

UMPQUA COMMUNITY COLLEGE: THE CASE OF
THE SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED
SCHOOL SHOOTING

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an interdisciplinary analysis of the mass shooting on October 1, 2015 at Umpqua Community College (UCC) in Roseburg, Oregon. I examine this event and the surrounding media coverage on a macro-level scale and through a critical media, social constructionist lens. Through an interdisciplinary review of theory and research, I explore the mass media's role in establishing cultural scripts and frameworks surrounding school shootings, placing a particular emphasis on the enduring influence of the media coverage of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting. I then apply these theories and concepts to the UCC shooting to exemplify the direct and indirect consequences of the media's narrative control. Finally, I suggest future directions for research, analysis, and social change.

Keywords: mass shooting, school shooting, mass media, Columbine High School shooting, Umpqua Community College shooting

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Umpqua Community College: The Case of the Socially Constructed School Shooting

Although it often masquerades as such, mass media is not simply a messenger passing on objective information. Especially in postmodern society, mass media prioritizes constructing a compelling narrative over accurately representing a complex reality. Because of its pervasiveness, media wields the power to situate events and information in a chosen cultural context, which, according to postmodern thought, shapes and redefines our lived reality as individuals and as a society. This paper is a meta-analysis of the interplay between mass media and school shootings, applying macro-level theoretical perspectives and concepts to the specific event of the Umpqua Community College (UCC) shooting. Ultimately, my goal is to demonstrate the scope of media influence and to enumerate the harmful consequences of the often reckless way in which that influence is currently exercised.

Umpqua Community College Shooting

When trauma strikes a society in the form mass public violence, it often takes years to piece together a coherent and reliable narrative of events from the wake of chaos that they leave behind. Over time, communities participate in the construction of a dominant narrative whose inconsistencies are either rectified or forgotten, but the immediate aftermath of these societal traumas sits amidst a haze of panic that obfuscates accurate information with hearsay and conjecture. The Umpqua Community College (UCC) shooting in Roseburg, Oregon is no different, and in the absence of a publicly available police report, several conflicting accounts still exist. The organization Everytown for Gun Safety compiled a comprehensive report of the incident based on press releases, eyewitness testimony, and official statements by

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government and law enforcement officials, culminating in the following timeline of events (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2015).

According to Everytown (2015), on the morning of October 1, 2015, 26-year-old UCC student Chris Harper-Mercer donned all-black clothing over a bulletproof vest and armed himself with five handguns, one AR-15 rifle, and five spare magazines of ammunition. He made his way to campus, heading for room 115 in Snyder Hall, where one of his classes was in session. After shooting through the window on the door, he fired a single warning shot into the ceiling, then purportedly smiled as he shot the professor in the head at point-blank range. Next, Harper-Mercer ordered the students to gather in the center of the room. Calling forward one of the students at random, 18-year-old Matthew Downing, Harper-Mercer handed him an envelope containing a flash drive and promised, "...you are the lucky one. I will not shoot you if you give this to the cops" (Hammill, 2015). Police later revealed that the flash drive contained documents of the perpetrator's writings, which news networks labeled manifestos (Li, 2015; Fowler & Keating, 2015; Dillon, 2015; Varandani, 2015). Harper-Mercer instructed Downing to sit at the back of the room and face him. As soon as Downing complied, Harper-Mercer turned back toward the front of the classroom and opened fire into the cluster of students. He then selected individual students from the group and asked about their religious beliefs, directing the other students to lie down on the ground; when any student expressed any belief in God or gods, the shooter replied that he was happy for them because they were about to meet their God in a few seconds, and then fatally shot them. When a student in a wheelchair did not comply quickly enough with his order to lie down, Harper-Mercer waited until she was on the ground and then told her to get back into her chair. He shot her as she attempted to comply. When police arrived on the scene, Harper-

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Mercer moved to the doorway and briefly exchanged fire with responding officers and was wounded. He subsequently retreated into the classroom, lay down on the ground, and shot himself in the temple. Ultimately, Harper-Mercer's rampage left ten dead, including himself, and nine injured. The shooting began and ended within ten minutes.

Contemporary Journalism and the Media Feeding Frenzy

To adequately analyze the events of Umpqua Community College and other mass school shootings, these events must be grounded in their historical context, especially with regards to the history and evolution of news media. The Cable News Network (CNN) was founded in 1980, the first of its kind as a network that marketed 24-hour coverage. Prior to the advent of 24-hour news and accessible online journalism, news stations presented the day's current events in nightly programs that were constrained to the time windows of typical television shows. 24-hour news offered the new luxuries of live coverage and lengthier time slots to devote to individual stories. This new format allowed the American people to experience a mediated version of history in real time, and, in certain instances, to watch at the sidelines, culturally defining moments. On occasion, these milestones were negative—natural disasters, scandal surrounding a public figure, or, in the case of the Columbine High School massacre, acts of unprecedented public violence. Every experiment with journalistic procedure in the 24-hour format set a precedent for future conduct and coverage, and the events of Columbine, along with its timing in relation to emerging competition between mass media networks, marked school shootings as prime grounds for a media feeding frenzy. The founding of MSNBC and FOX in 1996 brought competition to CNN, the first cable news network of its kind, and a simultaneous boom in online journalism resulted in Littleton, Colorado being swarmed by journalists who went to wildly unethical lengths in pursuit of

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exclusive information or breaking news (Newman, 2004). The increase in competition for viewership and the creation of demand for real-time updates set the stage for a shift in journalism toward sensationalizing and exploiting human suffering in order to gain an advantage in audience size over rivals. The more grotesque a tragedy or the higher the body count, the higher the media infestation. The Columbine massacre was triply attractive as a cultural grotesquerie because of its record-breaking body count (with 15 fatalities and 24 non-fatal injuries), because of the arbitrary and remorseless cruelty of its perpetrators, and because of its occurrence in an affluent, suburban community, which deviated from the cultural expectation that gun violence was constrained to poor, urban areas. It is precisely this macabre appeal and promise of a captive audience that made it such an irresistible topic for media coverage. In “Effects of Media Exposure on Adolescents Traumatized in a School Shooting,” Haravuori, Suomalainen, Berg, Kiviruu, and Marttunen (2011) compared the levels of traumatization and post-traumatic symptoms between students who had been interviewed by media reporters and students who were not approached by the media after surviving a school shooting. Haravuori et al. found that “being approached by journalists and especially being interviewed had a significant effect on posttraumatic distress in traumatized adolescents” (2011, p. 76). Likewise, Coté and Simpson (2006) noted that ethical guidelines for journalists’ conduct already acknowledge the possibility that the stress of media interaction could actually re-victimize survivors of violence and disasters, acting as a second trauma that compounds the one from which the witnesses have just emerged. The mass media’s immense hyper-focus on these tragedies, and the relentless obsession with the individuals who pull the trigger, their prioritization of an interesting narrative over journalistic integrity and the well-being of victims, and a news circuit that now relies on web traffic as currency for success not only do measurable and lasting damage to the members of

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the grieving community, but they also cause outward-rippling harm through phenomena such as the contagion effect.

Columbine, Contagion, and 24-Hour News

The events of the UCC shooting are bleak, but they are not by any means surprising or unfamiliar to the American public. Later that same day, as news of the shooting gained national attention, the White House (2015) issued a statement from President Obama in which he was visibly angry and fatigued. He expressed his frustration and concern, stating:

We don't yet know why this individual did what he did. And it's fair to say that anybody who does this has a sickness in their minds, regardless of what they think their motivations may be. But we are not the only country on earth that has people with mental illnesses who want to do harm to other people. We are the only advanced country on earth that sees these kind [sic] of mass shootings every few months.

Somehow, this has become routine. The reporting is routine. My response here at this podium ends up being routine; the conversation in the aftermath of it. We've become numb to this. We talked about this after Columbine and Blacksburg, after Tucson, after Newtown, after Aurora, after Charleston....

I hope and pray that I don't have to come out again during my tenure as President to offer my condolences to families in these circumstances. But based on my experience as President, I can't guarantee that.

In his statement, the president lists specific mass school shootings that have left the deepest impacts and ugliest scars on the American psyche. The first event he names, the point that marks the beginning of his timeline for the dialogue about mass shootings, is Columbine.

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Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's infamous rampage through Columbine High School in 1999 redefined the template of the school shooting and the archetype of the school shooter. Columbine was certainly not the first school massacre in America—in fact, the earliest recorded school massacre predates America's sovereignty as a nation by twelve years (Dixon, 2005). And yet, Columbine was the event that ignited a contentious discourse that still continues among the American public regarding the interpretation and prevention of mass shootings. In his article "The Columbine Legacy," Ralph Larkin posits that the booming 24-hour news cycle was largely responsible for making Columbine culturally relevant on a long-term, national scale, noting that Columbine was "the second-most-covered emergent news event in the decade of the 1990s, outdone only by the O. J. Simpson car chase" (Larkin, 2009, p. 1311). Mass media coverage elevated Harris and Klebold's audience from local to global as communities around the world watched the live updates and in-depth coverage that 24-hour news networks were able to accommodate, aided by the increasing ubiquity of the Internet. This kind of coverage was unprecedented for school shootings, and the nation mourned with the community of Littleton in real time, seeking explanations for a senseless slaughter that ended with the perpetrators' suicides. Without Harris and Klebold alive to explain their motives for such gruesome violence, the public tried to piece together motive from the artifacts the boys left behind—journals, video diaries, blog posts, etc. Reporters seized any new morsel of information and dissected it in the hopes that this new clue would be the crucial piece of the puzzle of why this massacre happened.

Unfortunately, there is often only a semantic line separating obsession from worship. The relentless media attention and speculation did not lay Harris and Klebold to rest by explaining their actions; rather, they immortalized Harris and Klebold as the ultimate cultural

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antiheroes, as celebrity iconoclasts, and as supernatural forces of chaos and evil. Mass media's practice of obsessing over these two boys in an attempt to find meaning for their actions effectively secured their legacy as formidable shadow-figures in American culture, implicitly promising the same lavish attention to anyone else who was willing to commit a massacre in order to obtain legendary status. In portraying Harris and Klebold as pariahs who vengefully targeted athletes and other conventionally popular groups, mass media also posited them to be labeled martyrs who enacted symbolic revenge on behalf of outcasts and alienated adolescents across the nation. The promise of fame (or infamy, or perhaps the two are now indistinguishable) as a reward for brutality combined with the deification of Harris and Klebold created a particularly virulent case of contagion. Columbine triggered a well-documented influx of so-called copycat shootings and plots, with "contagion" here meaning mass school shootings in which the perpetrators directly reference Columbine as inspiration, as a record number of deaths and injuries to beat, or as an expression of solidarity. In October 2015, a *Mother Jones* investigation found that Columbine "inspired at least 74 plots or attacks across 30 states" (Follman & Andrews, 2015). It would be difficult, if not impossible, to prove that Columbine was the sole causal factor of these subsequent mass school shootings, but at the very least, it served as the common reference point that later perpetrators used when envisioning their own school massacres.

Indeed, in some of the deadliest and most horrific school shootings since Columbine, the perpetrators have explicitly referenced Columbine in their plans or motivation—in both of the other school shootings mentioned by the president in his statement, Blacksburg (the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting) and Newtown (the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School), the perpetrators specifically studied, referenced, and/or praised the Columbine massacre (Kleinfeld, 2007; Voorhees, 2013). The same is true for the perpetrator of the UCC

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shooting, whom law enforcement officials described as “a student of past mass shootings” after reading the writings he had left behind (Sidner, La, Almas, & Ellis, 2015). He had a profile on a torrenting website (kat.cr) where he would regularly upload videos and documentaries about milestone school shootings such as Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Virginia Tech (Shapiro, Dewey, & Bernstein, 2015). Many copycat plots and shootings used the tactical plans and arsenal laid out by Harris and Klebold as a starting point upon which to “improve” when they committed their own school massacres. These plans were readily available as incredibly detailed reports were circulated by mass media, including specifics regarding the mechanics and components of the firearms, propane bombs, and pipe bombs the perpetrators used for the attack (Follman & Andrews, 2015). In the quest for answers, mass media readily armed would-be copycats with schematics for committing their own school massacres; in pursuit of a profitable story, they built a mythos around Harris and Klebold that transformed them from two troubled boys into archangels of vengeful justice; and in the clumsy search for a silver bullet explanation of a complex tragedy, they garnered Harris and Klebold a cult following.

A Crime of Postmodernity

Postmodernity, or late modernity as it is referred to in some disciplines, is a paradigm that holds promise for understanding mass shootings. Postmodern theories emerge from many disciplines and produce slightly interesting differences and foci in each. Generally, postmodern thought is a response to and critique of modern thought, postmodern reality is characterized by pluralism, relativism, hyper-individualism, ubiquitous mass media presence in a globalized society, and by the dominance of highly stylized, visualized, technology enhanced entertainment and pop culture. The postmodern world is one that is in constant

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flux, whose boundaries and rules are ever-changing in a society whose boundaries and definitions are in perpetual states of evolution (Jameson, 1991). The role of mass media in such an ambiguous and fluid time is to provide entertainment that also offers structure, or at least the illusion thereof, to reality; this role is desirable because it is immensely profitable and it gives the architect a powerful ability to shape reality. A postmodern moment is one in which order can only be achieved through illusion, escapism, or a combination of the two, and mass media exemplifies this combination. In "The Columbine Legacy," Larkin (2009) explains that in current society, "news has become entertainment. Tragedy has been converted to sensation and sensation is operationalized into viewership, Nielsen points, and market share, which is then materialized into advertising revenues" (p. 1322). Just as the exploitative and sensationalizing habits of the mass media are both products and demonstrations of postmodernity, mass school shootings in contemporary American society must be grounded in a postmodern perspective in order for them to be comprehensible. At their very core, these events are crimes of postmodernity.

A crime of postmodernity is an act of expressivity and self-actualization, of orchestrating one's role and affirming one's own identity in the postmodern world. To an individual living in the perpetual state of identity uncertainty and existential crisis that define the postmodern era, there are few acts more radical or more important than staking claim to one's own identity; however, this identity is not truly original, but rather stitched together from fragments and facsimiles of the images and illusions that saturate every aspect of present society; the criminal as bricoleur. Postmodern selves are said to be constructed from the collection of fictitious images and archetypes that we have internalized over the course of our lives. The postmodern historical moment "...furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent

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and unrelated languages of the self (Gergen 1991:6). Cite is in the Allen article I have attached. Even Harris and Klebold, who are themselves the archetypal mass school shooters, modeled their own identities after the leads in the 1994 Warner Brothers film, *Natural Born Killers*, (Frymer, 2009). These were fictional characters written for a dark satirical film, but they became real when Harris and Klebold emulated them in the Columbine massacre—an event that, in itself, has inspired dozens of similar attacks. This social phenomenon of realities that are built upon emulations of either fictional sources or warped reproductions of the source is termed “the simulacrum” by sociologist, philosopher, and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard in his 1981 work, *Simulacra and Simulation*. Harris and Klebold and the contagion effect of their massacre at Columbine (including the UCC shooting) are perfect examples of simulacra and the ways in which the imitation of the a thing or the myth of a thing can become more real than the original reality and more mythical than the myth, to the extent that the imitation becomes its own hyperrealized cultural artifact. Harris and Klebold based their actions and their personas heavily on characters written for a film, transforming those characters’ cartoonish satire of violent society into a harrowing real-world manifestation of glib cruelty and sadism. However, their attempt to recreate the glory and carnage of their idols failed on multiple fronts, and the actuality of committing a public massacre proved to be much more difficult and much less fulfilling for the two boys (Cullen, 2016). On a fundamental level, Harris and Klebold failed in their attack on Columbine; their explicitly stated goal was to commit an act of terrorism by bombing the school cafeteria, only intending to use their firearms to shoot survivors who escaped from the rubble. Their bombs failed in multiple locations; Harris broke his own nose at one point with the recoil of his gun; their fantasies of a final shootout with police fizzled into their own dejected suicides. And yet, the fact that they failed at the mission they set out for themselves is irrelevant at this

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point. Their legacy, molded and aggrandized and dissected by the media in pursuit of a worthy pair of villains for a lazy and placating explanatory narrative, has spawned an entire subculture of self-identified outcasts who worship Harris and Klebold as gods and who see glory in the act of massacre. Chris Harper-Mercer invested in the myth of the glory-wreathed school shooter just like many other young men have. He left behind a manifesto that echoed the sentiments of Harris's journal entries, he spoke with the same forcedly cavalier bravado that Harris and Klebold imitated from film characters, and he even asked victims about their religion before killing them—a perfect imitation of Harris's infamous murder of Cassie Bernall in the library—except for the fact that Harris and Klebold never targeted Christians or any other group, and in fact never even asked Cassie Bernall a single question (Cullen, 2016). But Harper-Mercer's actions transformed this fictitious element into a mythic reality; the simulacrum became more real than the source it initially aimed to replicate.

The Postmodern Critique

At its core, postmodernism rejects positivism and questions the notion of an identifiable, universal, and objective reality. Instead of objective truth, social scientists and philosophers in the postmodern movement understand the world as one that is never fully free from subjective bias, interpretation, and manipulation. Critical sociological theory concerns itself not with reinterpreting the world in a new way, but rather with critiquing the current constructs, assumptions, and methods of observation we use to perceive the world. Critical theory, in tandem with postmodernism, rejects essentialism. Critical analysis is less concerned with understanding why a phenomenon occurs and more geared towards discovering ways to generate meaningful social change. Therefore, a postmodern, critical analysis of school shootings is one that aims not to observe trends of school shootings and

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their perpetrators or to assemble a profile from correlating data points, but to change the society whose characteristics so readily produce these events and individuals.

Social Constructionism

One of the many social theories that fits comfortably beneath the umbrella of postmodernity is social constructionism. As delineated and expanded upon in Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's 1966 book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, the social constructionist paradigm rests on the assertion that people and groups assign meaning and value to objects and symbols; consequently, objects stripped of all cultural context have no intrinsic value or objectively correct meaning. The power of these cultural artifacts is very much real, but it is something we create rather than something we discover or reveal. Social constructionism does not necessarily deny the existence of an objective reality, but it does render such a thing irrelevant; though we may interact with an objective reality, we experience and interpret it through our subjectivity, which is tremendously shaped by our social environment. These social realities are constructed, modified, and disseminated primarily by social interaction.

This school of thought poses a direct challenge to, if not an outright rejection of, the perception that the media is guided by the noble aspiration to find and share "the truth" of a given situation. Social constructionism refutes the notion that the mass media is tantamount to a mass messenger or a passive conduit for information. Instead, social constructionism suggests that the mass media, alongside other social institutions is the author of shared, social reality, which in turn shapes people's internal, individual realities. Mass media usually works

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from real events, but determines the context into which these events are situated in much the same way that writers rearrange the same twenty-six letters of the English alphabet in order to tell radically different stories. The act of assigning meaning to events by contextualizing them is not exclusive to mass media, but it is important to examine mass media's role because of its ubiquity. This process of social authorship begins at the broadest level, when networks decide which events to present to the public, and diffuses to the specific, deliberate use of particular phrases and application of specific labels. All together, these layers of mediation, interpretation, and presentation provide the audience with clues and cues for how to conceptualize people and events—a cultural script that lends structure and familiarity to new events as they fit into pre-established roles and expectations (Goffman, 1959).

As a subcategory of mass shootings, mass school shootings in particular generally adhere to a fundamental template that seems at odds with the superficially senseless randomness of these acts. This archetype of the school shooting did not emerge gradually from several events, but suddenly, through the cultural watershed of the Columbine High School massacre.

The Society of the Spectacle

President Obama's reaction in Roseburg is an exemplary manifestation of the cultural callouses America is growing towards shooting rampages. The shock factor of these mass shootings is only resurrected when the perpetrator either supersedes the prior record for highest body count or when they are creative in their design (e.g., August 26, 2015, when a disgruntled former news station employee fatally shot reporter Alison Parker and photojournalist Adam Ward and critically wounded interviewee Vicki Gardner in the middle of a live broadcast. Additionally, the perpetrator filmed himself committing the murders and disseminated the videos across multiple social media platforms before committing suicide).

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Mass shootings, particularly school shootings, are now intrinsically performative acts in postmodern America. Guy Debord (1967) describes the emerging postmodern phenomenon he calls the society of the spectacle. The spectacle, Debord argues, is central to contemporary life and constructions of meaning. The society of the spectacle is one that takes Irving Goffman's notion of "the performance of self" and intensifies the need for attention. In the novel *Columbine*, author Dave Cullen explains the significance of the spectacle to Columbine:

For decades, terrorists and mass shooters trod their separate paths. Then Columbine. Eric and Dylan fused them. School murders had been done; Eric envisioned a school catastrophe. A new template was born. *The spectacle murder*. Performance without a cause. Just demonstration of personal power. (2016)

The spectacle permeates every aspect of postmodern life, including that of criminality. Just as Vester Flanagan filmed himself murdering his former coworkers and posted the footage on social media, just as the Virginia Tech shooter uploaded photos of himself brandishing weapons at the camera and a YouTube video explaining his motivation for his rampage, Chris Harper-Mercer was forcefully aware of the spectacular nature of his actions. He commanded one of the students to quite literally be an audience to his performance of cultural scripts—of hegemonic masculinity, of violent mental illness, and of social outcast. He gave the same student a flash drive of his writings to hand over to police, doing everything in his power to assert control over his portrayal in the public eye. On his blog, in the months leading up to his rampage, Harper-Mercer occasionally published his thoughts about other high-profile shootings. In one post about the aforementioned Vester Flanagan shooting, made less than a month before he would commit his own mass shooting at UCC, Harper-Mercer wrote:

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On an interesting note, I have noticed that so many people like him are all alone and unknown, yet when they spill a little blood, the whole world knows who they are. A man who was known by no one, is now known by everyone. His face splashed across every screen, his name across the lips of every person on the planet, all in the course of one day. Seems the more people you kill, the more you're in the limelight. And I have to say, anyone who knew him could have seen this coming. People like him have nothing left to live for, and the only thing left to do is lash out at a society that has abandoned them. His family described him as alone, no partner/lover. A victim not only of his own perception but also of our social media soaked environment.

(Glum, 2015)

In this paragraph, Harper-Mercer himself shows that he understands the relationship between mass media and mass shootings. Journalist and Columbine expert Dave Cullen (2016) echoes Harper-Mercer's observation in his book, *Columbine*: "If we care about ending this, we in the media need to see our role as clearly as the perps have. We did not start this, nor have we pulled any triggers. But the killers have made us reliable partners. We supply the audience, they provide the show." When both journalists and mass shooters are overtly acknowledging the symbiotic relationship between the news media and the perpetrators, perhaps it is time to halt the performance and reevaluate the spectacle we implicitly reward.

Framing

When critically analyzing media discourse, sociologist Irving Goffman used the terms "framing" and "frame analysis" to describe the ways that media representation guides and limits social reality (Hancock & Garner, 2009). These frames do not alter the reality they encompass, but they do determine the focal points of the picture they present, highlighting certain information while downplaying other facts and facets of an event or individual. The

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utility of these frames is to remove ambiguity and uncertainty from uncomfortable, unfamiliar situations. In an attempt to explain the brutality of Columbine and subsequent mass school shootings, mass media put forth multiple frames for analyzing the perpetrators and interpreting their actions (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). The media framing of Columbine was an experimental process, with multiple frameworks being applied simultaneously because there were no preexisting media frames that sufficiently explained the details of the massacre and the perpetrators (Muschert, 2009). Experts debated the “true” causal factor for the massacre for years, citing issues with the goth subculture, video games, bullying, mental illness, psychiatric medication, and American attitudes and policy with regards to guns. There is still no universally recognized independently causal factor that led to the Columbine massacre or mass school shootings thereafter.

As the media frenzy slowly began to dissipate in the months after the Columbine shooting, accurate information became easier to differentiate from speculation, and some frames emerged as dominant while others gradually faded from use. The most successful and widespread frames have since been generalized beyond the singular event of Columbine itself, and are presently invoked whenever another mass school shooting or similar event occurs.

Gun Control or Mental Health?

Glenn Muschert (2002) details the funnel of favored frames by corporate media and the evangelical community from the many options listed above to the eventual preferred explanation within mass media discourse: mental illness. That same frame is applied throughout current mass media after a school shooting, with causality attributed to one of two factors: mental illness or America’s gun legislation. The contemporary discourse surrounding school shootings consistently presents these two frames as a black-and-white dichotomy

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wherein one explanation is totally correct and the other is utterly baseless. This false duality is further polarized by self-professed polemicists like Ann Coulter, a conservative writer and political commentator who published an article titled “Guns Don’t Kill People, the Mentally Ill Do” (Coulter, 2013) shortly after the Sandy Hook massacre. Clearly, the title of her article was deliberately inflammatory, but her extreme stance was echoed throughout powerful industries across America. For instance, one week after the Sandy Hook shooting, the president of the NRA issued a press release in which he called for a national registry of the mentally ill (The Washington Post, 2015). These and similar statements are integral to the media frame of mental illness as the driving force behind mass shootings.

Some media frames become problematic when they perform their task of distilling a complex, nuanced event down to an easily digestible two-dimensional narrative, but they do so at the cost of accurately portraying reality. A simple story with a clear problem, cause, and solution may be a more profitable and narratively satisfying package to offer an audience, but such superficial discourses become dangerous when they become folded into the foundation of socially constructed reality. The media frames that encompass mass school shootings typify this mistake and demonstrate the consequences it can carry for society. When media frames prove to be inadequate at helping a society cope and interact with unfamiliar phenomena, they should logically be discarded or adjusted. However, the majority of mass media’s audience has no direct connection or interaction with a school shooting, and therefore uses solely the media’s representation thereof to inform their construct of reality. In such situations, the frame becomes all but imperceptible because the audience can only know what the media decides to reveal or highlight (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001). This chain of events is problematic when observed within news media in particular, because news media

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claims to share true information about the real world rather than fictional stories for the sake of entertainment. Media frames matter because they shape our shared perception of the world, and we tend to cling to them even when that perception is demonstrably at odds with reality. This tendency perhaps helps to explain why the debate in America over how to effectively address school shootings seems to be stuck at an impasse between solutions geared towards either gun control or mental health care reform.

Mass media representation of gun violence in America is utterly dominated by coverage of mass shootings, especially school shootings. Despite the fact that statistics show a marked and consistent decline in violent crime and mass shootings since 1990 (Krogstad, 2015), the majority of Americans believe that violent crime rates are climbing, and they believe that this is the case at any given time (Lind, 2016). The reality remains that mass shootings and school shootings in particular are statistical anomalies; and yet, in December of 2015, a national poll from NBC and the Wall Street Journal reported that 71% of Americans interpret mass shootings, spree killings, and other “random acts of violence” as a permanent fixture of American life (Murray, 2015). This is its own media frame which works to center the conversation about guns around these extraordinary and extreme events rather than the much larger populations afflicted by more common types of gun violence; for example, three out of every five gun deaths in the United States are suicides, and domestic abuse accounts for a significant portion of gun injuries and deaths (Center for Disease Control, 2014). The Center for Disease Control also found that nearly 80% of gun deaths among white men were the product of suicide, whereas approximately 85% of gun deaths among black men were homicides. Gun violence is disproportionately experienced by urban, lower-middle class, minority communities, and mass media fixates on upper-middle class school shootings, on

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the rare occasions in which that violence escapes to the suburbs. The disproportionate coverage of school shootings derails conversations about gun violence that would otherwise be applicable to a much larger subset of the American populace. Given long-standing systematic prejudices and hegemonic structures in America, from a sociological standpoint, mass media's apparent indifference to issues that disproportionately affect minority groups is not surprising.

Critical Solutions and Future Research

As mass school shootings have become increasingly legitimate points of concern and public outcry in contemporary discourse, social scientists have begun to examine these previously atypical events with greater depth and scrutiny. Because of this intensification of research, current psychological research works to do more than track the statistics of these horrors after they happen; the goal has shifted from passively observing to actively preempting and diverting. Consequently, more insight and analysis continue to emerge surrounding precipitating factors, predispositions, preventative measures, and post-traumatic impact on the affected community. As such a new area of significant study, much of the academic research raises more questions than it answers. Many of these questions are ones that should already have been asked and answered—by researchers, legislators, public administrators, lawmakers, and health professionals. The lack of credible answers manifests directly in ineffective legislation, stigmatization and reinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, public misinformation and misrepresentation of the situation, revictimization of the traumatized by the mass media, and societal validation and glorification of the perpetrators with the end result of creating more perpetrators. While some research has unwittingly played into a portion of mass shootings by reinforcing stereotypes, studying the social and

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psychological contexts of these events promises to better inform effective means of prevention and intervention than allowing media, perpetrators and law enforcement to control the narratives of causality.

One of the most important functions of critical academic research is that it, on occasion, is used by policy makers and legislators to challenge widely accepted assumptions and narratives about human nature and behavior. Cultural and critical analysis is central to understanding social problems in the complex mediated world of mass shootings. In fact, social research has repeatedly demonstrated that prevailing explanations used to understand mass shootings are incomplete and directly contradictory to the un-mediated, unconstructed reality of the situation (Altheide, 2009; Haan & Mays, 2013).

Social scientists have observed that the mass media wields a tremendous amount of power in constructing the frame through which we interpret these events. Notably, Warnick, Johnson, and Rocha (2010), educational policy researchers, emphasize that even the notorious Columbine rampage was by no means the first of its kind, but it was the first rampage to happen in a world of 24-hour news coverage of breaking events. In fact, school shootings had increased 560% between the 1980s and 1990s, and actually decreased by 11% between the 1990s and the 2000s (Haan & Mays, 2013). However, researchers note that this fact runs perpendicular to the primarily media generated 'epidemic' of school shootings that seemed to be triggered by Columbine. The quantifiable reality of the situation has proved to matter far less than the public's perception of it (Muschert, 2009). This not only leads to reactive legislation in response to fictitious trends and astronomically inflated risk; it additionally fuels the fervent need to find and punish scapegoats for why these events keep happening.

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There is still a tremendous amount of research to be done, as always; we need to separate gun violence and criminality in general from mental illness before we can implement a meaningful and lasting means of addressing either. There are certainly behavioral red flags or trends that are as of yet unidentified that can better predict or alert others if a person is at risk for joining the rank and file of Columbine copycats. There are certainly steps that can be immediately taken to address how the media are allowed to interact with victims. — demonstrated by the Roseburg police chief's refusal to name the Umpqua Community College shooter because he understood that fueling an obsession with his life and his story would only encourage others who wanted the quickest possible route to fame. American society is still deeply, deeply dysfunctional in how it copes with discussions regarding mental illness, especially mental illness and crime; but there is a growing call for education, insight, and ethicality in the way our leaders and spokespeople conduct themselves. Change may not have come in time to save the lives of the students at Virginia Tech or the children at Sandy Hook, but it may very well happen in time to prevent another small town from being put on the map as a grave site.

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