An Analysis of Media Portrayal of Mass Murder Incidents

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Abstract

This study used a content analysis to review newspaper coverage of mass murders that occurred in 2018 to determine how the media portrayed these incidents. Specifically, this research examined the contributing factors that were identified in newspaper articles within the first 30-days of a mass murder event and whether these contributing factors varied by the political leanings of media outlets. For comparison purposes, a left-leaning, a centrist, and a right-leaning newspaper were selected. These were *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Post*, respectively. The analysis examined a sampling frame of 1,251 articles that was reduced to a final analytic sample of 60 articles. Findings included that the three most cited contributing factors were guns, mental illness, and extremism. The political leanings of newspapers did impact two of the three contributing factors that were emphasized in articles. Based on these findings, implications are discussed.

Keywords: media bias, mass murder, active shooter, violence policy

An Analysis of Media Portrayal of Mass Murder Incidents

Mass murder incidents produce a tremendous amount of media coverage and evoke debate over issues such as firearm access, mental illness, bullying, ideological extremism, violent media and music, and parenting skills. After the immediate shock of a mass murder, two questions linger – what caused it and what can be done to prevent it from happening again. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has defined mass murder as an event in which at least four people are killed, excluding the shooter, at one or more geographical locations relatively close to one another (FBI, 2008). With annual estimates of mass murder in the U.S. ranging from an average of 10 incidents (Elsass et al., 2016) to 26 incidents (Duwe, 2000), this phenomenon is statistically rare.

Despite its rarity, many believe that mass murder is a national epidemic (Duwe, 2000; Elsass et al., 2014; Schildkraut et al., 2016). One of the main reasons for this erroneous belief is the amount of attention devoted to mass murder by the media (Duwe, 2000; Schildkraut et al., 2016). The relative infrequency of mass murder and its shocking level of violence make such events particularly attractive for media reporting, with the result that intense media coverage of these events has propagated inaccurate beliefs and exaggerated fears among the public (Silva & Capellan, 2018). The tendency to sensationalize the extreme violence and randomness of these incidents has been linked to an unnecessary sense of panic and helplessness among the public (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Silva & Capellan, 2018). Similarly, the media's emphasis on certain issues that may play a role in mass murder has led to the perception that such events occur for very specific reasons – for example, easy access to guns, bullying, failed relationships, or extremist ideology, and that they are perpetrated by certain types of people, such as the mentally ill or White males of a particular demographic (Duwe, 2000; Taylor, 2018). Media generated perceptions about the causes and perpetrators of mass murder help form social constructions about these crimes which can impact public policy, including legal sanctions and allocation of resources (Welsh & Harris, 2016). They can also lead to the stigmatization of individuals and groups. In a broader sense, the way mass casualty events are covered impacts how violence is conceptualized in the U.S., as well as consequent policy outcomes. Mass murders, then, are more than just single occurrences – they are events with wide-ranging and long-term social effects (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014).

To explore the relationship between media reporting and mass murder, the current study used a content analysis to examine how mass murders were portrayed in media outlets within 30 days of an incident.[1] More specifically, two principal research questions were examined. First, what contributing factors were most often identified by the media within 30 days of a mass murder incident? Second, how did these contributing factors vary by the political leanings of media outlets? Prior studies have focused on differences in media coverage between types of mass murder (e.g., disgruntled employee vs. school vs. ideologically motivated vs. rampage) and determined that school shootings typically received the most media attention (Schildkraut et al., 2018; Silva & Capellan, 2018; Silva & Capellan, 2019). Previous studies have also suggested that the media's exaggerated focus on mass murder is a way to bring contentious issues, such as gun laws and mental illness, to the forefront (McGinty et al., 2013; McGinty et al., 2014; Swanson et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2016; Wolf & Rosen, 2015). While the subject of mass murder has been well researched, including the part that media tends to play, no studies have examined how the political leanings of media outlets affected the contributing factors that they tended to identify.

To address this gap, the current study focused on articles about mass murder incidents in 2018 as published in three mainstream newspapers, each with distinctly different political leanings.[2] The highest

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[1] The first 30 days was chosen because this timeframe is usually the life span of coverage per incident (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert, 2007; Schildkraut, 2012; Schildkraut et al., 2018; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014).
[2] The year 2018 was chosen because it was the most recent year available for analysis that provided an ideal blend of the different types of mass murder.

circulated newspaper from each of three political classifications – right, centrist, and left – was chosen for analysis. These were the *New York Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*, respectively. A content analysis was conducted using data that were collected by searching the databases ProQuest Central, Nexis Uni, and NewsBank: America's News. The final analytic sample consisted of 60 articles.

Review of the Literature

Contributing Factors

A fundamental component of the current study involved the contributing factors of mass murder, to which a significant amount of research has been devoted. After analyzing numerous case studies, Fox and Levin (2003) suggested a range of factors that play a role in mass murder. These factors were grouped into three types: 1) predisposers – long-term and stable preconditions that became incorporated into the personality of the killer; 2) precipitants – short-term and acute triggers; and 3) facilitators, conditions – usually situational – which increased the likelihood of a violent outburst but were not necessary to produce that outburst (Fox & Levin, 2003). "Predisposers" included frustration and externalization of blame (Fox & Levin, 2003). Fox and Levin (2003) found that mass murderers typically had a long history of frustration, humiliation, and failure, and along with these, a deteriorated ability to cope and an increasingly negative self-image. In contrast to people who blame themselves for adverse situations, the mass murderers in Fox and Levin's sample externalized the blame onto others, which often resulted in aggression. A persecutory view of the world permitted them to identify themselves as victims (Fox & Levin, 2003).

Given their longstanding frustrations and blameful mindsets, certain situations or events may have served as "precipitants" or triggers for violent rage (Fox and Levin's second class of contributory factors). In most of the cases they reviewed, the killer experienced a sudden loss or the threat of a loss which seemed catastrophic to them. The loss typically involved separation from loved ones or termination from employment (Fox & Levin, 2003). The final class of contributors identified by Fox and Levin (2003) were "facilitators," which increased both the probability and amount of violence. One major facilitator in their sample was isolation and the resultant lack of emotional support (Fox & Levin, 2003).

Based on her review of 152 mass murders between 2007 and 2011, Taylor (2018) concluded that most mass murder incidents were preceded by some type of precipitant. Common precipitants in her sample mirrored those identified by Fox and Levin (2003) and included: 1) job-related issues involving dismissal, jealousy of another's promotion, confrontation by an employer, refusal of job reinstatement, bankruptcy, denial of tenure, and anger at employers for disability leave; and 2) issues related to a spouse, girlfriend, or female acquaintance which involved actual or perceived abandonment, jealousy, or child support issues (Taylor, 2018).

Mullen (2004) reviewed the cases of five mass murderers and determined that the perpetrators tended to share common social and psychological features. They were socially isolated, unemployed or in marginal work, and bullied as children (Mullen, 2004). Mullen (2004) noted rigid personalities, obsessional traits, suspiciousness, resentment with reflection about previous experiences of humiliation, a tendency to daydream about acts of heroism and revenge against an uncaring world, narcissistic and grandiose traits which materialized in a sense of entitlement and self-righteousness, and an obsession with guns. In most cases, there was no history of interpersonal violence, no contact with mental health services, no prior diagnosis of serious mental disorder, and no significant substance abuse (Mullen, 2004).

In an examination of 63 mass murders between 2000 and 2013, more than half of Silver et al.'s (2018) sample experienced mental health concerns. However, while most of their sample had some type of mental health issue, only 25% had actually been diagnosed by a mental health professional with a mental illness of any kind prior to the offense. Of the 25% diagnosed subsample, 12 had a mood disorder, four had an anxiety

disorder, three had a psychotic disorder, two had a personality disorder, one had an autism spectrum disorder, one had a developmental disorder, and one was described as "other" (Silver et al., 2018). In addition to mental health issues, Silver and colleagues (2018) found that mass murderers were typically facing multiple other stressors in the year before the attack. In order of prevalence, these were financial strain, employment, conflicts with friends and peers, and marital problems (Silver et al., 2018). Similarly, Hempel et al. (1999) found a high percentage of mental health problems among their sample of 30 adult mass murder offenders – approximately 50% had a documented psychiatric history, defined as at least one psychiatric hospitalization or one visit with a mental health practitioner before the mass murder, 30% had no psychiatric history, and 20% had a questionable psychiatric history (Hempel et al., 1999).

While the research seems to show disparate findings on the link between mass murder and mental illness, most of the discrepancy appeared to involve not whether the killers had mental disorders at all, but the kinds of mental disorders they had, whether the mental disorders were formally diagnosed, and how the term "mental illness" itself was defined (Aitken et al., 2004; Kelleher, 1997; Meloy et al., 2001; Mullen, 2004). In some studies, a formal diagnosis was required, while others inferred mental illness based on an individual's behavior (Aitken et al., 2004; Kelleher, 1997; Meloy et al., 2001; Mullen, 2004). Some studies viewed any mental disorder as significant, while others viewed only "serious" mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia) as meaningful (Hempel et al., 1999; Silver et al., 2018). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the various ways that studies have operationalized "mental illness," it is important to note that some scholars have seemingly downplayed the importance of mental illness in mass murder (Aitken et al., 2004; Kelleher, 1997; Meloy et al., 2001; Mullen, 2004), while others have emphasized it (Hempel et al., 1999; Silver et al., 2018). The relationship between mass murder and mental illness, which is one of the contributing factors most frequently appearing in the media (McGinty et al., 2014), is not well understood and varies significantly based on how mental illness is defined.

The Media and Mass Murder

To understand mass murder in the context of the current study, emphasis must be placed on the considerable role that the media have in shaping the public's understanding of this phenomenon (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). Duwe (2000) examined mass murder coverage during the period of 1976 to 1996 and found that the media emphasized death toll, stranger victims, public locations, and the use of guns and other weapons as significant predictors of coverage. Chyi and McCombs (2004) conducted a content analysis on 170 news stories to examine the media's coverage of the Columbine school shootings. They determined that most of the coverage adopted a societal frame, meaning that the shootings were discussed within the larger social context, as opposed to a community or individual context. A significant amount of this larger social context focused on gun control issues (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). In their content analysis of *The New York Times*' coverage of school shootings between 1997 and 2001, Muschert and Carr (2006) reported similar findings to those of Chyi and McCombs (2004).

Schildkraut and colleagues (2018) used a media distortion analysis to review 90 mass murders between 2000 and 2012 and found that higher victim counts received more media coverage, non-school locations received less coverage, and despite their rarity, female shooters were no more likely to receive coverage than male shooters (Schildkraut et al., 2018). In another media distortion analysis, Silva and Capellan (2018) studied the characteristics influencing the newsworthiness of mass murder by reviewing mass murder incidents in the United States from 1966 to 2016. They found that offender's age (with younger offenders being preferred over older ones), using a variety of firearms, school shootings, and a higher number of fatalities were all significant predictors of news coverage (Silva & Capellan, 2018). These studies revealed some of the factors that affect

media coverage, but the current study sought to reach a fuller understanding by examining whether the contributing factors that the media identified varied by the political leanings of news outlets.

The Media and Political Leanings

While significant strides have been made in mass murder research, there are important gaps that need to be filled, particularly in the area of how the political leanings of media outlets may affect the contributing factors that are identified. While this is the first study in this line of inquiry, the interest in this topic was based on prior research that looked at how the political slant of news outlets may affect coverage of the news generally (Adkins-Covert & Wasburn, 2007; D'Alessio, 2012; Nivens, 2003; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Shor et al., 2014). Some studies have found that the media demonstrated a liberal bias resulting from the ideological perspective held by most leading U.S. journalists (D'Alessio, 2012). Others maintained that the media were conservative due to their corporate ownership and profit orientation (Patterson & Donsbach, 1996). Still others found no significant political bias in media reporting (Adkins-Covert & Wasburn, 2007; Nivens, 2003; Shor et al., 2014).

D'Alessio (2012) examined media coverage across 16 presidential elections from 1948 through 2008 and found that Republicans received more coverage than Democrats in newspapers, but the tone of coverage in newspapers and television favored Democrats over Republicans. Patterson and Donsbach (1996) distributed surveys to journalists in five countries: the U.S., Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and Sweden. They found a significant correlation between journalists' personal beliefs and their news decisions, especially in the written press (Patterson & Donsbach, 1996). Focusing specifically on gender bias in news coverage, Shor et al. (2014) compared the 2010 female coverage rates in 168 newspapers and found that conservative media outlets tended to cover female subjects no less than liberal media, which was antithetical to the common view that liberal newspapers are more likely to cover female subjects. Shor et al. (2014) determined that both conservative and liberal newspapers were much more likely to cover males.

Then there are studies like the one by Adkins-Covert and Wasburn (2007), which employed a quantitative measure of ideological bias in a content analysis of the two largest circulation news magazines in the U.S. at the time of the study's publication, *Time* and *Newsweek*. The authors compared findings from those magazines with findings from an identical examination of two of the leading partisan journals in the U.S., the conservative *National Review* and the liberal *Progressive*. They found little support for significant media bias in either ideological direction (Adkins-Covert & Wasburn, 2007). Niven's (2003) study comparing newspaper articles on congressional party switchers mirrored those of Adkins-Covert and Wasburn (2007), again showing no indication of ideological bias in news reporting.

It seems, then, that the question of whether political leanings affect reporting by the media remains unresolved. In addition to divergent outcomes are claims of methodological flaws in the studies that have examined this important question (Adkins-Covert & Wasburn, 2007; Niven, 2003). To lessen the uncertainty of the factors that affect media reporting, at least in the realm of mass murder, the current research determined whether the political leanings of media outlets affected the sort of contributing factors identified in mass murder incidents.

The foregoing review indicates that a significant amount of research has been conducted on various facets of mass murder, but the question of whether the political leanings of media outlets affects the contributing factors they emphasize in their stories remains unexplored. The purpose of the current study was to expand the literature by examining this question as evidenced by three national newspapers of varying political stances. The method used to answer these questions is outlined below.

Method

Our study's primary purpose was to examine how mass murders were portrayed by the media within 30 days of an incident. Newspaper articles covering mass murders in 2018 were examined in order to conduct a content analysis on how media portrayed these crimes. The content analysis method was selected because its purpose is to identify how documents reflect aspects of a culture (Altheide & Schneider, 2013), as well as study messages along with the meaning those messages transmit (Maxfield & Babbie, 2018). Content analysis is ideal for answering the basic question of communications research: who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect, and allows for a methodical yet nuanced understanding of themes that may otherwise be overlooked (Maxfield & Babbie, 2018).

Mass murder has been conceptualized in several ways. According to Bush and Cavanaugh (1986), mass murder is the killing of a number of people within minutes to hours. Hempel and associates (1999) defined mass murder as an incident committed by a single adult (18 years or older) who killed at least three victims other than himself in a single incident. Petee et al. (1997) maintained that mass murder consisted of at least three dead victims and occurred in a public setting. Fox and Levin (1998) asserted that mass murder involved the killing of four or more victims by one or a few perpetrators within a single event and lasted for a few minutes to several hours (refer to Table 1 for additional conceptualizations).

Table 1
Conceptualizations of Mass Murder

Study	Definition
Hickey (2013)	The killing of many people by one or more offenders in a short duration of time and either in the same place or in areas in proximity to one another.
Holmes and DeBurger (1998)	The killing of at least three people in one place or during one incident.
Dietz (1986)	A killing in which the perpetrator injures five or more victims and at least three of those injured die from their injuries.
Capellan et al. (2019)	Incidents of targeted violence where offenders killed or unambiguously attempted to kill four or more people in a public setting in one or multiple closely related locations within a 24-hour period, excluding felony-related mass murders and familicides.
Silva and Capellan (2018)	Incidents of targeted violence where offenders killed or unambiguously attempted to kill four or more people in a public setting in one or multiple closely related locations within a 24-hour period, excluding felony-related mass murders and familicides. The main weapon must be a firearm. The murder cannot be related to any profit-driven criminal activity (e.g., drug trafficking or gang murders).

One aspect complicating our inquiry is the variety of definitions ascribed to the crime of mass murder by researchers, and the fact that the FBI changed its definition and terminology. Through the early 2000s, the FBI defined mass murder as an event in which at least four people were killed, not including the shooter, at one or more geographical locations that were relatively close to one another (FBI, 2008). After 2010, the FBI changed

its terminology from "mass murder" to "active shooter" and added broader inclusion criteria; now, events without a set number of victims or a defined parameter can be classified as "active shooter" incidents. Currently, the FBI defines an active shooter as an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area (FBI, 2019).

For the purpose of this study, the definition of mass murder was an amalgamation of the most methodologically useful parts of earlier definitions. Because previous assessments of the media and mass murder have consistently demonstrated that the number of fatalities is a key factor in determining news coverage (Duwe, 2000; Schildkraut et al., 2018; Silva & Capellan, 2018), this study operationalized mass murder as an incident that resulted in the death of at least three people, excluding the shooter. This choice allowed for comparison with the greatest number of previous studies, the majority of which required that three people die at the hands of the shooter (Dietz, 1986; Hempel et al., 1999; Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Petee et al., 1997). In addition to three or more deaths, this study further operationalized mass murder as an event that is unrelated to any profit-driven, gang-related, or terrorist-related activity. The dynamics leading to these types of incidents seem fundamentally different in offender motive, incident location, and victim selection than those typically conceptualized in the context of mass murder (Krouse & Richardson, 2015; Silva & Capellan, 2018). The third component we specified was the time element – the mass murder incident had to occur within a 24-hour period, which is consistent with earlier studies (Bush & Cavanaugh, 1986; Capellan et al., 2019; Fox & Levin, 1998; Hickey, 2013; Silva & Capellan, 2018). The fourth and final component of this study's mass murder definition was that the primary weapon in the murder had to be a firearm. This was decided because mass murder incidents were identified in this research by using FBI records (this process is detailed in the "Data Collection and Sampling" section below). Implicit in the FBI definition is the use of a firearm, as the new term used to describe mass murder is "active *shooter*." Therefore, the incidents in our study also complied with this part of the FBI's updated conceptualization. To summarize, this study operationalized mass murder as an incident that consisted of four components: 1) resulted in the death of at least three people, excluding the shooter, 2) unrelated to any profit-driven, gang-related, or terrorist-related activity, 3) occurred within a 24-hour period, and 4) involved the use of a firearm as the primary weapon.

Media can also be conceptualized in several ways. On a basic level, there are four forms of media: print media (newspapers and magazines), broadcast media (television and radio), outdoor media (billboards and signage), and internet. The most apparent purpose of the media is to inform the public of news, but media outlets are also businesses which aim for profit (Duwe, 2000; Chermak, 1994). As such, they frequently cater to a specific spectrum of readers, in effect carving out a market niche. One way they do this is by adopting a particular political leaning in terms of content and editorial stance. For this study, media were operationalized as newspapers, which are a form of print media. Newspapers were chosen because they are archived, which allowed for analysis of events over time. However, only online newspaper articles as archived through Newsbank, Proquest Central, and Nexus Uni were reviewed for the study. Print versions of news articles did not comprise any part of the data set.

Three of the most circulated newspapers were chosen – *New York Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*. These were also selected due to their contrasting political leanings as classified by AllSides.com, which will be discussed further shortly.

The study's first research question was: *What contributing factors were identified by the media within 30 days of a mass murder incident*? The concept of "contributing factors" is quite broad and was discussed at length in the literature review of this paper. For this study, the concept of contributing factors was operationalized as any of the following: (1) emotional triggers (any type of identifiable incident that set the offender off – break up with significant other, divorce, death of someone close to the offender, loss of a job, etc.); (2) relationship issues (history of turmoil among spouses, significant others, family, or friends); (3) references to guns; (4) mental illness (official diagnosis or reference to mental health issues by a mental health

professional or criminal justice official); (5) rejection; (6) lack of career success; (7) political, racial, or religious extremism; (8) financial troubles; (9) preoccupation with guns or other weapons; and (10) "other" (Petee et al., 1997; Silver et al., 2018; Taylor, 2018). The "other" category was coded broadly and intended to capture any unanticipated factors that appeared in the various news articles.

The study's second research question was: *In what ways did the contributing factors identified by the media vary by the political leanings of the media outlets?* Conceptualizing political leanings can be challenging. While the classification scheme of "liberal" versus "conservative" is imperfect, the opinions of those who affiliate with each party are substantially correlated with one other, so classifying media outlets in this way conveys meaning to most people (Zhou et al., 2011). Political leanings of media outlets for this study were operationalized according to the classification scheme of AllSides.com, which uses a patented bias rating system and multiple methodologies to classify news sources as "left," "left-leaning," "center," "right-leaning," and "right." Allsides.com was used as the source to determine political leanings of newspapers because it gathers data from a variety of sources, including blind bias surveys, editorial reviews, third party research, independent research, and community feedback. Allsides.com has been utilized by several university library websites, such as the library at the University of Michigan. According to AllSides.com (2019), sources with a "left" media bias rating were most likely to show approval for government services, federal laws to protect equal rights, tax increases on the wealthy, government regulation of corporations, keeping abortion legal, decreasing military spending and intervention, advocating for increased gun control measures, a belief that all people deserve help when they need it, a belief in the importance of multiculturalism, a rejection of social and economic inequality, and a belief that some groups of people suffer disproportionately in society due to identity characteristics. Sources with a "right" media bias rating were most likely to show approval for decreasing federal regulations, a belief that government should be as small and non-intrusive as possible, decreasing government spending with the exception of defense spending, decreasing taxes, preserving the rights of gun owners, using military force when it protects American interests, maintaining strong border security, rejection of entitlements and public funding for private needs, outlawing or restricting abortion, and a rejection of identity politics and the "welfare state" (AllSides Media Bias Ratings, 2019). Sources with a "center" media rating either did not show much bias to either side of the political spectrum, or their bias leaned to the left and right equally at different times. While it may seem that readers would be best served in following centrist outlets, it is important to note that media outlets of this classification may sometimes miss or omit important perspectives and context (AllSides Media Bias Ratings, 2019). The "right," "centrist," and "left" newspapers selected for this study were the *New York Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*, respectively.

Data Collection and Sampling

The unit of analysis for this study was newspaper articles. Only archived articles that were available online and were purported to be "hard news" type reporting were selected. Since our research interest here was in how these outlets reported the facts and immediate circumstances of mass murder incidents within the first 30-days, opinion pieces were specifically excluded from the data set. Online articles were collected from the highest circulated right, centrist, and left newspapers (as classified by AllSides.com), which were *New York Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*, respectively (Top 15 U.S. Newspapers by Circulation, 2019). The highest circulated newspaper from each political classification was used to ensure news coverage that reached a large subset of the U.S. population. Data were drawn from English language online newspaper articles published in 2018 as archived through ProQuest Central, Nexis Uni, and NewsBank: America's News.

To have an exhaustive list of all mass murder events in 2018, each of the 27 mass murder incidents reported by the FBI in 2018 were reviewed (FBI, 2019). During this review, any incident included in the FBI list that did not meet this study's operationalization of mass murder (minimum of three dead excluding the

shooter; unrelated to any profit-driven, gang-related, or terrorist-related activity; occurring within a 24-hour period; and gun as primary weapon) was removed from the sampling frame. The result was a list of 10 mass murder events in 2018 that met this study's definition of mass murder. In keeping with previous research of this nature, a 30-day timeframe, including the day of the murder, was used in the article search (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert, 2007; Schildkraut et al., 2018).

In the three selected databases (ProQuest Central, Nexis Uni, and NewsBank: America's News), the following terms were searched for a 30-day timespan after each of the 10 mass murder incidents: "mass murder," "mass shooting," "mass shooter," "active shooting," "active shooter," "school murder," "school shooting," "school shooter," "rampage murder," "rampage shooting," "rampage shooter," "rampage murder," "massacre," and "murder massacre." This search resulted in 1,251 articles. Every article was reviewed for applicability to the current study, using purposive sampling to decide which would be kept. Newspaper articles with any of the following features were eliminated from the final analytic sample: did not directly address the details of the mass murder incident; shorter than 100 words; classified as corrections, book reviews, letters to the editors, business or stock, obituaries, duplicate stories, story previews, or calendar reports; editorial or opinion pieces. A final analytic sample of 60 articles was deemed appropriate due to the foregoing criteria. Table 2 indicates the final analytic sample of mass murder incidents as covered by the three news outlets.

Table 2

2018 Mass Murder Incidents / News Articles

Incident	Location	Date	NY Times	NY Post	Wall Street Journal
Douglas HS	Parkland, FL	2/14	6	11	7
Waffle House	Nashville, TN	4/22	0	0	1
Santa Fe HS	Santa Fe, TX	5/18	2	2	2
Capital Gazette	Annapolis, MD	6/29	2	3	1
Fifth Third Center	Cincinnati, OH	9/6	0	0	0
T & T Trucking, Inc.	Bakersfield, CA	9/12	1	0	0
Rite Aid Dist. Center	Aberdeen, MD	9/20	2	1	0
Tree of Life Synagogue	Pittsburg, PA	10/27	4	2	1
Borderline Bar & Grill	Thousand Oaks, CA	11/7	3	4	3
Mercy Hospital	Chicago, IL	11/19	1	1	0

The protocol for this study (see Appendix A) consisted of the following elements: 1) newspaper title; 2) political leaning; 3) title/headline and author; 4) date of article; 5) year; 6) page and section number; 7) newspaper article length; 8) event date and time; 9) event location; 10) contributing factors; 11) persons/groups mentioned; 12) persons/groups quoted (directly or indirectly); and 13) miscellaneous comments (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). The first nine elements were chosen to allow easy identification of each article. Contributing factors (element 10) included the following: emotional triggers (any type of identifiable incident that set the offender off – breaking up significant other, divorce, death of someone close to the offender, loss of a job, etc.); relationship issues (history of turmoil among spouses, significant others, family, or friends); references to guns; mental illness (official diagnosis or reference to mental issues by a mental health or criminal justice professional); rejection; lack of career success; political, racial, or religious extremism; financial problems; preoccupation with guns or other weapons; and "other." These components were selected based on consistent themes that were identified in the articles.

Data Coding and Analysis

This study used open coding by applying codes that were derived from the text, an approach which allowed themes to emerge from the articles without any preconceptions (Glaser, 1992). This strategy required several readings of each article. No coding was performed in the first reading because the aim of this phase was to get a sense of the overall tone and message of each article. Based on the second reading, a "lean code" was created that consisted of about five to 10 codes. In the third reading, each article was fully coded. MAXQDA software was utilized to aid in this analysis.

Cross-validation procedures for the current study involved open coding by two independent evaluators. Coding of articles were then compared to ensure inter-rater reliability. Reader responses to articles were also reviewed to see if they picked out themes that were similar to those identified by the researchers.

Results

To assess how mass murder was portrayed by the media, two research questions were examined: *What contributing factors were identified by the media within 30 days of a mass murder incident?; In what ways did the contributing factors emphasized by the media vary by the media outlet's political leaning?* The three most prevalent contributing factors identified by the media were guns, mental illness, and extremism (political, racial, or religious), respectively. It was further determined that the political leanings of newspapers impacted how the contributing factors of guns and extremism were covered, but not mental illness.

Identification of Contributing Factors Within 30 Days

The contributing factor of guns was mentioned 409 times within the 60 articles that comprised the final sampling frame, which was almost five times as often as the next most cited contributing factor. This was expected since use of firearms comprised one of our sampling criteria. In addition, "guns" were broadly coded for and included anytime the word "gun" or "firearm" was used, any reference to a term associated with gun use (e.g., shot, trigger, loaded, etc.), and anytime access to guns was mentioned. Excluded from this category were phrases that mentioned preoccupation or fascination with guns, as such phrases were considered a separate contributing factor. While the disparity between how often guns were mentioned compared to the other contributing factors was likely due to its broad coding, the 5:1 disparity was noteworthy. Further, when the political leanings of the various outlets were factored in, the skewness which emerged suggested that emphasis on this factor did have a political component. This will be further explored in the next section.

Mental illness, the second most cited contributing factor, was mentioned 82 times within the 60 articles. To be coded as mental illness, newspapers had to explicitly state the term "mental illness" or some variation of it (e.g., mental health, mental wellbeing, psychological issues, etc.), and such a statement had to be declared in the article by a professional in the mental health or criminal justice fields. For example, the following statement was coded as mental illness, "The Ventura County Sherriff's Office said Long may have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder," but this statement was not, "He was a weird loner who never seemed right." The mention of mental illness was not skewed according to the political affiliation of outlets. It was mentioned in roughly equal proportion by the three newspapers.

The third most frequently mentioned contributing factor of extremism was mentioned 73 times within the 60 articles. Any statement that indicated racial, religious, or political extremism was coded as such. For example, "He had a history of posting online racist, anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic rants" was coded as extremism. Although extremism was mentioned in roughly equal terms by the left, center, and right leaning papers, it was characterized somewhat differently by the three outlets.

Identification of Contributing Factors by Political Leanings of Newspapers

The second research question examined how contributing factors varied by the political leanings of newspapers. Two themes emerged while coding for this area of inquiry. First, while guns were the most often cited factor by all three newspapers, this varied significantly by outlet. There were 201 references to guns in the 21 articles written by *The New York Times* (left-leaning). This was an average of 9.57 times per article. The 15 articles appearing in *The Wall Street Journal* (centrist) referred to guns 110 times, an average of 7.33 times per article. In the 24 articles by the *New York Post* (right-leaning), guns were brought up 98 times, an average of 4.08 times per article. Further, under the "other" heading of our coding protocol we noted that the term "gun control" was mentioned disproportionately by the *New York Times* (left leaning), appearing in 28% of the articles published by the *Times*. Conversely, the phrase gun control was mentioned in only three of the right leaning *Post* articles (12%), while the centrist *Wall Street Journal* fell in-between, mentioning gun control in 20% of its articles. These notable differences between the three most heavily circulated national newspapers comport with their respective political affiliations, suggesting that, at least on the topic of guns, political agendas affect reporting.

While the contributing factor of extremism did not exhibit statistically significant differences between the three newspapers, when cross referenced with terms coded under the "other" heading, an interesting and unexpected trend emerged in *how* extremism and gun control were covered. There was a striking difference in the number of times each outlet mentioned certain political figures in their articles, particularly those incidents that appeared to involve extremist intent or high casualty counts, such as the Tree of Life Synagogue, Borderline Bar & Grill, or Douglas High School shootings. Although we did not set out to code for mention of political figures initially, it became evident that the portrayal of politicians played into the topic of mass murder and seemed to be reflective of the political affiliation of the newspapers. For instance, *The New York Times* was more likely to mention Republican or conservative political figures in their articles, usually in an anti-gun control, extremist, or other negative connotation (18 times in 21 articles, an average of 0.86 times per article). By contrast, the centrist *Wall Street Journal* referred to specific politicians or parties just 4 times in 15 articles, an average of 0.14 times per article, while the right-leaning *New York Post* did so just 6 times in 24 articles, an average of 0.27 times per article. In other words, *The New York Times* was three times more likely to tie conservatives to a mass murder incident. A fairly obvious example of this appears in an October 28, 2018 *Times* article on the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting, which references a completely unrelated case of a mail bomb suspect whose extremist postings "…echoed the saber-rattling rhetoric of Mr. Trump's rallies" (p. 1). There is no apparent connection between the mail bomb suspect and the Tree of Life incident, yet the reader is left with the implication that President Trump somehow inspired both incidents.

Other Findings

In congruence with previous research (Duwe, 2000; Silva & Capellan, 2018), the mass murder incidents in our sample which garnered the most coverage were those involving schools and/or those inflicting the most casualties. The two incidents in our data set involving schools, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (17 victims) and Santa Fe High School (10 victims), accounted for one-half the data set, 30 news articles between the three newspapers. The Borderline Bar & Grill (12 victims) and the Tree of Life Synagogue (11 victims) together generated 17 articles among the three outlets.

Discussion

The topic of mass murder has been covered by both researchers and the media. Studies have focused on the contributing factors of the phenomenon (Fox & Levin, 2003; Hempel et al., 1999; Leary et al., 2003; Silver et al., 2018; Taylor, 2018; Verlinden et al., 2000), the different ways of classifying such incidents (Dietz, 1986; Fox & Levin, 1996; Holmes & Holmes, 1994; Kelleher, 1997; Langman, 2009; Meloy et al., 2001; Mullen, 2004; Muschert, 2007), and the various elements of mass murder that produce the most media coverage (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Duwe, 2000; Schildkraut et al., 2018; Silva & Capellan, 2018). The current study added a new dimension of inquiry, one which explored the contributing factors identified by the media and how the identification of these factors varied by the political leanings of news outlets. The analysis indicated that the three most cited contributing factors identified by the media within the first 30 days of an incident were guns, mental illness, and extremism, respectively. While the first two factors were expected and in line with previous research, it was notable that extremism was the third most common factor. A possible explanation for this may be linked to our second research question involving the political leanings of newspapers and will be addressed in connection with that research question.

It was expected that guns would emerge as the most oft cited contributing factor in the analysis due to its broad coding and the criteria of the study's sampling frame. However, it was revealing that guns as a contributing factor were mentioned in direct proportion to the respective political leanings of the three news outlets. The most liberal outlet (*The New York Times*) mentioned guns with significantly greater frequency than the more centrist paper (*The Wall Street Journal*), which in turn mentioned firearms significantly more than the most conservative paper in the study (*New York Post*). When cross-referencing with "other" coding recurrences such as "gun control" and political figures, the political shading of this factor by the three outlets is further evident. The third most often referenced contributing factor was extremism. While extremism appeared across all three outlets at about the same rate, *how* this factor was tied to prominent political actors was distinctly illustrative. The left-leaning *Times* was far more likely to mention a conservative, republican, or President Trump in its articles about mass murder, usually in the context of far-right rhetoric or inaction on gun control legislation.

Although mental illness was the second most cited contributing factor to mass murder, it was discussed at about the same rate by the three newspapers. However, analysis of this factor was complicated by how mental illness was characterized and reported by the media.

Implications

The impact of mass media on the public dialogue cannot be overstated, and it is evident from this study that more research needs to examine the factors that affect media coverage. Americans have unprecedented access to current event coverage through newspaper, broadcast, internet, and social media sources. While these sources inform, they also influence. It is important to understand the constant tension between objectivity and bias and the potential outcomes of this dynamic. When it comes to the tragic outcomes of mass murder, both extremes of the political spectrum find ample ground to sow their seeds of discontent. In connection with our findings concerning the contributing factor of guns, the left rarely misses an opportunity to propose new gun control measures, while the right counters with calls for expansion of legal gun carry and an armed citizenry. Similarly, when mass murder involves an element of political extremism, the debate becomes even more emotional and volatile. As noted, most newspapers harbor a political leaning in favor of a particular clientele. To some degree, it's understandable that they must cater to their clients and to their market. However, it would seem there is ample time to stimulate that partisan dialogue once the dust settles; this is the place of editorial boards, op-eds, opinion pieces, and pundits. It is not the place of news stories filed in the immediate aftermath

of an incident. When this happens too often, it can cross over from informing to misinforming, and further complicate the policy making process.

Three research implications are made clear in this study. First, more research needs to examine the factors that affect media coverage of mass murder incidents, with a careful eye to the political leanings of those outlets. Second, greater consistency is needed in how the concept of "mass murder" is defined. The vast discrepancies in existing studies undoubtedly account for some of the conflicting findings regarding the contributing factors, types, and general patterns found in mass murder research. Third, more uniformity is needed in how "mental health" is operationalized. This research implication clearly translates into the policy realm, as the conclusions of prior research, fraught with definitional inconsistences, may impact how those with mental illness are viewed and treated in society.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study contributes to knowledge on the pressing issue of mass murder, there were several limitations. Although the study attempted to identify all mass murders that met the definitional criteria, some cases may have been overlooked. Mass murder research largely depends on open-source data like newspapers (Silva & Capellan, 2019). Open-source data collection strategies tend to overlook older events and events that receive less publicity (Silva & Capellan, 2019). While selecting 2018 as the year of analysis rendered the first issue moot, the second issue undoubtedly affected the results, as events that received little or no media attention may have been excluded from the various database search results. Future studies may consider analyzing regional newspapers to overcome this problem.

A second limitation was that coverage of each incident was limited to 30 days. While this timeframe is common for mass murder research (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Muschert, 2007; Schildkraut et al., 2018), it also contributed to an incomplete analysis of these events. For example, there may be important differences in how a mass murder is portrayed by the media 30 days after it occurs versus three months after it occurs. To remedy this problem, future studies may consider collecting data from a lengthier timeframe for each incident.

Third, this study was limited to one year of analysis, which restricted the generalizability of its findings. Future studies should review several years, which may reveal patterns and themes absent from this analysis. Finally, including only the archived format of newspapers and ignoring non-newspaper sources (such as national television news websites) may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider expanding the reviewed formats.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of mass murder shocks the social conscience. Due to their random and horrific nature, these crimes impact our individual and collective perceptions of safety and security (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). Depending on the nature of the victims and the perpetrator, such incidents can also generate great anger and frustration – emotions which demand a public policy response. As our primary source of information, the media are in a position to directly influence both the dialogue and action that follows these tragedies. This power is not lost on journalists and was evidenced in our study. The data suggest that media outlets will consistently emphasize certain contributing factors which are in congruence with their political affiliation. Yet, no such disclaimers appear in their articles. If newspapers cater to their political aims instead of facts, the integrity of the information that emanates from the media comes into doubt. Along with this possible breach in integrity comes the question of whether the policies that are influenced by such reporting are, in fact, in our best interests.

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Appendix A: "An Analysis of the Media's Portrayal of Mass Murder Incidents" Protocol Sheet

1. Newspaper title:

2. Political leaning:

3. Title/headline and author:

4. Date of article:

5. Year:

6. Page and section number:

7. Newspaper article length

   a. Less than 500

   b. 501 to 1500

   c. 1501 to 3000

   d. 3001 plus

8. Event date and time:

9. Event location:

10. Contributing factors

    a. Emotional trigger (any type of identifiable incident that set the offender off – breaking up significant other, divorce, death of someone close to the offender, loss of a job, etc.)

    b. Relationship issues (history of turmoil)

    c. References to guns

    d. Mental illness (or any term associated with mental illness)

    e. Rejection or feelings of failure

    f. Lack of career success

    g. Political, racial, or religious extremism

    h.   Financial problems

    i.   Preoccupation with guns or other weapons

    j.   Other (specify):

11. Persons/groups mentioned

    a.   Personal to shooter (shooter's family, shooter's friends)

    b.   Personal to victims (victims, victims' family members, victims' friends)

    c.   Witnesses

    d.   Government official/politician (mayor, governor, President)

    e.   Criminal justice official (police officer, sheriff)

    f.   Experts (professors, analysts)

    g.   Other (specify):

12. Persons/groups quoted (directly or indirectly)

    a.   Personal to shooter (shooter, shooter's family, shooter's friends)

    b.   Personal to victims (victims, victims' family members, victims' friends)

    c.   Witnesses

    d.   Government official/politician (mayor, governor, President)

    e.   Criminal justice official (police officer)

    f.   Experts (professors, analysts)

    g.   Other (specify):

13. Miscellaneous comments: