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Media Framing of a Tragedy: A Content Analysis of Print Media Coverage of the Virginia Tech Tragedy

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On April 16, 2007, a gunman attacked the Virginia Tech (VT) campus killing 32 people, wounding 17 others, and tearing at the social fabric of the community. The deadliest school shooting in American history quickly attracted the media. As journalists from every major domestic and foreign media outlet reported on the events of April 16 and its aftermath, the world saw images of and read stories about fragile individuals, a shocked and grief-stricken student body, and a community united in its grief. Yet the media did more than simply tell the story of the tragedy: it gave opinions on its cause, pondered its consequences, offered advice for recovering from the event, and speculated on how to prevent such events in the future. But, was the story told the same way across the various outlets or did the media source influence the coverage?

Keywords: media framing, media coverage of tragedies, tragedies and social solidarity

Researchers are aware that the media frames our understanding of critical incidents, and these frames produce powerful forces at the individual and societal level. Indeed, media coverage can negatively affect the mental health of its consumers after tragic events (Ahern et al., 2002, 2004; Pfefferbaum et al., 2001; Pfefferbaum et al., 2002), even among those spatially distant from the event (Pfefferbaum et al., 2000). Conversely, media coverage can save lives through disseminating information in a timely manner and promote solidarity and healing among aggrieved communities (e.g., Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007; Hawdon, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2012; Letukas, Olofsson, & Barnshaw, 2009). Understanding what spatial and temporal factors affect the media's framing of tragic events has important implications for victims of these events, victimized communities, and consumers of media in general. Therefore, we examine how the framing of an event varies by the social location of the media vis-à-vis the victimized community.

The fundamental goal of our research is to investigate how the physical and social distance between a print media organization and the Virginia Tech (VT) community influenced the coverage of the April 16, 2007, tragedy. That is, did the tone and topic of the reporting from media outlets more physically and socially removed from VT differ from those sources located physically and socially close to VT? To answer our question, we conduct a content analysis of all stories related to the shootings published in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Roanoke Times* between April 16, 2007, and June 20, 2007.

Theoretical Background

It is common for visual and print media sources to provide extensive coverage of tragedies like that which occurred at VT. After all, tragedies are dramatic, people want to be informed about them, and news agencies want to make profits. However, such extensive coverage can influence how an event unfolds (Settles & Lindsay, 2011; Tierney, Bevc, & Kuligowski, 2006), perceptions of the event's cause (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004; Scharrer et al., 2003), interpretations of the incident (Nurmi, 2012), and the likelihood of similar events reoccurring (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009; Lawrence & Mueller, 2003). Long-term, extensive coverage can influence public opinion about an issue (Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007; Hawdon, 2001), temporarily raise an issue's political visibility (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006), influence public policy regarding an issue, or accelerate the rate at which existing policy regarding the incident is implemented (Birkland, 1996; Birkland & Lawrence, 2009; Hallam, 2002; Settles & Lindsay, 2011). Coverage of traumatic events can also have widespread repercussions that extend the tragedy's effects beyond those originally affected (Catalano & Hartig, 2001). It is therefore important to understand not only the effects of the media, but also what influences how the media "tells the story."

Recently, the media has come under increased scrutiny regarding their coverage of tragedies (see Brezina & Kaufman, 2008; Thevenot, 2006; Tierney et al., 2006). After a disaster or mass

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tragedy, the media tends to operate in "media hype mode," providing extensive and amplified coverage of the event (e.g., Vasterman, Yzermans, & Dirkzwager, 2005). While the increased coverage is understandable, researchers find that initial reports are often biased, based on rumors, oversimplified, and rely on emotional responses from victims rather than more objective sources (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009; Muschert, 2007; Thevenot, 2006). The nature of the media bias following a tragedy can be consequential because the media can hinder or hasten the recovery process, depending on the nature of the coverage.

For example, the media coverage that often occurs after school shootings provokes fear among parents, students, school staff, and the public by framing school violence as an increasingly common event without a broader context for understanding how rare it is (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009; Lawrence & Mueller, 2003). Similarly, the sensationalized coverage of violent events such as assassinations, heinous murders, or alleged widespread violence after a disaster can lead to exaggerated concerns and fears (see Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007; Brezina & Kaufman, 2008). In addition, coverage of traumatic events can lead to widespread communal bereavement that may have severe health consequences (see Catalano & Hartig, 2001). For example, after the Oklahoma City bombing, Pfefferbaum and her associates (2003) found that posttraumatic symptomatology was related to bomb-related media exposure among Oklahoma City area students. Similarly, several studies (e.g., Ahern et al., 2004; Blanchard et al., 2004) found that viewing TV coverage of the 9/11 terrorist attacks was associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and emotional distress. Thus, media exposure may prolong the grieving process for victims.

Conversely, the media can be a valuable asset during and after tragedies. First, the media often provides information that can mediate the effects of a disaster. Especially during events such as hurricanes or earthquakes, the media's dissemination of information can save thousands of lives. Second, the media can express shared beliefs, collective emotions, and the community's assessment of the consequences of the disaster, thereby helping individuals make sense of and provide meaning to the event (Gortner & Pennebaker, 2003). This expression of collective sentiments and a shared meaning of a tragedy can help victims cope with their grief and sense of loss (see Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007; Gauthier, 2003). Third, when news coverage of a tragedy avoids stereotypical depictions of the event and emphasizes analysis and systemic considerations—that is, when it engages in "thematic framing" (Iyengar, 1991)—the news media can contribute to social cohesion (see, Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007; Hawdon et al., 2012). For example, the portrayal of volunteers as symbols of patriotism in news coverage of 9/11 helped promote solidarity (Argothy, 2005). Similarly, the media's framing of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami elevated solidarity in the United States and Sweden (Letukas et al., 2009). Therefore, the media can help generate the social solidarity that serves as a protective factor for a tragedy's victims.

Given these contradictory findings, we must ask, what determines whether the media coverage of an event produces positive or negative effects or frames? One possible factor is the media's physical and social distance from the event. Generally, the closer the media's targeted audience to the community affected by a tragedy, both geographically and culturally, the greater probability the media will cover the event (McQuail, 2005). Of course catastrophic events are often covered by all major media; however, the nature and duration of the coverage will vary according to such factors as the resources available for deployment, accessibility to the site, the intended audience, the salience of the story for that audience, and competing events (Albarran, 2002). We consider whether the nature of the coverage also varies with the geographic and cultural distance between the tragic event and the reporting media.

There is reason to suspect that distance will influence reporting. For example, in Garner's (1996) analysis of news coverage of the 1993 Midwest floods, he found national and international coverage provided depersonalized accounts and rarely focused on individual stories. Depersonalized accounts typically emphasized the damage associated with the flooding and frequently mentioned the disaster's economic cost and potential national consequences. Conversely, the local media focused primarily on individuals and the community (Garner, 1996). Similarly, the Texas A&M student newspaper's orientation when reporting of the Texas A&M bonfire tragedy was significantly more about the community and socially oriented than was the University of Texas's student paper. In addition, the Texas A&M paper was more likely to include articles that searched for causes and meaning than did the University of Texas newspaper (Gortner & Pennebaker, 2003). Wenger and Friedman (1986) also found that stories of looting and increased crime were more prominent in national media sources than in local sources after Hurricane Alicia hit the Galveston-Houston area in 1983. Thus, local media sources tend to provide more personalized and collectively oriented coverage of tragedies than do national sources. But why would this be the case? A plausible explanation begins with a production of culture perspective.

Newspaper Markets, the News, and Market Niches

The U.S. newspaper industry is relatively concentrated as the top 50 papers account for approximately one third of the nation's total newspaper circulation (Kirchhoff, 2010). While most newspapers are "local" in that they are based in a metropolitan area, a handful of these papers, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Chicago Tribune*, have a national readerships in excess of a half million (Kirchhoff, 2010).[1] In addition, these widely circulated papers are known for their international reporting, general news coverage, or intensive coverage of national issues (Letukas et al., 2009). These "national" papers devote significantly more space to national and international affairs than do "local" papers. In comparison, local papers tend to focus on events that larger papers would likely consider "unnewsworthy." Simply put, these papers serve different markets.

Next, because of the concentrated ownership of newspapers, sharply declining ad revenues, and an increasing number of readers turning to alternative news sources such as the Internet (Kirchhoff, 2010; Noam, 2009), economics have led many U.S. news sources to serve marketing rather than public informational needs (Esser, 2008; Hickey, 1998). Economic pressures have also reduced the size of newsroom personnel for investigative reporting, simplified

[1] For example, among the top 20 U.S. daily newspapers by circulation, only the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* are not directly associated with a metropolitan area (see Kirchhoff, 2010, p. 11; for a list of the top 20 daily newspapers).

and shortened stories for cross-media convergence purposes, decreased international and national news, increased "soft" news, and increased the ratio of advertising to news (Pew Research Center for Excellence in Journalism, 2008). The pressure on media outlets to earn profits in the increasingly competitive market has led them to appeal to consumers by making the news as entertaining as possible (Britto & Dabney, 2010; Harris, 2006).[2] Moreover, marketing needs would also create greater pressure on reporters and editors to anticipate the needs and tastes of their targeted market. Once these consumer tastes are reified as a market, those in the field perpetuate the creation of cultural goods similar to those deemed most popular (Peterson & Anand, 2004). Therefore, the reporting styles and editorial decisions across newspapers within the same market niche tend to converge; however, journalistic styles across niches would likely diverge because the perceived needs and tastes of the papers' targeted markets probably differ. For example, national newspapers are obliged to carry more national and international news, while local papers are obliged to carry more local stories. We therefore predict how an event is reported by "national" papers would differ substantially from how the same event is reported by "local" papers.

But how would the needs and tastes of the audiences, and therefore the journalistic styles, differ? We can deduce hypotheses by using a social stage model of coping with disasters (see Pennebaker & Harber, 1993). According to this model, the first 2 to 3 weeks after a disaster (the emergency phase) is characterized by individuals openly sharing their thoughts and feelings about the tragedy. During this stage, people are processing the events and trying to make sense of the tragedy (Pennebaker & Harber, 1993). The second stage (the inhibition phase) is marked by a sudden decrease in people talking about the event despite their continuing to think about it. In the final stage (the adaptation phase), both thoughts and talking about the disaster decrease substantially (Pennebaker & Harber, 1993). Because the media both creates and reflects a community's collective framing of a traumatic event, it is likely that coverage of a tragedy will follow the social stage model of coping. As Gortner and Pennebaker (2003, p. 583) state, "the newspaper can be a mirror of how such traumatic experiences are "worked through" and resolved on a collective and cultural level." Indeed, this appears to be the case (Gortner & Pennebaker, 2003; Hawdon et al., 2012; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Pennebaker & Harber, 1993; Stone & Pennebaker, 2002).

In general, during the emergency phase, we expect a substantial number of articles to be written about the tragedy. This heightened coverage would likely occur in both national and local papers; however, following McQuail (2005), we predict the paper's geographic distance from the tragedy will be inversely related to the number of articles about the tragedy. Moreover, the articles published during the emergency phase would likely reflect attempts to "work through" the tragedy collectively. However, the news has become increasingly parochial because of the pressure to produce profits (Esser, 2008; Hickey, 1998). Because those in the afflicted community would likely make sense of the tragedy differently than those in less affected communities, it follows that national and local media would report the tragedy differently, each serving their own parochial market needs.

Stories in papers most proximate to the tragedy would likely serve their markets' needs by reporting the tragedy in a manner that evokes images of collective grief. In addition, because it was "their community" that was afflicted, local media would likely report the tragedy in a manner that reaffirms the community, enhances its sense of pride, and highlights its resolve and togetherness. The local paper would, in essence, serve similar functions as the public memorials that communities often hold after tragedies by printing stories that allow the reader to experience the emotions of grief, loss, and suffering while simultaneously experiencing the collective's strength to confront and overcome the loss (see Hawdon & Ryan, 2011; Turkel, 2002). Thus, during the "emergency phase," the local paper will likely avoid stories that address the complex issues underlying the tragedy such as the treatment of the mentally ill, handgun legislation, and campus safety; instead, stories in the local paper will disproportionately focus on the victims, thereby making the tragedy more personalized. In addition, for solidarity to emerge, the tragedy is framed as having victimized the entire community, not just those directly involved (Ryan & Hawdon, 2008). Thus, local papers, in their attempt to assist in meaning making for their customers, will likely publish articles that depict the community as collectively suffering grief.

By contrast, the needs and tastes of the "national" papers' market would be less focused on the victims and traumatized community. Although both national and local papers will use simplification and personalization to produce solidarity with the afflicted community (see Letukas et al., 2009), the national papers' targeted audiences' attempts to understand the tragedy would require less solidarity-producing efforts than would the local papers' audiences.[3] For national papers, parochialism would be less about how the local community is confronting the tragedy; instead, parochialism would be about how *their community could avoid such a tragedy from occurring there*. Thus, we anticipate that the "national" papers would likely assist meaning-finding by investigating and discussing issues of causation that could generally be applied to any community. Thus, relative to local papers, national papers would contain fewer stories about the victims and local community and more stories about the mentally ill, handgun legislation, campus safety, or other broad issues.

Next, following the social stage model of coping, we predict that during the "inhibition phase," the relative percentage of tragedy-related articles will decrease, as is expected with the coverage of any event. However, this decrease in coverage would be more pronounced in the national papers than in the local papers. In addition, we predict that local coverage would begin to focus increasingly on categories of causation and meaning-finding similar to the national coverage during the emergency phase. In other words, the national papers will move through each stage more quickly than would the local papers.

Finally, local papers will likely avoid stories about conflicts that emerge after the tragedy, while national papers will be more likely to cover stories of conflict. First, as argued previously, local papers will likely focus on solidarity-producing events rather than

[2] While the "tabloidization" or rise of "infotainment" may be more pronounced in television and radio news, it has also occurred in print news (Harris, 2006).

[3] Simplification is the use of simply structured stories that are decontextualized and lacking in substance or complexity. Personalization is the use of human interest narratives to promote similarity between the audience and the media construction (see Letukas et al., 2009).

conflict-producing issues as a means of helping make sense of the tragedy for the local readership. Second, as Vang (2007) notes, local papers covering local news maintain their advantage over competitors covering local issues by having reporters proximate to the likely source of newsworthy events. In this way, local papers can establish a relationship with the local bureaucrats, politicians, and interest groups upon whom they rely for controversial information. Since VT is a major research university, employer, and center for athletic and cultural activities in the area, it is frequently the topic of local news stories. Local reporters could therefore jeopardize their privileged position with respect to VT officials if they reported on corrosive issues. Conversely, national papers would be less worried about jeopardizing relationships with VT and likely define corrosive issues as exciting news.

Consequently, we will test the following eight hypotheses: (1) local papers will print more tragedy-related stories than will national papers. (2) The media coverage of the tragedy will decline more quickly in national papers than it will in local papers. (3) During the emergency phase, a greater percentage of stories in local papers compared with national papers will depict the afflicted community as experiencing collective trauma and grief. (4) During the emergency phase, a greater percentage of stories in local papers compared with national papers will focus on the victims of a tragedy. (5) During the emergency phase, a greater percentage of stories in national papers compared with local papers will focus on underlying causes of the tragedy. (6) During the inhibition phase, local papers will primarily focus their coverage on the tragedy's underlying causes. (7) A greater percentage of stories in local papers compared with national papers will be focused on community solidarity. (8) National papers will be more likely than local papers to report stories that focus on conflicts or corrosive issues that emerge after the tragedy. To test these hypotheses, we investigate the media's coverage of the VT tragedy. Following Chyi and McCombs (2004), we analyze how the tragedy was framed by various print news sources in terms of the people and communities it affected.

Method

The content of all stories related to the VT shootings published in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Roanoke Times* between April 16, 2007, and June 20, 2007, were analyzed. In total, 854 articles were coded. Each story is coded for its (1) focus (e.g., stories about the assailant, the victims, or "broader issues" such as gun control), (2) the reporting of indicators of community solidarity, (3) the reporting of corrosive issues and conflicts arising from the tragedy, and (4) whether the VT community is depicted as suffering from collective trauma.

Semantic validity, the degree to which the content analysis was sensitive to semantic distinctions in the articles, was decided based on the stability of the results. To establish this, all 854 articles were coded by one coder in the spring of 2008. Then, the same coder coded approximately 20% (171) of the articles again several months later, and 96.5% of the articles were coded consistently across $time_1$ and $time_2$ in terms of the articles' topical focus. To establish intercoded reliability and reproducibility, a second researcher coded approximately 20% (171) of the 854 articles. Reproducibility was established for the variables of focus and community solidarity. Percent agreement scores across the two coders were 92.9% (article's focus) and 93.5% (community solidarity). To protect against the claim that percent agreement inflates intercoder reliabilities, we also calculated the more conservative Cohen kappa's. These scores were .897 for the article's focus and .858 for community solidarity. These scores are well above the established threshold and indicate the coding was reliable and reproducible (see Gottschalk, 1995).

We analyze the four themes by social location of the reporting media. We hypothesize that the coverage in the papers that are geographically closest and socially most connected to VT will differ from the coverage in the papers that are geographically and socially distant from VT. Specifically, the "proximate" news sources will publish more articles about the tragedy, have a more victim-oriented focus, and depict the community as suffering collective trauma more than "distant" sources do. Distant sources, however, will be more likely than local sources to publish stories about conflicts that emerge in the community following the tragedy. We also investigate whether themes change over time in a manner consistent with the social stage model of coping. Phase 1, the emergency phase, is the first 3 weeks after the event (April 16, 2007, through May 7, 2007). Phase 2, the inhibition phase, is the following three weeks (May 8, 2007, through May 29, 2007), and Phase 3, the adaptation phase, is from May 30, 2007, through June 20, 2007. These phases approximate the stages of the social coping model (see Pennebaker & Harber, 1993).

Operationalizations of Media Coverage: Article Focus

The articles' focus refers to the central theme of the article. Articles were coded as focusing on (a) news of the tragedy, (b) the tragedy's victims, (c) the tragedy's perpetrator, or (d) underlying causes of the tragedy. An article was coded as focusing on "news of the tragedy" if it solely reported facts about the case, such as the number of victims or the location of the shootings, and did not discuss details of the victims or their lives, the shooter or his background, or issues surrounding the case such as Cho's mental health history, gun-control laws, or campus security and the response to the first murders by VT officials or the police. The article's focus was coded as "victim focused" if the central theme reported about the victims and their personal lives. An article published in the *Los Angeles Times* (Cooper & Reitman, 2007) exemplifies stories devoted to the tragedy's victims.

> If you were lucky enough to have a choice, there were only two ways to go Monday morning on the campus of VT: away from danger or toward it. Seventy-six-year-old engineering professor Liviu Librescu chose the second option, saved a classroom full of students, and became a hero—at the cost of his life.

The article was coded as "perpetrator focused" if it provided details about the gunman and his background. A *Roanoke Times* article (Alvis-Banks & Mallory, 2007) provides an example of a perpetrator-focused article.

> Usually, he'd go to bed early, around 9 p.m., save for the nights he watched wrestling. Sometimes late at night, he'd ride his bike around campus, always alone. He'd usually wake up about 5:30 . . . That was the way it was with Cho, a man who liked to call himself "Question Mark."

Finally, a story was coded as focusing on "underlying causes" if it centered on issues relating to potential causes of the tragedy. These issues included gun control, campus security and the response by officials, and issues related to the mental health profession's handling of the shooter. A *Roanoke Times* (Hammack, 2007) article represents an "underlying cause focus."

> Virginia Attorney General Bob McDonnell called Monday for changes in state law to close the gap that allowed Seung-Hui Cho to buy the guns he used in a shooting rampage on the VT campus. The law allowed Cho to purchase two handguns despite his mental problems because he was not involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital, McDonnell said.

Operationalizations of Media Coverage: Perceptions of Community as Grieving and Shattered

Next, articles were coded for the perceptions of the community as grieving and shattered. An example of an article that depicts a grieving and shattered community was published in *Washington Post* (Dwyer & Markon, 2007).

> At noon on a sidewalk in front of Norris Hall in Blacksburg, where the gunman from Fairfax County shot 30 of the victims Monday, a somber group of VT students stood silently as bells across the campus tolled 32 times and a bouquet of 32 orange and maroon balloons was set free, disappearing into the clouds. "They are winding their way to heaven, and I know they got there today," senior Katie Wilson said, sobbing as she released the balloons, on which the victims' names were printed.

The variable is coded as a dichotomy either depicting the community as being damaged or not.[4]

Operationalizations of Media Coverage: Community Solidarity

We also investigate whether the media discussed issues of community solidarity. Community solidarity, the mutual support and a sense of togetherness among the members of the community, is exemplified in a story (King, 2007) that quoted VT's football coach Frank Beamer:

> I think when we open against East Carolina that there will be a togetherness in [Lane] Stadium that we've never seen before, "Beamer predicted." And it's been a pretty together place . . . but I'll just bet . . . if I know Hokie people, we'll be tighter than ever next fall. We'll become closer together, we'll care more for each other, and we'll show more respect for each other.

Articles were coded as either reporting signs of community solidarity or not.

Operationalizations of Media Coverage: Corrosive Community

In contrast to stories that depict the community as solidified, other stories depict the community as divided and in conflict. One such conflict centered on if the gunman was a "victim," and if there were 32 or 33 victims that day. A *Roanoke Times* article (Thornton, 2007) reported this conflict:

> When (a student) heard someone had taken that stone from the semicircle that has drawn thousands of mourners to the Drillfield, she fired off an e-mail to *The Collegiate Times*, VT's student newspaper. Cho was a Hokie, too, (she) declared, a troubled member of the Hokie Nation, but a member nonetheless . . . . (She) also declared her intention to replace the stone. And if someone took that one, she'd replace it, too.

Again, the articles were coded as a dichotomy that either reported about community conflicts or not.

Operationalization: Proximate and Distant Media Sources

Finally, in most of the analyses below, newspapers are coded as either proximate (or local) or distant (or national). The *Roanoke Times* and *Washington Post* are proximate papers. The *Roanoke Times* is the local paper that is most widely read in the area surrounding VT and frequently covers university events. The *Washington Post* is considered proximate to VT for several reasons. First, Washington, DC, is approximately 270 miles from the VT campus. By comparison, New York (the next closest city) is approximately 490 miles from campus. Second, the *Washington Post* is widely available and read in the VT area. Third, a large proportion of VT students are from Northern Virginia, which is either part the *Washington Post's* central "metro market" or its broader Designated Market Area (see Washington Post Media, 2011). Finally, five of the victims and the shooter were from the greater Washington D.C. metropolitan area. The remaining newspapers that were analyzed (the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*) are coded as "distant papers."

Results

We conduct a series of cross-tabular analyses to test our hypotheses. First, the number of articles covering the VT tragedy that each paper published is presented in Table 1.

As seen in Table 1, the *Roanoke Times* published 257 articles about the tragedy between April 16, 2007, and June 16, 2007. The *Washington Post* published the second most VT-related articles (217). Combined, these "local" papers published 474 (55.5%) of the 854 tragedy-related articles published by the six papers; therefore, we find support for the first hypothesis that proximate papers will print more stories about a tragedy than do distant papers. Moreover, while the proximate papers published 51.5% of the articles that were published during the emergency phase, these papers accounted for 78.4% of the published articles during the inhibition phase and 64.7% of the published articles during the adaptation phase. It is clear from Table 1 that the more distant papers devoted relatively little attention to the tragedy in the inhibition and adaptation phases; however, the tragedy remained "newsworthy" for the proximate papers during these phases. While the four distant papers published 48 tragedy-related articles in the

[4] It should be noted that an article's depiction of the community as victimized and grieving is not a mutually exclusive category with respect to the article's focus. That is, articles could have any of the four foci defined above (victim, issue, shooter, or news) and still depict the community as victimized and grieving. The same is true for the following analyses of articles mentioning signs of social solidarity and mentioning conflicts touched off by the tragedy.

inhibition and adaptation phases, the two proximate papers published 69 tragedy-related articles in the inhibition phase and an additional 53 tragedy-related articles in the adaptation phase. Thus, the second hypothesis also receives support.

Next, we analyze the articles' focus by the papers' location in each phase of coping. As seen in Table 2, during the emergency phase, while most stories in proximate papers were "news focused," these papers also focused on the victims more than distant papers did (25.4% and 8.8%, respectively). This is a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(1) = 34.2$; $p < .001$, and supports the third hypothesis.[5] By comparison, distant papers were most likely to focus their stories on broader issues about the possible underlying causes of the tragedy. One half of all tragedy-related stories published by the distant papers focused on issues such as the treatment of the mentally ill, gun-control laws, or the university's response to the tragedy. Only 19.7% of the stories published in the proximate papers discussed these broad issues. Again, the articles' focus significantly differs by paper location, $\chi^2(1) = 68.4$; $p < .001$. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis is also supported.

We also see support for the sixth hypothesis in Table 2. During the inhibition phase (3 to 6 weeks after the tragedy), proximate papers primarily focus their coverage on the tragedy's underlying causes as they significantly increase their publication of issue-focused stories. While the percentage of stories published by proximate papers that have a victim-focus decreases from 25.4% in the emergency phase to 5.8% in the inhibition phase, issue-focused stories increase from 19.7% in the emergency phase to 44.9% during the inhibition phase. The relative percentage of issue-focused stories increases even more in the adaptation phase when 69.8% of articles published by proximate papers discuss mental health issues, gun control issues, or campus security issues. In distant papers, the percent of articles with an issue-focus stays relatively stable across the three phases of coping (50.0%, 50.0%, and 57.1%, respectively). Overall, we see in Table 2 that proximate papers have a news and victim focus during the emergency phase and an issues-focus during the inhibition and adaptation phase. Conversely, the distant papers maintain an issue-focus during all three phases of recovery.

Table 1
Number of Articles by Newspapers by Phase of Social Coping Model

Newspaper	Phase of Social Coping Model: Emergency phase	Inhibition phase	Adaptation phase	Total
Roanoke Times	209	30	18	257
	30.6%	34.1%	22.0%	30.1%
Washington Post	143	39	35	217
	20.9%	44.3%	42.7%	25.4%
New York Times	92	8	9	109
	13.5%	9.1%	11.0%	12.8%
Chicago Tribune	124	9	10	143
	18.1%	10.2%	12.2%	16.7%
Los Angeles Times	70	2	6	78
	10.2%	2.3%	7.3%	9.1%
Wall Street Journal	46	0	4	50
	6.7%	.0%	4.9%	5.9%
Total	684	88	82	854
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note. $\chi^2(10) = 47.12$; $p < .001$.

Table 2
Article Focus by Proximity of Paper by Phase of Social Coping Model

	Proximity of paper: Proximate	Distant	Total
Emergency phase			
Victims	89	28	117
	25.4%	8.8%	17.5%
Shooter	34	30	64
	9.7%	9.4%	9.6%
Issues	69	159	228
	19.7%	50.0%	34.1%
News	159	101	260
	45.3%	31.8%	38.9%
Total	351	318	669
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Inhibition phase			
Victims	4	1	5
	5.8%	6.3%	5.9%
Shooter	2	1	3
	2.9%	6.3%	3.5%
Issues	31	8	39
	44.9%	50.0%	45.9%
News	32	6	38
	46.4%	37.5%	44.7%
Total	69	16	85
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Adaptation phase			
Victims	6	1	7
	11.3%	3.6%	8.6%
Shooter	1	1	2
	1.9%	3.6%	2.5%
Issues	37	16	53
	69.8%	57.1%	65.4%
News	9	10	19
	17.0%	35.7%	23.5%
Total	53	28	81
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note. Phase 1: $\chi^2(3) = 79.08$; $p < .001$. Phase 2: $\chi^2(3) = 0.72$; $p = .869$. Phase 3: $\chi^2(3) = 4.67$; $p = .197$.

We next investigate whether proximate papers are more likely to depict the community as victimized and grieving more often than distant papers do. Support for hypothesis 5 is found in Table 3. During the emergency phase, 38.4% of the articles published in proximate papers depict the Blacksburg community as victimized and grieving; only 20.8% of the stories in distant papers depict the community in this manner. This 17.6% difference is statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 25.2$; $p < .001$. The difference between proximate and distant papers in the depiction of the community as victimized and grieving largely disappears in the inhibition and adaption phases ($p = .869$ and .200, respectively).

The next analysis addresses the papers' reporting of social solidarity. As reported in Table 4, proximate papers are significantly more likely to publish stories that include evidence of

[5] The subtables of the analyses (i.e. comparing proximate and distant papers' coverage of the tragedy's victims within each phase) are not reported because of space consideration. All tables are available from the authors.

Table 3
Community Depiction by Proximity of Paper by Phase of Social Coping Model

	Proximity of paper		
	Proximate	Distant	Total
Emergency phase			
Community not depicted as grieving	217	263	480
	61.6%	79.2%	70.2%
Community depicted as grieving	135	69	204
	38.4%	20.8%	29.8%
Total	352	332	684
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Inhibition phase			
Community not depicted as grieving	57	16	73
	82.6%	84.2%	83.0%
Community depicted as grieving	12	3	15
	17.4%	15.8%	17.0%
Total	69	19	88
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Adaptation phase			
Community not depicted as grieving	44	27	71
	83.0%	93.1%	86.6%
Community depicted as grieving	9	2	11
	17.0%	6.9%	13.4%
Total	53	29	82
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note. Phase 1: $\chi^2(1) = 25.20$; $p < .001$. Phase 2: $\chi^2(1) = 0.27$; $p = .869$. Phase 3: $\chi^2(1) = 1.64$; $p = .200$.

community solidarity than are distant papers during the emergency phase of coping (48.0% vs. 22.3%, respectively); $\chi^2(1) = 49.4$; $p < .001$. This difference is no longer statistically significant in either the inhibition phase ($p = .176$) or the adaptation phase ($p = .914$). Moreover, the reporting of solidarity decreases across the three phases (from 35.5% to 34.1%, to 7.3%, respectively), regardless of the papers' location. The seventh hypothesis is therefore supported.

Finally, we predict that distant papers would be more likely to publish stories about conflicts that emerge in the community after the tragedy. As seen in Table 5, during the emergency phase, distant papers were slightly more likely to publish stories of conflict than were proximate papers. While 9.0% of the stories in distant papers reported conflict, only 5.7% of proximate papers' stories did so. While this relationship is in the predicted direction, the difference is statistically significant only if liberal levels of significance are used, $\chi^2(1) = 2.8$; $p = .092$. The difference between proximate and distant papers in reporting stories of conflict does not approach significance in either the inhibition or adaption. Thus, our last hypothesis receives only modest support.

Discussion

Overall, the evidence supports our predictions. A media source's location influences how it frames a tragedy. Newspapers geographically close and socially connected to the tragedy not only publish more tragedy-related articles than distant papers do, they are also more likely to publish articles that focus on the victims, depict the community as victimized and grieving, and report evidence of community solidarity. Distant papers, by comparison, are more likely to publish stories that focus on the potential causes of the tragedy. In the case of a mass school shooting, these issues included gun control, issues of campus security, and issues of how the mental health profession failed to identify the shooter as a serious threat. While proximate papers avoid these larger-issue stories to some extent during the initial weeks following a tragedy, they begin to publish these stories approximately 4 weeks after the event.

This research supports a production of culture perspective by demonstrating how the reporting source's social distance from an event influences how the media frames a tragedy. Increasing market competition pressures media outlets to report news that is as entertaining as possible (Britto & Dabney, 2010; Harris, 2006), and force reporters and editors to anticipate the needs, desires, and tastes of their targeted market. Once a story's frame is seen as capturing consumer tastes, these tastes are reified as a market and are perpetuated. We therefore see the focus and content of stories printed in newspapers whose target markets were distant from the afflicted community converge as they report on a relatively narrow set of issues that emerge as possible causes of the tragedy. However, the focus of stories in papers from the afflicted market diverges from those of the distant papers because the perceived needs, desires, and tastes of the local papers' targeted markets differ.

This research also demonstrates how the social stage model of coping (Pennebaker & Harber, 1993) can be used to specify how stories published in media sources that are proximate to a tragedy differ from those published in sources distant from the tragedy. The proximate papers are more likely to adopt a victim-oriented frame and one that defines the local community as collectively victimized. Moreover, they are likely to delay discussions of larger issues that may be underlying causes of the tragedy. They are also

Table 4
Articles Mentions Signs of Community Solidarity by Proximity of Paper by Phase of Social Coping

	Proximity of paper		
	Proximate	Distant	Total
Emergency phase			
Signs of solidarity not mentioned	183	258	441
	52.0%	77.7%	64.5%
Signs of solidarity mentioned	169	74	243
	48.0%	22.3%	35.5%
Total	352	332	684
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Inhibition phase			
Signs of solidarity not mentioned	43	15	58
	62.3%	78.9%	65.9%
Signs of solidarity mentioned	26	4	30
	37.7%	21.1%	34.1%
Total	69	19	88
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Adaptation phase			
Signs of solidarity not mentioned	49	27	76
	92.5%	93.1%	92.7%
Signs of solidarity mentioned	4	2	6
	7.5%	6.9%	7.3%
Total	53	29	82
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note. Phase 1: $\chi^2(1) = 49.35$; $p < .001$. Phase 2: $\chi^2(1) = 1.83$; $p = .176$. Phase 3: $\chi^2(1) = 0.01$; $p = .914$.

Table 5
Signs of Conflict Mentioned by Proximity of Paper by Phase of Social Coping Model

	Proximity of paper		
	Proximate	Distant	Total
Emergency phase			
No mention of conflict	332	302	634
	94.3%	91.0%	92.7%
Conflict mentioned	20	30	50
	5.7%	9.0%	7.3%
Total	352	332	684
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Inhibition phase			
No mention of conflict	67	18	85
	97.1%	94.7%	96.6%
Conflict mentioned	2	1	3
	2.9%	5.3%	3.4%
Total	69	19	88
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Adaptation phase			
No mention of conflict	48	27	75
	90.6%	93.1%	91.5%
Conflict mentioned	5	2	7
	9.4%	6.9%	8.5%
Total	53	29	82
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note. Phase 1: $\chi^2(1) = 2.84$; $p < .092$. Phase 2: $\chi^2(1) = 0.25$; $p = .615$. Phase 3: $\chi^2(1) = 0.16$; $p = .694$.

likely to avoid reporting on conflicts that may have emerged because of the tragedy. By providing a dramatic focus on the individuals affected by the tragedy instead of the institutional and larger social problems that contribute to the event, the media promotes the event's "tragic framing." Since tragic frames ultimately alleviate the social guilt associated with a tragedy, they can bring closure to the larger social issues the event raises (see Ott & Aoki, 2002) and help foster the social solidarity that community members often rely on to help cope with the tragedy.

In contrast to the style and focus of stories published in newspapers serving markets close to the afflicted community, those in distant markets serve a readership's that was likely unaffected by the tragedy, at least directly. Their readers do not need the emotionally supportive, guilt-reducing, highly personalized frames that help generate solidarity within the afflicted community. Instead, their readers' meaning-making needs are likely centered on the underlying causes of the event. Support for this assertion was also found as distant papers published significantly more "issue focused" stories than did the proximate papers. These broader-issue stories help those not directly involved in the tragedy understand the alleged causes of the event. With knowledge of these potential causes, a frame emerges that permits people to believe similar tragedies can be averted from occurring in their communities.

This research also contributes to our understanding of the role various media actors play in framing tragedies. As noted earlier, how the media reports on a tragedy can influence how the tragedy unfolds, the likelihood of a similar tragedy occurring again, who is blamed for the tragedy, perceptions of the tragedy's cause, public opinion about the underlying issues related to the tragedy, policy decisions, and how quickly a community may recover from the tragedy. It is therefore important to understand how different media sources frame tragedies since different frames will lead to different understandings and conclusions. This research should alert scholars and those in the media to pay close attention to who is framing a tragic event.

While we researched the media coverage of only one tragedy, we believe our results are generalizable. First, similar results were found when the media coverage of other tragedies were studied (e.g., Gortner & Pennebaker, 2003; Pennebaker & Harber, 1993; Scharrer et al., 2003; Stone & Pennebaker, 2002). Muschert and Carr (2006), for example, found that when the media report on rampage school shootings, they emphasize individual- and community-level aspects of the story initially and then move to the societal aspects as the story. Second, there is little reason to think that the media coverage of the VT tragedy was unique. Like other tragedies, the event dominated the news for a short while, and, like after other tragedies, the media largely used a "tragic frame" (see Ott & Aoki, 2002) to report the event. Thus, we believe similar results would be found if the media coverage of other tragedies were analyzed.

It is important to note, however, that digital media has begun to change the journalistic terrain (, e.g., see Horrigan, 2005). With the increasing use of social media and digital news consumption, geographic distance from tragic events may become less important to how the story of the event, its victims, and the affected communities, is told. By 2011, 47% of Americans reported getting at least some local news or information on a mobile device (i.e., cell phone or tablet PC), many through mobile news applications (Purcell, Rainie, Rosenstiel, & Mitchell, 2011). Furthermore, 72% of adults with Internet access use social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Brenner & Smith, 2013), and around 70% of Facebook users report getting most of their news links from the site (Mitchell, Ronsenstiel, & Christian, 2012). This increase in digital news consumption is further complicated by a recent trend toward outsourcing local news reporting, driven by budget cuts, layoffs, and declining profits for print media in particular. Critics of this outsourcing trend fear a decline in not only the accurate reporting of local perspectives, but the overall journalistic quality of the coverage of local events (see Tady, 2008). Clearly, the complexities of digital and social media, and their implications for news consumption will increasingly complicate the coverage of tragic events in particular localities, affected by both the reporters and the consumers of the news. However, journalists will still need to consider and to balance the needs of divergent markets while they cover these events. Thus, the present study sheds light on news reporting practices that differ by spatial market segment in the aftermath of tragedy.

Conclusion

Tragedies attract media. After heinous crimes, natural or technological disasters, or other mass tragedies, the media flock to tell the story. As journalists write articles and editors decide what to print, they construct their audiences' understanding of what happened, to whom, and why it happened. Several media critics have warned about the hyper-sensationalistic nature of the coverage of tragedies. Other critics note that the depiction of the tragic events and the alleged causes of the events are often oversimplified. These findings alone should serve as a caution about believing everything one reads about tragic events. Our research adds to

these criticisms and cautionary warnings. It is clear from our research that not all media sources tell the same story in the same way. The location of a media source relative to the tragic event influences how the story is told, what aspects of the story are emphasized, and, ultimately, the influence the media has on the communities they serve.

The present study has important implications for journalists who cover tragic events, as well as the communities that are affected by them, and consumers of media in general. The fact that the location of various media sources influences how they tell the story of tragic events raises the question of if the "truth" about a tragedy can ever be discerned from media accounts. It is likely that the answer to that question is "of course not." However, we should note that the media's framing of the tragedy, regardless of whether it ultimately "gets to the truth," may serve important functions for their readers. Although mass tragedies may affect "all of us" in some way, they undoubtedly affect some more than others. Those closest to the tragedy in both geographic and social space are likely to disproportionately bear the brunt of the tragedy's physical, economic, and emotional harm.

The resources, information, and understandings of the event that is needed by those most affected by the tragedy differ from the resources, information, and understandings needed by the tragedy's more distant victims. As seen in our research, the framing of the tragedy by proximate and distant media sources differ and these differences appear to follow the phases of the social stage model of coping with tragedies and disasters (Pennebaker & Harber, 1993). If the pattern we observed in the media coverage of the VT tragedy is a general pattern, the media assists in meaning making that seems most appropriate for the audiences they serve. That is, since different audiences recover from a tragedy by making sense of the event in different ways, it seems appropriate that different media sources would "make sense" of the tragedy in different ways.

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