCombs, 2004; Manheim, 1987; McCombs, 2005). The greater the salience of the issue, the greater the demand will be for the media to cover it. Finally, valence refers to the media agenda within which visibility and audience salience are grounded (Kiousis, 2004; Kiousis & McCombs, 2004; Manheim, 1987). Valence is directly impacted by the *attention* given to an issue and the *prominence* of its coverage (Kiousis, 2004; Kiousis & McCombs, 2004; McCombs, 2005). Trumbo (1995) has explained that attention can be measured with respect to the number of news stories generated about a particular issue. Prominence, according to Kiousis (2004), views the dimensions of a news story (e.g., size, placement, pictures) with affecting the issue's salience. Thus, media agenda setting not only impacts the salience of an issue on its own but also is often impacted by the way in which a story is framed.

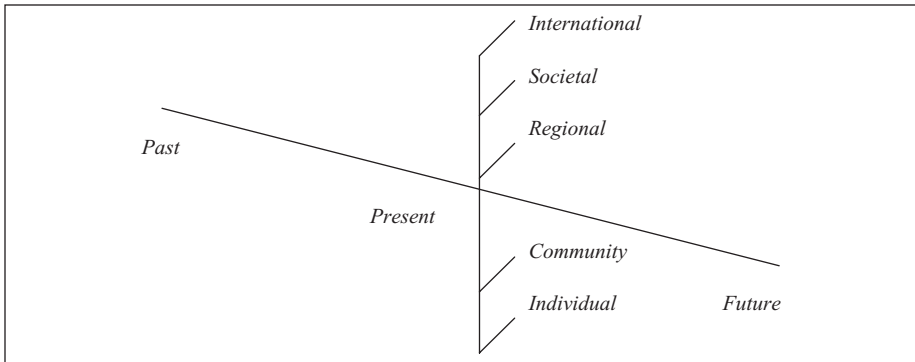
### **Framing Research**

Media framing is arguably one of the most influential techniques used to assign newsworthiness and construct the news. The concept of framing was first introduced by Erving Goffman (1974) to explain how members of society make sense of the world around them. Later research (e.g., Entman, 2007; Gans, 1979; Reese, 2007; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) has applied Goffman's framing concepts to media and agenda setting, particularly with respect to political agendas presented to society. A media frame, as Tankard (2001) explained, is "a central organizing idea for news content that supplies context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration" (pp. 100-101). Media framing has become, in a sense, a way for taking complex social issues and presenting them in a manner that makes them accessible and relatable to the intended audiences (Gans, 1979; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Entman (1993) suggested that framing can be thought of as "communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). Reese (2007) suggested that as certain aspects of a particular news story and its "reality" are emphasized, different media frames may surface. From these ideas has stemmed the notion of content bias, which has been described as patterns in framing that result from the influence of social institutions, media routines, or media hegemony (Entman, 2007; Reese, 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

### **Measurement Scheme**

Chyi and McCombs (2004) posited that when analyzing the five Ws of the media, *space* (where) and *time* (when) often emerge as the two most important dimensions of a story's coverage, and therefore, provide the most direct organizational measures of



**Figure 1.** Chyi and McCombs' two-dimensional measurement scheme table.

Source. Chyi and McCombs (2004, p. 25).

how stories are framed. As such, these dimensions provide the basis for Chyi and McCombs' analytic framework, which is presented in Figure 1.

The focus of the space dimension exists on a continuum, ranging from a micro (individual) level to a macro (international) focus. In this application, the *individual* focus referred to coverage of individual participants (e.g., the shooter or victims). The *international* level focuses on discussing the story's impact on a global audience. Between these two levels are three intermediary categories. The *community* level, which is the smallest of these intermediary categories, focuses on a story in relation to a particular group. The *regional* category broadens the intended impact of an event to include residents of a larger area, such as a state or metropolitan area. The final category, *societal*, examines the impact of the event on the nation as a whole.

The time dimension allows researchers to examine the framing of the story in either a past, present, or future context, known as the temporal focus of the media. The *past* level examines any news that retraces the back-story leading up to the particular event. The *present* frame examines coverage at the time of the event and short-range implications (typically what may occur in the first 30 days after the event). This particular frame is often the most commonly used focus of the media, who rely on telling the story in the "now." Finally, the *future* level situates an event in what it means moving forward. This typically refers to potential changes in policy that may prevent similar events from occurring, or the long-term effects of the phenomenon. In sum, this two-dimensional model permits an examination of the spatial and temporal changes in coverage through the use of variable media frames.

## Methodology

### Research Questions

Guided by research questions established by Chyi and McCombs (2004), this study examines the frame changing of the Sandy Hook shooting and compares it to the frame



changing of the Columbine story. These research questions help to advance the more conceptual issues of framing examined in the present study by allowing the researchers to observe patterns consistent with a broader “disaster narrative,” or a cyclical marathon of news coverage of these types of events that translates into a recurring narrative process. If Sandy Hook, like Columbine, is merely one component of a larger “disaster narrative” about school shootings, then it is expected that the framing (and frame changing) of the event should mirror that of its predecessor.

**Research Question 1:** How were the stories about the Sandy Hook shooting distributed across the event’s life span and how did this compare with the distribution of stories about Columbine?

**Research Question 2:** How were the *space* frames distributed across time? Were there any emerging changes in the framing over the event’s life span?

**Research Question 3:** How were the *time* frames distributed across time? Were there any emerging changes in the framing over the event’s life span?

**Research Question 4:** What was the relationship between the use of time and space frames?

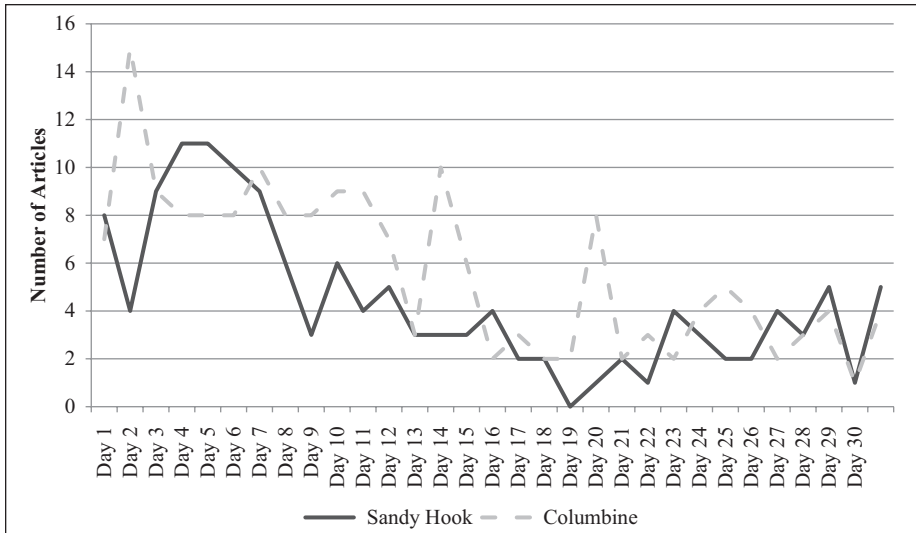
## Method

Similar to Chyi and McCombs’ (2004) and Muschert and Carr’s (2006) studies, the present study utilized articles covering the Sandy Hook shooting from the *New York Times*. The *Times* also has been identified in previous research as a national-level agenda-setting news outlet (e.g., Altheide, 2009a; Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Gitlin, 2003; Leavy & Maloney, 2009; Muschert, 2002; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Wigley & Fontenot, 2009). In some instances, the *Times* may even act as a source of news for other publications, which may reprint their articles (Muschert, 2002). Altheide (2009b) further noted that the newspaper format in particular is more compatible than television news for analysis of framing and audience effects; specifically, it offers a wider variation in views.

Full-text keyword searches were conducted using the terms “Sandy Hook” and “Newtown.” Articles were limited to the 30 days following the shooting. McCombs and Zhu (1995) have previously noted that coverage on public issues typically lasts an average of 18.5 months. Chyi and McCombs (2004), however, found the life span of the Columbine Massacre to be only about 1 month. The limited span of coverage for school shootings may be attributed to Downs’ (1972) notion of the “issue-attention cycle,” whereby interest in intense issues gradually fades and these focal points are replaced in the media and with the public by another issue.

Initially, the search returned 403 results. The articles were then reviewed and culled to be consistent with the previous studies, with the final data set including only news stories and editorials. Letters to the editor, opinion pieces, and blog entries were





**Figure 2.** Coverage of the Columbine high<sup>a</sup> and Sandy Hook elementary school shootings in the *New York Times* (30-day coverage period).

<sup>a</sup>Data for Columbine values imputed from Chyi and McCombs (2004, p. 28).

excluded. The final data set consisted of 132 articles, which is slightly less than the 170 articles discussing Columbine.

## Findings

### *Volume and Pattern of Coverage*

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of the 170 articles for Columbine (Chyi & McCombs, 2004) and the 132 articles covering Sandy Hook over the 30-day period immediately following each event. Several interesting differences in the patterns of coverage occur. First, while Columbine had three major spikes in coverage (Days 2, 14, and 20, for example, April 22, May 4, and May 10, 1999, respectively), the coverage of Sandy Hook, particularly in the initial peak (Days 3 through 7, or more specifically, December 17-21, 2012), was more sustained. What is perhaps more distinct is variance in the main themes covered in the initial spikes. In the April 22, 1999, spike of coverage of Columbine, Muschert (2007a) found that stories about the victims and impromptu memorials dominated the coverage, while social issues such as gun control played a secondary and extremely limited role in the coverage (Muschert, 2007a).

In the initial coverage of the Sandy Hook shooting, the opposite was true. Specifically, the discourse immediately following the shooting in Newtown focused primarily on the debate between gun ownership and gun control, with a secondary focus on coverage of the victims. In fact, coverage of the victims during the spike did

**Table 1.** Distribution of Main Themes in Sandy Hook Coverage, December 17-21, 2012.

	Guns/Gun control	Prevention	Victims	Shooter	Event	Mental illness	Response/ reactions	Other (miscellaneous)
12/17	2	1	1	1	—	—	3	1
12/18	4.5	—	1.5	1	1	1	1	1
12/19	6	1	2	—	1	—	—	1
12/20	5	1	2	—	—	—	—	2
12/21	4	1	1	—	—	—	—	2

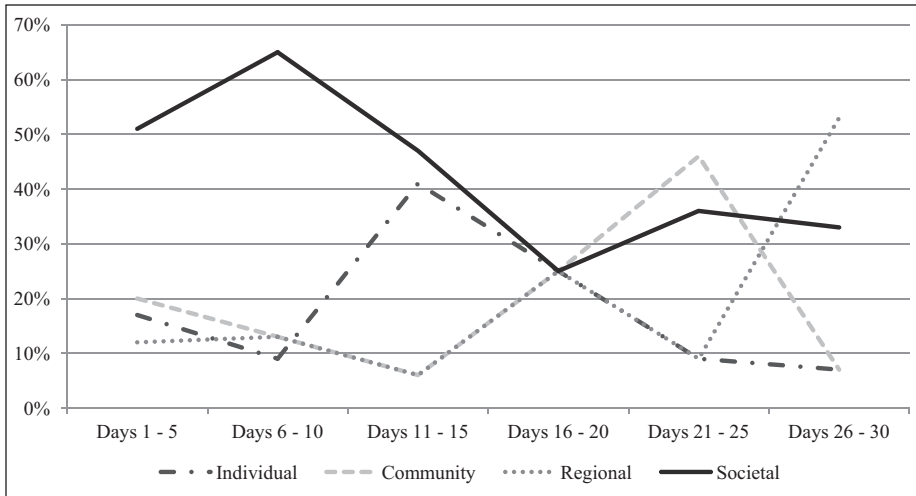
not exceed discussion about gun control on any of the days. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the main themes of the articles during the 5-day spike.

An additional point worth noting is the opposite pattern of coverage on Day 2 following each of the shootings. While the second day after Columbine represented the largest peak in coverage, the pattern of articles on Day 2 of the Sandy Hook shooting demonstrated an inverse trend. There are two potential explanations about this change. First, the Connecticut State Police tightly controlled the dissemination of information during the Sandy Hook investigation. During the initial news conferences, spokesman Lieutenant Paul Vance, as well as the chief medical examiner for Connecticut, remained tight-lipped on details. News conferences were also held less frequently than had been witnessed with prior mass shootings, including Columbine.

### *Space Frames*

To address the second research question, the distribution of frames over the five different spatial levels across the 30-day period was examined. Figure 3 presents the distribution of the proportions of articles covering the Sandy Hook shooting in 5-day increments.<sup>2</sup> Similar to the findings of Chyi and McCombs' (2004) and Muschert and Carr's (2006) studies, the findings of the present study indicate that the societal frame, which situates the event in a national context, was the most predominant. Specifically, 46% of the 132 articles covering the Sandy Hook shooting adopted the societal frame, as compared with 52% of 170 articles covering Columbine (Chyi & McCombs, 2004) and 48% of 290 articles covering nine school shootings (Muschert & Carr, 2006). The individual frame was the next most commonly used in coverage of Sandy Hook, accounting for approximately 18% of the articles. Interestingly, the second most utilized frame in Chyi and McCombs' and Muschert and Carr's studies was the community frame, representing 29% of stories in each study.

The third most prevalent frame in the present study was the community frame, accounting for 16% of the articles about Sandy Hook, as compared with 17% of the articles covering Columbine (Chyi & McCombs, 2004) and 21% of the articles covering the nine school shootings (Muschert & Carr, 2006), both utilizing the individual frame. Perhaps what is the most notable in the disparity between the coverage of Sandy Hook, Columbine, and the remaining eight shootings in Muschert and Carr's



**Figure 3.** Distribution of space frames for Sandy Hook coverage, by 5-day period.

(2006) study is the difference in framing at the regional and international levels. In both previous studies, the regional frame was used in only 2% of the stories (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006). In the coverage of Sandy Hook, however, the regional frame was used in 16% of the stories. This is likely due to the close proximity of Newtown to the New York Metropolitan area (an issue discussed below). While the international frame was the least frequently utilized in all three studies, it was used in nearly 4% of the Sandy Hook articles as compared with 1% in the Chyi and McCombs (2004) study. Furthermore, in the additional eight shootings incorporated into Muschert and Carr's study, the international frame was not used at all. The greater use of the international frame in the Sandy Hook coverage can be attributed to its comparison with a school attack in China that occurred on the same day. In that event, a man stabbed 22 elementary school students and 1 adult, though none were fatally wounded (Associated Press, 2012).

Besides the differences in the framing at the various levels for the aggregate data set, the analysis also revealed that the framing changed over the life span of the events. Furthermore, the frame changing observed in the Sandy Hook coverage also differs quite significantly from the two previous studies. In the Chyi and McCombs (2004) study, the use of societal frames increased across the coverage period examined, increasing 40% over the first 25 days. Conversely, the percentage of individual frames continued to decrease over the same time frame. The community level frame maintained a steady, intermediate position, dipping slightly around Day 25 and then quickly rebounding. Muschert and Carr's analysis of nine school shootings mirrored those findings closely, as both previous studies indicated that the focus of the coverage steadily shifted away from individuals to the focus of the event and its impact on society (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006).

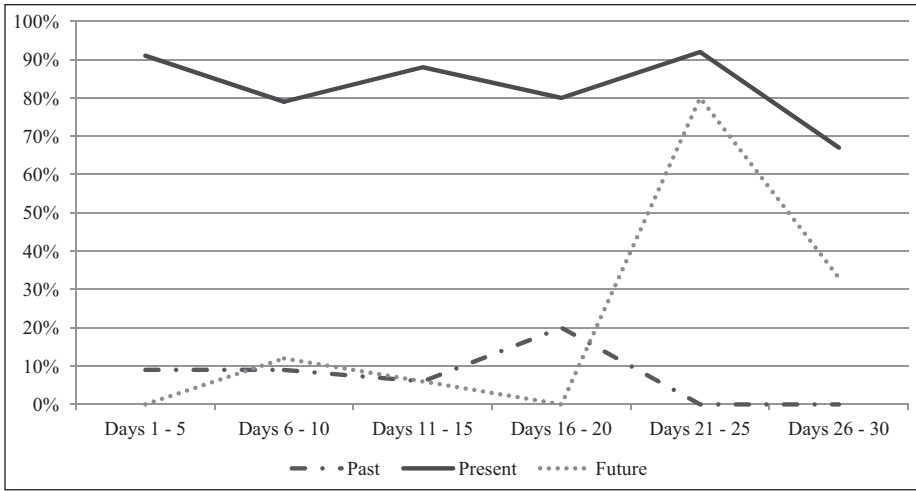
The examination of the frame-changing process of the Sandy Hook coverage reveals very different results. While the societal frame initially led the focus of the coverage, it peaked within the first 10 days and then began a steady decline. Perhaps more noticeably, each of the other three levels—individual, community, and regional—peaked at a time that coincided with specific events within the coverage. The individual level, for example, peaked between the 11th and 15th days of coverage, when the majority of the victims was laid to rest. The peak for the community level occurred between Days 21 and 25, during which the students of Sandy Hook returned to class at a makeshift school nearby. Finally, a peak in coverage was observed at the regional level in the last 5 days of the coverage period examined. This peak coincided with the passing of New York's assault weapons ban.

In sum, while previous coverage of school shootings situated coverage in the context of a greater social problem, the coverage of the Sandy Hook shooting reflected different facets of the story unfolding across different spatial levels. This provides evidence of journalists' use of frame changing to tell the story, which also can have potential implications for how the audience makes sense of the event.

### *Time Frames*

The third set of research questions focuses on the frames and how they change over different levels of time. As with the previous studies (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006), the framing of the event in the present context was the most common. Specifically, the use of the present frame for coverage was consistently higher than 80% on most days and, on the whole, accounted for approximately 83% of the total coverage. The use of the past frame (8% of the total coverage) was slightly lower than the findings of 16% in Chyi and McCombs' (2004) study and 10% in Muschert and Carr's (2006) study. In the coverage of Sandy Hook, the use of the future frame (8%) on the whole also was slightly lower than Chyi and McCombs' and Muschert and Carr's results, showing that this frame was used 13% and 12% of the time, respectively (see Figure 4).

The greatest difference, however, between the coverage of Sandy Hook and the other shootings is observed in the frame changing of the temporal frames. The changing of the present frame is nearly identical in all three studies, as is the continual declining use of the past frame. However, while the use of the future frame in all three studies peaked during the fifth period (Days 21 to 25), the spike in the coverage of Sandy Hook (reaching 80%) nearly doubled that of the other two studies. This particular increase in framing of the Sandy Hook shooting corresponded to an increasing discourse about the gun debate and what the long-term effects would be if new legislation were passed. In the following period (Days 26-30), there was a downward shift in the use of the future frame. During this period, the first gun laws promulgated in response to Sandy Hook were passed and the discourse shifted from future implications to what the new laws' immediate impacts were.



**Figure 4.** Distribution of time frames for Sandy Hook coverage, by 5-day period.

### *Framing Between Time and Space*

The final analysis examined cross-tabulations of findings examining the relationships between the time and space frames, sometimes referred to as “core frames.” These results are presented in Table 2 and compare Chyi and McCombs’ (2004) findings for Columbine with the present study’s analysis of the Sandy Hook shooting. These results indicate that for the majority of the combinations of space–time frames, the coverage is quite similar. In particular, as with Columbine, coverage of the Sandy Hook shooting was dominated by the “societal–present” relationship.

There are, however, two noticeable exceptions in the framing of these two events. First, the framing of coverage in the societal-future combination is greater for Columbine. As noted, Columbine became the problem-defining event with respect to school shootings. While other events occurred before Columbine, none really had set a precedent for how these shootings should be covered in the media. Therefore, Columbine forced the media to consider the long-term societal impact of the event. Sandy Hook, while defining in its own right, follows the precedent set during the Columbine case. Thus, though the coverage of Sandy Hook is markedly different, as the present study illustrates, it does not require the distant speculation that Columbine did, but instead allows the media and its consumers to ponder the current impact of the event.

The greatest disparity in framing, however, was observed in the individual-present combination. Coverage of Sandy Hook was framed over 3 times more (22%) in this orientation than was Columbine (7%). As noted, coverage of Columbine focused considerably more on the long-range impacts of the event rather than the individuals involved. Of the coverage that did focus on individuals, most referred to Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. In addition, while there was a total of 13 victims in that shooting,

**Table 2.** Space Frame by Time Frame, Comparing Columbine<sup>a</sup>/Sandy Hook.

	Time frame		
	Past	Present	Future
Space frame			
Societal	2%/3%	39%/49%	13%/5%
Community	4%/0%	24%/20%	1%/0%
Individual	10%/1%	7%/22%	0%/0%

<sup>a</sup>Values for Columbine are drawn from Chyi and McCombs (2004, p. 28).

the majority was rarely referenced, as coverage typically focused on three of the students (Rachel Scott, Cassie Bernall, and Isaiah Shoels) and one teacher (Dave Sanders) killed (see Muschert, 2007a). The coverage of the Sandy Hook shooting, following a shift in the reporting of the Aurora, Colorado movie theater shooting less than 5 months earlier, marked the transition from “offender-centered reporting” to “victim-centered reporting.” In many reports, particularly within the first 2 days of coverage, the news media refused to even say the shooters’ names, instead focusing on remembering the victims of the tragedies. This was markedly different from coverage of Columbine, where the December 1999 *Time* magazine cover, perhaps most iconically, featured a still of Harris and Klebold in the school’s cafeteria midway through their rampage.

**Discussion**

The results of the present analysis add to the growing body of literature on the media coverage of school shootings (see also Muschert & Sumiala, 2012). While previous studies, such as Muschert and Carr’s (2006) examination of nine school shootings, compared events with varying levels of salience, researchers had yet to compare two events of similar salience, mainly because prior to the Sandy Hook shooting, no event garnered as much attention as had Columbine. As such, examining the coverage of Sandy Hook provided an opportunity to analyze the precedent for media coverage set by Columbine and to determine whether such a precedent would hold over a highly publicized event.

Examination of the first 30 days of coverage of the Sandy Hook shooting showed that, as with Columbine and other school shootings, the media used continual frame changing, particularly with respect to framing at the spatial level, to emphasize different aspects of the story. This allowed the media to keep the story new and fresh, which also satisfied the audience’s desire to consume new and varying facets of the story. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2012), Sandy Hook was the second most closely followed story of the year, falling only a few percentage points behind the 2012 Presidential election. Perhaps more importantly, and consistent with Cohen (1963), the frame changing allowed the media to highlight specific aspects of the

Sandy Hook tragedy that coincided with various political agendas, which thereby influenced public opinion about the tragedy. Unlike earlier shootings at Virginia Tech (2007), in Tucson, Arizona (2011), and in Aurora, Colorado (2012), which were perceived by the public to be isolated incidents, the shooting at Sandy Hook was seen as a reflection of broader social problems in the nation ("Washington Post-ABC News Poll," n.d.).

The analysis, however, revealed a number of interesting departures from the coverage of the Columbine shooting. First, while coverage of Columbine reached its highest peak on the second day after the shooting, coverage of the Sandy Hook shooting dropped by half on the same day (see Figure 2). This is particularly noteworthy as the majority of coverage about an event is typically provided within the first several days, as the media inundates viewers with facts, photos, and interviews (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut, 2012). In a rush to disseminate information to the public, however, accuracy of such information is at times traded for winning the race to press (Robinson, 2011).

The minimizing of information about the Sandy Hook shooting presented in the media as the story broke may be attributed not only to the lack of information released by the police and medical examiner, but also to increased fact checking. Traditionally, gatekeepers have been used in media agencies to fact check information and determine which details were most important (Gieber, 1964; Janowitz, 1975; Schudson, 1989; Shoemaker, 2006; Surette, 1992). As technology has advanced, and the production of media requires a quicker, more rapid response, however, these gatekeepers often are bypassed to get information on the air (Lipschultz & Hilt, 2011). In the first few hours of coverage of the Sandy Hook shooting, the media initially reported that it was Adam Lanza's brother, Ryan, who was the shooter (Hack, 2012; Soliwon & Nelson, 2012). His picture was plastered across news screens and media web pages, and within 5 hours, his Facebook photo had been shared nearly 10,000 times (Soliwon & Nelson, 2012). Following this error, journalists began to reel in inaccuracies in the early reporting and became more cautious about getting their facts correct before going on air, which can explain the second day drop in coverage. It also is worth noting that, although the public demanded continuous information about the shooting, journalists had more time to gather the initial information and piece together the story. Unlike Columbine, which was still considered an active scene when police and media arrived, Lanza had committed suicide by the time the story broke onto the air.

Coverage of Sandy Hook also exhibited a significant departure from Columbine with respect to *how* the story was told. The mass media discourse notably changed with Sandy Hook, following the lead of the earlier shooting at the Aurora, Colorado movie theater. In both cases, coverage of the shooters was extremely limited and instead focused on the victims. In fact, very little significant information was released in the media about Adam Lanza or the investigation, particularly in the first week of coverage. Instead, the media focused on telling the stories of the heroic educators and the losses of innocent children. These groups especially fall in line with what Sorenson, Manz, and Berk (1998) have identified as the "worthy victim." Such victims, who typically garner increased media attention and are considered the most newsworthy,



are those who are “White, in the youngest and oldest age groups, women, of high socioeconomic status, killed by strangers” (Sorenson et al., 1998, p. 1514).

In addition to the shifting focus from the shooters to their victims, Sandy Hook also represents a departure in the driving themes of the coverage. Specifically, while the victims’ memorials drove the Columbine coverage, the Sandy Hook shooting coverage was driven by a discourse about gun control and other preventive measures. This not only sustained the initial spike in coverage but also drove the spike in the future frame of the time continuum. Interestingly, only a minimal amount of legislation was enacted in relation to the numerous policies proposed following Columbine (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009; Soraghan, 2000), and none of the gun control measures introduced were passed (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2013). Given the recentness of the Sandy Hook shooting, such a response has yet to be seen, despite a significant amount of discussion among politicians.

The most noticeable departure from the media precedent set forth by Columbine relates to the frame changing across space. Specifically, the analysis of the coverage of the Sandy Hook shooting reveals greater variation and overlap between the spatial frames. This continual shifting between the main levels coincides with events going on at each of the levels (individual, community, regional, and societal), such as the victims’ burials, the return of the survivors to school, and the passage of the New York state gun laws. The continual frame changing between space levels, however, also lends added understanding to the overwhelming use of the present temporal frame. Specifically, the frame changing across the various spatial levels corresponded to the events happening in the “now”—those focused on situating the event in the present, and this was evident in the peaks across the different space frames.

The use of the regional frame in coverage of the Sandy Hook shooting also warrants discussion. While this frame was used minimally (2%) in the coverage of Columbine, it appeared far more extensively in the coverage of Sandy Hook (16%). This finding, however, should be interpreted with caution. Columbine occurred well outside of the *New York Times*’ area of regional coverage, whereas such coverage would be more expected given Newtown’s close proximity to New York City. Indeed, an examination of the placement within the paper of those articles framed as regional supports this expectation. The articles in this frame appear in the metropolitan (New York region) section of the paper at a rate of nearly two to one with both front page and national coverage. While the articles in the metro section focus on discussions of changing legislation in Connecticut and New York, this is also where the majority of coverage of the victims was located. The articles that appeared in the national coverage section almost exclusively focus on the gun control debate. The articles appearing on the front page of the paper share a similar distribution of stories about gun control and stories about the victims. Nonetheless, all three sections—front page, national, and metropolitan—are located within the first section (A) of the paper.

## Conclusion

In sum, the findings illustrate that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting is a major milestone and discursive marker along a longer discourse of school violence

and mass murder. While Columbine set a precedent for how such stories should be covered, this examination suggests that such a model is worth revisiting, particularly as society and the media information practices change. While certain facets (time) of the frame-changing process have remained constant, other aspects (space) have departed from how the stories were told during Columbine.

In a broader sense, examining the coverage of Sandy Hook provides an important step in examining a recurring narrative process that follows mass shootings. This “disaster narrative” results from the marathon of news coverage of these events, the implications of which extend far beyond ratings. In essence, how these events are covered impacts how mass violence is defined and conceptualized in American society. As a result, events such as Columbine and Sandy Hook transcend single tragedies to sociological events with long-lasting social effects. It is then the job of researchers to *appropriately* situate such events within our culture of violence.

In addition, the recurring “disaster narrative” is particularly emblematic of Downs’ (1972) post-problem stage. Rarely, if ever, does society get important answers to questions about these events, such as why the shootings occur. Instead, the response is to rush what can be considered “feel good” or even “feel better” legislation to the floor, little of which passes (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2013). After a brief period of time, media coverage of the shooting is replaced with reporting of a new event. When the next shooting occurs, the media treat it as brand new and activate the “disaster narrative” back at the beginning of the issue-attention cycle (Downs, 1972). It is possible, however, that the framings of these events, while leading the audience to believe they are new, really just are the unresolved issues from the prior events reemerging, only to be left again with little resolution. The absence of such resolution is problematic not only for audience effects (Cohen, 1963), but also for the creation of effective and implementable policy.

The present study examined the coverage of Sandy Hook and its immediate effects in relation to this disaster narrative. However, the story has not had enough time to develop to allow assessment of the medium- and long-term effects of the shooting. Future research should revisit the idea of framing this event, particularly, as it relates to the gun control debate. Sandy Hook may potentially change how school shootings are covered, but that is an empirical question in need of further evidence and analysis. Future study should also examine the shift from offender-centered reporting to the newly emerging focus on primarily reporting about the victims. Such an examination can also provide greater insights into other outcomes, such as fear of crime or moral panics about school shootings (see, for example, Schildkraut, Elsass, & Stafford, 2013), which often are impacted by the media’s representations of such events. The continued examination of how stories are constructed in the media and their effects on news consumers, particularly related to public opinion (Cohen, 1963), must also remain on the research agendas of social scientists and media scholars.

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## Notes

1. For a detailed review of media coverage of the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, see Schildkraut (2012).
2. The results presented illustrate the four most prevalent dimensions of the spatial level. The international level was omitted as it represents less than 5% of the total number of articles. Given the small number of articles framed at this level, meaningful comparisons with the other four levels cannot be drawn.

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## Author Biographies

**Jaelyn Schildkraut** is a doctoral candidate in the School of Criminal Justice at Texas State University. Her research interests include school shootings, homicide trends, mediatization effects, and crime theories. She has published in *Homicide Studies*, *Fast Capitalism*, *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, and *Criminal Justice Studies*.

**Glenn W. Muschert** is Associate Professor in the Sociology, Criminology, and Social Justice Studies Programs at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. His scholarly interests lie in the sociological study of crime and social problems, including the mass media discourse of school shootings, moral panics, and surveillance technologies. His research has appeared in a variety of journals and volumes in the fields of sociology, criminology, and media studies.