MEDIA AND MASSACRE:
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE COLUMBINE STORY

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Media and Massacre: The Social Construction of the Columbine Story

Thesis directed by Professor Tom Mayer

The Columbine shootings were a watershed event that threatened the moral foundation of society. The Columbine story was the media's response and coverage of this landmark crime. This study is a thematic content analysis of the mainstream U.S. news media coverage of the Columbine High School shootings of 1999. It is an empirical and rhetorical investigation of the cultural meaning of the discussion the Columbine event and reactions to it. The data are 728 articles from ABC, CNN, PBS, the Associated Press, New York Times, Time, and Newsweek, collected using an on-line database search, and were analyzed using inductive content analysis techniques. Chapter 1 presents a narrative of the development of the media's focus on the event, and a discussion of the Columbine media story as public moral discourse. Chapter 2 continues the narrative, focusing on the perpetrators, victims, and commentaries, and connects these discussions to theoretical debates in the sociology of culture. Chapter 4 reports the descriptive findings, including the volume and frequency of coverage. Nearly two-thirds of the coverage focused on reactions to the shootings, while only one-
third covered the Columbine event. Chapter 5 examined the media's characterization of the perpetrators, and concluded of the two shooters, the media portrayed Eric Harris as more nefarious. An analysis of the sequencing of the media account of the event revealed that journalists broke with normal stylistic conventions when writing about the shootings, a phenomenon likely caused by the terroristic and racial elements of the shootings. Chapter 6 examined the media coverage of three of the victims. Those victims whose life histories or circumstances of death were more interesting received higher coverage. Also, victims whose stories were related to existing social movements received more coverage, as commentators framed their stories in terms of their causes. The media avoided covering the perpetrators in proximity to the victims, because the perpetrators heinous acts stripped them of their humanness.
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INTRODUCTION

THE NATURE OF THE STUDY

This dissertation a study of the thematic content of the mainstream U.S. news media coverage of the Columbine High School shootings of 1999. Basically stated, the coverage was massive, one of the largest news media stories of the 1990’s. The primary research questions addressed in this study are: What was the nature of the Columbine coverage, and, specifically, how were the perpetrators and victims characterized? What can these characterizations tell us about the process through which the media came to decipher the violence reported in the Columbine story? The inquiry proceeds from a concrete analysis of the media coverage of the Columbine shootings, and ultimately concludes in making abstract statements about the status of moral discourse about the shootings. Of course, one does not jump immediately from the concrete to the abstract, or vice versa, as such leaps require gradual conceptual steps. In this section, I describe the research questions addressed in this study, and indicate how the questions are to be answered.

This research begins as a concrete, empirical study of the media coverage of the Columbine shootings, the findings of which are reported in Chapter 4. On the most concrete level, I have first addressed the descriptive elements of such a
study. In relation to these issues, the research answers the question: When did the coverage occur and in what quantity? Relevant issues include describing the quantity, frequency, and volume of media coverage of the event. Scholars of media studies will hopefully view these findings as interesting.

Second, the study addresses the question of thematic content. That is, the analysis proceeds to a thematic summary of the coverage, applying a morphological and conceptual coding structure to content. The results of this analysis amount to a concise summary of the content, in terms of the nature and prevalence of themes present. In some ways, these summaries can be interpreted as a qualitative form of data reduction. Given the large corpus of articles, reporting these sorts of findings offers readers a manageable version of what the coverage was about. Of course, the narrative sequences also address this issue, although in a different form.

Third, I offer a sociological discussion of the thematic content, which addresses the ideological implications of the presence (or absence) of themes in the coverage. Here, the research addresses the issue of how individual themes have appeared (or not appeared) in the coverage, and the implications of these themes.

Chapter 5 discusses the characterization of the perpetrators in the Columbine story. The chapter begins with an extension of the narrative sequences, and an analysis of the descriptions present in the Columbine coverage. In particular, the chapter explores the themes of coverage of the shooters, both as
a pair and individually. What does the nature of these portrayals tell us about the assumptions behind the media accounts?

Also, in this chapter, I explore the sequencing of the headline and article leads for the *New York Times* articles in the data set. This analysis suggests that the Columbine shootings caused a period of sociomoral instability that made it difficult for journalists to cover the shootings in a conventional fashion. This might help to explain some of the idiosyncrasies present in the form of news articles I have observed in the data. Still, after a period of uncertainty, the media has settled upon a standard sequence for contextualizing the Columbine shootings.

In Chapter 6, I describe the characterization of the victims, particularly three of the students: First, I examine the story of Isaiah Shoels, who was the black student apparently targeted for his race. Second, I study the story of Cassie Bernall, who was allegedly shot for the affirmation of her faith in God. Third, I examine the story of Kyle Velasquez who is more noteworthy for the lack of coverage he received, despite his being both a minority and Special Education student. I examine the role that moral entrepreneurs had in highlighting the stories of some victims.

Also, in this chapter, I examine what I call the 13/15 Issue, which is indicative of the problematic nature of the relationship of the moral status of the perpetrators in relationship to the victims. This discussion is exemplified by the story of the 15 crosses erected as memorials for the 15 fatalities. Angered that the
shooters would be memorialized at the same place as their 13 victims, the father of one of the student victims cut down the two crosses for the perpetrators. This sparked a discussion of the moral status of the perpetrators, and whether they deserved to be memorialized. The chapter concludes its discussion with a statement about the mass media’s final stance on the right and wrong of the Columbine shooting.

The conclusion of this dissertation, Chapter 7, is a discussion of the nature of moral judgment and the Columbine story. Two crucial issues are the controllability of behavior and the intentional nature of the perpetrators’ actions. These issues underlie the moral issues that the journalists struggled with, and the discrepancies observed in the portrayal of the perpetrators may be related to the moral issue of intent. Finally, I offer suggestions for future research.

This is an appropriate place to explain what this study does not attempt to address. Namely, this research does not address the Columbine shootings as an historical event. Therefore, I am not able to address issues of what happened at Columbine, whether before, during, or after the shootings. The data are comprised of media accounts covering the Columbine shootings and the reactions to the event. It is folly to assume that what was reported in the news media was totally factual and objective, just as it is wrong to assume that the media coverage was totally without veracity. The actual status of the truth of the media coverage of Columbine lies somewhere between these two extremes.
When I refer to Columbine, I mean the Columbine media story, and not the Columbine event. Media is one form of public behavior, and beyond the methodological concerns discussed in Chapter 3, the ultimate the validity of this study lies in the fact that media writers and speakers actually wrote or spoke the content, and that editors and producers actually approved and produced the content. These are a matter of public record. I point this out as a contrast to potential historical statements that could be made about the factual or questionable nature of the behavior exhibited on the part of the perpetrators, victims, teachers, parents, law enforcement personnel, and any other participants of the actual Columbine shootings. I do not intend to make statements about these persons or the events in which they participated.
By 12:01 AM\(^1\) on Wednesday, April 21, 1999, only twelve hours after police responded to a call of a shooting at Columbine High School, Deputy Steve Davis, the public information officer for the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department had received some 339 calls from media sources in 60 countries. County officials were so overwhelmed by the media’s interest in the story, that they decided a concerted response to the media was necessary to handle the magnitude of the Columbine story. In the period of a little more than twelve hours, a local occurrence of a school shooting had mushroomed into a national media event, the largest of 1999 and one of the largest in a decade.

At 1:30 AM, the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department, Administrators, District Attorney’s office, and School District decided to set up a common communications center. They chose a nearby public library, the Columbine

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\(^1\) For continuity I use Mountain Standard Time, the local time zone for Columbine High School. This avoids the confusion of comparing events happening in Colorado, which is in the Mountain Time zone, with the New York- and Washington-centered mass media, two hours apart in the Eastern Time zone.
Public Library, as the location to set up their crisis communications center. By 6:00 AM, the library was functioning as an official crisis communications center (Jefferson County Colorado Sheriff’s Office 2000).

Meanwhile, the mass media had been busy. Daily newspapers went to press during the night, and hit the stands early in the morning. Across the country, the New York Times carried the headline “TERROR IN LITTLETON” in block letters on the front page, and for nearly a month would continue to run the same headline above the stories of the Columbine shootings.

Among the first articles in the Times was an overview piece, followed by a piece about the Trench Coat Mafia, and another article that included numerous eyewitness accounts of the shootings. Even though at the time that the paper went to press many facts remained unclear, the Times published in an editorial, “Once again a routine school day was interrupted by blasts of gunfire . . . Meanwhile, it is not too early to begin drawing lessons” (New York Times 1999a). The article went on to advocate early detection of potential violent offenders and to advocate gun control among youth.

Similarly, the broadcast media had been in action. CNN anchor Carol Lin and ABC’s Good Morning America host Charles Gibson had joined the media entourage on-site at Columbine. Both programs began their live broadcasts at 5:00 AM local time, well before dawn of the day after the shootings. Good Morning America characterized the shootings as “the bloodiest school massacre in
U.S. history . . . the eighth [school shooting] in 39 months” (Muller, Gibson, and Sawyer 1999).

Overnight there had not been much new information released. The media reported that at 11:00 PM the previous night, an undiscovered bomb had exploded, although no one had been injured. The investigation had proceeded slowly, because the police were wary of other explosive devices in the school. The Sheriff’s Department continued to describe Columbine as a “complex crime scene.” However, the media also reported that the investigation was proceeding in other areas. Police had been seen at both suspects’ homes, and the FBI was working with AOL to secure Internet content related to the crime. The Jefferson County District Attorney said, in an interview on The News Hour with Jim Lehrer, that he suspected that others probably knew about the attack (Lehrer 1999).

By noon on the 21st, a mixture of rain and snow had begun to fall, dampening the arid landscape and casting a gray pallor over the crime scene. To those present, and to the millions of viewers, the weather seemed appropriate, even if unwelcomed. The media continued to look for facts about the situation, and by the end of the day, Deputy Davis had conducted 134 on-camera interviews with mass media sources (Jefferson County Colorado Sheriff’s Office 2000). Through media contact with the Sheriff’s Department and witnesses, the main facts of the case began to emerge, including the identities and descriptions of the
perpetrators, the number and nature of fatalities, and the main tack of commentary and explanations about the event.

The Columbine shootings, overnight, had become a national media event. How had the story unfolded and come to mean so much to so many people so quickly? What were the events and meanings that had struck such a chord across the entire country, reflected in the focus on this story by so many people through the eyes of their media sources?

Chaos in the Suburbs

It is Tuesday, April 20, 1999 at 11:54 AM, and CNN viewers first hear reports of a shooting at Columbine High School, “We are going to listen in to one of our affiliates in Denver, Colorado, KUSA where there is a report of a school shooting.” It is CNN anchor Martin Savidge interrupting regular news programming to begin live coverage. They first talk with Jonathan Ladd, a Columbine High School student who has escaped and run home. He describes sitting in his classroom, and then hearing a loud explosion. He ran into the hallway, where he describes seeing other students running panicked through the hallways. KUSA Anchor Gary Shapiro asks, “What were the students saying and doing as you were fleeing the school?”

Ladd responds, “A lot of them couldn’t believe what was going on. My – myself – I couldn’t, you know – most of you just think that it will never happen to you, at your school, and unfortunately it has.”

Next, the media talks with Steve Davis, the spokesman for the Jefferson County Colorado Sheriff’s department. He is en route to the crime scene, and the media ask him to clarify the situation. Davis says, “Everything is kind of sketchy right now. I know we have had reports of shots fired and explosions there, also some units are reporting a fire at this time. However I don’t have any confirmed reports about victims or if there are any or how many. It sounds possible that there is more than one suspect involved at this time” (Savidge et al. 1999). Shortly after this conversation, Deputy Davis arrives at the scene. News crews from two of
the three local news stations have arrived before him (Jefferson County Colorado Sheriff’s Office 2000).

CNN covered the breaking news story in a single, uninterrupted broadcast that lasted over six hours, setting the stage for one of the largest media stories of the 1990’s. Through the rest of the afternoon, the media revisited eyewitnesses and police as the primary sources of information about the shootings. Throughout the broadcast, CNN monitored and broadcast live scenes from its four affiliate stations in Denver including KCNC (CBS affiliate), KMGH (ABC affiliate), and KUSA (NBC affiliate).

Chaos ruled the scene on the ground, and this lack of coherent knowledge of what was going on translated itself into a lack of lucid news coverage. On CNN, the reporters and anchors attempted to make sense of the situation, and as time progressed, details began emerging. Within the first two hours of the live broadcast, the media focused on a number of issues, specifically the perpetrators, whether students were still in the school, possible victims, and the police response. Eyewitness accounts formed the bulk of the content at this early stage.

Some of the most dramatic sequences include speaking to Columbine students live via phone. One student, Bob Sabin, speaks to KUSA while he is hiding in some bushes behind the school building. He describes what happened, “I was hiding around the back of the school after I heard the shots. I evacuated out of the back of the school and, you’ll have to pardon me I’m out of breath. I saw the men, I was hiding around the bushes and that’s when your lady on the phone, I called you as first [sic] fast as I could, and that’s when on the phone the lady told me to get out of danger because I was in danger, because I saw the men with the weapons inside the school.” Sabin says that he is still in danger, and that if the assailants come out the back door of the building that he will be in the direct line of fire. Shapiro, the KUSA anchor, tells the student to hang
up, and to get fully out of the range of any gunfire, and then to call back when he is safe. The student hangs up.

About one half-hour later, Sabin calls back to the studio, he has apparently run to his house, and is now safe. The newscaster asks him to describe what he saw. Sabin resumes, “OK, I saw – I saw the gunman. I saw two gunmen. I saw them have weapons, black masks, black trench coats, and, needless to say, I was very frightened. I saw some students running, and I was just – I felt lucky that I got away as fast as I did.” The journalists ask where he was when it all started. Sabin answers, “I was in Mr. Conyer’s (ph) math class and I heard noises and other students panicked, and I heard sounds in the hallway. I ran outside.”

The news anchor describes how the Trench Coat Mafia is being blamed for the attack on the school. He asks Sabin to comment on this group, and despite the fact that he has just lived through a traumatic experience, the student speaks lucidly, “Well, I think those kids – I think that they’re just trying to attempt to live the gothic lifestyle. I don’t think that they’re – they’re really – they could be to blame for this. I think this is – the society in which we live. If it is them that is committing these atrocious crimes, then we should blame the society in which we live in, which is pressing them to behave in this – this is about the seventh time that this as happened” (Savidge et al. 1999).

Student witnesses reported that two assailants dressed in black trench coats entered the school throwing pipe bombs and firing semi-automatic weapons. Some witnesses reported that the perpetrators were shootings at whomever they could target, while others claimed that they were targeting minorities and athletes in particular. Some students reported having seen a third perpetrator, wearing a white T-shirt. At this point, witnesses blamed the Trench Coat Mafia, described as a gothic group obsessed with death and violence, for being behind the shootings. Details began to emerge about the Trench Coat Mafia, for example Derek Molthen, a Columbine student, described the group as follows:

Well, basically it’s just a group of about like 20 guys that, I don’t know, they wear, like, trench coats every day to school and dress in all black. A lot of the time they’ll like wear makeup and paint their nails and stuff.
They are always just kind of, like, different and no one really associates with them. They’re kind of - I don’t know, like goth, sort of, like, and they’re, like, associated with death and violence a lot (Savidge et al. 1999).

In addition, the media was concerned with the safety and status of the students, and how many were still in the school. The media speculated about how many of the estimated 1800 students at Columbine High School were still inside the school. Within two hours of the start of the live broadcast, an estimated 90% of students had been evacuated, however, over and over the media showed clips of students running from the school building. As happened throughout the country, the people in Denver began hearing about the shootings. Parents of Columbine students began to drive toward the school in order to locate their children. Police had cordoned off the entire school grounds. The media began urging parents to rendezvous with their children at a nearby elementary school and library. News cameras captured numerous dramatic reunions between parents and their children, and between students and their friends and siblings.

The media assumed that many students had been injured and that some had possibly been killed in the attack. It was a priority to report on the status of the victims, including the severity of the victims’ injuries. Worrisome details emerged, as the media reported that victims had been raced to nearby hospitals with multiple gunshot wounds. Some victims were even flown in by helicopters. Hospitals had immediately implemented their disaster response plans.
Also, the coverage highlighted the massive police response to the shootings, and reporters on the scene estimated 100, 200, to 250 police officers present. Wide angle news helicopter shots showed the large high school building encircled by emergency vehicles, including police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances. It was still unclear where the gunmen were. SWAT teams began to arrive, and they approached the building from behind an armored truck. The SWAT teams entered the school, beginning their sweep of the building.

Outside the school, police discovered three young males dressed in black wandering through a field not far from the school

*Kathy Walsh, KUSA Reporter, describes the situation.* "Suzanne, we are looking at a field, this is right beyond the neighborhood where we are, so it would probably be between the school and the neighborhood that we’ve been standing in, which is probably southwest of the school. We’ve got three, it looks like, students, or the age of students, with their hands up with two police cars around them. Their hands are up, they’re standing there. I see their backs to the cars right now. I cannot tell you exactly what’s going here." Police hold the three young men at gunpoint, handcuff one of them, and then whisk them away. The media reports that they are possible perpetrators or are accomplices to the gunmen (Savage et al. 1999).

As the coverage progressed, the witnesses reported that the shooting had lasted for a short time, perhaps 15 or 20 minutes, after which time the school had become quiet. This description lent an eerie sense of expectation to the news coverage, as if everyone, those on the scene, journalists, and viewers alike, were waiting for the other shoe to drop.
At 2:00 PM on April 20, 1999, two hours after the first report, CNN offered a review of the situation:

To recap for you if you’re just joining us: about 11:00 or 11:30 a.m. Denver time, at least two gunmen walked into Columbine High School in Littleton Colorado just southwest of Denver. They’re described as two men wearing black trench coats, black masks, black hats. A number of students at the high school say they did recognize the gunmen, so that would apparently lead to the idea they might be fellow students. Apparently there was a lot of gunfire, explosions. At this point police officials say that at least 14 students have been hurt, including one female student who took nine gunshot wounds to the chest. Another female student took five gunshot wounds to the chest, and those 14 students being taken to hospitals around the Denver area.

The situation right now, it looks like police have taken three people into custody. They are not saying if these are the suspects. We are just watching the pictures live as we show them to you. Also, there was apparently a hostage situation inside Columbine High School. Parents waiting to get back in touch with their kids. We also witnessed about a half hour ago a situation where SWAT teams were able to get about 15 to 20 students out of the high school through a window (Savidge et al. 1999).

The expectant tone continued throughout the news reports, as the media waited for additional developments or more information. There had been no specific information regarding the whereabouts of the perpetrators. There were numerous students unaccounted for, and the media speculated that the gunmen might have been holding students hostage somewhere inside the school. The media also considered whether any students might have been trapped inside the school, particularly on the second floor.
Nonetheless, many students had escaped the building, and news cameras continued to capture dramatic scenes of parents meeting with their children who escaped unhurt. Students hugged one another, and parents hugged their children, relieved to know they were safe.

*Paula Reed, a Columbine teacher, is at one of the designated places for parents to meet their teens. She characterizes the scene, “Well, right now we’re in pretty good shape in terms of we have a number of victim assistants, people here, and we have a number of counselors here. And that is helping tremendously."

“The teachers who are at this site are circulating as best we can to the students who are crying and trying to at least assure them that the fact that they don’t see their friends right here does not mean that their friend is not safe. It only means that they’re not right here.

“At Columbine, we are a very protected group of people. In general, we don’t have gang problems to speak of. We don’t have crime problems. It’s not to say it’s nonexistent, but we really do have a deep sense of security, and to have that invaded in such a violent way is very difficult for these students to deal with.”

The television anchor responds, “Yes. Certainly, Paula, no matter what high school you’re talking about in any part of the country, none of us are truly insulated from this type of random violence” (Savidge et al. 1999).

While there were many joyous scenes of reunion, there was also emerging information about the injured students, as well as misinformation about the gunmen. In an apparent hoax, someone claiming to be a spokesperson for an area hospital identified Howard Stern as the gunman. The media disconnected the caller, and proceeded to cite information about the wounded.

Starting to be bogged down by the size of the media presence, school officials ordered reporters and camera crews off school property. Media personnel backed up to the sidewalks, talking to witnesses and anyone else at the
scene. The magnitude of this news story started to become apparent, and reporters described the arrival of satellite media trucks.

The mass media began setting up shop in the 285-acre Clement Park, adjacent to Columbine High School. The swift arrival of the national news media warrants explanation. News crews had been in Boulder, Colorado, awaiting breaking developments in the high profile Jon Benet Ramsey homicide investigation. When news broke of the shootings at Columbine, they wasted no time in traveling the 40 miles to the site of the dramatic school shooting. Ultimately, the media presence included an estimated 400 to 500 reporters, 75 to 90 satellite trucks, and 60 television cameras. The Columbine story had become an international story, and the media presence included 20 television crews from foreign news media (Jefferson County Colorado Sheriff’s Office 2000).

Appropriate to the magnitude of the event, the media carried the comments of political leaders. The Governor of Colorado, Republican Bill Owens, was the first to comment. Reflecting the lack of information about the shootings, Owens refused to comment specifically on the situation. Rather, Owens said that everything possible was being done to respond to the shootings, and he wanted to extend his sympathies to the families, especially since he was a parent of a 16 year-old daughter. When pressed to explain the causes behind the shootings, Owens referred to some children’s lack of moral development, and to the “culture of violence.”
Shortly thereafter, President Clinton offered very brief comments. Like the governor, the president did not comment specifically on the shootings, rather his tone was solemn, as he asked America to pray for the students, parents and teachers of Columbine. The school shooting in Littleton, Colorado joined the list of previous attacks, such as those at Jonesboro, Arkansas and West Paducah, Kentucky.

Unfortunately, the place name of Littleton, Colorado became erroneously attached to Columbine High School. This is probably due to Columbine’s proximity to the town of Littleton, and the fact that Columbine High School uses a Littleton mailing address. In reality, Columbine High School is located in an unincorporated suburban area of southern Jefferson County, Colorado, known locally as “Jeffco,” which lies just west of Denver, Colorado. Jeffco is the location of many suburban towns and has a population of approximately 509,000.\(^2\) Columbine High School falls under the law enforcement jurisdiction of the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department, and the Jefferson County School District administers the school itself. Littleton, Colorado is a separate municipality with a population of approximately 40,000\(^3\) adjacent to southern Jeffco, but located mainly in Arapahoe County. The town of Littleton maintains a separate school district and police department, although both the Littleton Police

\(^2\) This population figure is an estimate for July 1999, and reflects the predicted population trend for estimated from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. census counts (U.S. Census Bureau 2002).

\(^3\) This population figure is an estimate for July 1999, and reflects the predicted population trend for estimated from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. census counts (U.S. Census Bureau 2002).
and the Arapahoe County Sheriff’s Department aided the police in responding to the school shooting.

SWAT teams from numerous police departments continued to rescue students, and the media broadcast these images live. Students continued to run from the building, and police officers kept them grouped together. Apparently, the police were concerned that the gunmen might mingle in with the students, and try to escape. The coverage continued to focus on the police, when there was a sudden development.

Hiding behind an armored vehicle, a SWAT team is approaching the school building, the camera follows their progress. Suddenly, KMGH anchor Bertha Lynn says, “Look, there’s a bloody student right there in the window.” The camera focuses on a student waving for help in the library window, and captures one of the most dramatic sequences of the entire Columbine story. It is Patrick Ireland, who is later to become known as the “boy in the window,” who is covered in blood.

There is a moment of uncertainty regarding how the police will handle the situation, and then several SWAT officers climb onto the top of the armored vehicle. They are still several feet below the window, so the boy in the window hoists himself over the edge of the window and the broken glass. The officers position themselves to catch Patrick as he leans out the window. He falls from the window, and the police fail to catch him cleanly. His bloodied form bounces roughly on the top of the armored vehicle, but he is at least extricated from the building. The police rush him off to triage (Savidge et al. 1999).

The media continued to focus on police activities. Police led a handcuffed student away from the school building. He was put in a police car and driven away. The media speculated that he was a possible suspect in the shooting. Around that time, the media began to report that the police were describing
multiple student casualties. More information was slow in coming, although CNN continued to broadcast uninterrupted coverage.

At 4:00 in the afternoon of April 20, 1999, Steve Davis, Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department Spokesman, and Sheriff John Stone held a press conference. Davis and Stone described that two, possibly three, suspects had entered the school building wielding handguns and bombs. Within the last hour, police had found two suspects dead in the school library, apparently of self-inflicted gunshot wounds. The sheriff reported that the three youths taken into custody outside the school and the one students escorted away in handcuffs were unlikely to have been suspects themselves, but that they knew the suspects. There were as many as 25 dead, and 14 had been injured, although no police were among the injured.

The sheriff suggested that the complexity of the attack revealed a significant amount of planning, and that police investigators had already located explosives at the home of one of the suspects. The sheriff had not previously heard about the Trench Coat Mafia, and he was unable to confirm whether or not the dead perpetrators were wearing black coats. A journalist asked the sheriff to comment on how the school shooting would affect the gun legislation, and Sheriff Stone responded by pointing out that it was already illegal for anyone to bring guns to school, and that his concern was why parents would allow their children to have automatic weapons. The sheriff anticipated that the police investigation would last at least through the night.
Shortly thereafter, the Sheriff speaks directly with a female reporter at KUSA [unnamed in transcripts] and he suggests that the media coverage sparks the possibility of copycat attacks. “Well, you just wonder how much – when the attention like this media attention gets on it, that this is broadcast all over the United States and other people get the same idea . . .” The reporter responds, “And the conflict is that you can’t not cover it. Bet then again, you know, the dilemma is that 15 seconds of fame of whatever the motive is.” Stone concludes, “Yes, I understand” (Savidge et al. 1999).

Through the Eyes of the Witnesses

As the news coverage progressed on April 20, it took on an increasingly grave tone, and the seriousness of the event began to sink in. Reporters updated the conditions of the injured victims, and they increasingly compared Columbine to places where other disasters had occurred, including the Oklahoma City bombing. The most compelling stories came from the witnesses, who created vivid pictures of what it had been like in the building.

Earlier on, the media spoke with any students they encountered, however later in the developing story, reporters located students who offered specific accounts of the shooting.

One student, Nick Klaus, describes seeing some victims being fatally shot. When newsroom anchors press him to describe the perpetrators, he offers the following description,

“The guys eyes were just mean; they just didn’t care, no feeling, no nothing . . . The guy with the barrel just looked at me, and I looked at him, and he was shooting . . .” Nick did not believe that the shootings were
racially motivated, or that the shooters specifically targeted jocks, “Whoever these people were, they didn’t care what you were, they didn’t care what race you were, didn’t matter - doesn’t matter; they didn’t care. They wanted to shoot to have fun - I don’t know. Sick people, hurting innocent people. And, you know, I don’t know. I feel really sorry for them. I really do. It’s not a jock or any issue” (Savidge et al. 1999)

He believed that it was just random, senseless violence.

The frenzied pace of police activity had begun to die down by approximately 5:00 PM, when the Sheriff’s department reported that all students had been evacuated from the building, and that all students remaining inside were dead. Fire trucks and ambulances began to leave the scene, and homicide investigation officers with clip boards in hand headed towards the school. The investigation, a prominent component of the Columbine story, had begun. At 5:30 PM, the police held the first formal press conference, and they announced that they would hold press conferences every hour from then on. The sheriff released little new information about the shootings or the investigation, however he quoted officers from inside the school who had characterized the scenes as “grisly,” “gruesome,” “sad,” and “tragic.”

Early in the morning of April 21, most of the information about what had happened in the attack came from eyewitnesses. A composite picture emerged from their accounts, presented on Good Morning America and CNN Early Edition. The perpetrators had begun their attack outside the school, had proceeded into the cafeteria, and the attack had ended in the library, where most of the carnage occurred.

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On *Good Morning America*, Charles Gibson interviewed a student who was outside of the school when the attack started. Justin Woods, described what he saw,

Yes sir, I was playing soccer with a bunch of my friends. We saw windows start getting shot out, and we saw two gunmen come out, and they threw some kind of, like, a firecracker or a pipe bomb out into the street. And everyone kind of watched and kind of went, “Oooh, ahh.” And they came around and just started shooting people (Gibson 1999a).

Woods went on to describe how the perpetrators had seen them out in the field, and had fired at them. When he and his friends heard the bullets in the air, they all turned and ran to safety.

Another student, Will Beck, was just outside the cafeteria, where the attack started. He described the scene,

I was eating lunch outside as I do everyday when there’s not, like, bad weather, and I saw – I first heard noises, I heard, like, firecrackers – that’s what I thought it was . . . And then I started to see bullets hitting the ground, and then . . . I wasn’t sure if they were BB’s or what, and then I started to see people go down. People saying, I’m hit, I’m hit, and like, I’m paralyzed (Lin 1999a).

Beck described seeing one of the perpetrators dressed in a black trench coat, as he and his friends ran to safety.

Shortly thereafter, the perpetrators had entered the cafeteria, and another witness described that a janitor yelled for everyone to get down. Some students ran out of the cafeteria, while others hid under the tables. Charles Gibson spoke to a student, Bill Hanifer, who hid under a table 20 to 25 minutes. He described that the perpetrators were throwing bombs, and taking to one another. At one
point, the shooters came within 10 to 15 feet of him. Charles Gibson asked the student, “Did you think, maybe, I’m going to die here?” The student replied, “Yeah. I was just hoping they wouldn’t come over and shoot us” (Gibson and Sawyer 1999b). The perpetrators then had left the cafeteria, and had headed to the library where most of the fatalities occurred.

Witnesses described to the media that the perpetrators entered the library, and told the jocks to stand up, because they were going to die. All of the students got under the desks in the library, and one student, Joshua Lapp, described the scene as the shooters were in the library for 45 minutes,

“Yes, they started in that section of the room, and then they just worked their way around the room. And they – and then they just moved into the middle section. By that time they got close enough. They were one row over and a desk back. And there was a gentleman underneath the desk, and they shot him. And as they walked by they looked at me, and they kept walking.” Charles Gibson also asked this student, “Did you think, ‘I’m going to die here?’” To which Lapp responded, “Yes, I didn’t think I was going to get out of it. I was waiting – I thought they were going to be there forever. I was just waiting my turn to be next. I was waiting for a sharp pain in my side” (Gibson 1999a).

The accounts of students being shot were particularly attractive to the media, probably due to their dramatic appeal, and many of these stories came from eyewitness accounts. Sophomore Don Arnold reported seeing victims get shot:

“Then students started falling. ‘One boy was running and suddenly his ankle just puffed up in blood.’ Said the 16-year-old Arnold. ‘A girl was running and her head popped open’ when a bullet slammed into her skull” (Gutterman 1999).
Through the eyes of the victims, viewers were able to envision with frightening clarity what it had felt like to be in that building at the time of the shootings. The compelling details eyewitnesses revealed made the event riveting, the fear palpable.

From Local to National Media Event

At 4:00 in the afternoon of April 20, 1999, Steve Davis, Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department Spokesman, and Sheriff John Stone had held the first press conference for the local and national news media. Just forty-five minutes later, at 5:45 PM, President Clinton offered his thoughts on the Columbine shootings:

I want to begin by saying that Hillary and I are profoundly shocked and saddened by the tragedy today in Littleton, where two students opened fire on their classmates before apparently turning their guns on themselves. I have spoken with Governor Bill Owens and County Commission Chair Patricia Holloway (ph) and expressed my profound concern for the people of Littleton. I have spoken to Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder and who, along with Attorney General Reno, is closely monitoring the situation. I’ve asked the attorney general and the secretary of education to stand ready to assist local law enforcement, the schools, the families, the entire community during this time of crisis and sorrow.

A crisis response team is ready now to travel to Colorado, and I strongly believe that we should do whatever we can to get enough counselors to the families and the children as quickly as possible. I know the other communities that have been through this are also ready to do whatever they can to help.

I think that Patricia Holloway would not mind if I said that amidst all of the turmoil and grief that she and others are experiencing, she said to me just a moment ago that perhaps now America would wake up to the dimensions of this challenge if it could happen in a place like Littleton and
we could prevent anything like this from happening again. We pray that she is right.

We don’t know yet all the hows or whys of this tragedy. Perhaps we may never fully understand it. St. Paul reminds us that we all see things in this life through a glass darkly, that we only partly understand what is happening.

We do know that we must do more to reach out to our children and teach them to express their anger and to resolve their conflicts with words, not weapons. And we do know we have to do more to recognize the early warning signs that are sent before children act violently.

To the families who have lost their loved ones, to the parents who have lost their beloved children, to the wounded children and their families, to the people of the community of Littleton, I can only say tonight that the prayers of the American people are with you.

Thank you very much (Savidge et al. 1999).

The President’s speech revealed something prescient and influential in that it evoked several issues that would later rise to the forefront. Indeed, the President had deflected to comment on the “how’s” and the “why’s” of the shootings. However, that did not stop him from commenting on the shootings in general. The President’s comments are telling in a number of ways: First, the President stated, “America should wake up to the dimensions of this challenge.” While he does not exactly elaborate on this, the statement is enough to frame the Columbine shootings as a national issue, rather than as a local or idiosyncratic issue. Second, there was a focus on youth and how youth resolve conflicts. The apparent answer to this is two-fold and involves reaching out to children and developing abilities to detect warning signs. Third, the President invoked Christianity in particular and religion in general as an immediate solution to the situation. He waxed philosophical in his reference to St. Paul, and asked the
population to pray for the people in the Columbine community. These frames would play prominent roles in the Columbine story as it developed.

Shortly after the President’s speech, CNN had ended its non-stop live coverage. It was denouement for the actual participants, but for the mass media things had just begun. Throughout the live broadcast, approximately six hours of coverage, CNN had broadcast the most interesting portions the live coverage being produced by the Denver local news stations, affiliated with the broadcast networks. For this period of time, the Denver stations dominated the national news media, as their coverage was broadcast live.

However, the other news media soon began to catch up, as quickly as their news cycle allowed. For example, at approximately 4:40 PM, PBS’s *News Hour with Jim Lehrer* interrupted their broadcast to update the details of the Columbine shootings. Other news sources had followed suit, and soon the entire news media was dominated by the Columbine shootings.

For the remainder of the night, mass media sources continued to provide, with a high level of redundancy, the facts of the case. The media began to label the Columbine shootings as the “worst school shooting in U.S. history.” CNN continued to broadcast almost exclusively about Columbine, NPR’s *All Things Considered* offered three updates, and ABC’s *Nightline* focused that night on the shootings. In addition, the Associated Press news wire released five short articles that covered Columbine. AP was the first of the print sources included in this
study to cover the story. While the contents of these earliest reports were rather repetitive, there were some patterns.

The Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department served as one of the primary sources of information, and spokesman Steve Davis provided some new information about the investigation. He referred to the school as a massive crime scene, and set expectations that it would take at least the rest of the night for investigators to gather necessary information. Therefore, the bodies of the dead victims would not be removed from the school for a number of hours. The sheriff’s department did not speak about the perpetrators except to mention that SWAT team officers had located explosives on and around the bodies of the perpetrators and in one of the shooter’s cars. The primary source of information about the events of the day were the eyewitnesses, and the media showed a series of edited video clips from the field of witnesses making statements.

Interviewers asked media spokespersons to describe how personally difficult it is to cover a story like the Columbine shootings. There seemed to be a unanimous sentiment among journalists that this type of story was difficult to cover. Naturally, reporters and other people in the media were emotionally affected by the tragic nature of the Columbine shootings. For example, Greg Moss, a KUSA reporter, told Larry King,

It’s extremely painful. You know we – as reporters, we’re members of the community as well. I have friends in this community whose kids go to this school, and they did not find out, and have not found out, if their kids are safe and sound tonight. It hits home (King and Sadler 1999).
Another way in which the media demonstrated some self-reflexivity was when they discussed the possibility that Columbine might have been the first “interactive siege.” During the chaotic periods when the reports were unclear regarding the whereabouts of the perpetrators, the mass media became aware that the situation was somewhat fluid. Since there were televisions in the classrooms, it might have been possible for the perpetrators to watch the news reports, and therefore to find out details about the police response. Similarly, students on cell phones talking to the media might have revealed their whereabouts and jeopardized their safety.

Just as the media were strongly affected by the Columbine shootings, the rest of the United States was given pause. Many flags were lowered to half-staff, and, in general, many across the country began to ask why such a shooting had occurred. The mass media voiced this concern, and some possible answers began to emerge in their coverage, including the culture of violence, the availability of guns, and the problem of youth. To help explain why the attack occurred, the media also asked witnesses whether they had previously seen any indication that the perpetrators might be capable of such an attack.

As the coverage continued, many of the discussions were not about the Columbine shootings in particular, but about issues sparked by the shootings. For example, people in the media began to debate the role of guns in society. Others debated how safe or dangerous schools were. These discussions only hinted at the scope of the issues that were evoked and the fact-finding that would be needed to
help understand. As the night of media coverage came to a close, the mass media were coiled like a serpentine spring, ready to leap.

At approximately 9:45 PM was one of the last instances where the Denver news media preempted the national coverage. On Nightline Ted Koppel identified the shooters, “Tomorrow morning’s Denver Post identifies the two suspects as 18-year-old Eric Harris and 17-year-old Dylan Klebold. Both reportedly died of self-inflicted gunshot wounds” (Muller, Foreman, and Koppel 1999).

A Cultural Watershed: Justification for the Study

There are a number of reasons for conducting this study. Roughly these fit into three areas: First, there is a high level of public interest in the topic of media coverage of high profile events, and to date there have been no systematic sociological studies of the Columbine coverage. Second, the current research helps to advance sociological knowledge and discussion. Third, the findings generated here are of interest to scholars of mass media, and also producers and consumers of media. This section discusses these three issues, and how the current research contributes to the body of knowledge in these three areas.

The public has held a sustained interest in the Columbine shootings, and for most of the general public, Columbine was a media event. Even as I watched the coverage unfold in front of my eyes, and read about Columbine in the print media, I recognized that something important was happening. I was teaching a
course on self and society at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and I found
my students walking around in a daze. I thought their shock had something to do
with our proximity to Columbine, but I was wrong about that. I soon learned that
the Columbine shootings had struck a chord across the country, and that all across
the United States people were reacting as if the world had been blanketed by a
blizzard. They turned on their televisions, peered outside their casement
windows, and wondered when things would settle and clear.

The TV babies, those raised on television, outnumber those weaned on
different media, and there are more being born everyday. Of course, as a
Generation X’er, I was a TV baby, and I must admit that, although I was closer
professionally, geographically, and personally to the Columbine events, I also
experienced the Columbine shootings through the media. I have been to the
school, and have attended the memorial service with Al Gore. At this event, and
from students in the classes I taught at the University, I spoke with many people
who either attended Columbine, or those, including counselors and police, who
were in one way or another involved in the response to the shootings. Despite
this, I primarily witnessed it through the media: I saw it through the lens, heard
about it through the wires, and read about it in the press.

“All media are extensions of some human faculty – psychic or physical”
(McLuhan and Fiore 1967). To paraphrase, the camera is the extension of the eye
and the microphone is the extension of the ear. The written word represents
captured thoughts, and the printed word represents the mass reproduction of those
thoughts (McLuhan 1964:84). Mass media are cast broadly into the social, carrying their content. In this case, the content we are talking about is the Columbine shootings. While nearly everyone in the United States heard about Columbine, very few had direct experience with the Columbine event as an historical fact. What we did experience, and often in powerfully personal ways, was the Columbine story as expressed through the media.

What we refer to as “Columbine”4 was primarily a media event, except to those few whose life experiences brought them in direct contact with the event. It was a deeply moving and popular news story, and such a media event raises a number of questions. First, there is a need to come to terms with the topic matter. There are such questions as, what was the nature of the content? What are the themes present in the coverage? What are the implications of the presence, or absence, of certain themes? An attempt to address these questions is an effort to come to terms with the empirical topic of the Columbine story.

Similarly, given the high level of interest and the fact that Columbine seems to have been a defining cultural moment, this research serves the general public who are concerned with the status of U.S. society. There are already numerous books and articles written about Columbine. Some academics have focused on the topic. For example, Aronson (2001) examined the psychological

4 In contemporary usage, “Columbine Massacre” refers to the 1999 Columbine High School shootings. In past decades, references to “Columbine” were more likely to mean the 1927 Columbine Mine Massacre, in which striking coal miners were gunned down by a special state police force. Six of the workers died, and are memorialized by a monument in a Lafayette, CO and a highway marker at the junction of Colorado Highway 7 and Interstate 25 (Shuler 1986).
causes behind the shooting, compared it to a natural disaster, and offered intervention strategies. Omoike (2000) produced a book of dubious scholarly quality, in which he examined the sociological causes behind the shootings. The author offered a timeline of previous school shootings, and reproduced sections of the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Report (2000). Wooden and Blazak (2001: 101-16) examined the sources of school violence in, among other places, youth culture.


To date there has been only one systematic study of the media coverage of the Columbine shootings (Lawrence 2001), which focused on how the news media set the agenda for dealing with the problem of youth violence. Given the lack of research on the Columbine story, I felt it was my opportunity and responsibility to examine this issue as a research sociologist, and to offer my contribution to the discussion of this watershed event.
Naturally, this research also contributes to the body of sociological knowledge, and many of the findings offered will be of interest to professional sociologists, and those interested in sociological issues. Specifically, this research relates to two bodies of sociological literature: the sociology of culture and the sociology of mass media.

First, such a popular and culturally important event as Columbine can undoubtedly tell us something important about the status of the society in which it occurred. The Columbine coverage comprises a record of the public moral discourse that ensued following the shootings, and as a sociologist I use this record to generate findings about public discourse in U.S. culture at the time that Columbine occurred. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions: What is the content of the Columbine story? How were the perpetrators and victims portrayed, and how did the media portray the perpetrators in relationship to the victims? The answers to these questions appear in Chapters 5 and 6.

This research also speaks to issues of interest to scholars, producers, and consumers of mass media. The content analysis of the Columbine coverage generates descriptive findings about the volume, structure, timing, and thematic content of the coverage. Media scholars are likely to be interested in this category of findings, discussed in Chapter 4. The focus of this research is not simply to offer a concise summary of the Columbine story, but also to offer narrative accounts, found in Chapters 1, 2, 5, and 6. Of interest to scholars of mass media
content and processes, this research will address the issue of mass media as “a mirror of the wider society and culture” (Bell 1991:4).

In addition to the sociology of media issues, there are more concrete justifications for this research. First, the study of the Columbine coverage is justified because, as Bell (1991:3) points out, it examines a form of behavior that is intrinsically interesting. The methods through with stories are told, and the way in which they are told is intimately related to the construction of reality, and to subsequent forms of news media behavior. More specifically, the way in which the news media constructs a social problem will influence behavioral and attitudinal responses to that problem.

The mainstream media are the dominant forum in which public debate occurs, and for a high profile story such as the Columbine shootings, researchers might naturally look to the news media as a rich source of data. Therefore, it is not merely the presence of a public record that makes studying the media coverage of Columbine worthwhile; it’s also that this body of writings represents an influential and a rich source.

There are practical reasons to conduct this research, and these are related to methodological concerns. Empirically, this research benefits from a clean and complete data set, rare to find in the field. One of the reasons this source of data is so clean is due to the fact that the observed are already aware of being observed, thereby bolstering the validity of the research. In social science, the Hawthorne effect has suggested that the presence of researchers influences the behavior of the
people who are being studied. Similarly, discourse studies has identified the
“Observer’s Paradox” (Labov 1972), which is the effect on the speech or writing behavior of the subjects when they are aware that they are being observed. This is not an issue in the case of mass media behavior, because the actors are already aware that they are being observed. In fact, it is the entire point of mass media behavior, that large groups of media consumers would observe what is being conveyed. Therefore, the Hawthorne Effect and Observer’s Paradox do not apply to this research (Bell 1991:3).

Second, mass media content is readily available and highly reliable. Most mainstream broadcast or print news media sources list their stories or transcripts on Lexis-Nexis, a searchable and comprehensive database of media coverage. Since the news articles are already in electronic format, collection and analysis are facilitated. While, many empirical studies are faced with the task of accurately and reliably collecting data, scholars of mass media content face other issues. Namely, the challenge is to limit the content so that studying it does not become impractical or unwieldy. This contrasts sharply with the sparseness of many data sets.

Beyond the methodological appeal of studying media content from the sociologist’s perspective, mass media producers might share an interest in this sort of research. Since Columbine was a large and important news media event, media actors will be interested in understanding the shape and content of the coverage. Reporters, editors, and producers might be interested in understanding
the volume and timing of the coverage, and the thematic content. In addition, media producers might be interested in the possible ideological implications of the terminologies evoked in the coverage, as well as the possible implications of the news media’s focus, or lack of focus, on related themes or frames of understanding.

It would be a mistake to assume that the mass media simply produces content in a non-reflexive way, just as it would be to assume that the media are completely aware of their biases. Similarly, I do not assume that the media actors are passive agents of some external class of persons, such as the government or corporations. However, the structural study of culture suggests that culture is most powerfully, yet subtly present in the tacit assumptions that underlie behavior. As a form of behavior, indeed a communicative act, media contains the cultural structures and assumptions, packaged in the form of meanings.

Additionally, consumers of mass media content themselves will find much of interest here, since that content is consumed on a mass scale that does not mean that consumers are passive, uncritical consumers of mass media. Thus, consumers can gain a picture of their own consumption patterns and gain understandings that enable them to make additional distinctions as consumers. Interestingly, these insights bring the discussion full circle, as the consumer is the target of the coverage but also provides a source for this research.

There is much to be said about what scholars have previously written in topic areas relevant to the current research. The topic fits into the literature in the
sociology of culture, which is reviewed here. The sociology of culture developed from the tradition of French Structuralism, a philosophical approach that emerged out of a French intellectual tradition that waxed and waned in its dominance in the 1960’s. “The most fundamental claim of structuralism is that it can provide an objective, scientific, account of meaning”5 (Clarke 1981: 173). The tradition of structuralism, whose most noted proponent was Claude Levi-Strauss, developed partially in dialogue with two discussions that had preceded it, namely Durkheimian sociology and Husserlian phenomenology. The major contribution that Levi-Strauss made to social science was that he redefined the object of analysis. For Levi-Strauss, symbolic order was autonomous of the individuals in society, and as such could be studied scientifically. In this sense, Levi-Strauss was similar to Durkheim in that he advocated the study of social objects as objective social facts. Similarly, and with the clarification that the two scholars mentioned were not the only social scientists concerned with the phenomenon, it is noteworthy that the two shared interests in ritual, religion, and magic.

Levi-Strauss turned Durkheim on his head. Durkheim posited that social facts emerged from social structure, and most basically from the conscience collective, which is social in origin. In contrast, Levi-Strauss argued that the symbolic structures that lay under social structures such as kinship and myth had

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5 I have intentionally decontextualized this sentence, which the author intended to be in reference to linguistics. Given the structural sociological approach to meaning and moral philosophy employed in this book, the analogy validly applies to “meaning” in the sociological sense.
their origins in the deep structures of mind. However, there is room for much compromise, because both scholars would agree that the symbolic (moral) order “exists independently of the things that are symbolized and the people who symbolize” (Clarke 1981: 2). What matters most is that these symbolic structures exist, and for the purposes of the current research the media is a forum for public moral discourse, which offers a record of behavior that expresses the moral order. In the theoretical sense, a generally structuralist analysis is appropriate for studying the media coverage of the Columbine shootings. However, there have been further developments in the study of culture, whether or not one considers it structuralist research. Since the units of analysis for in structuralism are “signiferous,” or meaning bearing (Caws 1988: 1), mass media, a form of intentional human communication, is an appropriate object of study for a structuralist research.

In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, the classical sociological theorists had concentrated much of their attention on the issue of culture, although the issue fell out of popularity as Structural Functionalism became the dominant sociological school of thought. It was only in the latter quarter of the Twentieth Century that social scientists began to return their attention to culture as a topic of study, characterized by the work of Robert Wuthnow (e.g., 1987) and Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., 1984). Wuthnow and Witten (1988: 49-50) cite two causes for this return: First, neomarxists, especially the so-called Weberian marxists of the Frankfurt school and elsewhere, turned their
attentions to the study of ideology and therefore culture. Second, sociologists at the beginning of the last quarter of the Twentieth Century published a number of noteworthy empirical studies, which although they may have originated from divergent theoretical and methodological approaches, all cited culture or value systems as important explanatory variables. Most notable among these works are Erickson (1976) and Bellah et al. (1985). In this work, I am attempting to speak to some of the issues suggested in this tradition, most importantly the issue of how the study of media discourse can reveal something about the cultural climate or potential cultural conflicts underlying that discourse.

As an approach to studying culture, Wuthnow (1987:18-65) has suggested that sociologists should move “beyond the problem of meaning,” in particular the attitudes, beliefs, and subjective meanings held by individuals. The reasoning here is methodological, in that attitudes are too difficult to define and measure in a scientific way. Instead, sociologists ought to concentrate on “the structure of culture revealed through observable communications” (Turner 1991: 502 [italics in original]). This approach avoids the phenomenological pitfalls associated with studies of opinion. In this approach, culture is an implicit feature of social life, such that social behavior will inherently contain within it, the assumptions and expectations that constitute the culture (Wuthnow and Witten 1988). The assumption that culture is implicit in all behavior contrasts with an alternative approach that culture is seen in intentionally produced artifacts such as art works.
This research proceeds within the implicit approach to culture, that cultural products are by-products of social interactions. Of course, this assumption blends quite nicely into other schools of thought, such as dramaturgy and structuralism. I align myself with the methodological concerns of structuralism, or discourse studies, in the literary or textual sense. It has generally been the case that studies in this vein have utilized content analysis, and my use of these methods is discussed in the subsequent chapter.

I have already stated my assumption that culture can be studied by looking for the structural assumptions that underlie observable behaviors. Such a tactic has been called a “subjective approach” to studying culture, and the assumption is that the cultural structures are “the taken-for-granted assumptions, expectations, and outlooks that govern social interaction. Of special interest, therefore, are the underlying meanings, the connotations, the unstated presuppositions that seem to guide social behavior” (Wuthnow and Witten 1988: 53-4). The strength of this assumption is that the cultural structures are tied to the actors who implicitly express it through their behavior, however a limitation to the approach is that culture itself is, at least analytically, separated from the behavior through which it is supposedly expressed.

One focus in sociology, for example in the work of Durkheim, has been the problem of moral order, and for Wuthnow (1987) the study of culture seems to be a natural extension of the study of moral order, although this approach has received some criticism (e.g., Turner 1988). A moral order is comprised of
“definitions of the manner in which social relations should be constructed,” (Wuthnow 1987: 145). And its analysis is made concrete by examining moral codes, which are ideologies that indicate what is preferred or virtuous within a given social context. There are three elements that make up a moral code: First, a moral code suggests a “real program,” which is a concrete set of expectations or goals for behavior. For example, in a church, one may speak of “doing God’s will,” or in a middle class family, one may speak of “taking care of my family” (Wuthnow 1987: 71-2). The real program offers prescriptive and proscriptive directions to regulate the connection between the individual’s behavior and the attainment of the prescribed behavioral goals. Second, the moral code offers distinctions between individuals’ inner selves and the social roles they fill (Turner 1988). For example, in transcendental movements, the core self is considered to be separate from the roles that one fills in society. Third, the moral code offers distinctions between what is inevitable and beyond personal control, and what is within the control of the individual. Wuthnow (1988: 73-5) calls this the distinction between “inevitability and intentionality.” As journalists told the story of the Columbine shootings, they constructed it as an expression of a tacit moral order.

Therefore it follows that it is not only the scale and popular interest on this subject that justifies its rigorous study, but the contribution it makes towards enhancing sociological understandings. Finally, the research may inform producers and consumers of the mass media itself. Consequently, it is expected
that this research will contribute greatly to threads of social understanding in various disciplines and have broad appeal not only in understanding what the mass media’s role is in shaping public perceptions and vice versa, but in creating new understandings around a significant event that resonated with people across the nation.
CHAPTER 2

THE EMERGENCE OF THEMES

A Media Event, A Moral Rift

The mass media coverage of the Columbine shootings is a massive body of written materials. The Columbine coverage was the largest news media story of 1999, and there were only a small number of news stories that received higher ratings on CNN. The O.J. Simpson case stands out as the single largest news story of the 1990’s, but there were other significant news media stories that Columbine surpassed in ratings, including the Oklahoma City Bombing, the Rodney King Verdict and subsequent L.A. Riots, and the fall of the Berlin Wall (Nielsen Media Research 2000). In Chapter 4, I offer a more comprehensive list of significant news stories and their relative ratings.

The Columbine shootings sparked media coverage that had all of the intrigue associated with a dramatic mini-series, coupled with that of the recently emerging reality television shows, such as “Survivor.” The search for meaning in the Columbine story opened up questions about a wide variety of social changes, including the emergence of the Internet, the prevalence of media violence, issues of race and gender, the resurgence of evangelical Christianity, issues of
responsibility and blame, the desirability of gun control, issues around individual psychology, group dynamics, the rising popularity of “COPS” type of live coverage, resurgence of Nazism, and concerns about popular culture such as popular music and video games. Not to mention the blood and inherent drama associated with the victims. In short, the Columbine shootings provided the mass media with more threads of interest and emotional power than any television writers could have dreamed up. Added to this boiling cauldron is the perception in the general public that this type of event is too close to home, could possibly occur in one’s own community.

However much the Columbine story might have had the qualities of a dramatic television series, I am suggesting that the coverage of this event served as more than just entertainment. We are familiar with earthquakes’ immense power to roil the earth, causing fear, panic, and destruction. However, what has not been examined consistently is that some social and historical events shake the normative foundations of society, causing accompanying levels of fear, panic, and destruction. An earthquake represents the release of energy that has accumulated in the form of strain, as tectonic plates slide along one another. We are familiar with the term epicenter, and it is often the location closest to the epicenter that bears the name of the earthquake, such as Northridge or Loma Prieta. However, earthquakes have their focus, or hypocenter, located deep underground. It is perhaps our anthropocentric view of this phenomenon that associates it with the surface.
In reality, tectonic plates attempt to slide past one another. The resistance to movement builds up strain and causes tension at levels deep underground. While it is mostly the surface manifestations of earthquakes that concern most humans, destruction of buildings, tsunamis, and just the sheer terror of having the earth shake under one’s feet, the true study of earthquakes requires the long range and deep understanding of movements in the earth’s crust. This is not to say that earthquakes are not interesting; they are interesting indeed. From studying them, seismologists have learned a lot about the general movements of the earth’s tectonic plates.

Similarly, the Columbine shootings were the epicenter of a normative earthquake. For quite some time, tension had been accumulating along the fault lines where competing value systems came into contact with one another. The Columbine shootings sparked a release of energy that resonated through the social system. The normative systems had built up enough strain among them, and they would need to come back into some sort of equilibrium.

One of the means through which this energy could be released/expressed was the mass media. While the energy released in an actual earthquake is physical in nature, the energy expressed in a normative earthquake is social. The form of this energy is social behavior, and media production is one sort of observable social behavior.

Studying the media coverage of the Columbine shootings is interesting in itself, and this research has generated many findings, descriptive and thematic,
about the coverage itself. However, the real focus of my work as a sociologist has been to ask what such a massive body of media coverage can tell us about deeper social processes. Like a tectonic earthquake, a normative earthquake does not just happen on its own. Rather, it would have been building up tension for some time, and that build up would have occurred deep in the normative structures of society, often in subtle ways.

This is also a study of the mass media coverage of a particularly shocking and dramatic crime. As I have mentioned, there are numerous levels of intrigue present in the story. This study focuses primarily on the mass media’s discussion of the perpetrators and victims of the shooting, with particular attention given to the process through with the media comes to settle dominant themes of coverage of these subjects, and hints at the sources of the social tensions that are exposed at the rift.

Innocent As a Choir Boy: The Perpetrators

As details about the shootings emerged, characterizations of the gunmen contradicted each other, as did stories asserting whether or not the gunmen targeted specific people in their attack. Underscoring these searches for understanding was the struggle by the media as to whether the gunmen themselves were victims.
Media themes began to emerge from the analyses of the duo themselves, the perpetrators as individuals, the perpetrators as members of a local group called the Trench Coat Mafia, the perpetrators as members of a national movement called the Goth movement, and the families of the perpetrators. Each element of the society in which they moved was examined to turn up meaning in the face of the enormity and shock of the event.

From early in the Columbine story, the perpetrators received a lot of attention. Beginning the day after the shootings, a more coherent picture of the two shooters began to emerge, mainly through two sources, the police and individuals in the community who were either witnesses or friends of the perpetrators.

Although the media had been first to suggest the identities of the perpetrators, Sheriff’s Deputy Steve Davis officially confirmed the identities of the perpetrators. The two shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were both dead, apparently of self-inflicted wounds. When questioned about the motives of the perpetrators, Sheriff John Stone responded,

I don’t see any motive for this attack. I think you had this - and I guess I have a real concern with people that identify themselves as their heroes in life being people like Adolf Hitler. And if these people are tied in with one of these Hitler type movements, one of these right-wing fanatical movements to express their political view points, I think we’ve got a sick society, and we’re going to have to do something to render [sic] that (Shaw et al. 1999b).

For a man who claimed he saw no motive for the attack, he was surprisingly able to comment on the potential political meaning of the perpetrators’ motives.
Media exploration of the perpetrators’ life histories revealed some contradictory, yet interesting, results that sometimes put the two in a more positive light. Most sources reported that both perpetrators were quiet and intelligent. However, they had not been excellent students. Pat McDuffee, friend of the perpetrators and former Columbine student commented,

There’s a lot of stuff that’s been going around about - that they were Satanists and they were Fascists and they really weren’t. They were just - they actually were really nice people who just liked having a good time and then something went wrong in their heads and they snapped. It doesn’t make sense at all. It was two really good kids who just snapped. They were sick and tired of getting picked on at school and they were building up everything inside and finally just popped the cork and went off on everybody (Lehrer 1999).

However, many of the reports were oriented toward the negative images of the perpetrators. Together, the perpetrators were characterized as smart and unpopular students who had been teased. The police records revealed that they too had been arrested together for breaking into a vehicle, for which they had been enrolled in the Jefferson County juvenile justice diversion program. Also, the police commented that it was obvious that a lot of planning was behind the attack on the school, and that the high level of preparation necessary and the apparent premeditated nature of the crime did not support the idea that these were two “good kids” who had just snapped.

By the evening, the families of both perpetrators had released public statements. The Harris family said, “We want to express our heartfelt sympathy
to the families of all the victims and to all the community for this senseless tragedy.” The Klebolds said,

We cannot begin to convey our overwhelming sense of sorrow for everyone affected by this tragedy. Our thoughts, prayers and heartfelt apologies go out to the victims, their families, friends and the entire community. As with the rest of the country, we are struggling to understand why this happened and ask that you please respect our privacy during this painful grieving period (Shaw et al. 1999a).

Other reporters focused attention on the Trench Coat Mafia for its possible involvement in the shootings because the perpetrators had apparently been members of the group. As in the case of the perpetrators themselves, the mass media reports also focused on two themes surrounding the Trench Coat Mafia.

First, there were members and witnesses from the community who described the group as innocuous, but that the members had been teased because they dressed differently, in black clothing. On the other hand, there were witnesses and students from the school who claimed that members of the Trench Coat Mafia had actively intimidated other students.

Finally, a parallel was drawn between the Trench Coat Mafia and the Goth movement, a movement that is in various parts of the country, thereby raising the specter of the widespread nature of the threat. A report on ABC’s 20/20 described the Trench Coat Mafia as part of the Gothic youth group, and that the Goths were a sort of gang, comparable to the Crips and Bloods. Dianne Sawyer reported,

Well, since yesterday we’ve heard a lot of speculation about the two suspects and their group the Trench Coat Mafia, with police saying the boys may have been part of a dark, underground national phenomenon.
known as the Gothic Movement and that some of these Goths may have killed before (Ross, Sawyer, and Donaldson 1999).

All the groups the boys belonged to, from familial to possibly nationwide groups, came under intense scrutiny in the ensuing weeks. In addition to characterizing the perpetrators together, the mass media also offered individual profiles of the two.

Dylan Klebold was also characterized as smart, but a follower. Similarly, he overindulged himself with violent video games, would occasionally make the “Seig Heil” salute, and seemed to hate jocks. The media broadcast a picture of Klebold at his senior prom, only three days prior to the shootings. In all, the profiles were troubling, mainly because they were so ordinary, possibly fitting tens of thousands of other youth scattered in communities all across the nation.

Eric Harris was described as an intelligent person who was adept with computers. He was interested in German language and culture, played computer game to excess, and listened to German techo-rock music such as Rammstein. Harris was the son of a military family that was previously from Plattsburgh, NY. In a picture, a media correspondent described Harris as looking “innocent as a choir boy.”
The Victim Toll

In addition to examining the characteristics of the perpetrators, the media also looked at the victims to help explain why these victims should have been selected, and whether they were selected randomly. Witness accounts and the media explained the choice of victims in terms of social class (jocks versus Goths), race, and religious belief.

In addition to reporting on the witnesses’ accounts of the wounding and killing of victims, the media was also interested in ascertaining whether the perpetrators had specifically targeted, or if they had just indiscriminately shot at anyone they came upon. This line of inquiry reported contradictory information, as some witnesses claimed that the shooters had been indiscriminate in targeting anyone in particular. Still, other witnesses claimed that the perpetrators had targeted individuals because they were athletes, Christians, or minorities. Also, some witnesses claimed that the perpetrators had tipped off their friends, telling them to leave the scene. The debate regarding whether any individuals or groups had been targeted would continue throughout the majority of the Columbine story.

As reporters continued to interview witnesses, most of them were with any students they encountered. However later in the developing story, reporters located students who offered specific accounts of the shooting. From these stories, conflicting accounts of the perpetrators’ motives began to emerge. There were some witnesses who claimed that the perpetrators were shooting at anyone
they possibly could, others who said that they targeted minorities and athletes in particular. Whether or not they claimed that certain categories of individuals were targeted, most witnesses agreed that the shooters were laughing as they killed people.

A number of other reports claimed that the perpetrators had targeted minorities and athletes specifically. For example, an unidentified student told a reporter,

- We were just sitting there in the library and then we heard like popping, and we didn’t know what it was. And then I looked out the window and there is this guy throwing like a pipe bomb at all the cars. And then he came in - they, like, started blowing up and shooting everyone in the cafeteria. And then you could hear them laughing and running up stairs, and they were shooting anyone of color, wearing a white hat or playing a sport. And they didn’t care who it was and it was all at close-range. Everyone around me got shot. And I begged him for 10 minutes not to shoot me. And he just put the gun in my face and started (UNINTELLIGIBLE) everywhere and started laughing, saying that it was all because people were mean to him last year (Savidge et al. 1999).

Regardless of how or why individuals were targeted, it was clear that there were many casualties in the school shooting, and the media considered verification of the number and identities of the dead among its highest priorities.

The race of the victims was another of the issues concerning the fatalities that, beginning on April 21st, played a significant role in the Columbine story. Again, the media relied on eyewitness accounts to verify what had occurred. A key witness interviewed by the media was Joshua Lapp, a Columbine student who was in the library when the shooters did most of the killing. He described how the perpetrators targeted Isaiah Shoels, a black student who was fatally shot,
There was a little black kid that I’m pretty good friends with, and excuse the language, but they said, “There’s that little nigger.” Three shots, pause. They go, “Is he dead?” The other one paused, and the other one said, “Yes, he’s dead.” And I mean, you could say it’s a racial thing, which it appeared to be, because it was towards jocks and minorities (Gibson 1999b).

The possible racial motivation behind the high school shooting was a topic that the media pursued with great interest. Later, the Sheriff’s Department confirmed that among the 15 fatalities in the Columbine shootings, there was one black victim and 14 white victims. This was an interesting statement considering that one of the student fatalities, Kyle Velasquez, was Latino.

In a press conference, an unidentified reporter asked, “How it was [sic] that there were reports that the blacks or minorities were targeted?” Steve Davis responded, “I don’t know where that information came [sic], other than if it came from some of the students out of the school, but we have no indication of that” (Davis 1999). Despite the ambiguity surrounding claims that the attacks were racially motivated, the Associated Press reported on April 21st, “Isaiah Shoels was shot in the head because he was the wrong color and in the wrong place at the wrong time – a black man in the Columbine High School library at 11:30 a.m.” (Verrengia 1999a).

Still, as in any area in the United States, race was an important issue in southern Jefferson County, Colorado. Larry King interviewed a black student from Columbine named Justin Norman, and his father, Johnny Norman, who claimed that he had seen swastikas and white supremacist language in the school.
Nonetheless, Justin had been certain that no violence on the scale of the observed
attack would ever happen at Columbine.

When Larry King asked the father whether he would consider moving, Johnny Norman said that, as a product of the Civil Rights Movement, he would not consider moving, because to move would be to accept defeat (King 1999). The media would revisit the issue of race throughout the Columbine story, and it would rival Christianity as a dominant frame of reference for discussing the meaning of the school shootings.

The story that one of the student victims was shot because of her Christian beliefs also played a significant role in the Columbine story. Again, it was Joshua Lapp, an eyewitness from within the library, who gave one of the earlier accounts of this scene.

Charles Gibson asked Lapp, “And then you said they walked over to a girl and asked her if she believed in Christ?” Lapp responded, “If she believed in God, and she paused – she didn’t know what to answer. So she said yes, and they go, ‘Why?’ And then they just proceeded to shoot her” (Gibson 1999b).

Notice that the witness did not name the young woman who had affirmed her belief in God, however in later interviews student witnesses would identify her as Cassie Bernall.

Larry King asked another student, Mickie Cain, to describe the circumstances around Cassie’s death. Cain said,

She was in the - in a classroom, I believe, and she ended up standing up for the greatest thing ever. She had the courage to turn her life around, and she went straight up after she started trusting Christ. And when I came to
Columbine the year after she left, she lent a hand to me when I was kind of going crooked, and she completely, completely stood up for God when the killers asked her if there was anyone who had faith in Christ. She spoke up and they shot her for it (King 1999).

It was interesting that this portion of the interview was immediately followed by an unidentified female witness who said, “Jesus told me everything’s going to be all right. Jesus told me everything’s going to be all right. Jesus told me everything’s going to be all right; going to be all right; be all right, be all right” (King 1999). One possible irony in this is that belief in Jesus may have made at least one student a target, other students claimed to believe that Jesus protected them from the violence.

Cassie’s Bernall’s role in this event has become something of a legend, withstanding factual challenges to the veracity of the story. There is evidence that suggests Cassie Bernall was not the students who said “Yes,” but rather that it was either Rachel Scott, another of the fatally wounded victims, or Valeen Schnurr, a wounded survivor of the attack.

Nonetheless, Cassie’s story, along with Isaiah’s, stand out as the most noteworthy of the victim stories to emerge from the Columbine coverage.

Additionally, both Cassie Bernall and Rachel Scott were featured in their own

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6 The media has reported this student’s name as Valerie Schnurr, which appears to have been an error, since her real name is Valeen Schnurr. In reference to Schnurr’s appearance as an injured student, I refer to her by the erroneous name, Valerie. In reference to Schnurr’s possible role as the young woman who affirmed her belief in God, I refer to her by her correct name, Valeen.
popular books, *She Said Yes* (Bernall 1999) and *Rachel's Tears* (Darrell 2000), respectively.

Still, that the Columbine shootings evoked strong religious feelings is not disputed. In an interview on CNN that evening, a student witness, Crystal Woodman, described how she had been in the library with the shooters, but had later escaped to safety.

CNN announcer Bernard Shaw asked her, “Did you have the feel, the feeling that God was present?” Woodman replied, “Oh, more than ever. That’s the only reason I’m alive today is because he was protecting over us. I mean, Jesus made us invisible” (Shaw et al. 1999a).

The evangelical Christian meaning of the Columbine shootings, centered on the issue of one of the students being targeted for her religious convictions, was a dominant theme in the Columbine story.

Of course, the public showed concern not only for the dead victims, but also for the wounded victims. On the 21st of April, the mass media offered numerous updates on the condition of the victims. Early in the day, the media verified that approximately 23 people, a mix of students and teachers, had been injured in the shootings. Of the 16 that had been hospitalized, five were in critical condition (Lin and Zewe 1999). Of particular interest was Valerie Schnurr, the girl who had nine wounds, shrapnel and bullets. And an amazing story because she was brought here. She was still conscious. And despite having all those wounds, she was asking about her parents and whether her parents had been notified (Mora, Gibson, and Sawyer 1999).

In one of the more compelling comparisons, a trauma surgeon compared the types of wounds they were seeing in the victims of the school shooting as being the
similar to the injuries he had observed while treating fallen soldiers during the Gulf War (Savidge 1999a).

Late in the evening of April 20th, the Sheriff’s Department had estimated as many as 25 dead. However, this estimate by far exceeded the actual death toll. There had been multiple SWAT teams in the school, and many of the dead had been counted more than once. With the presence of explosives in the school, it was initially difficult to get an accurate count of the dead.

Early on April 21st, the Sheriff’s Department reported 15 or 16 dead, correcting its higher estimate of 25. Charles Gibson reported,

The number of dead is now 15, but it could be 16. Fifteen confirmed, and possibly a 16th. Twelve bodies were found in the library, including the two suspects, who died apparently in some sort of suicide attack. One more body just outside of the library of the school, two bodies outside the school itself, and there is perhaps a third body outside the school (Muller, Gibson, and Sawyer 1999).

At 8:37 AM, Steve Davis confirmed the actual death toll, “I do have a final total number of fatalities. We have 15 fatalities. That includes 11 males and four females” (Lin 1999c).

An unidentified reporter’s follow-up question suggests another issue: the discussion of the moral status of the perpetrators, as indicated by whether or not they were considered fatalities. The Associated Press reported that the perpetrators killed 13 people, for example, “They killed 13 people in the deadliest school massacre in recent years” (Foster 1999c). Here, the Associated Press author implied that the suicides of the two perpetrators were not fatalities.
In contrast, Good Morning America reported on 13 of the 15 dead:

“Twelve bodies were found in the library of the school. Teachers, students, and the two young men who were responsible for all this, these two seniors at Columbine High School” (Gibson and Sawyer 1999a). Some journalists considered the shooters among the fatalities, while others did not. The distinction played itself out live during a press conference. An unnamed reporter asked Steve Davis, “Does the death toll include the suspects?” To which Davis responded, “Does the death toll include the suspects, is the question. Yes it does. That includes our two suspects” (Lin 1999c). I call this issue the 13/15 Issue, a distinction that recurred throughout the Columbine story, and I return to the subject in Chapter 6.

The National Context: It Can Happen Anywhere

A local doctor treating victim wounds had likened the injuries to those who had fallen in the line of duty in the Gulf War as a frame of reference for understanding the nature of the casualties. A major component of the Columbine story was comprised of various sorts of commentary about the event, including suggested frames of reference.

Naturally, in the wake of an attack of the magnitude observed at Columbine, the media has a tendency to highlight the commentary of politicians, including the president. Bill Clinton had already delivered a speech on the
evening of the Columbine shootings, and on April 21st at 9:35 AM, he again appeared live on national television to comment.

The President’s speech revealed much about how the media and subsequently the public would later come to understand the Columbine shootings. As in the previous day’s speech, Clinton asked the nation to pray for the victims and their families, but he also framed the crisis as a national issue,

First of all, I think it is important that we remember that we must come together and pray together but also to commit to act together. In Littleton, we saw and continue to see horror and agony. We also see in that horror and agony the ties that bring us together as a national community . . . (Compton and Chang 1999).

That is, tragedy is a time for prayer, but it is also a time for concerted action. The statement reaffirms the President’s earlier statement that the Columbine shootings were important nationally, not just locally. The fact that Columbine did indeed become a national issue is a testament either to the President’s ability to set the national agenda, or it is a testament to the speechwriters’ abilities to sense the national mood.

Clinton spoke about the federal government’s assistance to the response to Columbine, including FBI and ATF officers being on site, and the fact that the federal government was dispatching a crisis response team. Clinton said that it was important to reassure children that they were safe, and “to hammer home to all the children of America that violence is wrong (Compton and Chang 1999).” Bringing the speech to a close, the President called for a moment of silent prayer for the victims, their families, and the community. The silence ended with,
“Amen.” Following the speech, ABC White House correspondent Ann Compton, interpreted Clinton’s speech by commenting, “[Clinton] does fear that the shooting yesterday in Littleton could set off kind of a rash of school violence, and he wants to prevent that if he can” (Compton and Chang 1999).

Other political figures commented to the media about the Columbine shootings, including Colorado Governor Bill Owens, and Al and Tipper Gore. U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, commented from Minneapolis, where ironically, she had been attending a conference on gun violence.

Like Clinton, Reno also framed the shootings as a national issue. In an interview on Good Morning America, Dianne Sawyer asked the Attorney General to comment on the fact that the shootings had occurred in a suburban location, rather than in an urban area, where people might expect it to occur. Janet Reno commented on the meaning of Columbine, “that no one is immune from this violence, and that America must come together as never before and really focus on helping children grow in strong and positive ways . . .” (Sawyer 1999). Her words suggested that the Columbine shootings were important because the violence could happen anywhere, that it was a national (American) problem, and that one of the sources was youth.

The concern that the Columbine shootings might be repeated, or even spark a wave of violence was an issue that the expert commentators also raised, although not in an alarmist tone. One of the prominent experts was James Garbarino, psychology professor at Cornell and Co-Director of the Family Life
Development Center. In the same year as the Columbine shootings, he had published his book, *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*. Garbarino’s book jacket included the prescient image of one boy holding a shotgun to another’s head.

On April 21st, Garbarino, who had worked with violent boys for 25 years, appeared on both PBS’s *News Hour with Jim Lehrer* and CNN’s *Larry King Live*. A panel of experts on the News Hour seemed to agree that there was something qualitatively different about the Columbine shootings, when compared to the other school shootings that had occurred in the previous three years. Garbarino characterized Columbine as a terrorist act, and Franklin Zimring, law professor at Berkeley, cited two reasons why Columbine was different. First, he pointed to the fact that the perpetrators had been much older than in the other school shootings, where there had been shooters as young as 11 and 13. Second, Columbine appeared to have been a remarkably premeditated attack. These experts agreed that there is always some chance that a similar attack will recur, and that it was very difficult to identify which youth might be particularly troubled (Lehrer 1999).

Youth violence experts were more cautious than many journalists, who voiced emotions as much as analysis. On *World News Tonight*, Peter Jennings remarked, “This community is really suffering tonight. It is also bewildered and it is very much convinced now that if it can happen here, it can happen anywhere (Jennings 1999a).” Similarly, although she has professional credentials and
talked about violence and suicide as the two edges of depression, pseudo-expert Dr. Joyce Brothers waxed philosophical when she paraphrased Stephen King, saying, “Life has teeth and it can bite you at any time” (Lin 1999a).

Despite the fact that many important facts had not been determined, the mass media began trying to place the Columbine shootings in various contexts, in particular in context with other violent events. The *New York Times* offered a chart called, “Chronology: Other Shootings Involving Students” in which they offered brief descriptions of previous school shootings that had occurred in Springfield, Oregon; Fayetteville, Tennessee; Edinboro, Pennsylvania; West Paducah, Kentucky; and Pearl, Mississippi (Barron and Sink 1999).

Similarly, the Associated Press compared the Columbine shootings to the Texas Tower shooter incident,

> On Aug. 1, 1966, University of Texas student Charles Whitman climbed to the top of the campus click tower and opened fire with a high-powered rifle. He killed 14 people and wounded more than 30 before he was shot to death by lawmen. Authorities also discovered the bodies of Whitman’s wife and mother in their homes (McDowell 1999a).

The article did not explicitly draw the connection between the Texas Tower shootings and the Columbine shootings. While there is obvious resemblance, the Texas Tower shooting is more similar to the Springfield, Oregon school shooting, where student Kip Kinkel killed both his parents before going on a shooting spree at his school.

Indeed, people were curious to know what was going on in the hearts and minds of the Columbine victims, and speaking to a victim of a comparable
incident was about the closest they could come. Nicole Buckholtz, a student from Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon appeared on CNN, and spoke about how the shootings at Columbine had stirred up her emotions:

“I cried. I cried for a good while. It just, kind of, flooded everything back. . . I can sympathize with some students because I was shot. . . I personally think it’s like the plague. It happens in random areas, it’s not predicted. It literally happens anywhere.” Behind her, someone yelled at the camera, “Go home” (Shaw et al. 1999a)!

The threat that such violence could potentially happen anywhere meant that the mass media would have to offer some context about youth violence in general. CNN reported that a recent CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll indicated that 55% of parents answered that they fear their children’s safety at school.

William Schneider, CNN Political Analyst, spoke about the general fear of crime, citing statistics that in 1998, 70% of Americans thought a school shooting could happen in their community, and that one in three teenagers knew someone their own age that had a gun. Surprisingly, CNN also reported a statistic that one in five teenagers said they knew someone their own age that had been shot (Shaw et al. 1999a).

While the mass media did not cover the actual crime rates, statistics they could easily have found in criminological research or by interviewing a criminologist, they did wager some commentary about causes of Columbine-type youth violence. By the day following the shootings, media sources cited the following contributing causes behind youth violence: culture of violence, availability of firearms, media violence, and the deterioration of the family.
As the Columbine story began to grow, with more facts emerging from the police investigation and with more and different sources offering comments and evaluations of the event, the discussions began to move forward in consistent trajectories. One interesting news show was the April 21, 1999 *Larry King Live* show on CNN which began with an interview with Vice President Al Gore and Tipper Gore, and ended with an interview with James Garbarino and Franklin Graham, son of the reverend Billy Graham. These interviews stand out like matching bookends framing the show, and in these interviews the participants offered competing opinions about the sources of such Columbine-style violence: one religious, the other psychological.

Larry King began the show with an interview of Vice President Al Gore and his wife Tipper. Al Gore sounded remarkably like a preacher, as he offered his first public commentary about the shootings:

> I think there’s a lot we don’t yet know about the motivation of these boys. You can’t dismiss the problem of evil. And I think that as this community inspires the nation with its tremendous support of the families that are going through this terrible experience, I think that all of us want to lift them up in prayer, want to do anything we can to help them find the healing and wholeness that they need (King 1999).

In contrast, Tipper spoke about how, “good mental health support is as important to kids in their schools as their text books” (King 1999).

As interview progressed, Al and Tipper Gore were singing competing parts of a canticle, with the first voice speaking of evil, the second speaking of
mental health. As Larry King alerted his guests that they were running short on time, both reiterated their stances. Tipper concluded with,

*I think that this is a wake-up call to all Americans, to parents, and also to other teenagers, because they often are the first to know who is the most troubled and they need to be supported. They need to have a place to go to: and adult, a mental health center* (King 1999).

Al Gore concluded, “Sometimes there’s a more basic issue between good and evil, and we have to confront the kind of – of evil that does exist in the world” (King 1999).

Viewers likely expected the Vice President to speak about what the branches of government had done and would continue to do, in the courts, legislature, and law enforcement, to respond to and combat youth violence. Instead, his bore an uncanny resemblance to one by a religious leader. Although the Vice President’s words might have been what some people wanted to hear it is unusual to hear secular government officials speaking of the problem of evil, words one expects from religious leaders.

Predictably, Franklin Graham, son of the Reverend Billy Graham, spoke about the world’s problem of sin, and how many in the U.S. would agree to place the Ten Commandments in classrooms. Graham summarized his views,

*I believe in God’s work. Believe in the Bible, and when God says that we are sinners and we have sinned against him, I believe when God tells me that he loves me and he cases for me and he has provided a way for me to come to him and that’s through his son Jesus Christ* (King 1999).

Next, the other participant in the interview, psychologist James Garbarino, spoke. In the interview, Garbarino pointed to the spiritual needs of troubled
youth, but he also identified other issues behind youth violence, beyond the need for redemption. Like Tipper Gore, Garbarino advocated understanding and treatment of troubled youth. He said,

I have interviewed boys who have committed murder now for several years . . . I think there is a kind of spiritual emptiness that you find in these boys. You know, the research shows that kids who are involved in a kind of loving, spiritual religion are buffered against these social pathologies. The reason why it’s so important is that without that spiritual foundation, one, kids don’t have something to fall back upon when they encounter the adversities of life. And two, they also feel like their rage can be unlimited. Remember these boys who do these thing, they don’t think they’re doing wrong. They have a fixed idea in their mind they’re doing right. They’re getting vengeance. They’re getting revenge. They’re dealing [sic] people’s disrespect of them. So, that’s important to understand from their point of view (King 1999).

Garbarino spoke with compassion and understanding, not only for the victims, but also for the youth who externalize their hurt through committing extremely violent acts.

The episode of Larry King Live began and ended with two similar discussions. On one hand, Al Gore and Franklin Graham spoke about the problem of evil in the world, and on the other, Tipper Gore and James Garbarino spoke about the psychological needs of violent perpetrators. This thread of discussion would continue through the following days, as the Columbine community, the mass media, and the general public attempted to put the Columbine shootings into meaningful perspective. By this point in time, the Columbine story had taken shape, and during the following month, the media
would continue to be a forum for discussion of the perpetrators, the victims, and the overall cultural meaning of Columbine.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes content analysis of print and broadcast media accounts of the Columbine shooting. The study focuses on the Columbine shootings as a media event, rather than as an historical event. In this chapter, I discuss the following issues related to the research: the data set and sources included, the content analysis method, coding and inference, non-reactiveness and unobtrusiveness, and use of QSR NUD*IST software.

Data

The data set consists of 728 articles, representative of the mainstream national media coverage of the Columbine shootings. The study period spans the one-month period following the shootings, from April 20, 1999 to May 20, 1999. The articles in the data set are the entire population of articles for the selected sources and allow access to the general public discourse surrounding the Columbine shootings. While undoubtedly other, less popular media sources exist, this research project uses the most prominent U.S. news sources to examine the mainstream discourse surrounding the event. The sources in the data influenced
public opinion and the discussion surrounding the Columbine event, and include
the New York Times, Associated Press news wire releases, Time, Newsweek, ABC
network news coverage, CNN coverage, and PBS’s The News Hour with Jim
Lehrer, and NPR’s All Things Considered.

Studying the news content in the one-month period following the
Columbine shootings allows for the examination of the typical surge and decline
of media coverage for this event, while excluding the Conyers, Georgia school
shootings that occurred in the afternoon of May 20, 1999. Although there were
many references to the Columbine shootings in conjunction with coverage of the
Conyers shootings, exclusion of such articles allows for the study of media
coverage of the Columbine shootings as a discrete phenomenon from the Conyers
shooting. While it is an advantage to separate the coverage of different school
shootings, a subsequent disadvantage is the exclusion of many media sources’
“one month retrospective” shows for the Columbine shootings. Given that little is
known about the effect the Conyers shootings had on the subsequent media
content, I have chosen to exclude this coverage. In the trade off, not much is lost,
as the study period nonetheless allows for the coverage of the one-month news
coverage cycle, including some of the early broadcast and cable media programs
aired on the morning of May 20, 1999.

Downs (1998 [1972]) wrote about the issue-attention cycle in which the
mass media focuses on a given social problem in the mass media. This surge of
attention often wanes simultaneously as the media reduce coverage of the issue
and the public interest wanes. In turn, the media attention to the given problem is supplanted by attention for another emerging problem. Although Downs does not specify the timing of the issue-attention cycle, a look at the distribution of articles written about the Columbine shootings suggests that the public interest in the event had already begun to fade by the end of the study period. Figure 3.1 shows the distribution of articles in the data set, by date.

Public attention shifted from the coverage of the Columbine shootings toward the severe tornadoes that occurred in Oklahoma on May 3, 1999 and to the then on-going crisis in Kosovo. Certainly a search of mass media on May 20, 1999 would reveal a resurgence of issue-attention to the problem of school shootings. It is impossible, however, to differentiate between the resurgence

Figure 3.1 - Distribution of Articles by Date

Public attention shifted from the coverage of the Columbine shootings toward the severe tornadoes that occurred in Oklahoma on May 3, 1999 and to the then on-going crisis in Kosovo. Certainly a search of mass media on May 20, 1999 would reveal a resurgence of issue-attention to the problem of school shootings. It is impossible, however, to differentiate between the resurgence
sparked by the Conyers, Georgia shootings and the one-month retrospective attention that the Columbine shootings might have sparked. While it is probable that some of the news coverage would have occurred whether or not another school shooting happened, the issue-attention cycle for the Columbine shootings was already reaching a decline.

Using Lexis-Nexis, I performed a database search to identify and retrieve all articles published or broadcast during the study period, and that contained the work “Columbine.” I omitted articles discussing columbine flowers that were not related to coverage of the Columbine shootings. The search of the selected sources returned 703 distinct articles. Given that *Time* magazine does not allow Lexis-Nexis to catalogue its articles, I searched manually on *Time*’s web site, and returned 25 relevant articles. Thus, the usable number of articles for the data set was 728.

The final data set included, representing a highly comprehensive depiction of the coverage of the Columbine shootings for the selected sources, during the study period. Following data collection, I reformatted the 728 articles from the “.html” format (Internet site format known formally as Hypertext Markup Language) used by Lexis-Nexis to the “.txt” format (plain text format) necessary to conduct analyses. I then imported the articles into a QSR NUD*IST database.

One limitation to the comprehensive nature of the data collection was that some of the media reports did not use the term “Columbine.” For example, some sources, and in particular early sources, referred to the shootings as, “school
shooting in Littleton, Colorado.” I conducted a subsequent search for articles containing “Littleton” in an effort to compensate for this pitfall. However, given that it is possible to refer to this incident a variety of ways, there remains the possibility that the data set omits a small number of relevant articles.

Technically, the Lexis-Nexis database and search system are the most reliable and comprehensive available for media searches, however some limitations to the system exist. One limitation present in the data set is that the Lexis-Nexis search engine does not return a 100% valid search. Beyond the content limitations mentioned above and the possible presence of typographical errors in transcripts, I noted during the data collection process that Lexis-Nexis returned a number of duplicates, and more rarely triplicates, of the same article. This required manually removing redundancies from the data set, making each article unique. It is manually possible to filter through the data for multiples, however the presence of these inaccuracies also suggests the possibility that the search engine excludes relevant articles. I had no way to estimate whether Lexis-Nexis excluded any appropriate articles.

Two final idiosyncrasies exist in the data and stem from the news releases of the Associated Press. This news service offers news releases for the same story on the same day in short and long formats, with the long format containing the total of the content in the short version, plus some additional details or additional coverage. The redundancy presented a challenge to the integrity of the data in that it contributed a measure of repetition to the Associated Press articles. This
stemmed from this company’s product, rather than from any problem in the collection of the data. For the sake of inclusion, the data set retains the longer versions, and the shorter versions were removed.

The second idiosyncrasy was that the Associated Press releases identical articles on multiple days. This issue also led to redundancy in the data. I estimated that two to three percent of the Associated Press articles are redundancies of this type. The data set includes 253 distinct articles from the Associated Press, of which I estimate that only 245 to 248 are unique. While it might have been possible to locate and eliminate these articles from the data set, it did not seem appropriate given that the articles represented actual press releases of the same content on different days. Removing them would eliminate content that actually was received by consumers. Therefore, these articles remain in the data set, and I proceeded with the analysis understanding that these built-in redundancies existed. In sum, the data set has a high level of validity in representing the media content for the chosen sources during the study period.

Sources

The analysis in the study drew articles form a range of sources that represented the mainstream national news sources. These sources include a daily newspaper, 2 weekly news magazines, television and radio broadcasts, cable television news, and wire news service, outlined in Table 3.1.
Table 3.1: Distribution of Articles by Source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Number of Articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associated Press</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBS</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsweek</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I selected 152 articles from the *New York Times* as the primary example of national newsprint coverage. In 1999, the *New York Times* had an average daily paid circulation of approximately 1.09 million copies (Wright 2000: 385), making it the third highest circulating newspaper in the United States. Two daily newspapers in the U.S. surpass the *Times* in paid circulation, namely the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* with average daily circulations of 1.75 and 1.67 million, respectively (Wright 2000: 385). The *New York Times* stands out in the United States as the standard for daily print news coverage. More importantly, many *Times* articles are reprinted and circulated in other daily newspapers around the country. The *Wall Street Journal* was less suitable, since its coverage focuses primarily on business and economic trends. Similarly, the *USA Today* was less suitable, given its colorful, tabloid-style approach and the fact that the newspaper reprints articles from other newspapers, such as the *Washington Post* or *New York*
Since the data include the *New York Times* and the Associated Press, the inclusion of the *USA Today* would be redundant.

The data set includes two weekly news magazines, *Time* and *Newsweek*. These two magazines have the highest paid circulations of U.S. news magazines, with an average circulation of 4.10 and 3.16 million copies per week, respectively (Wright 2000: 386). Therefore, *Time* and *Newsweek* are the dominant weekly news magazines in the United States. The data set includes 25 articles from *Time*. This includes three articles from May 24, 1999 issue. Even though these were published after the study period, I included them in the data set because they went to press prior to the end of the study period and contain no references to the Conyers school shootings. This idiosyncrasy in the data set results from the weekly magazine news cycle. The data set includes 19 articles from *Newsweek*, including one article from *Newsweek*’s May 24, 1999 issue.

The data set also includes ABC network news coverage, comprising 112 articles from a variety of new programs aired on the network. I selected ABC over CBS and NBC, because ABC was the only broadcast network that aired daily morning, evening, and nighttime news programs. These varying time slots meant that the network had access to varying demographics of viewers. This suggests that the network’s news coverage reached the widest variety of viewers, when compared to the other two networks. Of the 112 ABC articles included in the data set, the majority came from *Good Morning America*, with 57 of the articles, and *World News Tonight* and it’s weekend counterparts, *World News*
Tonight Saturday and World News Tonight Sunday, with 32 articles. Of the remaining articles, six came from Nightline, nine from 20/20, six from This Week, and two were ABC Special Reports.

The data set also includes CNN cable television coverage, with 114 articles from six sources. The largest sources of CNN coverage were CNN Early Edition and it’s weekend counterparts, CNN Saturday Morning and CNN Sunday Morning, with 44 articles; CNN Live Event/Special’s with 34 articles; and CNN Worldview and it’s weekend counterparts, CNN Saturday and CNN Sunday, with 18 articles. Of the remaining articles, ten came from Larry King Live and Larry King Weekend, seven came from CNN Newsday, and one was a CNN Breaking News report.

The data set also includes PBS broadcast radio and television coverage. 50 articles are from NPR’s daily radio show, All Things Considered, and four articles came from the News Hour with Jim Lehrer.

Finally, the data set includes 253 articles from the Associated Press news wire service. These press releases were distributed in both newsprint and broadcast media, including radio and television. According to the Associated Press, in the United States alone, the news wire serves 1550 newspapers and 5000 radio and television stations, making its dissemination extremely broad (Associated Press 2001).

The articles range in length from 16 words, a New York Times quotation of the day, to 68,736 words, a CNN Breaking News live coverage that lasted six
hours. Put in context, a typical *New York Times* article is 700 to 1500 words, and a transcript of a typical 30-minute television program, such as *Larry King Live* or *Nightline*, runs 7000 to 7500 words. The articles were distributed in a spike that began immediately following the shootings, and which generally subsided over a period of four and a half weeks.

Given the nature of news cycles, and the fact that the shootings began at 11:21AM in the Mountain Time zone, it was too late for many news sources to respond to the event on the date of the incident, April 20, 1999. The major spike of news coverage occurred in the selected sources during the first three days following the incident, as seen in Figure 2.1. In the weeks that followed, the quantity of articles gradually decreased along a nearly smooth curve, with two noted exceptions: May 3, 1999 and May 10, 1999, both Mondays. The news cycle of the weekly news magazines, *Time* and *Newsweek*, is nearly sufficient to explain the higher frequencies of articles on Mondays. Beyond this, the frequency of articles on these days corresponds to noteworthy, and obviously newsworthy, events. May 3 saw the arrest of Mark Manes, the man accused of purchasing one of the weapons for the perpetrators, the Columbine High School students returned to school at nearby Chatfield High School, and Denver Broncos quarterback John Elway announced his retirement, an announcement that had been postponed in deference to the seriousness of the Columbine shootings. On May 10, Mark Manes was charged with the felony crime of providing a handgun to a minor, President Clinton spoke about gun control, and the U.S. Senate
debated gun control issues. Despite these two minor spikes in media coverage, the frequency distribution of articles in the data set nonetheless follows an approximately smooth curve of decline over the four and a half weeks during the study period.

Method: Content Analysis

This study employs the method of data analysis generally described as qualitative data analysis, or qualitative content analysis. Content analysis involves examining content, the categorization of units of analysis according to coding rules, description of the content according a formal set of coding parameters to reveal typical patterns or characteristics, and to examine associations between the patterns or other characteristics of the content (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 1998: 1-17).

Much can be said about making inferences from the content of media to the antecedent conditions or the subsequent effects of the content. Related to these concerns, the production and consumption of media content has been linked theoretically with varying levels of effects. In the first half of the 20th Century, the effects of media content on its consumers were considered to be rather powerful, in that the content was a stimulus that had effects in the form of behavior, much as is the case in behavioral science. Later, it was argued that social factors mitigated these powerful effects. The consumers of media content
were aware that they were receiving messages, and that these messages were mediated through the consumers’ attitudes, behaviors, and social characteristics.

Lastly, another strain of thought regarding the analysis of media content focuses on the contingency effects. In this approach, the focus lies on the media content’s influence on people’s attitudes. That is, once people are exposed to media content, this approach focuses on what people do with that content in the form of behaviors. Therefore, the effect of media on people’s behavior is contingent on the extent to which the content influences personal attitudes (Riffe et al. 1998: 3-7). A classic example of this approach has been Gerbner’s body of research (for example, Gerbner, et al. 1994 and Gerbner, Signorielli, and Morgan 1995) linking television consumption and fear of crime.

Similarly, some content analysis studies have attempted to link the content to the context in which it was produced. For example, news media content emerges from a social world, and the researcher might glean some insight regarding the extent to which the social process of news media content production affects the content itself. Or, since the production of media content also occurs in the larger social context, the researcher might also attempt to link the content to the broader cultural context in which the production of the content occurs (Riffe et al. 1998: 7-8).

However, there is also much to be gained from description of the content, an approach that has often skirted the issue of the antecedent and subsequent influences related to the content. Not surprisingly, media content has often been
viewed as central to content analysis (Riffe et al. 1998: 8-10). Some studies have focused solely on the description of the content, and their usefulness is derived from the advancement of scientific knowledge through the production of a systematic and reliable process of analysis. Also, these descriptions can serve as ‘reality checks,’ to offer a clarification of exactly what the media content is, or to help both the producers and consumers of the content to understand the nature of the content (Riffe et al. 1998: 10-1). This study has primarily focused on the media content, and does not focus significantly on the analysis of antecedent or subsequent events.

In clarifying the essence of content analysis, I have adopted a portion of the definition offered in Riffe et al.:

[C]ontent analysis is the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those rules, and the analysis of relationships . . . in order to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication its context, both of production and consumption (1998: 20).

The elements of the definition include some crucial specifications that are worth clarifying regarding the strengths of the content analysis methodology. First, the method is systematic, adding to its scientific quality. While all persons may, on an informal level, engage in content analysis, it is the systematic nature of the process as a research methodology that separates it from the non-scientific analysis of content. Second, the method is replicable, making it capable of generating findings that are independent of the researcher who produces those
findings. Third, the research methodology focuses on the symbols of communication. In the current research project, the analysis focuses on words as the symbols of communication. Fourth, that the method is used to describe and infer meanings from the analysis of the content (Riffe et al. 1998: 20-31).

Conceptually, the analysis focuses primarily on the content. This includes descriptive statements about the meaning of the content, statements about the relationships among categories of content, and inferential statements about the context of production and consumption. The design of the research involves identifying the data source or sources relevant to the Columbine coverage, and the types of conclusions that can be drawn from content analyses of these sources. This study relies solely on the analysis of the content in the data set, following two foci. First, there is a description of the content of the data, from which the researcher can draw inferences about the content’s meaning. Second, I analyze the relationships among the content variables, from which I can draw two categories of findings: Inferences about the content’s meaning, and inferences from the content to the context of the production and consumption of the content (Riffe et al. 1998: 35).

As with any research method, there are advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages, Marshall and Rossman point out that documentary review, such as content analysis, is a good method for “documenting major events, crises, social conflicts” (1999: 134), and that this method can provide for insight into general cultural currents. Practical advantages to this research
methodology include its unobtrusive nature and the ready availability of data. In the current study, the data are part of the public record and are available to anyone who can search the Lexis-Nexis database.

There are also disadvantages to content analysis. The researcher may miss the ‘big picture’ as a result of concentrating on the empirical details. Similarly, there is a challenge to the reliability of the analysis, in that cultural factors mean that the data are open to multiple interpretations, particularly if qualitative data analysis with inductive coding is employed. Replication may be difficult because different researchers can interpret the same corpus of data differently. As is the case with all research, the investigator’s personal biases can affect the focus of analysis. Finally, the research methodology is “highly dependent on the ability of the researcher to be resourceful, systematic, and honest” (Marshall and Rossman 1999: 135). That is, content analysis requires a “span of inferential reasoning:” the full interpretation on the part of the researcher (Marshall and Rossman 1999: 117).

For quality, it is worth pointing out that this research project does not employ grounded theory as a methodology. The term grounded theory has been over-used. It is often applied in circumstances where it has not been appropriate to do so, and basically has come to mean attention to empirical detail. There are criticisms of grounded theory, notably that it places an overemphasis on coding, which can lead the researcher to a lack of understanding of the depth of meanings
embedded in the data (Denzin 1998). This is an issue of inference, which is a logical concern for any methodological approach.

Validity and Inference

The nature of inference is an issue of validity, which in this study has two aspects. First, there is the issue of validity related to the methodology of the research. Content analysis falls in the middle of the continuum between the qualitative and quantitative worlds of sociology, and as such it straddles arguments that range in the extreme from statements of its inherent invalidity to its absolute validity (Kelle and Laurie 1995: 19-22). Is it possible to state that the method is inherently invalid? Addressing such a question is beyond the scope of this research project. This researcher takes a middle ground in pointing out the virtues of making qualitative data analysis as rigorous as possible as a way to enhance the validity of the research.  

The second issue of validity is a discussion of how is it possible for the researcher to infer valid, and warranted, statements from the data and its analysis. In a sense, a large portion of the current study consists of offering concise accounts of the voluminous media discussion that followed the Columbine shootings. That is, it is a task of the researcher to tell the story of how the

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7 See Kelle and Laurie (1995) for references relevant to the validity debate in qualitative research.
aggregate story of the Columbine shootings was told in the media. While this study is not a formal discourse analysis there is an element of this approach that has been coupled with the generally data-driven approach of the researcher. As has been written in the discourse literature on news media, “Journalists do not write articles. They write stories” (Bell 1999:236). Therefore it is my job to report upon the structures and themes that emerge from the data, as a result of the inductive coding. For the discussion of the subject of validity, it is worth reiterating that the present study does not employ inferential statistics, given that the data are the total population of the coverage of the Columbine shootings for the selected sources for the study period. Therefore, the researcher can report patterns that have been observed and collected in the data, in absolute or relative terms.

Categorization and Coding

Coding is a type of classification system, and in this study coding is achieved through a human inductive coding system. Roberts (1997: 2-3) applies the distinction that what differentiates qualitative and quantitative content analysis is how the coding scheme is created. In qualitative analysis, the researcher creates a coding scheme through the repeated examination of the content, and through this process a coding scheme suggests itself, or emerges from the data. For this study, the coding structure is derived both from the literature and contact
with the data. Given that the data are the entire population of articles for the selected sources, this study does not rely on a sampling frame, and therefore eliminates sampling variability.

The creation of a coding system requires the specification of a number of details. First, the researcher must specify the unit of analysis. For the current research project, the unit of analysis is the paragraph. It is technically impractical to code smaller units of analysis, such as words and sentences, since these provide insufficient context of meaning. It would be methodologically undesirable to code larger units of analysis, such as entire documents, because it becomes more difficult to achieve high reliability (Weber 1990: 23). Therefore, I have chosen the paragraph as the unit of analysis, because it is large enough to include the context in which a term or phrase occurs, but it is small enough in relationship to the overall data set that it should not pose a large threat to the reliability of the study. Choosing the paragraph as the unit of analysis allows for the identification of a number of attributes of the data. These including counting unique paragraphs coded, counting paragraphs within unique documents, and counting of multiple paragraphs within documents.

Categories are not mutually exclusive in this study. While a quantitative study involving statistical inference would require that the categories not be methodologically confounded, this research does not require the use of discrete categories to avoid confounding the results. As mentioned before, the present research design does not require statistical inference. The categories overlap, and
a major area of interest for the research project lies in discovering how the categories overlap, such as whether the media discussed the perpetrators and victims in the same text units.

A category can be conceptualized as “a container, or a computational data structure that can hold material unified by a common definition” (Richards and Richards 1995: 82). For qualitative data analysis, the categories should be arranged in a hierarchical structure subject to the following principles. First, “children of a category should be cases in the same sense of the parent” (Richards and Richards 1995: 87). For example, I coded “Perpetrators” and a parent code with “Harris” and “Klebold” as its children codes. Second, “[t]he description of a given category should apply to all the categories in a sub-tree below it” (Richards and Richards 1995: 87). For example, I created the code “Print Media,” and that quality of the code applied equally to all of the categories below it, including “Newspapers” and its child “New York Times.” Third, “[o]ne topic or idea should occur in only one place in the index system” (Richards and Richards 1995: 89).

Technically, coding can be of two types, first order and second order. First order coding refers to the assigning of codes to texts, for purposes of identifying and classifying the text, and second order coding refers to assigning codes to other codes, that is, forming linkages between codes (Richards and Richards 1995: 80-1). As it is related to the structural analysis of news media,
Chapter 4 continues the discussion of coding, including the presentation the coding scheme.

Attention to coding is a very important topic, since the coding serves as the link between the empirical subject of analysis and the abstractions used to understand the phenomenon. Since qualitative analysis often means attempting to make sense of a large quantity of data, it is also possible to view coding as a sort of data reduction technique, an attempt to describe the content in a concise and systematic fashion. A limitation to this approach that warrants mentioning is that the qualitative researcher begins the analysis with an implicit understanding of human action. Much of the literature on qualitative analysis has concentrated on ethnographic methods, and this research has been able to avoid the problematized assumption, at least in part, because the analysis focuses on the content, rather than the context of the data. As mentioned earlier, content is central to content analysis.

In an effort to summarize the data set, I followed a topical approach to coding. That is, the researcher “starts with observation . . . which means by collecting sometimes large amounts of unstructured data, and then hypotheses and theories are developed on the basis of this material” (Seidel and Kelle 1995: 55). There are two senses in which data can be coded in qualitative content analysis. First, a code can refer to a relevant passage in the text. In this sense, coding is like an index to a book, which points to passages in a text. For example, the category “Victims” refers to all text units in the data that refer to the victims.
Second, coding can refer in itself to a fact, in that it summarizes a relevant fact or aspect concerning the data. For example, the code “Larry King” indicates that its referent article’s source was CNN’s *Larry King Live* program. It is important not to conflate the two senses of coding (Seidel and Kelle 1995: 52-3), as this research employs both senses.

The process of coding, roughly described, contains three portions. First, I noted relevant phenomena present in the text, such as the thematic content of the articles. This first step was a crucial aspect of the coding process as well as the later development of theoretical categories. No one is a *tabula rasa*, and every researcher begins coding with some preconceived notions regarding the meaning of the text, and possible conceptual networks about the connections among those meanings. In this case, I utilized a structure that has previously been used to identify the components and themes in news media articles (van Dijk 1988a: 72-99, van Dijk 1988b:17-94, and Bell 1991:147-211). The structure is more fully discussed in Chapter 4.

The second stage in the coding process was to collect the cases in which the relevant phenomena occur in the data. For example, once I identified a topic important for coding, such as “Perpetrators,” I further analyzed the data to mark each instance in which the topic was discussed. Third, I examined the relationships among the code patterns (Seidel and Kelle 1995: 55-8).

This coding strategy aims to reduce the data for the purposes of description, analysis, and organizing the codes into a conceptual tree, or hierarchy
of codes. Such hierarchies are theory-laden, as the coding process itself is partly an expression of the my ideas about the content, understanding of the sociological literature, and assumptions about the data.

Unobtrusiveness and Non-reactivity

Among sociological research methodologies, content analysis has the advantages of being unobtrusive and non-reactive. This means that the data collection process is unlikely to impact the subjects, making it a very socially responsible form of scientific inquiry. The unobtrusive nature of the research makes this form of analysis highly humane (Marshall and Rossman 1999: 116-7, Riffe, et al. 1998: 8 and Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, and Sechrest 1969).

In fact, the analysis of media content is among the least intrusive forms of research. All social science research has the possibility to intrude upon the lives of those who are the objects of study. The present study utilizes the paragraph of text as the unit of analysis. While the text is the product of many individuals’ labor, the reading of these texts, whether cursorily or deeply, does not greatly intrude on the lives of those who have produced the text. After all, journalists, commentators, and witnesses understand that the point of mass media coverage is that it is distributed en mass.

Similarly, content analysis of media content is a non-reactive form of research, in that the data collection does not influence the behavior of those who
produce the content. Insofar as the focus of analysis is media content, there are no human subjects to harm. However, it remains important to consider that the content is the work of real humans. Despite the fact that the data collection process will not influence the production of the content, given that the words have already been written or spoken, there nonetheless exists the small possibility that the authors, or possibly, consumers of the media might be harmed by this analysis. However, there also exists the possibility that the producers and consumers could benefit from this research, in that it takes a scientific approach to analysis of a corpus of popular media content (Riffe 1998: 8).

Given that the data collection process is highly non-reactive, this data set is not subject to the Hawthorne Effect, any influence from the research process that might confound the data. Similarly, this study is not affected by the “observer’s paradox,” which is the effect on the speech or writing behavior of the subjects when they are aware that they are being observed (Labov 1972). Therefore, the researcher can assume that the observed phenomenon, in this case that the news media would have written or spoken as they chose, was not influenced by the research process itself.

QSR NUD*IST Software

This study utilized QSR NUD*IST software as an aid to managing the large data set. Roughly described, the hard copies of the data, printed double-
sided in 12-point font, filled seven two-inch binders. Given the large quantity of data, it was necessary to use a software program to manage the data.

There is much to be said about the intersection between computer technology and techniques of analyzing texts. Alan Turing pointed out that a computer would process information only if provided with specific rules, and that it would only conduct that analysis in a way that assumed no context and no ambiguities. Therefore, it is not surprising that it does not seem appropriate to use computers to conduct analysis in research that requires an understanding of the meaning of text. However, there are many mechanical tasks associated with qualitative data analysis, and computers can help researchers to complete these tasks (Kelle 1995: 2-3).

The main benefit derived from qualitative analysis software is the assistance it provided in managing the data and coding systems. The software does not engage in analysis in its own right, rather it helps to manage the data (Reid 1992: 125-7). In specific, QSR NUD*IST software is useful for two functions: First, it facilitates coding and retrieval of text units, by attaching codes to text units. Here, coding is applied in the referential sense, where it acts as an indexing system (Miles and Weitzman 1994: 312). Second, many scholars have pointed out NUD*IST software’s use as a theory development application, in that it can assist the researcher with second-order coding and the development of complex classification schemes (Miles and Weitzman 1994: 312 and Popping 1997: 219).
There has been much discussion regarding the use of computers in qualitative data analysis, and much of the discussion has centered on ethnographic methods. As related to coding, these are also applicable to qualitative data analysis, such as the method employed in the present study. There are those who approach the use of computers in qualitative content analysis with both optimism and pessimism.\(^8\)

Optimistic attitudes have concentrated on the ability of software packages to enhance the rigor of the research process, in that computers require clarification of the systematic and formal methods employed in the research (Kelle 1995: 9, Kelle and Laurie 1995, and Dohan and Sánchez-Jankowski 1998: 495). Similarly, in the routinization and formalization of qualitative data analysis methods, the use of programs such as QSR NUD*IST might enhance the reliability and generalizability of the research by expanding the quantity and breadth of data that can be examined within the context of a single qualitative study (Dohan and Sánchez-Jankowski 1998: 495 and Kelle and Laurie 1995). Also, it is suggested that computers might enhance the creative ability of the researcher (Kelle 1995: 9).

Pessimistic concerns center on the possibility that the technical use of computer software might alienate the researcher from the data (Kelle 1995: 9). This is especially apparent in the case of programs that aid in theory building,

\(^8\) See Kelle (1995:9) for a review of the literature surrounding attitudes toward the use of computers in qualitative content analysis.
such as QSR NUD*IST, because such a “software moves the analyst a step further from the ethnographic text (Dohan and Sánchez-Jankowski 1998: 490).

Lonkila (1995: 46) points out the influence that grounded theory had on the development of QSR NUD*IST software, and other qualitative data analysis software packages. This influence is most apparent in the structure of the program’s coding and memo-making capacities. For the novice researcher, the danger is that the bias present in QSR NUD*IST could push the researcher toward a grounded theory approach, to the exclusion of other methods. It is therefore important to specify the theoretical approach to the research, in order to avoid a bias toward grounded theory (Lonkila 1995: 50).

In perspective, both the advantages and disadvantages of employing QSR NUD*IST software are important to note. However, these hopes and impediments exist in the context of the larger sociological divide between qualitative and quantitative sociology. Qualitative researchers seem skeptical of regarding the use of computers for qualitative data analysis; the formalization of methods suggests to them a flavor of positivism. Indeed, on the part of many qualitative researchers there is a “ghost-in-the-machine” type of anxiety that the software will take over the analysis (Lee and Fielding 1991). However, Blank (1991) pointed out that no “killer app” has emerged that has been so compellingly useful for qualitative data analysis. Therefore, there is no clear requirement or convention that specifies the use of computer software, as in the case of SAS or SPSS for statistical analysis. On the other hand, qualitative data analysis seems to
face a crisis of legitimacy in the larger sociological arena, when confronted with positivistic methodologies and thought (Dohan and Sánchez-Jankowski 1998: 492-4).

In summary, it is important to note the advantages and limitations of the use of QSR NUD*IST for the analysis in this research. In particular, I proceed with the analysis, informed about some of the issues concerning the use of computers for qualitative data analysis. However, motivation for using QSR NUD*IST software was the functionality it offered in the management of the study’s large data set.
CHAPTER 4
THE COLUMBINE COVERAGE

This chapter reports the initial findings of the discourse analysis\(^9\) of the Columbine coverage. The aim is to offer a quantitative summary of the content and to report on the qualitative analysis of the thematic content of the data. The thematic analysis involves identifying and evaluating the main topics present in the Columbine coverage. The coding scheme developed here has been applied to the headline and lead sections of articles in the Columbine coverage.

By now, we are familiar with the immediate effects of Columbine, but the shootings also had effects beyond the immediate areas. In fact, the crime caused a wave of emotion to wash across the United States. One forum in which this emotion found an outlet was in the U.S. national news media, which turned its attention almost exclusively to the subject for a number of weeks. Few stories have received more media attention, and as measured by CNN ratings Columbine was the largest media story of 1999, and the seventh largest story for the ten years

\(^9\) This chapter partially borrows the section organization of Teun A. van Dijk’s (1998a:215-54) chapter on “The Tamil Panic in the Press,” which is an empirical study of the 1984 to 1986 newspaper coverage of the Tamil refugee situation in the Netherlands.
preceding the event.\textsuperscript{10} Despite the magnitude of the event and the media coverage, to date there has been only one other scientific study (Lawrence 2001) of the media coverage of the Columbine shootings.

Descriptive Results: Frequency and Volume

We begin with some information about the frequency, distribution, and volume of coverage of the Columbine shootings. Described by volume, Columbine was a huge news story, which in the data set comprises 26,626 paragraphs of text. This section presents a number of figures that summarize the intensity and size of the coverage. Table 4.1 describes the frequency of articles by source for the study period.

Table 4.1: Frequency of Articles by Source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>AP*</th>
<th>NYT*</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>NW*</th>
<th>ABC</th>
<th>CNN</th>
<th>PBS</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-Apr</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-Apr</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-Apr</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-Apr</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-Apr</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-Apr</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-Apr</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27-Apr</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-Apr</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29-Apr</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-Apr</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-May</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-May</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-May</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-May</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-May</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-May</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-May</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-May</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-May</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-May</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-May</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-May</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-May</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-May</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-May</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-May</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-May</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-May</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-May</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-May</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-May**</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>N=728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* AP= Associated Press; NYT=New York Times; NW=Newsweek
** Only *Time* and *Newsweek* articles are included for the publication date of
5/24, which is outside the study period. These articles went to press prior to 5/20
Figure 4.1 shows the distribution of articles by source.

The data indicate that the daily print media sources, namely the Associated Press and *New York Times*, account for 55.4% of the articles published, each producing 34.4% and 20.9%, respectively. Broadcast and cable media together account for 24.7% of the articles, with CNN producing 15.7%, ABC producing 15.4%, and PBS 7.4%. Finally, the weekly newsprint sources, namely *Time* and *Newsweek*, together account for 6.2% of the coverage, with 3.6% and 2.6% of the articles, respectively.

As measured by the quantity of articles published, Figure 2.1 (in Chapter 2) offers a visual representation of how the coverage of the event surged, as the news media mobilized to report on the event as quickly as the news cycles for the
given media would allow. Following the first three days after the shootings, the media coverage begins to decline, diminishing steadily over the following three weeks. There are two noted exceptions to the steady decline of the coverage—two Mondays, 5/03 and 5/10. The news cycle, in which *Time* and *Newsweek* are both published on the Monday of each week, is nearly sufficient to explain the unusually high number of articles on 5/03, and the news cycle alone is sufficient to explain the seemingly high number of articles produced on 5/10. The residually high level of articles on 5/03 can be explained through the coincidence of a number of newsworthy events: the arrest of Mark Manes, the man subsequently convicted for purchasing weapons for the perpetrators, the Columbine students returned to school at nearby Chatfield High School, and Denver Broncos quarterback John Elway announced his retirement. Other than these two exceptions, the frequency of the articles seems to decline in a smooth curve, approaching, but not reaching, zero.

The fact that the coverage declines uniformly across the media and across the sources indicates a possible high level of consensus among media personnel, regarding the newsworthiness of the developments following the Columbine event, and the interactive relationship between public interest and media coverage. The distribution of media attention in this story is consistent with what the issue-attention cycle (Downs 1998 [1972]), describing the rapid surge and consequent decline in media attention for any given problem.
While describing the frequency of news articles produced can clarify the relative importance of a news story, estimating the volume of news coverage adds a dimension to the description of the event. Table 4.2 offers a summary of the volume of news coverage, measured in paragraphs\textsuperscript{11}, by source, which is an estimate of the intensity of the news coverage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>AP*</th>
<th>NYT*</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>NW*</th>
<th>ABC</th>
<th>CNN</th>
<th>PBS</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4831</td>
<td>2842</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>3881</td>
<td>12,440</td>
<td>1856</td>
<td>26,626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>19.25</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>15.92</td>
<td>19.05</td>
<td>34.65</td>
<td>109.12</td>
<td>174.75</td>
<td>36.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* AP= Associated Press; NYT= New York Times; NW= Newsweek

When analyzed by volume, CNN coverage surpasses the other sources, with 12,440 paragraphs devoted to Columbine, surpassing the next highest by two and one half times: the Associated Press with 4831 paragraphs written. It is clear that the broadcast and cable media sources demonstrated a more voluminous coverage of this news story than did the print media sources. Figure 4.2 describes the proportion of paragraphs, by source.

\textsuperscript{11}The data are organized using paragraphs as text units [units of analysis], a measure employed as the technically available, due to the structuring of the data in the QSR NUD*IST database. The paragraph is a reasonable estimate of the volume of content, however it is not a perfectly valid measure. The data set includes text from print media and transcripts from broadcast media. The particular challenge to the validity of the measure is that the length of a paragraph can vary greatly, and sometimes in systematic ways. For example, the paragraphs in a transcript from an interview will likely contain shorter paragraphs than the text of a newspaper or magazine article.
The broadcast news media, ABC, CNN, and PBS, account for more than two-thirds of the coverage, or 68%. Daily print media account for 29%, and weekly news magazines account for only 3% of the volume.

The broadcast media sources seem to produce longer stories than the print media sources. Even ABC, which, at a mean of 34.65 paragraphs per article, has the shortest mean article length of these three networks, was still nearly double in volume per article than the Associated Press, which is the print media source with the longest average volume of 19.25 paragraphs per article. Figure 4.3 illustrates the average length per article.
One detail worth highlighting is that, while CNN clearly produced the most volume of news coverage about this topic, PBS was the source with the longest mean length per news article, at 174.75 paragraphs. This is markedly higher than the aggregate weighted mean article length for all sources of 36.57 paragraphs.

Organization of the Analysis: Deciphering the Coverage

As described in the previous section, the Columbine coverage comprises a large body of text intended to define, describe, and comment upon the event.
Such a corpus of data makes analysis nearly overwhelming. Therefore, it is necessary to employ some coherent framework for interpreting the content of the text. That is, one needs to understand something about the structure of the news stories before attempting to understand the meanings contained in those stories. Previous researchers (van Dijk 1988a: 72-99, van Dijk 1988b:17-94, and Bell 1991:147-211) have advanced and refined such a model structure for analyzing news coverage. In applying the structure, I describe the morphology of the story, much in the same sense that a pupil of grammar might diagram a sentence. The process allows for the distillation of the story into its various components, and offers much clarity, especially given such a large corpus of text.\[^{12}\]

It is possible to apply the structure in order to derive inferences about both the meanings contained in the stories and the structure of the stories themselves. Indeed, “we cannot separate the news form from the news content” (Bell 1991:155). Figure 4.4 is a diagram of the coding structure employed in the present research, and is a close approximation of the model advanced by Bell (1991:171).

\[^{12}\] This mode of analysis can also be applied to other forms of content, such as everyday conversation (Labov 1999) and folktales (Propp 1968 [1928]). Actually, Propp’s work has been highly influential, especially in the subsequent development of French Structuralism, which has been influential in the development of discourse analysis, such as that in the current article.
Figure 4.4 Overview of Coding Structure

News Text

Abstract

Attribution

Story

Headline

Lead

Source

Date

Actors

Action

Consequences

Reactions

Commentary

Background
Note that the model allows simultaneously for the inclusion of structural aspects of the stories, such as headline and lead, while allowing for the categorization of various aspects of the content, such as action and consequences.

The major components of a news text are the abstract, attributions, and the story. The abstract is the primary structure of any news text, and it offers a summary of the news content to be conveyed. The key portions of the abstract are the headline and lead, and to a lesser extent the summary and section in which the article appears. Attributions offer information about the source, the author, and the date of publication. These details offer information about who is speaking and when, and in so doing, attest to the authority of the statements contained within the news text.

The story, or main body of news media text, contains most of the details and content, including coverage of the actors, actions, consequences, reactions, commentary, and background information (Bell 1991:169-74). First, a major element of any news story will, of course, be the coverage of the actors and the actions. For something to be news, in most cases something should have happened. Second, the consequences and reactions to the actors and their

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13 Bell (1991) uses the term “story,” but would prefer the term “body.” However, I keep with Bell’s terminology for the sake of clarity and consistency with other authors in the field. As Bell points out, “discourse studies” is the source of much confusion, and one reason is that the terminology is ill defined and cumbersome. (See Bell’s [1991:252] second footnote to Chapter 8.)

14 This is not always the case. Boorstin (1964) points out that many of the “events” covered in the news media are actually “pseudo-events,” constructed for the sake of media coverage.
actions will constitute a second major element of the news story. The media coverage itself is also a response to the story, but for the purposes of the analysis of media discourse, what is relevant is the media’s coverage of the non-media responses. Third, a specialized type of response that warrants categorization is the commentary about the actors, actions, consequences, and responses. These commentaries can be of two types: Commentators can offer context to the action or responses – that is, information that can help the reader to put the event in perspective. Commentators can also offer their evaluation of the situation, and this sometimes comes in the form predictions about what might happen in the future. Lastly, a major structure of news content comes in the form of reports that are intended to offer background for the story, such as explanation or reference to previous incidents that happened recently, or references to historical events. Having offered a brief explanation of the structural and thematic organization I apply to the body of news text in general, I proceed to discuss the findings of the study of the Columbine coverage.

Classifying the Coverage

Journalists themselves offer the distinction between what they call ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news, and this distinction will influence the section of the publication or news program in which the story will appear. “Hard news is [journalists’] staple product: reports of accidents, conflicts, crimes, announcements, discoveries and
other events which have occurred to come to light since the previous issue of the paper or programme” (Bell 1991:14). The emphasis is on the newsworthiness of content based on the description of occurrences or on new factual elements relevant to the story. Soft news is the opposite of hard news, however when pressed to define the distinction, journalists were unable to do so, except through the use of examples (Tuchman 1978:47-9). Relevant examples of soft news coverage include the human-interest story, coverage of the circumstances of human life, feature stories, and special-topic stories, such as sports, business, and entertainment.

The section in which a news story appears offers an indication of whether the journalists considered the news story hard or soft news. Of the 674 documents in the data set whose transcripts contained a reference about the section in which the article appeared, 561 (83.2%) of the articles were in hard news sections, and 113 (16.8%) appeared in soft news sections. The fact that so many articles appeared in hard news categories indicates that journalists and editors considered Columbine an event that was highly newsworthy in the sense that it was worth defining and updating in itself, and not merely from the human-interest angle. These statistics indicate that journalists considered Columbine a serious and newsworthy event.

15 While N=728 for this study, only 674 of the sources indicated the section in which they were published. There is a systematic reason for the exclusion of the other documents, as the PBS transcripts included in the data do not indicate the section. That means that the 50 NPR transcripts and 4 News Hour transcripts are excluded from this aspect of the analysis.
Of the 561 articles written in hard news sections, 408 (72.7% of hard news articles) were published in the Domestic/National news sections. While only the New York Times documents referenced which page the articles appeared on, even this bit of information can be telling. The Times included 78 articles in the National news category, and 23 (29.5%) of these appeared on the front page. This is a significant body of articles, for a number of reasons. Newspapers generally include only one article for any story on the front page, and provide references to other stories deeper in the front section. The data set spans 30 publication days, and the fact that the Times would publish a total of 23 Columbine stories on the front page indicates how seriously newsworthy the Times editors considered the story.

The remaining articles in the hard news category appeared in the following sections: 112 articles (20% of hard news articles) classified simply as news, without specifying a subsection, and 20 (3.6%) classified as Political/Washington news. Smaller portions of the articles appeared in the International/World news section, the New York Times’ NY/NJ Metro section, and a “Special Report/The Littleton Massacre” section.

Of the 113 articles written in soft news sections, 68 (60.2% of soft news articles) appeared in commentary sections, including opinion sections, letters to the editor, and week in review articles. The remaining articles from the soft news category included 26 (23%) sports stories, 7 (6.2%) entertainment articles, 5
(4.4%) business stories, and 7 (6.2%) articles in other sections, including technology, home, family/lifestyle, and behavior sections.

Judging by section, there were apparently more sports articles (26) for the Columbine story than there were political articles (20). However, political news articles are often included in the national news section, the relatively small proportion of explicitly political articles should not be interpreted as suggesting that politicians did not take Columbine seriously. In fact, national and state politicians were among the most frequent commentators about the event.

The most general conclusion from an analysis of the sections in which the articles appeared is that journalists and editors considered the Columbine shootings to be a seriously newsworthy story and a ‘hard’ news event. This conclusion bears a methodological punch as well, in that the news structures outlined in the previous section are most relevant to the study of hard news stories, since these stories are more likely to follow the standard news story format. Soft news stories can have more variability in structure and content (Bell 1991). Therefore, the fact that the Columbine coverage was so strongly ‘hard’ in nature, means that conclusions derived from the structural thematic elements of the story will have a high level of reliability, considering that journalists and editors are more likely to stick to stylistic conventions when writing hard news stories than when writing soft stories. Having situated the body of articles in their proper news context, I now turn to the analysis of the abstract sections of the articles.
Abstracting the Coverage: Headlines and Article Leads

Some portions of news text exert proportionately more leverage on the body of meanings conveyed in the text. In terms of its ability to define the content of a news article, van Dijk (1988a: 226-30) asserts that the headline is the single most influential portion followed by the article lead. In comparison, Bell asserts that: “[t]he lead is the most distinctive feature of news discourse (not the headline) . . .” (1991: 176). Regardless of which feature of the story is more influential, the headline and lead together serve as a sort of abstract for the article. Empirical research indicates that headline portions of news articles have a strong influence on the way readers interpret article content (Cerulo 1998) and that the headline and article leads are the portions of news articles that are best recalled by readers (van Dijk and Kitsch 1983). These findings support the importance of the analysis of the headlines and article leads in the current research. This section highlights the structure and function of the abstract sections of news stories, with a discussion of how these issues might impact the analysis of content.

The headline is the most parsimonious expression of the news story’s content, a stand-alone unit whose function is to attract readers. It is worth pointing out that the production of the headline varies by media. In print media, the headline is an integral part of the article, and invariably appears above the lead and subsequent body of text. Usually written by the editor, not the author, it is the last portion of the article to be written, and is usually derived from the article lead.
In broadcast media, headlines may be altogether absent from the articles, or may be applied at the beginning or end of the longer program (Bell 1991:185-89). Occasionally, the headline will appear, in the case of television, as a visual background to the announcer. Here, the headline is even more of an afterthought than in the case of print media, where the headline is considered a necessary part of the article.

Given the differing structure and function of the headline sections in various media, some methodological issues need to be addressed. First, the ability of headlines to act as valid measures for the content of broadcast media is truncated, although not reduced to zero, when compared with the ability of the headlines of print media to indicate article content. There are 280 (38.7%) articles from broadcast media contained in this portion of the research project, and 444 (61.3%) articles from print media. It is necessary to qualify the strength of the findings of the analysis of the headlines, given the differing media sources contained in the data.16

The article lead is perhaps the most fundamental portion of news reporting, and often a journalist will compose the lead of an article prior to writing the entire story. Unlike the headline, the lead is not a stand-alone unit. Rather, it serves the dual roles of summarizing and introducing the story, which follows immediately. Generally, the lead will range between 20 and 30 words,

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16 The problem suggests a solution: the elimination of broadcast media headlines from the analysis. Also, one might control for the effect of differential media by distinguishing methodologically between print and broadcast media.
and in print media coverage of hard news, the lead can refer to multiple topics. Broadcast news is less likely to introduce multiple topics in an article lead (Bell 1988: 175-85).

Recognizing the increased likelihood in print media that the journalists will introduce multiple themes in a single lead, it is necessary to qualify the validity of the findings. There are 280 (38.6%) articles from broadcast media contained in this portion of the research project, and 446 (61.4%) articles from print media. Therefore, the print media articles should present proportionately more themes than the broadcast media, a detail that undermines the reliability of inferences derived from the data.\footnote{Again, the problem suggests its own solutions: First, one might limit the analysis to one type of media outlet. Second, one might control for the differential inclusion of themes in article leads by distinguishing between the print and broadcast media article leads, and applying a multiplier to control for the propensity of print media writers to cover multiple topics. A contribution to the literature might come in the form of empirical analysis to determine the ratio of topics introduced in print article leads when compared to broadcast article leads.} Despite the systematic problems associated with the use of the headlines and article leads to determine the thematic content of news articles, short of reviewing articles in their entirety, these abstract sections offer the best estimate of an article’s content.

I first conducted a thematic analysis of the headlines, followed by an analysis of the article leads. In general, a comparison of these two stages of the analysis indicated that the results were fairly reliable. I expected that the analysis of the article leads would return more themes per article than did the analysis of the headlines. This result should emerge from two sources: First, there are more
words in an article lead than in a headline, and journalists might naturally take advantage of that extra space to mention more topics. Second, as mentioned above, the print media have the tendency to present multiple topics in article leads. The results of the headline analysis were relatively consistent with the results of the analysis of article leads. For example, the quantitative results of the analysis recorded that for every meta-theme and theme covered, that the article leads contained an average of 1.68 times as many topics as the headlines. Specific ratios are reported by theme in Table 4.3.

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This research supports the assumption that the headline and the article lead should be fairly reliable indicators of one another, however it also raises the methodological issue of how reliable abstracts are to indicate the overall content of the articles. The writing the article lead precedes the writing of the story, and the writing of the headline follows the writing of the story. Considering the lead serves as an outline for the story, and the headline as a parsimonious summary, how different can the story itself be? In the case of hard news coverage, I would assume a high level of consistency between the content of the headline, lead, and story. However, one might assume that the story itself goes into more depth.
Table 4.3: Ratio of Headlines to Article Leads for Meta-Themes and Themes of Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meta-Themes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Ratio of Headlines:Leads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perpetrators</td>
<td>1 : 2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accomplices</td>
<td>1 : 1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What Happened</td>
<td>1 : 1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guns &amp; Bombs</td>
<td>1 : 1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>911 Tapes</td>
<td>1 : 1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Real</td>
<td>1 : 1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Possible</td>
<td>1 : 1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideological Reactions</td>
<td>1 : 1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outside of the Community</td>
<td>1 : 1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>1 : 1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Police</td>
<td>1 : 1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commentary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contexts</td>
<td>1 : 1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>1 : 2.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>1 : 1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Terror</td>
<td>1 : 3.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Having discussed issues associated with the use of abstract sections of news articles, I now turn to the discussion of the findings from the analysis of the Columbine coverage.
Abstracting Columbine

As an initial stage to the qualitative analysis of the Columbine coverage, I systematically examined the thematic content of the headlines, in the 724 documents that include headlines,\(^{19}\) and the content of the article leads, in the 726 documents that included leads.\(^{20}\) Given that the findings of the two separate analyses were highly reliable, this section reports the findings of the thematic analysis of the Columbine coverage conducted on the headlines and article leads together. Roughly the analysis addressed the following question: What are the main topics or themes expressed in the headlines and leads? The outline of the themes covered in the headlines and leads follows the general structure for understanding news content outlined in Figure 4.5.

\(^{19}\) Four articles did not contain headlines were from the Associated Press, and were short blurbs such as quotes and corrections. These omissions should not significantly affect the findings in the analysis of the headlines.

\(^{20}\) The two articles that did not contain leads were *New York Times* photo articles. The only texts contained in these were short blurbs to describe the content of the photos. These omissions should not significantly affect the findings in the analysis of the article leads.
Figure 6: Overview of Thematic Structure and Coding

Note: In percentages, top figures refer to proportions of headlines, and bottom figures refer to proportions of article leads.
These elements include themes concerning the actors, actions, consequences, reactions, commentary, and background, and terror. Table 4.4 is a summary of the distribution of meta-themes and themes in the headline coverage.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{21} See Appendix A for detailed tables offering the distribution of meta-themes, themes, and sub-themes for the headline analysis of the coverage. This section describes selected themes in the coverage and their implications, while Appendix A offers a more comprehensive coverage of the themes, including examples of headlines.
Table 4.4: Distribution of Meta-Themes and Themes in Headlines and Article Leads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meta-Themes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Headlines N = 724</th>
<th>Article Leads N = 726</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrators</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplices</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Happened</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guns &amp; Bombs</td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>911 Tapes</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences</td>
<td></td>
<td>85</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real</td>
<td></td>
<td>71</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction</td>
<td></td>
<td>439</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Reactions</td>
<td></td>
<td>163</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside of the Community</td>
<td></td>
<td>134</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td></td>
<td>96</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td></td>
<td>83</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commentary</td>
<td></td>
<td>157</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contexts</td>
<td></td>
<td>68</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td></td>
<td>90</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terror</td>
<td></td>
<td>90</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most prominent topic, expressed in 439 (60.6%) of headlines and 521 (71.8%) of leads, consists of the various reactions to the shooting, outlined in Table 4.5.
Table 4.5: Distribution of Themes and Sub-Themes for the “Reactions” Meta-Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
<th>Headlines N = 724</th>
<th>Article Leads N=726</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Reactions</td>
<td>Exploration of Causes 163</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mourning</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blame</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Search for Meaning</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shock &amp; Disbelief</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside of Community</td>
<td>Political Meetings</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Schools</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Places</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aid for Columbine</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Memorials</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Columbine Situations</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Healing Process</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medical Staff</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious Leaders</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>Investigation</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Police Response Time</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A little more than one third of reactions are about ideological reactions to the Columbine event. The most significant component of this type of reaction is the exploration of the causes, present in 132 (18.2%) of headlines and 134 (18.5%) of leads. Some of the headlines referred to causes in general, while others
mentioned specific causes for the Columbine shootings, especially guns, social/cultural factors, and entertainment media. Typical examples of headlines include:\n
Coming to Clarity About Guns: Are We Witnessing a Cultural Shift that Says Gunmakers Are to Blame?  
(*Time*, 5/03/1999)

In America; Addicted to Violence  

Columbine High School Shootings and How the Internet, Video Games and Violence on TV and in the Movies May Contribute to Teen-Age Violence  
(*NPR All Things Considered*, 4/28/1999)

The significance of these headlines is that they signal a social process at work: the exploration of what caused the behavior, and to a lesser extent, an effort to discuss methods to detect and prevent this sort of behavior in the future. The implication of this is that the Columbine event was similar to dropping a stone in a pond, in that it caused a splash at impact, and sent ripples emanating outwards from the impact. As the ripples caused a normative disturbance across the United States, one aspect of the reaction was the discussion of what caused the event.

However, there is more to the reaction than discussion of possible causes, in that the Columbine shootings motivated responses in the form of actions and

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22 There is variability in how the headlines were printed in transcripts in Lexis-Nexis. For stylistic clarity, I have printed all headlines in title case, since printing some headlines in upper case, and some in lower case, might imply that others were more prominent than others. I wished to avoid this. This choice may represent a distortion, regarding how the headlines were published in the print media. What might be lost is the distinction regarding how a blanket headline in block letters, such as the *New York Times* 'TERROR IN LITTLETON,' might have preceded a lower case portion of the headline that would explain the relevant content of the article. For the broadcast media, some of which might not have been written with headlines at all, this does present a problem.
meetings both in the Columbine community and elsewhere. The analysis indicates that the community reactions to the event occupy 96 (13.3%) of the headlines and 134 (18.5%) of article leads. The major topic covered in the community reactions theme has to do with the various funerals for the victims and the other memorials held in the community. The second topic dealt with the status of the Columbine High School students, such as when and under what conditions they would be returning to school. Clearly, these sorts of events are to be expected following such a dramatic event such as a school shooting. To build on the stone in the pond metaphor, it's necessary to respond to the splash, and the news media covered the responses present at the point of impact. The effects of the impact were also felt elsewhere across the country, and news coverage of reactions elsewhere account for 134 (18.5%) of the headlines and 179 (24.7%) of leads. Three major topics are covered in this theme: political meetings, sports-related issues, and reactions at schools in other communities.

The second thematic group has to do with the coverage of the Columbine event, and as such, the treatment of this issue is handled in 192 (26.5%) of headlines and 286 (39.4%) of leads. This proportion represents the combination of the three thematic areas: the actors meta-theme in 66 (9.1%) of headlines and 128 (17.6%) of lead, the action meta-theme in 70 (9.7%) and 107 (14.7%) of leads, and the consequences meta-theme in 85 (11.7%) of headlines and 133
(18.3%) of leads. Coverage of the Columbine event is limited to the discussion of what happened, who did it, and the consequences. The police, in the context of the on-going investigation of the Columbine shootings were the dominant source of information regarding the Columbine event, although it was also the case that the media contacted witnesses and others in the community who were able to speak about the perpetrators or victims. Examples of coverage of the actors include:


Portrait of a Deadly Bond: One Was a Leader, The Other a Follower. One Prone to Fits of Venomous Temper, The Other Shy and Awkward. *Time* Investigates What Led Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to Turn Columbine High School into a Killing Field (*Time*, 5/10/1999)

Some of the coverage of the perpetrators focuses on the shooters individually, while most of the headlines and leads feature them as a pair, as outlined in Table 4.6.

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23 Although the coverage of the Columbine event is covered in the meta-themes of actors, actions, and consequences, the combination is non-additive. The coding is non-discrete, meaning that a single headline or lead can be coded in more than one category. The fact that the coverage of the Columbine event is smaller in proportion to the sum of the meta-themes of actors, actions, and consequences indicates the existence of overlap among the meta-themes.
Table 4.6: Distribution of Themes and Sub-Themes for the “Actors” Meta-Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub Themes</th>
<th>Headlines</th>
<th>Article Leads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 724</td>
<td>N = 726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrators</td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris and Klebold</td>
<td>Together</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Harris</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dylan Klebold</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible 3rd Gunman</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplices</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trench Coat Mafia</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Manes</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robyn Anderson</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The individual coverage of Eric Harris focuses on two issues: the shooter’s life history, particularly any past deviant behavior, and insight into his mind. In comparison, the individual coverage of the other shooter, Dylan Klebold, focuses exclusively on his personality, while predominantly ignoring past deviant behavior. When compared to the coverage of Eric Harris, it is clear that the media does not try to cast Klebold as a deviant individual, but rather, as in the second quote, as someone who was led astray. The coverage of the perpetrators’ personalities could be a function of the fact that the abstracts referenced here are from articles that attempt to study them apart from one another.

An examination of the coverage of the perpetrators together reveals two themes: First, that the press expresses some amount of sympathy for, or at least the intention to understand, the perpetrators. In particular, some *New York Times* coverage expresses the intention to understand the personalities and lives of the
perpetrators. For example, the headlines that handle Klebold and Harris together express that the journalists covering this event felt that some consideration of the perpetrators’ standpoint was necessary, as in cases where the perpetrators are described as “outcasts,” and that the headlines express that they are “confused.”

Second, even though some media actors might intend to understand, or even sympathize, it is clear that what Harris and Klebold did leaves little room for arguing to withhold judgment. When discussed together, the shooters are characterized as deviant, a “deadly” pair. When the perpetrators are discussed individually, it is Eric Harris who is portrayed as more deviant. I question whether it is fair and factual to characterize one of the perpetrators as more nefarious than the other. Even if the intentions of the perpetrators were different – that is, if one of them deep down meant to do it, and the other did not – their behavior speaks to the equality of their deviance. Therefore, it is a curious finding of this analysis that the two perpetrators were characterized differently. Chapter 5 takes up the discussion of the characterization of the perpetrators in more detail.

The third thematic group is coverage of the commentary about the event, outlined in Table 4.7.
Table 4.7: Distribution of Themes and Sub-Themes for the “Commentary” Meta-Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Headlines N = 724</th>
<th>Article Leads N = 726</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contexts</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Contexts</td>
<td>Teens</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contexts</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contexts</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contexts</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contexts</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>National Figures</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>Elsewhere</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>Experts</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This thematic group is present in 157 (21.7%) headlines and 285 (39.3%) of article leads, including the two thematic areas: evaluations of the event in 90 (12.4%) headlines and 192 (26.4%) leads, and comments about the context in which the event occurred in 68 (9.4%) headlines and 118 (16.3%) leads. The major sources of evaluative commentary are members of the Columbine community and national figures, particularly politicians in both the headlines and the leads, while media commentators played prominent role in commenting within the article leads, but not in the headlines. An analysis of the commentary reveals a lack of consensus about the motivations behind the event, for example:
Clinton Says Shootings Should ‘Wake Up’ America  
(Associated Press, 4/20/1999)

Gunmen’s Friends Say They Didn’t Know Plans, but Understood Pain  
(Associated Press, 4/24/1999)

It is a windfall for politicians to comment about the Columbine shootings, in that they speak largely to what has already been established as the general consensus, namely that the Columbine shootings were tragic and wrong. However, in the Columbine community a contingent of those who commented, but not all, expressed sympathy with the shooters’ point of view, but not with their means of expressing the point of view. This is interesting to note, as a parallel to the above discussion of the actors, in which some media outlets attempt to understand the perpetrators’ motivations. I will develop this idea more in the discussion section below.

The contexts offered in news coverage serve to inform the readers about circumstances or perspectives that might be helpful in understanding the coverage. Approximately two-thirds of the context offered in the headlines, and over a quarter in the leads, deals with youth and youth culture, for example:

How Well Do You Know Your Kid?  
(Newsweek, 5/10/1999)

We’re Goths and Not Monsters  
(Time, 5/03/1999)

The first headline touches upon a current in U.S. society, that our youth are somehow strangers in our midst. That is, youth are from us, but are not of us.
The message of the contextual focus on youth is clear: to understand the
Columbine story, it is necessary to understand youth and youth culture.

Behind this assumption lies the idea that the problem of youth stems from
the fact they navigate a social world that adults do not understand. Compare this
with the possible alternative assumption about the Columbine shootings: The
perpetrators were extremely troubled, and most people could find it comforting to
know that there are millions of other youth who are socially and psychologically
better adjusted. In sum, there appears to be an assumption in the coverage that
youth are a problem, largely because they are poorly understood. However, there
is also a level of reflexivity in this contextual discussion, in that individual teens
or youth groups can respond to the nature of the contextual discussion. In the
second example, Goths respond to how they have been characterized in the
Columbine coverage, and in mass media in general.

The final major theme in the corpus has to do with how the Columbine
shootings are characterized as a “terror.” The theme cuts across the structural
elements present in the reactions, discussion of the Columbine event, and
commentaries. Analysis reveals the presence of the terms “horror,” “terror,”
“massacre,” and “tragedy” in 90 (12.4%) headlines, and 157 (21.5%) leads, for
example:

Terror in Littleton: The Scene; In a Violent Instant, Routine Gives Way to Panic
(New York Times, 4/21/1999)

High School Massacre
(Good Morning America, 4/21/1999)
In block letters, the *New York Times* carried the headline, TERROR IN LITTLETON, in 56 (36.8%) of its 152 articles included in the corpus. The reporting journalists do not usually write the headlines; rather, copy editors usually write them. Nonetheless, the headlines are concise statements intended to give readers an understanding of the content. In this case, it seems that the headlines are intended to tell readers that the story will address the terror, horror, massacre, and tragedy in Littleton. Perhaps even more telling is that nearly twice as many article leads referred to terror, and this suggests that given more space journalists will enhance the newsworthiness of the story by flavoring the text with emotional terminology. I agree with Bell (1988:179-80) who comments that the use of dramatic verbiage makes news media coverage arguably more value-laden than advertising, with the added caveat that advertising makes no claims to value neutrality or objectivity.

Particularly in the case of the *New York Times*, and as in the three examples above, a relevant question arises: whose terror/horror/massacre/tragedy are we talking about? Despite the fact that the coverage of the victims, in the “real consequences” theme, amounts for only 71 (9.8%) headlines and 114 (15.7%) leads, we must assume that it was the victims who experienced the terror, etc., whether dead, injured, or emotionally affected. Although this statement does not hold up to an empirical test of correlation, as discussed in Chapter 6, I argue
that the association between the victims and terror is at least rhetorically correct. If there is any doubt regarding whose terror we are talking about, we might ask ourselves whether there was any concern for whether or not the perpetrators experienced terror. I say this to drive home the idea that the terror the media refers to belongs to the victims.

The order in which participants are mentioned in news reports affects readers’ interpretation of the deviant- or normalized-nature of the behavior. Particularly relevant here is research (Cerulo 1998) indicating that when a victim is mentioned first in a news article, the readers are more likely to find that the violence experienced by the victim was deviant. Here we find that the “terror” meta-theme aligns readers’ sympathies with the victims, by initiating the Columbine coverage with an emotion exclusively associated with the victims.

Such conventions that influence readers’ evaluations of violent behavior should be taken seriously. Particularly, there were cases where articles evoked the terms “terror,” “massacre,” and so on, when the article had very little to do directly with Columbine coverage, such as a 5/02/1999 article describing the social make-up of an Arizona high school. It is clear that the intention of publishing this article was to offer contextual information about high schools in general, and therefore to help readers to understand the Columbine event. I question the appropriateness of including such an article under the headline, TERROR IN LITTLETON. Having described the major thematic elements in the
Columbine coverage, briefly exploring the ideological implications, I now turn to
discussion of the possible deeper meanings of these themes.

Discussion

The analysis of the headline and article lead coverage of the Columbine
shootings has yielded several types of results. First, discussion of the perpetrators
focused on their cognitive mental states as causes for their behavior, while
explicit discussion of causes focused on sociological causes. The two perpetrators
are characterized differently, with intent being cited as a relevant mitigating
factor. A large part of the discussion of the perpetrators is an examination of their
cognitive psychological states.

The causality implied in this sort of examination is that the shooters’
mental states would influence their motivations to commit such a crime, and that
understanding the shooters’ histories and personalities might offer insight into
what caused them to do it. This focus on the perpetrators’ mental states stands in
stark contrast to the discussion of causes that are not psychological in nature.
Topics discussed as causes include availability and regulation of guns, social
factors such as cliques, the influence of violent entertainment media, and issues
related to detection and prevention of violent behavior. Mental illness was cited
as a cause in only 6 (0.8%) headlines and 11 (1.5%) leads, a small fraction of the
132 (18.2%) headlines and 134 (18.5%) leads referencing exploration of causes as
the subject, respectively. This finding lays a foundation for the following item of discussion.

Second, the analysis of the content suggests uncertainty among journalists about how to characterize the perpetrators. Specifically, there seems to be some ambiguity regarding whether the gunmen deserve sympathy, or at least understanding. The characterization of the perpetrators as “outcasts” and “confused” stands in stark contrast to the presence of headlines framing the coverage in terms such as “terror.” While it is sometimes unclear whether the perpetrators deserve sympathy or even understanding, there is no doubt in anyone’s mind that the murder of the victims is awful.

Ultimately, the news coverage couched any attempts to understand the perpetrators and their motivations in terms of their life histories or their cognitive psychological profiles. Such a focus avoided the possibility that the journalists could be misinterpreted as sympathizing with the perpetrators, because an expression of such a sentiment would likely cause moral outrage among the readers. The news media avoided discussing the perpetrators and victims in close proximity to each other. If the two topics are not separated, some individuals become emotionally aligned with the victims to the point that they interpret any examination of the perpetrators as a justification of their crimes.

This phenomenon can be understood in the context of the magnitude gap. That is, violent crimes “seemed much less evil – less wrong – to the perpetrators than to the victims. Victims tend to see things in stark, absolute categories of
right and wrong; perpetrators see a large gray area” (Baumeister 1999:40). The same seems to hold true for the *discussion* of violent crimes and the perpetrators and victims involved. The fact that in this empirical case discussion of the perpetrators is often troublesome and ambiguous lends support to the idea that the magnitude gap applies not only to the actual victims or perpetrators, but also to discussion of those who inflict suffering and those who suffer. “To understand perpetrators, it will be necessary to grasp what these crimes and other acts mean to them – which often entails seeing the acts as relatively minor, meaningless, or trivial . . . [Discussion of perpetrators’ motivations] will inevitably seem insensitive to victims, at least at times” (Baumeister 1999:19). Put simply, attempting to understand perpetrators is often mistaken as justifying their behavior.

Appearing insensitive to the victims or justifying the actions of the shooters are positions that journalists would want to avoid at all costs. Overall, the news media did a passable job of exploring the perpetrators’ motivations without seeming to justify their behaviors. Separating the discussion of the perpetrators and victims serves this purpose effectively, allowing some discussion about the shooters without arousing moral indignation on the part of readers. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that the choice of media language indicates journalists’ attempts to bridge the magnitude gap, and it also indicates a certain level of ambiguity about the moral status of the perpetrators. I examine this finding in more detail in chapter 5.
The causes cited in proximity to discussion of the perpetrators were predominantly psychological in nature, such as anger and hatred, while the general causes were more sociological. This touches upon a core issue: whether the perpetrators are ultimately accountable for their behaviors. Sociological causes are often perceived to waive the agent’s personal responsibility, while cognitive psychological motivations are less likely to waive culpability. (See Chapter 7 for an exploration of this issue.) It is possible that the almost exclusively psychological discussion of the perpetrators and the avoidance of mention of sociological causes in proximity to perpetrators stems from the media writers’ tacit understanding of the magnitude gap. That is, the media are careful in their writing to avoid the possibility that readers might interpret their coverage as justifying the perpetrators’ behavior.

Third, the magnitude gap has also appeared as relevant to the coverage of the memorials in the “community reactions” theme. In addition to the many formal memorials for the victims of the Columbine shootings, there were a number of informal memorials. For example, an Illinois man, Greg Zanis, erected fifteen crosses on a hill overlooking Columbine high school. In the shootings, the perpetrators fatally wounded thirteen other people, including twelve students and one teacher, and then apparently killed themselves\(^2^4\) bringing the total of fatalities

\(^{24}\) The news media reported a murder-suicide, that one of the perpetrators was found shot in the back of the head, and the other in the side of the head. Other accounts simply report their having committed suicide. Even the subsequent police reports are ambiguous regarding this detail. For the present purposes, I find it interesting that none of the news media sources included
to fifteen. After Zanis erected fifteen crosses, a discussion ensued regarding whether the perpetrators ought to be memorialized along with the victims. I call this the “13/15 Issue,” and it lies at the heart of the moral discussion surrounding the Columbine shootings. I have already pointed out above the presence of ambiguity regarding the moral status of the two perpetrators, when compared to one another.

Of course, the moral status of the victims is not at issue, but what is at issue is the ambiguity regarding the moral status of the perpetrators in relation to the victims. The 13/15 Issue touches on an important concern: While there is near universal consensus that the victims deserve to be memorialized, there is widespread disagreement about whether the perpetrators ought to be memorialized at all, and if so, how it should be done. This is another example of the magnitude gap, however this time it’s a discussion in the media demonstrating controversy in the community. I revisit the 13/15 Issue at the end of Chapter 6.

Sociologically, the 13/15 discussion indicates a level of uncertainty surrounding the moral status of the perpetrators, especially when examined in close proximity to the victims. That is, did they deserve any sympathy, and if so, how much? This is not a religious statement, rather a sociological statement about moral evaluation as a social process. Clearly, the consensus about memorializing the other victims caused the creation of other, informal memorials,

\[\text{in the analysis considered the circumstances of the perpetrators’ deaths important enough to write about. This reinforces the statement that the deaths of the perpetrators were irrelevant.}\]
most of them for the victims. The media sources covered “pilgrims” coming to see the makeshift memorials, such as one in a Columbine high school parking lot. If there were any makeshift memorials for the perpetrators, in addition to the two crosses in Zanis’s memorial, these are not mentioned in the media coverage. What are mentioned are accounts in which members of the Columbine community report that they can understand the shooters’ feelings, but not their actions. However, it was also the father of one of the dead victims who removed the two crosses for the perpetrators in the 13/15 incident, not someone from the public at large. Ultimately, these events suggest ambiguity in the community regarding the moral status of the perpetrators. In this case at least, the media process seems to reflect the real world process of removing the crosses.

Fourth, when comparing the frequency of coverage of the reactions to coverage of the Columbine event, it is clear that the reactions are the primary component of the Columbine story. That is, what matters most is not what has happened, but how people react to what has happened. Specifically, coverage of the reactions is present in 439 (60.6%) of headlines and 521 (71.8%) of article leads, while coverage of the Columbine event (together, the actors, actions, and consequences) comprises only 192 (26.5%) headlines and 286 (39.4%) leads. The ratio of reactions coverage to the Columbine event coverage is 2.29:1 and 1.82:1 in the headlines and leads, respectively. This means that it was more important to discuss why this event happened and how people inside and outside the
community were reacting to it, than it was to discuss what happened in the event, at a ratio of approximately two to one.

Fifth, there were two primary sources of information regarding the Columbine event: the police, through their investigation, and witnesses in the community. Of these two sources, the police served as the dominant source of information regarding the themes of actors, actions, and consequences. The press had to pay attention to police statements, and there was coordination between the police and mass media teams. The police set up a series of press conferences, contributing to the creation of an on-going news story, and the result was that the press was literally parked in the community for weeks on end. The fact that the main perpetrators were dead might also have contributed to this, since in the absence of any surviving perpetrator, there would be no first-person source of information regarding the shooters. If the gunmen had survived, the police would have been under a gag order regarding the release of information relevant to prosecution. The unintended consequence of the police being primarily in control of information about the Columbine event, and at liberty to divulge much of it, may be that the community became the subject and target of media spectacle, at least in a larger proportion than it already had been.

Having the media present in the Columbine community for an extended period of time likely contributed to the volume of coverage observed in the “reactions” and “commentary” meta-themes. The mechanism at work is simple: It is journalists’ job to find news, and when not gathering information at press
conferences, they were in search of news in the Columbine community. The presence of a large corps of journalists in the community meant that they would manufacture lots of news. It would have been possible to hold press conferences in Denver, a half hour’s drive from Columbine, and might have displaced some of the journalists from the community, ultimately leading to a reduction in media spectacle.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that coverage of the Columbine event, including the actors, actions, and consequences, was notably smaller in volume than other components of the story, journalists nonetheless considered the Columbine shootings a newsworthy event. One factor contributing to the volume of coverage was the inherent drama and importance of the event. However, an additional factor is that the police unintentionally contributed to the magnitude of coverage by creating an on-going news story. As the Columbine story developed, the perpetrators and the victims remained two foci of coverage. I have already pointed out that the moral status of the perpetrators was unclear, and I take up this topic in more detail in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 5

COVERING THE PERPETRATORS

Coverage of the two shooters is a major portion of the moral discourse surrounding the Columbine shootings. The moral judgment regarding such high profile crimes is not automatic and fixed. Rather, it involves a process through which successive facts and evaluations are revealed through the media. This chapter documents and explores the process through which the mass media settled on a single version frame for understanding the perpetrators’ role in the crime.

In Chapter 4, an analysis of the media content suggested that the moral status of the perpetrators was uncertain. There are numerous ways in which violent behavior can be described in the media, especially in the case of a crime of the magnitude and complexity of the Columbine shootings. In this chapter, I explore the ambiguity of the shooters’ moral status by addressing the following questions: First, how were the perpetrators portrayed in the mass media, alone and as a pair? To address this question, I offer composite sketches of the media’s rendering of the shooters. Second, How did the media present the moral status of the perpetrators as individuals, and in relationship to one another? Here, I draw an analytical eye to the perpetrators’ depictions, in order to assess patterns and idiosyncrasies. Finally, according to the media, what was the moral status of the
perpetrators as a pair? To address the final issue, I explore the specific sequences of media narratives of the shooters’ behavior.

Themes of Discussion about the Perpetrators

One of the most sociologically interesting components of the Columbine story was the media’s discussion of the perpetrators. However, the media coverage of the perpetrators comprised a relatively small proportion of overall content. Specifically, the perpetrators are mentioned in 92 (12.7%) of the 726 article leads and 41 (5.7%) of the 724 headlines included in the analysis. Harris and Klebold together are discussed in 26 (3.6%) of article leads and 11 (1.5%) of the headlines. Nonetheless, for the purposes of examining the media process through which the violent behavior is deciphered, this small portion of the coverage proved to be very interesting. In earlier chapters, I have offered an account of the day of the shooting and the following day. Here I offer a discussion of two dominant themes of coverage about the shooters.

Within 24 hours after the shootings occurred, the mass media had identified the shooters as 18 year-old Eric Harris and 17 year-old Dylan Klebold, both seniors at Columbine High School. In a purely factual fashion, the media reported the identities of the perpetrators. For example,

We wanted to bring you up-to-date on the details that are emerging on the deadly school shooting in Littleton, Colorado yesterday . . . (voice over) where two gunmen took the lives of 15 people. A sheriff’s spokesman
told reporters a short while ago that the death toll now stands at 15. That number includes 11 males and four females, and among those dead is the possibility of at least one faculty member as well as both of the suspects. Both suspects have been identified as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (Chang and Compton 1999).

As time passed, the media reported more details about the shooters. First, there were the details of their deaths, and while the media had already reported that the shooters were dead in an apparent murder-suicide, the exact details of their deaths remained unclear. CNN reported that the two were found dead, one with a gunshot wound to the back of the head and one with a shotgun wound to the side of his head (Lin and LaMotte 1999). Once the bodies had been removed from the crime scene, the coroner conducted autopsies to examine the perpetrators for the presence of drugs in their systems. On April 27th, Good Morning America reported, “newly released toxicology reports indicate that neither Harris nor Klebold had drugs in their system at the time of the massacre” (Dahler, Gibson, and Sawyer 1999).

However it was the details into the shooters’ personal lives that the media most aggressively pursued, in an attempt to address the burning question: Who were the two perpetrators of this brutal shooting? Little by little, media sources began to offer profiles of the perpetrators. In fact, there were numerous articles that painted “portraits” of the killers. The media interviewed Columbine students who had known Harris and Klebold. For example, Ben Lausten told CNN, “I grew up with Dylan. I’ve been going to school with him since 3rd grade. He was - they were both very brilliant kids. Eric, I knew him passing in the halls, you
know. Any time we saw each other we’d tell a joke or whatever.” When asked whether the two were teased, Lausten responded that they were teased no more or less than any other group in the school (Lin 1999b). Lausten seemed to think that these students were normal.

On the other hand, some accounts suggested that the youths had been troubled. NPR reported that both Klebold and Harris had recently undergone psychological metamorphoses. Harris, since moving several years back from New York State to Colorado, had trouble adjusting to his social environment. “As he adjusted to his new clan, students at Columbine say Harris began wearing all black, speaking German, and he became interested in unusual topics: World War II Germany, for example, Hitler and Satanism” (Adams and Bradley 1999). Similarly, a teacher at Columbine claimed that Klebold had undergone a personality transformation, about the time that he became acquainted with Eric Harris:

Their friendship got them into trouble. In early 1998, they broke into a car and stole electronic equipment. They seemed to bring out the morbid in each other, writing poems in a creative writing class with images of blood and rotting flesh, but also the innocent, they bowled together in the mornings (Adams and Bradley 1999).

There were two competing themes of coverage about the shooters. One suggested that they had been normal adolescents who snapped, and the other hinted that they had shown warning signs that they might be dangerous.
Theme 1: How could this have happened?

The first of the two themes focuses on the perpetrators as normal youth who went over the brink. Journalists asked the questions, how could this have happened? And, what went wrong? The discussion tends to point out that the perpetrators were “good” and “normal” teens, and that given their previous behavior it is surprising that they would commit such a brutal crime. The media offered numerous details that supported the idea that the perpetrators were normal. “Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, students at Columbine High School, worked last Friday making pizzas. On Monday, they went bowling. And on Tuesday, the committed mass murder” (Johnson and Brooke 1999). Thus, the details describe normal teens’ lives, and they indicate an incongruity between their typical behavior, such as bowling, and their subsequent violent behavior.

Journalists seized on the detail that Klebold attended the senior prom with his girlfriend the Saturday night prior to the shootings. From ABC News, Tom Jarriel reported,

A close look at these recent snapshots only compounds the mystery over the two high school seniors who had their day of infamy before they took their own lives. Dylan Klebold, handsome in a formal black tux, attending the Spring prom, just like the other kids - without his black trench coat. And Eric Harris, in a relaxed pose snapped by a friend, looking fresh-faced thin and as innocent as a choir boy (Jarriel, Sawyer, Donaldson 1999).

Pictures of the seemingly normal boys accompanied the text, and everyone seemed to ask, what motivated them to commits such violence?
As if positing an answer, some reports suggested that the normal pressure of teen life had pushed them over the edge. Deborah Roberts reported,

What is striking, however, is that in the week prior to the killings, Harris had endured two different rejections. He was turned down by the Marines after attempting to enlist for what Marine officials say is an undisclosed medical reason. And the day before that, there was the matter of the school prom (Roberts, Sawyer and Donaldson 1999).

Or, possibly it had been the teasing that had pushed the shooters over the edge, as “some acknowledge that last school year there was a small group of athletes who enjoyed taunting other students, including Klebold and Harris” (Roberts, Sawyer and Donaldson 1999).

Even though the perpetrators had been through a juvenile justice diversion program, there was no indication that their previous minor scrape with the law would have progressed to such significant violence. The New York Times reported, “It was just 11 weeks ago that a court officer released Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold early from a juvenile diversion program, saying they had learned the intended lessons in the months since their arrest and had promising futures” (Wilgoren and Johnson 1999). The court officer characterized the two in the following way,

“Eric is a very bright young man who is likely to succeed in life,” the officer wrote in a report released here today. “He is intelligent enough to achieve lofty goals as long as he stays on task and remains motivated.” Of Mr. Klebold, the officer said: “He is intelligent enough to make any dream a reality but he needs to understand hard work is part of it” (Wilgoren and Johnson 1999).
Similarly, Frank D’Angelis, principal of Columbine High School admitted that he knew the perpetrators’ names, but that he had no prior knowledge of any disciplinary problems associated with them. Also, D’Angelis said that he had never heard of the Trench Coat Mafia prior to the shootings (Battista 1999).

Even on the day of the shooting, some media accounts suggested there had not been any indication of what was to come. “When Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold arrived at their 6:15 a.m. bowling class, there was no reason to suspect that the day would end in a horrific bloodbath” (Newsweek 1999). In all, these details combine to paint a picture of normal kids who did something incredibly wrong, and that no one ever expected or could have predicted what happened.

Theme 2: Someone Should Have Known!

In contrast to the first theme of coverage, there is a competing discussion that emerges from the treatment of the perpetrators. The media pointed out a number of warning signs that could have suggested that these youths were at risk of behaving violently. Therefore, the media posed and answered the following questions: Why didn’t someone see it coming? And, shouldn’t someone have known?

From the beginning of the media coverage, the perpetrators were described in horrific terms. On April 21st, the New York Times carried the following description of the Trench Coat Mafia: “Fellow students and people in
the surrounding neighborhood said the faces of the group’s members were sometimes covered with white makeup and dark eyeliner, and their tongues were dripping with hatred for racial minorities and athletes” (Pulley 1999). Because the earliest reports strongly connected Harris and Klebold to the Trench Coat Mafia, the early descriptions of the group applied by association to the shooters.

On the same day, Ted Koppel characterized the perpetrators as brutal:

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were only 18 and 17 years old, but they were ruthless and efficient killers. It is a measure of how much thought they must have given their assault on Columbine High School yesterday that it was late [on April 21st] before authorities finally felt confident enough to remove the victims’ bodies from where they lay (Donovan and Koppel 1999).

Details emerged that the shooters had planned the shooting in detail, World News Tonight reported, “a diary found in Eric Harris’ home, shows the two teenage gunmen began planning the Columbine High School massacre last April [1998], a full year ago” (Miller and Brown 1999).

Besides characterizing Harris and Klebold as the ruthless perpetrators of a premeditated and diabolical crime, the media also concentrated quite a bit of energy on the shooters’ use of hate speech and fascination with hate symbolism. Eric Harris’s web page apparently included violent overtones and hate speech, as reported in the Associated Press,

Columbine High School gunman Eric Harris appears to have had a Web site filled with apocalyptic imagery, apparent bomb diagrams and song lyrics such as “WHAT I DON’T LIKE I WASTE.” Using the America Online screen name “rebdomine,” Harris apparently titled his Web page “REB’s words of wisdom, if you don’t like it, ill [sic] kill you” and packed it with drawings of devils, guns and pyres of skulls (Allbritton 1999).
The hate rhetoric extended itself to a fascination with Hitler and Nazism. The Associated Press also reported,

Their interest in Hitler and World War II was well-known around school. They played war games and bragged about their guns. Harris and Klebold sometimes spoke German in the hallways and made references to “4-20,” Hitler’s birthday (Foster 1999c).

Similarly, the media reported that the perpetrators were fascinated with guns, “Harris and several members of the [Trench Coat Mafia] made a video in class about guns they had. He also said that several members recently bragged about getting new guns” (McDowell 1999b).

Reports of the use of violent language and a fascination with Hitler and guns, left journalists and audiences wondering how it had been possible that someone hadn’t suspect that these boys were potentially dangerous. The media began to uncover evidence that people had indeed suspected something.

Report was given to the deputy who was stationed inside the school in March of 1998, more than a year before this massacre took place. That report said to watch out for Eric Harris, that he had been, as you said, detonating pipe bombs and had posted messages to his Internet Web page warning of mass murder. One of them said, I can’t wait until I can kill all you people, according to documents given to that sheriff’s deputy. But investigators here are saying that while the deputy was watching Harris, without proof of a chargeable offense, there was nothing he could do, and he never did get anything to charge either Eric Harris or his accomplice, Dylan Klebold, with before that shooting took place (Zewe and Zewe 1999).

The media also reported that the Trench Coat Mafia offered the shooters a place to stand out, even if it was at the bottom of the status hierarchy. The Associated Press reported,
their strange affectations as part of the “Trenchcoat Mafia” were what made Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris stand out at Columbine High School. But if the pair’s fondness for Hitler and black trench coats seemed bizarre, other students could relate to the social pecking order that had put Klebold, 17, and Harris, 18, squarely at the bottom (Foster 1999b).

However, the other members of the Trench Coat Mafia claimed that Harris and Klebold were extremists within the group. Similarly, friends and members of the Trench Coat Mafia claimed that Harris and Klebold’s obsession with guns and violence began to stand out as early as 7th grade (Kelley and Harris 1999).

As details about these possible warning signs increasingly emerged, the media began to explore whether these and other warning signs had been ignored. *Time* magazine wrote of the perpetrators, “we do know that these two high school boys sent up flares advertising their anger and alienation, but these signs were either ignored or dismissed” (Dickinson 1999). This sort of statement begins as a description of the perpetrators, and then quickly progresses to an indictment of the shooters’ parents, or other adults who might have observed their behavior.

Dickinson continues in her *Time* article,

But is it possible for parents to miss homicidal rage? I can’t help asking: Where were the Harrises and Klebolds when their sons were watching Natural Born Killers over and over? Have the parents seen that movie? Have they ever played Doom and the other blood-soaked computer games that occupied their children? Did these “educated professionals” take a look at the hate-filled website their kids created? . . So I wonder: Where the hell were the parents (Dickinson 1999)?

The discussion raises the questions whether it would have been possible to stop this event, since someone should have known.
Taken with the pervious theme that highlighting the unpredictable nature of the Columbine shootings, the presence of these themes in the media coverage suggests a latent moral discussion. If it were possible to foretell the crime, then those in positions privy to information suggesting the at-risk nature of the shooters might be morally responsible for the crime. On the other hand, if the crime had been totally unexpected no one could be held reasonably accountable.

The Moral Status of the Perpetrators

Taken together, the two competing themes, the one incredulous and the other retrospective, suggest that the media were uncertain about the moral status of the perpetrators. If it was the case that these were two essentially good boys who snapped, lashing out in a violent way, they could not be fully culpable. If they were pushed over the brink through the pressures of teen life, they might deserve some sympathy. On the other hand, if the two had been purely malicious, then they would not deserve sympathy. In this case, they would be thoroughly guilty of carrying out a particularly brutal and premeditated crime, one that terrorized a school, a community, and the nation.

The question of the perpetrators’ moral status is complex, because there are three ways in which we might examine it: First, in the media, what was the moral status of the perpetrators in relationship to one another? Second, what was the moral status of the shooters when taken together? Third, what was the moral
status of the perpetrators in relation to the victims? In the following sections, I
address the first two questions. I will return to the third question following the
discussion of the victims in Chapter 6.

The Moral Status of Harris Vs. Klebold

In nearly every case that the two perpetrators are mentioned together, the
media referred to them by their last names, with Eric Harris almost invariably
mentioned first. Some of the media accounts also included the perpetrators’ first
names, but journalists almost never referred to the perpetrators by their first
names alone. In the rare cases where the shooters are called by their first names,
it tended to be student witnesses speaking in interviews. For example, one
student said, “The first thing I thought was, Eric and Dylan, why did you do this”
(Shaw, Lamotte, Savidge, Zewe, Thomas, Schneider, Roland, Mintier, Sadler, and
McIntyre 1999)? Note that even when mentioning the perpetrators by their first
names, the student mentioned Eric Harris first. This detail would be
unremarkable, were it not apparently congruent with the characterization of Harris
as leader and Klebold as follower.

The media focused a lot of attention on Harris and Klebold being a
psychological “deadly mix.” For example, the Associated Press wrote, “Eric
Harris was a troubled teen, apparently suffering from depression and obsession.
Dylan Klebold was a follower, who was rejected by his peers and who found
acceptance from Harris” (Paulson 1999c). In the chemistry of the deadly mixture, Harris has been characterized as the catalyst. In comparing the perpetrators’ moral status, it is important to understand how they were characterized in the media, separate from each other. Unfortunately, there is not much material to work with, since the media coverage contained very little examination of the perpetrators as individuals. Specifically, Eric Harris is discussed individually in only 5 (0.7%) of the 726 article leads and 9 (1.2%) of the 724 headlines. Dylan Klebold is discussed individually in only 3 (0.4%) of article leads and 3 (0.4%) of headlines.

Characterization of Eric Harris Alone. I first describe the media’s characterization of Eric Harris, separate from Dylan Klebold. The most prominent theme of coverage about Eric Harris came when the police investigation released information about Harris’s diary, in which he planned the attack. Details in the diary included,

a timetable for obtaining the weapons, the explosives. And they show careful planning went in to ensure that on the day of the attack, Adolf Hitler’s 110th birthday, they would be able to kill the maximum number of victims (Miller and Brown 1999).

Harris apparently intended to kill hundreds, and fantasized about hijacking a plane to crash it into New York City, a seemingly prescient detail, given the events of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001.
According to the media reports, Eric Harris loved German insignia and guns. “Harris would come to class in steel-toed combat boots and a German cross. Harris was also said to be a big fan of Rammstein, a German industrial, or techno, rock band” (Paulson 1999a). In addition to the possible teasing and social rejection that Eric Harris endured, there was also the matter of his rejection from the Marines. Just days before the Columbine shootings, the Marines had rejected Eric Harris on the grounds that a psychiatrist had put him on the medication Luvox, a fact that disqualified him as a Marine recruit.

Despite the rejections he endured, Harris had not always been an outsider. Neighbors often described him as an intelligent youth who was well adjusted with lots of potential. By many indications, Eric Harris seemed to come from a normal family. Still, there was a level of concern about Harris, and we have already discussed his previous brush with the law for breaking into a vehicle. In addition, neighbors of the Harrises,

Randy and Judy Brown [said] a year before the high school shootings they were so concerned about Eric Harris’s violent writings on the Internet that they went to police. The Browns had had trouble with Eric Harris. They say Harris had threatened their son, Brooks, and vandalized his car. When Brooks found threats of mass murder on Harris’s Web page, he brought it to his parents (Miller and Jennings 1999).

As a result,

the sheriff’s deputy stationed at Columbine High School had been keeping an eye on gunman Eric Harris for about a year before last week’s massacre, officials confirmed [April 30]. The Denver Rocky Mountain News reported today that Neil Gardner, the sheriff’s deputy stationed at Columbine, received a report in March 1998 that Harris was detonating pipe bombs and talked of committing mass murder (Vogt 1999).
However, since Harris had not been caught for any serious infractions at school, the deputy could not do anything except keep an eye on Harris.

In composite, the media profile of Eric Harris emerged as follows: He was a somewhat troubled youth from a normal family who had a fascination with gun and hate symbolism. Eric kept a diary in which he outlined plans to attack his school, and in which he fantasized about committing even larger acts of violence. He previously had a minor scrape with the law, and his expressions of aggression reached the ears of neighborhood parents and the Sheriff’s deputy stationed a Columbine High School.

Characterization of Dylan Klebold Alone. In comparison, the media consistently described Dylan Klebold as “a follower, not a leader, who went astray after he met Eric Harris” (Paulson 1999b). According to witnesses, Klebold had been a quiet and smart student who had worked hard in Cub Scouts. However, friends pointed out that his demeanor had changed when he met Eric Harris. Nathan Dykeman, Dylan Klebold’s friend told Charles Gibson on Good Morning America that, unlike Eric Harris, Dylan had not been fascinated with Nazi symbolism, and had not been teased by athletes. There was nothing in the interview that suggested that Dylan Klebold was diabolical or would have been considered a risk for the shooting, although Dykeman did imply that there was
some reason to suspect that Eric Harris was one of the perpetrators (Gibson and Walters 1999).

The media also reported details about Klebold’s family. It was the same Dykeman who immediately after the shootings had called the Klebold house to find out if Dylan was safe. When he found out that Dylan was not there, Dykeman suggested to Mr. Klebold having a gut feel that their son might be involved in the shootings. Klebold’s father got off the phone with Dykeman to call the authorities and offered his services to negotiate with his son (Gibson and Walters 1999). Another surprising detail was that, “Dylan Klebold, one of the Columbine High gunmen said by classmates to have openly admired Adolf Hitler, was the great-grandson of a prominent Jewish philanthropist in Ohio” (Foster 1999a).

The media portrayed the Klebold parents as sensitive and caring individuals. Susan Klebold, the shooter’s mother, reported that something in her son’s “goodbye” that morning had felt out of the ordinary. “The goodbye had an edge to it,’ the mother, Susan Klebold, told a family pastor, describing her son’s tone last Tuesday morning as ‘almost fatalistic’” (Johnson and Wilgoren 1999). Similarly,

Dylan’s father, Thomas Klebold, 52, a former geophysicist who runs a mortgage business from his house, told the pastor he had detected “this slight tension” in his son a few days before the attack. Mr. Klebold made a mental note of it and thought he would get back to it, the pastor said (Johnson and Wilgoren 1999).
In sum, there is not much material to draw on, when trying to characterize the media’s discussion of the Dylan Klebold. In composite, he was described as a bright and enthusiastic youth, until he met Eric Harris. After meeting Harris, Klebold seemed to undergo a psychological transformation, although the media did not report that any of the people who knew Klebold suspected that he might be dangerous. Dylan Klebold seemed to come from a typical household, although his parents had sensed some tension in him prior to the shootings. Nonetheless, the media reports suggested there was very little evidence that might, even in retrospect, suggest that Klebold was capable to a brutal attack on his school.

Comparing the Individual Characterizations. In comparison to one another, there are a number of elements of these descriptions that stand out. First, Eric Harris’s description stands alone, while Dylan Klebold’s profile depends on Harris’s presence. For example, when the media discussed how both perpetrators had undergone psychological metamorphoses, Eric Harris’s shift was described as arising from his difficulty in adjusting to life in Colorado. In contrast, Dylan Klebold’s psychological change was attributed to his friendship with Eric Harris. In the Columbine story, the reader becomes acquainted with Dylan Klebold through his association with Eric Harris. With the exception of the three articles that cover Klebold independent of Harris, most of the information about Klebold occurred in articles that also discussed Harris.
The media portrayed Eric Harris as the more deviant of the two perpetrators. Specifically, the story presented Harris as the leader, and Klebold as the follower. Nick Baumgartner, a childhood friend of both perpetrators described their relationship as follows:

[W]herever Eric was, Dylan was sure to be not far from behind [sic]. He and Dylan nearing the end of seventh and eighth grade more and more started playing games like - certain games that are called first person shooters. They really kind of got obsessed. It was kind of where they would come home after school and start playing then, and wouldn’t stop until they went to sleep, you know, and eventually got involved with competing over the Internet or a modem and playing against each other (Kelley and Harris 1999).

In the Columbine story Harris is the engine behind the brutal attacks, a fact reinforced in the media by the stories describing Harris’s diary which included detailed and lengthy plans for the attack. One interpretation was that Harris intended to carry out his plans, and that his charismatic persuasion had brought Klebold under his sway. The media stories portrayed Harris as the diabolical influence, with Klebold simply following along. If intent and level of premeditation were the barometers for measuring culpability for this school shooting, the media judged Eric Harris more harshly than Dylan Klebold.

However, if one looks at the behavior of the perpetrators, their moral status seems equivalent. That is, judging by their behavior, both Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were equally responsible for carrying out the attack on Columbine High School. To what extent, in a legal sense or in a moral sense, is intent relevant in the face of naked aggression? Given the known facts of the attack,
neither perpetrator deserved more or less responsibility for the attacks than the other. Therefore, it is questionable whether the media fairly and validly portrayed the perpetrators as individuals.

The Moral Status of Harris and Klebold Together

Analysis of the moral status of the perpetrators in relationship each other reveals uncertainty on the part of the media, and analysis of the two as a pair suggests similar results. Empirical research of other narratives of violent behavior (Cerulo 1998) has determined that the moral status of perpetrators of violent behavior is not immutable, but rather that the moral judgment or justification emerges from the process of discussing the behavior. This section examines how the mass media presented the perpetrators as a pair, and specifically addresses the question of the moral status of their behavior, building on the earlier observation of the two contradictory and dominant themes of discussing the behavior. It also reports the findings of a test of the rhetorical implications of the structure of the headlines and articles leads of the 152 New York Times in the data set. I begin with a discussion of sequencing and moral judgment in journalistic accounts of violence.

Cerulo (1998) asserts that different meanings can be ascribed to similar cases of violent behavior. For example, it is possible to tell varying stories about similar events, such as police shooting and killing a suspect in a crime. The
sequence in which the elements of a story are presented influence readers to judge the behavior as justifiable violence on the part of the police, or as a case of police brutality. It is not that the details change, rather that the story of the incident changes, influencing readers’ moral sympathies to fall either with the perpetrators of the violence, or the targets of the violence.

There are narrative sequences of media accounts that offer readers clues about the relative deviance of an event. Similarly, the sequence in which a journalist chooses to offer the details of a violent act can reveal clues about the journalist’s judgment of the relative deviance of the behavior.

In assessing violence, vastly different meanings can be attributed to virtually identical acts. Stories of violence unfold before an audience – stories with comparable parameters – and in some cases the violence is deemed unacceptable, in other cases it is viewed as potentially justifiable, and in still other cases, the violence is considered too difficult to classify (Cerulo 1998: 3-4).

There is a typology of three types of violence: normal violence, deviant violence, and ambiguous violence (Cerulo 1998: 6). Some violence is considered socially acceptable, in that it is necessary or socially justified. This sort of violent behavior is normal violence. For example, if police utilize force to subdue a criminal, and if that force is used in its appropriate measure, the police use of violence is normal violence. Other violent behavior is considered socially unacceptable, because it lacks moral justification. This sort of violence is deviant violence. For example, if police utilize excessive force in subduing a suspect, such as beating him unconscious, then the violent behavior is deviant. Also, there
are cases of violence in which it is difficult to discern whether it was normal or deviant. For example, if a police officer uses excessive forces in subduing an assailant, but the suspect is a known cop-killer, then the violent behavior is ambiguous violence. In this case, the fact that the assailant is a cop-killer mitigates judgment of the arresting officer’s use of excessive force.

When writing about the three different categories of violent behavior, journalists show a distinct preference for employing specific sequences for describing the details. I utilize Cerulo’s (1998) typology and terminology of describing four sequences of presenting violence: victim sequences, performer sequences, contextual sequences, and doublecasting sequences. There are a number of important components to any account of violence, including details about the victims, the act, the performer, and relevant contexts. These sequences vary according to what component of the narrative they highlight, usually by the single component of the narrative a journalists puts first. In an empirical test that included 109 subjects, Cerulo (1998: 111-35) found that rearranging the sequence of the elements in a news story significantly affected the audience’s moral evaluation of the behavior.

Types of Sequences. The victim sequence typically stresses the target of the violence, or victim, over the other elements of the narrative. In doing so, it orients, even sympathizes, the reader toward the victims. This is of course a subtle, tacit rhetorical tool, packaged in the cultural assumptions and conventions
of narrative form. It implies that the victim is the most important aspect of the narrative, and the effect is that it aligns the reader’s moral sympathies with the victim. As a result, the victim sequence is most closely associated with the reporting of deviant violence, aggression unfairly dealt to the victim (Cerulo 1998: 40-3).

The main feature of the victim sequence is, of course, the victim. The other components of the account, the performer, the act, and contexts, take a back seat to the victim. For example, the data include the following headlines: “Terror in Littleton: The Dead; Portraits of 12 Killed at the Colorado School” (Barron 1999) and “Terror in Littleton: The Teacher; As They Mourn, They Are Left to Wonder” (Johnson 1999). The primary elements of these headlines are the victims, in the first case the 12 dead, and in the second the single teacher who was fatally wounded. There is evidence that journalists employ a strong convention of sequencing the accounts of deviant violence in the victim sequence, and that 71% of stories describing deviant violence are written in the victim sequence (Cerulo 1998: 46). Similarly, there is evidence that readers’ interpretations are influenced by the sequence of an account. Depending on the type of violence described, when the account was presented in the victim sequence between 52% and 60% of readers interpreted accounts of violent behavior as being deviant violence (Cerulo 1998: 119).

The performer sequence typically stresses the performer of the violence over the other elements of the narrative. This sequence orients, even sympathizes,
The reader toward the actor. It suggests that the performer is the most important aspect of the narrative, and the effect is that it aligns the reader’s moral sympathies with the performer. As a result, the performer sequence is most closely associated with the reporting of normal violence, justified aggression (Cerulo 1998: 42-6).

The main feature of the performer sequence is the one who commits the violent act, with the other components of the account, the victim, the act, and contexts, taking a back seat. For example, the New York Times published the following headlines: “Terror in Littleton: The Overview; 2 Youths Wanted to ‘Destroy the School,’ Sheriff Says” (Verhovek 1999) and “Terror in Littleton: The Suspects; Sketch of Killers: Contradictions and Confusion” (Wilgoren and Johnson 1999). Journalists employ a strong convention of sequencing the accounts of normal violence in the performer sequences, and 96% of stories describing normal violence are written in the performer sequence (Cerulo 1998: 46).

There are two sequences used to describe ambiguous violence: the contextual sequence and the doublecasting sequence. The contextual sequence stresses the circumstances in which the violence occurred, over the other elements of the narrative. It alerts the readers that the context is dominant factor of the narrative. The effect is that it influences the readers to consider the environment in which the behavior occurred when level moral judgment about the behavior. As a result, the contextual sequence is one of the two sequences most closely
associated with the reporting of ambiguous violence, where it is difficult to tell
whether the behavior was normal or deviant (Cerulo 1998: 48-51).

The other components of the account, the performer, the act, and the
victim, take a back seat. Two contextual headlines from the data are, “Terror in
Littleton: The Motives; When Violent Fantasy Emerges as Reality” (E. Goode
1999) and “Terror in Littleton: The Investigation; Little Was Done on Complaints
in Littleton File” (Brooke 1999b). In both cases, the main feature is the context:
first, motives, second the fact that there had been complaints about the
perpetrators in the shooting. There is evidence that journalists employ a
convention of sequencing the accounts of ambiguous violence in the contextual
sequence, and that 85% of stories describing ambiguous violence are written in
either the contextual sequence or the doublecasting sequence (Cerulo 1998: 46).
Evidence that readers’ interpretations are influenced by the sequence of an
account, is that, depending on the type of violence described, between 27% and
39% of readers interpreted accounts of violent behavior as being normal violence.
Between 36% and 63% of readers interpreted accounts of violence as being
deviant, when the account was presented in the contextual sequence (Cerulo 1998:
119).

The doublecasting sequence alerts readers that the performer and victim in
the event are not clearly distinct. This indistinction between the performer and
victim is the most important element of the narrative, and the effect is that it alerts
readers to the ambiguous nature of the violent behavior (Cerulo 1998: 48-51).
The main feature of the doublecasting sequence is, of course, the dual nature of the victim/performer.

Examples in the Columbine coverage include: “Terror in Littleton: The Overview; 2 Students in Colorado School Said to Gun Down as Many as 23 and Kill Themselves in a Siege” (Brooke 1999c) and “Terror in Littleton: The Gunmen; A Portrait of Two Killers at War with Themselves” (Johnson and Wilgoren 1999). In these examples, the perpetrators are mentioned first, but at later there appears some mitigating factor, either that they committed suicide or that they were in some way struggling within themselves. Empirical evidence suggests that readers’ interpretations are influenced by the sequence of the account. Depending on the type of violence described, between 36% and 41% of readers interpreted accounts of violent behavior as being ambiguous violence, while between 40% and 57% of readers interpreted accounts of violence as being deviant, when the account was presented in the doublecasting sequence (Cerulo 1998: 119).

Testing the Sequences in the New York Times Articles. Using Cerulo’s (1998) typologies of violence and sequencing, I examined the sequencing present in the 152 headlines and 150 lead sections of the New York Times articles included in the data. While there were 152 headlines and 150 article leads from the selected New York Times articles, only 81 headlines and 66 leads indicated that they were specifically about the relevant details of the Columbine shootings,
namely the performer of the violence, the violent behavior, the victims of the violence, or relevant contexts. Other articles were excluded from this portion of the analysis, because they ostensibly covered some peripheral topic related to the Columbine story. Examples of excluded articles are news coverage of a Senate debate on gun control, and coverage of professional sports cancellations.

This analysis offers clues about how journalists were thinking about the moral status of the high school shooters. What emerges is a picture of how the media came to decide upon the moral status of Harris and Klebold together. Similarly, the findings offer clues about how audiences likely interpret the violent behavior, whether as normal, deviant, or ambiguous. While the empirical tests (Cerulo 1998) indicated that readers were not perfectly influenced by the presence of a certain sequence into making a moral evaluation, we do observe that the sequence does influence readers’ moral evaluations. Therefore, an examination of these sequences is capable of suggesting both what the journalists were thinking and the effect that the sequencing might have in influencing reader’ opinions.

The analysis added validity to the previous finding, in Chapter 3, that the single most prominent component of the coverage was the context, which accounted for 55 (67.9%) of the 81 headlines and 33 (50%) of the 66 article leads. Figure 5.1 describes the total distributions of sequences for both the headlines and article leads, respectively.
Table 5.1 and Table 5.2 outline the distribution of articles by sequence in headlines and article leads, respectively.
Table 5.1: Distribution of Sequences in *New York Times*
Articles in Headlines, by Date

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<th>Date</th>
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<th>Doublecasting Sequence</th>
<th>Victim Sequence</th>
<th>Contextual Sequence</th>
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Table 5.2: Distribution of Sequences in *New York Times*
Articles in Lead Sections, by Date

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<th>Victim Sequence</th>
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There are a number of details worth noting. First, the contextual sequence is the dominant format for presentation of the Columbine event. Following the
eleventh day of coverage, April 30, 1999, we observe virtually no articles in which the victim and performer sequences are employed. This suggests that by this date variability in the moral discussion surrounding the violent behavior had played itself out. Similarly, there are virtually no cases of the doublecasting sequence following May 1, 1999. The contextual sequence was the dominant narrative form in the Columbine story from start to finish, and its prevalence continued, even after journalists no longer employed other sequences. The dominance of the contextual sequence is no surprise, because the mass media sources studied revealed a large measure of ambiguity about the nature of the violence observed in the shootings. Empirical study indicated that the contextual sequence was systematically associated with narratives of ambiguous violence (Cerulo 1998: 48-51). The media’s use of different sequences reveals uncertainty on the part of journalists about the moral status of the perpetrators.

Although one might like to conclude that journalists’ preference for the contextual sequence indicated that they did not know what to say about the behavior, there are a number of reasons why such an interpretation is misleading. First, the Columbine coverage was of a significantly larger scale than the articles employed in the previous empirical tests (Cerulo 1998). I observed that the elements of a sequence might have been broken up among articles, rather than contained within any single article. For example, in the *New York Times* coverage, a single daily paper might include different articles highlighting the performers, the victims, and contexts. Since the components are divided among a
number of articles, it is difficult to determine in some cases, which of the components is most prominent. Although the contextual sequence was dominant, it is possible that the rhetorical theory of sequences does not apply to a media story that is on a scale as large as the Columbine story.

Nonetheless, context stands out as the dominant feature of the *Times* articles, when considering the articles as a whole. This does lend validity to the interpretation that journalists were expressing a measure of ambiguity about the moral/deviant nature of the behavior at Columbine. For most types of violence, this would be the case, however Cerulo (1998) points out that empirical tests indicated two exceptions to the general rule. Narrative accounts of terrorism and racially motivated violence are not subject to the typical media conventions. The Columbine shootings was shocking enough that journalists were unlikely to be ambivalent. Similarly, it seems unlikely that a case of ambiguous violence would prompt 70,000 people to attend a memorial service whose key speaker was Vice President Al Gore.

Cerulo has argued (1998: 103-10) that the normal conventions of sequencing do not apply in the cases of *sociomoral instability*, which is the combined social situation of “destabilize[d] social environments and fragment[ed] moral evaluations” (Cerulo 1998: 108). Terrorism and racial attacks are the only types of violence for whose narratives journalists are freed from the typical conventions of sequencing. Therefore, the data, when interpreted through this
Theoretical lens, offer empirical evidence for the statement that the Columbine shootings were an event that caused a period of sociomoral instability.

The Moral Status of the Perpetrators. Given the finding that the Columbine shootings caused a period of sociomoral instability, what was the moral status of the perpetrators, after all? A clue lies in the way that the mass media has adopted a framing sequence for defining the Columbine shootings. Even two or three years after the shootings, the mass media continue to refer to the Columbine shootings as a watershed event. This is particularly true of the Denver, Colorado regional media, such as the Denver Post and the Rocky Mountain News, where Columbine remains a popular news story. It is a convention in mass media to offer background to current news stories, so that the audience will have a frame in which to understand recent news.

The following is a composite of the primary framing sequence that has emerged for the Columbine shootings: “On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17, stormed Columbine High School in a rampage, killing 12 students and one teacher, before turning their guns on themselves.” Occasionally, the sequence will begin with the words, “In the worst school shootings in U.S. history, …” This sequence emerged shortly after the attack on Columbine. For example, on April 22, the Associated Press published an article that said,

Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17, armed with sawed-off shotguns, a semi-automatic rifle, pistol and homemade bombs stuffed with nails and
shotgun shells, killed 12 students and one teacher Tuesday before killing themselves (Weller 1999).

Despite its early appearance, this sequence is most significant for its persistence after the national media’s focus on the Columbine story has dissipated. This sequence ultimately became principal narrative frame for describing Columbine. Although it took some time for the mass media to settle on this sequence as the dominant frame of reference for the event, once it became the primary description of Columbine, it stuck firmly.

Not only has this sequence become the dominant framing sequence for news media sources, it also dominates the popular and academic presses. For example, the noted psychologist Elliott Aronson began his book’s first chapter, called “What Happened at Columbine,” as follows:

It was April 20, 1999, the day that the corridors, the classrooms, and the library of Columbine High School reverberated with the sound of gunshots. Two students, consumed by rage and armed with an arsenal of guns and explosives, went on a rampage, killing a teacher and several of their fellow students. They then turned their guns on themselves (2001: 1).

Similarly, Lawrence begins her piece as follows:

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold strode into Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, armed with guns, explosives, and long-concealed rage and alienation. Within hours, they, along with many of their classmates and one of their teachers, were dead (2001: 91).

Both of these examples mirror the sequence that has become dominant in the news media. Notice the performer sequence, flavored with doublecasting.
This framing sequence tells us something about how journalists have come to define the shootings, and therefore the moral status of the perpetrators. The final framing sequence appears in a performer sequence, but also has an overtone of double casting. While the dominant narrative sequence employed throughout the study period was the contextual sequence, the final accretion of the narrative falls into a perpetrator sequence. Does this suggest that the mass media in the end came to understand the Columbine shootings as normal violence?

In light of Cerulo’s (1998) assertion that in cases of sociomoral instability the normal conventions of narrating violence do not apply, I suggest that the sequence focuses on the perpetrators because the behavior was so extraordinary and unprecedented. The shift of discussion gravitated toward these infamous perpetrators who planned and executed a crime that shocked the United States. The dominant narrative sequence does not contain any justification for the perpetrators’ actions, simply a sense of disbelief attached to the names of these two famous, and psychologically elusive criminals. Nonetheless, there does remain a hint of doublecasting, because at the end the sequence mentions that they took their own lives. Casting the performers as murder-suicides reveals a small portion of sympathy toward Harris and Klebold.
Conclusion

This chapter has explored the moral status of the perpetrators in two ways: First, the characterization of the Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as individuals reveals that Harris was portrayed as being more nefarious than Klebold. While Harris’s descriptions and psychological sketches stand alone from Klebold, I observed that Klebold’s descriptions relied on the presence of Eric Harris. I take up in the conclusion of the study some reasons why the media might portray one shooter as more nefarious than the other.

Second, the empirical study of the sequencing of media accounts in the New York Times revealed that the mass media broke with convention because the crime’s terrorist nature and apparent racial motivation caused a period of sociomoral instability. It was difficult for the media to put narratives of the crime into pre-existing contexts, and therefore most of the media coverage highlighted the context of the crime. The media’s stress on context helped journalists and audiences to define and process the crime.

When all was said and done, the media settled into the usage of a specific sequence that highlighted the perpetrators. Rather than being a typical performer sequence expressing normal violence, this performer sequence broke with convention to highlight the deviant nature of the performers. In pinpointing Harris and Klebold as perpetrators of a particularly heinous crime, the mass media nonetheless maintained a small measure of sympathy for the perpetrators. Having
examined the moral status of the perpetrators as individuals and as a pair, I now turn my attention to the examination of the moral status of the perpetrators in relationship to the victims.
CHAPTER 6
COVERING THE VICTIMS

This chapter investigates the Columbine story’s coverage of three victims, followed by an examination of the moral status of the perpetrators in relation to the victims. Specifically, I present the coverage of three victims, Isaiah Shoels, Cassie Bernall, and Kyle Velasquez, and then discuss the socio-political importance of the stories of these victims’ lives and deaths, in relationship to the existence of moral crusades. Ultimately, I return to a discussion of the perpetrators, this time in relationship to the victims.

Themes of Discussion about the Victims

Although the victims were one of the most sociologically interesting facets of the Columbine story, like the perpetrators, coverage of the victims comprised a relatively small proportion of the overall media content. Specifically, the media only mentions the victims in 112 (15.4%) of the 726 article leads and 71 (9.8%) of the headlines in the data. Fatally wounded victims are discussed in 54 (7.4%) of the leads and 35 (4.8%) of the headlines, and wounded victims who survived are mentioned in 29 (4.0%) leads and 23 (3.2%) headlines. The media also
discussed other victims, such as those psychologically affected by the shootings, in an additional 27 (3.7%) leads and 10 (1.4%) headlines. Despite the relatively small proportion of coverage of the victims, curiosity about the victims served as an early catalyst for much of the Columbine coverage. In the first two chapters, I offered an account of the media discussion of the victims during the first two days of the emerging story. Here I present how the victims were discussed in the mass media, followed by a discussion of some of the idiosyncrasies of the coverage.

Within 48 hours following the Columbine shootings, the mass media had established that there were 15 fatalities in the shootings, among them the perpetrators. While the earliest accounts had suggested as many as 25 fatalities, these estimates were exaggerated because multiple SWAT teams had passed through the school building, and as a result many of the bodies were counted more than once. The fatalities included four female students, eight male students, one male faculty member, and the two male student-perpetrators.

Among the articles that discussed the victims, most focused on two topics relevant to the fatalities. First, just as the media had wanted to answer the question of who the perpetrators were, they also were interested in addressing the same question about the victims. Second, the media covered many of the victims’ funerals, especially those whose lives or deaths were dramatic.

A number of articles offered profiles of the victims, including thumbnail sketches of each, often accompanied by pictures. For some of the victims, entire articles were devoted to discussing their lives. Shortly after the dead victims had
been identified, the mass media printed thumbnail sketches into the victims’ life histories and personalities. The earliest blurbs were rather short, a sentence or two at most. For example,

Kelly Fleming wanted to write songs. Isaiah Shoels wanted to produce them. Corey DePooter was saving to buy a boat so he might take his buddies fishing. Daniel Mauser joined the debate team to overcome his shyness. Lauren Townsend, a candidate for valedictorian, spent spring break in England on a school trip. John Tomlin built homes for the poor in Mexico (Verrengia 1999b).

These descriptions followed a headline that read, “Victims in High School Massacre: The Dead Had Big Dreams,” which illustrates the general forward-looking tone of the thumbnails.

The media, through the sketch profiles, imply that the worst part of the murders of the young victims was the loss of potential. There are numerous reasons why the murders of 13 persons might appear horrible. This includes the apparent physical and psychological suffering they had to endure prior to death or the apparent pointlessness of their deaths. However, the mass media consistently adopted the stance of pointing out the victims’ truncated dreams as the tragic element of the crime.

As more information about the victims emerged, the media began offering descriptions of the victims in the form of short paragraphs. For example,

Lauren Townsend 18, a senior. . . . Was the captain of the girls’ volleyball team, coached by her mother. . . . Was a member of the National Honor Society. . . . Planned to attend Colorado State University in Fort Collins in the fall and wanted to major in biology. . . . “She always knew that no matter what came up, she could handle it,” said a friend, Sara Reddon, 17 (Barron 1999 [Ellipses in Original]).
This example contains details both about this victim’s past achievements and future aspirations. While the media sketch of this person still suggested that the tragic nature of her death stems from the loss of so much potential, there are also details included to illustrate her accomplishments in academics and sports.

The loss of potential is only associated with the murder of youth, since the same article’s coverage of the one teacher killed in the attack does not mention his future.

William David Sanders 48, business teacher and coach. . . . Known as Dave . . . Married, with four daughters . . . Was substituting for a science teacher on Tuesday . . . Students said he was shot twice as he tried to lead them to safety . . . The women’s basketball team posted a winning record in 1997-98, his first year as coach, after finishing next-to-last the year before (Barron 1999 [Ellipses in Original]).

This sketch offered two types of details. First, we hear primarily about this victim’s past achievements. While the media was not concerned about what the teacher might have aspired to achieve later in life, we note that his roles in the community, teacher, coach, and parent, were what mattered. Second, the newspaper reported the details of his being shot, something that was not relevant in most of the other sketch profiles. This detail is especially noteworthy, given the compelling stories that emerged surrounding some of the other victims’ deaths, particularly Cassie Bernall and Isaiah Shoels.

Several of the fatally wounded victims received individual coverage, including John Tomlin, Rachel Scott, and Dave Sanders. However, it was Cassie Bernall and Isaiah Shoels who received the most extensive individual coverage,
with Isaiah’s story being important for the racial element, and Cassie’s story being relevant for its religious element. Race and religion are two sources of social conflict, and this suggests that these were the reasons why these victims’ stories were so popular. While it is true that the other victims’ deaths were also tragic, we observe that the stories of these two victims aroused more intrigue in the media than the stories of the other victims. Although the heroic stories of other’s deaths, such as Dave Sanders, and the lost potential of the young victims were important issues, ultimately it was the level of social intrigue generated by the stories that determined the level of their coverage.

Focus on Three Victims

In this section, I address what made some victim stories, specifically the cases of Isaiah Shoels and Cassie Bernall, so intriguing. Ultimately I compare the coverage of these two victims to the coverage of Kyle Velasquez, the fatally wounded victim who received the least coverage. Some victims’ stories were simply more dramatic, and therefore more interesting, than others. During a speech at a conference in Reno, Nevada on April 20, 2001, the second anniversary of the Columbine shootings, I asked the audience of approximately twenty social scientists whether they could recall any of the fatally wounded victims of the Columbine shootings. Though no one in the audience could refer to any of the victims by name, about half of the audience referred to two of the victims: “the
girl who was shot because she said she believed in God” and “the boy who was shot because he was black.” This suggests two interesting points: First, that consumers of mass media recall the cases that receive the highest proportion of the coverage. Second, that the journalists understand which elements of the story, in this case which of the victims, are likely to generate the highest level of intrigue.

The Isaiah Shoels Story

Of these three selected victims, Isaiah Shoels received the most coverage in the corpus of data. The Shoels story appears in 58 (8.0%) of the 728 documents, and is specifically named in 299 paragraphs, the unit of analysis for the study. There were five major elements in the Shoels coverage: identifying him as a victim, describing his life history and personality, details of his death, his funeral, and issues of race. Figure 6.1 presents the distribution of documents and paragraphs, by theme, in the coverage of Isaiah Shoels.
Articles that identified Isaiah as a victim in the Columbine shootings appeared in 10 documents (17.2% of the documents about this victim) and comprised 11 paragraphs (3.7% of paragraphs about this victim) of material. Often, the earliest identifying statements failed to mention what was later an important fact of the story: the race of the victim. For example, *World News Tonight* carried the following details, “Isaiah Shoels, who was 18, was about to graduate. He overcame a heart defect to play football” (Jennings 1999b). As is consistent with the thumbnail sketches used partially to flesh out the names of the victims, by defining Shoels in terms of his impending graduation, the article implied a loss of future potential.
In addition to naming and briefly sketching a description of the victim, the media also offered details about Isaiah’s personality and life history. This element of the coverage accounted for 30 documents (51.7% of documents about this victim) and 83 paragraphs (27.8% of paragraphs about his victim). The *New York Times* wrote,

Isaiah Shoels 18, a senior. . . . Had had heart surgery twice because of a congenital defect. . . . Wanted to be a record-company executive like one of his role models, Master P, the rapper whose No Limit label turns out hit albums. . . . Wrestler, football player and weight-lifter who could bench-press twice his weight (Barron 1999 [ellipses in original]).

Isaiah’s friends and school principal described him as a positive and pleasant young man. However it was Isaiah’s father, Michael Shoels, who at the time emerged as the most outspoken parent of any of the Columbine victims.

Michael Shoels spoke widely to the media, and in an interview on CNN, he described his son as follows:

Isaiah was a very rounded young man. I mean, you know, he had his mind made up. You know, there’s an old saying that in says, “He came with his boots laced up and ready to go?” Well, that was my son, you know? He had his mind made up, he knew what he wanted to do, and, you know, it’s ridiculous that he gets taken out so early in life, you know, when he could of had so many other opportunities and could have made this world, probably, a better place, with knowing my son (Kelley et al. 1999).

Like the mass media, Isaiah’s father spoke not of the pain of his own loss, but of the loss of his son’s future potential.

Besides offering a glimpse into the personality of the victim, the mass media also offered details about Isaiah Shoels’s death. This theme occurred in 30 documents (51.7% of documents about this victim) and 83 paragraphs (27.8% of
paragraphs about this victim) of the coverage. It was in the coverage of Isaiah’s death that the issue of race played a prominent role. Isaiah was fatally shot in the Columbine library, and some witnesses claimed that he was targeted for being black. A student who had been in the library told the media he had observed the following interaction between the shooters:

   Hey, I think we got a n----- here, one of the killers said now, spotting Shoels. They shot him in the head, and when he crumpled to the floor, they added two more bullets in the face. Hey, I always wondered what n--- -- brains looked like, one of the boys is said to have laughed (Bai 1999).

   In perhaps the single most heartrending news program of the entire Columbine story, on April 22 on NBC’s *Today* show, Craig Scott, brother of the fatally wounded victim Rachel Scott, told Michael Shoels about his having witnessed when Harris and Klebold shot Isaiah. While the data utilized in this study does not include NBC coverage, this discussion was so powerful that it received coverage in other media outlets.

   Craig, whose sister was among those killed at Columbine High School, and Michael Shoels held tightly to one another’s hands and choked back tears as the 16-year-old student detailed on NBC’s “Today” this morning the horrifying scene he witnessed in the library. Shoels sobbed quietly as Scott told of laying on the floor with his friends’ bodies around him “I was praying to God to give me courage, and to keep protection over us,” Craig said. At that moment Shoels reached over to touch the boy’s arm and took both his hands in his own. The father cried and shook quietly earlier in the interview when Craig told of how well-liked Isaiah [sic] was, and how happy Craig had been to see his friend in the library that day (Associated Press 1999a).

   One can imagine many such conversations of this sort, and how important they were both for the unfortunate witnesses of the violence and the family members
of the deceased victims. Of course, this was the only one of these conversations broadcast on national television, likely due to Michael Shoels having initially been the most forthcoming of the victims’ parents.

Isaiah Shoels’s funeral was the last of the victims’ funerals, and the largest, attended by an estimated 5000 to 7000 people. A major television event, CNN broadcast the funeral live, and Martin Luther King III, Governor Bill Owens, and Colorado Secretary of State Vicki Buckley attended it. Elizabeth Dole wrote a letter to the Shoels family, which was read aloud during the ceremony. The media covered the funeral in 21 documents (36.2% of the documents about this victim) and 146 paragraphs (48.8% of the paragraphs about his victim).

“This is the last piece,” said the Rev. Larry Russell, executive pastor of the Heritage Christian Center, after his church choir sang a rousing medley of gospel tunes. “Now the healing begins.” While the two-and-a-half-hour ceremony was tinged with humor, sobs were heard throughout as eulogists spoke. Many of the hundreds of Columbine students there sat together, an assembly of young faces that have shed more than their share of tears since the massacre that ravaged their lives nine days ago. At times, students left the sanctuary in twos and threes to cry in the lobby (Nieves 1999).

While the other components of the Shoels coverage received significant attention in the media, his race garnered the most intrigue. Coverage of the race issue appeared in 33 documents (56.9% of documents about his victim), comprised of 51 paragraphs (17.1% of paragraphs about this victim). Disagreement exists in the media accounts, whether Harris and Klebold targeted Shoels specifically for his race. On the one hand, numerous reports stated that
Shoels had been targeted specifically for his race, and that Harris and Klebold had hurled racial epithets before they shot Isaiah. However, the Sheriff’s Department also reported that they had no concrete evidence that the perpetrators had specifically targeted anyone on the basis of race.

Contrary claims, rather than a sensible assessment of evidence, characterized the coverage of the race issue. Judging specifically from the media accounts, it is difficult to ascertain the veracity of media claims of racial targeting. On the one hand, numerous reports claimed that Harris and Klebold had deliberately targeted minorities. For example,

Here is tribalism pure and deadly. The people they systematically murdered were not to be considered people; they were the generic “them.” Normal human feelings would only get in the way of seeing the enemy tribes as they must be seen-as targets. Harris and Klebold shot an African-American boy, Isaiah Shoels, directly in the face and remarked that his splattered remains were “awesome” (Rosenblatt 1999).

On the other hand, a student told the New York Times that Harris and Klebold were not racist, despite their use of racial epithets.

Dylan and Eric did use racial slurs. Because, unfortunately, it’s becoming common. And what I have heard is they did call Isaiah an N before they shot him. I don’t think it meant that they were racist. I think that they were just using the word that they - unfortunately it’s true that it has bearing from the movies and TV - that they had learned is okay (New York Times 1999b).

Having described the themes of coverage of Isaiah Shoels, I now turn to the coverage of Cassie Bernall, another of the fatally wounded victims at Columbine.
The Cassie Bernall Story

Among the victims, Cassie Bernall received the second most coverage in the corpus of data, with only Isaiah Shoels receiving more. Cassie Bernall is discussed in 41 (5.6%) of the 728 documents, and is specifically named in 145 paragraphs. There were five significant elements to the Bernall story, including identifying her as a victim, describing her life history and personality, the details of her death, her funeral, and issues of religion. Figure 6.2 presents the distribution of documents and paragraphs, by theme, present in the Cassie Bernall story.

Figure 6.2: Documents and Paragraphs in Bernall Coverage, by Theme
Articles that identified Cassie as a victim in the Columbine shootings appeared in 11 documents (26.8% of the documents about this victim) and comprised 11 paragraphs (7.6% of paragraphs about this victim). Nearly all of the identifying paragraphs mentioned what was later an important fact in the case: Cassie’s religion. For example, *Newsweek* carried the following details, “Cassie Bernall, 17, a photographer and aspiring doctor, she always had her Bible at school” (Bai 1999). Similarly, the *New York Times* offered details about religion, suggesting that her conversion had stopped her downward slide in character. “Cassie Bernall 17, a junior. . . . Went from being fascinated by witchcraft and suicide to being a born-again Christian. . . . Carried a Bible to school and wore a bracelet that said, ‘What Would Jesus Do?’” (Barron 1999 [Ellipses in original.])

Similar to the thumbnail sketches for other victims, these articles focus on the loss of future potential.

In addition to naming and briefly sketching a description of the victim, the media also offered more details about Cassie’s personality and life history. This element of the coverage was present in 30 documents (73.2% of documents about this victim) and 83 paragraphs (57.2% of paragraphs about this victim). The media told the story of a girl who had turned away from her family, and who became fascinated with witchcraft and the “dark side.” Cassie’s parents decided to remove her from her surroundings, and they permitted her only to go out to church. Eventually, Cassie went to a summer youth camp, and returned a born-again Christian. It was the conversion that her parents had hoped for.
Cassie was soon working with inner-city gang members, attending Bible study and wearing a WHAT WOULD JESUS DO bracelet; she thought about cutting off her long blond hair, so she could give it to a charity that makes wigs for kids undergoing cancer treatment (Gibbs 1999).

A friend and fellow Columbine student, Amanda Meyer, appeared on CNN and described Cassie as follows:

Cassie was one of those girls where the first time you saw her, you’re just like, wow, you are so beautiful. With her wonderful smile and her long blond hair, she was just - you saw her and you were just like, wow. But Cassie was also one of those people that the more you get to realize that they’re beautiful on the inside, because Cassie has the most beautiful inner qualities of anyone that I’ve ever known in my life (Kelley 1999).

As in the case of Isaiah Shoels, Cassie Bernall’s parents appeared live on television news programs such as ABC’s 20/20 and Good Morning America, however Misty and Brad Bernall did not appear as frequently on television as Michael Shoels. Later in 1999, Misty Bernall published a book called She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall, in which she described in more detail the troubles that Cassie had overcome through conversion.

Besides offering a glimpse into the personality of the victim, the mass media offered specific details about Cassie’s death. As perhaps the single most famous, and possibly most controversial, fact in the Columbine story, the circumstances of Cassie’s death have been discussed repeatedly in the mainstream media. This theme was present in 21 documents (46.7% of documents about this victim) and 38 paragraphs (26.2% of paragraphs about this victim). Cassie was fatally shot in the Columbine library, and CNN reported the following events:
As the killer rushed into the library and pointed his gun and asked her the life-or-death question, “Do you believe in God?” She paused and then answered, “Yes, I believe.” Those were the last words this brave 17-year-old Christian would ever say. The gunman took her life, and I believe that Cassie went immediately into the presence of Almighty God. She was ready. She was ready (Savidge 1999b).

There have been many versions of this event and, while solving this controversy is beyond the scope of this study, I point out that there is uncertainty about who, if anyone, said “yes.” There are claims that it was Cassie Bernall, others reported that it was Rachel Scott, another of the fatally wounded victims, or Valeen Schnurr, one of the injured survivors of the shootings. The findings of the library team of the police investigation determined that Eric Harris had played “peek-a-boo” with Cassie Bernall prior to shooting her. Klebold had shot Valeen Schnurr who, after she had been injured, shouted, “Oh my God!” According to the report, Klebold asked Valeen whether she believed in God. After Valeen did not respond, Klebold walked off (Jefferson County Colorado Sheriff’s Office 2000).

Regardless of what actually happened, for the purposes of this study, the true facts of the case are less important than what people believed from the media accounts. Many people continue to believe that it was Cassie Bernall who said ‘yes.’ For example, written from an evangelical Christian perspective, Bernall (1999) and Zoba (2000) both argue that the ultimate fact of who said ‘yes’ is irrelevant, and that veracity of Cassie’s final words is less important than her having lived a faithful life, prior to her death. In comparison, Omoike (2000: 114-5) argues that the killings appeared to be a rampage in which no particular
individuals were targeted. Therefore, he rejects the idea that minorities, Christians, or athletes were singled out.

Still, the symbolic power of the story is too significant to ignore, and the media waxed philosophical in some accounts. For example, *Time* magazine published the following commentary:

> If the killers gave evil a face, the victims lent theirs to grace. In ever widening circles the story that lingers is the tale of Cassie Bernall, the girl who when asked “Do you believe in God?” was murdered when she said yes. We expect our martyrs to be etched in stained glass, not carrying a backpack and worrying about their weight and their finals (Gibbs 1999).

Cassie’s funeral, held on April 26, 1999 and attended by 2000 people, was discussed in the news media, and although it was not covered in the same depth as the Shoels funeral, the funeral attracted some attention. For example, *World News Tonight* saved the news of Cassie Bernall’s funeral for the final piece, one typically designed to be thought provoking. Peter Jennings said,

> Finally this evening, a life changed, a life lost. We are going to be seeing funerals for those who were killed at Columbine High over the next several days. And from each funeral, we will all extract a little more about the child who died. Seventeen-year-old Cassie Bernall answered “yes” when one of the young gunmen asked if she believed in God (Wehmeyer and Jennings 1999).

The program went on to quote the minister attending the funeral, “Jesus fed 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish. But Cassie fed the world with one word, ‘yes’” (Wehmeyer and Jennings 1999).

Like Isaiah’s race, it was Cassie’s religion that garnered her story the most interest. There was a large portion of overlap, and the discussion of many of the
other themes has already suggested the dominance of religion in the Bernall story. In total, the coverage discussing Cassie’s religion appeared in 33 documents (80.5% of the documents about this victim), comprised of 63 paragraphs (43.4% of the volume about this victim). It was Cassie’s religion that defined her as an individual. As Cassie’s father, Brad Bernall, described how her conversion caused a dramatic change in her personality.

When she came back, her eyes were open and bright. And she was bouncy and just excited about what had happened to her and was just so excited to tell us. And it’s like she was in a dark room and somebody turned the light on, and she saw the beauty that was surrounding her (Wehmeyer, Gibson, and Chung 1999).

The religious element of the Cassie Bernall story apparently helped some journalists and consumers of media put the Columbine shootings into a meaningful perspective. For example, the Associated Press commented,

As explosions and gunfire thundered through the halls of Columbine High, Cassie Bernall closed her eyes and clasped her hands in prayer. One of the killers pointed a shotgun at her and asked if she believed in God . . . Randall Balmer, a professor of American religious history at Barnard College in New York City, said there has been a groundswell to designate Ms. Bernall a martyr, something that has not been done in the Protestant faith since the 1500s (Shore 1999).

Especially for those who described the Columbine shootings in terms of evil, the story of one victim’s integrity and courage seemed a ray of hope in the darkness. Having described the Cassie Bernall story, I now turn to the coverage of Kyle Velasquez, another of the fatally wounded victims at Columbine.
The Kyle Velasquez Story

Among the fatally wounded victims of the Columbine shootings, Kyle Velasquez received the least coverage. The coverage of Kyle illustrates by contrast, comparatively how much attention the stories of Isaiah Shoels and Cassie Bernall received in the mass media. Kyle Velasquez is discussed in 17 (2.3%) of the 728 documents, and is specifically named in only 17 paragraphs. This means that Kyle is mentioned in 17 different articles, in only one paragraph per article. This statistic suggests that the details of the Velasquez story received minimal exposure. The elements of the coverage identified Kyle as a victim, described his life history and personality, and discussed his funeral. Figure 6.3 provides the distribution of documents and paragraphs, by theme, present in the Kyle Velasquez story.
Articles that identified Kyle as a victim in the Columbine shootings appeared in ten documents (58.8% of the documents about this victim) and comprised ten paragraphs (58.8% of the volume about this victim). What distinguishes the sections that identify Kyle as a victim is that they contain little or no information. One report from Newsweek indicated that the Velasquez family did not release information about their son (Bai 1999). The New York Times article titled “Terror in Littleton: The Dead; Portraits of 12 Killed at the Colorado School” carried the following typical description: “One other student, Kyle Velasquez, was killed, but neither information nor a photograph were available” (Barron 1999). Harris and Klebold killed 13 others in their attack on
Hi, my name is Christie Sinner and I’m going to talk about Kyle Velazquez [sic]. I am proud to have known Kyle Velasquez. Kyle was a bright, intelligent, caring young man. I remember when I first met Kyle, he smiled at me and said hi. Kyle had a smile for everyone. Kyle talked about his family and his brother Daniel. He told me how much he loved his mom and dad, and he told me how much he admired his older brother (Kelley 1999).

One of the interesting details about Kyle was that he had suffered a stroke at birth that left him with a number of learning disabilities (McCrimmon 1999). The national news media omitted the fact that Kyle was a Special-Education student.

Seven articles (41.2% of documents about this victim) and seven paragraphs described Kyle’s funeral. While the interment of a Columbine victim was a newsworthy event in the period following the shootings, four of the articles mentioned the event along with the detail that Colorado Governor Bill Owens attended. For example, the Associated Press wrote, “friends and family recalled Kyle Velasquez, 16, as a gentle lad who enjoyed routine tasks, like washing the car. Gov. Bill Owens was one of 800 people in attendance” (Cohen 1999).

The coverage of Kyle Velasquez was perhaps most noteworthy for the lack of information it contained. The news media reported that the Velasquez family did not release any information about their son, and this perhaps can explain the small amount of information about this victim contained in the coverage. Of the ten documents identifying Kyle as a victim, none offers more
information than his name and age. There is only one document with one paragraph that describes what Kyle’s personality. Seven articles mention his funeral, partially because Governor Bill Owens attended. Finally, there was no coverage of the details of Kyle’s death, his race, or his learning disabilities. In comparison to the other two victims, the coverage of Kyle Velasquez is insubstantial. Having discussed the coverage of three student victims at Columbine, I now turn to a comparative analysis of this coverage.

Comparing the Coverage of the Three Victims

Even a cursory examination of the coverage of the three victims, Shoels, Bernall, and Velasquez, reveals a large discrepancy between the three segments of coverage. Figure 6.4 compares the coverage of these three victims, revealing that Isaiah Shoels and Cassie Bernall received significantly more coverage.
In this section, I examine the cause of this discrepancy. Since volume is a rough indicator of newsworthiness, I examine what might make one person’s murder more touching and newsworthy than another’s. The following pieces address two themes that increase understanding about this discrepancy: the dramatic appeal of the stories and their socio-political import.

Dramatic Appeal of the Stories

The media presents stories that contain dramatic elements, because such narratives are simply more interesting. The Shoels and Bernall stories were, at least as far as the mass media was concerned, of more dramatic interest than
Velasquez story. Some stories are more dramatic than others, and it is an institutional function of the mass media that they are drawn to relate stories of the remarkable events. Naturally, the murder of students in the Columbine shootings made for numerous dramatic tales, and journalists wanted to tell those stories. One reason why Velasquez’s story may have received comparatively less coverage was that his life and death, as reported in the media, did not have a strong dramatic appeal.

Confronting and overcoming significant hardships in life, or death, contributed to the striking nature of the Shoels and Bernall stories. In life, Isaiah Shoels had survived a heart problem, and still managed to play sports in the school. In death, regardless of whether he actually was targeted for his race, stories of his being racially targeted added to the dramatic quality of the story. Similarly, Cassie Bernall had overcome her fascination with the “dark side” and witchcraft, to become a born-again model of teenage virtue. Again, regardless of the veracity of the story surrounding the circumstances of her death, the story of her having stared down the barrel of a gun to affirm her belief in God makes for perhaps the single most dramatic tale of the entire Columbine story. Having survived hardships, both Shoels and Bernall appeared unafraid of death, a detail that appealed to readers trying to sort out the apparent meaningless of the Columbine shootings.

In comparison, Kyle Velasquez’s life, as reported in the news media, lacked intrigue. Since his learning disability was not mentioned in the media,
there was no possibility to discuss his having overcome the barriers associated with being a Special-Education student. Similarly, we have no details of the circumstances of his death, and this paucity of information contributes to a lack of drama in the Velasquez story.

Earlier in this chapter, I pointed out that one of the elements present in the victims’ narratives was the tragedy of lost potential. One similarity among the profiles offered for the three victims is that each of the three victims was described as an amiable person. In the media profiles of the victims, the descriptions tended to be forward-looking, pointing to their future aspirations. For example, the media reported that Shoels wanted to become a record producer, and Cassie Bernall wanted to become a doctor, with her entire life devoted to Jesus. Certainly, these are interesting aspirations, but in comparison Kyle Velasquez was described as enjoying routine activities such as washing the car. This was hardly an interesting detail with which to memorialize someone. However, if Kyle’s joy of the ordinary had been framed in terms of his learning disabilities, then the meaning of his performing routine tasks might have changed significantly. Still, as the Columbine story unfolded, Kyle’s story took a back seat to the compelling Shoels and Bernall stories.
Socio-political Importance of the Stories

If the story of Kyle Velasquez failed to capture the dramatic interest of journalists and their readers, we observe that it also failed to trigger discussion about its larger social and political meaning, while the Shoels and Bernall stories triggered moral discussion. Socio-politically, certain deaths prove more important than others, in that some deaths link to previously existing social movements. These movements might have interest groups ready to champion their causes. In this section, I discuss the relative socio-political importance of the three victim narratives.

Becker (1963) and Gusfield (1963) have discussed the existence of moral entrepreneurs who act in society to create awareness of social issues, and these moral entrepreneurs attempt to create social movements, moral crusades, centered on their chosen issues. When a crusade already exists, we observe the rapid emergence of a spokesperson that articulates the meaning of public events in terms of their moral meaning. This articulation, of course, couches the meaning of the event in terms of the speaker’s moral crusade. In describing the work of moral entrepreneurs, sociologists are not necessarily justifying or condemning the actions of the crusaders they identify, rather they point to the relativity of deviant behavior and normative structures. While it is clear that the Columbine shootings were wrong, it is not exactly clear which of several wrongs applied. That is, what norms did the shootings violate, and what solutions and responses were offered?
As part of their political work, moral crusaders suggest specific answers to these questions, and frame both the problem and the solutions within the moral framework of their particular moral crusades.

The high level of socio-political discussion that surrounded the Shoels and Bernall stories, especially when compared to the paltry coverage of Kyle Velasquez’s death, suggests the actions of moral entrepreneurs, and the presence of moral crusades. In this specific context, race and religion were the important factors that determined the social import of the victim narratives.

The apparent racial motivation behind the shooting of Isaiah Shoels meant that the story would achieve a high level of notoriety, and Isaiah’s funeral became a significant media event, broadcast live on CNN. Many noteworthy speakers attended, including Colorado Secretary of State Vicki Buckley, who delivered the following speech:

We, as parents, and we, as community and we, as leaders, must listen to the message that he left behind. He left us a message that talks to new age hate crimes. Not only did Isaiah leave this message, but the other children at Columbine left the same message. New age hate crimes that allow an educational system to turn out technologically illiterate children, and doom them to a systematic death similar to a man who was dragged behind a pickup truck in Jasper, Texas; or new-age hate crimes that allowing our youth to end up in correctional facilities instead of being students on our college campuses for tomorrow. All of these are new-age hate crimes, new-age hate crimes that are no different from a man who was shot in downtown Denver, Omar Jaw, just because he was black (Allen and Moret 1999).
In her speech, Ms. Buckley drew connections between the Columbine shootings and previous racially motivated crimes, and thereby offered a frame for others to understand the meaning and context of Isaiah’s murder.

William Collins, Isaiah Shoels’s grandfather and a pastor himself, also compared Isaiah’s murder to the others, but was a little less specific than Buckley. Rather, he connected the Columbine shootings to the general problem of crime and hatred.

On the 20th of March, I had a nephew who was shot to death, and one month later, my grandson, Isaiah. When does it stop? When does it end? I am tired laying to rest politicians, engineers, athletes, musicians, artists, preachers, janitors and sanitation haulers who were robbed of reaching their potential. We, when we are taught not to mingle, not to associate with, when we are taught to stay on our side of the fence, we become the fathers and mothers of hatred. I believe and I know it is time to tear the fence down (Allen and Moret 1999).

In Collins’s speech, there was a strong suggestion of the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, which itself grew out of Southern Christian discourse. As he drew his grandson’s eulogy to a close, he added the following sentences,

    When we remember that love is colorblind and hate is taught, when we remember that God took one man and one woman and made humanity . . . when we remember that the color of blood is always red, regardless of the color of our skin . . . when we remember these things then and only then is there hope for our children, for our grandchildren and for the world (Allen and Moret 1999).

In rousing words, Collins evoked the past, the present, and hope for the future. In so doing, he suggested the continuity, as well as value, of struggle, a theme that underlies the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement. In suggesting its historical
context, Pastor Collins frames the meaning of Isaiah Shoels’s murder within the larger environment of struggle for liberty and equality.

In comparison, the media accounts suggested that Cassie Bernall died for her Christian beliefs. The veracity of the narrative is irrelevant in determining whether the story had a political impact. Franklin Graham, the son of the Rev. Billy Graham, stepped forward to speak about the meaning of Cassie’s affirmation and its effect for the Christian faith and its social context. On CNN, Graham commented about the problem of school violence,

> We’ve got a problem in our schools. We have taken God out of our schools. We need to get God back in our schools. I believe my Jewish friends, and my Catholic friends, and I know my Protestant friends, we’d all agree if we could just put the Ten Commandments of almighty God back into the classroom again, and let that be a beginning, a moral standard for our kids to look up to and to model their life - the Bible says we have all sinned and we need God’s forgiveness (King 1999).

While it might not have anything directly to do with the violence observed at Columbine, Graham took the opportunity to suggest the importance of placing the Ten Commandments in all public schools. Speaking politically, he linked the public interest in Cassie’s story to the political motives of the moral crusade he represented, the Christian Right. Similarly, Graham suggested that the solution for the problem lay in the Christian conversion,

> really for all of those who are watching tonight, my question is are you ready to stand before a holy God because our life could come to an end suddenly just like it did for those 15, and we may never have another chance. Are you ready to stand before God and do know that your sins are forgiven? If you don’t, a person can receive Jesus Christ into their heart and into their life right now by just confessing their sins, and repenting and receiving Christ by faith (Larry King 1999).

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Notice, that Franklin Graham spoke of the meaning of Cassie Bernall’s life and death in terms of her faith in God, and the need for all individuals, whom he specifically addresses, to experience a Christian conversion in the present moment.

It was Martin Luther King III, speaking at Isaiah Shoels’s funeral, who integrated the contexts of on-going struggle and spiritual conversion.

Cassie Bernall, one of the young ladies killed with Isaiah and others, who was asked by her killers if she believed in God, said on tape before her death that hypocrisy was an enemy that we must deal with before changing. There’s something tragically wrong with a nation that produces youth who memorialize Adolf Hitler and their rejection of people who are different from them and go on a killing spree on his birthday. There’s something wrong with that (Allen and Moret 1999).

Although there were numerous moral entrepreneurs prepared to comment on the meaning of the Shoels and Bernall murders, with the exception of Vicki Buckley, no one stepped forward to remark about the meaning of the Velasquez murder. This is rather surprising, as there were two groups to whom Kyle would belong who might have benefited from the publicity of having one of their members targeted in the Columbine shootings, namely Latinos and the disabled. If the media reported that the perpetrators of the Columbine shootings had specifically targeted minorities, it seems curious that journalists would comment on the Shoels’s murder, while ignoring the racial meaning of the Velasquez murder. Given that the family name, Velasquez, is ostensibly Latino, journalists should have noticed.
On the other hand, it’s possible that it was not widely known among the media that there were accounts that Harris and Klebold targeted disabled students. Specifically, it might not have been publicly known by the mass media that Kyle Velasquez had a learning disability. Still, there were reports that a student with cerebral palsy was targeted, as NPR broadcast, “the gunmen also targeted those they perceived as weak. For example, they shot a boy with cerebral palsy, and they appeared to single out racial minorities and Christians” (Zwerdling 1999).

An irony in the Columbine story was that Susan Klebold, mother of one of the shooters, worked with disabled community-college students, as an aid to educational access (Foreman and Jennings 1999). If it were the case, or even alleged to be the case, that the shooters targeted the disabled, what would keep activists for the disabled from commenting on the meaning of the shootings of Kyle Velasquez and the student with cerebral palsy?

The fact remains that the media did not focus on the meaning of Kyle Velasquez’s murder, in terms of his ethnicity or disability. In fact, he was barely mentioned at all in the news media. Having discussed the socio-political importance of the stories of Shoels, Bernall, and Velasquez, I now turn to an assessment of whether the moral crusades were successful.
The coverage of the Columbine shootings, and in particular the coverage of the reported religious and racial motivations, suggests the work of moral entrepreneurs. In this section, I assess whether the moral entrepreneurs were successful in framing the problems associated with the Columbine shootings, in terms of their respective moral crusades. Both the entrepreneurs who championed racial causes and those who championed religious causes were successful in their endeavor, but it was the Christian moral entrepreneurs whose activities left a stronger mark on the public consciousness. That is, the people who told the story of Cassie Bernall were more effective in their activities than were those who told the story of Isaiah Shoels. Ultimately, the religious intrigue evoked by the Columbine shootings was more influential than the issues of racial persecution expressed in the story.

The discussion of religion in the Bernall story more perfectly blankets the entire story of this victim than does the discussion of race in the Shoels story. Admittedly, it is true that the Shoels coverage, at 58 documents and 299 text units, was larger than the Bernall coverage, which weighed in at 41 documents including 145 text units. However, nearly half, exactly 146 of the 299 total text units, of the Shoels coverage came from coverage of the funeral. This accounts for the largest theme of coverage in the Shoels story. Regarding the specific coverage of race and religion, we find that the Shoels story, with 33 documents
including 51 text units covering race, is smaller than the Bernall story’s coverage of religion, with 33 documents including 63 paragraphs. Although the Shoels story appears larger than the Bernall story, most of the volume is contained in the coverage of the funeral, which was something of a major media event, but the memory of the funeral does not persist. In comparison, the Bernall story was less publicized, and the major portions of the Cassie Bernall story are the discussion of religion and the details surrounding her death. Of course, these two elements overlapped strongly, because it was exactly the discussion of her death and her alleged affirmation of her faith that caused her apparent martyrdom.

The story of Cassie Bernall has assumed a larger position in the continued discussion of the meaning of the Columbine shootings in a religious and a cultural sense. One bit of evidence is that articles and books discussing the meaning of Cassie Bernall’s, Rachel Scott’s, or Valeen Schnurr’s “yes” continue to appear even some years after the Columbine shootings (e.g., Aronson 2001, Bernall 1999, Nimmo and Scott 2000, Omoike 2000, and Zoba 2000). In the conclusion of this chapter, I argue that the story of an affirmation of one person’s belief in God was a potent antidote to the sociomoral instability brought on by a crime such as Columbine. In the end, the moral enterprise of the Christian right, with its negation of nihilism, specifically through the Christian beliefs in the orderliness of life, and the ability to transmute the bad into the good, made a lasting impression on the public consciousness.
In contrast, we have not observed a continued discussion of the meaning of the Shoels murder, in terms of its meaning for the status of Civil Rights and race relations. If the moral entrepreneurs had been successful in elevation the Shoels killing to the level of a cultural icon, we might have seen examinations of this particular crime, and how it relates to other recent landmark racial incidents such as the Rodney King beating and trial and the O.J. Simpson trial. Instead we have heard very little about Isaiah Shoels since he was interred. Perhaps this is indicative of the level of commitment necessary to “walk the talk” of the Civil Rights rhetoric.

The struggle for Civil Rights is one that requires reasoned activity that is consistent and politically prudent. As a method for countering the shock of a morally destabilizing crime, social movement in the form of consistent, measured, and reasonable behavior does not satisfy as readily as does a personal, internal pledge to counter evil and negation. This is not to say that the Christian path does not require patience, persistence, and struggle. Of course there are many committed religious persons of all faiths.

What I am suggesting is that the Cassie Bernall story, as the media discussed it as an element of the Columbine story, served as a potent antidote to the apparent evil unleashed by our two young perpetrators. Misty Bernall (1999), Cassie’s mother, wrote that her daughter had been attracted to the dark side, and that approximately two years prior to her death, she experienced a religious reawakening. Misty suggested that Cassie should not be remembered as a martyr,
but as a good and faithful person. If journalists were searching for an answer to the apparent nihilism expressed in the school shooting, they could find no better solution than the story of a girl who had been to the dark side, but who had returned to confront apparent wickedness in heroic fashion. The Bernall story was destined to become a big part of the Columbine story. Having examined the efficacy of the moral enterprise behind the coverage of the three victims’ stories, I now turn to an assessment of the moral status of the perpetrators when compared to the victims.

The 13/15 Issue

In Chapter 5, I addressed the moral status of the perpetrators as individuals and as a pair. In this section, I discuss the moral status of the shooters in relationship to the victims. One of the issues that emerged when journalists and commentators discussed the 15 fatalities in the Columbine shootings was how to characterize perpetrators’ deaths. In their attack on the school, Harris and Klebold shot 13 others, including 12 students and one teacher. They then turned their guns on themselves in an apparent suicide pact. The dilemma that arose was whether to discuss the 13 dead or the 15 dead. This involved deciding whether 15 dead implied that the perpetrators were also double cast as victims. I call this the 13/15 Issue, and it is best exemplified in the story of the 15 crosses erected by
Greg Zanis near Columbine High School, which Zoba (2000) called “the Scandal of the Crosses.”

Zanis was a carpenter from Aurora, Illinois who practiced a ministry of erecting wooden crosses as memorials. On April 27, 1999, one week after the shootings, Zanis erected fifteen 8-foot wooden crosses on the so-called Rebel Hill, in Clement Park overlooking the high school. Each of the crosses bore the name and photo of one of the dead, including two crosses for the gunmen. While Zanis apparently intended the two crosses that he designated for the shooters to be symbols of healing, they generated a great deal of anger in the community. The New York Times reported, that Zanis said,

“I got calls about people spitting on the bad guys’ crosses,” he said today, referring to the two inscribed with the names of Mr. Harris and Mr. Klebold. “A girl called me and said a person pushed her in the mud because she left flowers at their crosses” (Brooke 1999a).

The most noteworthy opposition to the gunmen’s crosses came from Brian Rohrbough, father of the slain student, Daniel Rohrbough. Brian posted a sign on the crosses that read, “Murderers burn in hell” (Zoba 2000:47). He also contacted the management of the park requesting that they remove the two crosses. When the crosses remained, on April 30, 1999, Brian Rohrbough cut down the two crosses himself, and after cutting them into small pieces, threw them into a dumpster. On CNN, Rohrbough explained why he felt his actions were justified in removing the shooters’ crosses,

But this is the issue: We never ever honor a murderer with a his victims [sic]. If we wanted to build a statue of Timothy McVeigh in the center of
a cemetery where victims from Oklahoma City were buried, I think people could understand that is evil and that is wrong. And it is unfair to let people come from all over this country to honor these children that have died, and be forced to honor the murderer in the same place - that’s wrong. That doesn’t take away the right for anyone who wants to pray for him, anyone who thinks they can forgive them or wants to forgive them, that doesn’t affect that, but you don’t force a murderer to continue victimizing us families - that’s evil (Woodruff and McDermott 1999).

The CNN announcers asked the two Columbine students present in the studio whether they agreed with Rohrbough, and they concurred. John van de Mark said, “I believe exactly what Mr. Rohrbough was saying, is that they shouldn’t have their crosses up with the other students that they have killed. It’s very disrespectful, in fact” (Woodruff and McDermott 1999). Similarly, Lauren Beachem stated,

In regards to, like, forgiveness, and stuff, I can’t forgive. You know, and people that can, you know, that’s very strong of them, but I can’t ever forgive what they’ve done. And I agree with what John and Mr. Rohrbough were saying, because that’s just not right, them putting - I mean - I know that their families are grieving, too, about the loss of Eric and Dylan, but I just don’t - I think there is a time and a place where they should, not be with the victims (Woodruff and McDermott 1999).

Lauren Beachem raised the exact issue at hand, which was should the shooters be memorialized, and if so, how? At least among those who spoke in the mass media, the common sentiment was that if the perpetrators were memorialized at all, they ought to be memorialized separately from the 13 others they killed. As I have already pointed out in Chapter 3, this discussion is a good example of what Baumeister (1999) calls the “magnitude gap,” the idea that discussion of victims of violent crimes needs to be separated from discussion of
the perpetrators. In effect, Baumeister suggests in all senses that discussion, sympathy, or even understanding of the perpetrators’ circumstances needs to remain separate from stories of the victims. Commentators seem to have missed the irony that the cross in Christian symbolism stands for universal redemption.

While people in the community were unsure how to discuss the perpetrators, this uncertainty also appeared in the mass media. A good example of this uncertainty was that the media sometimes referred to the 13 victims and other times to the 15 dead. For example, on ABC’s 20/20, the fatalities were described as follows: “As you know by now, 15 people died at Columbine High School, one teacher, 12 students and the two young men suspected of the killings” (Jarriel, Sawyer, and Donaldson 1999). Specifically related to the issue of the crosses, the Associated Press published, “The carpenter who built 15 large crosses for the victims of the Columbine High School has taken them all away because of controversy over two of the memorials naming the gunmen” (Associated Press 1999c).

In contrast, other sources reported 13 victims. For example, also on ABC’s 20/20 Connie Chung said, “Twelve children were murdered during the bloody rampage at Columbine High” (Wehmeyer, Gibson, and Chung 1999). In this context, there would be 12 student victims, and the one omitted to make 13 would have been the single slain teacher, Dave Sanders. Indeed, when the mass media offered thumbnail sketches of the victims, in every case, it included the 13 victims, or occasionally 12, since Kyle Velasquez was omitted. There were no
cases in which the profiles of the perpetrators were discussed along with the profiles of the 13 other fatalities. The gunmen were discussed in different articles than the victims.

A parallel discussion ensued when Columbine High School released their 1999 yearbooks, which contained the senior portraits of Harris and Klebold. Some argued that the pictures should have been omitted, because of the shooters’ guilt. Other argued that Harris and Klebold deserved to have their pictures in the yearbook, because they were also students at Columbine High School. “While their senior pictures are included, the two are not pictured in the special four-page memorial supplement. It has pictures of their 13 victims - 12 students and a teacher - with their names and birthdates” (Associated Press 1999b). In the yearbook, the perpetrators were not memorialized along with the victims.

The Status of the Perpetrators in Relationship to the Victims

It is clear that Harris and Klebold received no sympathy, and often no mention, in proximity to the victims. In this section, I examine a number of issues relevant to the relationship of the perpetrators to their victims. First, the perpetrators received no sympathy in the media coverage. No significant journalists or commentators wondered what might be going on in the heads of such troubled youth, and what might have been done to help them. Instead, we observed coverage along the lines of a *Time* magazine cover that featured the
headline, “The Monster Next Door,” referring to the anxiety-producing idea that there might be numerous Harrises and Klebolds lurking among the cul-de-sacs of various suburban neighborhoods across the United States. In my repeated readings of the transcripts of the Columbine coverage, my consistent impression was that some writers in the mass media were interested in stirring up fear of the recurrence of Columbine-type attacks. If journalists were not interested in germinating fear, they nonetheless played off of the fears that suburban parents were already experiencing. Perhaps anxiety sells news stories, and Columbine brought more than its fair share.

While the media did not express sympathy for the perpetrators, they nonetheless cited numerous mitigating factors that might have influenced Harris and Klebold to go on their rampage. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the themes of discussion about the perpetrators was asking, “how could this have happened?” In this theme, the media examined specific causes in Harris’s and Klebold’s lives that might have pushed them over the edge. Similarly, the “someone should have known” theme also pointed to the warning signs that the shooters apparently exhibited prior to their carrying out the shootings.

However, the media also engaged in a separate discussion of the social causes that might have been behind the shootings. Table 6.1 outlines the discussion categories of causes that are discussed in the corpus of data.
Table 6.1: Distribution of Categories for “Exploration of Causes” Sub-Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Headlines N = 724</th>
<th>Article Leads N = 726</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guns</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Factors</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment Media</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detection and Prevention</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Illness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, 49 (6.8%) of the 724 headlines and 49 (6.7%) of the 726 article leads discussed guns as a contributing cause for the shootings. Another 28 (3.9%) headlines and 37 (5.1%) article leads discussed social factors, such as school cliques and the culture of violence. Twenty-two (3.0%) headlines and 31 (4.3%) leads fingered entertainment media such as television and video games for the violence of the Columbine shootings. An interesting detail about the inclusion of these macro social causes is that they rarely appeared in proximity to discussions of the victims. They also bore a significant relationship to the perpetrators.

An examination of a correlation matrix for the article leads yields some interesting results. The categories “exploration of causes” and “victims” were inversely associated, demonstrating a correlation of −.165 (p < .001). In contrast, “exploration of causes” was positively associated with “Harris and Klebold,” with a correlation of .08 (p = .031). Most dramatic was the association between the
“Harris and Klebold” code and the cause “mental illness,” which demonstrated a correlation of .224 (r < .001). While these correlations might appear low at first glance, given the low level of variability for these categories, some of them are rather noteworthy. For example, the “mental illness” category contained only 11 of the total 726 leads. For this category to correlate significantly with another, demonstrates a considerable association.

These causes, whether guns, media, or mental illness, are mitigating factors that might reduce or even negate the moral culpability of the shooters. The findings suggest that the media avoided discussing the mitigating factors in proximity to the victims, while associating these factors with the perpetrators. This is not a display of sympathy, yet it suggests that the media at least considered that the perpetrators might have been influenced by sociological or psychological factors beyond their control.

In the same way that the discussion of the victims was removed from the discussion of the mitigating factors, the discussion of the victims was removed from any discussion of the perpetrators. In the article leads, the categories “perpetrators” and “victims” demonstrated a correlation of -.083 (p = .026). A test of the same categories in the headlines returned a similar result of r = -.081 (p = .029). These findings suggest that the media demonstrated a slight systematic tendency to discuss the perpetrators and the victims separately. I argue that this avoids triggering audience sensitivity, such as the emotions evoked through the magnitude gap (Baumeister 1999).
In chapter 4, I have also discussed the prevalence of the theme “terror,” which I hypothesized would be associated with the victims. My hypothesis was that the theme “terror” would correlate positively with the theme “victims,” while correlating negatively with the theme “perpetrators.” The findings of the test of association have refuted this, as “terror” did not significantly correlate with “perpetrators.” A counterintuitive finding was that “terror” correlated negatively in with “victims” at -.103 (p = .005). These findings suggest that the media’s repeated use of terror did not correspond to either the victims at all, given that there was a slight tendency not to discuss terror when discussing the victims. Interestingly, what the test of association did show as having a patterned association with “terror” were “police reactions” theme and “reactions in other places” themes. “Police reactions” correlated with “terror” at .087 (p = .019). “Reactions in other places’ included coverage of what other schools were doing, such as suspending students for making threats and enacting policies banning trench coats. This kind of coverage correlated with “terror” at .080 (p=.031).

These are rather weak correlations, but given the small level of variability in some of these categories, the correlations might be meaningful.

In summary, the data suggest wide consensus that the perpetrators did not deserve sympathy, or even understanding. In cases where media discussed some of the mitigating factors that might have contributed to the perpetrators’ behavior, I observed that these discussions occurred separate from discussion of the victims.
This indicated that the perpetrators had no moral status in the Columbine story, especially when compared to the victims.

Conclusion

When considering moral judgment and status hierarchies as social processes at work, it is intuitive and valid to assert that the perpetrators were “bad.” A larger context, however, exists in which to understand the relationship between the perpetrators and the victims. In the Columbine story, the victims and the perpetrators stood in a necessary relationship with one another. The attributes and details attached to the shooters complemented qualities of the victims, and vice versa. I found that, although the mass media discussed the perpetrators and victims separately, these two aspects of the story necessarily highlight each other.

This rhetorical relationship was most apparent in the Bernall story, which regardless of its veracity, was destined to be one of the prominent features of the Columbine story. Its resonance derived from the fact that it was a story of a girl who had been to the ‘dark side,’ but had returned in a conversion. At her death she had once again confronted the ‘dark side.’ If the first time she had faced the ‘dark side’ in her own heart, the second time she encountered it through the barrel of a gun. For the populace of the U.S., who for some weeks became fixated on Columbine, the tale of Cassie Bernall’s affirmation may have served as the perfect antidote for the apparent meaningless of the Columbine shootings. Such
an affirmation of virtue may have been touchingly important, especially in the face of destructive nihilism.

Of course, these shootings were not actually meaningless. Rather, they were the expression of distorted rationale, one that justified, even potentially glorified, the destruction of a school and the killing of its students. The apparent nihilism of the Columbine shootings was significant enough to open up a possibility for the emergence of a new hero, Cassie Bernall. Perhaps it is not the hero who steps up to a challenge, but a challenge whose appearance makes the hero. Despite the media’s separate discussion of the perpetrators and the victims, these two elements were necessarily connected. The apparent evil glimpsed in, and the lack of sympathy expressed toward, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold manifested its own reciprocal: the complete sympathy for the victims, as exemplified by the creation of a contemporary martyr.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the social construction of the Columbine story in the mass media. The object has been to explore what the mass media coverage of the Columbine shootings revealed about the nature of public moral discourse. I have focused on the Columbine shootings as a media event that provoked significant moral outrage and discussion, with assumption that mass media were the primary avenue for moral discussion about the meaning of this noteworthy crime. The research has generated descriptive results, including a concise presentation of the content of the Columbine story. Beyond the descriptive results, the study has addressed two sociologically important facets of the Columbine story: the discussion of the perpetrators’ moral status and the socio-political issues evoked in the discussion of the noteworthy victims of the crime.

Descriptive Results

Due to the empirical nature of the study, I devoted Chapter 4, “The Columbine Coverage,” to describing the magnitude and content of the story. Concisely described, the Columbine story was a huge media event, the largest

The data included 728 articles drawn from mainstream national news media sources, slightly more than half of which were from the two newspaper sources: the New York Times and Associated Press. The remainder of the articles came from ABC, CNN, and PBS broadcast coverage, and two weekly newsmagazines: Time and Newsweek. The lion’s share of the articles appeared in the first week, following the shootings, after which the frequency of articles declined steadily over the study period. The corpus of data included approximately 26,000 paragraphs of material, with approximately two-thirds of the volume coming from broadcast media, and the remainder from print sources. CNN and PBS articles were significantly longer than any of the other sources.

A thematic and structural analysis of the headline and lead sections of the articles revealed that reactions to the crime were discussed in 60.6% of headlines and 71.8% of article leads, making it the largest component of the Columbine story. Reactions included the discussion of causes, the police investigation, community reactions such as memorial services, and reactions outside the community such as the institution of policies at schools across the country. This finding suggested that the media were more interested in covering the reactions to the crime, than the crime itself. Other significant themes included commentaries, consequences of the school shooting, and discussion of the Columbine event. For
a complete explanation of the themes with examples of headlines, see Appendix A.

The Perpetrators

Examining the coverage of the teenage gunmen was the focus of Chapter 5, “Covering the Perpetrators.” There were three avenues of analysis relevant to the shooters: a description of the narrative themes of coverage, an assessment of how the perpetrators were characterized as individuals, and an assessment of the moral status of the gunmen as a pair.

The thematic analysis, supplemented by repeated readings of news transcripts, revealed two contradictory themes of discussion about the shooters. A portion of the coverage assumed an incredulous tone, one that seemed to ask, “How could this have happened?” Witnesses attested to the fact that the shooters had been normal high school seniors who had somehow snapped. Some articles suggested that Harris and Klebold had been intelligent students, whom no one would have expected to perpetrate the worst school shooting in U.S. history. Further, other articles pointed to facts of the case that suggested that Harris and Klebold had somehow buckled under the pressures of teen life. Case in point was the alleged teasing that Harris and Klebold had endured at the hands of Columbine’s student athletes.
Alternately, the media’s coverage of the shooters also suggested a retrospective tone that suggested, “Someone should have known!” Media sources cited many behaviors exhibited by Harris and Klebold that might have been warnings that these youths were at risk of violent behavior. For example, the shooters were reported to have been fascinated with Nazi ideology and hate symbolism, to have excessively played violent video games, and to have shared a fascination for guns. Contrary to the reports that Harris and Klebold had endured teasing, other articles claimed that the shooters and their clique, the Trench Coat Mafia, intimidated other students at school.

Further analysis of the media’s portrayal of the shooters revealed a discrepancy in the media’s portrayal of the two as individuals. Namely, the media characterized Eric Harris as more nefarious than Klebold. The Dylan Klebold story depended on the presence of Eric Harris, in that Klebold was described as having experienced a psychological metamorphosis after meeting Eric Harris. On the other hand, Harris’s story stands alone, and the media explained Eric’s psychological transformation as stemming from his difficulty in adjusting to circumstances in his life. In almost every case, the media described Eric Harris as the leader, with Dylan Klebold as his follower. Based on the behavior of the perpetrators, there is no valid reason to characterize Eric Harris as more nefarious than Dylan Klebold, despite this having become a dominant convention for describing the gunmen.
Analysis of the media’s discussion of Harris and Klebold as a pair revealed some uncertainty about the moral status of the perpetrators, and this uncertainty was caused by socio-moral instability caused by the high profile crime. The analysis of narrative sequencing of *New York Times* accounts of the shooting revealed that the context of the violent behavior was the most prominent aspect of the news story. Following the first week of coverage, the journalists almost exclusively utilized a contextual sequence when describing the Columbine event. In most cases, the prominence of the contextual sequence would suggest that the media considered the violent behavior morally ambiguous, however since the Columbine shootings were apparently terrorist and racially motivated in nature, typical media conventions did not apply.

Ultimately, the mass media’s portrayal of the perpetrators and their behavior settled into a single sequence, similar to the following: On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, seniors at Columbine High, attacked their school in a rampage, leaving 12 students and one teacher dead, before they turned their guns on themselves. The final sequence was performer sequence that connoted a flavor of doublecasting. Despite the typical convention in which journalists use a performer sequence when violent behavior is appropriate, in the case of the Columbine shootings, the prominence of the shooters serves the opposite purpose. Namely, since the crime was particularly brutal and shocking, the media settled on the performer sequence because of their fascination with the perpetrators of this watershed deed.

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Examining the coverage of the teenage gunmen was the focus of Chapter 5, “Covering the Victims.” There were four portions of analysis relevant to the shooters: description of the discussion of the victims, a specific focus on three of the fatalities with a comparison of these stories, an assessment of the efficacy of the moral entrepreneurs, and a discussion of the 13/15 Issue, which is an assessment of the moral status of the perpetrators in relation to the victims.

In their attack on Columbine, Harris and Klebold killed one teacher and 12 other students, and the news media focused a portion of the coverage on the fatally wounded victims. Once the media had identified the victims, articles offered thumbnail sketches and pictures of the dead, including details about their lives and personalities. These portraits of the dead students contained a forward-looking tone that characterized the tragedy of their deaths as stemming from the fact that they would never be able to realize their future aspirations. In contrast the sketches of the only adult killed, a 48 year-old teacher, did not contain his aspirations, but instead focused on his status in the community as teacher, parent, and coach.

Among the victims of the Columbine shootings, Isaiah Shoels and Cassie Bernall received the highest level of media coverage, while Kyle Velasquez received the least media attention. The Shoels and Bernall stories received the most coverage because these narratives were the most dramatic and politically
scandalous of the victim stories. In the Shoels story, allegations that Isaiah’s murder had been racially motivated sparked outrage and commentary among African-American leaders, who spoke out against hate crimes.

Similarly, the media publicized the witnesses’ accounts that Cassie Bernall had been targeted for her belief in God. The story emerged that Cassie had been praying, when one of the perpetrators asked her whether she believed in God. When Cassie affirmed her faith, one of the perpetrators shot her. This story has become the most memorable of the victim narratives, because of its high dramatic appeal and socio-political importance.

At the other end of the continuum of coverage, Kyle Velasquez received only rare mention in the media. As the media reported it, Kyle’s story lacked drama and political intrigue, the two correlates of coverage for the victim narratives. Although Kyle was Latino and a Special Education student, no one appeared in the national media to frame Kyle’s murder in terms of the political interests of Latinos and the Disabled. This was apparent by its absence, especially compared to the political discussion surrounding the Shoels and Bernall stories, which media commentators framed in terms of the African-American and evangelical Christian interest, respectively.

The notoriety of the two victim narratives suggested the work of moral entrepreneurs within the context of existing moral crusades. The African-American leaders, such as Martin Luther King III, couched the meaning of the Shoels murder within the long-term struggle against oppression. The Christian
leaders, such as Franklin Graham, framed the Bernall murder and the associated problem of school shootings in terms of the need for Christian conversion. While both movements were well articulated in the Columbine discourse, it was the Bernall story and the Christian agenda that emerged as the most potent of the politicized victim narratives. I argue that the protracted struggle for Civil Rights was a less appealing solution to the social problem of school violence than the potentially short-term search for redemption.

In the final sections of Chapter 6, I integrated the discussions about the perpetrators and the victims, in addressing the moral status of the perpetrators in relationship to the victims. Basically described, the shooters had no moral status, especially in proximity to their victims. Within the body of articles, I observed that the discussion of the gunmen occurred separately from the discussion of victims, and often in completely separate articles. The 13/15 Issue of the memorial crosses in Clement Park stood out as symbolic of the parallel problems experienced in the media and the Columbine communities regarding how to speak about the perpetrators. Any media discussion that sought significant understanding of Harris and Klebold’s motivations would have sparked moral outrage, just as the memorial of the 15 crosses evoked scandal in the community. In the memorial or journalistic sense, the perpetrators had no status, however as characters in the Columbine story, the shooters were intimately connected to their victims.
The affirmation of virtue demonstrated by many of the victims was the necessary reciprocal of the nihilism expressed by Harris and Klebold. Among all the victim narratives, the Bernall story stood out as the antidote for the gunmen’s behavior. As the story goes, in a spiritual conversion, Cassie had defeated the darkness in her own heart. Later, in the final act of her life, she stared down the barrel of a gun and once again confronted the same shadows. Because of its narrative power, the Bernall story was destined to be famous, just as Harris and Klebold were destined to infamy. Cassie Bernall’s affirmation of her faith in God was so virtuous, precisely because Harris and Klebold’s behavior appeared so malevolent.

Of Responsibility, Intent, and Evil

When the media covers crimes, especially high profile crimes such as the Columbine shootings, a major portion of the discussion involves deciphering the violent behavior. Similarly, discussions of right and wrong partially deal with issues of responsibility. In the case of Columbine, the media focused much of their attention on discussing the teen shooters, and their relative responsibility for their behavior.

One aspect of responsibility has to do with whether or not the behavior can be controlled. In cases where the behavior is within the control of the individuals, moral responsibility lies with the perpetrators. Some of the facts

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discussed in the Columbine story supported the interpretation that Harris and Klebold had deliberately planned and executed their attack, and therefore that the two shooters were morally responsible for their behavior. For example, news media coverage pointed to Eric Harris’s diary in which he had apparently planned the attack on the school for over a year, and that prior to the attack on the school they had amassed a huge arsenal of guns and explosives. Certainly, these elements required premeditated thought, suggesting that Harris and Klebold were probably aware of the consequences of their behavior. Ultimately, such a cognitive state would indicate that these two were morally culpable.

There were also facts in the Columbine story that suggested the gunmen had been influenced by factors beyond their control, and ultimately that their moral responsibility would be waived, or at least mitigated. Some argued the displacement of blame to some social factors, such as the anonymity of suburban life or the stresses placed on contemporary teens. The social causes discussed in the data appeared separate from the specific discussion of the perpetrators, and many of these statements contained discussions of the generic causes of youth violence, rather than specific allegations of causality in the Columbine shootings. Therefore, the media avoided the presentation of mitigating factors, and preferred to lay the blame on the shooters, and not on social factors.

Another mitigating factor, one that would waive individual responsibility for behavior, would be a biochemical or mental malfunction on the part of the perpetrators. The media briefly examined the mental states of the perpetrators,
suggesting the use of pharmaceutical or illicit drugs, but this allegation was put to rest when the coroner reported that no drugs had been found in the perpetrators’ systems. Alternately, there were suggestions that the two simply snapped before going on their rampage. However, the fact that there were two shooters who carried out a detailed plan that they had developed over many month’s time seemed to invalidate any claims that Harris and Klebold had been mentally incompetent.

Related to the issue of controllability is the issue of whether the perpetrators intended to commit their crime. The discrepancy between portrayals of Harris and Klebold hints at the issue of intent. One shooter was characterized as the leader, and the other the follower, a detail that could lead to the interpretation that the attack was less intentional than if the two perpetrators had planned the attack together. If the shooters mutually planned and executed the crime, then it would appear more heinous. In some of the previous school shootings, notably in Springfield, Oregon, a student apparently lost control of his mental faculties, and perceived that he had no other course of action but to go on a shooting rampage. The moral responsibility for violent behavior is mitigated when someone has a mental breakdown before carrying out a shooting spree. It is quite a different issue if two people rationally plan to carry out a school shooting. Sociologists have argued that social interactions become more real when people discuss them (Berger and Luckmann 1967). The two perpetrators obviously
discussed their attack on the school, and therefore this discussion belied any claims in the media that Harris and Klebold lacked malicious intent.

What about evil? In a rational sense, evil is a state we identify with making monstrous or demonic choices, ones that negate the humanity of those who make the choices. One possible explanation behind evil behavior is that perpetrators are essentially demonic, or they intend to behave in such a way. Harris and Klebold demonstrated malicious intent, and through their purposive behavior negated their own humanity, which explains the lack of sympathy and understanding expressed in the media for the two young gunmen. In contrast, we see the emergence of intentional virtue in the Bernall character, which negated the nihilism of the Harris and Klebold characters in the Columbine story.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study will be of interest to sociologists, journalists, and the general public. The study of the media discourse surrounding one of the most shocking crimes, one that produced media coverage on a massive scale, yields findings that advance the sociological literature. Namely, this study speaks to the media process through which reality is constructed, particularly in the cases of high profile crimes. The findings extend the discussion initiated by Cerulo (1998) regarding how crime is discussed and deciphered in the mass media. Similarly, the findings demonstrate that the Columbine story, rather than being a
random grouping of media accounts, followed a trajectory in the development of its perpetrator and victim narratives. Sociologists of culture have asserted that meanings and values are implied in behavior and interactions, and the results of this study suggest that this assumption is true. Namely, an analytical assessment of the media accounts of the shooters and victims has suggested the underlying moral evaluations expressed by journalists’ words.

Journalists and scholars of mass media will also find much of interest to them in the story. This approach of this study, following a significant media event through its life cycle and analyzing its cultural meaning, is novel. The documentation of the thematic or structural contents of a large media story is not new, since there have been many studies that report descriptive analyses of media content, although of different empirical topics. What is innovative is the extension of the thematic discussion to a discussion of the underlying moral discourse.

The analysis of the Columbine story as an evolving narrative, bound by institutional and rhetorical conventions, suggests that the work of reporting, and the corollary effort of news consumption, is intimately connected with the social construction of reality. The mass media are not merely in the business of reporting crime, but also the industry of creating reality of the stories that they report upon. Therefore, this study documents the process through which the victim and perpetrator narratives of the Columbine story emerged and developed.
Scholars of mass media and journalists, particularly those who cover crime, will be interested to read the results of the study of the Columbine coverage.

Just as the study has clarified the process through which the media content evolved, the findings would suggest to consumers of news media that there is a similar process of interpretation that occurs during consumption. The findings of my analyses serve as a warning to viewers and readers, that the content they take in comes packaged complete with moral and cultural assumptions. Therefore, consumers of media would be wise to understand that, rather than receiving a version of an external reality, their consumption of news media content contributes to the construction of reality itself.

Finally, members of the general public will benefit from reading the results of this study, because the Columbine story was such a popular and culturally important media event. This academic study can shed new light on a topic that remains popular, although primarily most of the material has been written from the perspective of evangelical Christians or those interested in prevention of violence in schools. This study discusses the cultural meaning of the media frenzy that trailed the attack on Columbine, and therefore brings an analytical tone to a discussion that is often emotional.
Avenues for Future Study

The findings of this study have also suggested possibilities for future research. One future avenue for research lies in the extension of the analysis to include media coverage of other school shootings. Given that the study of the Columbine story has suggested an underlying media process at work, it might be fruitful to expand the data to include the same media source’s coverage of school shootings, such as those at Pearl, Mississippi; Jonesboro, Arkansas; West Paducah, Kentucky; Edinboro, PA; and Springfield, Oregon. Inclusion of previous shootings would allow the examination of the emergence and development of school shooting narratives, although over a longer period of time.

If the inclusion of previous school shootings would allow the assessment of how the discourse of school shootings emerged and developed, the inclusion of school shootings that occurred after Columbine would allow for the assessment of where the discourse is going. It is unclear what effects the Columbine shootings, as watershed event, had on the media coverage of school shootings in general. Therefore, it might be fruitful to expand the data to include school shootings that have occurred since Columbine, notably those in Conyers, Georgia and Santee, California. Also, since the Conyers, Georgia shootings occurred in close temporal proximity, it might be fruitful to assess the extent to which the two media stories influenced one another.
While expanding the data would be a fruitful extension of the analysis, there is also plenty of work to be done with the existing data. I have already described the prominence of the commentary in the Columbine coverage, and another future line of inquiry includes the description and analysis of commentaries leveled by members of the Columbine community, public officials, media pundits, and various types of experts. Such an examination would offer a natural extension of the analysis already completed on the victim and perpetrator narratives, which revealed a tacit moral discussion about the Columbine shootings. If the cultural discussion of the specific elements of the crime contained the tacit moral sentiments of the reporting journalists, then the overt commentary is likely to be an extension of this moral discourse. Relevant topics for the analysis of the commentary include, outlining the themes of commentaries and identifying the sources of those themes. Description of the themes would be a natural starting point for the discussion of patterns in the commentary, and the relationship between the various types of comments and the moral discourse about the shootings.

Another interesting area of inquiry lies in the study of media intersubjectivity. In the Columbine story, there were numerous cases in which media sources commented on the coverage contained in other news outlets. One irony was that the primary vehicle for criticism of the news media was the news media itself. For example, on the morning following the Columbine shootings, the New York Times published an article titled “Terror in Littleton: Television –
Critic’s Notebook; With Abundance of Confusion and Few Facts, Nonstop Coverage” that commented on the continuous coverage of the event by cable and network news sources (Goodman 1999).

Similarly, an extension of the current research might include an analysis of the ways in which the mass media might influence the very reality they intend to report on. I’m not talking here about the media’s role in creating reality through the process of covering it, but rather on the reflexive quality in which the content of new media influences people’s behavior, because the people are aware that they are being covered. In the Columbine coverage, media personnel spoke live with students who were inside Columbine High School. Later, media pundits warned that the media’s coverage might have put those students in danger. Alternately, the shooters might have had access to televisions inside the school, and therefore would the media’s coverage might have tipped them off to the locations of other victims and police.

There are other notable examples of this sort of media reflexivity. For example, during the O.J. Simpson car chase, viewers lined the highways when O.J. was driving by. Certainly, the media coverage of the car chase created the possibility for viewers to do this. In the 2000 Presidential election, the major networks called the election before the polls had closed, most notably before the polls had closed in Florida, which spans two time zones. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the news media refused to broadcast taped statements of
Osama bin Laden, in case those videos contained encoded messages intended for other terrorists who were in hiding.

These phenomena raise numerous questions, such as what mechanisms are in place to check or control media coverage or content? Are these controls primarily within media institutions themselves, such editors and intersubjective articles? What role would the public, government institutions, private institutions play in controlling intersubjective and reflexive media behavior? Future research might address these questions by way of the Columbine coverage and other empirical topics.

A broader sociological issue is that mass media can be considered social control behavior, if control is conceptualized as a response to deviant behavior. Since one of the elements of social control is identifying a defining deviant behavior, there is justification for interpreting the media coverage of crime as social control. This raises another related issue, which is who controls the controllers? That is, how is media behavior controlled? In short, there is much to be learned about the media’s social construction of Columbine and other school shootings.

The Columbine Story as Constructed Reality

This study has examined the social construction of the perpetrator and victim narratives in the Columbine story. The analysis has revealed the media has
followed a coherent trajectory in coming to rest on a specific version of the Columbine story. In a general sense, the Columbine story was a large-scale, discursive social control response to a particularly shocking crime. While in the previous years of the 1990’s we had observed other school shootings, the attack on Columbine was unprecedented in its drama and scale. The same hold true for the Columbine story, which was a powerful media event that struck an emotional nerve in the populace, and dominated the news media unlike any other crime, with the exception of the O.J. Simpson case.

Studying the Columbine story has revealed a subtle process at work, one in which the mass media discuss issues of the case, and then finally come to rest on a single version. My analysis of the perpetrator and victim narratives has indicated that the outcome of the Columbine story was influenced by the social contexts of the production and consumption of the media content. For example, the conventions governing the sequencing of narrative accounts of violent behavior influenced the way that journalists wrote about the shootings. Specifically, the fact that the Columbine shootings shared elements of terrorist and racial attacks contributed to a condition of sociomoral instability, one that loosened the normal conventions of journalistic style.

The Columbine shootings caused an upheaval in the typically stable normative structures of society. The occurrence of the particularly shocking and brutal school shootings, stirred an immense quantity of emotion in those who heard about it, and the primary outlet for this emotion was the news media. This
effervescent up welling of the normative framework of society was analogous a geologic upheaval. Darwin wrote, in reference to a seismic earthquake, “one second of time has created in the mind a strange idea of insecurity, which hours of reflection would not have produced” (Darwin 1906: 289). This is precisely what the moral reaction that the Columbine shootings provoked, the idea that the normative structures of society were not as solid as we thought. For a time, Columbine created “a strange idea of insecurity.”
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SOURCES

ABC Good Morning America
ABC Nightline
ABC Special Report
ABC This Week
ABC 20/20
ABC World News Tonight
Associated Press
CNN Breaking News
CNN Early Edition
CNN Larry King Live
CNN Newsday
CNN Special Report
CNN Worldview
NPR All Things Considered
Newsweek
New York Times
PBS News Hour with Jim Lehrer
Time
APPENDIX A

Detailed Tables of Meta-Themes, Themes, and Sub-themes

Table A1: Distribution of Meta-Themes in Headlines and Article Leads

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<thead>
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<th>Meta-Themes</th>
<th>Headlines N = 724</th>
<th>Article Leads N = 726</th>
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Table A2: Distribution of Meta-Themes and Themes in Headlines and Article Leads, Including the Ratio of Headlines to Article Leads

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<th>Article Leads (N = 726)</th>
<th>Ratio of Headlines:Leads</th>
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<td>Terror</td>
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Table A3: Distribution of Themes and Sub-Themes for “Actors” Meta-Theme, Including Examples of Headlines

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<tr>
<td>Perpetrators</td>
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</table>
• “Portrait of a Deadly Bond: One Was a Leader, the Other a Follower. One Prone to Fits of Venomous Temper, the Other Shy and Awkward. *Time* investigates what led Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to turn Columbine High School into a Killing Field” (*Time*, 5/10/1999) |
|                         | Eric Harris        | 9                  | 1.2                   | 5                                                                                   | • “Some Insight Into the Life of Eric Harris” (*World News Tonight*, 4/28/1999)  
• “High School Gunman Loved German Insignia, Guns” (Associated Press, 4/26/1999) |
|                         | Dylan Klebold      | 3                  | 0.4                   | 3                                                                                   | • “Klebold Described as a Follower Who Went Astray” (Associated Press, 4/21/1999)  
• “Knowing Dylan Klebold” (*Good Morning America*, 4/30/1999) |
|                         | Possible 3rd Gunman| 16                 | 2.2                   | 38                                                                                  | • “In the Wake of the Colorado School Shootings, Officials Find Numerous Explosive Devices, Leading to Speculation that the Killers Had Help” (*NPR All Things Considered*, 4/22/1999) |
| Accomplices             |                    |                    |                       |                                                                                      |
|                         | Mark Manes         | 10                 | 1.4                   | 23                                                                                   | • “Man Arrested on Suspicion of Supplying Pistol in Colorado Massacre” (Associated Press, 5/05/1999) |

255
Table A4: Distribution of Themes and Sub-Themes for “Action” Meta-Theme, Including Examples of Headlines

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<td>What Happened</td>
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<td>61  8.4%</td>
<td>• “Shooting at Denver-Area High School; Multiple Fatalities Reported” (Associated Press, 4/20/1999)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>• “Two Weeks after the Shootings at Columbine, There Are Still Questions about Exactly What Happened Inside the School” (NPR All Things Considered, 5/05/1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guns &amp; Bombs</td>
<td>27  3.7%</td>
<td>28  3.9%</td>
<td>• “Investigation into Columbine High School Shooting Reveals Gunmen Had Massive Arsenal of Bombs and Firearms” (CNN Live Event/Special, 4/22/1999)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• “Where Colorado Killers Got Their Guns” (World News Tonight, 4/28/1999)</td>
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<tr>
<td>911 Tapes</td>
<td>11  1.5%</td>
<td>17  2.3%</td>
<td>• “Police Release 911 Tapes from Columbine High School Shootings” (CNN Live Event/Special, 4/23/1999)</td>
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Table A5: Distribution of Themes and Sub-Themes for “Consequences” Meta-Theme, Including Examples of Headlines

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<th>Examples of Headlines</th>
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<td>Real</td>
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<td>Dead Victims</td>
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<td>54</td>
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<td>Injured Victims</td>
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<td>Emotional Victims</td>
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Table A6: Distribution of Themes for “Reactions”

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<td>Ideological Reactions</td>
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<td>173</td>
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<td>Outside of Community</td>
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<td>Community</td>
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Table A7: Distribution of Sub-Themes for “Ideological Reactions” Theme, Including Examples of Headlines

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<td>16</td>
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<td>Shock &amp; Disbelief</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
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Table A8: Distribution of Sub-Themes for “Reactions Outside of Community” Theme, Including Examples of Headlines

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<th>Article Leads N = 726</th>
<th>Examples of Headlines</th>
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<td>%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside of Community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Political Meetings            | 42                        | 134    | 18.5| 179    | 24.7| • “President Clinton Visits T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia, to Speak to Them about Massacre at Columbine High School” (NPR All Things Considered, 4/22/1999)  
• “NRA Annual Convention in Denver Draws Protests” (World News Tonight, 5/01/1999) |
• “Horse Renamed to Respect Littleton Victims” (Associated Press, 5/11/1999) |
| Other Schools                 | 34                        | 34     | 4.7 | 47     | 6.5 | • “Terror in Littleton: The Nation; Violence, Real and Imagined, Sweeps through the Schools” (New York Times, 4/30/1999)  
• “Metal Detectors, Mesh Book Bags, Armed Police—Should Kids Have to Attend Prisons? Here’s What Some Schools Have Done to Prevent Violence” (Time, 5/03/1999) |
| Other Places                  | 10                        | 10     | 1.4 | 16     | 2.2 | • “Explaining Black Trench Coats and Blood in The Library to Kids” (Associated Press, 4/22/1999) |
| Aid for Columbine             | 10                        | 10     | 1.4 | 19     | 2.6 | • “President Offers $ 1.5 Million in Aid to School Shooting Victims” (Associated Press, 4/23/1999)  
• “Nation’s Anguish Conveyed in Letters” (Associated Press, 5/03/1999) |
| Media                         | 10                        | 10     | 1.4 | 23     | 3.2 | • “Media Experts Are Troubled by What They Saw on the Live Coverage of the Columbine High School Shooting Because It Could Have Made the Situation Worse” (NPR All Things Considered, 4/21/1999 [npr42103]) |
Table A9: Distribution of Sub-Themes for “Community Reactions” Theme, Including Examples of Headlines

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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td></td>
<td>96</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>134</td>
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</table>
| Memorials         |            | 54    | 7.5    | 90    | 12.4   | “Funerals and Memorials for Victims in Columbine High Shootings” (NPR All Things Considered, 4/27/1999)  
|                   |            |       |        |       |        | “Two Sets of Crosses Erected for Victims of Columbine Shooting” (Associated Press, 5/05/1999)  
|                   |            |       |        |       |        | “A Neighborhood Park Draws Littleton Pilgrims” (New York Times, 5/06/1999)                  |
| Columbine Situations |      | 19    | 2.6    | 36    | 5.0    | “Students from Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, Resume Classes at Nearby Chatfield High School” (NPR All Things Considered, 5/03/1999) |
| Healing Process   |            | 12    | 1.7    | 10    | 1.4    | “How Do We Heal the Wounds of Columbine?” (Larry King Live, 4/28/1999)                     |
| Parents           |            | 7     | 1.0    | 8     | 1.1    | “Students, Parents Cope with Overwhelming Loss” (Associated Press, 4/21/1999)              |
| Medical Staff     |            | 6     | 0.8    | 8     | 1.1    | Colorado School Shooting: How Do Doctors Deal with Tragedy? (CNN Early Edition, 4/22/1999) |
| Religious Leaders |            | 3     | 0.4    | 3     | 0.4    | “Colorado School Shooting: Youth Minister Hopes to ‘Provide God’s Care’ to Students” (CNN Early Edition, 4/21/1999) |
Table A10: Distribution of Sub-Themes for “Police Reactions” Theme, Including Examples of Headlines

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Table A11: Distribution of Categories for the “Exploration of Causes” Sub-Theme, Including Examples of Headlines

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| Guns               | 49 | 6.8 | 49 | 6.7 | “Coming to Clarity about Guns: Are We Witnessing a Cultural Shift that Says Gunmakers Are to Blame?” *(Time, 5/03/1999)*  
|                    |    |   |    |   | “For Those at Home on the Range, Guns Don’t Kill” *(New York Times, 5/18/1999)* |
| Social Factors     | 28 | 3.9 | 37 | 5.1 | “In America; Addicted to Violence” *(New York Times, 4/22/1999)*  
|                    |    |   |    |   | “High School Cliques: Cool or Cruel?” *(New York Times, 5/03/1999)* |
| Entertainment Media | 22 | 3.0 | 31 | 4.3 | “Columbine High School Shootings and How The Internet, Video Games and Violence on TV and in The Movies May Contribute to Teen-Age Violence” *(NPR All Things Considered, 4/28/1999)*  
|                    |    |   |    |   | “Digital Dungeons: Gory Fantasy Beckons to Kids from Websites and Video Games. It Can Be Playful. But Often It’s Hateful” *(Time, 5/03/1999)* |
| Detection and Prevention | 19 | 2.6 | 28 | 3.9 | “‘Just Like A War Zone’, The Warning Signs” *(Newsweek, 5/03/1999)*  
|                    |    |   |    |   | “Metal Detectors, Mesh Book Bags, Armed Police-Should Kids Have to Attend Prisons? Here’s What Some Schools Have Done to Prevent Violence” *(Time, 5/03/1999)* |
| Mental Illness     | 6 | 0.8 | 11 | 1.5 | “Mental Illness in Young People” *(ABC This Week, 4/25/1999)* |
Table A12: Distribution Sub-Themes for “Contexts” Theme, Including Examples of Headlines

<table>
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<th>Article Leads N = 726</th>
<th>Examples of Headlines</th>
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<td>N     %</td>
<td>N     %</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contexts</td>
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<td>68    9.4</td>
<td>118   16.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>History</td>
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<td>5     0.7</td>
<td>34    4.7</td>
<td>“The Scourge of School Violence” <em>(New York Times, 4/25/1999)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>4     0.6</td>
<td>19    2.6</td>
<td>“Terror in Littleton: The Psychology; Deeper Truths Sought in Violence by Youths” <em>(New York Times, 5/04/1999)</em></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table A13: Distribution Sub-Themes for “Evaluations” and “Expectations” Themes, Including Examples of Headlines

<table>
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<th>Article Leads N = 726</th>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td></td>
<td>90</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>192</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
• “Gunmen’s Friends Say They Didn’t Know Plans, but Understood Pain” (Associated Press, 4/24/1999) |
| National Figures |       | 28    | 3.9  | 72    | 9.9  | • “President Clinton Visits T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia, to Speak to Them about Massacre at Columbine High School” (NPR *All Things Considered*, 4/22/1999)  
• “Heston Says Enforcement, not Gun Laws, the Answer” (Associated Press, 5/02/1999) |
| Elsewhere    |             | 10    | 1.4  | 18    | 2.5  | • “Complaints from Around the Country from Parents and Students Regarding Crackdowns Since Shootings in Columbine High” (NPR *All Things Considered*, 5/06/1999) |
| Media        |             | 10    | 1.4  | 50    | 6.9  | • “Broadcasters Urged to Stay Prepared for Their Own Littleton” (Associated Press, 4/26/1999)          |
| Experts      |             | 4     | 0.6  | 21    | 2.9  | • “Howard Davidson, American Bar Association, Talks about Parental Responsibility for the Actions of Their Children” (NPR *All Things Considered*, 4/27/1999) |
| Expectations |             | 4     | 0.6  | 5     | 0.7  | • “An Outrage that Will Last: The Public Has Had Its Fill of Politicians Who Won’t Touch the Gun Problem” (*Time*, 5/10/1999) |
Table A14: Distribution of “Background” Meta-Theme, Including Examples of Headlines

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<td>N = 726</td>
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<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Colorado School Shooting: Deputy Stationed in Columbine High Received Reports to Watch Eric Harris” (CNN Newsday, 4/30/1999)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Terror in Littleton: The Investigation; Little Was Done on Complaints in Littleton File” (New York Times, 5/01/1999)</td>
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Table A15: Distribution of “Terror” Meta-Theme, Including Examples of Headlines

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<th>Article Leads N = 726</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terror</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>156</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“High School Massacre” (Good Morning America, 4/21/1999)</td>
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<td>“High School Horror” (ABC 20/20, 4/23/1999)</td>
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