Using Genre Theory to Reduce Mass Shootings

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"Suicide contagion" is a well-established phenomenon in which highly publicized suicides are followed by a spike in the general suicide rate. In recent years, scholars have proposed a similar media contagion effect in mass shootings, a claim that's supported by a growing body of statistical and sociological evidence. The fact that increased media coverage is linked to an increase in the probability of another mass shooting suggests that news media exercise some power over mass shootings. This paper, drawing attention to the "genres" within mass shootings, explores how news media can rewrite these narratives in order to craft a more responsible response.

In 1974, sociologist David Phillips noticed a worrying trend in suicides. After each highly publicized suicide, the national suicide rate increased. Theorizing that exposure to media about suicide might increase an at-risk individual's risk, Phillips named this phenomenon the "Werther effect" (343). Today, the Werther effect is well-documented (Fahey et al. 19)—so much so that organizations like the Center for Disease Control and the American Psychological Association have released media guidelines for reporting on suicide. Further research has only backed up these guidelines, suggesting that adjusting the content and volume of these reports can influence the suicide rate. In 1987, for instance, the suicide rate in the Vienna subway system decreased 75 percent after new guidelines for reporting subway suicides were introduced (Gould and Lake 12).

In recent years, numerous scholars have applied the Werther effect—also known as media contagion (Gould et al.)—to mass shootings. They've presented evidence suggesting that mass shootings are contagious (Towers et al. 7) and that incidents rise in response to increased media coverage (Lee 33). Several have noted the significance of "fame" being a central motivator of many shooters (Johnston and Joy 5). All the research connecting mass shootings to media coverage raises important questions: How might news media be contributing to mass shootings? How can news media change the ways they report on mass shootings, as they did with suicides, in order to reduce their incidence?

In this article, I present new answers to those questions, drawing on rhetorical genre theory to explain the phenomenon of media-fueled mass shooting contagion. After covering what defines a mass shooting and the evidence that supports contagion theory, I will argue that three different kinds of genre—the genres of contemporary news reporting, the genre of news media's typified responses to mass shootings, and the genre of mass shootings—work together to create mass-shooting contagion. I'll explore a few possible media guidelines to reduce contagion, and the broader re-envisioning of genre

needed to address the problem, along with some of the research that still needs to be done to understand mass-shooting contagion. To start, I will present the case for mass-shooting media-contagion theory, based on research by scholars in statistics, sociology, and other fields.

The Case for Contagion

Before we can determine whether a contagion effect between mass shootings exists (and examine the role that genre may play in this effect), we have to decide which of the various gun violence incidents that occur each year qualify as mass shootings. This is a much more difficult task than it seems, because what defines a "mass shooting" depends on who you ask. How many deaths (or casualties) have to occur for a shooting to be a "mass" shooting? Does a shooting have to be indiscriminate to earn the "mass" title, or can it target specific victims? Rosanna Smart, a researcher who has written extensively on criminal justice and gun policy, covered some of the most common approaches to defining mass shootings in a research review last year. Building off of the FBI's definition of "mass murderer," Smart reports that some sources set the threshold for a mass shooting at no less than four fatalities by firearm; but others argue that the threshold should include injuries, or "additional fatalities occurred by other means." Still others lower the threshold to three casualties ("Stanford Mass Shootings") or even two (Smart).

An even trickier question is whether or not shootings related to domestic disputes, gang violence, or other crimes should be considered mass shootings. Many have argued that these shootings are stylistically different than "public mass shootings" where the shooter

kills indiscriminately. Omitting them, however, means excluding roughly eighty percent of the data (Smart). In short, determining what is and isn't a "mass shooting"—and, by extension, analyzing trends in mass shooting rates—is a challenge.

Still, a variety of researchers have made the best of the available data. Towers et al. used a conservative definition of a mass shooting (four or more people killed) and a mathematical contagion model to evaluate whether contagion was evident. They found "significant evidence" (7) of contagion in mass shootings. On average, the probability of another mass shooting was elevated for thirteen days after the original incident (1).

While Towers et al. only hypothesized about the connection between shooting contagion and media coverage, others have explored it in depth. Using data from the ALERRT dataset on active shootings, Johnston and Joy found that the prevalence of shootings had increased significantly since 2000 and argued that this can be attributed to media coverage. They pointed to common characteristics between profiled mass shooters like narcissism and a desire for fame, an opportunity presented to them by becoming a shooter. As Johnston and Joy pointed out, it's not uncommon for shooters to directly send manifestos or pictures of themselves to news organizations (19). Jetter and Walker took the research on shooting contagion and theories about media influence one step further. Quantitatively analyzing data from the Gun Violence Archive and ABC News, they concluded that "[their] findings consistently suggest that media coverage systematically causes future mass shootings" (14).

Looking beyond mathematical or criminological arguments, the idea that media coverage can impact the mass shooting rate

makes sense on a rhetorical level. As argued by Richard Vatz, rhetorical situations are largely constructed by the rhetor. A journalist reporting news makes two key choices: what information is relevant enough to include and how to use that information to create a meaningful narrative (157). Looking at news coverage through the lens of Vatz's thinking, it's easy to see how reporting decisions made by journalists or editors can shape the very situation that is being reported on.

For example: even with the variance in definitions of "mass shooting," what almost all experts agree on is that mass shootings make up a minority of homicides (National Criminal Justice Reference Service). Public, indiscriminate mass shootings are an even tinier fraction. These shootings, while horrific, are not inherently newsworthy. When editors choose to make a shooting a headline story, they are constructing that shooting as being newsworthy. The facts they choose as being most important end up gaining importance, but only because the news influences public perception of what is important. Through a phenomenon called the availability heuristic, viewers assign importance to information that is easily recalled or familiar—even when that information is inaccurate or misrepresentative (Foster). Frequently hearing reporters discuss shootings could make anyone believe that shootings are more prevalent than they actually are; and when the public believes that mass shootings are more prevalent than they actually are, they become more prevalent because more people are discussing and writing about them. Once shootings become more prevalent in the public eye, shooters who seek inspiration have that many more resources to choose

from and shooters interested in fame have that much stronger motivation.

Applying Genre Theory to Mass Shootings

Scholars have been discussing this mass shooting media contagion for years, and they've proposed a wide variety of explanations as to why the problem exists, but no one has suggested studying media coverage of mass shootings through a rhetorical lens. My argument for media-related mass-shooting contagion focuses on *genre*, as in the dynamic responses to and formations of a given situation (Devitt 580). In the eyes of prominent genre scholars, genres are not static categories that texts or responses fall into; they are "frames for social action" that "shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact" (Bazerman, qtd. in Bawarshi and Reiff).

There are three ways that *genre* can be used to understand mass-shooting media contagion. The first way is to analyze the overarching genres of news reporting (cable, online) that dominate contemporary journalism; as dynamic responses to technological innovation and social change, these genres of news reporting influence the rhetorical situation around mass shootings just as much as they're influenced by it. The second way is to study the genre of news media's individual "typified responses" (Bawarshi and Reiff) to mass shootings, examining the genre conventions of reporting on a mass shooting and how these might contribute to the problem. Finally, we can understand the way that genre relates to contagion by understanding the genres within the mass shootings themselves, and how these genres are partially created and reinforced by news media.

Together, these three genres—the genres

of contemporary news reporting, typified responses to shootings, and the shootings themselves—create the phenomenon of media-related "mass shooting contagion." To explain how they work together, I'll begin by discussing the overarching genres of news reporting. In order to understand what those genres might have to do with the spread of mass shootings, let's consider a new question: When did mass shootings become prevalent in popular culture, and how?

The most obvious answer is the infamous 1999 Columbine massacre, perpetrated by two teenagers in a Colorado high school. By no means was Columbine the first mass shooting or even the first school shooting that the United States had seen, but, as journalist John Cloud says, it was "so ornately gory and so profoundly heartbreaking that it became a cultural reference point." Inspiring dozens of in-depth profiles and hours upon hours of news coverage, Columbine captured the entire country's attention and influenced dozens of other shooters. A 2015 *Mother Jones* investigation identified 74 "copycat cases," 53 of which were thwarted by authorities and 21 which were carried out. All of the suspects mentioned being influenced by the Columbine shooters (Follman).

No one could argue that the Columbine shooting wasn't gory and heartbreaking, but I disagree with Cloud's assertion that these qualities were the main reasons behind its legacy. I think the reason for the shooting's legacy lies in the context of other social changes occurring in the background. The 1990s marked the rise of the 24-hour cable news cycle, which had begun with CNN in 1980 and came into its own with CNN's Gulf War coverage in 1990–91. In the 90s, a new term, the "CNN effect," was coined to describe the way that the cycle's coverage could influence public policy (Gilboa). At the same time, an even more revolutionary technology was changing the way the public gained access to information. During the year that Columbine took place, the Internet grew so rapidly that BBC News dubbed it "the year of the net" (Rodger).

Since genres are always "dynamic response[s]" (Devitt 580), journalistic genres responded to these social changes: to the capabilities of new technology, and the changing interests of news organizations. In the mid-1900s, says news historian Michael Griffin, the leaders of the predominant news organizations believed that reporting the news was a "public service" that "wasn't expected to make money for national broadcasters" (Macalester); but when news stations were acquired by larger conglomerates and the 24-hour news cycle gained momentum, these expectations shifted. The time reporters were given to research, prepare, and edit content was shortened. Costs were cut. Most importantly, news became a "commodity" (Macalester), dependent on views and advertisement revenue. The rise of CNN created an "increasingly competitive journalistic market with a voracious appetite for stories," in which "scandals and other dramatic events" received more media attention than ever before (Allen and Thompson).

Online news also utilizes drama to attract audiences, with a few added complications. For one thing, outside of traditional news websites, the Internet does not have "much new original reporting" (Macalester). Much of the content shared is recycled from other sources, or commentaries, blog posts and opinion pieces discussing existing reports. In addition, as Griffin points out, online news is uncurated. It's a "wash of stories and information," unprioritized by considerations like

"urgency" or "civic importance." Through algorithms, it tends to feed users content that it predicts they will want to consume. Which content is important and newsworthy is no longer determined by an editorial board, but by an audience and the content that they are interested in (Macalester).

In responding to the characteristics of a changing rhetorical situation (new technology, new demands, new constraints, and new competitors), the genres of modern news reporting helped to create a new situation: one in which mass shootings are uniquely newsworthy. Why? The simplest reason is that they are violent crimes; and if the world of cable and online news is a marketplace, violent crime is one of its best-selling products. Between 1993 and 1996, for example, the national murder rate decreased by 20 percent, but stories about murders on the ABC, NBC, and CBS news networks rose by 721 percent; and in general, it's estimated that 50 percent of all television news focuses on crime, in sharp contrast to the "public affairs journalism" of years past (Mann). The more victims a violent act accumulates, the more newsworthy it's considered. As pointed out by Grant Duwe, the body count of mass killings predicts the amount of media coverage (364), and indiscriminate shootings tend to garner more attention than their discriminate counterparts (Mann). Online, where information is uncurated, audiences may seek out violent content; over the years, many scholars have discussed the idea of "wound culture," which describes society's fascination with violence as public spectacle (Mann). Thanks to online algorithms, users who have interacted with stories about killings in the past are more likely to be recommended content about killings in the future (Macalester),

and the cycle continues.

Troublingly, media coverage of mass shootings may also create a "cycle of distress" in audiences. In a three-year longitudinal study at the University of California–Irvine, researchers surveyed four thousand participants after the Boston Marathon bombings and Pulse nightclub shooting. They found that "repeated exposure to media coverage of collective traumas" can cause individuals to experience increased anxiety about the future, and this anxiety leads them to consume even more media (Thompson et al.) The Internet, with its unlimited supply of uncensored content, can only contribute to this phenomenon. As Teddy Wayne writes in the *New York Times*, "We have all been there after a traumatic public event: compulsively clicking through the internet for an additional journalistic report, one more personal account, yet another status update."

Then again, hasn't violent and disturbing content always made the headlines? We only need to look at the newspapers of previous generations to understand that sensationalism in reporting precedes both the Internet and television. Over a century ago, covering the 1888 Whitechapel murders in England, the headline in Star newspaper declared that "a nameless reprobate—half man, half beast—is daily gratifying his murderous instincts" (Jones). Even then, the news contributed to the cultural legacies of crimes and killers; Jones describes infamous serial killer Jack the Ripper as "a mentally disturbed individual whose elevation to legendary killer was an accident of sensationalist journalism." It's clear, from studying the news media of years past, that whatever "wound culture" (Mann) and public fascination with violence may exist has existed for a long time.

However, as I've just covered, the genres of modern news reporting have raised sensationalism to heights the world has never before seen. On the cable news cycle, news is editorialized by what content will bring in views and ratings, a system that naturally favors violent, sensational content like mass shootings. Online, the stream of news—if filtered at all—is filtered by an individual's web history and consumption habits, playing into algorithms and cycles of distress that fuel continued consumption of shooting-related content. Both cable and online news allow audiences to have around-the-clock access to new developments and details about mass shootings; and online, they are inundated by the different sources (blogs, social media accounts, online newspapers) repeating the same details about each shooting. These characteristics—organization based on the whims of the audience and constant coverage—are unique to the genres of modern news reporting, and they've created a situation that feeds mass shooting contagion. After all, the heavier and more sensational the coverage of a mass shooting is, the more likely future shooters are to imitate or draw inspiration from it. Would there still have been 74 copycats directly inspired by Columbine (Follman) if Columbine hadn't received the amount of coverage it did? In a subtler way, the heavy and constant coverage of Columbine showed would-be shooters (and the world) how easy it was to capture the country's attention with a violent, shocking act. Even two teenagers were capable of it.

Through heavy coverage and sensationalism, the new genres of modern news reporting create a situation where would-be shooters are all the more likely to be inspired to perpetrate a shooting. It's that much easier to be inspired by another shooter, or they're that much more aware that perpetrating a shooting will guarantee them the fame that many desire. With some help from the other two genres, these contemporary news reporting genres construct media-related "mass shooting contagion."

Genre Conventions in Typified Responses to Shootings

Genres of modern news reporting, and the ways in which they select, produce, and disseminate news feed into mass shooting contagion, the amount and the sensationalism of coverage contributing to the problem. Next, let's zoom in to the actual content of these news stories. What genres and corresponding patterns can be observed in the different ways that news sources respond to mass shootings, and how might these patterns promote contagion?

Repeated situations tend to create repeated, or typified, responses. Over time, these typified responses come to "influence how subsequent rhetors define and experience recurrent situations" (Bawarshi and Reiff). In other words, typified responses determine the conventions that other rhetors follow; and each time a rhetor follows a typified response, they reinforce that typified response. In the context of news, the elements of a typified response might include what details are presented in a report and what terminology is used. There are many such elements in the typified response to a mass shooting: terms like *lone wolf* or a revived conversation on mental illness, for instance. In my eyes, the most important of these genre conventions is the strong focus on the shooter as an individual. The current typified response to mass shootings involves casting the shooter as the most important (or one of the most

important) aspects of the story, a decision that I believe is a key contributor to mass shooting contagion. To understand just how common it is to focus on the shooter as an individual, I've examined the way different news outlets reported on the August 2019 Dayton, Ohio shooting.

In my Google search for "Dayton, Ohio shooting CNN," the first result is a CNN story titled "Dayton shooter had an obsession with violence and mass shootings" by Murphy et al. Each section of the article includes a new personal detail about the gunman; one, for example, is about a hit list of people the gunman supposedly maintained. Another is about the likes and retweets on the gunman's Twitter account. Yet another is about a band the gunman belonged to, which plays music with "pornographic and sexual themes." Featured throughout the article are quotations from former classmates, describing the shooter's personality, background and interest in violence.

That same hit list detail also makes an appearance in a Fox News article on the shooting. More classmates are quoted, including a former ex-girlfriend who wrote online about the shooter's struggles with mental illness (Casiano). In the accompanying television newscast, one of the headlines is "Dayton Police: Suspect Was Interested in Violent Ideologies."

Even the reputable *Washington Post* released an article on August 4 including very similar details: the hit list, the apparent interest in violence, the rumors circulating around Bellbrook High School about the shooter (Williams et al). To the *Post*'s credit, these details are included further down in the article than in the other sources, but they were still considered important enough to make a breaking news report published the day of the shooting. They were also important enough to be part of the lede of a later *Post* article, which notes that "acquaintances described the 24-year-old as a deeply troubled individual who was obsessed with guns, carried a 'hit list' of classmates, and had a history of violently lashing out against women" (Farzan).

These three very different news outlets all demonstrate a strong focus on the individual shooter. In the context of the modern news reporting genres, it's a choice that makes sense; the attention paid to killers as individuals is driven by audience demand, which drives revenue and engagement. As one *Wired* article puts it: "A shared fascination with understanding the mind of the shooter perpetuates some media coverage" (Fore). But the choice to focus on the individual is also a choice that fuels contagion. Earlier, I touched on the significance of fame being a common and central motive for mass shooters (Johnston and Joy 5). If fame motivates shooters, then one of the most dangerous genre conventions within the typified responses to shootings has to be this focus on the shooter as an individual: their backgrounds, their social media accounts, their psychology. On an anonymous *Daily Beast* blog post, mass shooter Chris Harper Mercer wrote the following about another shooter:

I have noticed that so many people like him are all alone and unknown, yet when they spill a little blood, the whole world knows who they are. … A man who was known by no one, is now known by everyone. His face splashed across every screen, his name across the lips of every person on the planet, all in the course of one day. Seems the more people you kill, the more you're in the limelight." (Miller and Yang)

Mercer's blog post illustrates the way that news media's focus on the shooter as an individual could lead a fame-motivated individual to become a killer. If a shooter desires fame—whether it's infamy among the general public, or martyrdom within small, dark corners of the Internet—they know that gun violence is likely to take them there. Because spotlighting the shooter as an individual is such a central aspect of news media's typified responses to mass shootings, news coverage of one shooting can increase the likelihood of another happening in the coming days. The stakes are high in the game of reporting on mass shootings, which is why it's so important to be conscious of how much attention is being paid to mass shooters as individuals.

The Genre of a Mass Shooting

Let's return to the Columbine shooting. Through their actions, the Columbine killers wrote a script for a new kind of violence, a script that modelled "how school shooters should behave, dress and speak" (Peterson and Densley, qtd. in Strauss). The gunmen inspired 74 others directly (Follman), and it's likely they inspired many more indirectly. After all, many of the behaviors we now associate with "school shootings" or "school shooters" (suicide following the shooting, leaving behind a manifesto or videos) began with Columbine. These behaviors became genre conventions, actions that future shooters borrowed from or subverted through their own acts of violence.

It might be counterintuitive to consider mass shootings a "genre"; but if genres are dynamic responses to and formations of a situation (Devitt 580), then mass shootings more than qualify. They are in some respects largely a dynamic response to news media

and their coverage. In an article entitled "The Wrong Way to Talk About a Shooter's Manifesto," Brian Barrett calls shooter manifestos "largely performative, written with the understanding that the media and law enforcement will find them, pore over them, and share their contents." But what if mass shootings, in general, are performative? What if they are perpetrated with the knowledge that news media and law enforcement will study them carefully, so the perpetrators make deliberate decisions about the shooting in order to manipulate how they will be seen?

I would argue that most mass shootings are, to some degree, performative; and that as shooters participate in forming their own media narrative, they also participate in forming and reforming the larger genre of mass shootings. We know, from studying the motivations of mass shooters and blog posts like Chris Harper Mercer's, that shooters are generally aware that news media, law enforcement, and the public will study their actions closely. Many are motivated by the fact that they'll be studied closely; they want to be seen and discussed. In planning and executing their shooting, they make a series of decisions to pinpoint their actions within the larger genre of "mass shooting."

The first decision is to even engage in a mass shooting. When journalists discuss what motivates mass shooters (i.e. history of abuse, bullying, radicalization), they often end up talking about what motivates violence, not the specific breed of violence that is a mass shooting. There are different reasons an individual might choose to commit a mass shooting out of all the other available options: maybe because it's easiest for them to get a gun, or because they want to target as many people as possible, or because they

desire the infamy that comes with becoming a mass shooter. Regardless of the reasoning, it's a deliberate choice. Once an individual has decided to commit a mass shooting, they have to make other, more specific decisions: Where? Will they be indiscriminate or discriminate in who they attack? If they say anything to their victims, what will they say? If they leave behind a manifesto, what will they write? To answer these questions, they generally study the actions of previous shooters. Jillian Peterson and James Densley, researchers who study the lives of mass shooters, have noticed four commonalities shared by "nearly all" the shooters they've studied; one of them is studying the actions of other shooters. Peterson and Densley write that "perpetrators ... model their acts after previous shootings" and that "in the age of 24-hour rolling news and social media, there are scripts to follow that promise notoriety in death."

Following these scripts means following the genre conventions established by previous shooters. Many shooters do this, modeling their own behaviors off of what others have done and reinforcing the convention. Still, like other genres, the genre of mass shootings is always evolving. In an article about far-right mass shootings, Robert Evans notes that one recent development is the "gamification" of violence. Evans discusses how the Christchurch shooter recorded the shooting in a way reminiscent of a first-person shooter video game, complete with a musical soundtrack meant to "entertain and inspire." These strategies, Evans warns, have already been adopted by at least one other shooter.

When shooters choose to perpetrate a mass shooting, they make decisions that place them somewhere within the genre of mass shooting, depending on whether their goals are "notoriety in death" (Peterson and Densley) or violence against a specific group or some other motivation entirely. Their shooting reinforces, subverts, or innovates the genre conventions associated with mass shootings. Aided by news media that make the details of each of these shootings so widely accessible and continually discussed, this cycle of media-fueled mass-shooting contagion continues as more works are added to the genre and more individuals are inspired to contribute their own act of violence.

Rewriting the Script: Reenvisioning the Genres around Mass Shootings

To summarize, all three types of genre—genres of contemporary news reporting, the genre of news media's typified responses to mass shooting, and the genre of mass shootings themselves—work together to construct media-driven mass-shooting contagion. Heavy coverage and sensationalism construct mass shootings as being especially newsworthy and drive public preoccupation with shootings; a typified response that focuses on the gunman as an individual shifts that preoccupation to the shooter. With other actors (the shooter, the public), the detailed coverage and typified responses form and reform a genre of mass shootings, which lends future shooters inspiration and legitimacy. To summarize even more succinctly: news media's coverage of mass shootings is deeply problematic, and action is needed.

The good news is that people are already aware that news media's coverage of mass shootings is problematic. Encouragingly, some of these people have already put forth suggestions on how news media can improve. *Reportingonmassshootings.org*, developed by

numerous public health and media organizations, advises against using images of the shooter that include weapons, citing mental illness as the cause for the shooting, or "romanticizing" the killer in any way. Others have suggested that the recommendations on *reportingonsuicide.org*, a similar website, are equally applicable to reporting on mass shootings. While these recommendations are well-reasoned, they'd be more effective if accompanied by a broader vision of the reform that's needed. If we intend to revamp the entire genres underlying mass shootings, we will have to articulate the longer-term, larger-scale changes that need to happen.

In a way, *reportingonmassshootings.org* is right; adjusting news media's typified responses to mass shootings is a good place to start to address the spread of mass shootings. The recommendations from *reportingonsuicide.org*, which include avoidance of sensational or graphic content and the omission of details about the method or texts left behind, are equally valid in reporting on mass shootings. Along with the recommendations that *reportingonmassshootings.org* already makes, these suggestions could reduce the ease with which shooters gain inspiration and borrow ideas from each other.

In order to undermine shooters' desire for fame, I would add a recommendation to take the focus off of the shooter as an individual. Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" famously argued that a work should be considered separately from its creator, a sentiment that I think is applicable to reporting on mass shootings. Killing the author, as a rhetorical move, is not as much about not acknowledging the author exists (as campaigns like "Don't Name Them" push for) as it is about making author irrelevant when one considers the work. Instead

of considering the killer's mental state or examining their history, a reporter will focus on the external mechanisms that allowed the shooting to happen. How did they obtain the gun? How did they enter the premises, without being stopped? Besides the necessity of denying shooters the notoriety they desire, speculating about why one individual turned to violence is not helpful in either informing the public or in preventing future shootings. Remember that it is the form (mass shooting) that is contagious, not the function (revenge, politics, etc.) The latter is probably best left to social scientists.

Unless the connection is explicit, reporters should also resist the urge to connect the shooter to larger cultural narratives. The choices made within a genre create meaning (Devitt 580); so, by linking the shooter's actions to conversations about mental illness, bullying, the current state of masculinity and so on, reporters may give shooters the impression that their actions are serving some greater purpose. Similarly, when a connection is not explicit, there's no need to connect mass shootings with each other. Titles like "deadliest of the recent mass shootings in the Cincinnati area," as reported in a *Cincinnati Enquirer* article from last month, only serve to sensationalize.

Finally, in the same way that the Austrian media reduced its coverage of Vienna's subway suicides, I want to suggest that news media lessen the volume and duration of mass shooting coverage. The coverage of mass shootings is not proportional to the actual threat that mass shootings pose to the American public. As *Greater Good Magazine* notes, more children each year lose their lives to "bicycle accidents and pool drownings" (Jilani) than to school shootings. Also, as I mentioned earlier, mass shootings are

only a tiny percentage of gun-related deaths in the U.S. each year.

These changes will work to alter the genre of news media's typified response to shootings and reduce the contagion effect. However, if we intend to make serious and long-term changes to the way news media relate to mass shootings, we may have to look at the overarching genres of contemporary news reporting that create the typified response. In their continual quest for more revenue and engagement, the genres of online and cable news profit off of violent crime and the cycles of distress that follow their coverage of crime; and by doing this, they encourage the spread of more violence. They report and organize news based on what attracts an audience's attention, not based on what information it's important for the public to know. In a world where news outlets compete for clicks and views, is it possible to reintroduce the curation of news and elements of the public affairs journalism of previous generations? Whatever the current answer to that question is, it is important to considering ways that we can create better, more thoughtful and more responsible news organizations.

Opportunities for Further Research

I have explained how genres with their typified responses should be changed, but not the underlying mechanisms of that change. When it comes to genre innovation, theorists tend to subscribe to one of two theories. The *emergence* theory focuses on the rise of innovative works that defy the status quo, satisfying an exigency that audiences didn't know they had. In emergence, "a user community that is not waiting for a solution to a problem … recognizes a new problem-solution in surprised retrospect" (Miller 15),

rendering genre innovations unpredictable. On the other hand, *evolution* theory, which treats variation as the norm, focuses on "mechanisms that enable or promote change" (Miller 15). Emergence and evolution aren't exactly opposites, as they answer different questions about genre innovation (Miller 16), and both acknowledge the role technology can play in facilitating innovation.

In other words, the current thinking on genre innovation leaves most of the logistical questions unanswered. What kinds of mechanisms will enact change in news media's coverage of shootings and the underlying genres of modern news reporting, and how do we encourage them? In a world where online and cable news both compete for clicks and views, it may prove much more difficult to change these genres than it is to identify what needs to be changed. Encouragingly, some news outlets are already moving in a more responsible direction. After the Parkland shooting, researchers noticed that profiles on the shooter had shortened in length. In some news outlets, the profiles were even absent (Harris).

Another limitation of this article is that it doesn't really address social media, which some studies have already suggested plays an integral role in "media contagion." Garcia-Bernardo et al. identified a direct relationship between the social media "chatter" surrounding a shooting and the probability of another shooting occurring in the following days. Rhetorically, social media could offset positive changes resulting from responsible reporting. If shooters livestream their attacks, as at least one has already done, and if that livestream goes viral, killers won't necessarily require mainstream media coverage to command the national stage. We can't hold social media users to journalistic standards; or

maybe we can, but should we?

My decision to focus on mainstream news media was partially because those outlets can be held to journalistic standards; but it's also because, given the chaotic nature of social media, I believe that news outlets still regulate what is considered nationally "important" and what isn't. Even if they're just reporting the stories that will guarantee them the highest ratings, news media are still vital in setting the agenda of what's newsworthy. As a result, I believe that news outlets adopting responsible standards will still make a positive impact, even in the age of social media. That said, the rhetorical role that social media play in "media contagion" and mass shootings deserves more discussion and analysis. It will only become more relevant as technology continues to advance and academia struggles to keep up.

In sum, the relationship between mass shooting contagion and news media reporting is supported statistically, sociologically, and (now) rhetorically. Interactions between three different kinds of genre—the genres of contemporary news reporting, the genre of news media's typified responses to mass shootings, and the genre of mass shootings—create "mass-shooting contagion." Just as the Vienna subway system benefited from responsible suicide reporting, I believe that the public will benefit from changes in these genres, beginning with changes to news media's typified responses; but I also believe that it may not be as simple as censoring graphic images, or leaving the shooter unnamed. Meaningful reform will involve deconstructing news media narratives about mass shootings that have persisted for decades, narratives that also extend beyond the ones I've mentioned in this paper. Changing the ways that news outlets respond to mass shootings might even require us to look inside ourselves and examine our own responses to violence. And what could be more complicated than that?

Acknowledgements

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