Examining News Media References of Mental Illness in the Wake of

Mass Shooting Events Occurring in the United States

by

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of mass shooting events in the United States, it is generally understood that editorially conservative and liberal news media organizations seemingly present conflicting narratives for the occurrences. Liberals often emphasize the need for stricter gun control measures. Conservatives, on the other hand, often blame societal issues, such as mental illness, for mass shootings so as to discourage the public from participating in discussions critical of firearms, even though such arguments run counter to evidence in research literature. Via content analysis, this study examines news media references of mental illness following five recent mass shooting events in the United States (the Pulse nightclub shooting, the Congressional baseball shooting, the Route 91 Harvest Festival shooting, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, and the Waffle House shooting) to determine if there are major differences among CNN's, Fox News's, and MSNBC's news coverage that can be connected to political ideology.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Though the United States of America is home to only 5% of the world's total population, approximately 31% of all mass shootings occur here (Lankford, 2016). According to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (CDC, 2018), between 1999 and 2016, roughly 33,000 people were killed due to gun violence each year, an average of 90.410 gun-related deaths per day. Of those 33,000 fatalities, only 4% can be attributed to persons with a mental illness, suggesting 96% of all deaths due to gun violence in the U.S. would continue to occur, "even if the [slightly] elevated risk of violence in people with mental illness were reduced to the average risk in those without mental illness . . ." (Swanson et al., 2015, p. 368).

In the aftermath of mass shooting events in the United States, anecdotal observations often note that editorially conservative and liberal news media outlets seemingly present differing causal narratives for the incidents. Graham et al. (2009) assert that "in terms of their personalities, liberals and conservatives have long been said to differ in ways that correspond to their conflicting visions" (p. 1030). While liberals emphasize permissive gun regulations as a cause of gun-related violence, conservatives often emphasize other factors, such as mental illness, even though research indicates most persons with mental illnesses will never commit an extreme act of violence (Fazel & Grann, 2006).

Additional research indicates most people who have mental illnesses are no more violent than those without mental illnesses (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Choe et al., 2008). Moreover, there is scarcely any evidence suggesting that mentally ill individuals commit significantly more acts of violence than people without mental health issues (Appelbaum

& Swanson, 2010), including gun violence. Persons with mental health disorders are more likely to be victims of violent crimes, rather than perpetrators of such acts (Desmarais et al., 2014). Despite research findings, conservative media commentators and groups such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) continue to allege mental illness is the catalyst responsible for mass shootings and/or gun violence in the U.S. (Coulter, 2013; "Remarks from the NRA Press Conference," 2012; "Why the NRA Keeps Talking About Mental Illness," 2013).

News media outlets are among the sources most often cited for reporting mental health information to the public (Stuart, 2006). "Although the media are but one source of the messages, it is generally understood that mass media images of mental illness perpetuate mental illness stigma" (Stout et al., 2004, p. 544). Consequently, "this gives [the news media] great scope to dispel inaccurate and stigmatizing stereotypes . . ." (Stuart, 2006, p. 101). Nearly 40 years ago, the 1978 U.S. President's Commission on Mental Health found that many people think about mental illness only in terms of television's stereotypes, rather than trying to understand or empathize with persons who have a mental illness, indicating media representations of mental illness have long been problematic in American popular culture. In 2012, during a heated televised press conference following a mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, NRA chief executive Wayne LaPierre blamed "delusional killers" for gun violence in the U.S. (Metzl et al., 2015, p. 240). His remarks effectively scapegoated people living with mental illness and reinforced the counter-factual stereotype that mental health issues are correlated with extreme acts of violence, unsupported by evidence in the research literature.

But is there evidence to suggest that editorially conservative news media are more likely to refer to mental health issues than editorially liberal news media after a mass shooting event takes place in the United States? The following analysis is designed to examine news media references of mental illness, as they pertain to five recent mass shootings in the U.S., by comparing CNN's, Fox News's, and MSNBC's coverage of the shooting events in a manner that reveals distinctions in the frequency of mental health mentions.

Background

In recent years, mass shooting events have seemingly become routine occurrences in the U.S., a development that has greatly disturbed the public, both domestically and internationally. Several high-profile mass shootings have dominated news coverage in a manner previously unheard of in modern American history. Five such events were selected for the subsequent examination. The following mass shooting events, described hereafter for context and clarity, exemplify some of the most noteworthy cases of violence and domestic terrorism to transpire in modern U.S. history. Each incident is distinctive, occurring between June 2016 and April 2018 in different geographic locations across the United States, under varying sets of circumstances. The median number of victims for the mass shootings examined in this research is 14, and the median for total fatalities per shooting event is 17. Additionally, the average age of the perpetrators involved in the five shootings (all men) is approximately 41, ranging from 19 years old to 66 years old, a difference of 47 years.

Pulse nightclub shooting. As popular gay nightclub Pulse served last-call drinks during the early hours of June 12, 2016, 29-year-old Omar Mateen opened fire on

approximately 300 patrons inside of the establishment. After taking hostages in a bathroom and exchanging gunfire with responding officers from the Orlando, Florida police department for nearly three hours, Mateen was shot and killed ("Orlando Nightclub Shooting," 2016). In total, 49 people were killed during the incident, and 53 others were wounded, making it the second-deadliest mass shooting to occur in U.S. history.

In the days and weeks following the mass shooting, reports surfaced detailing Mateen's alleged mental health and anger issues, as well as his allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, more commonly known as ISIS, a terrorist organization. In coverage overlapping with the upcoming 2016 presidential election, conservative and liberal news media outlets frequently presented conflicting frames to the public, reinforcing then-nominees Donald Trump's and Hillary Clinton's major talking points, emphasizing mental illness and gun control, respectively.

Congressional baseball shooting. On June 14, 2017, five people were shot on a baseball field in Alexandria, Virginia. GOP House Majority Whip Steve Scalise (who was critically injured, but later recovered) and other Republican lawmakers were practicing for an upcoming charity baseball game when 66-year-old James T. Hodgkinson carried out the attack, "firing off at least 70 rounds, most of them from an assault rifle," wounding four others before being shot and killed by police (Shortell, 2017). According to *The New York Times*, "moments before [Hodgkinson] opened fired, [he] asked who was on the baseball field: Democrats or Republicans" (Huetteman, 2017). The incident ultimately produced zero fatalities, apart from the perpetrator.

Virginia officials stated that Hodgkinson was in financial trouble at the time and living out of his vehicle. Reports also allege that he "increasingly [made] vague statements about how he would 'not be around much longer' to family members" and that "people who knew Hodgkinson described him as 'hot-tempered,' but did not believe him to be violent" (Porter, 2017, p. 8). Immense, bipartisan response followed the shooting, with Republicans and Democrats alike condemning the attack.

Route 91 Harvest Festival shooting. Nearly four months later, on October 1, 2017, and approximately 2,400 miles away from the site of the congressional shooting, shots rang out at the Route 91 Harvest Festival in Las Vegas, Nevada, as popular country-music artist Jason Aldean performed for roughly 22,000 festivalgoers. Shortly after breaking out a window of his two-room hotel suite on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Resort, 64-year-old Stephen Paddock, armed with an arsenal of assault rifles and other firearms, opened fire on the crowd that was attending the festival across the street. His attack claimed the lives of 58 people and injured hundreds more.

Following the shooting, media organizations and opinion leaders quickly began searching for an explanation, eliciting nationwide conjecture around the prevalence of mass shootings in the United States. Ultimately, law enforcement agencies were unable to establish a motive for the shooting, and Paddock, who died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head, left no evidence behind to indicate what drove him to commit the offense. Ten months later, on August 3, 2018, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department officially closed its extensive investigation, concluding that ". . . investigators were unable to uncover or discover what Paddock's motive may have been" (Lombardo, 2018, p. 125), though the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) later

attributed the attack to Paddock's desire for infamy (Reints, 2019). To date, this is the single deadliest mass shooting to take place in American history.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. During the afternoon of February 14, 2018, in Parkland, Florida, a fire alarm at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School was triggered by 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz, a former student. Cruz began shooting at students with an assault rifle as they evacuated. "During his rampage, [Cruz] fired into five classrooms across three floors of the building," killing 17 people and wounding 14 others (Pullen et al., 2018). Almost immediately following Cruz's capture, questions regarding his mental well-being began to surface in the media; however, survivors of the mass shooting argued that a lack of gun control legislation was to blame for the incident, not the perpetrator's mental state. The conflicting narratives dominated the news cycle for many weeks.

In the months after the attack, many of the survivors participated in interviews with major news outlets, attended rallies advocating for stricter gun laws in the U.S., and strategically used social media platforms (primarily Twitter) to share their uncensored thoughts and opinions on a variety of political matters, ensuring the public at large remained cognizant of the events that unfolded in Parkland, Florida. Though Cruz claims he has heard a "demonic voice . . . inside his head for years that urges him to commit violent acts," an official motive has yet to be established, and the investigation remains open and active ("Florida Authorities Release Interrogation Video," 2018).

Waffle House shooting. In the early hours of Sunday, April 22, 2018, only two months after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, 29-year-old Travis Reinking, armed with an assault rifle, entered a Waffle House restaurant in Antioch,

Tennessee, and began shooting indiscriminately. Patron James Shaw Jr. tackled Reinking and wrestled the firearm away from him before Reinking fled the scene on foot. During the incident, "six people were shot, including four who died and two others [who] were injured" (Stewart, 2018). On Monday, April 23, 2018, nearly 34 hours after the incident, a still-armed Reinking was apprehended in a nearby wooded area and taken into custody (Blinder, 2018).

After his arrest, multiple reports surfaced detailing Reinking's alleged history of mental illness and erratic behavior that had led to his arrest in 2017, in Illinois, and the confiscation of his weapons. Police allowed his father to take possession of the seized firearms, with the understanding that Reinking would not be allowed granted to them, as his gun license had also been revoked. Law enforcement officials believe Reinking's father returned the guns to his son prior to the shooting. On August 22, 2018, at a criminal court hearing in Nashville, Tennessee, it was revealed that Reinking suffers from schizophrenia and hallucinations and was therefore not fit to stand trial. Since then, according to the *Tennessean* in Nashville, "mental health officials . . . deemed Reinking competent to face his charges in court" (Tamburin, 2018). He later entered a plea of not guilty. The investigation remains open and active.

Justification and Purpose for Analysis

In recent years, the public (both domestic and international) experienced exposure to extensive media coverage dedicated to several mass shootings occurring in the U.S. Following each event, conservative and liberal media outlets seemingly focus on specific aspects of the occurrences that reinforce the preexisting ideologies of their audiences. The five events selected for this analysis influenced the media agenda and, perhaps,

public opinion to varying degrees. However, each event added to the overall discourse surrounding mental illness and mass shootings in unique ways. It should be noted that mental illness may be more or less of a factor in some shooting events relative to others. Therefore, it should be expected that responsible news media organizations will reference mental health more in situations where there is some evidence that the alleged perpetrator experienced mental health issues.

The chosen mass shooting events share few commonalities, featuring differing situations, motives, and numbers of fatalities. These key differences among the incidents make the examination of each event both appropriate and worthwhile, given the purpose of the study, which is to uncover significant ideological distinctions in the frequency of mental health references as they relate to mass shootings occurring in the U.S.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Arguably, media consumers in the United States are more regularly exposed to violent media messages than in years past; partly because of the demand for such content in entertainment media, but also because news coverage of mass shootings becomes seemingly more regular (as well as other violent crimes) as time goes on. Though it should be noted mass shooting events are not necessarily on the rise themselves (Fox & DeLateur, 2013). Along with the perceived increase of media coverage surrounding mass shootings, audiences are also confronted with problematic narratives regarding mental illness, frequently at odds with the consensus of the medical community. As the debate over gun control and mental health persists within communities and among politicians, it is essential to take into consideration historical media portrayals of these controversial issues. As such, the following literature review ascertains several discoveries of previous research regarding media representations of mass shootings and mental illness and their various effects. A general overview of the scholarly work permits a deeper understanding of the phenomena and provides additional context for the present study.

Media Representation of Gun Violence and Mass Shootings

The ubiquitous nature of firearms in American culture is a deeply divisive topic, sparking intense debate throughout the political spectrum. "Guns are deeply embedded in American society. Indeed, many people around the world perceive the gun as one of America's primary cultural icons . . ." (Garbarino et al., 2002, p. 74). Due to the growing controversy surrounding firearms, the media, from local news to Hollywood blockbusters, are routinely criticized for what some consider to be pervasive portrayals of crimes and/or stunts involving guns and other depictions of graphic violence in television

shows, movies, and newscasts. Criticism of media depictions of guns has progressively

gained traction over the years, as previous research proposes that since 1950, "violence in

films has more than doubled . . ." (Bushman et al., 2013, p. 1017). Many parents worry

about the effects repeated exposure to media violence could potentially have on their

children while avid consumers counter that such portrayals of violence are merely

entertaining and pose no real threat. However, Meindl and Ivy (2017) found that media

coverage of mass shootings "[provides] a model to imitate," (p. 370) essentially acting as

a conduit for the promotion and repetition of violent behaviors (i.e., copycat crimes).

Additionally, the viewing of television violence, whether real or fantasy, is significantly

correlated with an increase in aggressiveness (Atkin, 1983).

In terms of crime stories in news media (locally and nationally), homicides and

mass murders tend to garner significantly more coverage than other offenses, thanks in

large part to their perceived newsworthiness, rarity, and sensationalism (Chermak, 1994).

For instance, following the highly publicized mass shooting at Columbine High School in

April 1999, Maguire and colleagues (2002) found that ABC, CBS, and NBC ran 53

stories about the massacre during their nightly news segments, totaling nearly four hours

of coverage within the first seven days following the incident's occurrence. Almost 13

years later, "the Associated Press's year-end poll of news editors placed mass shootings

as the leading news story of 2012" (Fox & DeLateur, 2013, p. 125).

Effects on public opinion and legislation. When a mass shooting occurs,

politicians, as well as news media organizations, are quick to politicize the event,

routinely relying on talking points that complement their respective political affiliations

and ideologies. "Most individuals learn of mass shootings through mass media. As a

result, the media can shape how the general public perceives and reacts to these events" (Wallace, 2015, p. 157). Moreover, unanticipated tragedies, such as mass shootings, are linked to substantial changes in policy in the United States (Jensen, 2011; Lowry, 2006). Thus, the frames political actors and media outlets choose to implement can potentially influence public opinion regarding gun control and firearms, in addition to actual policy change, to varying degrees. For example, Fleming et al. (2016) found that coverage of mass shootings generates more awareness for gun control policy and legislation in the United States. Additional research also indicates that news media portrayals of mass shootings tend to increase public endorsement of gun control policies (McGinty et al., 2013). However, important exceptions are obvious, though. In the aftermath of the mass shooting event at Columbine High School in 1999, many Americans anticipated public support for gun control legislation to increase. Instead, support for new gun control measures stayed about the same, despite sizeable media coverage of the incident, suggesting that opinions regarding gun control remain relatively stable following mass shooting events (Smith, 2002). Further, Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2001) reported that media frames of mass shootings ". . . may contribute to partisan polarization and a subsequent lack of consensus on inflammatory political issues" (p. 537).

Though the occurrence of a mass shooting seems to be correlated with the introduction of new policies regarding gun control measures in American politics, the corresponding media coverage of mass shootings appears to reaffirm the public's preexisting beliefs, rather than changing them altogether. Further complicating the public's perception of gun control and/or firearms is the counter-factual notion that "mass shootings by people with serious mental illness represent the most significant relationship

between gun violence and mental illness" (Knoll & Annas, 2016, p. 81). This inaccurate depiction of mental illness being intrinsically linked to violence and/or aggression, detailed more thoroughly in the following section, is regularly perpetuated via media organizations by exploiting the public's familiarity with mental illness stereotypes.

Media Representation of Mental Illness

Media depictions of mental illness have existed since the development of modern cinematography (Domino, 1983). Such depictions have propagated false characterizations of the mentally ill, creating challenges for people with mental disorders, as well as mental health experts. However, it was not until the 1950s that scholarly analysis of representations of mental illness in the media began (Gerbner, 1959; Taylor 1957). Since then, a steady stream of research has emerged, highlighting the many problematic inaccuracies of portrayals of mental illness. In a media watch study of 385 prime-time television shows, Wahl and Roth (1982) observed that television is a significant information source for mental illness (as well as other topics), an opinion which has endured over the years among scholars (e.g., Caputo & Rouner, 2011; Stuart, 2003). The authors also discovered that the most prominent descriptors used to portray the mentally ill were unfavorable terms, such as *aggressive*, *dangerous*, and *unpredictable* (Wahl & Roth, 1982, p. 603). Similar findings were later reported by Signorielli (1989) and Philo et al. (1994), respectively. Nearly 17 years after Wahl's and Roth's initial media watch study, Wilson and colleagues (1999) found in a purposive sample of 14 prime-time television dramas from the mid-1990s that, once again, depictions of mental illness were immensely negative, with the *dangerous* and/or *aggressive* themes being the most prevalent within the sample. Recognizing that television is one of the principal

contributors to viewers' knowledge of mental illness, it is understandable that much of the public remains generally unaware of the realities of mental illness, as they are routinely exposed to inaccurate and negative characterizations of the mentally ill without being corrected.

Researchers have long lamented the media's depiction of mental illness, often noting the many concerning messages routinely disseminated via popular television shows and daily news broadcasts. As previously mentioned, one of the major causes for concern is the inaccurate way media organizations portray mental health disorders, typically with the implication that those afflicted are a threat to the public at large. In 1957, Nunally discovered that "in general, the causes, symptoms, methods of treatment, prognosis, and social effects [of mental illness] portrayed by the media are far removed from what [mental health] experts advocate" (p. 229), indicating that even over 60 years later, portrayals of mental illness remain troublesome. In his historical review of media representations of mental illness, Wahl (1992) observed that "there is empirical evidence that mass media are informing the public about mental illness through their presentations . . . and that their depictions of mental illness are characteristically inaccurate and unfavorable," (p. 351). Wahl (1992) also found that media depictions of persons with mental disorders provide the public with false and misguided perceptions of such afflictions, strengthening harmful stereotypes. "Whether the attempt is to show a dangerous, violent character, or one who is carefree and happy, *typical media portrayals often use narrow definitions of mental illnesses, at odds with the much broader definitions of contemporary psychiatry . . .*" (Sieff, 2003, p. 262; emphasis added). Further, according to Angermeyer and Schulze's research (2001), media organizations

rarely inform their audiences that the vast majority of people who have a mental disorder are unlikely to commit a severe and/or violent crime. As a result, such haphazard inaccuracies have led the public to unnecessarily fear the mentally ill, effectively casting them as dangerous outsiders who ought to be kept at a safe distance from the rest of society.

Effects on public opinion and psychiatric healthcare. Given the media's propensity for mischaracterizing mental illness as being dangerous and peoples' tendency to glean information about mental health from media outlets, it is necessary to understand the effects of inaccurate portrayals of mental disorders. Overall, the media's misrepresentation of mental health issues encourages stigma, thereby alienating anyone who may have a mental illness (Klin and Lemish, 2008). In their study examining how dangerous and/or aggressive previous mental patients are perceived to be, Link et al. (1987) concluded that "a meaningful segment of the public sees former patients as dangerous and expresses a reluctance to interact with them" (p. 1494). Corrigan et al. (2003) reported similar findings in their analysis of survey data evaluating "relationships among causal attributions for mental illness . . . and the likelihood of helping and rejecting behavior" (p. 167). These attitudes and beliefs are not limited to adults, however; even children stigmatize mental illness. In a study measuring children's beliefs about people with mental illnesses, findings indicated that "the mentally ill were described more negatively overall than were the physically disabled" (Adler and Wahl, 1998, p. 325). The authors' findings suggest attitudes toward mental illness are formed early in one's development and that stigmas are seemingly carried through into adulthood, which can affect one's willingness to seek mental health care.

Media depictions of mental illness, which frequently utilize stereotypical imagery, can drastically interfere with the social lives, wellbeing, and/or recovery of those with mental disorders (Stuart, 2006). In their review of stigma barriers associated with mental illness, Corrigan et al. (2014) found that many people with mental health issues do not receive regular treatment, thanks in large part to perceived stigmas. Thus, ". . . stigma represents a significant public health concern because it is a major barrier to care seeking or ongoing treatment participation" (Corrigan, 2004, p. 619). Again, stigma acting as a barrier to mental health care is not solely limited to adults; Chandra and Minkovitz (2007) observed that ". . . teens' perceptions of positive or negative social consequences are a critical component in their willingness to use mental health services . . ." (p. 772). Thus, if media outlets continually disseminate stereotypical messages about mental illness, negative attitudes toward the mentally ill may progress among both adults and adolescents, which can have adverse effects on the mentally ill, as well as mental health care in the United States.

Though media representation of mental illness leaves much to be desired, research suggests there is some hope for improvement. In a media intervention study over 24 months, Stuart (2003) found that "the immediate effects of the [experiment] were positive, resulting in more and longer positive news stories about mental illness . . ." (p. 651). Although the impact of the media intervention was somewhat limited, the findings indicate that when provided with accurate and reliable information regarding mental illness, media outlets can and will alter their reporting to depict such issues in a more positive light. With a general understanding of the relevant research literature previously outlined and the possibility for media reformation regarding portrayals of mental illness,

the following study is meant to test real-world examples (e.g., news media coverage of mass shootings) for evidence of inaccurate stereotypes via content analysis. "This [sort of analysis] is seldom done and in fact seems to be quite carefully avoided" (Harper, 2005, p. 478). Given the lack of "'real-world' evidence about the correlation between mental illness and violence . . ." (p. 478), the following examination of news media references of mental illness in the aftermath of mass shooting events in the United States attempts to do just that, while simultaneously linking such representation to other prominent media phenomena, described in further detail in the subsequent section.

Theoretical Framework

Following many mass shootings, Americans are inundated with news stories describing the events, as well as the shooters and their mental health. Consequently, "these portrayals of the shooting events [may] raise public support for gun control policies, but [they] also contribute to negative attitudes toward those with serious mental illness" (McGinty et al., 2013, p. 500). This study draws from both social-scientific and critical-cultural theories to discover and better understand the function of news media in regard to the relationship between mass shootings and mental illness. Additionally, the present research is designed to investigate the nature in which three popular American news media organizations, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, characterize mental health issues and potentially propagate the stigmatization of persons living with a mental illness.

It is important to note the interconnected nature of the theories considered for this analysis, as there are some distinct commonalities among them. As such, the application of each theory permits a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities encompassing mass shootings events and mental illness.

Agenda setting and framing. Researchers have long argued that news media organizations possess incredibly powerful influence over "which problems viewers regard as the nation's most serious," ultimately setting the agenda for public discourse (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 4). At its most basic level, first-level agenda setting proposes the idea that news media organizations do not tell the public what to think, rather, they tell the public what to think *about*, thereby setting the media agenda (Cohen, 1963). Second-level agenda setting establishes which attributes of a given topic are most important (McCombs & Guo, 2014). More specifically, regarding the previously mentioned examples, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC set the media agenda by covering mass shootings, thus informing the public of the subject's importance relative to other issues (first-level). Additionally, it is expected that when CNN and MSNBC cover mass shootings, they tend to connect the events to gun control legislation, whereas Fox News is expected to tend to relate them to mental health issues (second-level), based on their presumed editorial political ideologies.

Though many scholars argue that framing resembles agenda setting, this study applies framing theory, as defined by Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009, p. 21), as "render[ing] specific information, images, or ideas *applicable* to an issue . . . the more applicable a construct is to an issue, the more likely it is to be used when thinking about the issue." Thus, a news media frame is essentially a frame of reference people call upon to understand and discuss events with one another, such as mass shootings (Tuchman, 1978). The language media outlets employ to refer to the mentally ill illuminates several frames that are commonly used during coverage of mass shootings. While some verbiage is mostly innocuous and/or generic, other terms used to refer to mental illness are far

more damaging, often perpetuating stereotypes that audiences can easily recall due to media framing. For this analysis, the various news media frames assessed are based on the observed language of news anchors and guests appearing on CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. The public may recall the language used in news media to describe or refer to mental illness and mass shootings, thus informing and influencing public opinion and conversations regarding these topics.

      Stereotypes and stigma. While not wholly positive or negative, stereotypes are often used as shortcuts to identify an entire group of people based on limited information, which can lead to false and problematic perceptions of stereotyped groups, such as the mentally ill. Essentially, stereotypes are oversimplified and, often, offensive ideas or attitudes about a specific group of people, "which may be deeply embedded in prejudiced cultures, and play a significant role in shaping the attitudes of members of the culture to others" (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002, p. 381). Gilman (1985) argued that stereotypes become more powerful "as a result of actions by the corresponding real entities" (p. 20). Further, Lippmann (1922) contended that stereotypes are "highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy" (p. 28). Therefore, stereotypes are cultural constructions people use to understand and justify their place in the world, while assumptively labeling others with the intention of elevating one's position, thereby maintaining the hegemonic norms of the society. For instance, the media's consistent stereotyping of people with mental illnesses as dangerous may grow stronger and come to be understood as the truth by the culture exposed to such messages. In turn, the mentally ill may be looked down upon as outsiders, threats to the status quo.

Closely related to stereotypes, stigmas are best defined as "cues that elicit stereotypes [and] knowledge structures that the general public learns about a marked social group" (Corrigan, 2004, p. 615). Goffman (1963) argued that such cues are culturally recognized as negative attributes, exploited by the public to classify and discriminate against a specific social group. In terms of mental illness (and health communication overall), Smith (2007, p. 233; emphasis added) describes stigma endured by those afflicted as a foreboding obstacle, positing:

> health communication faces an obstacle that appears to explain why people do not seek information or change their behaviors to improve their own health. This obstacle explains why people do not tell each other about their health conditions, and why certain health policies appear on the public agenda. *This concept is known as stigma.*

Indeed, as previously mentioned, it is widely reported by researchers and medical professionals alike that fear of stigma often deters many with mental health issues from seeking help, which can significantly affect their overall quality of life (Corrigan, 2004; Klin & Lemish, 2008). As a result, the majority of adults with some type of mental illness do not regularly receive care from a medical professional (Corrigan et al., 2014). When mass shootings occur, news media organizations and the public seem to dedicate increased attention to the event and issue, often carelessly attempting to link the incidents with mental illness (frequently based on cultural stereotypes), regardless of any evidence to the contrary, thus intensifying the ongoing stigmatization of those living with mental health disorders in the United States (Stuart, 2006).

Focusing events and audience mobilization. As previously noted, in the days and weeks following a mass shooting event, news organizations spend an extraordinary amount of time and resources covering the drama, triggering sudden intensive speculation

on a national (and, at times, global) scale. As such, mass shootings can be considered

focusing events. Birkland (1997, p. 21) defines a focusing event as:

> an event that is sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, inflicts harms or suggests potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable geographical area or community of interest, and that is known to policy makers and the public virtually simultaneously.

The manner in which focusing events are so suddenly thrust into the public's

awareness makes them unlike most news stories that Americans are exposed to daily,

commanding more attention and prolonged scrutiny than competing events which may be

deemed as less significant or newsworthy. Because of their perceived significance and

potentially harmful effects, focusing events, such as mass shootings, take over both the

national media and political agendas, thereby having a greater influence on public

opinion compared to the day-to-day coverage of political and policy issues. Moreover,

". . . extensive news media coverage of mass shootings draws public attention to the

problem in a way that 'everyday' gun violence does not," (McGinty et al., 2014, p. 406).

Mental health advocates fear that the combination of widespread media coverage and

emphasis on mental health may cause further stigmatization of persons living with severe

mental illnesses because these types of messages "are considered to be primary

contributors to all mental illness stigmas . . ." (Klin & Lemish, 2008, p. 440).

When news organizations like CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC cover mass

shootings, they set the agendas for other media outlets, political actors, and the general

public, increasing the probability that the topic will be brought to the attention of larger

portions of the public. Once the agenda is established, the event is framed with related,

additional information. These frames often utilize stereotypes audiences are familiar with,

though the enabled frames and stereotypes may vary across media outlets. Focusing events (i.e., mass shootings) are framed more hastily than other competing stories due in large part to their rarity (Birkland, 1998). Research indicates ". . . high-profile cases of mass shootings, which typically receive the most intense media coverage, are in fact the least representative of mass killings" (Knoll & Annas, 2016, p. 83).

Such widespread coverage of focusing events gives politicians at both local and national levels more leverage to introduce or define issue attributes they believe will have the most impact on citizens' opinions, as well as their respective constituencies and voting bases, political platforms, and desired policy solutions. In the context of mass shootings, conservative politicians often blame societal problems, such as mental health, in order to dissuade the public from engaging in conversations critical of firearms or the Second Amendment. Consequently, "the real-time translation of incidents into visual images by news cameras that 'don't lie' provides overwhelming authentication for cultural stereotypes" (Stuart, 2006, p. 101). On the other hand, liberal politicians and advocates for gun control use the opportunity to argue for stricter gun laws, primarily in the form of enhanced background checks (McGinty et al., 2013). News media outlets, such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, then take those arguments and present them to viewers, thus providing potentially mobilizing information to conservatives and liberals alike to expand on the debate.

Television news programming "inform[s] and mobilize[s]" audiences (Newton, 1999, p. 596), often resulting in extensive scrutiny of perceived social problems and policy failures, which may not have been part of the agenda prior to a focusing event's occurrence. In this way, mobilization can be interpreted as an important media effect

following the occurrence of a focusing event. Because focusing events have been successfully linked to significant policy change, exploitation of such events may shift the balance of power to one ideological and/or political side or the other. Thus, focusing events give political actors the opportunity to mobilize their bases, in an effort to take advantage of the narrative and/or agenda (Fleming et al., 2016; Jensen, 2011). News media and politicians seemingly work in tandem to mobilize the public by tapping into and exploiting preexisting social schemas familiarly connected to the focusing event.

Selective exposure and ideological selectivity. For some time, researchers have noted that the American public has become increasingly fractured and polarized politically (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). It is now commonly understood that people seek out news sources they deem to be the most closely representative of their own beliefs and/or values. In fact, "a substantial proportion of the public . . . consumes media sharing their political predispositions" (Stroud, 2008, p. 358). Also understood is the notion that popular news media organizations in the United States often cater to specific political parties and/or ideologies.

This polarization poses significant potential problems for normative democratic function when mass shootings or other focusing events occur, and further polarize ideologues via exposure to insular media messages. Predictably, news organizations become more resolute regarding their previously established platforms, reinforcing the political ideologies of those tuning in. Indeed, past research indicates that there is a trend among viewers increasingly seeking out media and/or information that largely reinforces their predispositions, dividing public opinion even more (Morris, 2005). It makes sense then that when mass shootings take place, conservatives and liberals are exposed to

conflicting media frames, often fortifying preconceived notions of gun control and/or mental illness.

Summative Rationale

Given the media's tendency to inaccurately link mental illness with aggression and violence, it is important to examine how this process happens as focusing events occur; in this case, mass shootings. Additionally, it is worth establishing whether political ideology plays a role in news organizations' coverage of such events. As previously mentioned, the combination of theories applied to the present study allows for a more substantial, deeper understanding of news media organizations' role in circulating stereotypical, and often false information regarding mental illnesses, as they relate to mass shooting events in the United States.

When a mass shooting (focusing event) transpires in the United States, news media organizations decide how newsworthy the event is relative to other events and topics the organizations might cover (first-level agenda setting). Once the significance of the event is established, editorially conservative and liberal news outlets decide which attributes of the event to emphasize during their coverage of the incident (second-level agenda setting), frequently by subtly inviting audience members to apply preexisting meanings, norms, and values when selecting, connecting, and interpreting these attributes (framing). Often, these frames are based on familiar, counter-factual stereotypes, which perpetuate the stigmatization of a specific group of people (e.g., the mentally ill). Given the public's proclivity to seek out information sources that support what they already believe, it is unlikely opinions or attitudes will be affected by contradictory viewpoints, even if said contradictions serve as corrections (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). In fact, many

people become further entrenched in their personal politics and principles, further solidifying their pre-established beliefs and attitudes. Subsequently, conservative and liberal opinion leaders and politicians then take advantage of the focusing event and the corresponding media coverage to encourage the mobilization of their bases, so as to affect potential policy reformation and/or social change.

Accordingly, the following analysis seeks to examine the theoretical process detailed above, by way of analyzing news transcripts from three major news organizations in the United States (CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC). The present study is designed to uncover, quantify, and interpret significant ideological distinctions in news media coverage involving mass shooting events, as well as any accompanying references to mental health and/or illness. Such references may serve to perpetuate stereotypes of the mentally ill and encourage stigmatizing attitudes and opinions among the public.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Given the relevant literature to the topic at hand and the overall purpose of the analysis, two research questions guided the study, and two sets of hypotheses were assessed. It is important to note that hypotheses 1_A and 1_B consider the *presence* of a mental illness reference within a given news transcript, while hypotheses 2_A and 2_B consider the *frequency* of mental health and/or illness references within a given news transcript.

Research Questions:

RQ$_1$: Is there a significant association between the evident ideological bias in media organizations' content and the frames those organizations typically apply to cover mass shooting events?

RQ₂: Overall, how is mental illness constructed in news media coverage following mass shooting events in the United States?

Presence of Mental Illness Reference(s):

H₁A: Fox News will feature a significantly greater percentage of news transcripts discussing mental illness (in conjunction with mass shooting events) than CNN or MSNBC.

H₁B: MSNBC will feature a significantly smaller percentage of news transcripts discussing mental illness (in conjunction with mass shooting events) than CNN or Fox News.

Frequency of Mental Illness References:

H₂A: Fox News's news transcripts will exhibit a significantly higher average of mental illness references per 30 minutes of televised coverage than will CNN's or MSNBC's news transcripts.

H₂B: MSNBC's news transcripts will exhibit a significantly lower average of mental illness references per 30 minutes of televised coverage than will CNN's or Fox News's news transcripts.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

Methodology

      Quantitative content analysis. Via content analysis, this study examines news media references of mental illness in the wake of five recent mass shooting events, which occurred in the United States between April 2017 and April 2018. Content analysis, as defined by Krippendorff (2004), "entails a systematic reading of a body of texts, images, and symbolic matter. . ." (p. 3). Notably, content analysis is useful in gauging the cultural significance assigned to a specific topic by observing the frequency of its mentions (Krippendorff, 1989). Scientific, manifest content analysis provides a systematic means of examining differences in the discussion of mental health within coverage of mass shooting events that reduces the influence of political biases and social stigmas on observations and findings.

      Qualitative content analysis. The present study also utilizes a qualitative approach to content analysis. The method aids in the ability to decipher latent features of the coded data (e.g., news media references to mental illness) with the primary goal of "understanding the contextual use of the words" within the news transcripts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1283). Specifically, a summative analysis of the content allows for quantitative data, such as word counts, to be examined from a critical-cultural perspective, deriving "deeper meaning implied in the text" (Kondracki et al., 2002, p. 225). By employing a mixed-method approach to the analysis, findings should be broader in scope, as critical interpretation can be applied to the data. Said approach is also useful in identifying stigmatizing stereotypes commonly associated with mental illness.

Sample

   Mass shooting events. As previously discussed, the five mass shootings examined in the study were chosen due to the different respective circumstances surrounding them, as well as the abundance of media coverage they received. Since these events occurred in June 2016 (Pulse Nightclub Shooting), June 2017 (Congressional Baseball Shooting), October 2017 (Route 91 Harvest Festival Shooting), February 2018 (Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting), and April 2018 (Waffle House Shooting), respectively, analyses of the news coverage for each event should not extensively overlap beyond explicit connections made as part of the coverage. This temporal spacing provides reasonably clear distinctions between the coverage of the five mass shootings analyzed. Refer to Table 1 at the end of this chapter for descriptive statistics of the mass shooting events.

   News media organizations. The three news media organizations examined in this analysis are some of the most prolific and culturally significant media outlets on television, attracting the largest audiences among cable news networks, according to data from the Pew Research Center (2018). For an approximation of network viewership, see Appendix A. For this study, CNN is regarded as the *moderate* news organization, Fox News as the *conservative* news organization, and MSNBC as the *liberal* news organization (Groeling, 2008; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005; Smith & Searles, 2014).

   News transcripts. To conduct the content analysis, a stratified random sample consisting of 357 news transcripts ($N = 357$) from CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC was collected, with each news media organization making up 34.17% (CNN = 122), 33.61% (Fox News = 120), and 32.21% (MSNBC = 115) of the transcripts used for the study.

Additionally, each mass shooting event is represented in roughly 15% of all of the news organizations' transcripts examined in the study (Pulse Nightclub Shooting = 19.61%, Congressional Baseball Shooting = 14.01%, Route 91 Harvest Festival Shooting = 16.53%, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting = 21.29%, Waffle House Shooting = 2.52%). This sampling method ensures a balanced examination of each news source and mass shooting event.

The above-mentioned news transcripts were compiled using the Nexis Uni database by searching the keyword *shoot, in order to identify the most relevant transcripts for the analysis. The keyword formatting allowed for easier location of news transcripts containing variations of the word *shoot* (e.g., shooting and shooter). Search results were then filtered by date range (oldest to newest) and news source. The transcripts selected for each of the five events come from broadcasts that aired within the first 14 days of the initial shooting (including the day of the shooting). As such, there should be little to no overlap within the sample. For this study, CNN's, Fox News's, and MSNBC's news transcripts are considered the units of analysis, and references to mental health and/or illness are recognized as the units of observation.

Operationalization

Defining *mass shooting*. It is necessary to call attention to the fact that there is no single accepted definition of a mass shooting; however, research suggests mass shootings are primarily described as having three to four victims (fatal or nonfatal), as well as indiscriminate motivation (see Appendix B for more specific information on various definitions of mass shootings). The shooting events considered for this study fit these loose parameters, as there were at least four casualties involved in each incident and no

confirmed motivation for the shootings. Additionally, the present study mainly concentrates on mass shooting events that generated substantial media coverage.

Defining *political ideology*. Though there is no universally accepted definition of political ideology among scholars, it is necessary to delineate its meaning, as the concept is central to the research questions and hypotheses assessed in the study.

Broadly speaking, ideologies "are particularly elaborate, close-woven, and far-ranging structures or attitudes" (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 192). More specifically, political ideologies, as defined by Denzau and North (2000), are ". . . the shared framework of mental modes that groups of individuals possess that provide both an interpretation of the environment and prescription as to how that environment should be structured" (p. 24). Simply, political ideologies are principles societies apply to their surroundings to explain how the world *should* work both politically and culturally.

Defining *mental illness*. Though this analysis only seeks to quantify references to mental illness in the wake of mass shootings in the United States, it is essential to understand how psychiatric professionals define mental illnesses. According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2018):

> mental illnesses are health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior (or a combination of these). Mental illnesses are associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work, or family activities.

In addition, there are key distinctions between mental illnesses and *serious mental illnesses* that are important to take note of:

> serious mental illness is a mental, behavioral or emotional disorder (excluding developmental and substance use disorders) resulting in serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities.

With the understanding of the above definitions in mind, this study assesses all references to mental illness (as they pertain to mass shootings) within the sampled news transcripts in both denotative and connotative contexts. Allusions within the sampled news transcripts to one's perceived or assumed aggressiveness, dangerousness, and/or unpredictability as being the symptom(s) of mental illness are accepted as observations of negative constructions, as are terms such as *crazy*, *disturbed*, *troubled*, or similar verbiage. For the full list of terms and/or phrases observed and accepted for this analysis, see Appendix C.

Procedure and Analysis

Coding. CNN's, Fox News's, and MSNBC's news transcripts contained manifest and latent features that required extensive coding. Manifest content, such as the news source, show title, and date variables were easily identified and coded, as they did not demand subjective scrutiny. The news source variable, for example, was coded and measured by assessing if the individual news transcripts were from CNN (coded as 1), Fox News (coded as 2) or MSNBC (coded as 3). Latent content, however, was more difficult to code, as it needed to be more carefully examined. For instance, determining what was deemed a legitimate reference to mental health and/or illness was more tedious due to the various terms and phrases often used to describe them. Every reference to mental health and/or illness as it related to a mass shooting event was tallied and entered into the dataset; however, if a similar reference was made without relation to a mass shooting event it was not counted, as a non-shooting event was coded as *Missing* and not included in the overall sample and subsequent analysis.

If a shooting event was observed in a news transcript (0 = *Pulse Nightclub Shooting*, 1 = *Congressional Baseball Shooting*, 2 = *Route 91 Harvest Festival Shooting*, 3 = *Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting*, 4 = *Waffle House Shooting*, 5 = *Other*) but did not include a reference to mental health and/or illness, a zero was entered and included in the overall analysis. The variable measuring the presence of a mental illness reference was coded as *No* (0) if a reference to mental health and/or illness was not identified. The same variable was coded as *Yes* (1) if any explicit reference of mental health and/or illness was identified within a given transcript.

Independent and dependent variables. This study considers the news organization (e.g., CNN, Fox News, or MSNBC) to be the independent variable and reference to mental illness to be the dependent variable. Basically, the frequency in which news transcripts feature references to mental illness, in association with mass shootings, is reliant upon which popular cable news network is discussing the shooting event.

Further, each set of hypotheses considers two variables; however, they require different analytical techniques, as hypotheses 1_A and 1_B deal with two dichotomous variables: the independent variable, news source (e.g., CNN, Fox News, or MSNBC), and the dependent variable, the presence of at least one reference to mental health and/or illness, requiring a logistic regression analysis; and hypotheses 2_A and 2_B deal with one nominal independent variable, news source, and one dependent quantitative variable, the total references of mental health and/or illness per news transcript, requiring an OLS (ordinary least squares) regression analysis. All analyses were conducted using IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for News Transcripts Referencing Mental Illness by Mass Shooting Event and News Source

	In Sample	Mention Presence	Mention Frequency
Pulse Nightclub Shooting	19.61%	23.81%	$M = 1.193$ $SD = 1.800$
Congressional Baseball Shooting	14.01%	9.52%	$M = 0.410$ $SD = 0.983$
Route 91 Harvest Festival Shooting	16.53%	21.77%	$M = 1.153$ $SD = 1.782$
Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting	21.29%	40.82%	$M = 3.165$ $SD = 4.211$
Waffle House Shooting	2.52%	3.40%	$M = 1.333$ $SD = 1.887$
Other Shooting	0.56%	0.68%	$M = 0.500$ $SD = 0.707$
CNN	34.17%	32.65%	$M = 1.557$ $SD = 3.497$
Fox News	33.61%	39.46%	$M = 1.188$ $SD = 1.718$
MSNBC	32.21%	27.89%	$M = 0.809$ $SD = 1.889$

Note: *In Sample* refers to the percentage of transcripts in the sample. *Mention Presence* refers to the percentage of transcripts referencing mental illness in the sample. *Mention Frequency* refers to the mean and standard deviation of news transcripts' frequency of references to mental illness per 30 minutes of televised coverage.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The following section details the findings of the previously described content analysis. It should be noted that results for both sets of hypotheses (measuring the presence and frequency of mental illness references) precede those of the research questions, as said results were used to interpret and answer the broader research questions.

Hypotheses

Presence of mental illness reference(s). Hypotheses 1_A and 1_B gauged whether the sampled news transcripts contained at least one reference to mental health and/or illness. On the following page, table 2 shows the results of a logistic regression equation testing these hypotheses. Hypothesis 1_A was not supported. There was no evidence of a difference between CNN (reference category) and Fox News in terms of the news organizations' odds of featuring at least one reference to mental health and/or illness during coverage of mass shootings ($b = -0.387$, $p = ns$). Likewise, hypothesis 1_B was not supported. There was no evidence of a difference between CNN and MSNBC in terms of the news organizations' odds of featuring at least one reference to mental health and/or illness during coverage of mass shootings ($b = 0.065$, $p = ns$).

Table 2

Logistic Regression Estimating Odds of a Reference to Mental Illness During Televised Coverage of Mass Shooting Events in the United States

	Model 1	Model 2
Intercept	0.770	0.508
Congressional Baseball Shooting	0.944*	1.015*
Route 91 Harvest Festival Shooting	-0.170	-0.123
Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting	-1.322*	-1.320*
Waffle House Shooting	-0.223	-0.145
Other Shooting	0.000	0.295
Fox News	--	-0.387
MSNBC	--	0.065

Note: All *b* unstandardized. *$p < .05$. Reference category for *Mass Shooting Event*: Pulse Nightclub Shooting. Reference category for *News Source*: CNN.

Frequency of mental illness references. Hypotheses 2_A and 2_B evaluated how often mental health and/or illness were referred to per 30 minutes of televised coverage. Table 3 shows the results of an OLS regression equation testing these hypotheses. Hypothesis 2_A was not supported. There was no evidence of a difference between CNN (reference category) and Fox News in terms of the number of references to mental health and/or illness during coverage of mass shootings ($b = -0.0531$, $p = ns$). Hypothesis 2_B, however, was supported, as displayed in Table 2. MSNBC referenced mental health and/or illness significantly less than CNN during coverage of mass shootings ($b = -0.991$, $p < .05$)

Table 3

OLS Regression Estimating References of Mental Illness Per 30 Minutes of Televised Coverage of Mass Shooting Events in the United States

	Model 1	Model 2
Intercept	1.193*	1.706*
Congressional Baseball Shooting	-0.783	-0.805
Route 91 Harvest Festival Shooting	-0.040	-0.086
Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting	1.972*	1.959*
Waffle House Shooting	0.140	-0.137
Other Shooting	-0.693	-0.675
Fox News	--	-0.531
MSNBC	--	-0.991*
Adjusted R^2	0.118	0.132

Note: All *b* unstandardized. *$p < .05$. Reference category for *Mass Shooting Event*: Pulse Nightclub Shooting. Reference category for *News Source*: CNN.

Given the observed signs and disparity in differences between Fox News and CNN, as well as MSNBC and CNN, respectively, particularly in regard to the logistic regression of whether mental illness was mentioned, post hoc analyses were conducted contrasting Fox News and MSNBC directly. However, these analyses did not reveal statistically significant differences between Fox News and MSNBC in terms of either mention of mental illness or frequency of references.

Research Questions

Influence of political ideology. Recall the first research question posed earlier: *Is there a significant association between the evident ideological bias in media*

organizations' content and the frames those organizations typically apply to cover mass shooting events? The results of the analysis did not provide evidence of Fox News particularly framing mass shootings as being related to mental health disorders in the United States more than other outlets. However, there is evidence to suggest that MSNBC frames mass shootings relatively more in terms other than mental health disorders in the U.S. Thus, the present study does not provide evidence to assert that political ideology overtly or uniformly influences whether news media organizations frame mass shootings as being related to mental health disorders.

News media construction of mental illness. Recall the second research question posed earlier: *Overall, how is mental illness constructed in news media coverage following mass shooting events in the United States?* The examination of CNN's, Fox News's, and MSNBC's news transcripts revealed several terms used to describe and/or frame mental illness following mass shootings (see Appendix C). Overall, discussions of mental illness in terms of mass shootings often used stereotypical language alluding to one's perceived aggressiveness, dangerousness, and/or unpredictability, adding to the ongoing stigmatization of those who have mental disorders.

Altogether, there were 720 references to mental health and/or illness within the sample, an average of 2.017 references per news transcript. Many of the 24 terms observed in the sample utilized stereotypical language to describe the mental states of the alleged perpetrators involved in the mass shootings events, using descriptors such as *deranged*, *lunatic*, *madman*, *maniac*, *sicko*, and *twisted*. These descriptors, among others, were present throughout the analysis, with little verification of documented mental health issues among those accused. By associating, or perhaps even conflating, mental illness

with innate aggressive behavior or a propensity for violence, news organizations within the sample erroneously characterized the mentally ill via sweeping generalizations rarely based in fact or evidence. For instance, during her primetime show on Fox News on February 14, 2018, following the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Laura Ingraham claimed, ". . . there are some distinguishing characteristics of these young, *twisted* killers. Many of them . . . have few friends. They have little social interaction. Many of them are members of broken or damaged families. *Mental illness* obviously is part of this oftentimes . . ." (emphasis added). Ingraham's comment, occurring mere hours after the incident, featured two inaccurate references to mental illness lacking credible citation or evidence from a mental-health expert, effectively presenting stereotypes as truth and potentially reinforcing stigmatizing attitudes toward those with mental illnesses.

Another finding of the research is that news organizations tend to conflate character flaws, such as narcissism, with mental disorders. On June 16, 2016, for example, following the Pulse Nightclub shooting, CNN news anchor John Berman alleged, ". . . It could just be pure narcissism. You know, a *deranged* mind who wanted to see if he was making an impact" (emphasis added). In this particular instance, Berman seemingly confuses narcissism for a diagnosable mental illness and/or personality disorder, thereby implying the character flaw is somehow correlated with the desire to commit violent acts in order to garner attention for one's self. Though *narcissistic personality disorder* is diagnosable per the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), individuals that have the disorder are not necessarily aggressive or violent, and in fact, "only when [traits of the disorder] are inflexible, maladaptive, and

persisting and cause significant functional impairment or subjective distress do they constitute [a diagnosis]" (APA, 2013, p. 672). Thus, without consulting a medical professional for a proper diagnosis, it is irresponsible for a news organization to imply that the presence of narcissistic traits makes one more likely to commit a violent act, such as a mass shooting, as it perpetuates exceedingly harmful and false stereotypes about the mentally ill.

Though many references to mental illness within the sample were made by representatives and/or hosts of the individual news organizations, interview footage featuring public officials was also often utilized during coverage of mass shooting events. On October 3, 2017, two days after the Route 91 Harvest Festival shooting, MSNBC aired footage of then-Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Paul Ryan offering his opinion about the incident, remarking, "I think one of the things that we've learned from these shootings is that often underneath this is a diagnosis of *mental illness*" (emphasis added). While the above statement did not come from an MSNBC spokesperson, the organization did allow for Ryan's opinion to be broadcast to viewers, indicating his beliefs were seemingly important enough to take into consideration, even though such viewpoints are not based in fact and run counter to evidence presented in the relevant research literature. As such, Ryan's assertion only seems to perpetuate negative attitudes toward the mentally ill.

Throughout the analysis, numerous observations of derogatory verbiage regarding mental illness were documented, suggesting news media organizations often rely on inaccurate stereotypes to discuss mental health in the aftermath of mass shooting events in the United States. By employing these kinds of news frames, CNN, Fox News, and

MSNBC seemingly propagate damaging generalizations associated with mental

disorders, effectively contributing to the ongoing stigmatization of the mentally ill.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The results of the study suggest that political ideology does not influence whether news organizations frame mass shootings in terms of mental illness; however, it should be noted that stereotypes indicating aggressiveness, dangerousness, or unpredictability are often used to describe mental illnesses when said media frame is implemented. Given the polarized nature of American politics, these findings reveal that news coverage of mental illness and mass shootings remains relatively similar among news sources, contradicting the idea that conservatives and liberals do not agree on the topic. This acknowledgement could help to create an opportunity for more open dialogue about the way news organizations, as well as everyday American citizens, talk about mental health issues. Still, there are many questions that linger despite the findings presented in this study. By considering, and perhaps even, answering said questions, a deeper understanding of how (and why) news organizations frame mass shootings may be accomplished.

As stated previously, the analysis did not provide clear evidence of political ideology influencing how news organizations frame news stories about mass shootings, at least in regard to mental illness. For example, CNN and Fox News seemed to mention mental illness at roughly the same rate. On the other hand, MSNBC tended to reference mental illness significantly less during coverage of mass shootings, potentially suggesting that there is another more dominant frame being employed. Possibly, news organizations may be discussing and/or debating the merits of gun-control legislation or the rights guaranteed by the Second Amendment.

Following mass shootings, American citizens are frequently exposed to conflicting viewpoints regarding gun rights. Indeed, "depending on whether the [audience] falls into the gun-control camp or the gun-rights advocates camp, the competing interpretations attach different weights and meanings to the preamble and operative clauses [of the Second Amendment]" (Emmert, 2018, p. 812). If CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC are discussing mass shooting events in terms of gun control or the Second Amendment, does editorial political ideology play a role in the coverage? Previous research indicates Fox News's news coverage is consistently conservative and/or pro-Republican in nature (Baum & Groeling, 2007), therefore it can be reasonably hypothesized that the network may bring up gun rights or the Second Amendment more often to illustrate a need for added protection.

Other societal factors, apart from mental illness or firearms, may also be attributed to mass shootings by popular news organizations, as was the case with the 1999 Columbine massacre. The infamous shooting event ". . . stands out as the one historical incident in which so many different popular-culture products were seen as responsible in so many different ways" (Scharrer et al., 2003, p. 82). Could it be that popular news media organizations are framing recent mass shootings as the products of exposure to popular-culture products? If so, are the products similar to those in 1999 or are they new?

The mass shooting at Columbine High School has itself become a product of popular culture, frequently recalled when school shootings occur in the United States. Indeed, according to Muschert (2007), "*Columbine* has become a keyword for a complex set of emotions surrounding youth, risk, fear, and delinquency in 21st century America"

(p. 365). Following the mass shooting event, the Pew Research Center (1999) reported that "the murderous rampage . . . in Littleton, [Colorado] attracted by far the most public interest of any news story in 1999," making it the third most watched news story of the 1990s. Given the cultural significance of the Columbine massacre in the U.S., perhaps that is why the results of the present analysis indicate that the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School received far more news coverage than other focusing events in the sample. CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC also seemed to reference mental illness significantly more during coverage of this particular incident. It seems as though school shootings, such as the event at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, are inherently different than other mass shootings, as violence among adolescents prompts greater speculation than violent acts committed by adults, as youths are considered less prone to violence overall (Muschert, 2007). Broadly speaking, everyday violence in schools has existed since the establishment of the educational system. However, according to Rocque (2012), "the issue of rampage or mass killings is relatively new" (p. 305). Even though schools are arguably safer today than in the past thanks to more advanced and/or stringent security measures, graphic imagery of adolescents as innocent victims of mass murder is enough to incite widespread moral panic.

While the results of the of the analysis did not provide clear evidence to suggest political ideology overtly influenced whether popular news outlets would reference mental illness during their coverage of mass shootings, when CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC did mention mental health, the language utilized was predominantly negative, consistent with earlier research studies (e.g., Coverdale et al., 2002; Nunnally, 1957). Cross (2004) points out that "as the central institution of the public sphere, television is

the epicenter of public discourse about what it means to be a 'normal' citizen" (p. 212).

Thus, meaning and cultural norms are connected and delivered through language, as

described by Hall's (2013) theory of representation. Additionally, as previously

mentioned, television news is a primary information source for the public regarding

mental illness and other public health concerns, especially among those who have no

experience with or knowledge of mental disorders and/or psychiatric care (Fawcett,

2015). Therefore, by presenting mental illness as a negative and/or dangerous attribute,

popular news organizations like CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC reinforce hegemonic

norms, which can influence how society understands and reacts to persons with mental

illnesses (Slopen et al., 2007). According to Phelan and colleagues (2000), these negative

and/or stigmatizing attitudes have become *more* stigmatizing over time.

As one can imagine, negative media presentations that reinforce stigmas attached

to mental illness do real harm to those with mental disorders, an estimated 20% of the

total U.S. population (NAMI, 2017). Of the 43.8 million Americans with mental

illnesses, only about 41% will seek treatment from a licensed psychiatric professional

(NAMI, 2017). The fear of stigma and public scorn associated with having a mental

illness is correlated with one's likelihood to avoid and/or be deterred from seeking

mental-health care, especially among "ethnic minorities, youth, men, and those in [the]

military . . ." (Clement et al., 2014, p.1), illustrating the power negative attitudes and/or

language can have on an already vulnerable group of people regardless of political

affiliation or ideology.

Limitations

Based on the research findings, two categorical limitations are acknowledged (coder reliability and sample validity), which may have affected the results of the study. Said limitations are defined hereafter in greater detail, along with recommended solutions.

Repeatability is the aftereffect of high reliability (Hayes, 2015), suggesting the outcome of any given study should be able to be replicated each time the data is coded. Since only one coder collected and entered the data for the present study, it could be reasonably argued that there would be inconsistencies in the counting of references to mental illness within each news transcript if they were to be coded a second time. This sort of coder error could be mitigated in the future by involving multiple individuals in the coding process. Prospective studies should utilize multiple coders (if possible) to avoid issues with reliability and coder error.

Further, the sample was limited in two ways, which may potentially affect measurement validity, specifically *content validity*. Since the only news sources considered in the study are CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, it cannot be argued that the inclusion of only those three variables "adequately represent the universe" of editorially conservative or liberal news media organizations (Hayes, 2015, p. 27). Similarly, the study did not assess every story related to the chosen mass shooting events, nor did it consider the many other mass shootings that have taken place in the United States over the past 20 years. Future analyses should examine all major news organizations' transcripts related to the identified mass shooting events, as well as others, for a more accurate and/or complete representation of the issue.

Future Research

Though the goal of this analysis was not to quantify distinctions between mass

shooting events and references to mental illness, future studies should attempt to uncover

how discrepancies in coverage of various mass shooting events could potentially affect

audiences. For instance, as previously mentioned, the results of this examination revealed

major inconsistencies in how often CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC referenced mental

illness among the five mass shootings. The Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School

shooting featured many more references to mental health and/or illness than the other

shooting events assessed in the study. These inconsistencies should be examined in

greater detail to determine how the public interprets and makes decisions based on news

media coverage of mass shootings. Furthermore, future studies should consider other

frames news media organizations use when discussing mass shooting events. If mental

illness is not the predominant frame applied, perhaps there are others that are more

regularly referenced, such as gun control, the effects of violent media, or other societal

factors.

The employment of Gerbner's theory of cultivation in an experimental setting

may also prove to be beneficial in evaluating the public's perception of the mentally ill

following mass shootings in the United States. The theory states that ". . . those who

spend more time 'living' in the world of television are more likely to see the 'real world'

in terms of the images, values, portrayals, and ideologies that emerge through the lens of

television" (Gerbner et al., 2002, p. 47). Essentially, "this perspective . . . assumes an

interaction between the medium and its publics" (Gerbner et al., 1986, p. 23). As such,

the application of cultivation theory could further the general understanding of how the public is affected by the news media's politicization of mass shootings and mental illness.

Conclusion

This study sought to quantify and interpret ideological distinctions between editorially conservative and liberal news sources by measuring references to mental illness in the aftermath of mass shooting events in the U.S. The results of the content analysis do not indicate a significant difference in terms of news outlet political ideology and *whether* mental illness is referenced in the aftermath of mass shooting events in the United States. However, the findings did indicate a remarkable difference in the *frequency* of mental health mentions per 30 minutes of televised coverage between editorially liberal MSNBC and the other two news media organizations examined (CNN and Fox News), such that MSNBC referenced mental health significantly less frequently. Given what is popularly perceived as the incredibly polarized nature of political communication in America, the outcome of the study reveals that news sources with differences in editorial political ideology are more similar than audiences may initially be inclined to believe, at least in regard to coverage of mass shooting events. Still, further research is needed to determine other media frames that may be influenced by political ideology. Though political ideology may not overtly affect how news media organizations discuss mental health regarding mass shootings, past research indicates the public's perception of those with mental illnesses and the stereotypical nature in which they are represented in the media continue to be problematic.

In their haste to assign blame and/or propose causes for mass shooting events, news media organizations reinforce stigmas surrounding mental disorders by eliciting

harmful stereotypes, which make imprecise allusions to aggression, dangerousness, and unpredictability, seldom based on evidence or medical opinion. Charged language commonly understood to contribute to and bolster cultural stereotypes is frequently used to discuss mental illness following mass shooting events in the United States. Given the public's well-established tendency to rely on news media for information regarding mental health, it can be reasonably postulated that such charged, stereotypical language used within the sample to describe and/or frame mental illness has an immensely negative impact on the mentally ill and contributes to the proliferation of preexisting cultural stereotypes and stigmas, consistent with the previously cited research literature. The analysis also revealed several colloquial terms disparaging to the mentally ill, which may ultimately reduce their likeliness to seek out regular care from a licensed medical professional and adversely impact their general quality of life. Moreover, the perpetuation of false stereotypes makes it far more difficult to educate those who do not have a mental illness, as the news media is one of the primary sources of information about mental health for many people.

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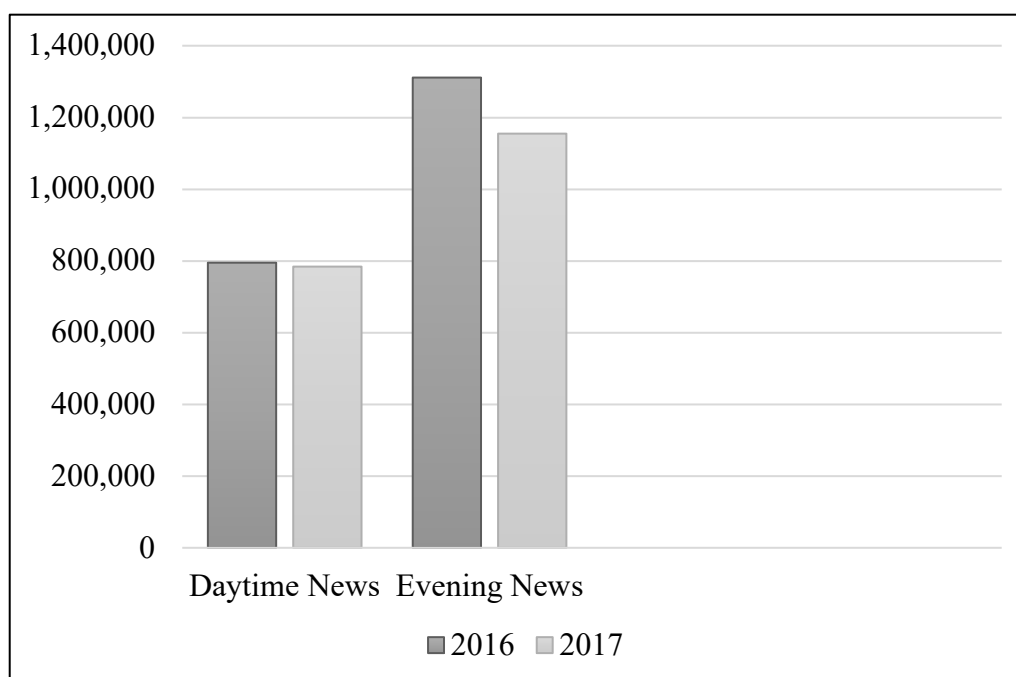
APPENDICES

Appendix A

Average Number of TVs Tuning to News Programming for CNN,

Fox News, and MSNBC

(Pew Research Center, 2018)

Note: Numbers represent CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC for the full year and include live viewership only. Average audience is the average number of TVs tuned to an entity throughout the selected time frame. It is calculated by dividing the total hours viewed by the length of the time frame (in hours). National news is defined as any telecast that has been flagged by comScore (either by notification from clients, or from standard processes) as being a news-based program airing at approximately the same time across a majority of markets. The evening time slot is defined as a prime news by comScore and includes newscasts that air from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m.; the daytime news time slot includes newscasts that air from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Source: comScore TV Essentials®, 2016 and 2017, U.S.

Appendix B

Variation in How Mass Shootings Are Defined and Counted

(RAND Corporation, 2018, p. 266)

Source	Casualty Threshold (for injuries or deaths by firearm)	Location of Incident	Motivation of Shooter	Number of U.S. Mass Shootings in 2015
Mother Jones (see Follman, Aronsen, and Pan, 2017)	Three fatal injuries (excluding shooter)[a]	Public	Indiscriminate (excludes crimes of armed robbery, gang violence, or domestic abuse)	7
Gun Violence Archive (undated)	Four fatal or nonfatal injuries (excluding shooter)	Any	Any	332
Mass Shooting Tracker (undated)	Four fatal or nonfatal injuries (including shooter)	Any	Any	371
Mass Shootings in America database (Stanford, Geospatial Center, undated)	Three fatal or nonfatal injuries (excluding shooter)	Any	Not identifiably related to gangs, drugs, or organized crime	65
Supplementary Homicide Reports (FBI) (see Puzzanchera, Chamberlin, and Kang, 2017)	The FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports do not define *mass shooting*, but do provide information on the number of victims, and the reports have been used by researchers in conjunction with news reports or other data sources.			

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[a]Before January 2013, the casualty threshold for *Mother Jones* was four fatal injuries (excluding the shooter).

Appendix C

Observed Expressions Indicating or Describing Mental Illness within CNN's,

Fox News's, and MSNBC's News Transcripts

Crazed	Maniac	Mentally unstable
Crazy	Mental defect	Paranoid schizophrenic
Delusional	Mental health	Psychotic
Deranged	Mental illness	Psychopath
Disturbed	Mentally deranged	Sicko
Emotionally unstable	Mentally defective	Troubled
Lunatic	Mentally disturbed	Twisted
Madman	Mentally sick	Warped

Note: The terms and phrases listed in the table above were observed in the news transcripts sampled for the present study and should not be interpreted as an exhaustive listing of indicators and/or descriptors for mental illness overall.