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## "Acts of Pure Evil": The Portrayal of Mass Shooting Events on Online Media Platforms

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“ACTS OF PURE EVIL”: THE PORTRAYAL OF MASS SHOOTING  
EVENTS ON ONLINE MEDIA PLATFORMS

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## ABSTRACT

### “ACTS OF PURE EVIL”: THE PORTRAYAL OF MASS SHOOTING EVENTS ON ONLINE MEDIA PLATFORMS

Elizabeth Faye Twitty  
Old Dominion University, 2021  
Director: Dr. Mona J.E. Danner

As media continues to integrate into everyday life, it is essential to critically examine the media and the messages that are forwarded to the public, who often lack personal knowledge of crime and justice issues, and thus rely on news media to glean information. This effort, also called media criminology, seeks to understand the media and the effect it has on understanding societal issues. This project forwards media criminology by examining online news articles, as media criminology has historically focused on traditional media formats, such as newspaper and television. Online news has surpassed these traditional formats and has become a main source of information, however, information in online news articles can often include opinions alongside facts. As such, this project utilizes a conflict criminology framework to analyze the messages used in the media to achieve hegemony. In order to fully grasp how the media forwards messages about crime and justice issues, eight mass shooting cases were chosen to discover what differences, if any, are present in the representation of mass shooting events across liberal and conservative mainstream news sites and news commentary sites. News sites were chosen based on their comparable consumer traffic and their political orientation as conservative or liberal. Mainstream news sites are those national news sites that are popular and considered reliable sources of information. The two mainstream news sites chosen for this project are *NBC News* and *Fox News*. Commentary sites are sites that feature information alongside opinion, and often engage in partisan reporting. The two news commentary sites chosen for analysis are *Slate* and

*Breitbart*. Once cases and news sites were chosen, a word frequency query was performed on all articles, followed by thematic analysis for the portrayal of offenders and victims, as well as how cases were explained and what policies were forwarded. Results reveal that media bias does exist along political party lines of the news media when representing mass shooting cases. Offenders and victims alike were subjected to sympathetic and unsympathetic themes. Additionally, the explanations and subsequent policy discussions that were forwarded often aligned with the shooters' motives, but also with the narratives that fit the news site's political orientation.

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I dedicate this dissertation to all scholars who struggle with imposter syndrome. If I can do it,  
you can do it. Just keep going.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

San Bernardino (2015), Charleston (2015), Orlando (2016), Las Vegas (2017), Sutherland Springs (2017), Pittsburgh (2018), El Paso (2019), and Christchurch (2019) are previously unrelated cities that now share a common tragedy: mass shootings. These events have forever changed lives, shocked the world, and drawn large amounts of media attention. Intense media coverage of mass shootings has propelled these events into the national discourse, reflecting broader societal issues, such as gun control, violent media, immigration, and terrorism. However, media saturation of crime and justice issues—and how they are portrayed-- can have significant effects on its consumers. In general, media consumption of crime and justice events can increase fear and misconceptions about the reality of crime (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2015; Gilchrist et al., 1998; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Schafer et al., 2006). This fearfulness can lead to excessive efforts to ensure safety based on narratives about social ills (Cohen, 1972; Garland, 2008). However, the narratives and subsequent policy suggestions can vary based on ideology of media platforms. News media bias is real and can reduce the credibility of journalism, while also fostering distrust among its consumers (Carney, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2014; Owen, 2020). For instance, Mitchell and colleagues (2014) found that conservative audiences are more likely to distrust news sources than their liberal counterparts. This separation and distrust can lead to isolation, perpetuation of stereotypes, and inherent bias through the use of propaganda, which can further impact voting patterns (Canes-Wrone et al., 2001; Caplan, 2007; Carney, 2015; Gardner, 2009; Graziano & Percoco, 2016; Massey, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2014; Owen, 2020). Media influence is further exacerbated when consumers seek out far-leaning news commentary sites for information. These commentary sites provide news articles alongside

opinions and comments from the journalists and organization. Articles from commentary sites tend to engage in partisan reporting that is based on opinion and ideology rather than non-partisan reporting (Avlon, 2019; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Smith, 2009). Utilizing extreme viewpoints can trigger feelings of personal affliction, causing consumers to exhibit hostile perceptions (Baugut & Neumann, 2018; Briggs & Feve, 2014). Therefore, this project seeks to discover what differences, if any, are present in the representation of mass shooting events across liberal and conservative mainstream news sites and far leaning news commentary sites. This will also forward understandings of the relationship between mass media, social constructionism, and policy.

News and entertainment media is the main source for information for many Americans (Beale, 2006; Dowler, 2003; Heath, 1984; Petersen, 2016; Surette, 2015; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004) in addition to the other three sources of social knowledge: personal experiences, significant others (peers, family, friends), and social groups and institutions (schools, unions, churches, government agencies) (Surette 2015). These sources of knowledge thus work together to construct individual perceptions of the world, also known as socially constructed reality (Surette, 2015). A socially constructed reality is perceived as the “real” world by each individual and differs based on personal experience and how much one integrates their outside sources of knowledge (i.e. the media, peers, family, social institutions, etc.). Because most people do not have a direct, personal experience with crime, the criminal justice system, or policymaking, the media becomes the primary source for understanding these issues.

While the media is sought out for information, it is important to note that the media’s presentation of crime is based on newsworthiness and profits, rather than a true reflection of the world (Sacco, 1995). According to newsmaking criminologists, media portrayals of crime and

justice events are distorted to only show the most serious but rare events (Barak, 2011; Greer, 2010; Surette, 2015). For instance, property crime outweighs violent crime at a rate of 9:1 but violent crime is the focus of media reports (Curiel et al., 2020; Gramlich, 2016; 2019). The focus on violent crime affects consumers' perceptions of crime, with consumers believing that crime has risen or gotten worse in recent years (Gramlich, 2016).

Media criminology is the study of the complex “intersections between crime, criminalization, and control, and media, mediatization, and representation” (Greer 2010 p. 5). Critical investigations of media and crime are essential as the media continues to integrate into everyday life, becoming inseparable from the human experience. Conflict criminologists also argue that those in power are able to direct and control the narratives of issues through the media in order to achieve consensus from the masses, also known as hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Quinney, 1970a; 1970b). This consensus allows current policy to continue on unopposed and the status quo to thrive. Achieving hegemony has been simplified by the introduction of the online news market, which allows people to migrate to news sites based on political leaning (Surette, 2015). When these narrow platforms are relied on for information, they can create a skewed perception of reality and crime, also influencing policy support and voter decisions (Graziano & Percoco, 2016; Dolliver et al., 2018). Therefore, this project aims to expand the research on media representations of crime by focusing on online news platforms.

Although gun violence continues to be a regular feature of American society, intense coverage of mass shootings dates back to 1999 with the Columbine High School shooting. Setting the precedent for subsequent shootings, Columbine received an exorbitant amount of coverage, including live streams and on-site interviews (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009). Since then, mass shootings have received ongoing and widespread news coverage that includes discussions

about motives and debates on policy issues. The seemingly random nature of mass shootings that target innocent victims in public locations causes these events to be featured in the media over other more common gun violence incidents (Lankford, 2016; Newman et al., 2004; Silva & Capellan, 2018). Furthermore, the focus on the random aspect of mass shootings perpetuates fear among the public, believing that a shooting can occur at any time. In the wake of a mass shooting, news organizations rush to become a source of information as well as attempt to make sense of the grand display of violence. The media, taking advantage of the interest and concern from the public, forward claims as to why a mass shooting occurred and appropriate responses that should take place (Duwe, 2000; Chermak, 1997; Daly, 1995; Ericson et al., 1987; Ericson, et al., 1989; Ericson et al., 1991; Kappeler et al., 1996). Often after a mass shooting, policy debates center on gun control, mental health, and violent media, as well as terrorism and racism. These policy claims and frames that are used to define the problem thus shape understanding and perceptions of mass shootings and their implications for society. As Cohen (1963) said, “the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling people what to think about” (p. 13). Therefore, media portrayals of mass shootings and their subsequent policy debates influences social constructionism and creates skewed realities that further impact the understanding of crime and justice issues as well as policy responses.

This project expands knowledge of media criminology research by examining news reports of mass shooting events across liberal and conservative online news sites. Much of media criminology has focused on entertainment media, television news, and newspapers. Using online news sites as the focus of analysis for this project will bring media criminology forward (Barak, 2011). Online news sites were chosen based on political leaning and include the conservative

news organizations of *Fox News* and *Breitbart* and the liberal news organizations of *NBC News* and *Slate*. The content of examination is mass shooting events, which are likely to be prominently featured in news reports, offering information, theories of motive, and policy implications. Eight cases were chosen for this study based on their presence in the national news cycle, as well as characteristics of the offender(s) and victims, location of the shooting, and the policy responses that emerged after each incident. Finding both similarities and differences across shootings allows for better examination of media portrayals. After selecting both the cases and the news organizations, a content analysis will be done on media reports for emergent themes. The remaining content of this chapter outlines the rest of this project.

Chapter two reviews the literature relevant to mass media studies and the relationship between media and crime. Analyzing the news making process reveals the use of frames, claims, agenda setting, and the role of claims makers in the reporting of news media. The relationship between crime and the media reveals the influence of social constructionism, narratives, and policy on mass shooting events. Conflict criminology is thus a particularly useful theoretical framework in media studies of crime and justice issues.

Chapter three describes the research methodology used for this study. The data are discussed at length, including the reasoning for choosing online news sites and the sites chosen as the sources of analysis. The eight mass shooting cases are also presented, including details about each event, including offender motives, classification, and policy debates. Methodological approaches for the study are then discussed, including case study and content analysis, as well as the use of thematic coding. Tables for the study can also be found in this chapter.

Chapter four illustrates all results from the word frequency queries. These queries were conducted on all mass shooting cases and then according to each news site. This chapter presents

to findings from these queries, and also displays the findings in word cloud formats. Also discussed are the implications of these findings and their impact on the thematic analysis that follows.

Chapter five focuses on the themes surrounding offenders and victims. Both offenders and victims were subjected to sympathetic and unsympathetic descriptions. The thematic findings are discussed in detail and excerpts from news articles are included to demonstrate these themes.

Chapter six discusses the explanations, frames, and narratives that were used in news sites' reports of mass shootings. Explanations, frames, and narratives refer to how news sites labeled each mass shooting case and presented information to their consumers. Each mass shooting case is discussed in detail and includes the various explanations, frames, and narratives that were forwarded across all news sites. Common explanations that were found include terrorism, white supremacy, hate crime, and mental health. The thematic findings are discussed in detail and excerpts from news articles are included to demonstrate these themes.

Chapter seven examines the policy discussions that took place following each mass shooting case. Policy discussions found in this project often centered on gun access, mental health, counterterrorism, and monitoring extremism. Additionally, the sentiment of "thoughts and prayers" became a point of contention, where the expression was debated as genuine or simply a hollow gesture to sidestep policy action. The thematic findings are discussed in detail and excerpts from news articles are included to demonstrate these themes.

Chapter eight is the discussion and conclusion, which synthesizes the findings and applies the theoretical framework. Limitations and future research are also examined, as well as policy implications.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Examining mass shooting events and their representation across liberal and conservative mainstream news and far leaning news commentary sites may help in understanding how people understand these events. Particularly, media representation of mass shooting events is crucial to understanding narratives about the events, the fear of crime that results, and the policy implications that arise from them. This chapter reviews the literature on mass media and the news-making process, as well as criminological theories that apply to media portrayals of crime and criminal justice issues. Conflict criminology serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Finally, the relationship between crime and media representation of crime reveals the influence of social constructionism, narratives, and policy on mass shooting events.

#### MASS MEDIA

The news media as a source of information advanced from print to broadcasting, cable, and the internet thereby making the 24-hour news cycle a ubiquitous and powerful societal force in both determining newsworthiness and shaping public opinion. Cable News Network (CNN) became the first dedicated, round-the-clock news channel in the 1980s (Cushion & Lewis, 2010). Since then, the number of television channels, radio stations, and internet sites that are completely dedicated to news and current events has exploded. This oversaturation of the news media market, and a need to fill the time, has compelled journalists to search for stories to report on. However, not all content attracts viewers in the same way and journalists now use a set of criteria to both select stories to produce and to present stories in a particular way (Chermak & Chapman, 2007). The key for each model of production is newsworthiness. In the first model, known as the market model, newsworthiness is determined by public interest and organizations

objectively report on current events (Cohen & Young, 1981; Surette, 2015). Under this model, news reporting is seen as reactive and as a service to the public. The second model, called the manipulative model, selects news stories according to the interests of the news organization (Cohen & Young, 1981; Surette, 2015). News reports using the manipulative model distort their reporting in an effort to use the news to shape public opinion and support of large institutions and policies. The organizational model blends the first two models and acknowledges that crime news is inherently subjective but refutes that idea that stories are chosen and presented in an ideologically biased manner (Cohen & Young, 1981; Surette, 2015). As such, the role of the news is not to mirror the world as it is, but instead draws attention to problems that need solutions (Shoemaker, 2006). However, the way these problems and solutions are presented are more likely to be shaped and skewed based on frames and agendas of those in positions of power (Shoemaker, 2006).

### *Frames*

When creating a news story, journalists and news organizations use frames to present stories and issues in a particular way, which may influence audience perceptions (Entman, 1993; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). According to Entman (1993), framing is to

select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient...in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (p. 52).

In other words, frames are a template that allow for the evaluation of an issue (Entman, 1993; Surette, 2015). Defined another way, Nelson and colleagues (1997) state that framing is the process of defining an issue, often using a prepacked construction (Surette, 2015). These prepackaged constructions allow journalists to place an issue within a larger context that purports some truth about the world. Furthermore, frames allow consumers to quickly digest, label, and

categorize events without a second thought (Surette, 2015). When frames are used to define a problem, subsequent stories with similar features can be linked to that frame, forwarding the perception that these problems are common, need attention, and need a solution (Entman, 1993). According to Entman (1993), frames have different locations in the communication process. First, communicators make conscious or unconscious framing judgements when deciding how to present information. Second, the text contains frames in the form of keywords, phrases, images, and sentencing that reinforce the overall scope of the frame. Third, frames then guide the receiver's thinking and perceptions. Finally, commonly used and recycled frames take hold in the culture, as seen in discourse and thinking in social groupings. The recycling of frames is important because it "activates some ideas, feelings, and values more than others, and thus encourages particular trains of thought and leads audiences to arrive at certain conclusions" (Beale, 2006, p. 447). In short, frames create a shortcut for interpreting complex issues, and applying causality and solutions to said issues.

### *Agenda Setting and Claims Making*

A related topic to framing is agenda setting. The media play an important role in the social construction of reality, defining and shaping events rather than simply presenting a reflection of events. In this construction, Sacco (1995) notes that

the ways in which the news media collect, sort, and contextualize crime reports help to shape public consciousness regarding which conditions need to be seen as urgent problems, what kind of problems they represent, and, by implication, how they should be resolved (p. 141).

This process, termed agenda setting, allows the media to shine a spotlight on issues while simultaneously supporting claims made by a primary group (Schildkraut, 2016; Surette, 2015). Claims makers are the promoters, activists, and experts involved in forwarding specific claims about an issue or social condition (Best, 1991; Surette, 2015). Claims maker do more than simply

present facts and bring attention to a problem; instead, they shape opinions about conditions and their meanings. For instance, a social problem (e.g. crime) can be interpreted and constructed in a multitude of ways, such as a social, racial, or economic problem. The claims themselves come in two forms: factual and interpretative (Best, 1991; Surette, 2015). Factual claims are statements that are used to describe the world. These are statements that are presented as objective facts about a condition or issue. Interpretative claims are statements that focus on the meaning of events as a way to interpret what has happened. These claims offer either an explanation as to the cause of a social problem, or a course of action that would best address the problem. Taken together, both factual and interpretative claims target the beliefs and attitudes that people hold about the world (Surette, 2015). According to McCombs (1997), one of the goals of agenda setting is for the public to come to some consensus about the importance of an issue. The media is a tool in agenda setting, highlighting certain stories and using frames to present these issues as important to its audience (McCombs, 1997; Schildkraut, 2016). As media portrayals increase, awareness of an issue also increases, causing it to become a priority for the public's agenda (Entman, 2007; McCombs, 1997; Reese, 2007; Schildkraut, 2016; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). When framing an issue as important, it is rare to focus on more than one problem at a time. This limited focus allows the public to key in on a specific issue without becoming distracted or reducing the perceived importance of a problem (McCombs, 1997; Schildkraut, 2016). Generally, topics of focus are those issues that are the most serious or are uncommon, such as serious criminal events (e.g. mass shootings, terrorism). While the media is an influential tool in disseminating the topics in need of attention and forwarding proposed solutions, they are not the sole players when setting an agenda. The majority of media organizations rely on public or political officials for their information, which also pushes them into the role of claims makers

(Schildkraut, 2016). Due to the large reliance on these sources for stories, the information that is presented in the media is largely shaped by these officials and their agendas. However, the media is not simply a passive bystander in the agenda setting process. By selecting which stories to highlight and what frames to employ, the media becomes a secondary claims maker, playing an active role in the construction of reality (Barak, 1994; Gans, 1979; Schildkraut, 2016; Tuchman, 1978; Weaver & Elliott, 1985).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF MEDIA AND CRIME

Much of the research on theory and media has focused on the effect that media consumption may have on behavior (Anderson, 2004; Ferguson, 2014; Ferguson & Olson, 2014; Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Funk et al., 2004; Gentile et al., 2004; Markey et al., 2014; Morgan et al., 2009; Sparks & Sparks, 2002; Uhlmann & Swanson, 2004). For the purposes of this research, the review focuses on applying criminological theories to media portrayals and constructions of crime, particularly mass shootings. Conflict criminology serves as the key theoretical framework to understanding various media representations of crime (e.g. mass shootings) and the influence this representation has on policy.

Conflict criminology, or critical criminology, challenges assumptions to the consensus and functional models of criminology (Dahrendorf, 1959). The consensus models of criminology argue that society has come to an agreement on what is and is not considered criminal behavior. Under this model, social control is achieved through creating laws based on an understanding of what is good and beneficial for the majority (Lynch & Groves, 1989). Conflict criminology rejects this consensus model in establishing social control and instead argues that law is used as a tool of oppression. For instance, conflict criminology asserts that crime in capitalistic societies is linked to the inherent power structures that advantage wealthy elites and allow them to exploit

others. This inequality and exploitation results in the oppressed groups turning to crime as a way to gain material wealth or simply survive. As such, it is from the conflict between the elite and the marginalized classes that lead to crime. While traditionally applied to capitalist societies and wealth, conflict theory can also be applied to norms and values, as well as the media.

Relating to norms and values, Sellin (1938) and Turk (1969; 1972; 1980) stated that the changing cultural landscape leads to the enactment of new laws. However, these new laws will reflect the mainstream norms of the dominant group, oppressing the disadvantaged groups and leading to conflict. Turk (1969; 1972; 1980) further expanded this theory, stating that the power held by the elite classes is exercised by the social institutions that dominate everyday life, such as religion, education, government, and family. Coinciding with the theory that laws are an extension of those in power, Chambliss and Seidman (1971) view crime and deviance as a political rather than moral question because the law serves the interests of the most powerful classes. Quinney (1970a; 1970b) presented six propositions describing the relationship between crime, the social order, and maintaining social control. According to Quinney (1970a; 1970b), crime is created by defining people and behaviors as criminal, particularly those that conflict with the interests of those in positions of power. Further, the powerful groups will delegate the application and enforcement of these criminal definitions to authorized legal agents in order to legitimize their alleged plights (1970a; 1970b). Due to the structural inequality of society, those who are represented in positions of power or in the authorized authority are less likely to have themselves or their actions be defined as criminal, as opposed to those who lack representation. Most related to media, Quinney (1970a; 1970b) argues that these concept of crime and criminality are constructed and disseminated through various forms of communication.

When applying conflict criminology to mass media, the narratives and frames that are put forth when reporting crime are often determined by those in a position of power in a way that highlights issues defined as important by claims makers. Conflict criminologists argue the importance of the ownership of media platforms and deregulation of the media noting that much of the media is privately owned and so will forward messages that are supportive of the system as it is (Marsh & Melville, 2019). Therefore, the media can forward ideological domination that supports a conservative, conformist view of society (Marsh & Melville, 2019). This collective conformity relates to Gramsci's (1971) discussion of hegemony, the process by which powerful groups maintain and extend their power through winning the consent of the masses rather than physical coercion. He further elaborates that the media play a crucial role in achieving hegemony because media messages can portray issues in a positive or negative light, drawing acceptance or condemnation based on what the dominant class wants to accomplish. As such, alternative ideas and opinions that contradict the majority consensus are given little attention or credibility (Marsh & Melville, 2019). Miliband (1973) applied the concept of hegemony and conflict criminology to entertainment media, stating that these programs further portray present social systems in a positive light. Thus, Miliband (1973) argues that the media as a whole is an agency of conservative indoctrination, conditioning people into complacency. When examining media portrayals of mass shooting events, the concepts of conflict criminology and hegemony can be seen. For instance, in the wake of a mass shooting event, discussions typically center on gun control and/or terrorism. When the offender(s) is of Middle Eastern descent, the event is often framed as terrorism and an attack on American values. Contrastingly, if the offender is White, the shooting rarely receives the label of terrorism or white supremacy and instead simply mentions them as a shooter. Therefore, those who are seen as "true threats" are offenders of color

instead of their white counterparts, which serves to further the status quo and maintain social control. Furthermore, policy narratives can center on the governmental party in power at that time. As an example, the narrative of “good guys with guns” often creeps up after a mass shooting in order to contradict calls for stricter gun legislation (Castillo, 2012; DeFilippis & Hughes, 2016). Therefore, conflict criminology applies to the present study when examining media representations of mass shooting events and the narratives surrounding them.

## MASS MEDIA AND CRIME

The media attends to stories and interest pieces based on their newsworthiness, particularly those that are serious and rare events. As such, crime and criminal justice events fit into the category of newsworthiness, which has led to a rise in crime media. A large amount of crime media can be attributed to entertainment media, accounting for one-fourth of all entertainment output (Reiner, 2002; Surette, 2015). This includes the various movies, television shows, and printed material devoted to fictional crime stories or those inspired by true events. However, news is the primary arena in which crime media flourishes and so the remainder of this chapter discusses the definition of crime news, the news-making process in reference to crime, and the influence that crime news has on perceptions of reality.

### *Crime News*

News media is any media format that presents itself as true, current, and objective information about world events (Surette, 2015). As it relates to crime and criminal justice events, news informs the public about real events and real people, but the crimes are often presented as rare and distant. Stories surrounding crime are presented as bizarre or extraordinary rather than commonplace, making watching crime news voyeuristic (Surette, 2015). Due to its sensationalized nature, crime news is presented as an escape from the normal pattern of society.

When a story is presented in the news, it is often reported along with criminal justice efforts and policies, essentially performing social control.

Crime news has always been popular because crime is seen as unique and inexplicable and is therefore likely to be reported. Early crime news focused on treason, murder, and witchcraft and was intertwined with moral appeals about the effects of sin (Surette, 2015). As time progressed, reporters who specialized in criminal reporting emerged along with the aggressive marketing of crime news (Surette, 2015). The result was the introduction of more news programs and reporting and, as the demand for more crime news increased, news organizations responded by supplying stories in various ways.

News organizations tend to focus on the rare and unusual crimes that can be related to previously established stories and themes (Cohen & Young, 1981; Surette, 2015). These established themes or prepackaged constructions are called frames. News organizations use five specific criminal justice frames in their reporting to make the processing, labeling, and understanding of crimes and criminal justice events easier for the public and their views of reality. These frames include both factual and interpretative claims about the event along with proposed policies (Surette, 2015). The first criminal justice frame is the *faulty system* frame which suggests that crime results from a lack of “law and order” (Surette, 2015, p. 38). The faulty system frame posits that people commit crime because they can get away with it and the system is too lenient. Under this frame, the only way to crack down on crime is to increase the swiftness, certainty, and severity of punishment (Surette, 2015). As such, this frame argues that discretion is problematic, funding for the system should be increased, and loopholes for leniency should be eliminated. The second frame focuses on *blocked opportunities* and argues that crime is a result of inequality and discrimination throughout society (Surette, 2015). People commit

crimes because there is a lack of access to legitimate opportunities such as education and employment. As such, this frame recommends improving societal conditions and creating more opportunities for disenfranchised communities. The *social breakdown* frame views crime as a consequence of immorality (Surette, 2015). A lack of family values, community disintegration, high rates of divorce, and single-headed households are commonly cited examples of a breakdown in morals. As a result, a lack of community and values has led to an increase in disrespect, criminal behavior, substance abuse, and unemployment. In order to combat these harsh conditions and crime-ridden communities, the frame suggests that citizens should simply band together to recreate traditional communities that encouraged values, morals, and unity (Surette, 2015). The *racist system* frame focuses on the criminal justice system itself rather than crime rates and proposes that the system is racist and an institution of oppression. The profiling of people of color and high rates of imprisonment are examples often used to showcase evidence of racism (Surette, 2015). In order to bring awareness to the inherent racism within the system, this frame suggests that communities and people of color should simply band together to bring awareness and to demand justice. Finally, the *violent media* frame posits that crime and violence is a consequence of violence on television, in movies, music, and video games (Surette, 2015). As such, the only way to reduce violence in society is to reduce it in the mass media.

These frames are further utilized considering the relationship between news organizations and the criminal justice system. The method in which news is presented to the public is not done in a seemingly random manner but are based on journalists and their organizations' sources and relationships within the criminal justice system (Chermak, 1994; Ericson et al., 1987; Ericson et al., 1989; Grabosky & Wilson, 1989; Sherizen, 1978; Voumvakis & Ericson, 1984). News organizations depend on sources, such as police, to provide them with stories for crime news. In

addition, having official sources to cite in their stories enhances the credibility of news organization and journalists. Likewise, these source organizations are equally dependent on the media (Chermak, 1994). Appearing in the news media as “official sources” makes them appear legitimate and authoritative on crime and policy efforts. Similar to media organizations, sources also have their own criteria for deciding what stories and information should be shared and released (Chermak, 1994; Ericson et al., 1989). Primarily, the source organization for the media within the criminal justice system are the police. Police then have the power to discern what information is necessary to share, effectively shaping their story to fit their version of crime (Chermak, 1994; Ericson et al., 1989; Grabosky & Wilson, 1989; Sherizen, 1978). Recent research has revealed an evolution of police becoming more open to the media in an effort to control their environment, protect their image, and legitimize their work (Chermak, 1994; Ericson et al., 1989). Once the source organization has shared their version of events, the news media uses their criteria to decide what information will be shared and what angle to use when reporting the story. As mentioned above, information is more likely to be featured if it falls within one of their organizationally driven frames (Chermak, 1994). Crime news should be simple and explicit in order to fit within a previously established framework, which makes digesting the information easier for the audience.

Other media criteria for crime news include the seriousness of the event, sentimentality, status of the offender(s) and/or victim(s), and the presence of engaging images (Garcia & Arkerson, 2018; Surette, 2015). The seriousness of the crime has led to an ideology of newsworthiness known as “if it bleeds, it leads” (Garcia & Arkerson, 2018, p. 26). Essentially, this ideology claims that the more serious crimes and events are those that are highlighted among news organizations, often featured as a lead story or the front page of a newspaper. The

overreporting of serious crimes, such as homicide, has an inverse relationship with crime rates. According to statistics, crime rates, particularly violent crime rates, have been declining since the 1990s (Kappeler & Potter, 2005). However, the media continue to provide a distorted depiction of how much crime is in society. For instance, in 2015, the UCR (Uniform Crime Report) reported a violent crime rate of 372.6 per 100,000 Americans (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016; Garcia & Arkerson, 2018). The property crime rate for 2015 was 2,487 crimes per 100,000 people living in the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016; Garcia & Arkerson, 2018). These numbers highlight the fact that property crime vastly outnumbers violent crime, even though violent crime tends to be the focus across all media platforms. If one were to believe media portrayals of crime, it would appear that crime is ever-increasing, that violent crime is rampant, and that no one is immune. Prior research has shown that news media have a bias towards reporting murder, sexual assaults, gang violence, and drug-related violence (Beirne & Messerschmidt, 1995; Livingston, 1996; Potter & Kappeler, 2006). When examining television news, studies have found that crime stories surpassed all other topics in local newscasts, including weather and sports (Lundman, 2003; Potter & Kappeler, 2006). The focus is overwhelmingly on crimes of violence (Lundman, 2003) and stranger violence (Feld, 2003), despite the fact that property crime happens at a higher rate, and interpersonal violence is most often experienced at the hand of an intimate other. Further reporting disparities occur when gender, race, and age of involved parties are considered. For instance, White victims tend to receive exorbitant amounts of coverage while Black and Latinx victims receive less coverage (Slakoff & Brennan, 2019). Offenders of color are also more likely to be featured with negative themes when compared to White offenders (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Bird, 1996; Entman, 1994; Martindale, 1996).

## FEAR AND PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME

Even though crime rates have continuously fallen since the 1990s, crime news has proliferated across media platforms for a variety of reasons with important results. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) state that crime news is excessive and sensationalizes crime, promoting fear and misconceptions about crime. Heath (1984) argues that crime news raises awareness of crime and provides an education for citizens to protect themselves against victimization. Both positions have merit, but Chermak (1994) provides five further reasons as to why news organizations rely heavily on crime news. “Crime news as information” justifies the use of crime news by stating that it provides the public with knowledge and ways to protect themselves, much like Heath (1984) argued. When stories are featured in the news, they are often presented in ways to inform the public about potential danger. As such, the media further justifies the overreporting of crime news by stating that the “public has a right to know” (Chermak, 1994). “Crime news as a deterrent” posits that the presentation of crime and the representation of offenders being caught and punished might deter an individual from committing crime (Chermak, 1994). For example, police can use the news media to publicize the use of sobriety checkpoints and speed traps in order to deter drunk driving and speeding. “Crime news as entertainment” relies on the public’s fascination with gore and the unusual to draw consumers (Chermak, 1994; Gans, 1979). Crime stories are emotional by nature, which can cause a variety of reactions from viewers, such as laughter, sorrow, reflection, and rejoicing, depending on the story. The nature of the reaction depends on the viewer’s socially constructed reality, discussed below.

Crime news can be partially explained by the “nature of the criminal justice system” (Chermak, 1994). When a crime is reported, there are many steps that now must be followed once the criminal justice system gets involved; there is process, from investigation through

sentencing. As such, the media has a steady stream of crime stories, whether it be a new crime or simply an update on an ongoing case. Some stages of the criminal justice system are more newsworthy than others: arrest, arraignment, and sentencing (Chermak, 1994). These phases mark the beginning and also the conclusion to a particular featured story. Therefore, the prevalence of crime news under this justification can be explained by the drawn-out nature of justice, as well as an inside look into the criminal justice system. A final explanation claims that there is a “hole that must be filled” every day by news organization. Due to its popularity, crime stories are often used to fill this gap. Graber (1980) found that 95 percent of the respondents in her study cited the mass media as their primary source of information about crime. News media, including television, newspapers, social media, and news sites, continue to be popular sources of information about current events, including crime (Shearer, 2018). Due to the ever-changing nature of society, news platforms must find stories to fill their pages and time in order to continuously draw audiences and profits.

### *Social Constructionism*

Crime is experienced both as a private trouble and a public issue (Sacco, 1995). Victims of crime experience a personal loss or injury, but the way certain crimes are framed, such as the “opioid epidemic,” “random acts of violence,” and “waves of terror” allow for the discussion of crime on a larger scale, inviting public and political debate. Likewise, the continual coverage of crime stories by the media can induce fear of crime on the individual level. As such, the representation of crime in the media further impacts the public’s perception of reality. Lippmann (1922) once stated,

We do not first see, and then define. We define first and then see... We pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture (p. 54).

According to this statement, reality is essentially defined and created by society. This premise, later termed social constructionism, posits that people create their own reality based on personal experiences and from knowledge gained through social interactions (Garcia & Arkerson, 2018; Surette, 2015). Furthermore, social constructionism emphasizes human relationships and shared meanings. Shared meanings among groups of people – ideas, interpretations, and knowledge of events – are the result of cooperative social relationships that agree to see the world in a specific way (Garcia & Arkerson, 2018; Surette, 2015). However, not all groups see reality the same way due to differences in experiences. These competing constructions are further fueled by shifting cultural trends and other social forces, which can sway perceptions. For instance, the world may be in one state, but it is perceived to be in another: social conditions that seem highly important and problematic at one time may be largely ignored at another (Surette, 2015). Relating to crime, social constructionism can affect perceptions and fears of crime, also influencing how the public responds to criminal events.

Societal responses to events seen in the media can differ based on competing claims and frames among various sources. The rise of television, social media, and other online media platforms has led to a plethora of options for the public to gain information and insight about current events. This overreliance on the media for information is believed to affect perceptions of reality (Gerbner, 1969; Morgan et al., 2009). Also known as cultivation theory, this premise of affected reality posits that those who spend more time watching television are more likely to perceive the world in ways that reflect the recurrent messages of television (Gerbner, 1969; Morgan et al., 2009). While this theory was traditionally applied to television, it can also apply to other media platforms, such as the Internet, streaming services, and other digital sources (Morgan et al., 1990; Morgan et al., 2009). In fact, Gerbner (1998) states that “new types of

delivery systems such as cable, satellite, and the Internet mean even deeper penetration and integration of dominant patterns of images and messages into everyday life” (p. 177). These patterns are continuously repeated, which only serve to define the world and legitimize the social order that is being forwarded. As such, there is a positive correlation between the amount of exposure to media messages and fear/perceptions of crime. Those who view media more often tend to hold exaggerated perceptions of violence, also termed the “mean world syndrome.” According to Gerbner (1998), long-term exposure to media and its violent content tend to “cultivate the image of a relatively mean and dangerous world” (p. 185). Further studies have found that when compared to groups who view media less, those who are higher viewers believe that protection is a necessity, most people “cannot be trusted,” and that many people are “just looking out for themselves” (Gerbner et al., 1980; Gerbner, 1998; Signorielli, 1990). As such, cultivation theory and its subsequent research shows that perceptions can be influenced by the media.

Social constructionism and cultivation theory can be seen in action through the use of moral panics. Cohen (1972) introduced the term:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appear in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folk-lore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (Cohen, 1972, p. 9)

While Cohen never clearly defined “panic,” it can be inferred that an increase in awareness of a perceived social threat, or folk devil (Cohen, 1972), results in excessive feelings of fear, which

ultimately leads to excessive efforts to secure safety (Garland, 2008). The most successful moral panics are those that are able to resonate with wider anxieties (Cohen, 2004; Garland, 2008). Moral panics can use these wider anxieties that align to previously established frames, furthering claims and narratives about social ills. The success of a moral panic is highly dependent on the media. The social reaction to an event and potential moral panic depend on the information available in the public arena (Cohen, 1972). Due to the lack of first-hand experience the public has with the criminal justice system, the media are particularly essential in the social constructionism process, producing the stories and images that the public will absorb (Cohen, 1972). The stories and images that are presented generate commentary, interest, and awareness of the event, simultaneously making the media beneficiaries of moral panics (Garland, 2008). As Young (1971) notes, the media have a need to create moral panics in order to generate news and appeal to their consumers. As such, the media – and other particular interest-groups (politicians, lobbyists, etc.) – become moral entrepreneurs, publicizing concern, identifying folk devils and deviance, and promoting “proper” reactions and policy suggestions (Garland, 2008; Hunt, 1997).

While the media does not create news, decision makers base their reports on what is newsworthy, which reproduces and sustains the dominant narratives, functioning as a form of social control (Hall et al., 1978; Hunt, 1997). Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) expand on this notion, stating that the ruling class creates moral panics through political and juridical activity to simultaneously draw attention to a perceived threat, as well as divert attention from their own misdeeds and failings. Most reactions to a moral panic involve fear and moral judgement. Previous research has discussed the proportionality of fear to moral panics and the perceived danger it threatens (Cohen, 1972; Garland, 2008; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Thompson, 1998). In reference to moral judgement, there is a process of condemning the folk devil or event.

Moral concern takes precedent for some, believing the event to be troublingly evil (Garland, 2008). In contrast, another reaction to a moral panic is denial. According to Cohen (2000), denial has sociological dimensions that can be scrutinized as a set of social practices (Garland, 2008). When discussing authoritative denial, Cohen (2000) distinguishes between literal, interpretive, and implicatory denial. Literal denial is the process of believing that nothing has happened. This form of denial posits that the moral panic itself is false and the reaction to it is overexaggerated. Interpretive denial states that something has happened, but it is due to a reason different than what is being pushed. In this form of denial, the event is accepted, but the cause of the event is rejected and replaced with a different explanation more fitting to one's reality. Implicatory denial downplays the seriousness of the issue. In this case, the issue is addressed, but it is diminished or justified, rejecting overstated claims and reactions to the event. As such, forms of denial by those in authority also serve to push policy suggestions based on what they deem as appropriate when faced with a moral panic.

Therefore, social constructionism is influenced by experienced and symbolic realities, as well as by the media. When a crime event takes place, competing constructions offering explanations emerge as to why that crime occurred and they continue to compete for media attention in order to forward their claims. The media then act as filters, promoting the constructions they favor, which are usually dramatic, involve powerful groups, and are related to previously established frames (Garcia & Arkerson, 2018; Surette, 2015). Favoring the more powerful group and their claims makes it difficult for other constructions to be heard and promoted in the media and also gives more credibility to the powerful. As this construction is featured in the media, it then becomes the dominant discourse surrounding perceptions of reality.

The most crucial effect of winning the construction competition is that the dominant construction then directs public policy.

### *Media Influence and Policy*

The nature of the news to report on current and often disastrous events places them at the epicenter of information sharing, claims-making, frame forwarding, and policy discussions. Because the majority of the public receive information about the world from the news, having little direct experience themselves, the media play a critical role in how this information is presented, employing frames and narratives that can skew reality and influence policy. The degree to which the media can influence policy has been debated (Altheide, 1997; Dolliver et al., 2018; Gerber et al., 2009; Graziano & Percoco, 2016; Robinson, 1999; Strömberg, 2001; Strömberg, 2004; Surette, 2015) and a causal relationship between the two remains inconclusive. However, researchers have argued that the influence of the media on policy is profound (Robinson, 2000; Shaw, 1996).

The media's influence is linked to their coverage of politics, events, and governmental response. The "manufacturing consent" school of thought states that the media does not create policy, but rather it mobilizes into forwarding and supporting proposed governmental policies (Robinson, 1999). Frames allow the media to influence how people understand issues (Entman, 1993; Shanahan et al., 2011; Takeshita, 2005). During the framing process, an issue and its supposed causes and consequences are identified. Presenting issues in this way allows consumers to associate "problems" with a specific cause and potential solution (Altheide, 1997; Entman, 1993; Shanahan et al., 2011). By denoting the cause of the presented "problem", frames also forward a proposed policy to handle the situation. For instance, framing a story using the faulty system frame would forward "tough on crime" policies, such as mandatory minimums and three

strikes laws. The success of these frames and policies depend on media narration that identifies heroes (policy and/or supporter), villains (the wrongdoer and/or policy opposers), and victims (those who suffer without the policy enactment) (Shanahan et al., 2011). As such, the way that “problems” are presented and the extent to which frames are used can raise public awareness and influence political action. This process can be seen in the enactment of memorial policies for symbolic crimes. Symbolic crimes are those rare, devastating events that are highlighted by claims makers to convince people of the existence of a pressing issue or threat and desperate need for policy response (Surette, 2015). In the wake of these symbolic crimes, policies are often created as a memorial to the victim, responding to pressure and outrage from the public. Examples include Megan’s Law (sex offender community notification), Jessica’s Law (lifetime monitoring of child sex offenders), and AMBER Alert (child abduction alert system). These particular policies are a direct result of the Missing White Woman syndrome, the fixation on missing White women and children (Moody et al., 2009; Slakoff & Fradella, 2019; Stillman, 2007; Wanzo, 2008). The exorbitant attention that these victims receive forwards the belief that people with these demographic characteristics are viewed as likely victims, leading to moral panics and policy responses (Maguire & Stinger, 2011; Moody et al., 2009; Slakoff & Fradella, 2019; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002; Wanzo, 2008). Therefore, when forwarding a policy, frames allow public opinion to grow out of an interaction between media messages and what audiences make of them (Entman, 1995; Shanahan et al., 2011).

The public opinion garnered from the media is crucial in creating awareness and calls for reform as well as influencing voting patterns. The more time an individual spends with the media, the more likely they are to believe that media portrayals are accurate representations of reality (Gerbner, 1969; Gerbner, 1998; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Morgan et al., 2009; Morgan et

al., 2015). Since the media tends to focus on crime, specifically rare and brutal crimes, consumers may perceive society and social interactions as more dangerous than they are. This then leads to a heightened fear of crime and victimization and a greater demand for punitive criminal justice responses in accordance with the narrative frame (Dolliver et al., 2018; Garland, 2001; Simon, 2007). Politicians can tap into this fear, implementing propaganda and scare tactics through the media to increase voting, and to sway individuals into acceptance of harsh policies (Canes-Wrone et al., 2001; Caplan, 2007; Gardner, 2009; Graziano & Percoco, 2016). The influence the media has about the importance of a “problem” and an appropriate response is exacerbated when political leaning is considered. The oversaturation of the mass media market has created narrow, highly focused platforms, that bring specific material and information to homogenous audiences (Surette, 2015). Some of these platforms differentiate along political lines, providing news to consumers based on political affiliation and leaning and presenting events, “problems”, and policies through a specific partisan lens (Shanahan et al., 2011). When these narrow news platforms are sought out as a primary source of information, support for political leaders and their policies grow and influence voter turnout and decisions (Dolliver et al., 2018; Graziano & Percoco, 2016; Iyengar & Hahn, 2000; Yanovitzky, 2002).

## NARRATIVES

Much like frames, narratives are useful in news media and the social construction of reality. While often found alongside frames, the two should not be confused. Frames are all-encompassing, developed constructions, whereas narratives are mini constructions of crime and justice reality (Surette, 2015). Narratives do not include broad explanations of crime causality nor do they put forth policy suggestions. Instead, narratives outline and regurgitate crime and justice themes that are regularly featured in media frames. According to Ibarra and Kitsuse

(1993), narratives utilize recurring elements and terminology to describe and culturally anchor social problems. When reporting on crime and justice issues, common catchphrases and metaphors are used to describe crime. For example, the “stranger in the bushes” narrative presents crime and victimization as random. Another narrative is the “heroic, masculine crime fighter” who is above corruption. Other narratives include the “naïve, innocent victim,” the “rogue cop,” the “corrupt lawyer,” and the “innately evil killer” (Surette, 2015). Because they do not have causal explanations (other than simplistic notions of good and evil) or propose a solution, narratives most often focus on the individuals involved, particularly victims and offenders. As such, narratives can also be used to establish the characteristics of victims and offenders into the larger crime and justice frames (Surette, 2015).

#### *Narrative Themes about Victims*

Media reports of crime have traditionally not focused on the victims of crime, but rather the offenders. Many journalists and reporters concentrate on characteristics of the offender and the motives they might have for committing the crime that they did. In instances where victims are featured in the media, they are portrayed as “ideal victims.” These ideal victims are deemed innocent, naïve, trusting, and in need of protection (Christie, 1986; Surette, 2015), and the identity of a victim as “ideal” is also influenced by social divisions including class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexuality (Greer, 2007). For instance, the ideal portrait of victims usually involves children, pregnant women, or White, virginal women (Surette, 2015). Visibly absent from this list are the elderly, people of color, and men. The ideal victim narrative paints a picture of what real victims should and should not look like, often alienating entire populations of people who are victimized but are not seen as such or deserving of the public’s sympathy. The result of this popular ideal of “true victims” allows the public to then blame the “non-ideal”

victims or see them as deserving or blameworthy of their victimization (Slakoff & Brennan, 2019). Victim blaming is primarily seen in sexual assault cases, but it can also be observed in other criminal instances depending on the race, class, and sex of the victims.

Victims who do not fit into the “ideal” category are left out of media reports or seen as undeserving of public empathy. People of color are often neglected, misrepresented, or stereotyped in news reports, allowing misinformation to spread and portraying an inaccurate depiction of the reality of crime. In many instances, people of color are considered less newsworthy than Whites, despite their frequency in crime reports (Bjornstrom et al., 2010; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Gruenewald et al., 2013; Lundman, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). Research has found that people of color were (and are still) more likely to appear as suspects than victims in crime news reports (Campbell, 1995; Chiricos & Escholz, 2002; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Dixon et al., 2003; Entman, 1992, 1994; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gruenewald et al., 2013). When featured, people of color are often linked to negative topics such as terrorism, illegal immigration, gang affiliation, or other racial stereotypes. They are more often linked to the offender category than the victim category because the “victimization of persons of color is devalued, while White victims are privileged” (Bjornstrom et al., 2010, p. 276; Slakoff & Brennan, 2019 p. 7). This news coverage both reflects and reinforces social divisions and inequalities, feeding into the wider structures of power, dominance, and marginalization from which they derive (Greer, 2007). Racial disparity in news reports has been a focus of research in recent years, resulting in the development of the victim devaluation hypothesis, which states that victims of color receive less media coverage than White victims because they do not conform to scripts about ideal victims (Gruenewald, et al., 2009; Gruenewald et al., 2011; Petersen, 2016;). The devaluation hypothesis also provides an alternative account relating to when victims of color

are featured in news media: stereotypical portrayals of victims and offenders help audiences make sense of stories by offering ready-made scripts that comport with their beliefs about crime and race (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Graber, 1990; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Lundman, 2003; Lundman et al., 2004; Petersen, 2016).

Regarding gender, female victims are overrepresented in media accounts, in both news and entertainment media, compared to their male counterparts. This overrepresentation diverts from the reality of crime because men are more likely than women to be both offenders and victims of crime (Hagan, 2017). Media representations of victims shape public opinion, and consequently, fear, promoting misleading views of who is most vulnerable to crime and who needs protecting (Bjornstrom et al., 2010). Since female victims are more likely to be reported on, female populations are more likely to fear crime and be seen as those who need protection (Bjornstrom et al., 2010; Callanan & Rosenberger, 2015).

However, when different categories (race, sex, class, etc.) intersect, there are many more lived experiences to be examined with regards to systems of inequality. Intersectionality analysis examines these different levels of identity and hierarchy in social settings (Romero, 2018). Historically, examinations of individuals or groups have been one-dimensional, focusing on only race or gender or class and fail to capture the complexity of people's lived experiences, while also creating specific aspects as the norm, such as being a White, middle-class man (Romero, 2018). Intersectionality is concerned with examining the power relationships that lead to oppression and inequality. Race, class, gender, and sexuality all have consequences on people's lived experiences and opportunity to access basic needs. The intersectional approach can also be applied to media portrayals.

Women of color may never be considered as equal to White women due to the additional restrictions and pressures they face in society (Slakoff & Brennan, 2019). This intersection between racism and sexism is unique to women of color and can be used to explain their differential treatment in media portrayals, as well as many other circumstances. While women are more likely than men to be featured as victims, women of color are often left out of the victim category and are seen as deserving of their victimization. Women of color do not conform to the traditional “ideal victim” stereotype and are frequently depicted as being responsible for their victimization due to their alcohol/drug use, association with dangerous people, and their questionable decision-making (Meyers, 1997; Slakoff & Brennan, 2019). The lack of inclusion of women of color in the “ideal victim” category is often not due to their own actions. Rather, these narratives and frames serve to further the structural status quo of who can be seen as victims deserving of attention or as troublesome individuals who would inevitably be harmed. This “ideal victim” stereotype also relates to the good girl/bad girl dichotomies. These dichotomies are important to the understanding of crime narratives and serve to categorize victims and offenders. According to Gilchrist (2010), “in order for there to be a ‘bad,’ ‘unworthy,’ ‘impure,’ ‘disreputable’ woman/victim – there must also be a ‘good,’ ‘worthy,’ ‘pure,’ and ‘respectable’ woman/victim against whom she is judged” (p. 375). In addition to victim portrayals, there are also differences in offender portrayals in media and crime reporting.

*Narrative Themes about Offenders*

Much like victim representation in the media, offenders are portrayed and treated differently based on their race, gender, and their many intersections. While offenders gain more media attention than victims do, there are still discrepancies depending on facts of the crime and the offender themselves. When a crime happens, the main focus of the media is to frame the

story in a way to understand why the event occurred. Due to this reporting style, the primary focus of news reporting is on the offender and their possible motives. However, while offenders are more of a focus than victims, there is still the notion of “ideal offenders.” The types of offenders that fall into this “ideal” category are the “outsiders, strangers, foreigners, aliens, and intruders who lack essential human qualities” (Surette, 2015, p. 207). Ideal categories of offenders further serve as a way to other offenders from the rest of society. According to Spivak (1985), othering is a way to secure one’s own identity through viewing or treating a person or group of people as intrinsically different from oneself. This categorization therefore paves the way for offenders who do not adhere to the status quo to be treated harshly in the media as “dangerous others” which can also lead to harsh sentencing, believing them to be incapable of rehabilitation. The broad characteristics of the “ideal offender” allows people to be placed in this category based on their race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and/or their many different lived experiences.

In society, there is a sense of heteronormativity that advantages White, male heterosexuals above other people, primarily people of color. This heteronormativity has been a part of U.S. society since its foundation, as seen during the slave era, the Jim Crow south, the War on Drugs, and even now with mass incarceration, the #MeToo movement, and the election of President Donald Trump. The media also plays a part in this heteronormativity by adhering to stereotypes when portraying people of color. For instance, studies by Entman (1994), Martindale (1996), and Bird (1996) have found that news stories make “implicit links between Black people and negative thematic issues and concerns – such as violent crime, drugs, poverty, prisons, AIDS, welfare, etc.” (Abraham & Appiah, 2006, p.184). These links were promoted by airing stories related to the negative topics while also displaying pictures of African Americans. The

process of linking negative stereotypes through pictures plays into people's natural tendency to categorize people based on what is seen. Cognitive structures, called schema, guide perceptions in order to make sense of a complex world (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Graber, 1990; Massey, 2007). The media can invoke people's schema using pictures in relation to stories, allowing people to classify information and possibly affirming prior judgments and stereotypes regarding race. The problem with these images and "ideals" is that they categorize people into who can and cannot be an offender. For instance, criminals are often portrayed as strangers rather than being known to the victim. In fact, people are more likely to be victimized by someone they know, rather than by a stranger. This leads to a fear of strangers and others rather than an awareness of who is known to them. In addition, the portrait of "ideal offenders" can allow the categorization of all people of color and immigrants as offenders or potential offenders instead of victims, leading to fear, prejudice, micro-aggressions, blocked opportunities, and even hate crimes (Romero, 2018).

Relating to policy, the concept of "ideal offenders" can lead to the harsh sentencing of nonviolent offenders based on their race or class status, while white-collar criminals often go free, only incurring an easily paid fine. Often, white-collar crime is more devastating and harmful than street crime (Michel, 2015). However, entertainment media and news media ignore white-collar criminals, choosing to focus on the violent, personal acts of street crime. When white-collar criminals or White offenders from the middle to upper class are covered in the media, they are treated better than offenders of color. White offenders are often treated with a sense of respect, providing information about their lives and their contributions to society, and the pictures used are those that portray them in a positive light, such as candid or professional photos (Abraham, & Appiah, 2006; Creighton et al., 2014). Contrastingly, coverage of offenders

of color almost always use mug shots and lack any details of the offender's lives other than their crimes. When taking gender into account, White female offenders' criminal behavior is often excused or justified while female offenders of color are blamed for their criminality (Brennan & Vanderberg, 2009). Furthermore, news stories with White offenders often include an attempt to understand the causation of their crime such as mental illness, often stating that the crime was "out of character" (Lopez, 2016; Sacco, 1995). When offenders of color are featured, their causation is not expanded on or is linked to criminal affiliations, such as gang activity, basing reports on stereotypes (Sacco, 1995).

#### MEDIA COVERAGE OF MASS SHOOTING EVENTS

Although mass shootings and gun violence have long been a part of American society, the intense coverage of the 1999 Columbine shooting by Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris set the precedent used with mass shootings today. The amount of coverage on the Columbine shooting was only rivaled by the live streams of the Gulf War (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009). While Columbine was unquestionably the worst single school shooting in the history of the United States at the time (Lawrence & Mueller, 2003), there have been even more tragic mass shootings in recent years, each receiving extensive mass media coverage that follow in the footsteps of how Columbine was covered. For instance, the more recent shootings in Aurora, Colorado (2012); Newtown, Connecticut (2015); Orlando, Florida (2016); Las Vegas, Nevada (2017); and Parkland, Texas (2017) have all received widespread and ongoing news coverage including debates on gun control, mental illness, and the criminal justice system. These continuous discussions about mass shootings have leaked into popular culture and everyday dialogues within the general public that have thus transformed the fixation on a rare crime into a moral panic about mass shootings in the United States (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2006).

Mass shootings receive an exorbitant amount of media attention because their seemingly random nature targets public locations and presumed innocent victims (Lankford, 2016; Newman et al., 2004; Silva & Capellan, 2018). The framing of mass shootings as random perpetuates the idea that a shooting could happen at any time, which increases fear. Furthermore, there is a symbiotic relationship between mass shootings and the mass media (Silva & Capellan, 2018). The news media has a need for sensational stories, which violence fits; and public shootings need a stage for which they are performed (Duwe, 2004; Jewkes, 2004; Krouse & Richardson, 2015; Newman et al., 2004; Silva & Capellan, 2018). Certain features increase the newsworthiness of shooting events in the media. For instance, the most common predictor of newsworthiness is a large number of victims (Chermak, 1998; Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006; Duwe, 2000; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Silva & Capellan, 2018). Additionally, victims and offenders who have no prior relationship (strangers) are more likely to be featured (Duwe, 2000) as are shootings that utilize assault weapons (Duwe, 2000). Taken together, these previous studies suggest that mass murder (and shootings), especially those that occur in a public setting, receive more coverage than other homicide events (Silva & Capellan, 2018). While the event itself is newsworthy, focus on the offender and their resulting “fame” is a point of contention and there has been recent critique to limit the “credit” given to shooters, as seen in the “No Notoriety” campaign (Silva & Capellan, 2018). In response to this campaign, the use of the shooter’s name is limited, as well as details surrounding their motives or “cause” as a way to deglamorize the event and to discourage copycat offenders. As such, debates often occur following a mass shooting event relating to media coverage, causality, and policy.

The widespread news coverage that mass shootings acquire both informs the public and serves as a way to understand the social implications of such events (Schildkraut & Muschert,

2014). High-profile cases generate interest and concern, providing reporters and platforms with the opportunity to make claims about new or recurring crime problems (Chermak, 1997; Daly, 1995; Duwe, 2000; Ericson et al., 1987; Ericson, et al., 1989; Ericson et al., 1991; Kappeler et al., 1996). These claims makers shape the perception of the problem and our sense of the implications for society. When such tragic events occur, there is a sense of collective sentiment and empathy felt for the victims and their loved ones. However, there is also an opportunity for normative expectations to be reaffirmed and/or redefined (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). For instance, racial and gender stereotypes can be affirmed in the viewer's eyes as people of a certain race as dangerous or criminal. Furthermore, discussions that are sparked often reflect value conflicts within society, such as gun control, discipline, and mental illness, which then lead to broader policy implications.

“Why” it happened emerges as the resounding question when a mass shooting event occurs. While there are many reasons and interacting causal factors, three potential factors have remained a constant in mass shooting discourse: guns, mental health, and violent media. Termed the “usual suspects” (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013) in the media, these topics continue to be debated in the background but are brought back into the spotlight in the wake of a mass shooting. As a result, the increased attention and call for change may result in legislation, criminalization of firearms, stigmatization of those with mental health issues, and/or condemnation of violent media (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013; Soraghan, 2000). Guns appears first and most frequently among the “usual suspects.” Debates typically center on gun control, advocating for stricter laws and regulations, and gun rights, arguing that armed, law-abiding citizens can intervene in attempted shootings and save lives. In the wake of mass shooting events, the gun debate is spurred, and

elected officials often feel pressure to act by either more strictly enforcing existing laws or by passing new ones (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). Most often, a multitude of bills are introduced in the aftermath of a high-profile shooting, but only a small percentage are successfully enacted into law (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014; Soroghan, 2000).

Mental health has also been a concern in the wake of tragic, violent incidents. These discussions often center the possibility of brain tumors, anxiety disorders, and depression, as well as the use of medicinal treatment (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). The framing of a mental health issue as a cause for mass shootings gives the public an answer as well as a sense of relief because there is a characteristic to blame. This designation can further serve as a way to distance oneself from the problem, differentiating offenders from the rest of society and placing blame on the individual, rather than societal ills. When mental health issues are related to a shooter, the main topic of concern is about how to better address and treat those diagnosed. For instance, in the wake of the Virginia Tech shooting, the failure to report the shooter's commitment to a mental health institute to the state's Central Criminal Records Exchange was criticized as this allowed him to purchase firearms without issue (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014). As a result, many states enacted legislation to improve reporting in an attempt to close loopholes in obtaining firearms and the NICS Improvement Amendments Act went into effect which improved the national instant criminal background check system (NICS, 2007; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). The improvements focused on better reporting, frequent updating of records, and better coordination between agencies. However, in the years following this legislation, it was found that more than two times the number of records in the system were missing, states were failing to submit mental health records, and that mental health budgets were being dramatically cut during the recession (Brady Campaign Press Release, 2011; National

Alliance on Mental Illness, 2013; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Witkin, 2012). While funding for mental health treatment fell in these years, there was renewed interest following the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting and most states enhanced existing budgets for mental health spending (Mukherjee, 2013; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Simon, 2013). Included in these budgets were programs that addressed early detection and intervention for mental health issues, violence prevention, and treatment and civil commitment (Hernandez et al., 2015; National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2013; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). Mental health issues continue to be a point of debate in the aftermath of mass shooting events.

Blaming violence on media depictions of violence is widespread and longstanding dating back to violent depictions in comic books and complaints of grotesque images (Surette, 2015). People continue to argue that violent media has a desensitizing effect on consumers, causing them to become violent or reinforcing violent predispositions and tendencies (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Surette, 2015;). Blaming violent media occurs most commonly in school shooting events but has also been applied in other shootings. Discussions about violent media have led to campaigns to more tightly regulate television, music, movies, and video games, especially first-person shooter games (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). While considered a direct cause in the eyes of the public, the true causal relationship between violent media and real-world violence is highly debated. Some research (Anderson, 2004; Funk et al., 2004; Gentile et al., 2004; Uhlmann & Swanson, 2004) has found evidence of a causal link between playing violent video games and aggression, suggesting that playing violent video games increases hostility and the likelihood to exhibit violent behavior. However, while these studies have produced significant results, there is still no definitive causal link between the two, especially when considering mass shooters (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). Furthermore, other studies do not support a relationship between

video game violence and violent behavior (Ferguson, 2014; Ferguson & Olson, 2014; Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Markey et al., 2014) and some argue that violent video games produce a cathartic effect. Under this hypothesis, exposure to violent media acts as a therapeutic release for anger and self-hatred (Sparks & Sparks, 2002; Surette, 2015). Therefore, there is no definitive evidence that violent media causes real-world violence.

Beyond the three “usual suspects” regarding mass shooting explanations lies another explanation that has often been overlooked: gender and masculinity. Mass shootings can be thought of as “a profoundly masculine act” (Issa, 2019, p. 687; Madfis, 2014; p. 77). Looking at the history of mass shootings in the United States, 93-98% of all mass shootings have been committed by men, making gender the single most common factor in mass shootings (Bridges & Tober, 2018; Fox & Levin, 2012; Issa, 2019; The Violence Project, 2020). This coincides with previous research that has found men more likely to externalize their aggression and frustration, while women internalize or self-harm (Jung et al., 2017; Martin & Bowman, 2021; Rosenfield, 2012). This externalization also stems from a need to blame others for one’s problems. For instance, women are more likely to self-blame, while men see other people as causing them problems and leading them to air the grievances in a public display. Furthermore, violence is seen as a masculine act; men who are more violent are perceived as more manly (Madfis, 2014; Messerschmidt, 1993). Violence is also seen as an available solution to men’s problems, especially in an attempt to regain lost masculinity. Therefore, a mass shooting can be a show of force, power, and strength, which serves to bring back a masculine identity accompanied with fame (Madfis, 2014).

Gun ownership itself is also gendered. Of the U.S. population, 40% of men are gun owners, compared to 22% women (Parker et al., 2017). When asking gun owners their reasons

for owning guns, both men and women are likely to cite protection as a primary reason, but men are also likely to cite recreation as a reason for owning guns. Within this protection narrative also lies links to masculinity. For instance, Melzer (2008) found that gun ownership allows men to construct masculine identities based on imagined threats of violence and American freedoms. These constructions of home invasions and masked robbers allows gun owners to see themselves as protectors and saviors of the innocent. Therefore, gun ownership is seen as an extension or display of masculinity (Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Media criminology examines and analyzes the process of selecting and presenting criminal events in the news media. Adhering to the newsworthiness model, crime is a central feature in news media, drawing attention from the public and political alike. Due to the fascination with crime and the lack of personal knowledge that the majority of society has about crime and criminal justice actions, the media serves as point of reference for these issues. However, the way crime is presented is affected by the use of frames, claims, and narratives. Frames and claims purport to describe the situation, as well as its causes, while narratives regurgitate crime and justice themes. Specific frames, claims, and narratives are forwarded by news organizations, often in line with the general opinions of public or political officials. The reliance on these officials can further drive particular policies that, due to structural inequality, give authority to powerful classes over others, according to conflict criminologists.

This project applies conflict criminology as the theoretical framework in examining the differences in mass shooting reports across online news sites. Using mass shooting events ensures media attention and subsequent policy discussions as points of analysis. Furthermore, examining both mainstream and commentary online news platforms allows for a wider

examination of claims making and agenda setting based on political leaning. As such, this project undertakes a content analysis of news reports on mass shooting events in an effort to truly understand the relationship between criminal portrayals in the media, social constructionism, and policy influence.

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research methodology for this study that seeks to discover what differences, if any, are present in the representation of mass shooting events across liberal and conservative mainstream news sites and far leaning news commentary sites. This chapter begins with a discussion of the data, including the reasons for choosing particular online news sites and case selection, as well as the parameters of this study. The methodology that is used for this study is then discussed, focusing on the case study approach and content analysis. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of themes and coding that were employed when examining the chosen cases.

#### DATA

##### *Online News*

Online news sources provide the data for this analysis, diverting from traditional media research that has centered on newspapers (Davis, 1952; Ditton & Duffy, 1983; Garofalo, 1981; Graber, 1980; Humphries, 1981; Liska & Baccaglioni, 1990; Marsh, 1989; Marsh, 1991; Smith, 1984) and television (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997; Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000; Garofalo, 1981; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gitlin, 1979; Gitlin, 1985; Graber, 1990; Katz, 1987; Lichter & Lichter, 1983; Pandiani, 1978; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). Online information and news sites have continuously increased in popularity, surpassing print newspapers, social media, and radio as primary sources of information (Geiger, 2019; Shearer, 2018). The only platform more popular than online news websites for information is television, but even this format has seen a decline in usage since 2016 (Shearer, 2018). Furthermore, when online news media use is combined – the percentage of Americans who get their news from news

websites and/or social media – the gap between online sources (43%) and television (49%) is even smaller (Shearer, 2018). The popularity of news media formats differs across age groups, however. Those aged 65 and older consistently get their information from television and print newspapers, while online news usage is more popular among all other age groups, surpassing print newspapers, and in some cases (ages 18-49) television as well (Geiger, 2019; Shearer, 2018). Furthermore, news websites are easy to access, and most do not require a subscription as print newspapers do. The advertisement of articles on social media also increases news website traffic, making information available on a wider variety of platforms and to wider audiences. Therefore, online news and information sites were chosen as the medium for this study.

#### *Chosen Sites*

Two mainstream news websites were chosen for this study to compare the reporting of mass shooting events between liberal and conservative news organizations: *NBC News* and *Fox News*. The chosen websites are national in scope and have comparable consumer traffic. Both sites fall within the top ten most visited news websites (eBizMBA, 2020; Sharma, 2020). *Fox News* has a monthly average of 65 million visitors to their website, offering news related to a variety of topics, such as sports, finance, politics, and entertainment. Similarly, *NBC News* receives a monthly average of 63 million visitors also offering a variety of news categories to their users. These two websites were also chosen based on the political leaning of the organization and of their audience members. According to media bias guides from Pew Research Center (Mitchell et al., 2014) and AllSides (2020), *NBC News* and *Fox News* are equally distributed across the political spectrum. *Fox News* online content and its audience members tend to be consistently more conservative, with 47% of conservative respondents stating that they primarily use *Fox News* as their main source of information (Mitchell et al., 2014). Therefore,

*Fox News* was chosen as the mainstream conservative news website for this study. In contrast, *NBC News* garners an audience that tends to be more liberal leaning. While there are a variety of left leaning online news sources, *NBC News* was chosen because of its equal distribution on the political spectrum when compared to *Fox News*. In other words, both *Fox News* and *NBC News* were equidistant from center or neutral news sites on their respective political sides (AllSides, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2014). A final condition when choosing these news sources was that neither site required a subscription to view their stories.

In addition to mainstream news networks, data will be collected from two far leaning news commentary sites. News commentary sites are sites that provide news articles alongside opinions and comments from the organization. For instance, articles on these commentary sides tend to engage in partisan reporting that are opinion- and ideology-based rather than non-partisan reporting. The two chosen sites (*Breitbart* and *Slate*) have comparable consumer traffic and fall on opposite ends of the political spectrum, much like *NBC News* and *Fox News*. According to Aelive (2019a & 2019b), *Breitbart* falls in the top ten most popular conservative websites at number seven and *Slate* comes in at number five for the list of the most popular liberal websites. *Breitbart* has an average user traffic of 23 million visitors to their website, offering news and opinion pieces on a variety of topics, including politics, entertainment, media, the economy, sports, and social justice. Similarly, *Slate* draws an average of 30 million users seeking information related to politics, culture, technology, business, and human interest. These two commentary sites were also chosen based on the political leaning of the organization and of their audience members. According to media bias guides from Pew Research Center (Mitchell et al., 2014) and AllSides (2020), *Breitbart* and *Slate* fall on opposite sides of the political spectrum. *Breitbart* consistently draws more conservative audiences and is described as a far-right

syndicated American news, opinion and commentary website (Piggott, 2016). Much of the content on *Breitbart* is considered to be ideologically driven and has been criticized by liberals and conservatives alike, often called misogynistic, xenophobic, and racist (Grynbaum & Herman, 2016). On the other end of the spectrum lies *Slate*, which draws more liberal audiences and is described as a left-wing media outlet (Blake, 2014). Similar to *Breitbart*, *Slate* offers its users news information while also including analysis and commentary and has been criticized by conservative audiences for overusing identity politics and being anti-Trump (Winter, 2015a). Therefore, the similar traffic of *Slate* and *Breitbart*, as well as their equally opposite and far-leaning political ideologies make them ideal candidates for this media analysis.

## CASES

For the purpose of this study, mass shootings are defined as:

“an incident of targeted violence carried out by one or more shooters at one or more public or populated locations. Multiple victims (both injuries and fatalities) are associated with the attack, and both the victims and location(s) are chosen either at random or for their symbolic value. The event occurs within a single 24-hour period, though most attacks typically last only a few minutes.” (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016, p. 28)

According to an analysis conducted by Everytown for Gun Safety (2021), it is estimated that 19 mass shootings happen each year. While mass shootings have not increased in frequency throughout the years, the death and injury counts have been rising. As such, shooting events occurring in recent years (2015-2019) comprise the time range for cases chosen for this study. This time range also coincides with a change in the United States presidency in 2016 between a Democratic and Republican president, and a rise in the use of news commentary sites (Mitchell et al., 2014). Furthermore, events happening in public or semi-public areas were chosen, excluding mass shootings events that occurred in domestic settings. School shootings were also excluded from the analysis for multiple reasons. First, school shootings have become their own

distinct phenomenon, often explored as a subcategory of mass shootings (Muschert, 2007; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). Second, the age of the shooter and victims of school shootings tend to be younger than the average age of mass shooters. Finally, school shootings are often motivated by revenge, with specific intended victims (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999). Instead, this project focuses on cases that occurred in public or semi-public locations that were chosen based on ease of access (e.g., a nightclub or music festival) or for symbolic purposes (e.g., religious institutions or racial groups).

Eight mass shooting events were chosen for analysis in order to discover if differences in representations of mass shootings differ across liberal and conservative mainstream news sites and far leaning news commentary sites. These eight cases were chosen due to their presence in the national news cycle, as well as characteristics of the offender(s) and victims, location of the shooting, and the policy responses that emerged after each incident. Finding both similarities and differences between each shooting case allows for better analysis and examination of media portrayals. Such characteristics include, but are not limited to, shootings at various religious institutions, offenders' motives of white supremacy or terrorism, and attacks on various racial and/or ethnic populations. The details of each shooting event and the public and political responses to the incident are presented below. These responses include attempts to explain why each mass shooting event occurred, as well as public policies that were discussed immediately following each tragedy.

#### *Case 1 – Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina*

On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old White male, attended a Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in Charleston, South Carolina and killed nine attendees. All nine victims at the church were African American and this church in

particular is one of the oldest Black churches in the United States, with a rich history in the fight for civil rights, both past and present (Kang, 2015; Sarlin, 2015). Around 8:15 p.m. Roof entered a side door of AME and participated in a Bible study, according to survivors (Sanz & Goldman, 2015). According to witness accounts, Roof listened and engaged in discussion during the study, at times disagreeing with the Scripture (Drash, 2015). After other members started to pray, Roof stood, retrieved a handgun from his fanny pack, and aimed it at the churchgoers (Alcindor & Stanglin, 2015; Sickles, 2015). When asked why he was doing this, Roof responded with “I have to do it. You rape our women and you’re taking over our country. And you have to go” (Borden et al., 2015; Sack & Blinder, 2016). Roof started to shoot while he also shouted racial epithets and stated, “y’all want something to pray about? I’ll give you something to pray about” (Borden et al., 2015; Sack & Blinder, 2016). Roof continued to shoot until he ran out of ammunition, purposefully leaving one victim to tell the story. According to this witness and two other survivors, Roof turned the gun on himself before realizing he had no more bullets, and then left the church (Phelps, 2015). The shooting lasted approximately six minutes (Francis & Bruce, 2015).

Shortly after 9:00 p.m., the Charleston Police Department began receiving calls of a shooting at the church. Police responded, assisted victims, and began to search for the perpetrator. Using surveillance video from AME, investigators distributed photos of Roof to the public in order to aid in his identification and capture. Following the release of these photos, Roof’s father and uncle contacted Charleston police and provided them with a confirmed identification and location of where he might be (Leger, 2015). At 10:44 a.m. on the morning after the attack, Roof was captured in a traffic stop in Shelby, North Carolina and was taken into custody without incident, even providing Roof with a meal after his arrest (Ellis et al., 2015).

Police learned Roof had arrests for trespassing and drug possession made in the months preceding the shooting. Further inquiry uncovered Roof's apparent motive for the shooting: white supremacy. His Facebook page included images of him wearing emblems popular among white supremacists: the flag of former Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and the flag of apartheid-era South Africa (Robles et al., 2015). Other evidence of his racism was later uncovered, including statements claiming that Roof had made comments about attacks to his friends and coworkers, but that no one took these threats seriously. Perhaps the most damning evidence was his online presence. Three days after the shooting, bloggers discovered a website called "The Last Rhodesian" that had been registered to Dylann Roof (O'Conner, 2015; Robles, 2015). This website included a manifesto containing Roof's opinions of race and religion, primarily focusing on "Blacks," "Jews," "Hispanics," and "East Asians" (Goldberg, 2015; Lewis et al., 2015). Photos of Roof were also on the website, wearing the aforementioned emblems in some and posing with the Confederate flag in the other. In the manifesto, Roof claimed that he became racially aware after the shooting of Trayvon Martin, of which he sided with George Zimmerman and did not understand the controversy surrounding the case (O'Conner, 2015). Roof wrote that after he became interested in the case, he began researching "Black on White" crime and came to believe that this was a serious problem and a "race war" (O'Conner, 2015). Roof continued to update his website, including the day of the shooting, and was shown to be in communication with other white supremacists, some of whom encouraged the shooting (Robles, 2015; Schmidt, 2015).

On June 19, Roof was charged with nine counts of murder and one count of possession of a firearm during the commission of a violent crime (Dearden & Guion, 2015). Roof's first appearance in court was via videoconference where a \$1 million bond was set for the firearms

charge and no bail on the nine counts of murder. On July 7, Roof was indicted on the nine murder charges and three charges of attempted murder for the three survivors (Bacon, 2015; Kinnard, 2015). Further charges included federal hate crime violations, nine counts of using a firearm to commit murder, and 24 civil rights violations (12 hate crime charges and 12 counts of violating a person's freedom of religion) (Bacon, 2015; Kinnard, 2015). Of these charges, 18 carried the federal death penalty. On July 31, Roof pleaded not guilty to the federal charges. On September 2, district attorney Scarlett Wilson announced her intention to seek the death penalty against Roof (Kinnard & Collins, 2015). Trial proceedings faced many proposals for jury selection, pleas, and Roof's request to represent himself. In November 2016, Roof was declared competent to stand trial for his crimes. The trial began on December 7, 2016 and one week later, on December 15, Roof was found guilty of all 33 federal charges against him (Blinder & Sack, 2016). In his later sentencing trial, Roof offered no explanation stating, "there's nothing wrong with me psychologically" (Blinder & Sack, 2017). At this hearing, prosecutors introduced new evidence: a two-page excerpt from a journal written by Roof while jailed after his arrest. This new manifesto indicated that Roof had no remorse for his actions with statements such as, "I would like to make it crystal clear, I do not regret what I did. I am not sorry. I have not shed a tear for the innocent people I killed" (Blinder & Sack, 2017; Zapatosky, 2016). After entering this evidence, Roof was sentenced to death on January 10, 2017, making him the first hate-crime defendant to be given the death penalty (Shah & McLaughlin, 2017).

While there were many responses to the Charleston Church shooting, the primary point of discussion centered on white supremacy and racism. Roof's comments during the shooting and in the manifesto, his targeting of AME, and the labeling of the shooting as a hate crime made discussion of race an important focus of debate. According to Roof's manifesto, part of his

concern was based on the fear surrounding “Black on White” crime. According to the director of the Southern Poverty Law Center, this motive has frequently appeared on supremacist websites and in rhetoric used about interracial crimes. The director said, “Black men assaulting White women is probably the oldest racist trope in the United States”, as seen in the film *Birth of a Nation* (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017). The myth of Black rapists has dominated imaginations of White men (especially in the South) who viewed sexual access to White women as the ultimate privilege of White men (Gray, 2015). These discussions focused on the perpetuation of tropes to justify racism and mistreatment of people of color by other citizens and in the criminal justice system. Furthermore, the display of the Confederate flag by Roof sparked debate about the history of the flag and its symbolism. After the shooting, many calls were made to remove the flag from statehouse grounds, especially in South Carolina. On July 6, 2015, the South Carolina Senate voted to remove the flag from the State House, and on July 10, the Confederate flag was taken down for the last time (Wagner & Siemaszko, 2015). Removal of the Confederate flag also renewed interest in the removal of Confederate monuments and memorials throughout the nation.

Another topic of debate focused on whether or not to classify the shooting as terrorism. Many academics and experts expressed their beliefs that the event fit the definition of a terrorist act. According to these experts, this was an act of violence carried out against civilians for ideological purposes (Bergen & Sterman, 2015; Corbin, 2017; Norris, 2017; Phillips, 2015). However, on June 19, 2015, FBI Director James Comey said that the shooting was being investigated as a hate crime, but that he did not consider it an act of terrorism, citing the lack of political motivation for Roof’s actions (S. Harris, 2015). Some argued that the failure to refer to Roof’s actions as terrorism reflected forms of denial of racism. For example, mass shooting

events by offenders of color are more quickly labeled as acts of terror when compared to events by White offenders (Corbin, 2017; Norris, 2017). Due to the debate that ensued surrounding the label of terrorism and seemingly to ease tension, a spokesperson for Attorney General Loretta Lynch announced that the Department of Justice was investigating the shooting as both a hate crime and an act of domestic terrorism (Melber, 2015a).

While gun control is a debate that often ensues following a massive display of gun violence, the gun debate following the Charleston massacre was much more subdued. With the main focus on racism and white supremacy, gun debates fell to the wayside except for select and specific points of discussion. For example, following the shooting, President Obama issued a statement that primarily focused on racism and freedom of religion before briefly mentioning gun control:

There is something particularly heartbreaking about the death happening...in a place of worship. And we know that hatred across races and faiths pose a particular threat to our democracy. We must confront the ravages of gun violence and the stain of hatred that continues to be visited on our streets, in our schools, in our houses of worship, and in our communities. (Roberts, 2015)

Following his statement, President Obama furthered the religious framing of the event by singing *Amazing Grace* at the funeral for Reverend Pinckney (Kaufman, 2015). A further point of discussion concentrated on how Roof was able to acquire his gun to commit this shooting. Rather than focusing on gun control nationally, outrage centered on the flaws in the background check when Roof legally purchased his weapons even though he had prior arrests. Debates surrounding gun rights and sales came under fire after this realization because Roof's arrest record should have prevented him from purchasing his weapon (Eaton, 2019; Nakashima, 2015b). It was later discovered that an error within the National Instant Background Check System excluded Roof's record from his background check (Nakashima, 2015b). In this case, the FBI did not complete

Roof's background check within three business days and a provision in the 1994 Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act – the Brady Provision – allows dealers to proceed with sales on the fourth day (Eaton, 2019). Since the Charleston shooting, reports have uncovered that because of delayed background checks and the Brady provision (now often called the “Charleston loophole”), at least 3,960 weapons in 2018 were sold to people who should not legally have them (Eaton, 2019). Congress has weighed in on these flaws, attempting to come up with solutions, such as increasing the three-day waiting period, implementing mandatory background checks for private sales, and notifying local law enforcement when a prohibited person attempts to purchase a firearm. However, years later, nothing has been done.

*Case 2 – Inland Regional Center, San Bernardino, California*

On December 2, 2015, 28-year-old Syed Rizwan Farook and 29-year-old Tashfeen Malik, a married Middle Eastern couple, carried out a shooting attack in San Bernardino, California. The shooters targeted a San Bernardino County Department of Public Health training event and Christmas party. Farook, a health inspector at the Department of Public Health, attended the initial training event the morning of the shooting before exiting the building and carrying out the attack with Malik (Saslow & McCrummen, 2015). Shortly before 11:00 a.m., Farook and Malik donned ski masks and tactical gear and, armed with semi-automatic pistols and rifles, began firing outside of the building, killing two individuals (Saslow & McCrummen, 2015). After firing the initial shots, Farook entered the building and opened fire on the guests in attendance and Malik followed soon after. Farook also planted three explosive devices at the initial training event, but was unsuccessful in detonating them (Chan, 2015; Hauser, 2015). During the shooting, Malik pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIL

(Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) on a Facebook account (Schmidt & Pérez-Peña, 2015).

Once the shooting ended, the offenders fled the scene in a black SUV.

Following the initial emergency call, police arrived at the scene three- and one-half minutes later. Over 300 officers and agents from the city, county, and state responded to the active shooter event and aided in offender location, evacuation, and tended to the wounded (Lin & Winton, 2015). After identifying Farook and Malik's identity and the vehicle used to flee the scene, law enforcement began their search. Some officers were deployed to the offenders' home in Redland, California, where Farook and Malik were spotted fleeing their home in the black SUV (Myers & Pritchard, 2015). Police gave chase and Malik began firing through the back window of the automobile. Shortly after 3:00 p.m., the SUV came to a stop and the offenders further engaged in gunfire with law enforcement (ABC7 News, 2015; Hurt, 2016). Farook, who attempted to approach and critically injure the first responding officer, was eventually shot multiple times in his legs and upper body, and was killed. Malik continued shooting even after Farook died, injuring an officer in the process. Five minutes later, Malik was also killed after several bullets struck her body and head (ABC7 News, 2015; Hurt, 2016). The initial shooting at the Department of Public Health lasted only three minutes, killed 14 and seriously injured 22 others, while the entire attack, including the shootout, lasted over four hours.

Once the attack was over, law enforcement and other governmental agencies began investigating the incident. This shooting was quickly labeled a terrorist attack because Malik pledged allegiance to ISIL on social media and upon the discovery that the offenders were inspired by and in communication with Islamic terrorists (Botelho & Ellis, 2015). The investigation found conversations about jihad and martyrdom for two years leading up to the shooting incident, cementing the idea that the offenders had been radicalized by online content

(Baker & Santora, 2015; Goldman & Berman, 2015; Williams & Abdullah, 2015;). However, one year after the attack, December 1, 2016, information unearthed a further motivation for Farook: his forced participation in the training event and the Christmas party (Christie et al., 2016). Emails between Farook and Malik indicated that Malik had objected to the party and did not want Farook to attend. According to the emails, Malik stated that “she didn’t think that a Muslim should have to participate in a non-Muslim holiday or event” (Christie et al., 2016).

In the aftermath of the attack, reactions and discussions centered on policies relating to terrorism and gun control. On December 6, 2015, President Obama declared the shooting an act of terrorism, stating that the shooters had been radicalized by a perverted version of Islam (CNN, 2015). In his address, President Obama also declared that the “threat from terrorism is real, but we will overcome it” (CNN, 2015; Shear & Gardiner, 2015). The President went on to promise that the United States will destroy ISIL and any other terrorist organization that attempts to harm the United States and asked that America not give in to fear or hate. Many other presidential candidates who were campaigning at the time claimed that the United States was now at war (Oliphant & Whitesides, 2015). Chris Christie, former New Jersey Governor, claimed that this would be a new world war made up of radical Islamic jihadists attempting to destroy the American way of life (Flores, 2015). Then-candidate Donald Trump called for a total and complete ban on Muslims entering the United States (Gowen, 2015; Holland & Stephenson, 2015). These calls were met with criticism from both Republicans and Democrats, but also reignited the debate on civilian surveillance made in the Senate (Nakashima, 2015a). Furthermore, the Council on American-Islamic Relations reported an increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes following the attack. Vandalism, violence, and death threats occurred across the country, with a large majority happening in California (Dorell, 2015). Stemming from fear and

the blaming of Islam, these communities were targeted for violence even after condemning the attacks and stating that the perpetrators were not true followers of Islam (Dorell, 2015; Westcott, 2015).

In addition to discussions surrounding terrorism and jihadism, another topic of discussion centered on gun control. In the wake of the shooting, President Obama called for “common sense” gun laws and better background checks for firearms purchases (Tau, 2015). The president also proposed that people on the No-Fly List should also be blocked from purchasing weapons in an attempt to deter mass shootings and other terroristic attacks (Tau, 2015). While many Democrats backed these proposed policies, Republicans saw them as an infringement of Second Amendment rights and also stated that the focus should not be on guns, but on Muslim extremists (Bierman & Halper, 2015). In response to the shooting and the proposed gun legislation, California saw a rise in gun sales (up 18,000 from the previous year) and concealed carry permit applications (an increase from 10 to 75 applications per week in San Bernardino County – a 750% increase) (Mendelson, 2016; Steinberg, 2016).

### *Case 3 – Pulse Nightclub, Orlando, Florida*

On June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen, a 29-year-old, Middle Eastern security guard, killed 49 people and injured 53 others inside Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. On this particular night, Pulse was hosting “Latin Night,” which drew a primarily Hispanic and Latinx crowd (Rothaus, 2016). Over 300 people were inside the club at 2:00 am, when last call drinks were served. At approximately 2:02 a.m., Mateen approached the nightclub, armed with a semi-automatic rifle and semi-automatic handgun (Drabold, 2016; Jansen, 2016; Santora, 2016; Siemaszko, 2016; Zarroli, 2016). Mateen initially engaged with the security guard on duty before moving further into the club, where he carried out the rest of his attack. Once inside, Mateen shot

at patrons while the security guard called for assistance (Gibson, 2019). Unaware of the situation, the music inside the club continued to play while Mateen opened fire. Once aware, the DJ turned down the music and told people to run (Gibson, 2019). At 2:04 a.m., police officers responded to the scene and fired at Mateen on the patio of the nightclub. After being shot at, Mateen retreated back into the club, turning the scene into a hostage situation (Caplan & Hayden, 2016; Stapleton & Ellis, 2016).

Over the next hour, more than 100 local law enforcement officers, firefighters, and paramedics arrived at the scene in an attempt to end the attack (Burch, 2016; Stapleton & Ellis, 2016). Some survivors managed to escape through a door, while many others took shelter inside the club under tables and bars, behind walls, and in the bathrooms, also calling 911 and contacting their loved ones. Mateen also called 911 and mentioned the Boston Marathon bombers and Moner Mohammad Abu Saha and swore allegiance to ISIL leader al-Baghdadi (Bertrand & Engel, 2016; Joscelyn, 2016). Mateen made additional calls to 911 and to local news stations, taking credit for the shooting and claiming that he was inspired by the United States bomb-strike in Iraq that occurred in May 2016 (Doornbos, 2016a). Two hours later, eight more hostages escaped with the aid of law enforcement. Shortly after 5:00 a.m., police began to breach the building using carefully placed explosives and a BearCat (a bulletproof tactical vehicle) through the bathroom wall (Gibson, 2019). Once inside, officers engaged with Mateen, shooting him a total of eight times, and killing him (Berman, 2017; Doornbos, 2016b; Sickles, 2016). Police then rescued the final hostages and aided the wounded. In total, this attack last approximately three hours.

Once police put an end to the shooting, an investigation began into Mateen's possible motives to commit such a violent act including anger issues, terrorism, and homophobia. Many

people came forward to claim that Mateen had a history of anger issues and violence in school and the police academy in Florida (Swisher, 2016). After Mateen failed to become a local law enforcement officer, he became a security guard for a private agency, where he passed a psychological test and criminal background check (Katersky et al., 2016). Mateen did not have an official criminal history but his first wife later told police that she believed he was mentally unstable, was often physically abusive, and had a history of substance abuse (Goldman & Tate, 2016; Healy, 2016; Perez & Tacopino, 2016; Toppo, 2016). Prior to the shooting, Mateen used several social media accounts where he vowed vengeance for the U.S. airstrikes in Iraq and Syria and his search history uncovered that he had researched content related to terrorism (Blinder, Robles, & Pérez-Peña, 2016; Ross et al., 2016). Another potential motive centered on the belief that Mateen may have been gay or was homophobic. People from Mateen's past came forward and claimed that they had been involved with Mateen, who often times visited gay bars or chatted on gay dating apps. This, however, has been debated by law enforcement officials, who found no concrete evidence to indicate that Mateen was gay. In relation to targeting LGBTQ+ populations due to homophobia, Mateen's father later stated that Mateen had been outraged at the sight of a gay couple kissing in a recent incident (Hanks, 2016; Williams, Connor, et al., 2016).

In the aftermath of the shooting, discussions centered on terrorism and immigration, gun control, and anti-LGBTQ+ violence. The Orlando shooting was quickly labeled as a terrorist attack due to Mateen's pledge of allegiance to ISIL and his search history of terror-related material online. Upon investigation, FBI Director James Comey stated that they were unable to find evidence that this was a plot directed from outside the United States and claimed that Mateen had been radicalized through Internet material (Shabad, 2016). The majority of

Republican responses focused on the terrorism aspect, where they criticized their Democratic counterparts for failing to use the term “radical Islam” when addressing the shooting (Diamond & Gaouette, 2016). Particularly, then-candidate Trump tweeted that he was right about radical Islam and terrorism and used the incident to promote his policies regarding immigration, such as the Muslim ban and a registry for Muslim Americans (Reston, 2016). While his promotion of the Muslim ban was nothing new, this proposed registry emerged after the Orlando shooting when Trump, on the campaign trail, stated “We aren’t vigilant, and we aren’t smart. And we have to go, and we have to maybe check the mosques” (Reston, 2016). In sum, Trump called for increased surveillance of Muslim Americans and claimed that these communities put allegiance to their religion over the safety of their fellow American citizens. Many of these comments were criticized, particularly by President Obama and candidate Hillary Clinton who claimed that generalizing the radicalization of Islam legitimizes propaganda, alienates those communities, and declares war on an entire religion (Wright, 2016). Additionally, many Muslim Americans, including community leaders and the Council on American-Islamic Relations, swiftly condemned the attack, and offered condolences to the victims and their families (Blinder, 2016).

On the Democratic response to the shooting, many politicians focused on increased gun control. Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton reupped her call to restore the assault weapons ban (Wright, 2016). Echoing President Obama’s stance, many Democrats pushed for common sense gun safety reform across the country. These claims were quickly denounced and criticized by Republicans, who argued that this shooting was a terrorism problem, not a gun problem. Furthermore, Donald Trump argued that if the people in Pulse had been armed, the scope of the tragedy may have been lessened (Wright, 2016). In Congress, Democrats demanded that Republicans enact legislation that would ban the sale of guns or explosives to people on

watchlists or those suspected of terrorism by the Justice Department (Herszenhorn & Lichtblau, 2016). Republican lawmakers called for more focus on Islamist extremism rather than the possibility of infringing on Second Amendment rights.

A final point of discussion surrounded the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ populations and homophobia. Since the attack was against a LGBTQ+ establishment, it was also labeled as a hate crime in the media, although the FBI has still declined to officially classify it as such (Ogles, 2018). The debate over whether or not this shooting should be classified as a hate crime also trickled into the presidential election, but was more often used to highlight motives for terrorism and anti-Western tenets than it was to recognize the history of violence and discrimination that LGBTQ+ people have faced. For instance, news pundits claimed that this attack was not an “American form of homophobia. This is a Middle Eastern form...a very specific type of anti-gay hate” found in Islam (Aziz, 2016; May, 2016). Furthermore, several news reports and politicians failed to mention that Pulse was a gay nightclub and referred to the establishment as simply “a club” and the victims as “young people”, which critics argued was an attempt to whitewash the incident (Munzenrieder, 2016; Valcore & Buckler, 2020). Critics also stated that failure to recognize the victims as Latinx and the shooting as an act of hate against the Latinx community further whitewashed the event (Munzenrieder, 2016; Valcore & Buckler, 2020).

#### *Case 4 – Route 91 Harvest Music Festival, Las Vegas, Nevada*

On the evening of October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock opened fire on a crowd of attendees at the Route 91 Harvest music festival on the Las Vegas Strip in Nevada. A total of 58 people were killed and an additional 413 more were initially injured, but as a result of the ensuing panic, over 400 more were injured. Paddock, a White 64-year-old former real estate businessman and auditor, arrived in Las Vegas on September 25, 2017, and booked a room at the Mandalay Bay

Resort (Pearce, 2018). While there, Paddock amassed an arsenal of weapons, equipment, and ammunition. His arsenal included AR-15 and AR-10 rifles (some of which were equipped with bump stocks), a bolt-action rifle, and a revolver (Pearce, 2018). Paddock brought the weapons to his room by packing them inside suitcases and then used hotel assistance to transport his luggage. During his stay, Paddock returned to his home multiple times, wired a large sum of money to his girlfriend in the Philippines (Pearce, 2018), and gambled at the hotel casino, often interacting with hotel employees (Prince, 2018). Paddock also placed “do not disturb” signs on the door and set up his equipment.

Prior to the shooting, Paddock deadbolted both doors to his rooms, placed surveillance cameras in the hallway, and secured an L-shaped bracket on the access door to the thirty-second floor so it would stay closed (Chavez, 2017; Pearce, 2018). Shortly before 10:00 p.m., hotel security guard Jesus Campos discovered the barricaded door and reported the incident to the dispatch center. While waiting on assistance, Campos began to hear the sound of rapid drilling coming from Paddock’s rooms and attempted to investigate, where he was then shot (Chavez, 2017; Pearce, 2018). According to reports, Paddock broke the window glass in his suites and opened fire on the concert crowd at 10:05 p.m., firing his last shots at 10:15 p.m. (Levenson, 2017). Unaware of the present danger, concertgoers initially mistook the gunfire for fireworks before attempting to flee (Schick et al., 2017). In total, Paddock fired over 1,000 rounds, which covered the festival grounds and a nearby airport (German, 2017). Due to the confusion and mass panic, police were delayed in determining the exact location of where the shots originated from. When the Mandalay Bay was determined to be the shooter’s location, they arrived on scene at 10:12 p.m. (del Castillo Galvan & Rand, 2017). After police reached the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor, officers encountered Campos, who directed them to Paddock’s room. By this time, the shooting

had stopped but officers helped evacuate guests before breaching the hotel room. Police gained entry to the barricaded room at 11:20 p.m. after using explosives (Hayes, 2017). Police entered the room and found Paddock dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head (Bui et al., 2017; Law, 2017). To date, the Las Vegas mass shooting is the deadliest mass shooting in the United States (Miller, 2017; Nestel & Miller, 2017).

With Paddock having died by suicide, an investigation began in an attempt to determine the possible reasons he would have carried out such a heinous act. A handwritten note was discovered in the hotel room, but it was simply calculations that Paddock has used to gauge the distance, wind, and trajectory from his hotel room to the festival lot he fired on (Margolin & Nestel, 2017). The rest of the investigation produced few answers. No accomplice was found, and no definitive motive has been determined. At a press conference in 2018, Las Vegas Sheriff Joe Lombardo stated “what we have been able to answer are the questions of who, what, when, where, and how... what we have not been able to definitively answer is why Stephen Paddock committed this act” (Ortiz, 2018). The FBI published a report in 2019, saying that there was no single or clear motivating factor for the shooting (Campbell, 2019), but investigators believe part of Paddock's motivation was his “desire to die by suicide” and to “attain a certain degree of infamy via a mass casualty attack” (Romo, 2019).

Due to the lack of clear and convincing evidence of a motive, discussions surrounding the shooting centered on the gun control debate and mental health. Regarding the gun control debate, many politicians were quick to send their condolences after the shooting and simultaneously called for stronger gun legislation. The majority of these gun control statements came from Democrats who called for action. For example, Senator Chris Murphy called out Congress for its failure to restrict access to guns, stating “it is positively infuriating that my colleagues in

Congress are so afraid of the gun industry that they pretend there aren't public policy responses to this epidemic" (Berman, 2017). Hillary Clinton also called for action: "our grief isn't enough. We can and must put politics aside, stand up to the NRA, and work together to try to stop this from happening again" (Berman, 2017). However, Republicans were quick to criticize Democrats for politicizing the event. For instance, Mitch McConnell called it both inappropriate and premature to discuss legislation this early, before all the facts were gathered and while there were still bodies on the ground (Pappas, 2017). White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders echoed this sentiment and stated that "there's a time and place for political debate, but now is the time to unite as a country" (Pappas, 2017). The concept of unity was a running theme among Republicans who focused on the protection of individual rights and praised President Trump for his visits with the victims and survivors of the shooting (Horsley, 2017). Even with the debate, a piece of legislation did get passed in regard to gun control. With a focus on the bump stocks Paddock used, rather than the actual weapons themselves, Republicans and Democrats reached some middle ground and banned the sale of bump stocks and also required current owners to surrender or destroy their existing bump stocks (Balsamo, 2018). Bump stocks use recoil to speed up the rate of fire on semiautomatic rifles. The piece of legislation was signed in December 2018 and went into effect in March 2019 (Balsamo, 2018).

The second point of discussion related to mental health. Without a clear motive, reports labeled the event a "tragic and heinous act of violence" and an "act of pure evil" (Liptak, 2017). In a press conference, President Trump described Paddock as a "very, very sick individual" and a "demented man with a lot of problems" (BBC News, 2017). Other reports also used identifiers such as psychopath, madman, lunatic, and senseless to describe both the event and the shooter. The use of these identifiers was criticized by some who claimed that this lessened the seriousness

of the crime. For instance, many people questioned why the attack was not labeled an act of domestic terrorism, especially when the casualty rate was so high and there has been no hesitation to label an event terrorism when the offender is a person of color (Al Jazeera News, 2017; Jarrett, 2017; Wood, 2017;). Furthermore, an autopsy was performed with specific intentions to examine the brain for any possible disorders as an attempt to explain this crime (Fink, 2017; Wang & Berman, 2018). Due to his age, there was speculation that Paddock may have experienced a deterioration of his temporal lobe (Fink, 2017) and the autopsy was expected to put an end to all questions surround the Las Vegas shooting. However, the autopsy revealed that there was no definitive reason that Paddock's brain had an effect on his decision-making (Wang & Berman, 2018).

*Case 5 – First Baptist Church, Sutherland Springs, Texas*

On November 5, 2017, Devin Patrick Kelley, a 26-year-old White male, arrived at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas and fatally shot 26 people, simultaneously wounding 20 others. At approximately 11:00 a.m., Kelley arrived at the church in black tactical gear, a ballistic vest, and a black skull mask (Sandoval & Cullen, 2017). Armed with an AR-556 semi-automatic rifle, Kelley approached the church, fired on and killed two individuals outside and continued to fire on the building itself. Kelley then entered the church, where he shouted, “Everybody dies, motherfuckers,” as he proceeded to shoot at the congregation (Jaeger, 2017; Sandoval & Cullen, 2017). Survivors claimed that Kelley targeted scared children during the shooting, becoming enraged at their cries (Sandoval & Cullen, 2017). The shooting lasted approximately eleven minutes before Kelley was confronted by Stephen Willeford – a local resident and former firearms instructor (Jenkins, 2017; Spriester & Medina, 2018). Willeford took cover behind a vehicle and fired on Kelley, where he was struck twice. Kelley dropped his

rifle in the process but brandished a handgun and returned fire to Willeford before he returned to his vehicle and fled the scene (Pearce et al., 2017). Willeford then noticed fellow resident Johnnie Langendorff in a nearby truck, where they then pursued Kelley at high speed for several minutes (Dexheimer & Autullo, 2017). During the chase, Kelley called his wife and spoke to his family, admitted to the shooting, apologized, and said goodbye (Martinez, 2018), while Willeford called 911 to report the shooting and their location in order to apprehend Kelley. Due to injuries suffered at the church, Kelley soon lost control of his vehicle, hit a road sign, and crossed a drainage ditch before stopping in a field. Police then took over the scene and found Kelley dead in his car with three gunshot wounds: two from his shootout with Willeford and one self-inflicted head wound (Danner, 2017; Montgomery et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2017).

The Texas Rangers led the investigation as it occurred in Texas. The FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) also assisted (Montgomery et al., 2017). Officials uncovered that the shooting was not motivated by racism or religious prejudice, as is common with other mass shooting incidents. Rather, Kelley was spurred to act due to a dispute with his mother-in-law, a member of the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs (Baucum, 2018). According to phone records, Kelley had sent threatening texts to his mother-in-law in the months leading up to the shooting (Siemaszko & Johnson, 2017). Further investigative efforts uncovered Kelley's history of violence. In 2012, he was court-martialed on two charges of assault against his spouse and their child (Siemaszko & Johnson, 2017). He was convicted of both charges, sentenced to a reduction in rank, confined for 12 months, and received a Bad Conduct Discharge (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018). Even with these charges and convictions, Kelley was still able to legally purchase the firearms that he used to carry out the church massacre, which sparked heated debates on gun control.

There were many reactions following the Sutherland Springs shooting including ensuing debates on gun control, mental health, and freedom of religion. Speaking to gun control, many focused on the fact that Kelley was able to purchase firearms even though he had been convicted of domestic violence in the United States Air Force. Under federal law, anyone with a domestic violence conviction is barred from buying firearms – a provision that was first introduced and reauthorized with the Violence Against Women Act (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). However, the Air Force failed to record the convictions in the federal database, nor did they submit the final disposition report for Kelley’s criminal record to the FBI (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018). Because no records were submitted, Kelley was able to purchase firearms on six occasions, four of which were after his convictions and discharge from the Air Force. In the wake of the shooting and this revelation, many Democratic politicians called for increased gun control measures. For example, Senator Chris Murphy issued a statement calling for the end of political support for the gun industry, criticizing people for supporting weapons-makers over their constituents (Graef, 2017). Other Democrats also weighed in, claiming that the frequency of mass shootings is alarming in our country, urging Congress to act.

Contrastingly, Republicans focused on Willeford’s actions and the importance of law-abiding citizens having gun rights, furthering the long standing “good guys with guns” argument when discussing gun control. For instance, when asked about stricter gun control measures, President Trump stated that this would have made no difference in the shooting. Furthermore, the President added that these proposed measures could have kept Willeford from legally owning and carrying firearms, preventing him from engaging Kelley: “instead of having 26 dead, he would’ve had hundreds more” (Bennett, 2017; Diamond, 2017). This sentiment was previously seen in President Trump’s response to the Orlando shooting, where he said that if the people of

Pulse had been armed, the tragedy may have been lessened (Wright, 2016). Furthermore, many politicians argued that guns themselves were not the issue, but rather it was the incomplete background check that made the shooting possible. In addition to shifting the focus from “bad guys with guns” to “good guys with guns”, Republicans related this event to mental health issues. In his initial press conference, President Trump stated, “I think that mental health is a problem here...this was a very deranged individual with a lot of problems” (McCurry et al., 2017). Political figures and media outlets were quick to point out Kelley’s violent tendencies, his discharge from the Air Force, and his involvement in therapy and mental health counseling. Additionally, the shooting was called an act of evil and Kelley was labeled as sick by many political figures and commentators.

A final point of debate centered on the location of the shooting and First Amendment rights. As the shooting took place at a church, many comments were made about the sanctity of life and religious freedoms. President Trump, in his statement, mentioned that shooting occurred in a “place of sacred worship” where people should feel safe to congregate (Graef, 2017). Texas governor Greg Abbott also added that “the tragedy is worsened by the fact that it occurred in a church, a place of worship, where these people were innocently gunned down” (Weber & Shellnutt, 2017). Other religious leaders also weighed in and called the victims martyrs and labeled the act of violence as evil and an attack on churches and religious freedom. This line of commentary also spurred debates on protections within churches, such as armed guards or parishioners. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton backed these ideas, stating that attacks on religion and churches have always happened and will continue to happen (Beckett, 2017).

*Case 6 – Tree of Life Synagogue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

On the morning of October 27, 2018, Robert Gregory Bowers, a 46-year-old White male, shot and killed 11 people and injured six others at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Tree of Life – *Or L'Simcha* Congregation is a conservative Jewish synagogue located in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh (Tree of Life – *Or L'Simcha* Congregation, 2020; Rosenblatt et al., 2018). Squirrel Hill is one of the largest Jewish neighborhoods in the United States and is a pinnacle of Pittsburgh's Jewish community (Boxer et al., 2018; Paul et al., 2018; Smith, 2018). The synagogue building also rents space to Dor Hadash, a reconstructionist congregation, and New Light, another conservative congregation (Tree of Life – *Or L'Simcha* Congregation, 2020; Olitzky & Raphael, 1996). At approximately 9:45 a.m., services were being held in the synagogue for each congregation that the building housed. Two congregations were holding their Shabbat morning service, while the other was involved in their Torah study session (Carlson et al., 2018). Shortly before 10:00 a.m., Bowers entered the building and opened fire. Armed with an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle and three semi-automatic pistols, Bowers fired for 20 minutes (Griffiths, 2018; Rosenblatt et al., 2018). The first 911 calls came in at 9:55 a.m. from people who had barricaded themselves in the building (Almasy & Moshtaghian, 2018; Shackner, 2018). As Bowers made his way throughout the synagogue, survivors claimed that he shouted, "All Jews must die!" as he continued to fire (Hayes et al., 2018; Sheehan & Schiller, 2018; Tibon et al., 2018). At 10:00 a.m., police arrived at Tree of Life, where Bowers fired on them from the entryway (Almasy & Moshtaghian, 2018; Bradbury, 2018; Carlson et al., 2018). Police returned fire, which made Bowers retreat further into the building. Approximately 30 minutes later, tactical teams entered the synagogue and exchanged fire with Bowers. Being wounded during this exchange, Bowers ran and barricaded

himself into a room on the third floor (Almasy & Moshtaghian, 2018). At 11:08 a.m., the gunman surrendered and crawled out of the room.

According to officers working the scene, Bowers made a statement while in custody and claimed that he wanted all Jews to die because they were committing genocide against his people (Chavez et al., 2018). It was uncovered that Bowers had been radicalized by white nationalism, finding connections to the far-right and neo-Nazis in England (Graham, 2018). His coworkers and online presence confirmed this and stated that he was conservative but had become more aggressive in his beliefs to the point of right-wing extremism (Lord, 2018). In his social media posts, he had also begun posting antisemitic conspiracy theories, such as the white genocide theory that believes Jews support non-white immigration, racial integration, and abortion (Lord, 2018; Renshaw, 2018). For instance, shortly before his attack at Tree of Life, he had posted on a social media site that Jews had aided members of the Central American refugee caravans moving toward the United States. In his posts, he referred to the migrants as “invaders” who “kill our people” (Andone et al., 2018; Kragie, 2018). Bowers also directed his anger at African Americans, used racial slurs and images related to lynching (Lord, 2018; Raymond, 2018), and attacked White women who have relationships with Black men.

After receiving medical treatment, Bowers was charged by the United States Department of Justice with 29 federal crimes (Robertson et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2018). He made his first court appearance on October 29, 2018 where he was remanded into the custody of the United States Marshals Service without bail. Two days later, Bowers was indicted on 44 counts by a federal grand jury. The counts included hate crimes, obstruction of exercise of religious beliefs resulting in death and bodily injury, use of a firearm to commit violence and murder, and discharge of a firearm during a crime of violence (Ward et al., 2018). Bowers entered a plea of

not guilty before the grand jury convened again and indicted Bowers on an additional 19 counts, 13 of which were hate crimes (Scolforo, 2019). Bowers was arraigned in federal court on February 11, 2019, where federal prosecutors announced their intention to seek the death penalty (Torsten, 2019). Bowers was also charged with 36 state criminal charges, including criminal homicide, aggravated assault, attempted homicide, and ethnic intimidation (Robertson et al., 2018). As of now, a trial date has yet to be set, pending the resolution of outstanding motions.

In response to this shooting, many of the reactions focused on antisemitism and white supremacy, and freedom of religion and church security. Debate surrounding gun control was much more subdued in this case and was only briefly discussed with calls for commonsense gun legislation from Nancy Pelosi, former President Obama, and some celebrities (Shannon & Richardson, 2018). Rather than debating calls for gun control, the responses from President Trump and other Republicans focused on increasing security with armed guards for churches. For instance, President Trump stated that “if there was an armed guard inside the temple, they would have been able to stop him” and the event would not have been as tragic (Kelly et al., 2018; Lexington, 2018; Stewart, 2018). Echoing what was seen in the Sutherland Springs shooting, much of the discussion from conservatives involving guns centered on arming more civilians and guarding religious organizations from harm, in order to protect First Amendment rights.

In conjunction with the shooting taking place in a religious institution, the majority of reactions focused on antisemitism and white supremacy. In his press statement, President Trump called the shooting a wicked, antisemitic act of “pure evil” (Dedaj & Joyce, 2018). Many candlelight vigils and rallies were held to show solidarity with the victims and those of the Jewish community. However, while this shooting was widely denounced by politicians and

citizens alike, some were quick to criticize President Trump. For instance, Cecilia Wang of the American Civil Liberties Union said that the attack, along with other displays of violence and division, was inspired by Trump's rhetoric (Burke, 2018; Cummings, 2018). While Trump has not directly shared antisemitic statements or tweets, he has stoked "nativism and xenophobia" that has typically been directed against American Jews (Kirchick, 2018). As such, since President Trump took office, there has been an increase in division and bigotry and one cannot ignore the fact that Trump appeals to sentiments and animosities that marginalize already marginalized groups (Kirchick, 2018). Bowers' statements made online regarding Jews, immigrants, and people of color confirm that part of his motive was due to white supremacy. Additionally, the investigation uncovered that Bowers had been in communication with various far-right, white nationalist groups. In the aftermath of the shooting, many of these social media sites claimed Bowers a hero and supported genocide of Jews, further indicating the prevalence of white supremacy (Hauslohner & Olhlheiser, 2018; Katz, 2018).

#### *Case 7 – Walmart, El Paso, Texas*

On August 3, 2019, Patrick Crusius, a 21-year-old White man, entered a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas and shot and killed 22 people and injured another 24. Armed with a WASR-10 rifle, a semi-automatic version of an AK-47, Crusius entered the store and opened fire just before 10:30 a.m. (Branham, 2019; Danner, 2019). Witnesses stated that the shooter began firing in the parking lot before entering the store, which alerted the manager to issue a "Code Brown", which is Walmart's code designating an active shooter (Ryan, 2019). After alerting the store of the situation, employees assisted customers with fleeing or hiding for safety (Ryan, 2019; Stump, 2019). The shooting lasted approximately 10 minutes before Crusius left the store and returned to his vehicle. First responders arrived within six minutes of the first 911 call and assisted

victims with injuries and collected evidence. Crusius was arrested around 11:00 a.m. at the corner of Sunmount Drive and Viscount Boulevard, a three-minute drive from the Walmart (Branham, 2019; Chute et al., 2019; Danner, 2019). According to reports, Crusius did not resist arrest and went willingly with authorities.

Crusius was charged with capital murder shortly after his arrest (Blankstein & Burke, 2019; D. K. Li, 2019). The ensuing investigation revealed that he had been living with his grandparents in Allen, Texas and had driven over 10 hours to carry out his attack (Danner, 2019). El Paso police also uncovered that Crusius had posted a manifesto to 8Chan, an online message board (Blankstein & Burke, 2019). Information in the manifesto revealed the type of weapon used in the attack as well as the suspect's name and motive. Crusius claimed to be inspired by the Christchurch, NZ shootings, in which he expressed his support for the offender and also aired other grievances such as environmental degradation, cultural and ethnic replacement, and a Hispanic invasion (Abutaleb, 2019; Arango et al., 2019; Biesecker et al., 2019; Darby, 2019; Dearden, 2019; Eligon, 2019; Embury-Dennis, 2019). Statements made in the manifesto focused on immigration and the depletion of natural resources, stating that ending immigration would make the "American way of life more sustainable" (Abutaleb, 2019). Crusius also claimed that Democrats would soon control the United States due to an increasing Hispanic population, in which he believed that Latinx voters would side with Democrats (Abutaleb, 2019). Crusius criticized both the Democratic and Republican party for allowing corporations to employ foreigners and stated that the shooting would serve as a warning and incentive for Hispanics to leave the country (Abutaleb, 2019). While his focus was mostly on racial and ethnic complaints, Crusius also expressed fears of increasing technology and automation and the effects it may have on employment, and blamed corporations for overusing natural resources (Abutaleb, 2019).

In the wake of this incident, discussions largely centered around white supremacy, immigration, and gun rights. Due to the content of the manifesto, the El Paso shooting was quickly labeled as both domestic terrorism and a hate crime by the public and investigators (BBC News, 2019a; Romero et al., 2019). Crusius' racially extremist views written in the manifesto prior to the shooting could be used to prosecute him under hate crime statutes and domestic terrorism (Romero et al., 2019). As such, this event has been described as the deadliest anti-Latino attack in recent U.S. history (Hall & Contreras, 2019; Romero et al., 2019). Statements made in the manifesto have been attributed to ideologies associated with white supremacy and fears regarding the Great Replacement – a conspiracy theory that believes that western or White identity is at risk of being replaced by people of color through immigration. Furthermore, Jonathan Greenblatt, chief executive of the Anti-Defamation league, said this and other similar shootings indicated a global threat of white supremacy (Eligon, 2019). For instance, while Crusius was a lone wolf in action, he had a support community through technology that has advanced because of the ability to create echo chambers that cultivate violent and exclusive ideologies (Fisher, 2019).

The theme of white supremacy was also carried into the discussion surrounding immigration and the accompanying rhetoric that has been used by politicians and citizens alike. Primarily, politicians pointed out that anti-immigration comments made by President Trump could have inspired actions committed by white supremacists. The day of the shooting, President Trump condemned the attack and called it hateful and cowardly and stated that “our nation must condemn racism, bigotry and white supremacy. These sinister ideologies must be defeated. Hate has no place in America” (BBC News, 2019b). Critics, however, were quick to point out the similarities between Crusius' manifesto and statements that Trump has made in the past. For

example, earlier in 2019 President Trump told a group of minority congresswomen to “go back” to the countries they came from rather than “telling the American people how to run the government” (Rogers & Fandos, 2019). This statement in particular drew criticism due to the fact that the congresswomen he directed his statements at were American citizens, born in the United States. Other examples include Trump’s comments that were made in the wake of the San Bernardino and Orlando shootings, citing the need for travel bans and surveillance on mosques and people of the Muslim community (Gowen, 2015; Holland & Stephenson, 2015; Reston, 2016). Regarding Latinx communities specifically, Trump has consistently commented on illegal immigration, the border wall, and ending funding for DACA and other visas.

As with most mass shooting cases, a debate also centered on gun rights. Many of the members of the Democratic party, including several 2020 presidential candidates, called for political action to end gun violence (Frazin, 2019; Montero & Finnegan, 2019). Celebrities and other media figures also reacted in turn and called for action from Congress. Many were quick to criticize politicians for their sentiments after the shooting, stating that thoughts and prayers are not enough to stop gun violence (Dorman, 2019). Walmart employees were also involved in the gun control debate. In the days following the shooting, one Walmart employee sent an organization-wide memorandum urging employees to strike in order to force the corporation to stop selling guns and ammunition (Peterson, 2019). At the time, Walmart announced that it had no plan to alter any of its gun-sale policies within their stores. One month later, however, Walmart issued a new statement and announced that it would reduce its gun and ammunition sales (Meyersohn, 2019). The company said it would stop selling handgun ammunition and “short-barrel rifle ammunition” as well as handguns themselves (Meyersohn, 2019). Walmart

also requested that customers no longer openly carry guns into any of their stores, including Sam's Club stores (Meyersohn, 2019).

A final point of debate involved the role of video games in perpetuating a culture of violence, even though no link has been made between Crusius' use of video games and the shooting. As seen in the aftermath of other mass shooting events (e.g. Columbine, Parkland), video games have been accused of inspiring individuals to carry out violence in their real lives. Following the El Paso shooting, President Trump stated that "we must stop the glorification of violence in our society. This includes gruesome and grisly video games that are now commonplace" (Timm, 2019). Other conservative politicians backed the President's claim, believing that video games "teach young people to kill" (Timm, 2019). However, while debates surrounding violent video games have been repeatedly discussed, there is no evidence that there is a correlation between violent video games and real-world violence (Barnett et al., 2008; Ferguson, 2008; Ferguson et al., 2008; Unsworth et al., 2007). The video game industry responded and claimed that politicians, especially Republicans, were simply looking for a scapegoat to take the focus off of gun control (Badham, 2019; Baragona, 2019; Farokhmanesh, 2019; Gilbert, 2019;). Even without evidence that video games and other violent materials cause violence, Walmart instructed its stores to remove signs and displays that contain violent themes or aggressive behavior, including the removal of signage and video game demos displayed on screens within their stores.

#### *Case 8 – Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre, Christchurch, New Zealand*

On March 15, 2019, Brenton Tarrant, a 28-year-old White male, carried out two consecutive mass shootings at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, resulting in 51 deaths and 49 injuries – New Zealand's worst mass shooting. Islam is practiced by less than two percent of

New Zealanders but has had a strong showing in the Christchurch region. The Al Noor Mosque opened in 1985 as the first mosque in the South Island and the Linwood Islamic Centre opened in 2018 (Akerman, 2019; Matthewson, 2015). At 1:40 p.m., Tarrant arrived at the Al Noor Mosque and began shooting. There were an estimated 300 people inside of the mosque when the shooting began, attending Friday prayer. Prior to the shooting, Tarrant began live streaming on Facebook Live. The video shows Tarrant driving to the mosque, where his cache of weapons can be seen in the passenger's seat. Filmed on a helmet camera, it then shows Tarrant exit the vehicle and walk into the mosque before he opened fire on the congregation. He initially used a shotgun where he fired nine shots before switching to his semi-automatic rifle. This burst of shooting lasted for three minutes before Tarrant returned to his car for more ammunition and then re-entered the mosque to open fire again (Macklin, 2019). During both bursts of shooting, Tarrant fired at people outside of the mosque and also used strobe lights and loud music to disorient his victims while firing, all the time streaming his actions (Horton, 2019). This video lasted for a total of seventeen minutes and ended as Tarrant drove away from the mosque at 1:46 p.m. In total, this shooting only lasted six minutes. First responders arrived at the scene at 1:51 p.m. to render aid and search for the shooter, who had already left the scene (Cave, 2019).

After Tarrant left Al Noor Mosque, he made his way to the Linwood Islamic Centre, three miles away from Al Noor. Once he arrived, Tarrant began shooting at people outside of the Centre and through the windows (Macdonald, 2019). Between gunfire, Tarrant attempted to retrieve another weapon from his car and was confronted by a worshipper named Aziz Wahabzada, who threw a credit card reader at him and attempted to distract him from the mosque (Perry, 2019; Saber & Ahmadi, 2019). Despite Wahabzada's attempts, Tarrant retrieved another weapon, entered the mosque, and continued to fire. When the gunman returned to his

car, Wahabzada threw a shotgun at his car and shattered one of the windows before Tarrant drove away (Perry, 2019; Saber & Ahmadi, 2019). After emergency calls came in from the Linwood Islamic Centre, the police pursuit began at 1:57 p.m. According to video footage, the chase lasted only a couple of minutes before Tarrant's car was rammed by a police car and it came to a stop (BBC News, 2019c). At this point, Tarrant was arrested at gunpoint and taken into custody. The Prime Minister later released a statement that Tarrant still had weapons and explosives in the car and was believed to be making his way to a third location to continue his shooting spree (Chavez et al., 2019; Crawford, 2019).

After his arrest, Tarrant was initially charged with murder in relation to the attacks. Upon investigation, it was uncovered that Tarrant had become obsessed with Islamic extremist attacks in 2016 and planned his attacks as an act of revenge (Ward, 2019). According to officials, he had visited European countries, where it is believed that he came into contact with far-right organizations (Sengupta, 2019). He also donated to many right-wing groups and had a large social media presence where he called for the United States to be weakened and for the ethnic cleansing of Muslims (Coalson, 2019; Wilson, 2019; Zivanovic, 2019). Further proof of his radicalization can be found in Tarrant's manifesto. The 74-page document titled "The Great Replacement", referenced white supremacist conspiracy theories, detailed the plans of his attacks, and expressed anti-immigrant sentiments (Darby, 2019; Gilsinan, 2019). The manifesto displays neo-Nazi symbols such as the Black Sun and Odin's Cross and referred to himself as an "ethno-nationalist", an "eco-fascist", and a "kebab removalist" (Purtill, 2019; Weissmann, 2019; Zivanovic, 2019;). Tarrant further conveyed his support for Anders Behring Breivik, the man responsible for the Norway bombing, and for U. S. President Donald Trump and called him a symbol of "renewed white identity and common purpose" (Gelineau & Gambrell, 2019).

Minutes before his attacks at the mosques, Tarrant emailed it to more than 30 recipients, including the prime minister's office and several media outlets, and also shared links on Twitter and 8Chan (Davey, 2019; Wong, 2019). Further evidence of Tarrant's link to white supremacy was the evidence found on his weapons. While legally obtained, Tarrant modified the weapons he used with bump stocks (Savage, 2019) and covered them in white writing. The writing contained the names of historical events, people, and symbols related to historical conflicts and wars between Muslims and European Christians, as well as the names of victims from recent Islamic terrorist attacks and the names of far-right attackers (Coalson, 2019; Zivanovic, 2019).

In the wake of the investigation, Tarrant made multiple appearances in court. His first appearance took place on March 16, 2019 where he was charged with one count of murder (Chavez et al., 2019). The judge ordered the courtroom to be closed for this appearance except for the media, at which Tarrant smiled, waved, and made an assumed "white power" gesture with his hand (Falconer, 2019). Tarrant was then remanded into custody and transferred to the maximum-security unit at Auckland Prison. On April 4, the number of charges increased to a total of 89 – 50 for murder and 39 for attempted murder (Graham-McLay, 2019). The judge also ordered that Tarrant undergo a psychiatric evaluation to assess his mental fitness to stand trial. On May 21, Commissioner Bush announced that they would also be charging Tarrant with engaging in a terrorist act (Graham-McLay, 2019). In June of 2019, Tarrant pled not guilty to all charges and his mental health assessments came back clear. The trial date has been set to start in June 2020, where, if found guilty, he could face the mandatory sentence of life imprisonment, either with parole after 17 years or without parole, depending on the decisions of the sentencing judge (Edgeler, 2019).

This case is presented as a negative case due to the fact that it occurred outside the United States and is governed by completely different laws, contexts, and frames. Negative or deviant cases are those cases that demonstrate contrasts with the majority of the data (Charmaz, 2014; Emigh, 1997). Qualitative researchers employ negative cases to identify new variables or to provide alternative explanations for their developing theories and hypotheses (Charmaz, 2014; Emigh, 1997). Additionally, using negative cases makes it easier to distinguish between important and irrelevant factors in case analyses (Emigh, 1997). However, while this shooting took place outside of the United States, it received international coverage, and was widely discussed in the U.S., with much attention on gun laws, white supremacy, and the connection to rhetoric used by U.S. President Donald Trump. Tarrant purchased his weapons legally and a loophole allowed him to upgrade his guns into a military-style weapon. For instance, Tarrant legally purchased his AR-15 rifle with the standard license, but these firearms can only be sold with a magazine that holds no more than seven rounds (Savage, 2019). However, Tarrant was able to purchase a high capacity magazine (that holds 30-100 rounds) without a license. As such, gun law regulation became a point of discussion by the New Zealand government. In the days following the shooting, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern stated that gun laws needed to change. In a chance to make the community safer, the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, and the cabinet met to vote on potential gun law reform. One month after the shooting, New Zealand's parliament voted 119 to 1 in favor of the ban on military-style semi-automatic weapons (Faidell & Wright, 2019). The swift action taken by New Zealand prompted considerable criticism of the United States' lack of action on gun control issues. The only significant U.S. gun regulation since 1994 was the banning of bump stocks in 2019 (Norris, 2019). Assault weapons are still allowed and there has been no change in background check regulations. The fact that New

Zealand, a country without universal gun registration rules and strong gun lobbies, was able to act in a strong manner after a devastating attack was proof enough for gun control advocates to criticize the lack of gun control legislation and inaction by Congress (Norris, 2019).

Due to the fact that Tarrant was a white supremacist, debates also centered on the prevalence of white supremacy as well as anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments. While the shooting was widely condemned by world leaders across the globe, some were quick to point out that President Trump has used hateful rhetoric in his tweets and statements about immigration and Muslims. For instance, Trump was faulted for not explicitly expressing support for Muslims, rather just stating that his warmest sympathies go out to New Zealand (Bort, 2019; Walsh, 2019). Others also highlighted previous statements and tweets President Trump made such as calling for the Wall to stifle illegal immigration and his proposed Muslim bans and registry. Tarrant himself stated that President Trump is a “symbol of white identity” (Gelineau & Gambrell, 2019; Walsh, 2019). Senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Amy Klobuchar stated that President Trump has emboldened white supremacists by not labeling the acts as terrorism, and that it cannot be overlooked that these supremacists have cited Trump along the way (Walsh, 2019). Additionally, President Trump and the White House failed to acknowledge the prevalence of white supremacy. Rather than focusing on white supremacy or nationalism, Trump told reporters that he believed these acts were carried out by a very small group of people with very serious problems. Further proof of the lack of acknowledgement from the White House is their decision to hold out on signing the “Christchurch call” (Stewart, 2019). This effort is an international call to fight online extremism, which has been signed by more than a dozen countries as well as tech giants Amazon, Facebook, and Google (Stewart, 2019). Billed as a commitment to eliminate extremist content online, governments agree to uphold freedom of expression while acknowledging that

the darkest reaches of the internet must be addressed. According to White House representatives, the decision not to sign stems from concerns surrounding First Amendment lines, such as infringing upon the right to free speech and freedom of the press (Stewart, 2019). To critics, therefore, this is just another sign that the U.S. is unwilling to face the problems behind mass shootings and hatred.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study uses a case study approach to investigate the representation of mass shootings across liberal and conservative mainstream news sites and far leaning news commentary sites. According to Creswell (2007), case study research involves the study of an issue through one or more cases. This qualitative approach allows researchers to explore their chosen cases through detailed, in-depth data collection. These data then allow for the examination of emergent themes. In collective case studies, the researcher selects a main issue and uses multiple cases to explore this issue in depth (Creswell, 2007; Silverman, 2005). Furthermore, these cases are often purposefully chosen in order to fully explore the issue and to gain multiple perspectives.

Although qualitative methods are sound, they have been criticized for issues of reliability and generalizability when compared to quantitative methods (Leung, 2015; Silverman, 2005). Critics often state that qualitative methods are not as rigorous or generalizable in their methods, analyses, and findings. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and King and Horrocks (2010) have suggested that qualitative techniques are just as rigorous but should be analyzed based on different criteria from quantitative research such as credibility, transferability, trackable variance, and confirmability. With regard to this project, transferability, trackable variance, and confirmability will be reached. Credibility is not used in this study because it involves respondents who were interviewed, who are then asked if the results are an accurate

representation of their participation (King & Horrocks, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since this study uses articles, credibility does not apply. Transferability refers to the ability that conclusions drawn in one setting can be transferred to another (King & Horrocks, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trackable variance refers to the inherent change that occurs within qualitative research. In place of reliability, trackable variance recognizes that real-world settings change and phenomena are instable (King & Horrocks, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, confirmability states that qualitative research is not objective. In order to be fully transparent in regard to their subjectivity, researchers should present their research process in sufficient detail in order for readers to reasonably see how the conclusions were reached (King & Horrocks, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Relating to this study, transferability will be achieved by including events that take place in various regions and locations and include a variety of offender and victim characteristics. As such, these chosen mass shooting cases can be reasonably applied to other shootings. Trackable variance is achieved by recognizing that circumstances, discussions, reactions, and policies surround mass shooting events are in flux. However, the common themes that emerge will still have cultural and societal significance. In order to achieve confirmability, this project has and will continue to outline the details of the methods used and the emergent themes.

In this study, eight specific cases were chosen to examine the representation of mass shootings across liberal and conservative mainstream news sites and far leaning news commentary sites. These cases were chosen because they each appeared in the national news cycle and sparked debates on policies and violence. Four cases were specifically chosen because they each occurred at religious institutions, but each represents different religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. While these cases all have religion in common, the differences in the sect of

religion and makeup of the victims allows for an in-depth comparison of how each event may have been portrayed differently. The other cases were chosen for their occurrence in public spaces as well as the demographics of the victims and offenders. For instance, two cases featured offenders of Middle Eastern descent, while the remaining cases involved White offenders. The difference in offender demographics allows for comparative analysis of how offenders of different races are portrayed in the media. Therefore, the case study approach is ideal for this study because one issue is explored through the examination and analysis of multiple cases.

The articles comprise the data and were analyzed for emergent themes using content analysis and thematic coding. Scholars have a long history of examining texts using content analysis (Cole, 1988; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Content analysis is concerned with meanings, intentions, consequences, and context (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). While often criticized as being too simplistic and subjective, qualitative research is just as rigorous as quantitative research (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Morgan, 1993). Content analysis can also be utilized in both quantitative and qualitative research designs. In qualitative research, content analysis can be used to gain more understanding of certain issues by analyzing meaning (Creswell, 2007). The goals of qualitative content analysis include finding correlations in concepts; understanding intentions of a group, individual, or institution; identifying bias in communication; revealing differences in communication; and analyzing the consequences of communication content (Luo, 2019; White & Marsh, 2006). In a quantitative design, content analysis refers to the frequency of words, phrases, or concepts. This form of content analysis is also used in this study.

There are three approaches to content analysis: deductive, inductive, and abductive. Deductive content analysis is often used in cases where the researcher is retesting data in a new context (Catanzaro, 1988; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This approach usually involves testing

categories and concepts and is therefore not a good fit for this project. Inductive content analysis includes open coding, creating categories, and abstraction (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The researcher chooses and reads through the material while taking notes that are then used to code and categorize concepts. The purpose of creating categories is to provide a means of describing the issue in order to better understand it (Cavanagh, 1997; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Once categories are defined, subcategories can also be developed with similar characteristics. Abductive analysis is the process of creatively inferencing and double-checking those inferences with more data (Charmaz, 2009; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Therefore, abduction should be understood as a continuous analysis process, where inference is based on what the researcher already knows. In other words, rather than setting all preconceived notions aside in the research process, researchers should enter the project with a broad theoretical base and develop insights throughout the entire process (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This project thus uses the abductive content analysis method.

Having performed extensive background research in choosing the cases, some themes have already been identified, making this project abductive rather than purely inductive. Utilizing the abductive content analysis method, the chosen articles were then examined for emergent themes. Themes are “subjects that are introduced in the media and text and can be minor, significant, or central to the unfolding of the story” (Holtzman, 2000, p. 45). This project examined articles for themes relating to offenders, victims, policy responses, and explanations. Possible offender themes relate to their motive, as well as sympathetic and/or unsympathetic descriptions that were used in reports. Victim themes may include sympathetic and/or unsympathetic themes as to whether they were innocent or deserved their victimization. Explanations include how the event was labeled and categorized in the media. These can include

motives and what the possible reasons this crime happened may be. For instance, mass shooting events may use the explanation of gun availability or the rise of white supremacy. Finally, Policy responses refer to the way in which politicians and society in general reacts to criminal events. These may include calls to action or tangible policies that were enacted following incidents. The themes that emerged for each category are discussed in depth in the following chapters.

Table 1 provides a snapshot of pertinent case information including offender and victim demographics, total number of people that were killed and injured, as well as location details of each shooting incident. As shown in this table, the majority of offenders were White males in their 20s. Half of the shootings took place in the south and were in public places, as most mass casualty shooting events are (Krouse & Richardson, 2015). Victim demographics include race, sex, and age range. While most incidents include a wide array of victim identities, the race with the highest fatality rate was recorded. According to the findings, White victims were represented in the majority of cases, with Latinx populations being the second most prevalent. Males represented the majority of victims. In regard to age, victims ranged from as young as one to 97; however, the largest age group affected were those aged 30-60. Table 2 further outlines important case information as it relates to the explanations and policies that were forwarded in the aftermath of each shooting event.

**Table 1 – Details of Shootings: Demographics**

<b>Cases</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Offender Race</b>	<b>Offender Sex</b>	<b>Offender Age</b>	<b>Fatalities</b>	<b>Victim Race*</b>	<b>Victim Sex</b>	<b>Victim Age Range</b>	<b>Nonfatal Injuries</b>
Charleston, SC	6/17/2015	South	Religious institution (Baptist)	White	M	25	9	African American	6 F 3 M	26-87	5
San Bernardino, CA	12/2/2015	West	Workplace	Middle Eastern	M & F	28 & 29	14	White	5 F 9 M	26-60	22
Orlando, FL	6/12/2016	South	Nightclub	Middle Eastern	M	29	49	Latinx	9 F 40 M	18-50	53
Las Vegas, NV	10/1/2017	West	Public festival	White	M	64	58	White	36 F 22 M	20-67	413
Sutherland Springs, TX	11/5/2017	South	Religious institution (Baptist)	White	M	26	26	White	17 F 9 M	1-77	20
Pittsburgh, PA	10/27/2018	Northeast	Religious institution (Synagogue)	White	M	46	11	White	3 F 8 M	54-97	6
El Paso, TX	8/3/2019	South	Shopping Center	White	M	21	22	Latinx	10 F 11 M	15-86	24
New Zealand	3/15/2019	Oceania	Religious institution (Mosque)	White	M	28	51	Middle Eastern	4 F 47 M	3-77 (50-60 largest)	49

\*Victim Race indicates the race of the majority of the victims

**Table 2 – Details of Shootings: Explanations and Policies**

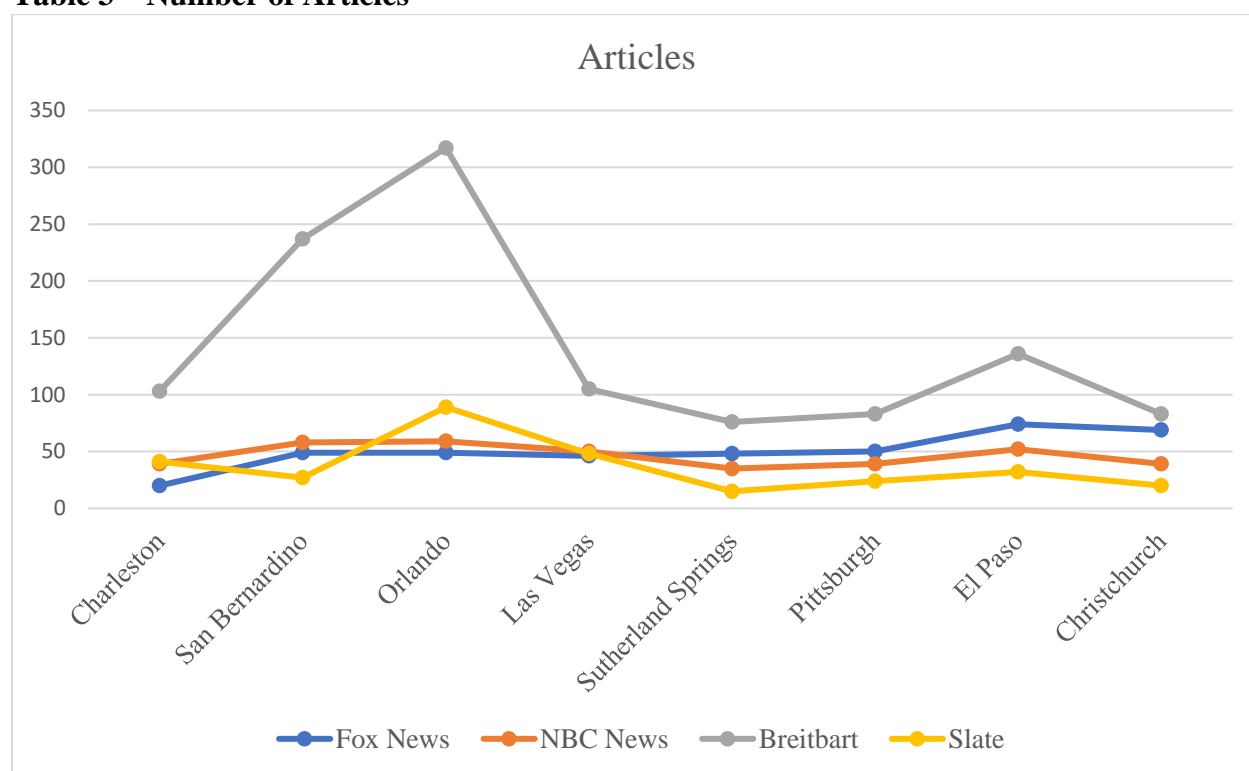
<b>Cases</b>	<b>Explanations</b>	<b>Policies Proposed</b>
Charleston, SC	White Supremacy Hate Crime First Amendment Infringement Gun Access	Confederate Flag Removal Armed Security at Religious Institutions Gun Control (Background Checks)
San Bernardino, CA	Terrorism and Extremism Gun Access	Immigration bans Muslim Surveillance Gun Control (Commonsense & No Fly Lists) Thoughts & Prayers
Orlando, FL	Terrorism and Immigration Gun Access Hate Crime	Immigration bans Muslim Surveillance Gun Control Thoughts & Prayers
Las Vegas, NV	Mental Health Gun Access	Gun Control (Bump Stocks) Thoughts & Prayers
Sutherland Springs, TX	Mental Health Gun Access First Amendment Infringement	Gun Control (Background Checks) Armed Security at Religious Institutions Thoughts & Prayers
Pittsburgh, PA	White Supremacy First Amendment Infringement	Gun Control (Commonsense) Armed Security at Religious Institutions White Supremacy Monitoring
El Paso, TX	White Supremacy and Immigration Gun Access Video Game Violence	Political Rhetoric and Immigration Laws Gun Control Removal of Violent Displays and Demos White Supremacy Monitoring
New Zealand	White Supremacy Gun Access	Christchurch Call (Bill to combat White Supremacy) Gun Control (Semi-Automatic Weapon Ban) Thoughts & Prayers

Table 3 displays the number of articles that were found for this project. A search was done on each of the chosen sites using keywords for each case (e.g., the location followed by “shooting”), after which time parameters were implemented. Articles were gathered starting on the day of each shooting. A time range of three weeks after the date of each shooting was then imposed, as this is when article attrition occurs. In other words, the event has run its course in the news cycle and reports and updates begin to wane. Once these filters were applied, the resulting number of total articles was 2,212. After finalizing the total number of articles, they were analyzed. The following section breaks down the number of articles according to mass shooting case and news site. The Charleston shooting produced a total of 203 articles (*Breitbart* = 103; Fox = 20; NBC = 39; *Slate* = 41). The San Bernardino shooting produced a total of 371 articles (*Breitbart* = 237; Fox = 49; NBC = 58; *Slate* = 27). The Orlando search resulted in a total of 514 articles (*Breitbart* = 317; Fox = 49; NBC = 59; *Slate* = 89). Las Vegas presented a total of 249 articles (*Breitbart* = 105; Fox = 46; NBC = 50; *Slate* = 48). The Sutherland Springs shooting produced a total of 174 articles (*Breitbart* = 76; Fox = 48; NBC = 35; *Slate* = 15). The Pittsburgh shooting produced a total of 196 articles (*Breitbart* = 83; Fox = 50; NBC = 39; *Slate* = 24). The El Paso search resulted in a total of 294 articles (*Breitbart* = 136; Fox = 74; NBC = 52; *Slate* = 32). Christchurch presented a total of 211 articles (*Breitbart* = 83; Fox = 69; NBC = 39; *Slate* = 20). Orlando and San Bernardino produced the highest number of articles, showing a media tendency to focus on events designated as terrorism. El Paso received the next highest amount of attention, with discussions centering on the presence of white supremacy and political response, as this event occurred in the run up to the 2020 presidential election. Las Vegas followed shortly behind El Paso, receiving a substantial amount of media attention, as this was the largest mass shooting in U.S. history to date, and due to the lack of known motive by the shooter, Stephen

Paddock. All shootings that took place in a religious institution received comparable amounts of media attention, albeit much less than the other shootings featured in this analysis.

When the articles are broken down by news site, *Breitbart* greatly outnumbers the other sites, accounting for more than half of all articles (n=1,140). However, it should be noted that *Breitbart* also published many repeat or extremely similar articles with slightly different headlines, inflating the total number of articles. Exact duplicates of articles were discarded, but the slightly altered articles remained. *Fox News* accounted for the next highest number of articles (n=405) and *NBC News* amounted a total of 371 articles. This shows that the mainstream news sites published a comparable number of articles related to each shooting. Finally, *Slate* comprised a total of 296 articles. Once the final number of articles was amassed, they were then analyzed for emergent themes.

**Table 3 – Number of Articles**



In order to supplement the themes, a quantitative content analysis utilizing a word frequency query was conducted on the articles for each case from each news site. Word frequencies can be used to identify possible themes and to supplement emerging themes (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The word frequency query searches selected text and identifies the words that are most commonly used. While instrumental, it should be noted that this method is not an alternative to interactive thematic coding (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Rather, word frequency queries can be used for exploratory purposes or to strengthen the themes that have been pulled in qualitative data. In order to perform word frequency queries, this project utilized NVivo software. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software that assists researchers in their analysis of qualitative data. NVivo does not run analyses but is simply a way to store and organize information to aid with coding and categorization (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). NVivo was used to conduct the word frequency analysis and as a way to sort emergent themes. Word frequency query results and themes are discussed in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER IV

### WORD FREQUENCY QUERIES

This chapter reports the results from the word frequency queries ran across all articles chosen for this project. Word frequency queries search all selected text or files for the most used words, which can also be used to identify emergent themes. Word frequency queries were conducted on each case as a whole and then by the case by each news site (*Fox News*, *NBC News*, *Breitbart*, and *Slate*) to identify the top 50 most used words. The results from these queries help to identify emerging themes for each case, based on the main focus of each news site. These results also reveal what differences, if any, are present in the representation of mass shooting events across liberal and conservative mainstream news sites and commentary sites. Thematic findings are also discussed.

#### CASE 1 – EMANUEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

A word frequency query was conducted on all 203 articles about the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC in order to determine which words were used most often. Figure 1 presents the top 50 words that were used in all articles relating to the Charleston shooting in a word cloud format. “Church” was the most used word with a count of 879 instances, closely followed by “Charleston” with 781 uses. However, these words can be considered identifiers for the location of the shooting, and as such, do not lead to pertinent themes. The third most used word was “flag”, signifying debates about the use and display of the Confederate flag and its racist history. As such, “Confederate” was also a featured word, with 503 uses within the articles. The shooter’s last name, “Roof” was used 621 times, showing the tendency for the media to focus on offenders in high profile criminal instances. “South” was a

frequently used word as well, totaling a count of 630 uses. However, articles will need to be analyzed for context in order to determine if “south” was used as an identifier of the state (i.e., South Carolina) or as a signifier to the predominant use of the confederate flag and history of slavery in the South. Race was also a topic of discussion in this case, as seen in the use of “Black” (n=529) and “White” (n=470) and the debates that centered around classifying this shooting as a hate crime. In sum, the word frequency query on all articles for the Charleston church shooting reveals a focus on the location of the shooting, the offender, and the subsequent debates surrounding the event regarding race and the Confederate flag.

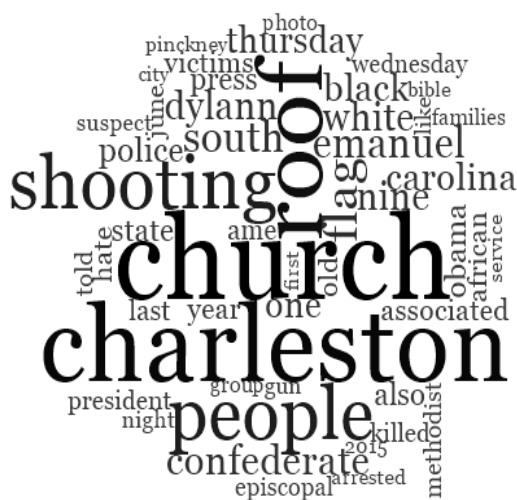
### Figure 1 - Charleston Shooting Case Word Cloud



After running a word frequency query on all articles, separate queries were conducted for each news site. *Fox News* had similar top results to the overall word frequency findings. Figure 2 displays the top 50 most frequent words used in *Fox News* articles discussing the Charleston shooting. The top two most used words were “church” (n=121) and “Charleston” (n=110), similar to the overall findings. The third most used word was “Roof” (n=98), referencing the

shooter and displaying the tendency to focus on offenders when reporting crime. The word “shooting” was the next most used word (n=73) and speaks to the labeling of the event as a shooting rather than a hate crime or act of domestic terrorism. “Flag” (n=47) and “Confederate” (n=37) fell within the top 10 most used words on *Fox News*, referencing the debates of the use of the Confederate flag and the legacy of slavery in the United States. Words signifying race, such as “White” (n=35) and “Black” (n=34) fell within the top 15 most used words but were comparable to other words that were not significant to thematic findings, such as “Carolina”, “Thursday”, and “nine”, referencing the date and location of the shooting, as well as the number of victims. Therefore, it is possible that *Fox News* focused their reports on the offender and classifying the event as a shooting rather than discussing race and the implications of the event as an act of hate. Furthermore, their reports discussed the use of the Confederate flag, but not at as great a rate as the overall word frequency query found.

**Figure 2 - Charleston Shooting Case Word Cloud - *Fox News***



*NBC News* word frequency results are displayed in Figure 3. These results show that *NBC News* exhibited some similarities in their articles with reference to their top three most used words, but also showed deviation in their reporting of the Charleston church shooting. For instance, the top three used words were, once again, “church” (n=225), “Charleston” (n=159), and “Roof” (n=153). This shows that *NBC News*’ main focus in their reporting was on the location of the shooting the identification of the shooter, Dylann Roof. The remaining results in the top 10 most used words were simply identifiers rather than signifiers of themes. These words included “south”, “news”, “NBC”, “Carolina”, and “people”. However, words related to possible themes were found within the top 20 results. “Black” was used a total of 62 times, referencing the demographic makeup of the victims and the discussions on race surrounding this shooting. While race was a discussion in these articles, “White” (n=43), was not as prominent, falling at the 23<sup>rd</sup> most used word. Another commonly used word was “hate” (n=48), showing *NBC News*’ willingness to frame this event as a hate crime and discuss racism. Finally, *NBC News* reports focused a great deal on the victims, as shown in the fact that the word “victims” was used a total of 44 times. Notably absent, however, was the discussion of the Confederate flag. Neither “flag” nor “Confederate” were found within the top 25 most used words. Instead, they landed at 30 and 35, respectively. Therefore, beyond the reference to location and the shooter, it can be seen that *NBC News* placed a greater amount of effort in their reports to reference the victims and give precedence to the framing of this shooting as a hate crime.

**Figure 3 - Charleston Shooting Case Word Cloud - *NBC News***



The results from *Breitbart's* word frequency query place “church” and “Charleston” at the top of the list. Both words were used over 370 times in their articles, representing where the shooting took place. Varying from the other news sites, however, *Breitbart's* third and fourth most used words are “flag” and “Confederate”, rather than allusions to the shooter. References to the Confederate flag were mentioned over 300 times in their articles, showing that *Breitbart* tended to focus on the implications of the Confederate flag and the subsequent policies related to production and display of the flag. While mentions of the shooter did fall within the top 10 most used words (“Roof” = 234), the focus on the shooter was overshadowed by discussions surrounding the flag. Race was also mentioned in *Breitbart* articles, with “Black” being used 225 times and “White” being used 157 times. Also receiving a large amount of attention was the word “gun” which was used 196 times. Overall, while references to the location of the shooting, the shooter himself, and race were consistent with other sites’ reporting of this event, *Breitbart* placed a greater amount of attention on the Confederate flag and was the only site to have “gun”











The results from *Breitbart*'s word frequency query once again place "San" and "Bernardino" at the top of the list. Both words were used over 730 times in their articles, representing where the shooting took place. "Farook" was also within the top 10 most used words with 459 uses. However, "Malik" was only mentioned 275 times, showing the gender disparity in reporting female offenders. Varying from the other news sites, *Breitbart*'s other most used words included "gun" (n=454) and "Obama" (n=401). These words could signify greater discussion of gun policies and subsequent debates calling for gun control by President Obama. *Breitbart* also featured more articles framing the event as terrorism, as seen in their use of the words "Islamic" (n=323), "terrorist" (n=260), "Muslim" (n=235), and "ISIS" (n=211). Furthermore, *Breitbart* was the only news site to have "American" (n=214) in their list of the top 50 most used words in their articles. This may be in relation to the discussions of the event as a terrorist attack and the threat to American values and the American way of life. Overall, while references to the location of the shooting, the shooters, and policy were consistent with other sites' reporting of this event, *Breitbart* placed a greater amount of attention on the framing of the event as terrorism. Figure 9 displays the word frequency reports from *Breitbart*.

**Figure 9 - San Bernardino Shooting Case Word Cloud - *Breitbart***



*Slate* also deviated from other news sites in regard to their word frequency query results. Figure 10 displays these results in a word cloud. References to “San” and “Bernardino” did not comprise the most used words and instead fell at numbers four and five, respectively. While both words were used over 80 times, *Slate* gave more attention to the implications of the shooting rather than simply reporting the location. For instance, the most used words at *Slate* were “gun” (n=116) and “mass shooting” (n=88), which references the use of firearms in yet another mass shooting in the United States. “Control” (n=34) was also used, falling within the top 20 most used words in *Slate* articles, possibly relating to discussions of gun control. The shooters names were mentioned in *Slate*’s articles and fell at numbers six (“Farook” = 75) and nine (“Malik” = 55). While not the main concentration of their articles, *Slate* still did participate in focusing on the offenders in their reports, and in the gender disparity in reporting female offenders compared to male offenders. “Terrorism” was mentioned in some articles from *Slate* but was only used 27 times and fell at number 35 of the list of top 50 results for most used words. Therefore, *Slate*’s reporting of the San Bernardino shooting can be seen as focusing more on the details and framing of the shooting as it relates to guns, gun control, and mass shootings, rather than focusing solely on the offenders, terrorism, and location.

**Figure 10 - San Bernardino Shooting Case Word Cloud - *Slate***



### CASE 3 – PULSE NIGHTCLUB, ORLANDO, FLORIDA

A word frequency query was conducted on all 514 articles in order to determine which words were used most often. Figure 11 presents the top 50 words that were used in all articles relating to the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, FL in a word cloud format. The top two most used words were “Orlando” and “Mateen”, both used over 1,700 times. The use of “Orlando” can be considered an identifier for the location, and thus, not related to emerging themes. The use of “Mateen” continues to display the proclivity to focus on offenders over victims in mass casualty events. Words referencing the event, such as “people” (n=1,371), “shooting” (n=906), and “attack” (n=861) also fell within the top 10 most used words. Other words commonly used in these articles that may lead to themes were “gun” (n=893) and “gay” (n=793). The use of the word “gun” may symbolize a discussion on gun control, as often seen in the aftermath of a mass shooting. “Gay” references the location of the shooting, Pulse nightclub, but is also used as an identifier for the victims. Further analysis will examine the context of these words to determine if they are related to emergent themes regarding policy and victim representation. Using words





but also showed deviation in their reporting of the Orlando shooting. For instance, the top two used words were, once again, “Mateen” (n=341) and “Orlando” (n=307). “Omar” also fell in the top 15 most used words with 96 counts. This shows that *NBC News*’ main focus in their reporting was on the location of the shooting and the identification of the shooter, Omar Mateen. The majority of the remaining results in the top 15 most used words were simply identifiers rather than signifiers of themes. These words included “people”, “shooting”, “news”, “NBC”, “nightclub”, and “attack”. *NBC News* also featured more articles reporting on the victims, as “gay”, “victims”, and “community” each had over 100 uses, which may be discussing the impact of the shooting on the LGBTQ+ community. “Gun” was also a top result from *NBC News*, with 88 uses, which may reference discussions on gun control. Once again, references to terrorism were absent in *NBC News*’ articles. Only mentioned 54 times, “Muslim” fell at 35, and “ISIS” (n=48) fell at 41 of the top 50 most used words. Therefore, beyond the reference to location and the shooter, it can be seen that *NBC News* was rather straightforward in their reporting, unwilling to frame the event as anything other than a shooting, also giving more attention to the victims and effects of the incident.

**Figure 13 - Orlando Shooting Case Word Cloud - *NBC News***

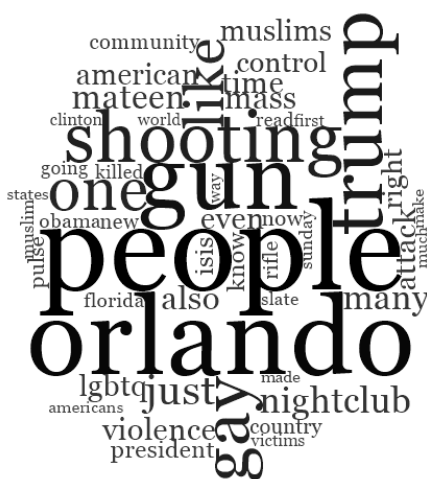


Related to other cases and news reports, *Breitbart* featured far more articles on the Orlando shooting than any other news site. The results from *Breitbart*'s word frequency query once again place "Mateen" and "Orlando" at the top of the list. Both words were used over 930 times in their articles, representing the offender and where the shooting took place. "Omar" was also within the top 15 most used words with 344 uses. Varying from the other news sites, *Breitbart*'s other most used words included "gun" (n=494), "gay" (n=395), "Obama" (n=365), and "Trump" (n=278). These words could signify greater discussion of gun policies and subsequent policy debates from President Obama and then-candidate Trump. In reference to the use of "gay", further analysis will need to be conducted in order to understand the context and whether it is alluding to the location of the shooting or the victims themselves. *Breitbart* also featured more articles framing the event as terrorism, as seen in their use of the words "Islamic" (n=686), "terrorist" (n=404), "Muslim" (n=375), "ISIS" (n=246), "radical" (n=231), and "war" (n=171). Furthermore, *Breitbart* also used the word "American" a total of 321 times, far outweighing the other news sites. Heavy usage of this word may be related to framing the event



controversial comments following the shooting. The shooter's name was mentioned in *Slate*'s articles, but fell at number 12, amassing a total of 121 uses, far below that of their news counterparts and other words within *Slate*'s articles. "Muslim" (n=107) and "ISIS" (n=100) were mentioned in some articles from *Slate* but fell at 21 and 24 on the list of top 50 results for most used words. Therefore, it can be seen that *Slate*'s reporting of the Orlando shooting focused more on the implications and framing of the shooting as it relates to guns, policy implications, and victim impact, rather than focusing solely on the offender, terrorism, and location.

**Figure 15 - Orlando Shooting Case Word Cloud - *Slate***

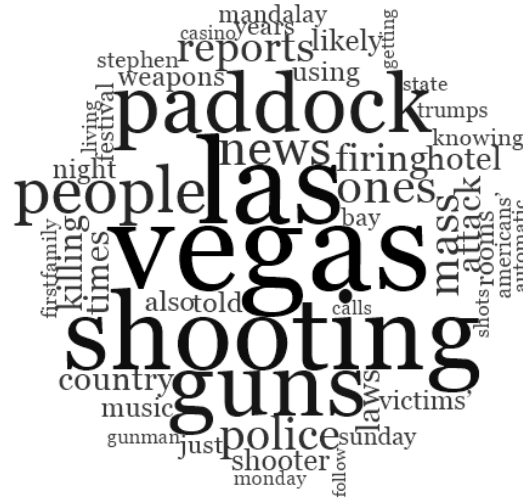


#### CASE 4 – ROUTE 91 HARVEST MUSIC FESTIVAL, LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

A word frequency query was conducted on all 249 articles discussing the Route 91 Harvest Music Festival shooting in Las Vegas in order to determine which words were used most often. Figure 16 presents the top 50 most used words in all articles referencing the Las Vegas shooting in a word cloud format. The top two most used words were "Vegas" and "Las", both used over 1,150 times. These uses can be considered as referencing the location of the shooting rather than leading to emerging themes. "Shooting" was the third most used word overall, also

used as an identifier for the incident. The fourth most used word was “gun”, referenced a total of 897 times. The use of “shooting” and “gun” firmly frames this event as yet another mass shooting and display of gun violence. However, there could also be emerging themes related to gun control. References to the shooter fell at the fifth most used word with “Paddock” comprising 806 counts. This varies from other mass shooting cases where the shooter’s name often fell within the top three most used words. Other words referencing the event, such as “people” (n=625), “reports” (n=415), “firing” (n=367), and “347” (n=861) also fell within the top 15 most used words. Further words commonly used in these articles that may lead to political themes were “law” (n=309), “America” (217), and “Trump” (n=215). These words may symbolize a discussion regarding the political reaction to the shooting, referencing then-President Trump and United States laws and freedom. “Victims” also fell within the top 30 most used words with 263 uses, showing that attention was paid to the victims who were affected by this shooting. In sum, the word frequency query on all articles for the Las Vegas shooting reveals a focus on the location of the shooting, the implications related to firearms, the offender, and the subsequent political debates surrounding the event regarding policy.

**Figure 16 - Las Vegas Shooting Case Word Cloud**



Once a word frequency query was conducted on all articles, separate queries were conducted for each news site. *Fox News* had similar top results to the overall word frequency findings. Figure 17 displays the top 50 most frequent words used in *Fox News* articles discussing the Las Vegas shooting. Referencing the location of the shooting, “Vegas” and “Las” fell at the top two most used words, both used over 290 times each. “Shooting” (n=212) and “people” (n=110) also fell within the top five results, showing a greater tendency from *Fox News* to focus on the shooting and the effect it had on the people involved. The shooter was also alluded to in articles with “Paddock” being used 165 times, which is consistent with previous findings that news reports tend to center on the offender. Other most commonly used words in *Fox News*’ reports includes “news” (n=108), “police” (n=90), “hotel” (n=81), and “country” (n=76). However, these words can be seen as general signifiers regarding the shooting, which took place at a hotel during a country music festival. “Police” can also be a general reference to law enforcement response to the shooting. Varying from the overall results, “gun” was only used 50 times, falling at number 23 of the top 50 most used words. This may allude to efforts by *Fox*



(n=66), and “Trump” (n=57) were frequently used, possibly signifying political themes and policy implications. Noticeably absent from *NBC News* reports were any mention of the victims. This deviates from their other reports following mass shootings, which tended to give some attention to the victims and the effect the incident had. Therefore, it can be seen that *NBC News* was rather forthright in their reports, focusing on the location, the shooter, and possible policy implications.

**Figure 18 - Las Vegas Shooting Case Word Cloud - *NBC News***



The results from *Breitbart*’s word frequency query show “Vegas” and “Las” at the top of the list. Both words were used over 310 times in their articles, representing where the shooting took place. “Paddock” was also within the top 5 most used words with 148 uses but fell after the more general terms of “shooting” (n=232) and “people” (n=158). Also consistent with other results, “gun” was frequently used, amassing a total of 136 counts. Further analysis is needed to determine if “gun” was used in relation to the general use of firearms, or in reference to possible policy debates, such as gun control. “Trump” was another frequently used word, with a total of 87 instances. This may lead to further political themes, alluding to President Trump’s response





emerging themes. “Kelley” was the third most used word overall, with 769 counts, referencing the shooter. Further mentions about the shooter include words relating to his past, such as “Air Force” (n=248) and “wife” (n=141), discussing his history of violence and discharge from the military. The words “Air” and “Force” were combined into one term for all queries due to their similar tallies and reference to Kelley’s military past. Multiple references to the shooter are consistent with previous findings, showing that news reports often focus on the offender and their motives over other factors. Words further referencing the event in general include “shooting” (n=755), “people” (n=581), “Springs” (n=473), and “Sutherland” (n=473). “Gun” was used a total of 435 times, referring to the type of weapon used, as well as possible themes relating to policy in the form of gun control. Articles focusing on the victims of the shooting were also frequent, as seen in the use of “Baptist” (n=302), “victims” (n=214), “family” (n=176), and “children” (n=143). These words describe who was affected by the shooting, such as members of the Baptist congregation, families, and children. While victims are often not the focus of many crime reports in the media, the presence of child victims as “ideal victims” typically leads to higher reporting. Therefore, more articles focusing on the victims in this case is consistent with prior research. Possible political themes may also be gathered in these articles due to the presence of “law” (n=241), “Trump” (n=211), and “authorities” (n=157). A final word worth mentioning is “Willeford”, which was used 135 times and references the man who fired on Devin Kelley, attempting to stop the shooting. Further analysis is needed to determine how the references to Willeford were used. Overall, the word frequency query on all articles for the Sutherland Springs shooting reveals a focus on the location of the shooting, implications related to firearms and policy, and the offender and victims.





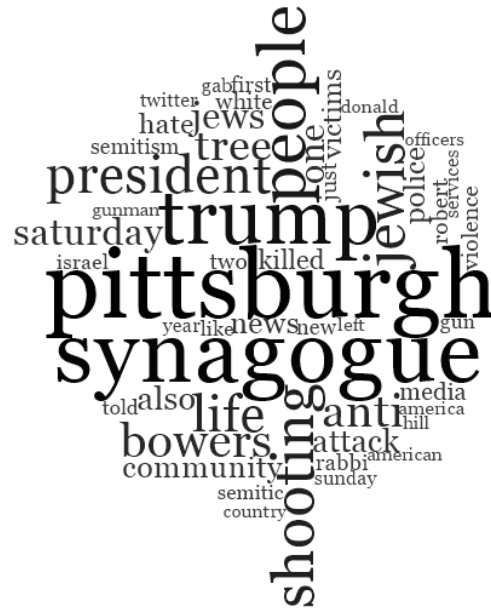


references to the shooter were also made, including “gunman” (n=104), “attacker” (n=90), and “Air Force” (n=64). Also consistent with other reports, “shooting” (n=252), “people” (n=213), “Sutherland” (n=166), and “Springs” (n=166) fell within the top 10 results. “Gun” was a frequent topic of discussion in *Breitbart* articles, amassing a total of 172 uses. Themes related to policy can be seen in the use of “Trump” (n=69), “control” (n=55), “American” (n=53), and “background” (n=53), possibly referencing the calls for gun control and reform against the backdrop of American rights to bear arms. Victims were also a feature of *Breitbart* articles, albeit much less than reports from their news counterparts. For instance, “Baptist” (n=105) and “victims” (n=71) were the only references to victims, lacking any other possible identifiers that could be linked to victims. However, compared to their reports in other cases, *Breitbart* gave more attention to the victims in the Sutherland Springs shooting. Finally, “Willeford” made another appearance with a total of 64 uses and may symbolize the presence of the “good guy with a gun” narrative that was common after this shooting. Generally, *Breitbart* reports of the Sutherland Springs shooting were focused on the location and the shooter. Possible themes relating to this shooting may revolve around guns, gun control, and political reactions. Figure 24 displays the word frequency reports from *Breitbart*.





emerging themes. Vastly differing from other cases, the third most used word was “Trump” with 737 uses, and “president” had 478 uses. This deviates from other cases where the shooter’s name was often featured in the top three words. The use of these words thus signifies that President Trump was a main focus in these articles, possibly referencing claims to his use of rhetoric. Top words further describing the event in general include “people” (n=617) and “shooting” (n=527), which fell at numbers four and five on the list. “Jewish” (n=494) was also a frequently used word, referring to the both the location of the shooting and to the identification of the victims affected. Further mentions of victims also were applied, including “community” (n=255) and “victims” (n=220). The shooter was also a subject of discussion; however, much less than other words. References to the shooter include “Bowers” (n=419), “Robert” (n=175), and “gunman” (n=123). Framing the event as an act of hate was also prominently discussed, as seen in the use of “anti” (n=409), “hate” (n=228), and “Semitism” (n=158), also referring to the motives of the offender. “White” was also used 172 times, possibly alluding to framing the event as an act of white supremacy, but also referring to the race of the shooter. “Gun” was used a total of 148 times, describing the type of weapon used. Overall, the word frequency query on all articles for the Pittsburgh shooting reveals a focus on the location of the shooting and implications related to framing the event as a hate crime as it relates to the victims and offender, with a minor focus on firearms and policy.

**Figure 26 - Pittsburgh Shooting Case Word Cloud**

Once a word frequency query was conducted on all articles, separate queries were conducted for each news site. *Fox News* had very similar top results to the overall word frequency findings. Figure 27 displays the top 50 most frequent words used in *Fox News* articles discussing the Pittsburgh shooting. Referring to the location of the shooting, “Pittsburgh” and “synagogue” were the top two most used words, both used over 310 times. “Life” (n=192), “people” (n=190), “shooting” (n=187), and “tree” (n=164) make up the next most frequent words, all used as generalizations describing the shooting and where it took place. Similar to the overall findings, “Trump” was a top 10 most used word, with 150 tallies. The use of “Trump” may signify political themes, or the claims of controversial statements uttered by President Trump. “Jewish” once again was frequently used, with 145 counts, describing both the victims and the location of the shooting. Further references to the victims include “victims” (n=92), “community” (n=86), and “congregation” (n=53). “Bowers” (n=137) did fall within the top 10 most used words but was overshadowed by other discussions of the implications of the shooting. Other references to the shooter included “Robert” (n=57) and “gunman” (n=52). “White” was



to be an emerging theme from *NBC News*, with the use of “anti” (n=70), “hate” (n=66), and “Semitic” (n=30). “White” was also used 43 times, but further analysis is needed to determine if this was in reference to the race of the shooter or as a way to frame the shooting as an act of white supremacy. Articles mentioning victims were also featured, with “victims” accounting for 46 uses, “community” with 57 counts, and references to the victims, such as “Jewish” and “Jews” comprising a total of 147 tallies. Discussions surrounding firearms took a back seat to other discussions, with “gun” only being mentioned 36 times. In all, *NBC News* also focused on framing the event as an act of hate, discussing the location of the shooting and characteristics of the offender and victims.

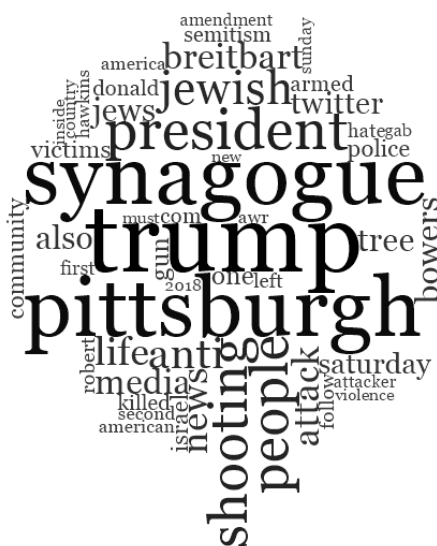
**Figure 28 - Pittsburgh Shooting Case Word Cloud - *NBC News***



The results from *Breitbart's* word frequency vary from their news counterparts. “Trump” holds the top spot in *Breitbart's* articles, with 334 tallies. “President” was also in the top five words, with 188 uses. Similar to the other sites, “synagogue” and “Pittsburgh” are also found in the top five results, both having over 280 counts. Other most commonly used words in *Breitbart* articles include “shooting” (n=178), “people” (n=178), “Jewish” (n=152), and “attack” (n=116),

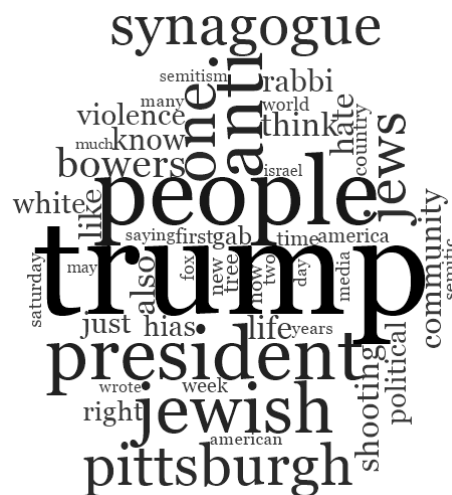
which can be seen as general descriptors of the event and the victims. Further referencing victims, *Breitbart* also used words such as “Jews” (n=99), “victims” (n=73), and “community” (n=69). Framing this shooting as a hate crime also made an appearance on *Breitbart*, as seen in the use of “anti” (n=139), “Semitism” (n=61), and “hate” (n=55). Surprisingly, “Bowers” fell at number 15 on the list of most used words, with 103 tallies. Additional words describing the shooter include “Robert” (n=57) and “attacker” (n=47). Political and gun policy themes may also arise from *Breitbart* articles, as words referring to politicization were prominently featured. These words include “gun” (n=77), “left” (n=57), “second” (n=51), “American” (n=50), “amendment” (n=46), and “country” (n=46). Further analysis will reveal the context of these words and how they relate to political and policy discussions. Largely, *Breitbart* reports of the Pittsburgh shooting were focused on President Trump and framing the event as a hate crime. Possible themes relating to this shooting may revolve around guns, gun control, and political reactions. Figure 29 displays the word frequency reports from *Breitbart*.

**Figure 29 - Pittsburgh Shooting Case Word Cloud - *Breitbart***



*Slate* (Figure 30) had similar results to *Breitbart*, in that “Trump” and “President” were two of the top three most used words, with over 118 uses each. However, *Slate* deviated in their results from here. Framing the event as a hate crime was a salient theme in *Slate* articles, with “anti” (n=91), “hate” (n=44), and “Semitic” (n=29) being frequently used. *Slate* also focused on those affected by this shooting, as seen in their use of “Jewish”, “Jews”, and “community”, with tallies ranging from 43 to 88. Describing the location of the shooting was also mentioned, with “Pittsburgh” and “synagogue” both used 74 times and falling within the top 10 results. “Bowers” fell outside of the top 10 results, with 54 counts. “White” (n=41) climbed the list on *Slate*, but further analysis for context is still needed. Further political themes may arise as “political” (n=40), “country” (n=31), and “America” (n=30) were also presented in articles. Visibly absent from *Slate* articles were any mentions of firearms. This departs from their other articles, which tend to focus on the need for gun control following mass shooting events. Thus, *Slate*’s reporting of the Pittsburgh shooting primarily focused on framing the event as a hate crime, with possibly political themes, rather than focusing solely on the offender and gun policy.

**Figure 30 - Pittsburgh Shooting Case Word Cloud - *Slate***



## CASE 7 – WALMART, EL PASO, TEXAS

A word frequency query was conducted on all 294 Walmart, El Paso, TX shooting articles to determine which words were used most often. Figure 31 displays the top 50 most used words in a word cloud format. The most used word was “Paso” (n=1,528), signifying the location of the shooting, and most likely not related to emerging themes. The second most used in all articles was “Trump”, with 1,323 tallies. “President” was used 843 times, also referencing President Trump. The high use of these words may be related to emerging themes as it relates to President Trump’s reaction to the shooting and claims that his rhetoric may have encouraged the shooter. Other general descriptions about the shooting were also found, such as “shooting” (n=1,247), “people” (n=886), and “Texas” (n=630). Vastly different from other cases, the shooter’s name is visibly absent from the most used words. This may be due to recent calls to limit the use of the shooter’s name (e.g., No Notoriety Campaign) when discussing the event in order to discourage future events. References to the shooter, other than his name, include “shooter” (n=396) and “gunman” (n=238). An emerging theme related to the framing of the event is that of a hate crime against the Latinx community and immigrants, and white supremacy. This can be seen in the use of “White” (n=623), “immigrant” (n=333), “hate” (n=295), “nationalism” (n=279), and “American” (n= 267). Possible themes relating to politics and policy may also arise, as “gun” (n=488), “immigration” (n=333), “laws” (n=311), “country” (n=308), “democrats” (n=271), and “politics” (n=233) were all frequently used. Articles focusing on the victims of the shooting were also frequent, as seen in the use of “victims” (n=293) “community” (n=256), and “Mexican” (n=252). Overall, the word frequency query on all articles for the El Paso shooting reveals a focus on possible political implications, white supremacy, and policy debates over the offender.

**Figure 31 - El Paso Shooting Case Word Cloud**

After a word frequency query was conducted on all articles, separate queries were conducted for each news site. *Fox News* had very similar top results to the overall word frequency findings. Figure 32 displays the top 50 words used in *Fox News* articles about the El Paso shooting. “Paso” was again the top word used, with 445 counts. References to President Trump also fell at the top of the list, with “Trump” amassing 357 uses, and “President” having 228 tallies. “Shooting” (n=301), “people” (n=238), “mass” (n=198), and “Texas” (n=162) compile the next most common words, all used as general identifiers relating to reports of the shooting. Consistent with overall results, the shooter’s name was absent from Fox articles, instead using words such as “shooter” (n=87), “gunman” (n=65), and suspect” (n=58) to reference the offender. *Fox News* also followed suit, framing the event as a hate crime by frequently using “White” (n=127), “hate” (n=63), and “rhetoric” (n=58) as a way to reference white supremacy and hateful rhetoric. Further political themes may also emerge on Fox reports of the El Paso shooting, as “presidential” (n=70) and “democratic” (n=56) made multiple appearances. Also related to political themes, “gun” was mentioned 104 times, which may refer





supremacy and the shooter's motive as a hate crime, "hate" (n=96), "manifesto" (n=85), and "racism" (n=84), made frequent appearances. References to the offender were limited to "shooter" (n=165) and "gunman" (n=75). *Breitbart* did feature many articles relating to the victims, as "victims" (n=107) was the only reference to those affected by the shooting, also not including any words related to their identity. Political themes may also arise beyond that relating to President Trump, as "gun" (n=130), "country" (n=108), "left" (n=89), "states" (n=73), "political" (n=70), and "campaign" (n=66) were all used, possibly referring to calls for gun control and political reactions to the shooting. Largely, *Breitbart* reports of the El Paso shooting were focused on President Trump and discussions surrounding classifying the event as a hate crime. Possible themes relating to this shooting may revolve around white supremacy, gun policy, and political reactions. Figure 34 displays the word frequency reports from *Breitbart*.

**Figure 34 - El Paso Shooting Case Word Cloud - *Breitbart***



For the El Paso shooting, *Slate* was consistent in their word frequency results to the overall results. Figure 35 displays these results in a word cloud. "Trump" was the most used word, with 253 tallies, and "president" amassed 80 uses, both referring to President Trump.

“Paso” was also used multiple times (n=116), describing the location of the shooting. While “White” was featured prominently on all news sites, it made its way to the number three position on *Slate*’s list, with 108 counts. Based on the top results, *Slate*’s most common themes revolve around President Trump and white supremacy relating to this shooting. Further cementing the narrative of this shooting as a hate crime, “racist” was used 26 times. Deviating from other news sites, however, *Slate* gave much more attention to possible political and policy themes. Like their other articles, “gun” (n=55) was a frequent point of discussion, with “background” (n=26) also being used. Taken together, it can be seen that *Slate* focused some of their articles on gun policy reform. Furthermore, discussions surrounding policy and political reactions can be seen in the use of “right” (n=52), “law” (n=42), “country” (n=34), “state” (n=34), “American” (n=31), “government” (n=31), and “border” (n=26). Reports on victims were mostly absent in *Slate* articles, as the only word referencing victims to be frequently used was “Mexico” (n=29). Most references to the shooter were noticeably absent on *Slate*, with no mention of his name, nor general identifiers, such as “gunman” or “shooter”. The only word on the top 50 results that may reference the shooter is “mental” (n=29), possibly referring to the shooter’s mental state at the time of the shooting and the common explanation of mental illness as it relates to mass shootings. In total, *Slate*’s reporting of the El Paso shooting focused mostly on hate crime narratives, President Trump, and further political themes. References to the shooter and victims were minimal, giving much more attention to overall implications than affected individuals.

**Figure 35 - El Paso Shooting Case Word Cloud - *Slate***



#### CASE 8 – AL NOOR MOSQUE AND LINWOOD ISLAMIC CENTRE, CHRISTCHURCH, NEW ZEALAND

A word frequency query was conducted on all 211 Christchurch shooting articles to determine which words were used most often. Figure 36 displays the top 50 most used words in a word cloud format. While the Christchurch shooting is presented as a negative case, understanding how this shooting was presented in the media is still valuable and comparable to the other shootings. The top two most used words were “new” (n=1,612) and “Zealand” (1,490), referencing the location of the shooting. These words can be thought of as identifying the location of the shooting rather than relating to prominent themes. “Mosque” was the third most used word overall, with 1,112 counts, further describing the location of the shooting, but also denoting the religion of the victims. Additional mentions of the victims and those affected by the shooting include “Muslim” (n=400) and “victims” (n=224). This differentiates from other cases, where victims were given more attention in the articles. General references to the shooting were also featured, such as “people” (n=902), “shooting” (n=825), and “attack” (n=810). Similar to the El Paso shooting, the offender’s name was not prominently featured in the articles covering



Once a word frequency query was conducted on all articles, separate queries were conducted for each news site. *Fox News*' results were consistent with the overall word frequency findings. Figure 37 displays the top 50 most used words discussing the Christchurch shooting in a word cloud. Describing the location of the shooting, "new" and "Zealand" were the top two most used words with over 500 tallies each. The third most used word was "mosque" (n=306), referring to the location of the shooting, as well as giving insight into the religion of those affected. General references to the shooting rounded out the majority of the remaining top 10 most used words. These words included "people" (n=287), "Christchurch" (n=272), "shooting" (n=177), and "attack" (n=137). The offender was referenced in *Fox News* articles, with "Tarrant" receiving 74 counts. More generic terms for the shooter were used more often, however, with "gunman" accounting for 117 references, and "suspect" accruing 69 counts. "White" was also used 111 times, but further analysis is needed to determine if this word was used as a descriptor of the offender's race or as a nod to the white supremacy narrative. Political themes are likely to arise in *Fox News* articles, as "Arden", "prime", and "minister" were all used over 75 times, in reference to Prime Minister Jacinta Arden. Further political themes may surround President Trump, as "Trump" was used a total of 56 times in *Fox News* articles. The frequent naming of political leaders may also hint at subsequent policy discussion, as "gun" amassed a total of 82 tallies. Finally, victims did not seem to be a large focus in *Fox News* articles, as the only references commonly used were "victims" (n=83) and "Muslim" (n=54). While they did feature victims in their articles, it seems to be much less than other cases and news sites. Therefore, it is possible that *Fox News* focused their attention on the offender and possible political debates, over featuring the victims and framing the shooting as a hate crime.



amount of attention at NBC, as “Muslim” (n=58), “victims” (n=38), and “Islamic” (n=33) were found in the top 50 results. “Gun” also made the list, with 48 uses, possibly referring to subsequent discussions of gun control and policy. An additional theme that may arise from *NBC News* is that of the media. “News”, “media”, “video”, “Facebook”, “social”, “online”, and “YouTube” all made the list of top 50 most used words. The use of media-related words may refer to the shooter streaming the shooting on social media but may also relate to emergent themes of social media and the spread of hate, notably white supremacy. Further analysis is needed to understand the frequent usage of media terms in *NBC News* articles. In sum, it can be seen that *NBC News* focused on framing the Christchurch shooting as an act of white supremacy, referring to the offender and his motives, as well as the victims affected. Possible political and media themes may also be relevant.

**Figure 38 - Christchurch Shooting Case Word Cloud - *NBC News***



The results from *Breitbart's* word frequency query once again place “new” and “Zealand” at the top of the list. Both words were used over 495 times in their articles, representing where the shooting took place. “Christchurch” and “mosque” were also featured at

the top of the list, further describing the location of the shooting and the community affected.

“White” was used 166 times, possibly describing the shooter’s race, or relating to the narrative of white supremacy, as “manifesto” (n=69) also appeared on the top 50 list. Further relating to the shooter, “Tarrant” (n=97), “gunman” (n=65), “shooter” (n=64), and “suspect” (n=56) were also used. Political themes seem to be prominent in *Breitbart* articles, as “Trump” was featured 159 times, and “president” (n=115), “minister” (n=91), “Arden” (n=80), and “prime” (n=75) were also utilized. References to victims were almost nonexistent, as “Muslim” (n=65) was the only word found on the list relating to victims. “Gun” was used a total of 68 times, possibly relating to gun policy debates, but no further descriptor was found. Similar to *NBC News*, media seems to be a featured discussion in *Breitbart* articles. “News” (n=107), “video” (n=87), “Twitter” (n=74), “Facebook” (n=73), and “media” (n=63) were all used multiple times, possibly discussing the spread of Tarrant’s live stream or even the use of social media in fostering hate. Thus, *Breitbart* reports of the Christchurch shooting focused on location and the shooter. Possible themes relating to this shooting may revolve around political reactions and the media. Figure 39 displays the word frequency reports from *Breitbart*.



“Arden” (n=32), “laws” (n=26), “political” (n=23), and “Prime Minister” (n=22) were featured words, referring to political reactions to the shooting and subsequent policy discussions. *Slate* also had a possible media link, as seen in the use of “internet” (n=27), but this is far less than their news counterparts. Overall, *Slate*’s reporting of the Christchurch shooting focused more on the connotations and framing of the shooting as it relates to white supremacy, political reaction, and guns, rather than focusing solely on the offender, victims, and location.

**Figure 40 - Christchurch Shooting Case Word Cloud - *Slate***



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the word frequency queries revealed a tendency for all news sites to focus on the offender and the explanations of each mass shooting case. Victims were also given attention in articles, but more so from the liberal-leaning sites than the conservative-leaning sites. Policy discussions were also featured, as references to gun, terrorism, and politicians, such as Obama and Trump, were found. The findings from these queries helped identify emergent

themes from articles, but further analysis is needed to explore the context in which these words were used. Further description and findings of themes are discussed in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER V

### OFFENDERS & VICTIMS

This chapter presents the thematic findings from all cases for offenders and victims. Themes are organized by sympathetic or unsympathetic references to the offenders and victims for each case. Quotes from the articles are included in order to explain findings.

#### OFFENDER THEMES

For all cases, general references to the shooter included their name and race and identified them according to their motive. For instance, shooters were often described as racists, terrorists, or white supremacists. In two cases, El Paso, TX and Christchurch, NZ, the media outlets participated in the “No Notoriety” campaign, and only mentioned the shooters’ names in a handful of articles. This campaign seeks to limit the attention given to mass shooters and other mass murderers in order to prevent copycat crimes. The “No Notoriety” campaign began in 2012 but did not receive widespread acclaim and acceptance until 2017 following the Parkland, FL shooting. The acceptance of this campaign coincides with the word frequency query results which showed that in these two cases, the shooters’ names were not in the top 50 most frequently used words. Other general terminology included terms like gunman, shooter(s), and/or suspect. After these common references were identified, themes were then categorized according to sympathetic or unsympathetic descriptions.

#### *Unsympathetic*

Reports of these mass shooting cases often focused on the offender and their alleged motives, which is in line with previous research stating that offenders are often the main focus of crime news. Overwhelmingly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, discussions of the offenders were unsympathetic. Articles across all news sites often referred to the offenders as “evil,” “hateful,”

or “radicalized” (for examples, see Abdullah & Ortiz, 2016; Fox News, 2015a; Hotsenpiller, 2017; Neyfakh, 2015; Pollak, 2017). Some news sites also provided articles with background information on the offenders, such as their families, prior criminal histories, the purchase of firearms, and the evolution of their violent ideologies. References were also made to the weapons that the offenders used, which usually tied them into conversations about policy and gun control. Other descriptors for offenders alluded to their alleged motives and how the shooting was labeled or categorized by the media and investigating authorities.

For events labeled as hate crimes or white supremacy, the offenders were often demonized for their actions and ideology. Articles often featured quotes from politicians which referred the shooting evil or hate-inspired. If the shooter had a manifesto, articles also included excerpts from their manifesto to further drive the overall framing of the event as an act of hate. For instance, in the coverage of the Charleston, SC shooting, *Slate* published an article with quotes from Dylann Roof’s manifesto, stating, “throughout the 2,444-word screed, Roof expounds on some of the more common themes in white supremacist thought, echoes that suggest he has spent a lot of time reading racist websites” (Politi, 2015, para. 1). Both *NBC News* and *Slate* featured excerpts from Roof’s manifesto, as well as his affinity for white supremacist ideology. *Fox News* and *Breitbart* also labeled Roof as a racist, but *NBC News* and *Slate* were more overt in their labeling of Roof and linking him to the problem of white supremacy.

Reports on the Pittsburgh, PA shooting were more evenly distributed in the labeling of Robert Bowers. All four news sites referred to Bowers as an “anti-Semite” and a “Jew-hater” (for examples, see Collins, 2018; Nolte, 2018; Politi, 2018; Shapiro, 2018). Articles also featured quotes from Bowers, where he claimed that “all Jews must die” while he attacked the Tree of Life Synagogue, as well as hateful rhetoric that he posted online. Follow-up articles reported on

Bowers' charges. Coverage of the El Paso, TX shooting differed in that the offender's name, Crusius, was infrequent as more outlets participated in the "No Notoriety" campaign to limit the attention mass shooters and other mass murderers receive in the media. This campaign began to gain traction in 2017, and the urgency to limit the shooter's fame was also due to his white supremacy ties, not wanting this ideology to gain followers. While the shooter's name, Crusius, was limited, references to him and his actions were still seen across all news sites. Crusius was called "evil" in many articles, as well as described as being "anti-Latino" and targeting Mexicans in his shooting (see Conde, 2019). *Slate* was the only news site to explicitly call Crusius a "white supremacist gunman" (Byman, 2019) in their articles, but all news sites discussed Crusius' ideology and manifesto, which was influenced by white supremacy and the fear of a "Hispanic invasion" (Conde, 2019; Price, 2019). News sites also participated in the "No Notoriety" campaign for the Christchurch, NZ shooting and limited the use of Tarrant's name. Instead, references to Tarrant included "a self-proclaimed racist," "immigrant-hating white nationalist," a "white supremacist," and a "right-wing extremist terrorist" (for examples, see AFP, 2019; Associated Press, 2019a; Givetash & Bennett, 2019; Ismail, 2019; Pollak & Caplan, 2019). Mostly, the articles about Tarrant focused on his motive and extremist ideology. Only a handful of articles described the shooter as a terrorist, but this also relates to how New Zealand labeled the incident. Further reports provided information about his radicalization, as well as statements from his manifesto, which overwhelmingly focused on immigration and the notion of white genocide.

Offenders that were labeled as terrorists received even more unsympathetic expression of themes, as well as more news coverage. For instance, the San Bernardino, CA and Orlando, FL shootings amassed the most articles of all cases, for a combined total of 881 articles. Much like

those events designated as hate crimes, the cases labeled as terrorism were demonized for their ideology, but also for their threat to the American way of life. News sites also featured multiple articles detailing their lives and timelines that led up to the shooting. In the San Bernardino, CA shooting, many of the reports across all news sites focused on the radicalization of Farook and Malik. All news sites used the phrases “jihad,” “homegrown violent extremists,” and “terrorists” to describe the shooters (for examples, see Fox News, 2015a; Hannon, 2015; Schachtel, 2015; Shaw, 2015; Williams & Abdullah, 2015). However, *Fox News*, *NBC News*, and *Breitbart* were more overt in their labeling of the offenders and frequent use of the terms “jihad” and “terrorists,” while *Slate* focused more on the details of the shooting and juxtaposed it to lone-wolf, White male shooters. For instance, an excerpt from a *Slate* article read:

That’s why anyone who went to bed assuming the shooters were right-wing, paramilitary fantasists targeting special-needs patients woke up shocked by the revelation that two suspects were a husband and wife, Rizwan Farook, 28, and Tashfeen Malik, 27, who targeted his office holiday party. Farook is apparently a devout Muslim, born in America, who traveled to Saudi Arabia and returned with a wife. The couple left their 6-month-old daughter with Farook’s mother Wednesday and said they had a doctor’s appointment. They attacked the holiday party wearing tactical gear armed with both automatic rifles and handguns, and left what may have been pipe bombs at the scene. That would seem to indicate terrorism, and made the attacks look like anything but what we have grown used to: a home-grown rampage from a lone-wolf white man. (Lithwick, 2015, para. 3).

This excerpt shows that *Slate* did label the offenders as terrorists, but also discussed how these events occur less frequently than lone-wolf shootings committed by White, male offenders.

One pattern that emerged in the reports of the San Bernardino shooting was the focus on Malik, the female shooter. While the word frequency query results showed that Malik received fewer mentions than Farook, Malik was often a featured subject in the articles and received much harsher attention than Farook. For instance, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* claimed that Malik was “the more radicalized of the two” and that she was responsible for Farook’s radicalization (see Fox News, 2015b; Huston, 2015; McKay, 2015). Looking at their background information, Farook

was often mentioned as a United States citizen, born in Chicago. Contrastingly, reports on Malik focused on her life in Pakistan and her immigration status. Some articles mentioned that they were trying to trace Malik's actions in Pakistan and whether or not her family had links to terror networks. *Fox News* stated that "Malik was a terror operative who had been radicalized before coming to the United States," which forwards the claims that Malik's intention for coming to the U.S. was to do harm (Fox News, 2015c, para. 11). All news sites also reported that Malik was the one who pledged allegiance to ISIS on social media before the shooting. The reports that surrounded Malik as a terrorist and mass shooter is consistent with previous research which has found that female offenders are often treated more harshly in the media for stepping outside of their ascribed gender roles (Brennan, 2002). Traditionally, female offenders have been categorized into "bad" women and "mad/sad" women, or the much simpler categories of "good" and "evil," which the media helps to perpetuate. "Bad" women are those offenders described as willfully defying traditional gender roles through their actions. Women that are portrayed as "bad" are usually demonized, masculinized, and chastised for violating their domestic responsibility (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009; Chesney-Lind, 1999; Grabe et al., 2006). Relating to the San Bernardino, CA shooting, an excerpt from an *NBC News* article stated:

After masquerading for months as a newly Americanized housewife, Tashfeen Malik dropped the facade in a burst of gunfire on Wednesday, joining her husband in an attack on his office Christmas party that left 14 people dead and 21 injured. (Schuppe, 2015, para. 1).

This quote evokes the idea that Malik, who was supposed to be an American housewife, chose to defy those gender roles to join her husband in a mass shooting event. This coincides with previous research and shows that Malik was often the target of reports and their harsh labeling.

The Orlando, FL shooting also received a great deal of media attention and was subjected to similar unsympathetic themes as seen in the San Bernardino shooting. All news sites referred to Mateen as an “Islamic State fighter,” a “terrorist,” a “radical Muslim,” a “lone jihad holy warrior,” and a “crazy lone wolf” (for examples, see Byman, 2016; Fox News, 2016a; Huston, 2016; Martel, 2016a; Meyer, 2016; Zimmerman, 2016). Reports included information about Mateen’s life and apparent instability. Statements from former coworkers were included in articles, which painted a picture of Mateen as unhinged and unstable. Past interactions that were described as racist, misogynistic, and homophobic were the focus in a large number of articles and showed that Mateen had a long history of hatred and anger, which further portrayed him as “scary in a concerning way” (Williams, Connor, et al., 2016). Beyond his past statements, much of the media framed Mateen as an outsider and focused on his radical ideology and the immigration status of his parents. For instance, *Fox News* and *NBC News* mentioned that Mateen “was born to Afghan parents and was a Muslim” (Fox News, 2016a; Williams, Sanders, et al., 2016). *Breitbart* described Mateen’s father as a “Taliban supporter” (Lawrence, 2016), which further framed Mateen and his family as strangers to the American way of life. Consistent references to Mateen’s religion were also featured, as seen in the use of “radical Muslim,” “Islamic extremist,” and “a practicing Muslim” (Gedrich, 2016; Huston, 2016; Zimmerman, 2016). By frequently referring to Mateen’s religion, links were made between terrorism and the Muslim community, which was also portrayed in unsympathetic ways. *Breitbart* was the biggest perpetrator of framing the Muslim community in unsympathetic terms, and almost portrayed them as secondary offenders. For instance, in reference to Mateen’s pledge of allegiance to ISIS, *Breitbart* wrote “he declared his loyalty to Islam’s unforgiving deity, Allah” (Hayward, 2016a, para. 3). Other statements from *Breitbart* about Islam included:

What is so special about the words “radical Islam”? Maybe it’s not radical Islam. Maybe it’s just “Islam.” (Coulter, 2016a, para. 20).

There is an “Islamic element” to the kind of terrorism that led to the mass murder of 49 people at an Orlando gay bar over the weekend. (May, 2016, para. 2).

Since 9/11, we have had 28,135 terrorist attacks committed by Islamic jihadists that have occurred around the world. We know what the problem is, we’re just afraid to say it. (Gabriel, 2016a, para. 2).

We must acknowledge that the vast majority of global terror attacks emanate from countries with Muslim-majority populations, and from individuals and groups within Islam who become radicalized. (Gedrich, 2016, para. 13).

This framing of the Muslim community as a responsible party is consistent with previous research that identifies “ideal offenders” as those who are “outsiders, strangers, foreigners, aliens, and intruders who lack essential human qualities” (Surette, 2015, p. 207). *Breitbart’s* demonization of the Muslim community painted them as strangers, foreigners, and threats to the American way of life. This also serves to create delineation between communities and creates a pathway for policy, directed at those deemed dangerous.

In sum, many of the offenders in these mass shooting cases were portrayed in an unsympathetic light. This is unsurprising due to the nature of their crimes and the slaughter of innocent victims. However, events labeled as terrorism were subjected to far more media attention and demonization, some of which spilled over into the Muslim community. This aligns with prior research that the offender is often the main focus of crime news, and also that offenders with characteristics that are easily identified as “outsiders” or “different” are likely to be highlighted to appease to the status quo.

### *Sympathetic*

While offenders do receive the most attention in crime news reports, much of that attention is in a negative light, admonishing the actions of the offender. However, in some

instances, offenders can be portrayed using sympathetic tones, as a way to understand the offender and their struggles. Most often this is accomplished by focusing on the hardships the offender has faced in their life, how an offender's mental health may have been a factor in their actions, or simply by shifting blame to other aspects of the offense. With mass shootings, these sympathetic narratives are often absent, promoting a harsh storyline rather than anything that could evoke empathy for the offender. In some cases, however, even mass shooters are shown pity in an attempt to understand the tragedy that has unfolded.

In the cases examined for this study, the offender that was shown the most sympathy by some news sites was Dylann Roof in the Charleston, SC shooting. While Roof was mostly portrayed in a negative light, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* featured several articles that either expressed sympathy for his troubled life or placed the blame for his actions onto others. For instance, detailed information about Roof's life was featured across all news sites, but *Fox News* was the only one that used a softened tone when doing so. One article from *Fox News* was titled "Charleston shooting suspect's life: Confused, troubled childhood then racial radicalization." In the article, *Fox News* described Roof's evolution "from a sweet child to a disturbed man" (Associated Press, 2015a, para. 1). Information about Roof's childhood was also included and stated that his "early childhood was troubled and confused, as he grew up in an unstable, broken home amid allegations of marital abuse and infidelity" (Associated Press, 2015a, para. 4). Roof's family timeline is exhibited, which included the marriage and divorce of his parents, and his obsessive-compulsive tendencies he displayed throughout his life. *Fox News* goes on to feature quotes from Roof's family members in an attempt to understand how Roof changed into a mass murderer:

According to Patricia Hastings, recounting recent conversations with her daughter, Roof was quieter than he used to be; he looked distant, lost. He was no longer the sweet blond

kid she helped raise for nearly a decade. As she was getting ready to leave, Roof, not one for affection, hugged her tight. (Associated Press, 2015a, para. 35).

This excerpt painted a sympathetic picture of Roof, that before his murderous actions, he was just a lost, troubled young man. Continuing with the sympathetic theme, *Fox News* published another article titled “Why didn’t anyone help Dylann Roof?”. Once again, Roof’s timeline of spiraling is mentioned, which included his dropping out of high school and drug abuse. However, instead of simply mention that Roof had a history of depression and struggles that may have propelled him towards radical thinking, *Fox News* questioned why no one intervened on Roof’s behalf and shifted the blame from Roof onto those close to him, as seen in this excerpt:

Yet no one intervened in any way to prevent Roof from allegedly committing a mass killing. His uncle didn’t — even though he noted that, at 19, Roof was mostly staying in his room and hadn’t even gotten a driver’s license. His roommate didn’t, even though he has been quoted as saying that Roof was “planning something like this for six months.” His black friend didn’t, even though Roof reportedly outlined his murderous plans to him a week before he carried them out. Neither did a white friend who said he was so concerned when Roof went on a drunken rampage recently that he confiscated his gun. Why does it always seem that there are good and decent and intelligent people around killers like Dylan Roof, who see clear signs of serious trouble, yet do nothing or almost nothing? (Ablow, 2015, para. 4).

The shifting of blame seen in this excerpt is also present in *Breitbart* news articles. Several articles from *Breitbart* center on Roof’s history of drug use and his relationships. Primarily, *Breitbart* features statements from Roof’s friends, focusing on the fact that Roof had friends of color who claim, “he never said anything racist” (McHugh, 2015, para. 9). *Breitbart* published an article with quotes from his friends and stated:

Everyone is making him out to be racist, but here I am in front of you today as a black man, and telling you, I don’t feel no different today than when I looked at him last week, because he never said anything racist to me, never treated me any different than he treated Justin [a white friend]. (McHugh, 2015, para. 11).

The inclusion of this quote essentially argued that Roof couldn’t have been *all* bad or racist because he had friends of color who he treated well. However, *Breitbart* went on to blame those

same friends for not intervening. In fact, *Breitbart* stated that Roof “clearly surrounded himself with horrifically irresponsible friends who didn’t bat an eye when he told them he planned to shoot up a school” (McHugh, 2015, para. 14). This quote bluntly takes the blame off of Roof and onto his friends that should have done something to stop Roof from carrying out his plan. As such, it can be clearly seen that while Dylann Roof was overwhelmingly painted as a hateful, white supremacist, he was also shown sympathy by *Fox News* and *Breitbart*, who painted his life as troublesome and shifted blame onto those around Roof.

Another case where blame shifting appeared was the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting. While the shooter, Devin Kelley, was mostly subjected to unsympathetic themes due to his past history of violence, there was an attempt to shift sole responsibility for the shooting onto other aspects of the offense. For instance, *Slate* published an article that focused on the weapons Kelley used in the shooting, rather than on Kelley himself. In an article titled “Everything we know about the Sutherland Springs shooter, an AR-556”, *Slate* repeatedly referenced the gun as the shooter, rather than Kelley. For example, one line from the article read “The shooter was a Ruger AR-556, which is, in the words of its instruction manual, ‘a gas impingement driven, box magazine fed, autoloading rifle’” (Dessem, 2017a, para. 1). A history of how this gun was manufactured and introduced to the market is included, along with details of how the gun works. Kelley is only mentioned in the last line of the article, which stated, “The shooter killed at least 26 people in church on Sunday in the hands of a man named Devin Patrick Kelley” (Dessem, 2017a, para. 16). While Kelley is still referred to as an offender, *Slate* overwhelmingly puts responsibility for the shooting onto the weapon used and the gun industry for manufacturing this weapon and making it widely available to the public. *Breitbart* and *Fox News* also participated in shifting the blame from Kelley, faulting the United States Air Force. According to reports,

Kelley had a history of violence while enlisted in the Air Force. This included a domestic violence conviction and a stay in a psychiatric facility, in sum earning him a bad conduct discharge. This conviction and discharge should have been entered into a national database, which would have prevented Kelley from purchasing the weapons used in the shooting. Instead, the Air Force neglected to report Kelley's criminal history, where he would later pass the required background check when buying firearms. As such, *Breitbart* and *Fox News* heavily focused on the Air Force's responsibility in the shooting, rather than solely on Kelley. For instance, *Breitbart* reported:

Should the Texas church attacker, Devin Kelley, have been able to buy a gun? Not based on his 2012 arrest and subsequent conviction. But the Air Force somehow fumbled reporting his record to the National Instant Criminal Background Check system (NICS). (Hawkins, 2017a, para. 9).

In a similar vein, *Fox News* stated:

The U.S. Air Force didn't report Texas church shooter Devin Kelley's domestic violence conviction to the FBI -- even though it was required by the Pentagon - leaving the door open for Kelley to buy weapons. (Fox News, 2017a, para. 1).

These quotes show that news sites in part blamed the U.S. Air Force for the shooting in Sutherland Springs, rather than place sole responsibility on Kelley. It should be noted that *Slate* and *NBC News* also mentioned the neglect of the Air Force, but instead introduced it as an issue to be addressed, rather than place sole responsibility for the shooting on them.

A final sympathetic tone that emerged in the articles was relating to shooters who may have suffered from mental illness. Mental illness has long been cited as a possible explanation for mass shootings, giving the public a specific characteristic to blame. Additionally, mental illness may be perceived in a sympathetic way, identifying the individual as sick and in need of help. This can be seen in the language used in drug crises. For instance, the war on drugs had a connotation of a battleground and an enemy that needed to be defeated. In contrast, the opioid

crisis, was framed as a public health crisis, where abusers were seen as a victim of the system rather than drug abusers. The attempt to link mental illness to mass shootings can also be seen as sympathetic, stating that offenders were neglected in their lives and that their actions are a cry for help. The mental health characterization of mass shooters was only seen in select cases for this study and included the Las Vegas, NV shooting, the Charleston, SC shooting, and the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting. For Devin Kelley, the offender of the Sutherland Springs shooting, discussions of mental health ranged from sympathetic to unsympathetic. News sites were quick to publish details of Kelley's life history and included when he had a stay at a psychiatric facility while in the U.S. Air Force. However, this brief stay at the mental health facility was often related to his history of violence because he escaped from the facility after threatening his superiors. Therefore, this link to mental illness was instead used unsympathetically, as a way to paint a violent picture of Kelley. On the other end of the spectrum, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* featured statements from President Trump, who claimed that the shooting was a result of poor mental health. The statement read:

President Trump said the mass shooting at a Texas church on Sunday was indicative of a mental health problem, not gun laws in the United States ... "Mental health is your problem here," Trump said. "This isn't a guns situation. This is a mental health problem at the highest level. It's a very, very sad event." The president added that "based on preliminary reports" the shooter was "a very deranged individual." (Fox News, 2017b, para. 2).

*Fox News* also published an article with interviews from former classmates of Kelley, who stated that they were shocked he would do this, as he mostly kept to himself and was "heavily medicated" (Fedschun, 2017, para. 1). As such, the placement of blame on mental illness also took the blame off of Kelley and painted him as a person who needed help that he obviously did not receive. Dylann Roof of the Charleston, SC shooting was also linked to discussions about mental health. All news sites participated in calling Roof "deranged," "disturbed," "sick," and

“crazed” (for examples, see Associated Press, 2015a; Fieldstadt, 2015; Neyfakh, 2015; Nolte, 2015a). *NBC News* also published an article that discussed his life and change in personality, that included his “obsessive tendencies and germaphobia” (Calabrese & Fieldstadt, 2015, para. 5). *Fox News* was more overt in their linkage to mental illness and stated that Roof “showed all the signs of a severe and worsening mental illness” (Ablow, 2015, para. 1). This quote was featured in the same article that asked why no one helped him throughout his early life struggles. *Fox News* went on to further state:

We know, of course, that Roof expressed hateful white supremacist opinion. But we also know that psychiatrically ill people can channel their paranoia or depression or extreme self-loathing into bizarre beliefs that sometimes lead to the destruction of others. Those beliefs can look just like intense hatred — of a particular person or a whole race of people. (Ablow, 2015, para. 2).

This further shifted the blame from Roof onto his alleged mental illness and continued to frame Roof as not solely responsible for his hateful ideology and actions. As such, *Fox News* continued to paint Dylann Roof in a sympathetic light.

Perhaps the offender most linked to discussions of mental health was Stephen Paddock, the Las Vegas, NV shooter. Paddock was frequently referred to in articles as “crazed,” “sick,” and “demented” (for examples, see Dedaj, 2017; Edelman, 2017; Spiering, 2017). Articles also stated that Paddock had a family history of mental illness and claimed that he just snapped before the shooting. *Fox News* featured many articles that stated Paddock was a “psychopath, a narcissist, and suffered bouts of depression” (Fox News, 2017c, para. 4). *NBC News*, in an attempt to understand the shooting, stated that Paddock may have been in physical or mental anguish and also reported that he had been prescribed anti-anxiety medication. *Breitbart* continued to link Paddock to mental health issues and repeatedly featured statements made by President Trump:

“I guess a lot of people think they understand what happened, but he was a demented, sick individual. The wires were crossed pretty badly in his brain,” Trump said. “I can tell you it’s a very sick man. He was a very demented person. We haven’t seen that yet,” Trump said. “But you will know very soon if we find something. We’re looking very, very hard.” (Spiering, 2017, para. 21).

While *Slate* did use generalized terms that could be linked to mental illness, such as “crazed,” they were also the only news site to point out that Paddock had “no other known mental health problems and no history of addiction” (Olmstead, 2017a, para. 3), which separated themselves from the other news sites who seemed to home in on the possible mental health connection. The attempt to link Paddock to a possible mental illness may be due to the fact that there is still no known motive behind the shooting. However, it should not be ignored that the focus on mental health in this case often served to alleviate some of the blame from Paddock in this shooting, rather than to bluntly demonize him for his actions.

Therefore, it can be seen that while most offenders in these cases were subjected to the usual admonishment in the media, some offenders were extended sympathy. Most often, these offenders were White shooters who possibly had a history of mental illness. This shows a tendency to follow the ideal offender narrative, which demonizes easily distinguishable “other” offenders, such as terrorists, and showing empathy for those more like “us”. Furthermore, attempts were also made to shift the blame onto others, whether it be oblivious family and friends, loopholes in the system, or firearms themselves. This sympathetic/unsympathetic dichotomy can also be seen in how victims are portrayed in the media.

## VICTIM THEMES

All news sites included references to the victims and survivors. These references included victims’ names and information about their lives, as well as information about vigils and funerals for the victims. Survivors were also sought out for their accounts of the shootings, where many

articles featured quotes from the survivors about the events, the shooter, and the fallen victims. While not featured as prominently as the offenders, victims did receive some media attention, which coincides with research that found that victims of rare, horrendous acts often receive more attention than others. This also corresponds to the word frequency results, which found that “victims” often fell within the top 50 most frequently used words. Other than general terminology and references to the victims, articles were analyzed for how the victims were presented in the final number of articles. Like the offender themes, victim themes were categorized according to sympathetic or unsympathetic aspects.

### *Sympathetic*

Overwhelmingly, victims were portrayed in a sympathetic light in articles. Due to the nature of mass shootings, victims are typically perceived as random and innocent, which thus contributed to their compassionate tone. Some articles also included graphic accounts in order to garner more sympathy, as seen in this quote from an *NBC News* article about the Las Vegas shooting: “The sickening thuds of bodies hitting the concrete, the sound of bullets whistling by, the blood – these are the moments from the Las Vegas shooting that [remain]” (Galante, 2017, para. 1). As such, most victims were seen as truly innocent, swept up in a random act of violence. Many articles across all news sites for each case featured the names of the fallen victims, as well as information about the lives they led. Information about vigils, funeral services, and donations for the victims and their families were also featured, which further expressed sympathy and the wide effect each shooting had. Articles also included accounts from survivors who discussed the shooting, which helped the public understand the devastation of what had happened. Quotes from survivors were intermingled in these articles, such as:

Megan Kearney told *NBC News* that she saw “people just dropping, hundreds of bodies all over the ground” as Paddock opened fire. “It sounded like it was coming from the sky,

up above,” she said of the gunfire. “People just kept dropping and dropping, all over the concert, so it was someone that was above and able to kind of, you know, get a full range.” (Dessem, 2017b, para. 4) – Las Vegas, NV shooting, *Slate*

Just within moments, a son had dropped off his mother at the front of that Walmart so that she could walk in while he drove to find a parking spot. By the time he parked his car, he heard the gunshots ring out. And he got out, ran inside. By the time he got there, he said he saw his mother laying there on the floor with a dozen or so other people, dead, blood all over the floor. And all he could say to me was, ‘my mom is dead. My mom.’ And that gives you a sense of the loss and the depths of loss in this community, for so many people. (Givas, 2019, para. 3) – El Paso, TX shooting, *Fox News*

The survivors of the Sunday morning Islamist massacre at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida have begun telling their stories of hiding in bathrooms, pretending to be dead, and praying to survive. (Martel, 2016b, para. 1) – Orlando, FL shooting, *Breitbart*

“I did not want to move,” Solis, a grandmother of four told Univision news. “If I spoke or if I moved he was going to kill me because he was standing there killing everyone who moved. I played dead and it saved my life.” Sharing her terror and hiding place was her husband Joaquín Ramírez, who said he managed to call 911 as they clung to each other beneath the pew. He suffered a minor shrapnel injury. “I was holding her under the pew,” Ramírez recalled to the station. “I covered her and she said, ‘Leave me, save your life.’ And I said to God, ‘My God, save us because I do not want to die.’” All around them, he said, people were “crying and screaming and asking for help.” (Talmazan et al., 2017, para. 3-6) – Sutherland Springs, TX shooting, *NBC News*

“It sounded like a loud crash in the hallway,” Stephen Weiss, who was in the synagogue Saturday morning told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Weiss said he heard loud and repeated gunfire as he ran through the building. (Politi, 2018, para. 6) – Pittsburgh, PA shooting, *Slate*

Articles of this nature were found across all eight mass shooting cases and all news sites.

Survivors were also often referred to as heroes in all cases, especially for those who helped lead others to safety. These accounts painted a picture of the violence and fear that victims faced, which further drew shock, sympathy, and outrage from the public.

While unsuspecting victims of mass shootings already garner sympathy, the location of each shooting was also featured as a way to frame victims as innocent and undeserving of the violence inflicted upon them. This was most often seen in the shootings that occurred in religious institutions (i.e., Charleston, SC; Sutherland Springs, TX; Pittsburgh, PA; and Christchurch,

NZ), or in places that held significance for the community, such as the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, TX, and Pulse nightclub in Orlando, FL. Shootings that occurred at religious institutions were often framed as an attack on religious freedom and the victims were held in high regard. For instance, *NBC News* reported on the Charleston, SC shooting and stated, “The senselessly slain parishioners were in a church for Wednesday night bible study. There is no greater coward than a criminal who enters a house of God and slaughters innocent people engaged in the study of scripture” (Bruton et al., 2015, para. 11). In their description of the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting, *Fox News* reported that it “was the deadliest church shooting in modern U.S. history” (Darrah, 2017, para. 4). All news sites also focused on the loss of children in this shooting case and stated that “nearly half of the victims killed were children,” “children were shot at point-blank range,” and that the youngest victim was “just 18 months old” (for examples, see Associated Press, 2017a, 2017b; Bailey & Arkin, 2017; Fox News, 2017d; Gutierrez et al., 2017; Price, 2017a). *Fox News* also called those inside the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, TX “helpless worshippers” (Associated Press, 2017c, para. 1), which further cemented the idea that the victims were innocent people expressing their First Amendment rights. *Fox News* framed the victims of the Pittsburgh, PA shooting in a similar manner and stated, “Innocent people peacefully practicing their right to worship were gunned down in their own synagogue in the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in American history” (Franklin, 2018, para. 2). Christchurch, NZ also garnered sympathetic themes for their fallen, when reports included statements such as “Muslim worshippers were mowed down at Friday prayer” and “a gunman entered the city’s largest mosque and started massacring innocent people” (see Dann, 2019; Norman, 2019). Furthermore, in some cases, the church or synagogue itself was framed as significant. The Charleston, SC shooting resulted in reports about the significance of the church,

Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. *NBC News* and *Slate* featured many articles discussing the history of the church and the role it played in achieving racial justice for the Black community, such as being “a leading actor in the Underground Railroad, shuttling slaves out of the South during the Civil War, and that Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. held several rallies there during the civil rights movement of the 1960s” (Johnson, 2015a, para. 18). The Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA was also reported on in this manner, where *Fox News* and *NBC News* featured articles stating that “The synagogue, which ‘has stood for joy,’ he said, ‘is forever stained’ following the attack, in which six others were wounded” (Zwirz, 2018, para. 3) and that the “house of worship is in the city’s Squirrel Hill neighborhood, which is considered to be a historic Jewish enclave and center for Jewish life in Pittsburgh” (Rosenblatt et al., 2018, para. 2). These statements were taken from articles where locals talked about how much the synagogue meant to the community and the outreach the synagogue was involved with.

Beyond religious institutions, two other locations were discussed in regard to the impact they had on their local communities. The San Bernardino shooting took place at a center which caters to disabled individuals. *Fox News* reported on the center and wrote:

More than 600 people work at the Inland Regional Center, which serves 30,000 people with disabilities ranging from autism to cerebral palsy to epilepsy, from newborns to people in their 90s. Social workers help the adults find jobs, housing and transportation, said Stacy McQueen, a member of the center’s board of trustees. (Associated Press, 2015b, para. 4).

*Fox News* continued to state, “that the violence happened at a place dedicated to helping people with developmental disabilities — even if they were not targeted — made it even harder for some to comprehend” (Fox News, 2015d, para. 23). *NBC News* also reported that the victims’ jobs “were to keep their friends and neighbors healthy” (Silva et al., 2015, para. 1). *Slate* further echoed the importance of the Inland Regional Center and wrote that it “provides services to

people with developmental disabilities” (Mathis-Lilley & Hannon, 2015, para. 20). All of these reports served to evoke sympathy for those who were lost in the shooting, as they helped the community, especially those who needed it most. Pulse nightclub in Orlando, FL was also the recipient of sympathetic themes, as many articles discussed the importance of Pulse to the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, *Fox News* stated that Pulse “was more than just a club for many of those in the Orlando LGBT community. It was a place where people could go to relax and celebrate the community” (Fox News, 2016b). *NBC News* echoed this sentiment and reported that “The 49 innocent souls who were killed went out for a night of fun, dancing and singing at a place where they knew they would be affirmed, validated, cared for and loved” (Jones, 2016, para. 7). *Slate* further published an article which discussed that the shooting at Pulse was another example of anti-LGBTQ+ hate and that the nightclub was targeted because it was a place where “sexual minorities came together to be with friends, to dance and to sing, and to live a spot where they felt a sense of safety, belonging, and empowerment to live authentically and push for a better world” (Frank, 2016, para. 2). *Breitbart* was the only news source that did not feature articles that discussed the significance of Pulse but did mention that the LGBTQ+ community and the Latinx community were affected by the shooting. As such, reporting not only on the victims themselves, but also the significance of the location serves to evoke sympathy from the public, in an attempt to grasp the widespread impact that mass shootings have.

Another sympathetic theme that emerged when examining reports on victims was the concept of secondary victims. Secondary victims typically refer to those victims who are affected indirectly, such as family members, friends, and coworkers who have lost loved ones (Condry, 2010). In these articles, the idea of secondary victims refers to those who were labeled as victims, although they were not directly affected by gun violence. For instance, all news sites for

all eight cases framed first responders, law enforcement, and medical employees as secondary victims based on their actions and what they witnessed. *NBC News* reported on an officer responding to the San Bernardino, CA shooting and stated that the officer “described a harrowing, “surreal” panorama of carnage Thursday, vividly detailing panic on the faces of the victims and as chaos enveloped him” (Johnson, 2015b, para. 1). First responders were also shown sympathy in the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting, where *NBC News* wrote:

Days after they responded to the worst mass shooting in Texas history, the husband and wife paramedic team that was the first on the scene is haunted by what they saw inside the blood-soaked sanctuary of the First Baptist Church. “I’m trying to get the horror out of my mind,” said paramedic Mike Shaw, of the La Vernia Emergency Medical Service. “But you can’t unsee what you already saw.” Still, there was no blocking out the sheer number of bodies everywhere, especially the dead children. (Gutierrez & Siemaszko, 2017, para. 1-2, 9).

All news articles also gave victim status to law enforcement in the Pittsburgh, PA shooting, where four police officers were wounded after responding to the attack. In this shooting, medical personnel were also featured as victims, where the religion of the medical personnel was mentioned as they attended to the shooter, Robert Bowers. After being taken to a local hospital, the shooter was treated by Jewish doctors, who had to “put their personal feelings aside to help save the life of the man who allegedly claimed he wanted to “kill all the Jews” as he opened fire at a synagogue” (Chakraborty, 2018, para. 1). Medical personnel were also featured in reports of the Orlando, FL shooting and the Las Vegas, NV shooting, where the impact of treating the massive wake of victims arriving at the hospital was discussed. As such, these individuals were featured as secondary victims because they were affected by the mass shooting that took place, even if they were not directly present at the time of the shooting.

Excluding those secondary victims that were indirectly involved with each mass shooting, *Breitbart* made attempts to further frame individuals and communities as victims, even

if they were not involved in the shooting. These victims are referred to as ambiguous victims. In half of the mass shooting cases, *Breitbart* reported on ambiguous victims as if they were affected by the shooting or were unjustly blamed for the shooting. In the Orlando, FL incident, *Breitbart* featured an article that placed America and White conservatives as victims of political correctness. In an attempt to demonize the Muslim community for the act of terror that took place, *Breitbart* wrote:

When the Third World immigrants admitted under Sen. Teddy Kennedy's 1965 Immigration Act — as well as their children — commit mass murder, the government and media tell us it's a gun problem. Or it's "our" culture. Or it's "homophobia." Or we have to keep admitting millions of Muslims because otherwise the ones already here will REALLY hate us. How did we get in the position where we're screwed if we're not in the good graces of the Muslim community? Maybe we should stop doing that. (Coulter, 2016b, para. 7, 9).

They went on to state, "While more innocent American families await the future slaughter of their loved ones by Islamic radicals already living amongst us, our Attorney General recently vowed to fight such threats with both love, and equality" (Gabriel, 2016b, para. 3). This framing not only painted the entire Muslim community as guilty partners and future offenders, but placed America as a potential future victim, simply waiting to die because of political correctness and policies open to accepting immigrants. *Breitbart* also blamed the political left and stated that it is their problem for mass shootings committed by Islamic terrorists:

The gay Establishment, run by far-left wackos, is of course part of the problem too. It constantly makes excuses for Islam instead of sticking up for the people it's supposed to protect. Wake up, faggots. The political Left is part of the problem. (Milo, 2016, para. 33-34).

Once again, *Breitbart* placed the blame on Islam and left-leaning politicians and claimed that their policies put the rest of America at risk for future violence. Additionally, *Breitbart* appears unsympathetic to the victims of the shooting and their community. This blame of Muslims can also be seen in the Christchurch, NZ shooting. Rather than focus on those victims who were

affected by the shooting, *Breitbart* published an article that reported on the persecution of Christians by Muslims and framed Christians as ambiguous victims. Rather than bring themselves to be sympathetic for the Muslim community that just witnessed horrendous violence, *Breitbart* shifted the focus to other violence that affected people they saw as true victims. In the article, *Breitbart* wrote:

Political leaders and public figures were falling over themselves this weekend to condemn the mosque attacks in New Zealand, while dozens of Christians were slaughtered by Muslims in Nigeria to the sound of crickets. The bizarre aspect of the coverage was not, in fact, the attention paid to a heinous crime committed in New Zealand, but the absolute silence surrounding the simultaneous massacre of scores of Christians by Muslim militants in Africa. Since, in point of fact, Muslim radicals kill Christians around the world with alarming frequency, it is probable that one more slaughter did not seem particularly newsworthy to the decision-makers at major news outlets. Muslims being killed, on the other hand, may strike many as newsworthy precisely because it is so rare. Moreover, the slaughter of black Christians in Africa may not enkindle rage among westerners the way that the murder of white and brown Muslims in New Zealand would. How much mileage can be gained from Muslims murdering Christians, when Christians in America are often seen as an obstacle to the “progress” desired by liberals? The left sees Christians in the United States as part of the problem and seeks to undermine their credibility and influence at every turn rather than emboldening them. Christians are by far the most persecuted religious group in the world, but the mainstream media routinely ignore this fact as if it were unimportant or uninteresting. As a result, many people do not even realize how widespread the persecution is or that 75 percent of the victims of religious persecution around the world are Christians. (Williams, 2019, para. 1, 4, 9, 11-12, 16).

While both incidents are truly horrible and should be condemned, the shift in focus from those killed in New Zealand to those facing Christian persecution serves to forward *Breitbart*’s definition of ideal victims. Worshippers in general do not get this title, only those who are perceived as practicing the same religion as those who write for *Breitbart*. This also serves to frame the Muslim community as offenders rather than those victims who are in need of sympathy and support. A final ambiguous victim featured in *Breitbart* articles was President Trump and his supporters. In the Pittsburgh, PA shooting *Breitbart* rushed to the defense of President Trump when he was partially blamed for the shooting due to his use of hateful rhetoric

throughout his presidency. As news outlets and survivors condemned President Trump, *Breitbart* published an article where Trump was framed as a victim of left-wing Jews. In the article,

*Breitbart* wrote:

Left-wing Jews blaming President Donald Trump for inciting Saturday's mass murder at a Pittsburgh synagogue are "dishonoring the dead" and "dishonoring the cause of fighting anti-Semitism." But what we're finding, particularly among left-wing Jews is that they're using it to attack the administration and trying to conflate the Nazi who committed this massacre with President Trump. Obviously, nothing could be further from the truth. (Kraychik, 2018, para. 1, 3).

*Breitbart* went on to further claim that President Trump could not possibly be linked to anti-Semitism because his children and grandchildren are Jewish (Hudson, 2018) and that he has been a "staunch defender of the Jewish people" (Pollak, 2018a, para. 10-11). By framing President Trump as a victim, the focus on the Jewish community still reeling from this act of violence was diminished. Furthermore, *Breitbart*, perhaps inadvertently, portrayed left-wing Jews as those undeserving of sympathy, and placed conservative Jews in the ideal victim category instead. This ambiguous victim status of conservative Trump supporters can also be seen in the El Paso, TX shooting. In this case, *Breitbart* published an article about a family who took photos with President Trump when he visited the victims. According to *Breitbart*, "The family of a couple who died in the El Paso, Texas, shootings protecting their baby is receiving death threats for associating with President Donald Trump on his trip to El Paso to console victims of the shooting" (Rodriguez, 2019, para. 1). Once again, *Breitbart* framed conservatives, Republicans, and Trump supporters as ambiguous victims. While the family of the slain couple was undeserving of this criticism and these death threats, *Breitbart's* reports of the incident shifted the attention from the shooting of innocent shoppers and onto President Trump and his supporters. Therefore, it can be seen that *Breitbart* also participated in the utilization of

ambiguous victims, but more so as a way to push their agenda and forward those who are seen as “true victims” according to *Breitbart*.

Overall, it can be seen that most victims were treated with sympathy and shock at the shooting. In addition, some news sites applied the status of victim onto those that were not directly impacted by the shooting. These individuals and communities were also shown in a sympathetic light in an attempt to bring attention to societal issues, such as violence, religious persecution, discrimination, and politics. The focus on the victims in these cases aligns with the ideal victim narrative, in which the media tends to report on those victims who have suffered horrendous violence. However, while victims of mass violence are often shown sympathy, they can also receive unsympathetic reports.

#### *Unsympathetic*

While the majority of reports on victims were sympathetic, there were some that featured unsympathetic themes. These unsympathetic themes largely revolved around the idea of victim blaming. Victim blaming is when victims are held or perceived as partially responsible for their own victimization (Eigenberg & Garland, 2008). Primarily seen in sexual assault cases, victim blaming can be based on a victim’s actions or on the identity of the victim, such as race, class, sex, religion, and sexuality (Greer, 2007). In this project, victim blaming was seen in half of the cases. In the san Bernardino shooting, *Fox News* and *NBC News* published articles that theorized the offenders’ motive and why they would have targeted Farook’s coworkers. The *Fox News* article focused on Farook’s behavior leading up to the shooting, which featured statements from survivors. One quote stated Farook “also had gotten into several heated arguments with a co-worker, Nicholas Thalasinis, about Islam. Thalasinis reportedly questioned whether Farook’s faith was truly a ‘religion of peace.’ He was one of the 14 killed in Wednesday’s attack” (Fox

News, 2015e, para. 39). This statement shifted the blame for the shooters' actions onto one of the victims and claimed that these arguments about Islam may have been the catalyst for the shooting. *NBC News* also featured articles that claimed Farook's coworkers "made fun of him for his beard" (Siemaszko & Francescani, 2015). Seen as a sign of heightened religious devotion among Muslims, *NBC News* posits that the ridicule of Farook's beard may have been an attack against his religion and further blamed the victims for enduring the rage of their coworker. *Fox News* and *Breitbart* also published articles which featured reactions from people in the wake of the Orlando, FL shooting and the Las Vegas, NV shooting. In response to the Orlando, FL shooting, *Fox News* featured an article that focused on a Sacramento Baptist pastor who praised the shooting. Quotes from the pastor were included in the article, such as:

"I'm kind of upset he didn't finish the job — because these people are predators," Jimenez said in his sermon. "Are you sad that 50 pedophiles were killed today? Um, no. I think that's great. I think that helps society. I think Orlando, Fla., is a little safer tonight." (Fox News, 2016c, para. 11).

*Fox News* did not explicitly support nor condemn this reaction to the Orlando, FL shooting and instead let the quotes speak for themselves. But their silence and the publication of the article alludes to the possibility that they supported such responses. In addition, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* featured unsympathetic reactions to the Las Vegas, NV shooting. These articles included statements that were made by a Chicago deli owner and a CBS executive. Statements made by the deli owner included:

"Soon as I heard it was country music, I felt relief. White people shooting white people isn't terror... it's community outreach," the restaurant operator said in his now-deleted tweet. Attempting to explain his meaning, Morelli, a Hillary Clinton supporter, told the Chicago Tribune, "As a white guy, I was relieved that it wasn't across race lines, or religion lines or (an attack) from outside the country. When I heard the news, I said, Please God, don't let it be war." (Huston, 2017, para. 3-4).

The CBS executive echoed these sentiments in her statement, which read:

“If they wouldn’t do anything when children were murdered I have no hope that Repugs [sic] will ever do the right thing,” Geftman-Gold wrote in a now-deleted message that was first reported and captured by The Daily Caller. Geftman-Gold continued: “I’m actually not even sympathetic bc [sic] country music fans often are Republican gun toters [sic].” (Flood, 2017, para. 6-7).

*Fox News* and *Breitbart* explicitly called these statements unsympathetic and hateful and included responses on social media, which condemned them and called them hateful. The firing of the CBS executive was also reported on, which showed the backlash for statements of this nature. Compared to the Sacramento Baptist pastor article, it can be seen that *Fox News* and *Breitbart* made sure to denounce these responses rather than silently report on them.

A final theme related to victim blaming was based on the actions, or lack of action, of the victims. *Fox News* and *Breitbart* subtly blamed the victims in three of the shootings for not carrying firearms and not being able to fight back when under attack. Once again, these unsympathetic, victim blaming themes were found in *Fox News* and *Breitbart* articles, rather than the left-leaning news sites. In reports on the Orlando, FL shooting, *Fox News* was quick to contradict President Obama’s calls for gun control:

Despite the president’s claim to the contrary [gun control], it is reasonable to believe that even a small number of armed patrons might have limited the number of fatalities. And had the shooter known he would encounter armed patrons perhaps he might not have chosen that particular club as his target. (Thomas, 2016, para. 6).

This statement blamed not only the patrons for not carrying firearms and limiting the number of casualties, but also Democratic lawmakers who have rallied for gun-free zones and commonsense gun control. By extension, *Fox News* criticized Democrats for the election of these politicians, which placed conservative, Republican lawmakers as their liberator in the call to arm more people. *Breitbart* echoed these sentiments and stated that while people would have still died, the number would have been dramatically lower:

Might an armed response have meant “collateral damage”? Perhaps. But it isn’t likely that 50 deaths would have resulted if some armed citizen was able to put an end to terrorist Mateen’s rampage earlier in his attack. Certainly, no one wants to see people shot and killed, but there is value in stopping a terrorist in his tracks even if a few still die in the process than might otherwise. Those whose lives are saved would not so easily discount the response. (Huston, 2016, para. 19).

*Breitbart* also criticized gun-free zones and said Pulse nightclub “was full of innocent people and you had no guns on the other side” (Hawkins, 2016, para. 2). This theme of blaming gun-free zones was also seen in the Las Vegas, NV shooting. *Fox News* reported on the rules of the festival and claimed that the festival banned attendees from carrying firearms. This alludes to victims not being able to protect themselves from possible violence. Furthermore, *Breitbart* posed the question, “how many lives might have saved on October 1 if Paddock had been confronted by a good guy with a gun six minutes before the attack began” (Hawkins, 2017b, para. 10). Never mind the fact that Paddock had a higher vantage point, which was why he was able to amass so many casualties, *Breitbart* is certain that armed citizens would have significantly affected the end result of the shooting. In a final appearance, this theme was seen in the Pittsburgh, PA shooting. *Breitbart* reported that the Tree of Life Synagogue was gun and security-free. They also stated that the victims were innocently killed when “no one could shoot back.” To further guide this frame, *Breitbart* included a statement by President Trump:

Trump said, “If they had protection inside, the result would have been far better. This is a dispute that will always exist, I suspect, but if they had protection inside the synagogue maybe it could have been a very ... different situation.” He observed that the lack of security allowed the attacker “to do things, unfortunately, that he shouldn’t have been able to do.” (Hawkins, 2018, para. 3).

The inclusion of this quote served to further cement the idea that more guns and armed security would have prevented the shooting, no matter how motivated the shooter was to bring violence upon Jewish people at their place of worship. Therefore, it can be seen that *Fox News* and

*Breitbart* participated in victim blaming by suggesting that these shootings would not have been as deadly, or simply would not have taken place had the victims been armed.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, it can be seen that both offenders and victims are subjected to sympathetic and unsympathetic themes. Offenders were overwhelmingly treated negatively in reports, which focused on their harmful actions and lasting effects the shooting had on communities. However, some offenders were extended sympathy in reports, which focused on the struggles they faced in life and a history of mental illness. Most often, those offenders who were excessively demonized were those seen as “others” and threats to the American way of life, such as terrorists. Those offenders who were shown sympathy tended to be White shooters, and thus were not as easy to distinguish from the rest of society. Victims were also subjected to this reporting dichotomy. Being affected by a public and tragic act of violence, victims were most often shown sympathy, as they were unsuspecting and deemed innocent by the media. Those attacked in religious locations were shown the most sympathy and were seen as pure, innocent, and helpless. In some cases, victims were shown in an unsympathetic light, where they were blamed for being unable to defend themselves. These distinctions seen in reporting were often made along political affiliation lines of the news organizations, which thus shows that there is disparity in how liberal and conservative news reports on mass shootings.

## CHAPTER VI

### EXPLANATIONS, FRAMES, & NARRATIVES

This chapter presents the thematic findings from all cases for explanations, frames, and narratives. Explanations refer to the overall descriptions that were forwarded regarding the offenders' motives and how the event was labeled in the media. Frames and narratives often focus on how crime events are packaged and portrayed in the media, in order to help the public digest information. Frames and narratives are more comprehensive versions of explanations, where details are expounded upon to fit the overall message that the media is forwarding according to their political orientation. For this project, explanations, frames, and narratives refer to how each news site labeled the mass shooting cases and forwarded their own ideas about the explanations and implications of the shooting. Each mass shooting case often had varying and competing explanations across news sites, and as such, these findings are broken down by each case to better analyze these competing frames and narratives. Excerpts from articles are also presented in order to strengthen findings.

#### EXPLANATIONS

In the wake of a mass shooting, there is often a rush to understand why the shooting occurred. As such, news media seeks to provide explanations for these events in an attempt to assuage the public. The explanations that are forwarded are often in line with the motives of the offender(s) and how the event has been labeled by both the media and investigators, such as terrorism and/or hate crimes. Other general frames surrounding mass shootings are often those denouncing the event as evil and unimaginable. Similar sentiments can be seen in the common use of "unspeakable carnage," "hellish scene," and "wicked act" (see Dedaj & Joyce, 2018; Johnson, 2015). News articles also had to designate shootings as the deadliest on U.S. soil. In

2016, that distinction went to the Orlando, FL shooting, but it had to be amended in 2017 and applied to the Las Vegas, NV shooting. The use of this general language serves to denounce mass shootings while also realizing the breadth of their devastation. Further framing of each shooting specifically focused on each offender and their motive, as well as how criminal justice personnel were conducting their investigation of each shooting.

*Case 1 – Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina*

The Charleston, SC shooting was almost immediately labeled a hate crime. A hate crime is any crime, usually involving an act of violence, that is bias-motivated on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and other distinguishing factors (Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002). All news sites alluded to this explanation, focusing on the race of the victims and the religious nature of the shooting as it occurred in a church. However, while the shooting took place at a church, much of the focus was on the importance of the church in the Black community rather than the crime being perceived as an attack against Christianity. For instance, *NBC News* reported that “Roof targeted the church because of its significance to the black community” (Potter & Helsel, 2015, para. 4). This shifted the focus of the hate crime narrative from religion and onto race. *Breitbart* also used the racially motivated explanation for Roof’s attack and stated that this shooting “is a reminder that racial hate remains in society” (May, 2015, para.1). Additionally, *Slate* frequently called Roof a racist and referred to the shooting as an “unambiguous hate crime” (A. Harris, 2015, para. 6). *Slate* linked this act of racial hate to the larger context of systemic racism and stated:

The instinct to classify the Charleston shootings as an evil act committed by an insane individual isn’t entirely wrong. But leaving it there is a journalistic disservice. Framing the massacre as such removes it from any broader social context rather than acknowledging it as something that exists on the extreme end of a societal spectrum of disenfranchisement. Fox [News] is willing to say that this was the act of a racist but is reluctant to acknowledge the existence of systemic racism, of the oppression that

occasionally manifests itself as mass murder but more often appears as small indignities: opportunities denied, breaks not given, stories not told. (Peters, 2015, para. 12).

All news sites also included references to Roof's manifesto, which clearly stated that he wanted to start a race war and was targeting Black individuals because he perceived them as dangerous. Therefore, all news sites participated in framing this shooting as a hate crime. However, *Breitbart* also featured articles that attempted to take the focus off of the racial nature of this shooting. In one article, *Breitbart* questioned whether it was truly a hate crime and stated that Roof had other issues that were not addressed in other new reports, such as anger, drug abuse, and loneliness. In another article, *Breitbart* criticized Hillary Clinton for "playing into racial debates":

It's odd that as Clinton lectures about the enduring threat of racism, she has to pat herself on the back as if she's bravely treading new ground. Meanwhile, "racism" is blamed for almost everything in the U.S. today. Consider the warnings against "white privilege" being burned into elementary school children's brains. Here, Clinton sounds like a social justice warrior, telling America that one microaggression can undo all of the effort and trillions of dollars America has spent to bridge racial gaps and heal old wounds. She seems to think she could save the country by reminding us to check our privilege. (McHugh, 2015, para. 17, 22).

President Obama became the focus in an additional article, where *Breitbart* questioned whether there is enough evidence to label the shooting a hate crime:

President Obama's decision to label a crime a hate crime – without any supporting evidence – follows hard on Obama's decision to label America a continuing horror show of racism over the weekend. (Shapiro, 2015, para. 6).

This speaks to *Breitbart*'s criticism of the label of a hate crime and also reveals a bitterness toward racial discussions. Further evidence of this negative reaction to a racial connection of the shooting is seen in another handful of articles that focus on reverse racism. In these articles, rather than report on the history of racism and systematic oppression that has led to extremist ideology, *Breitbart* reported on remarks that were made by historical Black rights groups. After

the Charleston, SC shooting, demonstrations were held to bring attention to racial division and hate in America. In the reports on these demonstrations, *Breitbart* called the protests “hate rallies” and often framed the protestors as “radical” and “anti-American”:

A radical leader of an anti-American, racist, paramilitary organization told an enthusiastic crowd that they can “strap up” with weapons “for only a couple of hundred dollars” and received applause when she said she planned to establish a Charleston chapter of the group. The remarks—delivered about a block from the church where white racist Dylann Roof allegedly murdered nine black churchgoers—came at the same Tuesday night New Black Panther Party (NBPP) rally where one speaker declared “this is war” and where NBPP leader Malik Zulu Shabazz told the all-black audience of about 250 that “we need to complete” the work of a former slave who wanted to kill as many white people as possible in a revolt. However, the danger of the group isn’t its pro-gun stance but in its distorted hatred of America, which it sees as racist to its core. (Stranahan, 2015, para. 1-2, 13).

This report from *Breitbart* forwarded their claim that Roof was a lone shooter and struggled with other issues rather than blatant racism. Furthermore, *Breitbart* shifted the focus off of White-on-Black racism by framing protesters as racist against White people. Therefore, while all news sites referred to the shooting as a hate crime, *Breitbart* shifted their narrative away from the hate crime label and onto a generic mass shooting label.

Another explanation that emerged in the Charleston, SC shooting was that of white supremacy and terrorism. *Fox News*, *NBC News*, and *Slate* all referred to the shooting as an act of white supremacy and included references to Roof’s manifesto and his hateful, extremist ideology. *Fox News* published an article about the growth of these extremist groups, which claimed:

Confronting extremists, law enforcement in the U.S. has been focusing on aspiring jihadists who align with the Islamic State, overshadowing longstanding concerns about avowed racists, neo-Nazis and anti-government militias. The killings of nine people at a black church in South Carolina appear to fit a grim pattern of violence fueled by hateful ideology, joining attacks by extremists in the last five years that have targeted Jewish and Sikh centers, federal government buildings and police officers. While the number of Americans professing extremist ideologies fluctuates, the election of President Barack

Obama, coupled with a national economic downturn, has in recent years intensified anger among white supremacists and antigovernment groups to levels not seen since the time of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. (Associated Press, 2015c, para. 1, 3-4).

In this article, *Fox News* likened white supremacy groups to terrorist groups and criticized law enforcement for focusing only on jihadi attacks, rather than home-grown racial extremism. *Slate* also featured several articles that labeled the shooting an act of white supremacy and discussed the implications of the shooting taking place at a historically important Black church in the South:

Do not be mistaken. This attack embodied white supremacy at its most blunt and brutal. And it is neither inexplicable nor a coincidence that it happened in a “place of worship.” Institutions like Emanuel AME stand as affronts to white supremacy. To paraphrase Frederick Douglass, black churches have long distinguished the “Christianity of Christ” from slaveholding religion, the “Christianity of this land” that is Christian in name only. Because of this, black churches have served as ever present threats to white power. But we certainly can and do know why white terrorists would target black people in a church. By their very nature, black churches pose threats to white dominance in both quotidian and structural ways. It would be a grave mistake to conclude that this attack bears no meaning, that it cannot be explained, that it does not “make sense.” Black churches and the people who give them life have far too frequently faced death for their resistance to racism. Failing to recognize this most recent attack for what it is does disservice to the lives lost in building this beloved community. (Cressler, 2015, para. 3-4, 10).

These three news sites were explicit in their framing of the Charleston, SC shooting and linked it to a history of racial oppression and white supremacy. *Breitbart* was the only news site to not discuss white supremacy and instead framed Roof as a lone racist, rather than link him to broader hate networks throughout the United States.

In discussions of the shooting as an act of white supremacy, *NBC News* and *Slate* also labeled it as an act of terrorism. *NBC News* featured an article with an interview from a terrorism expert, in which the shooting was called an act of terror:

Stewart expressed despair over what he said would be a largely non-response by Americans to the attack. He said he was baffled by “the disparity of response between when we think people that are foreign are going to kill us and us killing ourselves,”

referring to the threat of Islamist extremism. “This is a terrorist attack,” Stewart said. “This is a violent attack on the Emanuel church in South Carolina, which is a symbol for the black community. It has stood in that part of Charleston for a hundred and some years and has been attacked viciously many times as many black churches have.” (Duchon, 2015, para. 6-7).

In this article, *NBC News* framed the shooting as terrorism and sparked a discussion of what should and should not be considered terroristic on United States soil. *Slate* also forwarded this narrative and stated that the “harsh truth is that this act of terrorism is not senseless” (Cressler, 2015, para. 3). *Slate* also criticized the quickness to label violent attacks committed by people of color as terrorism, but their apparent silence when that violence is committed by White individuals: “Republicans have firm rules for fighting terrorism – unless it’s committed by whites” (Saletan, 2015). These news sites therefore criticized the double standard that is present in labeling acts of violence as terrorism. Ever the one to respond, *Breitbart* also featured an article about the Charleston, SC shooting and the terror label. However, rather than label the act as terrorism, *Breitbart* instead listed the definition of terrorism and a quote from FBI Director James Comey about why the Charleston, SC shooting does not fit the definition:

Comey said, “Terrorism is act of violence done or threatened ... in order to try to influence a public body or the citizenry so it’s more of a political act, and again based on what I know so far, I don’t see it as a political act. Doesn’t make it any less horrific the label, but terrorism has a definition under federal law.” (Hanchett, 2015, para. 2).

As such, *Breitbart* effectively squashed the label of terrorism from the Charleston, SC shooting and instead focused on the actions of a lone, racist gunman. Therefore, it can be seen that there was some consistency across all news sites in the denouncement of the shooting as a hate crime, but there was also some divergence in the discussions of white supremacy and terrorism.

*Case 2 – Inland Regional Center, San Bernardino, California*

For the San Bernardino, CA shooting, all news sites unanimously labeled the event as terrorism. However, there was some variance in how the label of terrorism was applied and the broader implications it had. For instance, *Fox News* stated that the shooters:

had been radicalized Muslims for “quite some time”, which points to the difficulty discovering potential terrorists who keep a very low profile and shows the deadly consequences that can occur when identification comes too late. (Associated Press, 2015d, para. 3).

This statement not only labeled the event as terrorism but also stated that links to larger networks are possible and that identification and surveillance are necessary in the prevention of future acts. Links to ISIS and the Islamic State were also made in *Fox News* articles, where it was reported that:

Investigators are now looking into the possibility of encrypted and other communications between terror groups including the Islamic State and the Muslim husband-wife team in the San Bernardino, Calif., attacks. (Fox News, 2015a, para. 14).

*Fox News* thus cemented the terrorism label in their allusions to larger terror networks that may commit further terror acts. *NBC News* also labeled the San Bernardino, CA shooting as terrorism, but repeatedly stated that there was no link to larger terrorist networks. *NBC News* stated that the shooters were “homegrown violent extremists who were inspired by foreign terror networks” (Williams & Abdullah, 2015, para. 5) but that there was “still no evidence that the couple was in direct contact with any terror groups” (Williams, 2015, para. 8). Therefore, *NBC News* recognized that this shooting was an act of terror, but claimed it was a lone-wolf shooting, not connected to any larger conspiracy of terrorism. *Breitbart* additionally called the shooting terrorism but also overtly framed this shooting as another in a long list of radical Muslim acts of violence. Rather than focus on overseas networks, *Breitbart* framed the shooting as just another example of Islamic extremism:

Whether or not it was part of an Islamic jihadist plot, or a workplace grudge, or a combination of both, really doesn't matter. Our government officials have proven they cannot identify or speak about the true nature of evil posed by Islamic extremism, so we can't expect they'll do anything to address it. (Donnelly, 2015, para. 14).

Furthermore, *Breitbart* continued to link the shooting to the Islamic religion and framed it as inherently hateful and a threat to America:

Today, Americans are confronted with a new enemy. Not a nation with defined borders, diplomats, armies, and heads of state, but a creed that is pitted against civilization and aims to draw the world into a new dark age. On September 11, 2001 it was clear that this enemy threatened American civilization and that it was earnest in its aim to bring absolute devastation to the American people. In the long war between civilization and radical Islam, two terrorists butchered American citizens en masse in San Bernardino, California. (Stepman, 2015, para. 10).

This frame used by *Breitbart* not only labeled the shooting as terrorism, but also served to demonize an entire community and religion and stated that there is a war on American soil, where Islam is the enemy. Contrastingly, *Slate* also framed the shooting as terrorism, but made sure to distance it from local Muslim communities. *Slate* reported that the “couple were inspired by foreign extremist groups,” which claimed that the terroristic threat was foreign, rather than domestic (Hannon, 2015, para. 2). *Slate* also questioned the use of the term “radicalized” when discussing the motives of offenders:

Now, the term “radicalized” is a vague, inelegant one that in this usage seems to imply that there is some identifiable binary difference, observable in retrospect, between being a normal person and being a murderer. It also seems to be used largely in reference to Muslim terror groups even though right-wing white and Christian extremists can be just as dangerous. (Mathis-Lilley, 2015, para. 1).

*Slate* therefore stated that while the shooters were radicalized, there should be a balance in also labeling violent acts committed by right-wing extremists as such. Therefore, it can be seen that while all news sites labeled the San Bernardino, CA shooting as terrorism, there were also distinctions in how they forwarded their own narratives.

*Case 3 – Pulse Nightclub, Orlando, Florida*

Much like the San Bernardino, CA shooting, there was some solidarity among all news sites for the Orlando, FL shooting. Two primary explanations emerged for this shooting. One focused on terrorism and the other focused on the label of hate crime, for both the sexuality and race of the victims, as the shooting took place at a gay nightclub on “Latin Night.”

Overwhelmingly, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* labeled the shooting as terrorism. While there were discussions on both sites of the hate crime distinction, their focus was mostly on terrorism. *Fox News* repeatedly reported on Mateen’s pledge of allegiance to ISIS during the shooting and on his radicalization while in the United States. Reports of this nature can be seen in the following excerpts from *Fox News*:

Omar Mateen, a U.S. Citizen with no apparent criminal history, had committed himself to ISIS before carrying out the bloodiest mass murder in U.S. history. (Fox News, 2016d, para. 2).

Authorities say he may have had a connection with radical Islamic terrorism, and his father, Mir Seddique, told NBC News that his son became angry a couple of months ago when he saw two gay men kissing. (Fox News, 2016d, para. 9).

In the hours after he blasted his way into an Orlando gay nightclub, and with his victims lying dead or wounded around him, Omar Mateen took to Facebook to pledge his loyalty to ISIS and threaten more attacks on the civilized world. (Zimmerman, 2016, para. 1).

In addition to this frame of terrorism, *Fox News* also criticized other news sites and politicians who attempted to call the shooting anything other than terrorism:

The false narrative emerging from the media seeks to make a few points, all of which are red herrings and straw men designed to take attention from the truth. The simplest explanation is that Mateen was a radicalized Muslim, who moved easily with other radicalized Muslims, some of whom are probably living their lives in Orlando. Only now would the FBI be interviewing those people and find connections. The press is weaving a false narrative to fashion a complex explanation for a simple problem. We have a cancer of radical Islam growing in America. Political correctness, the inability of our president to accept the problem because of his beliefs about Islam being a religion of peace, and impossible restrictions placed on federal, state and local law enforcement have made this crime possible. (Berman, 2016, para. 1-2, 16-17).

As such, *Fox News* adamantly labeled the shooting as an act of terror and rebuked anyone who claimed it was anything else. *Breitbart* also followed suit in this reporting style and labeled the shooting as terrorism and called attention to their narrative that framed immigrants and the Muslim community as potential threats:

The latest terror attack, carried out by the son of Afghan migrants, underscores how large-scale migration creates a multi-generational threat matrix. (Hahn, 2016, para. 11).

Obama is a hapless fool, but what is so special about the words “radical Islam”? Maybe it’s not radical Islam. Maybe it’s just “Islam.” (Coulter, 2016a, para. 20).

*Breitbart* went on to further publish multiple articles that discussed Sharia law, Islamic sects, and the Muslim community, which continued their narrative of who is considered a terrorist and a threat (see Coulter, 2016a; Gedrich, 2016; Hahn, 2016). When *NBC News* and *Slate* reported on the shooting as an act of terror, it was limited and focused on the facts of the case, such as Mateen’s pledge of allegiance to ISIS. Furthermore, *NBC News* and *Slate* did not link Mateen to the larger Muslim community, and instead stated that he was a lone wolf and not representative of most terrorism. *NBC News* also called for unity and claimed that the act was an attack against all Americans, which was felt nationwide. *Slate* also attempted to distance Mateen from the Muslim and immigrant community and stated that “Mateen is hardly representative of second-generation Muslims in America, the vast majority of which would never dream of committing a terrorist attack” (Salam, 2016, para. 2). In sum, while there was consistency which labeled the attack as terrorism on all news sites, there was delineation across all news sites, seemingly along their respective political orientation.

Beyond the terror label, the Orlando, FL shooting was also considered a hate crime against the LGBTQ+ community and the Latinx community. *NBC News* and *Slate* were the two

news sites that primarily participated in this framing, while *Fox News* and *Breitbart* focused on terrorism instead. *NBC News* was overt in their labeling, where they stated:

But the Orlando massacre was certainly a hate crime, a bias-motivated attack aimed directly at the LGBTQ community for whom Pulse was a safe home and place of celebration. On Sunday morning, the LGBTQ community felt not only threatened but directly targeted. This devastating psychological impact on a minority group is the particularly dangerous and pernicious effect of bias motivated crimes. Hate crimes are a criminal manifestation of bigotry that tear at the fabric of society. They tear particularly deeply because bias criminals seek to widen preexisting societal fissure lines. Despite remarkable progress in recognizing rights of gay, lesbian and transgender members of society, the LGBTQ community remains an embattled minority. The uniqueness of a hate crime is in its particular impact. Not only does a hate crime have an overwhelming personal effect on an individual victim, it inflicts an intended harm on other members of the target community who experience psychological trauma vicariously. Failing to label and understand bias-motivated crimes as a thing apart fails to validate the specific and deep harm caused to the target minority community. It renders the harm legally invisible, thus invalidating the pain of the community. It thereby inflicts a fresh wound on the victim community, this time coming from their fellow citizens. (Lawrence, 2016, para. 4-5, 9).

Therefore, *NBC News* not only labeled the shooting a hate crime, but they also stated the importance of recognizing it as such, due to the history of violence and oppression that the LGBTQ+ community has faced and endured throughout the years. However, *NBC News* did fail to mention the significance of race and ethnicity in the Orlando, FL shooting attack, as the night was themed as “Latin Night,” which made the majority of victims members of the Latinx community. So, while *NBC News* did recognize that the shooting was a hate crime that targeted LGBTQ+ individuals, there was also a whitewashing of the event, where they failed to acknowledge the various intersections of the victims impacted. *Slate* also framed the shooting as a hate crime against the LGBTQ+ community and provided many articles that outlined the history of violence they have endured throughout the years. *Slate* reported that:

This tragedy will be a painful reminder for many that this country’s immigration policies and tolerance for homo- and transphobia continues to erode the humanity of our fellow residents, even in death. It is only the latest chapter in a long history of violence at LGBTQ bars and clubs in America. In fact, for as long as LGBTQ people have been

congregating in their own social spaces, these spaces have been the target of vicious homophobic and transphobic violence. (Cauterucci, 2016, para. 9).

In this article, *Slate* drew attention to the history of violence the LGBTQ+ community has endured, while they also mentioned the importance of policies that designate communities as threats, such as immigrants. *Slate* also explicitly noted that the identity of the victims should not be erased:

The LGBTQ identities of the victims of Sunday's massacre must not be erased. Nor should the fact that most of the victims were Latinos. It takes nothing away from unity to acknowledge this. In fact, it creates solidarity. Every single victim from this tragedy matters. For some of us, though, the psychic trauma is more acute. (Brammer, 2016, para. 11).

Therefore, *Slate* and *NBC News* labeled the Orlando, FL shooting as a hate crime, primarily against the LGBTQ+ community, but nonetheless brought attention to the hatefulness these communities have endured. *Fox News* and *Breitbart* briefly mentioned the hate crime aspect of the Orlando, FL shooting and often focused on the statement made by Mateen's father which said that Mateen had become angry at the site of two men kissing in the months prior to the shooting. When *Breitbart* framed the shooting as a hate crime, it was overwhelmingly related to the hatred of homosexuality in Islam (May, 2016). Rather than discuss the general existence of homophobia in various regions and religions, *Breitbart* specifically linked it to Islam, claiming that "homosexual acts are punished by death in many Muslim countries. The Islamic State and other jihadist groups are also known to brutally execute homosexuals, at times justifying their actions with verses from the Quran" (Mora, 2016a, para. 3). In this focus on Islamic homophobia, *Breitbart* continued to frame the shooting as terrorism and the Muslim community as threats, which erased the harm endured by the LGBTQ+ community. In sum, the Orlando, FL shooting was framed as terrorism and a hate crime in all news sites, but the delineation across apparent political orientation is stark.

*Case 4 – Route 91 Harvest Music Festival, Las Vegas, Nevada*

The Las Vegas, NV shooting was a challenging case for explanations and narratives, as there is still no known motive as to why Stephen Paddock carried out the shooting. In attempting to uncover his motive, all news sites reported on Paddock's life history and mental health, and *Breitbart* reported on fringe explanations, also known as conspiracy theories. Primarily, all news sites reported on mental illness, while *Breitbart* and *Slate* also discussed terrorism and masculinity. In regard to mental health, all news sites reported on Paddock's known family history, almost in an attempt to blame biology for his crimes. His father was a particular subject of discussion as he was a known bank robber who made an appearance on the FBI's Top Ten Most Wanted list from 1969-1977. News sites also stated that Paddock's father had been diagnosed as psychopathic and also had possible suicidal tendencies. Several articles claimed that Paddock himself was "narcissistic, suffered bouts of depression and was very status-driven," which furthered the claim that Paddock inherited his father's penchant for violence and mental illness (Fox News, 2017c, para. 4). *NBC News* also stated that Paddock may have been in physical or mental anguish and that he had previously been prescribed the anti-anxiety medication Valium (Ainsley & Dilanian, 2017). *Slate* also mentioned this prescription but clarified that Paddock "had no other mental health problems" (Olmstead, 2017a, para. 3).

Beyond biology and mental health, some news sites discussed whether the shooting could be labeled as terrorism. *Slate* argued that there was a double standard in the application of the label of terrorism to acts of violence and stated:

But there's already a false dichotomy emerging in the question of whether Paddock, who shot and killed more than 50 people and injured hundreds more in Las Vegas on Sunday night, was a "terrorist"—i.e., someone acting for political or ideological reasons—or simply a mentally disturbed person. But it's important to understand that ideology can sometimes be just one of a number of factors motivating an act of terrorism. If someone is distraught it doesn't mean they're not also a terrorist. As many observers have pointed

out, certain types of terrorist violence are more likely to be waved away as acts of insanity than others. Those who act in the name of the caliphate, no matter their unusual behavior or past traumas, tend not to get the same pass. (Keating, 2017, para. 1, 4-5).

*Slate* therefore posited that an act of violence on this scale should be considered terrorism and that it is wrong to only consider those cases where someone had pledged allegiance to an officially labeled terror group. *Breitbart*, seemingly aware of the emergent discussion of the terror label, also published articles that discussed whether or not the Las Vegas, NV shooting should be considered terrorism. In these articles, *Breitbart* listed the official definition of terrorism and went on to state that without knowing Paddock's motive and ideology, it cannot be labeled terrorism. *Breitbart* wrote, "By its definition, 'causing terror,' as Paddock evidently did, is not 'terrorism.' If a political, ideological, or religious motive can be identified, then it is terrorism" (Kassam, 2017, para. 10). Therefore, *Breitbart* stated that this shooting could not be considered terrorism because the ideology of Paddock was, and still remains unknown. As such, there was a movement on social media to change the definition of terrorism to include mass murders and mass shootings. In a response to these calls to change the definition of terrorism, *Breitbart* wrote:

The point behind blue tick Twitter's objections is to change terrorism's definition — as the left is so good at doing — to encompass gun violence. In doing so, they would, for example, create "terrorists" out of many black men in Chicago. It is manifestly a nonsense to describe gun violence sans ideological motive as "terrorism", not least because of the charging, legal, and sentencing implications. So no, it's not "not terrorism" because Stephen Paddock is white. It's just not terrorism until it is. (Kassam, 2017, para. 15-17).

Therefore, *Breitbart* quickly defended the hesitancy to label this shooting as terrorism, which fit their narrative of ideal offenders. But in their response, *Breitbart* claimed that other communities of color would be affected by this new definition, which also showcased their prejudice.

A final explanation that was applied to the Las Vegas, NV shooting related to the race and masculinity of the shooter. *Slate* published an article that examined the labels applied to mass shooting cases and the rush to create distinctions between shooters and “normal” citizens, such as race and religion in terror attacks. Instead, *Slate* brought attention to the demographics of the majority of mass shooters, and stated that shooters “aren’t angry immigrants, by and large. They’re white men” (Engber, 2017, para. 1). *Slate* also discussed the presence of privilege in these types of crimes:

In that limited sense, it would be fair to say that whites are responsible for more public massacres than you might expect. Does that mean their whiteness is a factor in these crimes? It’s possible—but given all the numbers above, I think it makes more sense to ask why those classified as non-white might be disproportionately represented among killers, from mass shooters down the line. The answer there would seem to have everything to do with privilege. Structural inequalities related to education, employment, housing, and health care, along with de facto segregation and a history of discrimination and bias, create conditions under which black Americans in particular are more likely to be both the perpetrators and the victims of this violence. Lankford suggests the relative whiteness of public killings, in particular, could indeed result from structural advantage and “aggrieved entitlement.” (Engber, 2017, para. 11-12, 16).

Therefore, *Slate* discussed the fact that the majority of these public killings are overwhelmingly committed by men, and usually White men. Privilege and access to weapons, locations, and media attention are all factors that must be considered when reporting on mass shootings, and ignoring these factors does a disservice to understanding the motives behind some offenders. This report by *Slate* also coincides with previous research finding that mass shootings are the most gendered crime and the links that have been made between mass gun violence and masculinity. Nonetheless, the lack of known motive behind the Las Vegas, NV shooting left news sites in a scramble to label the event, which resulted in a mishmash of frames and narratives.

*Case 5 – First Baptist Church, Sutherland Springs, Texas*

Explanations for the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting exhibited some consistency across news sites and linked this shooting to discussions of violent tendencies and poor mental health. All news sites painted a picture of Kelley as a violent individual, who possibly suffered from a mental illness and sought to do harm. For instance, Kelley’s previous domestic violence conviction was often a topic of discussion, which painted him as an extremely violent individual. Reports from *Fox News*, *NBC News*, and *Breitbart* included statements, such as:

Kelley was found guilty in 2012 of choking and kicking his wife and striking his young stepson hard enough to fracture his skull, according to interviews and military documents. He was also accused of threatening his wife four times with a gun. (Norman, 2017, para. 11).

Two ex-girlfriends told NBC News that Kelley had a short fuse and his behavior was disturbing and even violent after they broke up with him. (Siemaszko & Johnson, 2017, para. 34).

Four women came forward in the days following the mass casualty shooting at the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas, revealing previous sexual allegations against the killer. The accusations range from harassment to “rape by force.” (Price, 2017b, para. 1).

*Slate* also reported on Kelley’s previous behavior and stated that his “previous history of domestic violence, however, fits the profile for mass murderers” (Olmstead, 2017b, para. 6).

*Slate* thus concurred with previous research which has found connections between domestic violence and mass shootings (Issa, 2019). These reports coincided with the later discovery that Kelley was seeking revenge on his mother-in-law, after she had received threatening texts from him prior to the shooting. All news sites furthered this frame of an unhinged, violent offender, and reported on Kelley’s mental health history, which included his stay and escape from a behavioral center. *NBC News* interviewed those that knew Kelley prior to the shooting and featured this statement:

“That was another thing about him — he was very sick in the head,” former flame Katy Landry told NBC News in a Facebook message. “He would tell me very sick strange things.” (Siemaszko & Johnson, 2017, para. 35).

This served to paint Kelley as a disturbed, unhinged maniac. Furthermore, when discussing Kelley’s brief stay in a behavioral facility, and subsequent escape, *NBC* stated:

The person who reported Kelley missing told El Paso officers that Kelley “was a danger to himself and others as he had already been caught sneaking firearms onto Holloman Air Force Base,” where he had been stationed, according to the police report. (Connor & Arkin, 2017, para. 5).

*Slate* similarly reported:

In the police report from the episode, the person who reported Kelley’s escape warned that Kelley “suffered from mental disorders,” and the report concluded Kelley was “a danger to himself and others.” He “was attempting to carry out death threats” against his superiors in the military and had been caught smuggling guns onto his base. (Olmstead, 2017b, para. 3).

The mental health frame was further forwarded when all news sites featured President Trump’s remarks in the wake of the shooting. For instance, President Trump claimed that the shooting was a result of “a mental health problem at the highest level” (see Fox News, 2017c). Trump further described Kelley as a very deranged individual, which was also included in news articles. As such, all news sites framed Kelley as a dangerous, unhinged individual who had a history of domestic violence and mental health issues before he carried out his domestic dispute-driven shooting on the church that his mother-in-law occasionally attended.

Beyond the official motive for Kelley’s shooting rampage in Sutherland Springs, TX, three news sites were quick to label the event as an act of religious persecution. In a general sense, the shooting was frequently called the deadliest church shooting in United States history. Beyond this, *Fox News* reported on Vice President Pence’s remarks when he addressed a crowd about the shooting, where he stated that “whatever animated the evil that descended on that small church, if the attacker's desire was to silence their testimony of faith, they failed” (Fox News,

2017e, para. 9). *Fox News* further wrote that the shooting “disregarded the sacred things of society and became a site of evil” (Hotsenpiller, 2017, para. 1). In a similar tone, *NBC News* wrote, “Because ultimately, if our churches are not safe, then none of us are safe” (Barber & Wilson-Hartgrove, 2017, para. 13). Likewise, *Breitbart* continuously called Kelley an atheist “who thought Christians were stupid,” which is why he opened fire on a Baptist church (Shadwick, 2017, para. 1). While Kelley’s motive was later determined to have no racial or religious motivation, these sites were quick to assume that the shooting could only be that of a religious nature and made sure conversations revolved around the importance of faith.

#### *Case 6 – Tree of Life Synagogue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

In response to the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA, all news sites quickly labeled the act as a hate crime of anti-Semitism. Due to Bowers’ statement of wanting “all Jews to die,” it would have been difficult for the news sites to not label it a hate crime (Chavez et al., 2018). As such, the label was quickly and effectively applied, as well as condemned on all news sites. *Fox News* called the shooting an act of “racism and bigotry” while they also claimed that Bowers was full of “poisonous hatred” (Merkulova, 2018). *Fox News* furthered this frame and aligned this shooting with the history of anti-Semitism in the United States, where they wrote that the “carnage, however unprecedented, is not an aberration” (Associated Press, 2018a, para. 2). *Fox News* went on to state that anti-Semitism remains “among the most entrenched and pervasive forms of hatred and bigotry in the United States,” which thereby situated the Pittsburgh, PA shooting as another in a long list of anti-Semitic hatred and violence (Associated Press, 2018a, para. 3). *NBC News* similarly reported on a rise in anti-Semitic attacks in previous years, which further cemented this shooting as a hate crime and display of anti-Semitic violence. References to the shooter’s online posts and manifesto are also

included, which finalized Bowers' identity as a "Jew-hater" (for examples, see Collins, 2018; Nolte, 2018; Politi, 2018; Shapiro, 2018). In an unusual display, *Breitbart* did not have much to say in regard to this shooting and instead simply reported politician's responses to the shooting, such as President Trump's denouncement of the attack. Also, *Breitbart* contradicted other news sites and claimed that the number of anti-Semitic incidents was not as high as reported, as seen in this quote:

While there has been a rise in antisemitic "incidents" — which include vandalism and harassment — the ADL itself actually reported a decline in physical attacks on Jews. As *Breitbart* News noted when the ADL audit was first published earlier this year, assaults on Jews fell by nearly half from 2016 to 2017, to 19 incidents. In general, the U.S. remains arguably the least antisemitic country in the world, outside of Israel itself. (Pollak, 2018a, para. 4, 10).

Otherwise, *Breitbart* was surprisingly silent in the framing of this shooting. Continuing with the hate crime frame, *Slate* also condemned the shooting as anti-Semitic. *Slate* stated that the shooting was "the deadliest attack targeting Jews in American history," which effectively painted the event as a premeditated attack against the Jewish people (Stern, 2018, para. 7).

In addition to the explanation of a hate crime, *NBC News* and *Slate* also linked this shooting to white supremacy and an extremist ideology. *Fox News* and *Breitbart* did not frame this shooting as an act of white supremacy and just focused on the anti-Semitic nature of the crime. In their reports on this shooting and white supremacy, *NBC News* stated that "anti-Semitism is a central motivating force in far-right ideology" and that the Jewish people are often blamed for "immigration, perceived threats to the white race, and socialism" (Berlatsky, 2018, para. 4, 7). Furthermore, *NBC News* wrote:

Privilege is when, in a two-week span, white men kill 11 Jews in Pennsylvania, two black people in Kentucky grocery store, two women in a Florida yoga studio and 12 people in a California bar, yet no one calls to ban, deport, or profile white men — or asks, "Where were they radicalized?" Imagine, for a moment, if the suspects were from a minority demographic like Muslims or immigrants. We would probably send in the military, and

many people would demand the minority demographic hold their own members accountable. Does this happen when the suspects are white men? (Rashid, 2018, para. 1-2).

*NBC News* adamantly linked this shooting to white supremacy, and brought attention to the double standard that is present in reporting and investigating shootings that are committed by far-right extremists versus those committed by radicalized Muslims. *Slate* also claimed that this shooting was linked to white supremacy and stated that platforms that disguise hate speech as free speech should be banned. In reference to the social media site, Gab, where Bowers posted his hateful ideology, *Slate* stated that “there’s little stopping violent hate groups from gathering together to organize, socialize, and indoctrinate new followers,” and alluded to the growth of white supremacist groups and networks through social media (Glaser, 2018, para. 5).

Another explanation that was explored in this shooting was the climate of hateful rhetoric in the United States. While not explicitly linked to white supremacy, three news sites reported on the presence of hateful rhetoric for anyone considered an outsider, especially immigrants. Discussions of rhetoric often centered around President Trump and his blunt language and calls for policies to limit immigration and the surveillance of specific groups of the population. Rather than focus on President Trump’s rhetoric, *Fox News* reported that hate in general was the underlying motive for the shooting, and that there was a “hatred of those we perceive to be different from ourselves and seen as evil” (Marshall, 2018, para. 12). *Fox News* also stated that this hatred surrounded us:

Our minds are filled with hatred – whether it be from what we watch on television, listen to on radio and in podcasts, or read in news stories and opinion pieces. Our talking heads, journalists, talk show hosts, politicians and even our president spew hate. This constant rhetoric of hatred, of exclusion and of banning is circulated in our minds. We need to take a deep look in the mirror, America. We need to stop screaming about bans, which alone will not fix this problem we have as a very angry and divided and, dare I say, hateful nation. We need to change. The change begins within each of us. We need to stop hating each other. If only we could ban that. We need to ban hate. (Marshall, 2018, para. 14-17).

In this article, *Fox News* discussed the climate of hate that has developed in America and the “othering” of anyone seen as different. However, *Fox News* did not link this climate and rhetoric to President Trump, like *NBC News* and *Slate* did. For instance, *NBC News* wrote that:

Trump’s anti-Semitic dog whistles are inseparable from his broader message of nationalist purity. When Trump stokes fears of foreigners and outsiders — attacking Mexicans as rapists or presenting a caravan of refugees as an existential threat to the U.S. — he fuels far right anger and hatred directed at Jewish people also, since Jewish people have historically been perceived as impure foreigners and refugees for centuries. When Trump says that accusations against Kavanaugh were leveled by “people who are evil,” the shadowy conspiratorial rhetoric is aimed at Democrats, but it also implicates Jewish people, who are, for many on the far right, the shadowy conspirators of choice. (Berlatsky, 2018, para. 14).

When local residents of the Jewish community were interviewed, *NBC News* featured this statement:

Residents here are steeling themselves for President Donald Trump’s planned Tuesday visit, with some saying the commander-in-chief shouldn’t come because of his polarizing rhetoric. “I don’t blame the president, but I certainly think we can hold him responsible for making the atmosphere much more polarized,” Cox said. (McCausland & Gregorian, 2018, para. 1, 10).

This served to say that while Trump could not be held directly responsible for the shooting, his use of rhetoric and designation of certain groups as “outsiders” was still dangerous and may be correlated to rise in hateful aggression and violence. *Slate* explicitly echoed this sentiment and claimed that President Trump’s perceived hateful remarks could, and should, be linked to an increase in violence:

But it is clear that the kind of violent and dehumanizing language that is the hallmark of Trump’s political style is likely to increase the number of such crimes. That is enough to make the president morally culpable for an overall increase in civic strife, even if we cannot know whether he is causally responsible for this or that specific act of violence. It is clear that Donald Trump bears the main culpability for destroying whatever norms of civility we still retained a few years ago. (Mounk, 2018, para. 6, 14).

This focus on rhetoric forwarded the frames of hatefulness that spurred Robert Bowers to commit his act of anti-Semitism. Furthermore, the narratives of who should be considered bigoted and hateful was also on display, with much of the debate focused on white supremacists, President Trump, and by extension, Trump supporters. The Pittsburgh, PA shooting thus drew sharp partisan lines in news reports of this incident, as seen in the frames and narratives forwarded by these news sites.

*Case 7 – Walmart, El Paso, Texas*

The shooting that took place in El Paso, TX elicited many explanations based on media framing and law enforcement investigation. While law enforcement labeled it as domestic terrorism and structured their investigation according to this label, the news sites did not frame this shooting as an act of terror. Instead, the media explained this shooting as a hate crime and act of white supremacy. *Fox News* was reserved in the label of hate crime for the El Paso, TX shooting and simply reported statements made by the shooter, Patrick Crusius, and by law enforcement. For instance, *Fox News* featured information about Crusius' manifesto and said that "he was explicitly targeting Mexicans" (Leon, 2019, para. 3). This framed the shooting as a hate crime, but *Fox News* did not elaborate further, nor condemn the shooting in the way other news sites did. *NBC News* was more overt in their designation of the event as a hate crime. They featured many articles that discussed Crusius' manifesto and that he "posted a hate-filled diatribe decrying a Hispanic invasion" (Gamboa, 2019, para. 3). *NBC News* also published a couple of articles that discussed the history of racial violence in Texas against immigrants and the Hispanic and Mexican communities. The inclusion of these articles served to cement the label of this shooting as a hate crime and another example of violence targeting vulnerable populations. Much like *Fox News*, *Breitbart* was reserved in their label of the shooting as a hate crime, but they did

decry the event. *Breitbart* reported that Crusius' attack was a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas and they called the shooter's ideas twisted and deranged (Coulter, 2019). *Breitbart* also featured excerpts from Crusius' manifesto and called it "a racist confederacy of various races" (Klein, 2019, para. 25). However, little was said beyond these statements other than official statements from investigators. *Slate* also believed this shooting was a hate crime, but instead called it an act of white supremacy, which was also seen in other news sites.

*Fox News* did frame Crusius as a white supremacist and stated that he was influenced by a book titled *The Great Replacement*, which is a "driving philosophy of white supremacists" (Devine, 2019, para. 12). Furthermore, *Fox News* stated that the shooter "wrote a white nationalist manifesto ahead of the shooting" (Fox News, 2019, para. 4). However, beyond these few statements, *Fox News* did not discuss white supremacy. *NBC News* wrote boldly about white supremacy and stated that there is a "threat posed by growing white nationalism in America," which referred the El Paso, TX shooting and other recent shootings (Talmazan, 2019, para.1). *NBC News* also discussed how white supremacist ideology is spread:

White supremacists are relying on both social and technical means to reach new publics, while inspiring others. First, a person planning an attack posts on a fringe online message board. Second, they carry out the attack. Third, the media picks up the post and amplifies it. Fourth, the police and experts on extremism are interviewed, where they validate and contextualize the shooter's ideas. While journalists strive for objectivity and see themselves as serving the public, in situations like these, the press is an important part of the circulation process. (Donovan, 2019, para. 1-2).

This statement recognized that white supremacy is real and is spread through the media, which gave pause to how the media portrays these acts of violence. *Breitbart* also called Crusius a white supremacist, "motivated by white nationalist ideology" (Kew, 2019a, para. 2). However, *Breitbart* did not further discuss white supremacy and instead criticized people who linked the shooter's ideology to President Trump. *Slate* was the news site that most discussed white

supremacy and denounced the shooter for their ideology. *Slate* also situated the El Paso, TX shooting in the larger discussion of bias-motivated violence, stating:

When a white supremacist gunman killed more than 20 people at an El Paso, Texas, Walmart on Saturday, he claimed a dubious honor for his cause: Right-wing terrorism is once again responsible for more deaths on U.S. soil (107) than jihadi terrorism (104) since 9/11, according to data collected by New America. (Byman, 2019, para. 1).

As such, *Slate* purported that white supremacy is a greater threat than jihadi terrorism, although the latter is often the subject of debate and focus of preventative action. Furthermore, *Slate* questioned the ideology of white supremacists and noted their contradictions by asking:

But if whites are superior, then why, in these racist fantasies, are they losing? The conventional answer to that question, among white nationalists, is that the “invaders”—usually Muslims or Latinos—are arriving in hordes and cranking out too many babies. But in the terrorist manifestos, that argument has been overtaken by more complicated theories. The “invaders,” it seems, have found new ways to outperform the “master race.” (Saletan, 2019a, 3-4).

Therefore, *Slate* clearly defined this shooting as an act of white supremacy with the inclusion of statements about Crusius’ manifesto and ideology, while they also situated this shooting in the larger discussion of the growing threat of white supremacy.

Inspired by the discussions surrounding Crusius’ motivation of white supremacy, many news sites also linked the shooting to broader discussions of hateful rhetoric and climate. *NBC News* and *Slate* reported on the similarities between Crusius’ ideology and President Trump’s rhetoric when he discussed immigration and border control. *NBC News* featured statements from Democratic politicians that blamed President Trump’s rhetoric for stoking hate and claimed that Trump has created a climate of hate in reference to the El Paso, TX shooting (Madani, 2019). In an attempt to link President Trump to white supremacy, *NBC News* wrote:

After the weekend’s killing of 20 people in El Paso by an antiimmigrant shooter who lamented an “invasion” by Latinos, the political debate in the country right now could be the familiar one — about access to guns — or it could be about the radicalization of white supremacists in the Trump era. (Todd & Dann, 2019, para. 1).

Specifically, *NBC News* reported on the similarity of the language used in Crusius' manifesto and in President Trump's statements about the southern border:

Before the attack, the shooter apparently posted an online screed that police are calling a manifesto and that referred to a "Hispanic invasion." But his anti-Mexican words do not exist in a vacuum — indeed, they echo those we have heard repeatedly over the past four years. (Varela, 2019, para. 1).

*NBC News* did clarify to say that President Trump's rhetoric did not directly cause the shooting but that a correlation could not be ignored, in that a "Mexican invasion was a central theme of the Trump presidency" (Varela, 2019, para. 15). *Slate* echoed these sentiments and claimed that:

The rise of Trump both reflected the greater radicalization of right-wing voices and heightened it. Trump rode to power in part on anti-immigrant and racist sentiments. At the same time, he elevated these concerns, with a regular track record of racist statements and hostility to Mexicans and other immigrants. Many white supremacists embraced Trump. Radicalization expert J.M. Berger found that the top hashtag for the alt-right is #MAGA. (Byman, 2019, para. 4, 7).

As such, *Slate* situated President Trump as responsible for the growing violence from white supremacists and the growth of its ideology on social media. When focused on the victims of the El Paso, TX shooting, *Slate* reported:

For four years, the president has besieged the Hispanic community. Undocumented men and women have been forced out of their routines, even forgoing medical care for fear of being caught and deported. Trump's pursuit of immigrants has also managed to break down the trust between immigrants and local law enforcement. (Krauze, 2019, para. 2).

According to this excerpt, *Slate* posited that President Trump's focus on immigration and his subsequent policies have cultivated a climate of hate towards immigrants and the Hispanic community in general. Therefore, it can be seen that *NBC News* and *Slate* linked the motivation of the El Paso, TX shooter to the climate of hate that has allegedly been cultivated under President Trump. In contrast, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* claimed that President Trump could not be held responsible for the actions of Crusius. *Fox News* did feature articles where presidential

candidates called out Trump for his rhetoric, but *Fox News* also stated that the only one responsible is the shooter (Re, 2019). Furthermore, *Fox News* stated that President Trump has repeatedly denounced white supremacy, which served to distance Trump from this line of discussion:

In unequivocal terms, the president also condemned white supremacy, responding to reports that the shooter in El Paso wrote a racist manifesto. “In one voice, our nation must condemn racism, bigotry and white supremacy,” Trump said, standing beside Vice President Pence. “These sinister ideologies must be defeated. Hatred has no place in America.” (Singman, 2019, para. 3-4).

*Breitbart* echoed these statements and also featured the quote made by President Trump that denounced hate and white supremacy. Furthermore, *Breitbart* condemned political leaders who linked President Trump to the shooting and thus claimed that these arguments are moronic (Coulter, 2019). In an effort to mock these arguments, *Breitbart* featured an excerpt from Crusius’ manifesto and the subsequent arguments about President Trump’s rhetoric:

Crusius began: “This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas. They are the instigators, not me. I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion.” *Wait a second! Didn’t Trump use the word “invasion” to describe our wide-open border? Why, that makes him a co-conspirator in the white supremacist’s slaughter!* Of course, if we believe the part of Crusius’ manifesto that talks about an “invasion,” I don’t know why we’re required to disbelieve the part where he says his ideas have nothing to do with Trump — or the part where he denies being a “white supremacist.” (Coulter, 2019, para. 3-5).

In addition, *Breitbart* claimed that “extremist killings declined 39% during the first two years of the Trump administration, compared to the last two years of the Obama administration” (Pollak, 2019a, para. 5). Therefore, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* critiqued any link made between President Trump and the El Paso, TX shooter and rebuked both the media and politicians who claimed anyone other than the shooter was responsible for this crime.

*Case 8 – Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre, Christchurch, New Zealand*

The emergent explanations for the Christchurch, NZ shooting were similar to those used in the El Paso, TX shooting. All news sites referred to the shooting as terrorism, which echoed official statements from Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and law enforcement investigators, who quickly labeled the attack an act of terrorism and called the shooter “an extremist, right-wing, violent terrorist” (for examples, see Givetash & Bennett, 2019; Ismail, 2019; Pollak & Caplan, 2019). However, beyond these official statements, there was not much further framing of the event as terrorism, as news sites shifted focus to the hateful ideology of Brenton Tarrant, known as white supremacy.

All news sites reported on Tarrant’s hate-filled manifesto and his previous interactions with nationalist groups. *Fox News* repeatedly referred to Tarrant’s manifesto and actions that led up to the shooting and stated that he “was out to avenge attacks in Europe perpetrated by Muslims” (Associated Press, 2019b, para. 7). Further reports claimed that he “hated immigrants, wanted revenge, to create fear, and clearly wanted attention” (Associated Press, 2019c, para. 1-2). *NBC News* also reported on Tarrant’s manifesto and situated this act of violence into larger discussions of the threat of white supremacy:

The recent mass shooting of Muslim worshippers in New Zealand was a devastating and tragic symptom of the growing threat posed by violent white supremacy in the U.S. and across the world, experts say. (Givetash & Bennett, 2019, para. 1).

*NBC News* also referenced that white supremacy was not exclusive to the United States, but that “it has been allowed to grow, due to a much broader culture,” such as social media and the almost instantaneous transfer of information (Givetash & Bennett, para. 25). *NBC News* further stated that the lack of focus on white supremacy was a double standard that should be addressed since “violence and threats by the far right in many Western countries have been largely

overshadowed by fears of Islamist extremists” (Givetash & Bennett, 2019, para. 34). In *Breitbart*’s reports of the shooting, references were made to white supremacy, but there were also efforts made to explore other motivations. For instance, *Breitbart* called Tarrant “an immigrant-hating white nationalist” but also referred to his manifesto as an “ideological hodgepodge”:

A Twitter profile under the name “Brenton Tarrant” posted a manifesto, as well as several close-up shots of what appear to be the rifles used in the attack, where the white writing is more legible. It appears to contain anti-migrant statements. The manifesto itself is an ideological hodgepodge, from socialism to white supremacy to environmentalism. He identifies himself as a fascist and talks about a racial war in the U.S. (Pollak & Caplan, 2019, para. 88).

*Breitbart* repeated this lack of focus on the part of Tarrant and claimed that his “motivations are not yet clear, as his manifesto suggested an attraction to white supremacy, socialism, and ecofascism, as well as a hatred of Muslims” (Pollak, 2019b, para. 11). This lack of focus on white supremacy, while possibly accurate according to the manifesto, served to shift focus onto other motivations rather than to solely denounce white supremacy and categorize this attack as further evidence of a growing threat. *Slate*, once again, framed this attack as a blatant act of white supremacy and also discussed the ideology behind white supremacists:

Enthusiasts of the so-called “alt-right” espouse the belief that whites are justified in maintaining political dominance by virtue of cultural and/or genetic superiority. This belief is sometimes accompanied by claims that laws and norms which allow for increasing nonwhite populations constitute a slow-motion “white genocide,” a phrase that appears in the New Zealand shooter’s writing. (Mathis-Lilley, 2019, para. 5).

As such, *Slate* firmly situated this shooting into the narrative of white supremacy and also linked it to other acts of violence that have been inspired by this hateful ideology.

Connected to the white supremacy narrative, articles on the Christchurch, NZ shooting also discussed the climate and rhetoric that has produced and inspired bias-motivated crimes. Primarily, the focus was again on President Trump and his statements made about immigrants

and Muslims. *Fox News* linked Trump to the shooting and stated that “Trump said the attacks were a ‘horrible, horrible thing,’ but later said that illegal immigrants seeking to enter the U.S. are part of an ‘invasion’” (Darrah, 2019, para. 4). *Fox News* also claimed that Trump downplayed any threat posed by white nationalism:

The alleged gunman of the attack called Trump “a symbol of renewed white identity,” but Trump downplayed any threat posed by white nationalism. He said he didn’t believe white nationalism was a rising threat around the world, and said: “I think it’s a small group of people that have very, very serious problems, I guess. ... If you look at what happened in New Zealand, perhaps that’s the case. I don’t know enough about it yet. But it’s certainly a terrible thing.” (Darrah, 2019, para. 9-10).

Therefore, in contrast to the El Paso, TX shooting, *Fox News* alluded to President Trump’s rhetoric as a possible inspiration for the Christchurch, NZ shooter and criticized him for his attempt to downplay the threat that white supremacy poses. *NBC News* similarly reported that Trump “immediately condemned the shooting” but also faced “criticism for downplaying the broader threat posed by white supremacists” (Givetash & Bennett, 2016, para. 6). *NBC News* went on to state that this “is exactly the kind of denial and deflection that the West has criticized so forcefully when it came from Sunni Arab countries after 9/11” (Clark, 2019, para. 2). In the aftermath of a terrorist act, calls are often made for the Muslim community to denounce the act and separate themselves from radical actions. However, *NBC* juxtaposed these calls with the lack of denouncement of white supremacy in Western countries and wrote:

After yet another massacre apparently inspired by white nationalism, it is long past time for Western countries to reflect on whether they should act on the advice that they so freely handed out to others. It is our turn to deal with propagandists who radicalize online, as well as with those who fund them, or risk the lives of people around the country and the world. (Clark, 2019, para. 4).

Furthermore, *NBC News* stated in one headline that the “New Zealand shooting was inspired by the hate America is exporting,” and called the U.S. to recognize and deal with that reality (Clark, 2019). *Slate* also called for the U.S. to rebuke these acts and the rhetoric of President Trump:

We must rebuke the characterization of our religion that has been perpetrated by none other than the president of the United States, who has pursued a virulently anti-Muslim agenda since taking office (an offshoot of what he promised on the campaign trail). (Ismail, 2019, para. 6).

*Slate* recognized that while racism was never dead in the U.S., the election of President Trump gave inspiration to those still harboring hateful ideals:

Trump took a politically dormant, race-obsessed subculture—one that has been strongly associated, both historically and in recent times, with violence—and demonstrated that its ideas could still support a national figure. He shouldn't be able to argue that he comes from the respectable, morally acceptable wing of the American nationalist movement, because such a thing doesn't exist. (Mathis-Lilley, 2019, para. 6).

Furthermore, *Slate* addressed the double-standard of security efforts that focus on jihadism while they also ignore white supremacy and argued that by “dismissing anti-Islamic violence, Trump helps white extremists foment jihadism and undermine pluralism. You can't fight one kind of terror if you won't fight the other” (Saletan, 2019b, para.13). As such, these three news sites clearly denounced white supremacy and President Trump for possibly giving inspiration to the ideology behind the Christchurch, NZ shooter. *Breitbart* also discussed these allegations, but more so in a way to combat them and protect President Trump. *Breitbart* featured several articles that claimed that Tarrant was more inspired by China than Trump:

The man allegedly responsible for the mass shooting at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, wrote in his manifesto that the modern political system he most admired was that of communist China. Tarrant's alleged admiration for China may be based on the country's fervent nationalist ideology, with citizens required to declare loyalty to the state above their religion or even their own families. Furthermore, China has also stepped up the repression of its own Muslim population, forcing over a million Uighurs into communist “re-education” camps where they are forced to renounce their own religion and declare loyalty to the state. (Kew, 2019b, para. 1, 5).

In these articles, *Breitbart* attempted to take the focus off of President Trump's rhetoric and place it onto another blameworthy figure. Other articles that discussed President Trump's rhetoric claimed that it was unfair to frame the shooter as a supporter of Trump, and to do so

would open the door for his “eco-terrorist passages to be aligned with Nancy Pelosi or Ms. Ocasio-Cortez” (AP, 2019, para.2). Therefore, President Trump’s rhetoric was also a subject of debate in these articles, which served to forward the narrative of white supremacy and far-right extremism. However, in contrast to other cases, these distinctions cannot be drawn solely on political ideology lines of the news organizations, as *Fox News* treaded new territory in their critique of President Trump.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, the explanations forwarded by news sites often aligned with the motivations of the offender and statements made by law enforcement about the investigation. These explanations often included the designation of shootings as a hate crime, act of white supremacy, terrorism, or as caused by poor mental health and access to guns. While there was some consistency in select cases among news sites, there were also stark differences in how the shootings were presented across news sites. Those cases that were deemed as terrorism received the most consistency as there was overwhelming evidence to categorize them as such. However, the conservative news sites often implicated Islam and the Muslim community in discussions of terrorism, while the liberal news sites focused only on the actions of the shooters in order to not ostracize those communities. Hate crime and acts of white supremacy often had more debate from news sites that discussed whether those labels should be applied. For instance, all news sites agreed that the Orlando, FL shooting was a terrorist act, but the liberal news sites also designated it as a hate crime against the LGBTQ+ and Latinx communities. The conservative news sites often did not focus on the hate crime aspect of this crime, and *Breitbart* also questioned the application of the hate crime label to the Charleston, SC and El Paso, TX shootings. This aligns with the narratives they forwarded, which focused on religious persecution

and mental illness, in order to create a separation between the shooters and the rest of society. The liberal news sites, though, focused on hate crime labels as well as white supremacy, in order to bring attention to the threat these groups pose to society. In addition to the motivation of offenders, some sites discussed mental health and access to guns as contributors to mass shootings. The application of mental health serves to designate those offenders as “other” and places the blame solely on individuals rather than societal ills. Liberal news sites also focused on access to guns as a contributor to the shootings, especially in those cases where offenders passed background checks that they should have been flagged in. As such, these discussions align with the next chapter, which explores the policy debates that were present in articles and also serves to understand how news media participates in agenda setting.

## CHAPTER VII

### POLICIES

This chapter presents the thematic findings from all cases for policy discussions that emerged following the shootings. Policies include those that were enacted, suggested, and debated. These policies may be related to the explanations and narratives that were applied to each case, indicating a definitive cause for these policies to address. Each mass shooting case had various policies that were forwarded, and the debates surrounding them on the news sites were often competing and contradictory. These findings are grouped based on the most prominent policies that were discussed across all cases and excerpts from articles are presented.

#### POLICY

Following a mass shooting, there is a rush to explain why it happened, as well as prevent another shooting from occurring. Oftentimes, these policies center on gun control, counterterrorism and surveillance, and mental health. There was some similarity to the policies forwarded in the eight cases chosen for this project. Debates often centered on access to firearms, whether it be restricting or increasing access. Additionally, discussions of counterterrorism were present in many cases, including talks of surveillance and monitoring, as well as immigration. Some outlying policy discussions were case-specific, such as the removal of the Confederate Flag from government buildings following the Charleston, SC shooting and the removal of violent video game displays and demos in Walmart following the El Paso, TX shooting. As such, discussions here will focus on those common debates across all cases.

#### *Gun Control – Limiting Access*

The discussions of gun control often took two divergent paths, primarily along political party lines of the news organizations. For instance, *NBC News* and *Slate* featured articles that

called for increased gun legislation, while *Fox News* and *Breitbart* criticized these calls and stated that they infringed on Second Amendment rights. When calls for gun control arose, *NBC News* and *Slate* often focused on background checks and the ease of access to semiautomatic weapons. Background check reforms can be seen in the Charleston, SC shooting and the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting. In both of these cases, the shooters had previous criminal records that should have deterred them from purchasing firearms legally. In the Charleston, SC shooting, Dylann Roof had a pending drug charge and had been banned from a shopping mall in the months prior to carrying out the deadly attack. According to federal law, the sale of a gun to anyone under indictment for a felony is prohibited. However, in Roof's case, the drug charge was a misdemeanor, which allowed him to purchase his firearms legally. *NBC News* reported on this flaw in the system and claimed that the current policy is insufficient in limiting gun-related violence and featured statements from President Obama and Hillary Clinton calling for common sense gun reform. *Slate* also called for gun reform, but more so in a dissatisfied way. They claimed that the focus on the Confederate Flag served to distract Americans from discussions of gun control and that "most Americans have given up on achieving meaningful gun control in their lifetimes or in their grandchildren's lifetimes" (Winter, 2015b, para. 3). Additionally, *Slate* wrote:

When 20 dead first-graders cannot result in new and meaningful national measures on gun control or even in weak and largely symbolic national measures on gun control, then perhaps—if you are of a certain cast of mind—that is the moment to retreat on gun control. (Winter, 2015b, para. 12).

Referencing the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting, *Slate* argued that if the shooting of children did not result in any legislation, then it was unlikely that any new mass shooting case would. As such, *Slate* seemed to be disillusioned with the achievement of any substantial gun control in the aftermath of the Charleston, SC shooting.

The focus on gun control and background checks was also seen in the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting. In this case, Devin Kelley had previous charges for domestic violence, as well as a stay in a behavioral facility, which should have restricted him from legally purchasing the firearms he used in his shooting. The United States Air Force was often mentioned in these articles, as it was an oversight in their operations that failed to flag Kelley in the national database. *NBC News* reported on the oversight and stated that the “shooter shouldn’t have been able to legally own a gun” (Johnson, 2017, para.1). Furthermore, *NBC News* wrote:

An Air Force officer failed to enter Devin Patrick Kelley’s domestic violence court-martial into a national database that would have barred him from buying weapons, the Air Force said Monday. (Johnson, 2017, para. 2).

The civilian head of the Air Force said Thursday that the military is trying to figure out why a domestic violence offense for the man suspected of killing 26 people at a Texas church wasn’t reported to the FBI — and whether it’s a systemic problem. (Helsel, 2017, para. 1).

Therefore, *NBC News* reported on the issue in the background check system, as well as efforts that took place to amend this oversight. Many articles discussed the importance the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) in preventing violent individuals from buying guns, but also claimed that too many firearms were still being purchased. According to *NBC News*, “less than one percent” of gun sales “were blocked in 2016 because of disqualifying information in a would-be-buyer’s background” (Williams, 2017, para. 9). As such, *NBC News* claimed that the current system is inadequate and that it is too easy to buy firearms in the United States. *Slate* also faulted the U.S.A.F. oversight in Kelley’s background check, but also presented a policy of their own: a special tax on the firearm industry (Stern, 2017). Focusing on the harm caused by firearms, *Slate* stated that the firearm industry should be held liable or financially responsible for gun-related injuries and deaths:

Thanks to a law called the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, you have no legal remedy if you are hurt by a gun. In passing that law in 2005, Congress granted gun dealers and manufacturers legal immunity in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and every U.S. territory. No other industry receives this privilege: Firearms are the only consumer products that receive federal immunity from tort liability. Legislatures should impose a new tax on gun dealers and manufacturers and place the revenue in a special fund. This fund should be used to cover the medical bills of gun violence survivors. The firearm industry is responsible for America's crisis of gun violence. It should be required to pay for it. (Stern, 2017, para. 2, 4).

*Slate* thus stated that an increase in taxes for gun dealers and manufacturers would aid victims in their time of need, as well as bring a sense of responsibility upon the gun industry when mass shootings occur. Another point of debate in the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting was the link between mental illness and guns. Some politicians and news sites claimed that the shooting was a mental health issue rather than a guns issue. Both of the liberal news sites criticized these narrative shifts and *NBC News* claimed that:

Opponents of new gun reforms respond to mass shootings by pointing to mental health, while proponents of new gun reforms point out that every country has people who suffer from mental illness, but the United States is unique in its experiences with gun violence. (Benen, 2017, para. 5).

*Slate* further stated that the majority of people with mental illnesses are not violent, which debunked this narrative that placed mental illness at fault. Additionally, both news sites pointed out that President Trump had signed a bill that made it easier for people with mental illnesses to purchase firearms:

In February, Trump signed into a law a bill repealing an Obama-era policy designed to limit access to guns among people with certain mental illnesses. The law, which received its fair share of criticism, would have required the Social Security Administration to flag some people receiving disability benefits for background checks should they try to buy a gun. Trump made this choice because it "could endanger the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding citizens," according to a statement from the White House at the time. (Cummins, 2017, para. 6).

Therefore, both news sites criticized this attempt to blame the shooting on mental illness and focused on the limitation in the national background check system.

Another topic of gun control that was often featured in news articles was the manufacturing and ease of purchase of semiautomatic weapons. These discussions were seen across multiple cases, including the San Bernardino, CA, Orlando, FL, Las Vegas, NV, Pittsburgh, PA, and the Christchurch, NZ shootings. *NBC News* and *Slate* focused their attention on the gun business and included information about how lucrative it is and compared it to the number of deaths and injuries that are related to gun violence. In their critique of the gun business and ease of access, *Slate* wrote about the San Bernardino shooting:

Given the semiautomatic weapons and extensive stockpile of ammunition that Farook and Malik had legally obtained, it's worth remembering that al-Qaida has, in the past, urged its followers to take advantage of America's permissive gun laws to carry out shooting attacks. (Keating, 2015, para. 4).

*Slate* thus criticized not only the availability of these weapons, but also the lax system that currently operates in the U.S. which allows any individual to purchase a firearm as long as they pass a background check. *NBC News* echoed this sentiment in the Orlando, FL shooting, where they wrote:

ISIS supporters seem to have discovered just how easy it is to buy a powerful gun in the United States without raising suspicion — a hole in America's national security armor they're evidently taking advantage of. This change in ISIS strategy has exposed an American vulnerability: access to high-powered firearms, bought legally even by those whom the FBI suspects of extremism. (Engel, 2016, para. 2, 11).

In this statement *NBC News* revealed that terror-related mass shootings may benefit from U.S. gun laws and the right to own a firearm. As well, they again critiqued the background check system, in that Mateen was able to purchase his firearms legally even though he had been investigated twice before by the FBI. In the Las Vegas, NV shooting, *NBC News* also focused on the semiautomatic weapons used, as well as the modifications made to the guns that allowed them to inflict so much devastation:

The Las Vegas attack threatens to undermine longstanding arguments by gun rights activists that semi-automatic rifles are not "assault weapons," a label they say should apply only to automatic weapons. If a shooter can fire a semi-automatic so quickly as to resemble an automatic weapon, the line gets blurrier. (Sietz-Wald & Sarlin, 2017, para. 17).

*NBC News* argued that these weapons should not be allowed in the hands of average citizens, but rather reserved for war times. *Slate* also echoed this opinion:

Our streets should not resemble battlefields; our criminals should not be armed like soldiers; our police should not have to act like SEAL teams to face down criminals. And yet they do, because the proliferation of sophisticated weaponry makes them impossible to prevent. (Carter, 2017, para. 7).

*NBC News* and *Slate* proposed that semiautomatic weapons should not be able to be legally purchased in the United States due to the amount of damage they can cause. *Slate* also focused on Paddock's stockpile of weapons that he amassed leading up to the Las Vegas, NV shooting:

Perhaps the most startling fact about the Las Vegas shooter's means of mass murder is that he stockpiled 33 firearms in 12 months, "most of which were rifles." Why is this legal? I'm not talking about why we don't require reporting multiple sales of long guns to federal authorities (which we don't). I'm not talking about the bump stocks the shooter used to make his semi-automatic weapons fire like machine guns. I'm talking about why people are allowed to own more than, say, two firearms without a really good reason. (Pennington, 2017, para. 3).

*Slate* thus proposed that gun legislation should focus on the number of guns people are allowed to purchase and stated that two should satisfy the need to protect oneself and one's property. Furthermore, if an individual wished to purchase more than two firearms, they would be required to go through more rigorous background checks and registration, as well as specifically stating their reason for purchasing another weapon. *Slate* also stated that this proposal would uphold American's Second Amendment right to bear arms but could also limit the number of mass shootings and general gun violence that continues to plague America (Pennington, 2017).

While *NBC News* and *Slate* called for gun reform in the wake of these shootings, there was little action on the parts of legislators, other than the bump stock ban following the Las

Vegas, NV shooting. However, New Zealand did pass gun control measures following their shooting, which became a point of debate. Following the Christchurch, NZ shooting, the country was quick to amend their laws and implement an almost immediate ban of assault-style or “military style” weapons. All news sites reported on this development in New Zealand, and also compared it to the lack of action in the United States following mass shootings. *Fox News* and *NBC News* simply reported the developments in New Zealand and stated the facts of the proposed laws. *Breitbart* also reported on the changes to gun legislation in New Zealand, but also stated that their gun control policies were similar to those already in place in the United States, which questioned the effectiveness of these laws:

New Zealand has more restrictive gun laws than those in the United States. It is not yet clear how the murderer, or murderers, obtained the weapons used in the attack. (Pollak, 2019b, para. 8)

Moreover, New Zealand already has gun control measures similar to those Democrats want to pass into law in the United States, including the universal background check bill that the Democrat-controlled U.S. House of Representatives passed last month. (Pollak, 2019c, para. 11).

These excerpts show that *Breitbart* was unimpressed with the weapons ban and they argued that it would not be effective in the United States as the offender found a way to skirt around the already restrictive gun laws that were in use prior to the shooting. Furthermore, *Breitbart* stated that there was little “evidence that banning a certain category of guns will make people safer, especially when the guns banned are not the most popular guns for killers to use” (Hawkins, 2019a, para. 13). *Breitbart* continued to criticize the weapons ban and claimed that the majority of gun violence did not involve assault style weapons, which is true, but failed to address the use of these weapons in mass casualty events.

*Slate* was the only news site to report on the New Zealand weapons ban in a positive light and simultaneously criticized the United States’ lack of action:

Shortly after 49 people were killed in a terrorist attack at two mosques, New Zealand leaders didn't take a page from their U.S counterparts. Rather than simply offer thoughts and prayers to the victims, they made it clear that the country would act to change the nation's gun laws in an effort to make it more difficult for an attack of this nature to take place again. "While the nation grapples with a form of grief and anger that we have not experienced before, we are seeking answers," Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said at a news conference in Wellington on Saturday morning. "I can tell you one thing right now, our guns laws will change." (Politi, 2019, para. 1).

*Slate's* reporting of lawmakers' actions clearly praised New Zealand while they also mentioned their disillusionment with the United States. *Slate* went on to write:

For spectators in the United States, the speed with which Ardern's coalition government enacted gun control legislation was unfamiliar—and for our purposes impossible. Whereas New Zealanders don't have a constitutional right to bear arms, America's Second Amendment isn't going anywhere. (D. Li, 2019, para. 2).

Discussions of America's Second Amendment further implied that the U.S. will likely not see any significant gun control legislation, the likes of which was seen in New Zealand.

Many news sites thus reported on the ensuing gun control debates that often occur following a mass shooting. Some news sites, particularly *Slate* and *NBC News*, framed gun control as a positive and potential solution to mass gun violence, while others argued that gun control would not have the desired effect that it proposed. Beyond criticizing calls for gun control, some news sites, such as *Breitbart*, actually called for an increase in gun ownership and easing the ability to purchase guns.

#### *Gun Control – Increasing Access*

While *NBC News* and *Slate* largely featured calls for increased gun control in their articles, as well as the presentation of policy amendments themselves, *Breitbart* and *Fox News* argued that more guns could limit gun violence and the casualties incurred by mass shootings. For instance, a common theme found among articles was the concept of gun-free zones. Gun-free zones are places where people are not generally allowed to have firearms, such as schools,

airports, sports arenas, courthouses, etc. Few places can be truly gun-free, but these areas are where firearms are generally discouraged. An argument often seen on the side of gun rights activists is that gun-free zones attract motivated criminals and leave potential victims defenseless. This argument was seen multiple times in articles following a mass shooting, especially on *Breitbart*. In their critique of gun control policies following the Charleston, SC shooting, *Breitbart* wrote “background checks are ignored by the same criminals who don’t pack up their weapons and go home when they see a ‘gun-free zone’ sign” (McHugh, 2015, para. 5). *Breitbart* not only claimed that increased regulations and background checks would not solve the gun problem in America, but that gun-free zones also do not deter gun violence. Furthermore, *Breitbart* stated that gun control advocates perpetuate mass shootings:

In his early afternoon statement, it took President Obama exactly 4 minutes to politicize this massacre into a partisan call for gun control. Gun control fanatics create gun-free zones. Mass-murderers target gun-free zones. Gun control fanatics call for more gun-free zones. (Nolte, 2015b, para. 2-5).

This sentiment was echoed in *Fox News* articles following the Orlando, FL shooting, who also that laws and gun-free zones do not deter individuals from committing violence. In an opinion piece published by *Fox News*, the author stated:

Interviewers frequently ask me why I don’t favor more gun control laws. My response: Name one law that deters someone intent on breaking the law. Murder has been prohibited since the beginning of civilization, but people still murder. One might as well outlaw human nature. Only those predisposed to obey laws will obey them. Florida prohibits openly carrying firearms and many places advertise “gun-free zones,” which can be an open invitation to anyone intent on mass murder. (Thomas, 2016, para. 3-4).

Once again, gun-free zones became a point of contention, and articles stated that an offender will readily choose those areas where they will not be confronted by armed civilians. *Breitbart* furthered this narrative and published then-candidate Donald Trump’s statement that Pulse “was full of innocent people” who “had no guns on the other side” (Hawkins, 2016, para. 2).

According to *Fox News* and *Breitbart*, gun-free zones were inherently at risk for gun violence and victims were essentially sitting-ducks.

Another theme relating to increasing firearm ownership is the “good guy with a gun” narrative. The good guy with a gun narrative is based upon cases where armed civilians have engaged offenders in an attempt to stop the carnage. This narrative suggests that more gun ownership would increase the number of people who could stop a mass shooting before police could respond. In the eight cases chosen here, this narrative was only seen in action in the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting. In this instance, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* were quick to report on the actions of the individuals and called them heroes and advocated for widespread gun ownership. *Fox News* wrote:

Gun-rights advocates say that not only do these gun-carrying civilians prove that an armed populace can help mitigate the death toll of a mass shooter, but could also prevent mass shootings as a whole from happening. (O’Reilly, 2017, para. 12).

Likewise, *Breitbart* stated:

It was the brave actions of a law-abiding gun owner who ended the horrific shooting in Texas, and the only thing that new gun controls will do is prevent good guys from arming up against bad guys in the future. (Brown, 2017, para. 13).

In their praise of the actions of the individual who engaged with the shooter, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* also criticized gun control and posited that increased legislation would have resulted in more loss of life and would leave people defenseless in the future.

*Slate* was the only news site to dissent against these claims that more guns save lives. While they agreed that individuals who intervene in the midst of violence are heroes, *Slate* pointed out that good guys with guns do not necessarily stop shootings from happening, they just keep them from continuing. Furthermore, *Slate* stated:

Shootings unfold quickly, in places where people often don't carry weapons. It's unrealistic to expect that a good guy with a gun can be everywhere a bad guy with a gun goes. (Olmstead, 2017c, para. 5).

*Slate* did acknowledge that well-intentioned, armed civilians can help in these situations, but also recognized that it is simply not feasible to assume that armed individuals could stop every mass shooting before it starts.

While Sutherland Springs, TX was the only case where an armed civilian attempted to engage the shooter and stop their actions, the narrative was seen throughout many of the other cases, often posed as hypothetical questions and outcomes. For instance, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* posited that the outcomes of the Charleston, SC, Orlando, FL, and Las Vegas, NV shootings might have all been different had armed individuals been present and willing to confront the offender. For instance, *Breitbart*, in their reports of the Charleston, SC shooting wrote that “guns in the right hands have stopped, or interrupted similar attacks before” (Pollak, 2015a, para. 2).

*Fox News* and *Breitbart* shared the same opinion in the wake of the Orlando, FL shooting, where *Fox News* wrote:

Despite the president's [Obama] claim to the contrary, it is reasonable to believe that even a small number of armed patrons might have limited the number of fatalities. And had the shooter known he would encounter armed patrons perhaps he might not have chosen that particular club as his target. (Thomas, 2016, para. 7).

*Breitbart* similarly stated:

To assume a response by an armed bystander would have still resulted in up to 49 murdered in one incident is an odd argument. Might an armed response have meant “collateral damage”? Perhaps. But it isn't likely that 50 deaths would have resulted if some armed citizen was able to put an end to terrorist Mateen's rampage earlier in his attack. Certainly, no one wants to see people shot and killed, but there is value in stopping a terrorist in his tracks even if a few still die in the process than might otherwise. Those whose lives are saved would not so easily discount the response. (Huston, 2016, para. 17).

*Breitbart* expressed this sentiment again following the Las Vegas, NV shooting and asked the hypothetical question, “how many lives might have been saved if Paddock had been confronted by a good guy with a gun?” (Hawkins, 2017b, para. 10). All of these examples and “what-if” questions served to forward the narrative that more guns could save lives. As such, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* placed gun ownership as a duty to protect not only oneself, but also one’s fellow citizens. This idea can be seen in the following quotes:

The best defense against a mass shooting is a better-armed and better-trained civilian populace that is ready to defend itself, anytime and anywhere. (O’Reilly, 2017, para. 5) – Sutherland Springs, TX shooting, *Fox News*

The only way to stop someone hell-bent on killing innocent people in a free society, is by arming yourself, and being prepared to act in that critical moment. (Donnelly, 2015, para. 10) – San Bernardino, CA shooting, *Breitbart*

You cannot choose where evil will strike, you can only choose to be prepared when it does. And being armed is part of being prepared. (Hawkins, 2019a, para. 3) – Christchurch, NZ shooting, *Breitbart*

It can be seen that *Fox News* and *Breitbart* argued for increasing access to firearms in order to prevent mass shootings and other acts of violence. And, by framing it as a duty, these claims are bolstered, which may encourage to more individuals to buy into this narrative.

An additional theme related to increasing firearm access is the idea of security at religious institutions. In all articles across all news sites, the victims of shootings at religious locations were often referred to as innocent individuals, unable to protect themselves in their houses of worship. As such, many news sites discussed the possibility of introducing armed security at these locations in order to protect First Amendment rights and against religious persecution. Following the Charleston, SC shooting, *NBC News* interviewed pastors about the possibility of armed guards at churches and stated that “even the most sacred of places aren’t immune to violence” (Chuck, 2015, para. 1). *NBC News* reported that “many pastors said they

might need to bulk up security at their churches” (Johnson, 2015a, para. 9). Additionally, *NBC News* reviewed the 2013 federal recommendations for keeping houses of worship safe, which recommended these locations form a relationship with first responders and develop safety plans in the event of an emergency (Chuck, 2015).

Church security again became a topic of concern after the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting, where *Breitbart* stated that this case should answer the “longstanding call for either armed guards at every house of worship or for an armed and trained member of each congregation to be present at every service” (Breitbart Jerusalem, 2017, para. 1). *Breitbart* further stated:

In the wake of the Texas church attack a Bible and a handgun have become the logical concealed carry combo for pastors and congregants throughout the country. According to the Wall Street Journal, members of clergy and congregants alike are now choosing to bring their Bibles and their handguns to church, a way to feed the soul while being prepared to defend their lives. (Hawkins, 2017c, para. 1, 3).

In this statement, *Breitbart* forwarded the narrative of church security by encouraging churchgoers to carry firearms into these locations, regardless of training. In addition, *Breitbart* used fear to elicit these actions, as if all churches are under attack and are likely to face violence.

The theme of church security was also found in the wake of the Pittsburgh, PA shooting, where *Fox News* featured President Trump’s sentiment, the president said, “the results would have been far better” had someone inside the synagogue been armed (Associated Press, 2018b, para. 14). *Fox News* also reported on safety measures that houses of worship already take, such as active shooter drills, armed guards, and training. *NBC News* also discussed the implications of security at houses of worship and stated that “security experts consider houses of worship ‘soft targets’ – places that are especially vulnerable to potential attacks” (Chuck & Romero, 2018, para. 3). *NBC News* further reported on the history of security at synagogues and asserted that

this safety measure has been employed by the Jewish community for at least two decades, as Jewish institutions have long been targets for domestic terrorists. *Breitbart* also furthered this narrative and said that the “way to respond to the shooting is to be ready to shoot back” (Pollak, 2018b, para. 13). Similar to *Fox News*, *Breitbart* featured President Trump’s reaction to the synagogue shooting:

The Tree of Life Synagogue had no security at the time of the attack, and Trump lamented the absence of good guys with guns. Trump said, “If they had protection inside, the result would have been far better. This is a dispute that will always exist, I suspect, but if they had protection inside the synagogue maybe it could have been a very ... different situation.” He observed that the lack of security allowed the attacker “to do things, unfortunately, that he shouldn’t have been able to do.” (Hawkins, 2018, para. 1-2).

In this excerpt, *Breitbart* linked the idea of church security to gun-free zones and gun ownership and asserted that less people would have died if people had been armed and ready to protect themselves when the shooting started. *Breitbart* also reported on church security following the shooting in Christchurch, NZ. Reports included the claim that “mosques around the world are pondering how to improve their security” (Pinkerton, 2019, para. 2). However, *Breitbart* only mentioned increasing security at mosques, rather than encourage worshippers to arm themselves. This is consistent with previous findings in which *Breitbart* framed Muslims as dangerous and threats to America, and thus would not encourage them to be armed. In addition, *Breitbart* published an article recounting the shootings that have taken place at religious institutions, which bolstered the narrative that these places need more guns. *Slate* was the only news site to not report on church security, of which their silence can be interpreted as supporting their own narrative of stricter gun legislation.

Finally, in forwarding the theme of gun accessibility, *Breitbart* participated in fearmongering when calls for gun control took place. It can be seen in *Breitbart* articles that they consistently criticized these calls and those who forward the cause. Repeatedly, *Breitbart* called

those who want reform “zealots” (see Hayward, 2015a) and stated that gun control laws do not stop mass shootings (Nolte, 2015c). For instance, *Breitbart* discussed that many of the shooters in these cases purchased their guns legally, thus passing the background checks already imposed. Rather than recognize the loopholes in these background checks, *Breitbart* used this to debunk gun control and stated that the legislation obviously does not work, but rather keeps guns out of law-abiding citizen’s hands. For example, *Breitbart* wrote:

Background checks cannot stop a determined attacker because these checks look backward; they search for past crimes and problems. If the would-be attacker has criminal or terror-based intentions but lacks any criminal or terror-based history, gun control will never stop him. However, gun control will render his victims less able to defend themselves. (Hawkins, 2019b, para. 7).

Additionally, *Breitbart* stated that “more gun control increases our dependency upon police, although police are rarely present to prevent crime. Rather, they arrive after the report of a crime has been called in” (Hawkins, 2019c, para. 8). Therefore, *Breitbart* claimed that gun control leaves people defenseless and reliant upon police, who are reactive rather than proactive in stopping crime.

Finally, *Breitbart* participated in fearmongering by framing gun control as gun confiscation and infringement on Second Amendment rights. Following the San Bernardino, CA shooting, discussions about gun control included the idea of restricting gun access from individuals on the no-fly list. In their reports on this, *Breitbart* wrote:

This goes to the heart of the NRA’s opposition to expanding background checks to include the no-fly list. If such an expansion occurred it would not prevent people who are not on “any list” from getting guns, even if those people were planning a San Bernardino-style attack. What it would do, however, is expand gun control to include an imprecise list that puts law-abiding citizens in a position of forfeiting their Second Amendment rights by having their name cross referenced and falsely viewed as being on the list. (Hawkins, 2015, para. 5).

*Breitbart*, once again, criticized any call for gun control and tautologically suggested that the presence of a no-fly list would impede law-abiding citizens from legally purchasing guns, while also somehow allowing those individuals planning terrorist attacks to purchase weapons.

Relating to the topic of gun confiscation, *Breitbart* framed discussions of buyback programs as thinly veiled attempts by Democrats to render America gun-less. For instance, *Breitbart* featured an article that discussed this aspect of gun control:

When Democrats such as Joe Biden talk about a government buyback program, that is just a euphemism for gun confiscation. Even if the government decides to reimburse you in some way for turning in your firearms, it is still confiscation, and confiscation is exactly what Democrats have in mind. And as you can see, on more than one occasion, they have even admitted to it. But they hide their plan to take away our civil rights behind euphemisms like “what Australia did” and “buyback program,” which sounds very pleasant, but is not. What we have now is a group of Democrat elected officials who see Red Americans as racists, as Nazis... What we have now are Democrat lawmakers — not Antifa, not activists, not the corrupt media — but elected officials launching doxxing campaigns against us. If Democrats think we’re a bunch of Nazis and are willing to dox us, of course they want to disarm us ... and now you need to try and imagine how they will treat us once we’re helpless. (Nolte, 2019, para. 1, 23-26).

In this article, *Breitbart* clearly participated in fearmongering and claimed that Democrats want to take away every firearm, even from law-abiding citizens. In addition, they framed this possible gun control action as an act of war in their use of an “us versus them” narrative and in their claims that these actions would leave some of the population helpless. These discussions thus forward the narrative of increasing gun access and ownership in order to deter mass shootings, but also as to protect oneself from the “overreaching Democrats” that seek to take guns away (Nolte, 2019).

### *Counterterrorism*

Often in the aftermath of a terrorist attack, policy discussions center on counterterrorism as a strategy to prevent these attacks in the future. Counterterrorism actions can include monitoring suspicious individuals, surveillance of internet and daily activities, and immigration

policies. Most often, discussion of these policies is only seen in cases that have had the official label of “terrorism” applied, and often feature Muslim offenders inspired by radical Islam. This was very much the case in the mass shooting cases designated as terrorism, which included the San Bernardino, CA shooting and the Orlando, FL shooting.

All news sites reported on the implications of terrorism in their articles; however, there was still a difference in reporting styles. For instance, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* often pushed for increases in surveillance and monitoring, as well as stricter immigration policies, while *NBC News* and *Slate* either simply reported on the facts or framed increased surveillance and strict immigration as a violation of individual freedom and civil rights. For instance, following the San Bernardino, CA shooting, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* were quick to point out the inefficiency of monitoring homegrown extremism. References to the offenders stated that they had gone undetected while planning the massacre and that there is a difficulty in discovering terrorists who keep a low profile. As such, *Fox News* argued for increased surveillance of suspected individuals, as further seen in this quote:

The competing goals of protecting Americans’ emails and other private electronic messages and helping the U.S. intelligence community decode them to foil terror plots are on a “collision” course. (Fox News, 2015a, para. 1).

*Breitbart* also reported on counterterrorism developments, which including the reduction of terrorists’ use of social media, also known as the Combat Terrorist Use of Social Media Act. Beyond these statements, the focus on monitoring and surveillance were quite reserved in the San Bernardino, CA case. The Orlando, FL shooting, however, was not subjected to the same reservations. *Fox News* and *NBC News* reported on the actions of investigators, which included the scouring of Mateen’s phone for terrorist communication and the scrubbing of references to radical Islam from the 911 transcripts. *Fox News* also questioned how Mateen was able to evade

the FBI's radar as he had been the focus of two previous investigations into suspected terrorism. However, most of this focus on his previous investigations were linked to his ability to legally purchase firearms, rather than the failings of counterterrorism. *Breitbart* was the most overt news sites in their calls for increased surveillance and monitoring of suspected terrorists. Particularly, *Breitbart* heavily criticized the Obama administration on being too politically correct to see threats like Mateen coming:

It's all the "we don't know" that make these times alarming — all the casual assumptions made without firm knowledge, all the guesswork necessary because the terrorism threat is too big for the FBI to handle. With political correctness and President Obama's political agenda in the mix, there are too many people alive today because law enforcement got lucky, and there are far too many dead because it didn't. (Hayward, 2016b, para. 11).

*Breitbart* further criticized President Obama, and questioned whether Mateen was truly self-radicalized or if that narrative was just used to divert counterterrorism failures away from the president:

I suggested that one of the driving forces behind the self-radicalization narrative is that it protects the Obama administration from charges that it dropped the ball on counterterrorism, portraying terrorists like Mateen as thunderbolts nobody could have seen coming. (Hayward, 2016c, para. 9).

*Breitbart* continued to address political correctness and said that this has led to a lack of monitoring and surveillance for fear of potential backlash and negative optics. Specifically, *Breitbart* featured a quote from a former coworker of Mateen, who stated that the company he worked for "refused to investigate Omar's frequent racist and homophobic attacks 'because he was Muslim'" (Hoft, 2016, para. 3). As such, *Breitbart* framed this statement as inaction on the side of fear because avoidance was simpler than being presumed to be prejudiced. Beyond the focus on Mateen specifically, *Breitbart* also ostracized the Muslim community in their claims

that Muslims are responsible for the most terrorist attacks, but simultaneously go undetected because of political correctness. Arguments of this nature can be seen in the following excerpt:

If America persists in its “see no sharia” approach, not only will we surely be caught flatfooted as this country and our allies are subjected to many more, and far worse, jihadist attacks. We will have invited them. That’s right. When jihadists perceive us to be capitulating – whether we call our accommodations “political correctness,” “multiculturalism” or “diversity sensitivity” – they view it as “submission.” And according to the Koran, the appropriate response for the believer is to make the infidel “feel subdued.” That can only translate into more violence aimed at achieving our complete and irreversible subordination to their permanent supremacy. (Gaffney, 2016, para. 10-11).

In addition, *Breitbart* claimed that political correctness continued to fuel terrorism while holding law-abiding citizens captive in their fear:

Political correctness – which transforms the Islamic world, which has a lot to answer for, from aggressors into innocent victims – functions as a shield for Islamic terrorists, and handcuffs law-abiding citizens prompting them not to report suspicious activities by Muslims for fear of being called racist. (Horowitz, 2016, para. 2).

*Breitbart* strongly called for increased surveillance and monitoring, which primarily targeted the Muslim community, as this fits the narrative of who they believe to be responsible for terrorism. *Slate* also reported on surveillance and monitoring but did so in a way that questioned whether this would be a violation of freedom and civil liberties. Referring to the suggested no-fly list following the San Bernardino, CA shooting, *Slate* called the list controversial and stated that those on the list “haven’t necessarily been convicted of any crime” and that many of those on the list may have been added to the list in error (Gross, 2015, para. 5).

Furthermore, *Slate* questioned the constitutionality of the list and stated that:

People are not notified when they are put on, nor why, and they usually don’t discover they have been branded suspected terrorists until they try to travel somewhere. (Gross, 2015, para. 5).

*Slate* thus claimed that this list was an infringement on people’s rights, as well as inaccurate in who is designated to be put on the list. *Slate* echoed this theme in the Orlando, FL case, and

discussed the implications of surveillance. For instance, *Slate* posited that using the terror watch list to limit firearm purchases raised civil liberty concerns:

Expanding background checks is a worthy goal, but Democrats' newfound focus on using the terror watch list to keep guns out of the hands of potential terrorists raises serious civil liberty concerns. The Supreme Court has declared the right to bear arms a fundamental right that is protected by the U.S. Constitution's Due Process Clause. As *Slate*'s Mark Joseph Stern explained earlier this week, you can disagree with SCOTUS, but the fact remains that using the FBI's watch list for gun control purposes would set a dangerous precedent. The Supreme Court has said private gun ownership is protected by the Second Amendment of the Constitution. It has also ruled that the right to bear arms is a "fundamental right" under the 14th Amendment as a component of the "liberty" protected by the due process clause. If the government can revoke your right to access firearms simply because it has decided to place you on a secret, notoriously inaccurate list, it could presumably restrict your other rights in a similar manner. You could be forbidden from advocating for causes you believe in, or associating with like-minded activists; your right against intrusive, unreasonable searches could be suspended. And you would have no recourse: The government could simply declare that, as a name on a covert list, you are owed no due process at all. (Voorhees, 2016, para. 5-6).

*Slate* argued firstly that the terror watch list was inaccurate and secretive and alluded to the infringement on people's right to privacy, as well as notification. Additionally, while also advocating for limiting gun access, *Slate* recognized the constitutionality of gun ownership and agreed that limiting access due to landing on a list would be unconstitutional. *Slate* furthered this claim and discussed that this could be a slippery slope for restricting other civil liberties. Therefore, *Slate* argued against increased surveillance and monitoring, and instead advocated for constitutionality and the civil liberties that citizens have become accustomed to having in the United States.

Another theme that arose in discussing counterterrorism was the topic of immigration and immigration policies. The immigration status of the offenders in the San Bernardino, CA shooting were of particular interest, as Malik, the wife of Farook, had just entered the country in the year prior to the shooting on a K-1, or fiancé visa. All news sites reported on her status, but

some also raised concerns about the immigration and screening process as the couple had just wreaked havoc in California. For instance, *Fox News* stated:

Malik was one of just 519 Pakistanis allowed into the country last year on a K-1, or fiancée visa. Her path to the United States has raised warning flags on the U.S. government's immigration vetting practices after she was identified as one of two attackers. (Fox News, 2015f, para. 3).

*Fox News* thus brought Malik's immigration status into the spotlight, and questioned the vetting process for immigrants. *Breitbart* went on to further refer to the shooters as "government-approved immigrant jihadis" and called for a fix to future attacks, which would be to "reduce Islamic migration into the United States" (Munro, 2015, para.1). *NBC News* also reported on the immigration process, but instead framed it in a way that it is a good system. *NBC News* stated that the "fiancé visa program has one of the more rigorous security screening processes — presenting far more hurdles than other avenues for foreigners to enter the U.S.," and also outlined the thorough process that applicants must endure (Melber, 2015b, para. 3). *NBC News* further reported the efforts that Congress had taken in recent years in amending the visa programs and efforts to weed out fraud and abuse. Therefore, it can be seen that *NBC News* thus framed the theme of immigration as not responsible for the shooting.

*Breitbart* also reported on the immigration status of Malik, and condemned current immigration policy and a lack of strong border control:

Mrs. Jihad waltzed right through Obama's vaunted "screening" process, the one he says American voters are bigots and fools to express reservations about, when it comes to flooding the United States with Syrian refugees. Mr. Jihad somehow eluded the all-seeing eye of our trillion-dollar Surveillance State, even though he was chatting with terrorists online and checking out ISIS propaganda. The killers swore fealty to the Islamic State at literally the same moment Obama was offering confident assurances ISIS could never pull off a Paris-style terror attack in the United States. (Hayward, 2015b, para. 10).

While this statement is obviously prejudiced against the shooters, President Obama, and immigration policy, surprisingly, *Breitbart* also criticized then-candidate Donald Trump for his

suggestion of a Muslim ban. *Breitbart* called the proposed ban a “terrible idea – though not for the constitutional reasons the left imagines. It would cause harm to our economy, our diplomacy, and even our security” (Pollak, 2015b, para. 2). *Breitbart* went on to state that the ban would not be unconstitutional, but that it would violate “virtually every other national interest of the United States,” which reiterated their previous statement (Pollak, 2015b, para. 5).

The topic of immigration was again seen in the Orlando, FL shooting, where *Fox News* alluded that immigration is a threat to national security, that President Obama perpetuates:

And why is the president adopting their language by using the term ISIL, which stands for the “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant,” a larger area of the Middle East that includes Lebanon, Jordan and Syria? The president uses their terminology, but refuses to say “Islamic terrorism,” while continuing to allow thousands of Syrian refugees into America when authorities say there are so many that they can’t conduct proper background checks. (Thomas, 2016, para. 9).

*Fox News* showed their political leaning in this excerpt and claimed that President Obama was too concerned with optics rather than with immigration and background checks.

*Breitbart* echoed this sentiment and claimed that “our government has become so corrupt that they reward bad behavior and offer benefits to illegal immigrants who refuse to assimilate or contribute to the economy” (Gabriel, 2016a, para. 7). *Breitbart* continued to criticize immigration policy and stated that the Islamic State takes “advantage of loose immigration policies, weak borders, and the migrant tide pouring out of the Middle East” to bulk up terrorist networks (Hayward, 2016d, para. 3). In a change of tone from the San Bernardino, CA shooting, *Breitbart* praised the proposed Muslim ban by Donald Trump and called for stronger immigration legislation, as seen in these excerpts:

To win the war against radical Islamic terrorism, the United States must deny entry to people who pose a threat to America’s Christian way of life. (Mora, 2016b, para. 1).

Trump showed how strategic securing the border is, how important stopping immigration from terror zones like Syria is, and how deadly political correctness has become. (Horowitz, 2016, para. 2).

It can be seen that *Breitbart*, while a previous critic of the ban of Muslims due to its effect on United States operations, vastly changed their opinion and called for a ban of their own. *Slate* also discussed immigration and the Muslim ban, but criticized it rather than praised it:

With his call against Muslim Americans, Trump has given one of the most openly xenophobic speeches in modern American politics. And with his call to restrict, monitor, and harass American Muslims, he's echoing the kind of rhetoric that leads inevitably to tragedy and atrocity. (Bouie, 2016, para. 5).

Therefore, *Slate* also alluded to the implications of a Muslim ban, but more so in the degradation of people rather than possible effects on the economy and trade that *Breitbart* previously mentioned. *Slate* further stated that immigration had nothing to do with the Orlando, FL shooting, as Mateen was not an immigrant:

That the child of an immigrant turns out to be a nutcase should not be cause for a blanket refusal of all immigrants from a certain country, or of a certain faith. Let's simply reiterate that this killing spree had nothing to do with Mateen's immigration status, since he had no immigration status, since he was an American. (Newell, 2016, para. 6-7).

Thus, it can be seen that the news sites varied dramatically in their calls and discussions of counterterrorism policies, often along partisan lines. In addition, discussions of immigration centered on these cases that were labeled terrorism, even though two of the three shooters were not immigrants, as well the fact that these offenders were found to be self-radicalized and homegrown extremists rather than part of a larger network that infiltrated the country.

### *Monitoring Extremism*

Discussions of surveillance were also present in cases that were believed to be hate crimes or acts of white supremacy, but instead of being called counterterrorism, these efforts were simply referred to as internet monitoring and examination of social media use. This

coincides with the understanding that terrorism committed by people of color and radicalized individuals (usually Muslims) are often the focus of counterterrorism efforts, leaving far-right extremism to flourish unabated. *Slate*, *NBC News*, and *Fox News* included these concepts in their reporting, and focused on the disparity between counterterrorism for Islamic radicals and white supremacists.

Perhaps the most outspoken on this issue, *Slate* referred to the El Paso, TX shooting as an act of domestic terrorism and criticized the lack of focus on violence inspired by far-right extremism. In an article published by *Slate*, they wrote:

The rise in white supremacist violence, and the lower-than-anticipated levels of jihadi killing, does not accord with U.S. counterterrorism officials' post-9/11 focus on jihad. This varied response explains the relative success of anti-jihadi efforts and the problems stopping right-wing violence. (Byman, 2019, para. 3).

*Slate* went on to say that the “FBI devotes far fewer resources to right-wing terrorism that it does to jihadi terrorism,” and also called for more resources to be directed toward domestic terrorism (Byman, 2019, para. 13). In addition to these statements, *Slate* and *NBC News* made their own policy suggestions in how to combat domestic terrorism and hateful white supremacist ideology. For instance, *NBC News* wrote the following recommendations following the Christchurch, NZ shooting:

While always respecting the civil liberties of even the most repellent propagandists and financiers of white nationalism, there is much more the U.S. and European governments must do to combat this ideology that has cost too many. First, our governments and our leaders must explicitly acknowledge the abhorrent ideologies driving the attacks, as well as the pertinent racial and/or religious identity of the victims. Second, our governments need to explain to citizens how dehumanizing political rhetoric isn't just a rejection of so-called “political correctness” but can lead to violence, and consistently, openly reject the propagandists and politicians who traffic in this language for political gain. Third, the funding sources for white nationalist propaganda must be investigated, exposed and, where linked to criminal activity, prosecuted to the full extent of the law. It is time to get our own houses in order, exposing the propagandists and funders of a vicious ideology, and investing in the police work and civil society activism needed to defeat them. (Clark, 2019, para. 12-15, 18).

In this excerpt, *NBC News* states that the most important step is acknowledging that these ideologies exist and recognizing their harmful reach. As well, *NBC News* suggested that this hatefulness needs to be denounced and funding for investigations needs to be increased in order to truly prevent hate-inspired violence.

*Slate* also criticized current efforts to combat extremism and claimed that funding has been cut under the Trump administration and that the president repeatedly downplayed the threat of white supremacy. Therefore, *Slate* featured a list of their own recommendations following the Christchurch, NZ shooting:

First, law enforcement officials do not need new terrorism charges to counter domestic extremists. Prosecutors already have hundreds of federal criminal charges at their disposal, which they have used to prosecute offenders in the past. And the FBI can already conduct far-reaching investigations of domestic organizations based on relatively low levels of suspicion. Second, and relatedly, these new proposed laws create a potential for abuse. Consider, for instance, the recent proposal to make it a federal terrorism crime to kill, assault, or destroy property with the intent “to intimidate or coerce a civilian population” or “affect the conduct of a government.” Pitched as a modest proposal, such a law could actually convert a large number of ordinary crimes to federal terrorism offenses and ratchet up sentences. Third, government officials can properly stigmatize white supremacist violence as “terrorism” without adopting new charges. Thus, government officials can extend the moral stigma of terrorism—often reserved for Muslims—to other perpetrators without new laws. (Sinnar, 2019, para. 6-8).

*Slate* went on to report on the importance of denouncing white supremacy and increasing counterterrorism efforts to include far-right extremism.

*Fox News* also reported on the failings of the government to recognize white supremacy groups, but was not as overt in their reporting, nor did they offer recommendations. For example, following the Christchurch, NZ shooting, *Fox News* simply stated that this case:

has highlighted apparent failings by security and intelligence services to view white supremacists as a real threat or to take seriously warnings from Muslim groups of a rise in Islamophobic and xenophobic incidents in recent years. (Associated Press, 2019a, para. 4).

So, *Fox News* did address the inconsistencies in monitoring extremism, but did not offer any suggestions, nor did they provide any details of the implications of the government not examining white supremacy.

In addition to discussing governmental failings in combating white supremacy, social media was also a topic of debate. According to research, white supremacy flourishes and spreads online, especially social media, as these platforms promote free speech and can transcend geographical borders. Some articles reported on this realization, as well as efforts that social media sites have, and should, take to prevent extremism. For instance, *Fox News* stated that the dark recesses of the Internet needed to be policed in order to prevent mass murderers before they act (Brazile, 2019). *NBC News* also recognized the importance of social media:

While the Internet is a revolution in communication, there is a tension between free speech and free reach. Social media platforms bring people together just as much as they pull us apart. My point here isn't that we must get rid of message boards, because that is impossible. Rather, we need to be aware of how technology can be used to bring together these disparate individuals and unite in a common cause. (Donovan, 2019, para. 5, 7).

In this article, *NBC News* acknowledged that white supremacist ideology blossoms online and can be used to unite hateful individuals for a common cause, encouraging them to act. Similarly, *Slate* reported on the use of social media following the Pittsburgh, PA shooting and said “there’s little stopping violent hate groups from gathering online to organize, socialize, and indoctrinate new followers” (Glaser, 2018, para. 5). Due to the reliance on social media to spread this hateful ideology, *Slate* also proposed a policy recommendation that could limit extremist violence without infringing on free speech. In this article, *Slate* wrote:

While social media platforms have made improvements over the past year in identifying and removing hateful and racist content in violation of their rules, it’s even harder for them to discern whether a certain post is a warning sign that a user is about to commit violence. Given the gargantuan volume of content that goes up on Twitter and Facebook every day, it may be impossible for law enforcement and the companies themselves to detect red flags for violence on the platforms in time to prevent a mass shooting from

happening, and artificial intelligence tools are not advanced enough to automate this task. It can also be difficult to determine whether users are just spouting off or actually primed to commit violence just based on what they post on social media. Being too heavy-handed in labeling people as potential shooters based on their internet activity raises civil liberties concerns. Social media companies could conceivably work within this existing extreme risk protection order system, flagging posts for courts and police to consider. (Mak, 2019, para. 4, 9).

Therefore, *Slate* recognized that not all individuals who post hateful comments are mass murderers and should not be subjected to investigation, but also suggested that these posts should be flagged in an effort to deter criminal behavior. As well, *Slate* acknowledged that social media companies should continue to monitor these posts and remove them as quickly as possible in order to stem the spread of hateful ideology.

Coinciding with suggestions to limit the spread of hateful ideology online, *Breitbart* countered these suggestions and framed them as an infringement on free speech and governmental censorship. *Breitbart* referred to Robert Bowers' (the Pittsburgh, PA shooter) use of social media to post his hateful belief system and inspire others laughable (Delingpole, 2018). *Breitbart* also claimed that this blaming of social media sites was just the latest effort of left-wing media to censor conservatives:

Of course, it suits the left-wing media to pretend otherwise because that is part of its mission: To close down any sites where conservative voices are not censored by Silicon Valley's house left-wing activists — hence, for example, the hit job in the New York Times, headlined “On Gab, an Extremist-Friendly Site, Pittsburgh Shooting Suspect Aired His Hatred in Full.” (Delingpole, 2018, para. 5).

*Breitbart* believed that any effort to stem white supremacist dogma was censorship and an infringement of free speech. *Breitbart* further forwarded this claim, where they hypothesized that Bowers had to find his place on social media to air his grievances:

It would not take him long to work where the battle lines are really drawn on the internet: Between the censorious, controlling, politically correct sultans of Silicon Valley on the one side, freedom of speech on the other. (Delingpole, 2018, para. 7).

*Breitbart* failed to demonize Bowers posts and actions, and instead framed his landing on far-right social media boards as a natural choice, as political correctness has dominated all other aspects of the media. In the El Paso, TX shooting, *Breitbart* also came to the defense of social media platforms Gab and 8Chan:

The free speech focused social media platform Gab questioned why sites such as 8Chan are under scrutiny following the El Paso shooting, when it has been alleged that the shooter also had accounts on websites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. (Nolan, 2019, para. 10).

In this excerpt, *Breitbart* framed these sites as no worse than popular, mainstream sites such as Facebook and Twitter. While it is accurate that hate can infiltrate any social media site, *Breitbart* attempted to shift the narrative off of far-right conspiracy sites that have been connected to acts of violence, all in an effort to claim that they were protecting American's right to free speech. Therefore, it can be seen that while some sites recognized the reach social media has in influencing and spreading white supremacy, *Breitbart* shifted the narrative to one that suits their political alignment, in favor of Americans' rights over that of preventing violence.

### *Thoughts and Prayers*

It is common after a disastrous event to offer condolences for the victims, families, and communities affected. This is the case in both natural disaster events, such as tornadoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes, as well as massive displays of violence, such as terrorist acts or mass shootings. Oftentimes, these words are simply seen as sharing sympathy for those affected by tragedy. However, in regard to gun violence, the phrase "thoughts and prayers" has taken criticism for being a token response and deliberate inaction on those expressing their sympathy. According to Folles (2019), the phrase "thoughts and prayers" has become a victim of semantic satiation, which is a phenomenon that occurs when a word or phrase is repeated so often that it loses its meaning. Furthermore, "thoughts and prayers" is seen as the linguistic equivalent of an

individual calling for change, when in fact the ability to change outcomes lies with them (Folles, 2019). Other studies have found that this initial virtue signaling by offering “thoughts and prayers” can lead to further inaction by feeling as if one has already helped or done enough in the wake of a tragedy. Also referred to as slacktivism, “thoughts and prayers” can be seen as a “relatively costless, token display of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change” (Kristofferson et al., 2014, p. 1149). While “thoughts and prayers” may be well-intentioned, the repeated use of the phrase following mass shootings is seen as a way to act or react without any real or substantive action, such as legislative change, and has therefore received criticism. However, those who are condemned for offering “thoughts and prayers” often respond that the time immediately following a mass shooting is no time for legislative change, accusing those calling for change of politicizing tragedy to further their own agendas. Proponents of this anti-politicization tactic often state that time needs to be taken to gather facts and grieve for the victims. However, experts have noted that the time immediately following tragedy is when change should be made, while it is fresh on everyone’s minds and to prevent further devastation. “The reality is that responding to crises with political agendas is one of the things that the government is supposed to do, and doing nothing is a political and policy decision by itself” (Lopez, 2016, para. 5). Therefore, all this back-and-forth name-calling does is take the attention off of the issues at hand, and ultimately leads to no effective change.

The sentiment of “thoughts and prayers” was expressed and reported on in the majority of cases in this project. While some articles simply reported on the condolences shared by politicians and celebrities, others discussed the implications of these sentiments and the criticism that they faced, often along political party lines of the news organizations. For instance,

following the San Bernardino, CA shooting, *NBC News* reported the two sides of the “thoughts and prayers” debate:

A wave of statements and tweets by politicians sending “thoughts and prayers” after the San Bernardino shooting was quickly followed by an angry backlash over the state of America’s gun laws. However, others objected to “social media snark” and what they described as “prayer shaming.” (Jamieson, 2015, para. 1, 10).

Grasping on to this “prayer shaming” narrative, *Breitbart* quickly responded to the criticism:

In the immediate aftermath of a horrific terrorist attack in San Bernardino, before the dead had even been counted, the bigoted attacks from the elite media against the Faithful had already begun. Do not let the bigots shame or fool you. Thoughts and prayers are not just a beautiful expression, they work. (Nolte, 2015d, para. 1, 4).

The idea is that those who sent “thoughts and prayers” to the victims and to law enforcement during the attack, instead of calling for immediate gun control legislation, are complicit in the murder. (Pollak, 2015c, para. 5).

Here, it can be seen that *Breitbart* responded to the criticism “thoughts and prayers” drew, and also forwarded the politicization narrative and claimed that the media and advocates for gun control acted too soon.

*Fox News* similarly reported in this manner following the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting and published an article titled “Keep My Thoughts and Prayers Out of Your Political Agenda.” In this article, *Fox News* wrote:

There’s a new wave of indignation directed at people who dare to pray for the victims. That’s right. As well-intentioned Americans pray for their countrymen who were just gunned down while worshipping God, gun control advocates are bashing them for their expression of faith. It’s one thing to hold strong opinions about gun control. But it’s entirely different to direct anger towards people of faith after such a horrific tragedy. Just because you might not believe in prayer, doesn’t give you the right to publicly insult those who do. As America grows increasingly hostile to Christianity, inappropriate and insensitive rhetoric regarding expressions of faith has become more acceptable. It seems the same people who pride themselves on advocating religious and cultural “tolerance” are the least tolerant when it comes to American Christians. (Hunt, 2017, para. 2-3, 6-7).

*Fox News* clearly drew political party lines in this article and praised those who chose to pray for the victims, and simultaneously condemned those that participate in “prayer shaming.” *Fox News*

also brought in the religious persecution narrative and stated that those who express sympathy are under attack, particularly Christians. Finally, it can be seen in the title of the article that *Fox News* has a particular disdain for those attempting to politicize the shooting in favor of pushing gun control and other legislation.

*Slate* was the most consistent news site in criticizing “thoughts and prayers” and framing it as political inaction, as seen in multiple articles across all cases. In addressing the “prayer shaming” narrative, *Slate* stated that the criticism isn’t about attacking prayer, but about calling out empty platitudes (Graham, 2015). *Slate* furthered this narrative of political inaction and wrote:

The problem is when “thoughts and prayers” are the only response to a public event that calls for political action. The issue is that politicians like him [Senator Ted Cruz] continue to offer thoughts and prayers and nothing else: no assault weapons ban, no universal background checks, no federal gun registry. (Graham, 2015, para. 8).

*Slate* also stated that offering “thoughts and prayers” is not inherently wrong. Rather they framed the combination of “thoughts and prayers” while offering no meaningful change as cynically hypocritical. Furthermore, *Slate* stated that the sentiment becomes meaningless when it is offered by people like lawmakers who actually have the power to effect change:

The “thoughts and prayers” sentiment is, of course, even more meaningless when it comes from people who have the power to prevent some of these tragedies from occurring in the first place, but choose not to for some reason. (Martinelli, 2017, para. 9).

This argument from *Slate* can be seen as true across all mass shooting cases in this project.

“Thoughts and prayers” were offered in the majority of cases, but the only real legislative change that occurred was the banning of bump stocks following the Las Vegas, NV shooting. As such, it can be seen that *Slate* has a right in their criticism of these sentiments as deliberate political inaction, which shows that these sentiments are common, but legislative change is not.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be seen that all news sites participated in agenda setting by forwarding various policy suggestions and engaging in policy debates based on the narratives that were forwarded. Primarily, policy debates centered on gun control, whether it was by limiting or increasing access. Gun control discussions drew sharp lines across the policy orientation of the news organizations, with liberal news sites advocating for gun control and conservative sites for increasing the access to guns. Each news site featured many articles about the gun control debate, sometimes offering their own policy recommendations. Beyond gun control, news sites focused on the implications of counterterrorism and monitoring extremism. For cases designated as terrorism, debates often surrounded the topics of immigration and surveillance of deemed “dangerous” communities. Again, these discussions varied across political party lines, where conservative sites argued for stricter legislation for immigration and increased surveillance of Muslim communities. The liberal news sites criticized these calls and instead argued that surveillance would be a violation of civil liberties. When white supremacy was discussed, the liberal news sites were in favor of monitoring extremist groups and websites, particularly social media. However, the conservative sites, especially *Breitbart*, stated that this monitoring should be considered censorship and a violation of First Amendment rights.

Therefore, depending on the offender and how the case is labeled, these news sites changed their views on surveillance and monitoring according to their narrative. Finally, the expression of “thoughts and prayers” drew its own debates. The liberal news sites blasted these sentiments when they came from politicians who failed to enact any meaningful legislation following a shooting. These sites viewed the sentiment as hypocritical and an act of deliberate inaction. The conservative news sites who saw these reactions instead called the criticism

“prayer shaming” and the call for action politicization. These sites stated that prayer does work and the expression of such should not be condemned. As well, they argued that the rush to act in the wake of tragedy is simply an underhanded move to forward a political agenda. As such, all sites participated in agenda setting along their respective political party lines.

## CHAPTER VIII

### DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This project sought to discover what differences, if any, are there in the representation of mass shootings across liberal and conservative mainstream news sites and far leaning news commentary sites. Studying crime and justice issues through the narratives and framing provided by media reports helps us better understand public responses and policymaking. As well, news media has become the main source of information for many people, especially when it comes to crime and justice issues. However, there is a distortion of crime in the media because the media tends to focus on only the rarest, violent, and most heinous crimes. These crimes are shocking and invoke fear, which lead to policy debates and possible legislative actions that do not respond to the most common crimes but memorialize victims of appalling crimes. Furthermore, the information presented in news media is biased towards their respective political affiliation. The bias in reporting can enhance fear and distrust among those who consume the news, which can also lead to isolation, the perpetuation of stereotypes, and inherent bias, which can further impact voting patterns. The media's influence on consumers is further exacerbated when far-leaning news commentary sites are relied on as a source of information. While still reporting on real and relevant events, these news commentary sites also provide opinions and comments from the authors and organizations. These sites tend to engage in partisan reporting that are based on the political ideology of the organization, which can also include inflammatory remarks. Utilizing these reporting techniques can increase hostile perceptions about world events and society at large, also leading to questions as to the reliability of competing news organizations.

This news media bias is also seen in the reporting of mass shootings. Mass shootings are highly reported on in the media due to their rarity, seemingly random nature, and high casualty

rates. Furthermore, the focus on mass shootings in the media has resulted in a rise in national discourse about broader issues, such as gun control, terrorism, immigration, mental health, and violent media. Following a mass shooting, news organizations rush to report on the incident, as well as attempt to make sense of this display of violence. Taking advantage of their position, news organizations will offer narratives and claims as to why the shooting happened and what could be done to prevent shootings in the future. The forwarded claims and frames that are used to make sense of the issue also shape widespread understanding and perceptions of mass shootings, as well as the implications it has for society as a whole. Therefore, media portrayals of mass shootings, as well as their frames, narratives, and policy discussions, creates a skewed reality that influences understanding of crime and justice issues, as well as policy responses.

Media criminology seeks to understand the crucial role that the media plays in social awareness and knowledge of real-world issues, particularly crime and justice issues. Media criminology acknowledges that as the media continues to integrate into everyday life, critical investigations of the media are essential in investigating how knowledge and social understanding is formed. Media criminologists investigate media influence, often utilizing a conflict criminology framework, which argues that those in power are able to direct and control the narrative of issues through the media in order to achieve hegemony. Hegemony is also known as the consent of the masses or the status quo, which drives everyday thought and decision-making. Achieving hegemony has been vastly simplified by the introduction of the media, particularly the online news market, which is readily available for consumers, and provides a tailored message to fit their audience.

Historically, media criminology has focused on traditional news and entertainment media formats, such as television, newspaper, and film. This project built upon the media criminology

framework by examining online news media articles. As such, this project sought to discover what differences, if any, were present in the representation of mass shooting cases across liberal and conservative mainstream news sites and far leaning news commentary sites. Online news sites were chosen based on political leaning and included the conservative news organizations of *Fox News* and *Breitbart* and the liberal news organizations of *NBC News* and *Slate*. The content of examination was mass shooting events, which are likely to receive prominent news attention, as well as theories of the offender's motive, and policy discussions. Eight cases were chosen for this study based on their presence in the national news cycle, as well as characteristics of the offender(s) and victims, location of the shooting, and the policy responses that emerged after each incident. After selecting both the cases and the news organizations, a word frequency query was done on all cases for emergent themes and a content analysis was further performed on media reports regarding frames and narratives. The remainder of this chapter discusses findings, theoretical application, and avenues for further research.

## THEMATIC FINDINGS

This project examined liberal and conservative mainstream news sites and far leaning news commentary sites for disparities in reporting on mass shooting events. The mainstream sites chosen were *Fox News*, who consistently draws a more conservative audience, and *NBC News*, whose consumers consistently lean more liberal. These two sites draw comparable consumer traffic and thus represent the mainstream news sites. Far leaning news commentary sites are those that feature information alongside opinions and often engage in partisan reporting based on their political affiliation. *Breitbart* was chosen as the conservative commentary site and *Slate* was selected as the liberal commentary site for this project.

Thematic analysis revealed stark differences in how mass shooting events were portrayed in online news media, based on the characteristics of the case, confirming the ideology of the news organization. When examining cases for offender themes, offenders who were White and who were assumed to have mental health issues were more likely to be viewed sympathetically. Offenders of color did not receive any mental health discussions, and this did not receive the same sympathy that White offenders did. Additionally, the offenders of color in these cases were labeled as terrorists and were further demonized for their threat to the American way of life. This coincides with previous research which found that Muslim mass shooters are less likely to be perceived as mentally ill, instead solely motivated by religion and hatred (Mercier et al., 2018). These offenders' characteristics of "outsiders" were also a focus in articles, in an attempt to separate them from the rest of society. Offenders that targeted religious institutions were also demonized for the shooting, but the outrage was often directed more at a general violation of religious liberty rather than outrage for the victims. These offenders were seen as purely evil, preying on helpless worshippers and innocent souls.

Victims and survivors were featured in articles for all cases, and most were treated with sympathy, due to the unsuspecting and random nature of mass shootings. Names and background information about the victims and their lives were a frequent element in articles, as well as survivors' accounts of the shooting. The victims of the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting received the most attention because almost half of the fallen victims were children. This focus on children and innocent souls served to draw sympathy from the public about the shooting. However, some victims were treated unsympathetically in articles, most often being blamed for not having a firearm as a means to defend themselves and their fellow citizens from the harm that incurred. Therefore, both offenders and victims received both sympathetic and unsympathetic tones in

articles, despite the fact that offenders wreaked unspeakable carnage upon unsuspecting, innocent victims.

The themes for explanations as to why the shootings occurred most often lined up with the motivations that offenders explicitly stated having, or with the information that was gleaned according to official investigations. Cases that received the most attention were San Bernardino, CA and Orlando, FL and were overwhelmingly labeled as terrorist acts. Beyond the label of terrorism, little attention was given to the other factors of the cases. For instance, in some articles, Orlando, FL was also referred to as a hate crime, as the victims were mostly members of both the LGBTQ+ community and Latinx community. However, the hate crime narrative was vastly overshadowed by the terrorism narrative, which focused on the shooter's radicalization and pledge of allegiance to ISIS during the shooting.

Only two other shootings were labeled as terrorism, but there was debate as to those labels. The El Paso, TX shooting and the Christchurch, NZ shooting were called acts of terrorism by public officials, which led to this label being used in news articles. News sites reporting on the Christchurch, NZ shooting did readily use this label, but there was some debate for the El Paso, TX shooting. Due to the shooting taking place on U.S. soil, and the offender being a White male, there seemed to be some hesitancy in reporting the shooting as domestic terrorism. Law enforcement and government officials stated that the case would be investigated as domestic terrorism, but more often, news articles framed the shooting as a hate crime against the Mexican and immigrant community. Additionally, white supremacy was reported on in this case, but was not often linked to the growing threat that white supremacy poses, nor was any effort made to frame white supremacy as an official hate group or a terrorist network.

The lack of applying the domestic terror label also occurred in other shootings, including the Charleston, SC, Las Vegas, NV, and Pittsburgh, PA shootings. The Charleston, SC and Pittsburgh, PA shootings were similar to the El Paso, TX shooting in that they targeted a specific group of people based on their race or religion. As such, the label of hate crime was applied in these cases rather than domestic terrorism. Additionally, the Charleston, SC and Pittsburgh, PA cases included little to no discussion of white supremacy, further shifting the narrative away from far right and white supremacist groups and focusing on the actions of one, hateful individual. While the Las Vegas, NV shooting still does not have a clear picture as to the shooter's motive, some questioned that the sheer scale of the shooting should have led to the use of the domestic terror label. Therefore, it can be seen that the terror label was reserved for cases with offenders of color, primarily Muslim offenders, while White offenders were not subjected to this label. This coincides with previous research that finds that the media is biased in their representation of terrorism, featuring those offenders who are Muslim or otherwise linked to Islam (Powell, 2011; Valcore & Buckler, 2020). Furthermore, White offenders and domestic terrorists are often perceived as a minor threat by the media, and are thus presented as troubled individuals (Powell, 2011; Valcore & Buckler, 2020). The actions of domestic terrorists are also frequently linked to the hatred of the individual offender, which also serves to absolve society from any guilt or responsibility (Husselbee & Elliott, 2002; Meyer, 2015; Valcore & Buckler, 2020).

Another theme related to explanations involved shootings that occurred at religious locations. Oftentimes, the mere location of the shooting resulted in the label of a hate crime or, more often, religious persecution before any further facts were gleaned. For instance, the Pittsburgh, PA and Christchurch, NZ shootings were quickly labeled hate crimes against Jews

and Muslims, both based on the location, as well as statements the offenders made during the shooting. The Charleston, SC, and Sutherland Springs, TX shootings were quickly labeled hate crimes against Christians and framed as inherently evil, having attacked people in their houses of worship. This framing, however, was primarily based on the location of the shooting rather than additional information from the shooter or investigators. For instance, hypothetical claims were made that the Texas shooter was a devout atheist, who believed Christians to be stupid, when in fact the shooting was an act of revenge, stemming from a domestic dispute. Additionally, the South Carolina shooter was more focused on the race of the victims he targeted, rather than on their religious affiliation. This attempt to frame shootings as something other than they are, shifted the narrative and created a skewed reality of mass shootings, and in these cases, threats to religious freedom. As such, the label of religious persecution was mainly applied to those shootings that took place at religious locations. Overwhelmingly, this label was dependent on the location of the shooting, and often occurred before the official motive of the offender was learned. Therefore, the label of religious persecution and hate crime was quickly applied to shootings that took place at houses of worship, where they were perceived to be religiously motivated.

An additional narrative shift that took place in this project was the link between mass shootings and mental illness. The mental illness theme was used in the Charleston, SC, Las Vegas, NV, and the Sutherland Springs, TX shootings. For Charleston, SC, the mental illness narrative was aimed at the shooter, claiming that he had all the signs of severe and worsening mental illness. This idea helps to shift blame from the shooter and his hateful ideology, and place it onto a generalized mental illness, for which no specific diagnosis was ever given in these articles. Furthermore, this frames the shooter as not in his own control, instead subjected to act

according to his mental deficiency. This also serves to frame the offender as a “crazed lone-wolf” rather than address the racial hatred that is still widespread within society.

In Las Vegas, NV, there was no clear motive for the shooter, and thus explanations largely centered on his mental state, going as far to posit that his violence might have been inherited by his bank robber father. As such, this mental illness link theorizes that no rational person would commit violence on this scale, which further suggests that the shooter was not in his own control during the shooting. This narrative also serves to take the focus off of gun violence that plagues society, suggesting that this case was an anomaly and is not indicative of any wider social ills. Finally, the Sutherland Springs, TX shooter was subjected to the mental illness narrative, focusing on his past transgressions and a brief stay in a psychiatric facility. By focusing on the shooter’s history, reports framed him as a violent, erratic, and irrational individual, which also framed him as a person who could not be helped. News articles also featured quotes made by President Trump, which stated that the shooting was not a guns issue, but “a mental health problem at the highest level”.

Primarily, the focus on mental health in these cases was an attempt to shift the narrative off of guns and gun violence. This shift was almost immediate in attempts to divert gun control debates, and instead focus on mental health issues. However, none of the reports on these cases ever presented any discussions about mental health policy recommendations. Additionally, there was almost no discussion made about the fact that mental illnesses are not sufficient causes of violence (Stuart, 2003) and that most individuals diagnosed with mental illness are not violent (Varshney et al., 2016). Therefore, the mental health explanation was overwhelmingly applied to White shooters rather than offenders of color. This coincides with previous research which found that Muslim mass shooters are less likely to be perceived as mentally ill, instead solely motivated

by religion and hatred (Mercier et al., 2018). This also serves to “other” these mentally ill offenders, in order to take responsibility and guilt off of society.

One explanatory theme that was only briefly mentioned in select articles was the explanation of masculinity. While mass shootings are the most gendered crime (Bridges & Tober, 2018; Fox & Levin, 2012; Issa, 2019; The Violence Project, 2020), there was hardly any discussion of the role gender and masculinity plays in mass shootings and other grand displays of violence. Research has found that men tend to externalize their aggression and frustration, often in public displays, as an attempt to air their grievances, place the blame on other individuals, and reassert their image of masculinity, strength, and power (Madfis, 2014). Additionally, Kimmel (2013) suggests that mass shootings are part of a larger sociocultural issue, and that the relationship between masculinity and violence is overwhelmingly found in a group he classified as “angry white men”. According to Kimmel (2013), members of this group often act out as a way of reclaiming what they believe they are entitled to, such as wealth, politics, opportunities, etc. And when this group acts out, it is often in grand, public ways, such as mass shootings. However, Kimmel (2013) argues that a focus on gun access and mental health following mass shootings serves to individualize the issue, rather than to examine broader sociocultural problems of masculinity and violence. For instance, violence has become masculinized in that violent acts can be used to access a gendered sense of status. Violence has also been understood as proof of masculinity within society. Therefore, when the broader culture that mass shootings occur in is explored, it is impossible to ignore gender because mass shootings are enactments of masculinity (Bridges & Tober, 2018). As such, the news sites’ unwillingness to recognize masculinity as a factor in mass shootings also serves to ignore broader social issues and puts all blame onto individuals.

When examining cases for policy discussion, articles largely featured talks of gun control. Gun control is often the center of debate following a mass shooting, as firearms are used, and the number of casualties from mass shootings in recent years have risen. While gun control was a central theme, there were stark differences in how the topic was presented. *Slate* and *NBC News* were proponents of gun control, arguing that strict legislative change needs to swiftly happen in order to prevent future mass shootings. In contrast, *Breitbart* and *Fox News* stated that gun control would not stop mass shootings, as criminals would simply find an illegal manner to procure their weapons. Furthermore, these same sites stated that current gun control policies do not work, as many of the shooters acquired their firearms legally. Using this point as central to their debate, these sites also argued for increasing access to guns, believing that more citizens carrying guns would be able to confront would-be shooters, as well as participating in target hardening, by reducing the number of gun-free zones.

While gun control was the most common policy debate, there were only two instances of real legislative change, one of which occurred on United States soil. Following the Las Vegas, NV shooting, the deadliest mass shooting in the U.S. to date, Congress passed a law banning the manufacture, sale, and possession of bump stocks. Bump stocks have been used to transform semi-automatic weapons into fully automatic weapons, akin to machine guns, which have been banned since the 1980s. As such, a bipartisan bill stated that bump stocks should be covered under the machine gun ban, which led to the only significant legislative change in gun control following a mass shooting in recent years. This U.S. Department of Justice banned bump stocks at the federal level in December 2018, but there is debate whether this ban is lawful considering the Second Amendment.

The other legislative change that occurred in these cases was the assault-style weapons ban in New Zealand. Following the Christchurch attacks, New Zealand swiftly acted in banning all assault-style weapons, which includes semi- and fully automatic firearms. Additionally, New Zealand stated that all magazines holding more than 10 rounds are also restricted, in order to allow owners to continue to protect themselves and their property, but to also reduce loss of life in the event of another attack. This swift response in New Zealand stood in glaring contrast to responses in the United States following a mass shooting; however, the right to possess firearms is not guaranteed in the New Zealand Constitution, as it is in America. Therefore, while there have been calls for gun control, legislation in the United States has not swiftly acted due to rights guaranteed by the Second Amendment.

The lack of action addressing gun control following a mass shooting also led to debates surrounding politicians who express their sympathy. Commonly seen in the wake of a tragedy, politicians, celebrities, and average citizens take to social media to express their sympathy for victims and communities affected, often through the sentiment of “thoughts and prayers”. However, this sentiment became hotly contested in some articles from *NBC News* and *Slate*, which stated that this sentiment shared by politicians was weak and hypocritical, as these individuals actually had the power to effect change. *NBC News* and *Slate* stated that this sympathy, while possibly well-meaning, was simply a performative, hollow gesture, knowing that nothing would be done in any meaningful way to prevent future mass shootings. *Fox News* and *Breitbart* supported the gesture of expressing “thoughts and prayers” and often deployed tactics to defend these individuals, such as claiming that those wanting change were politicizing tragedy, or that they were participating in prayer shaming, edging on religious persecution. *Fox News* and *Breitbart* arguments often stated that participating in policy changes immediately

following a shooting was too soon, as the focus needed to be on grieving the victims and showing support for the community. As well, the prayer shaming argument suggested that those expressing “thoughts and prayers” were being unreasonably persecuted and shamed for their religion, simultaneously positing that prayer does work. However, as seen in the lack of significant policy change that has taken place, it can be deduced that the expression of “thoughts and prayers”, while common and well-intended, often takes the place of significant legislative action.

Another common theme in policy discussions dealt with counterterrorism, through surveillance, restricting immigration, and monitoring radicalization or extremism. Policy suggestions took a predictable route in cases that were officially deemed terrorism, where debate centered around counterterrorism efforts. These efforts included suggestions from *Fox News* and *Breitbart* to better monitor known terror networks, as well as online presence. Additionally, debates ensued about immigration, particularly around refugees and those migrating from Muslim countries. As such, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* provided discussions about a Muslim ban, presented by President Trump. While these talks were initially negative on all news sites following the San Bernardino, CA shooting, the ban started to receive some support from *Fox News* and *Breitbart* after the Orlando, FL shooting, even though the offender was American born. Moreover, discussion surrounding Islamic terrorism led to suggestions to monitor mosques and the Muslim community. However, these suggestions were also met with criticism from *NBC News* and *Slate* due to the infringement upon privacy and the right to freedom of religion. Talks of monitoring radicalization and extremism for would-be Muslim terrorists seemed to have some support, as well as already being a governmental undertaking for national security. However, *NBC News* and *Slate* highlighted the lack of effort to monitor extremism when it relates to white

supremacy. *NBC News* and *Slate* had similar policy suggestions, such as online surveillance, but also recognized the lack of governmental action and resources devoted to fighting far-right hate groups and white supremacy. As such, suggestions from *NBC News* and *Slate* revolved around social media surveillance and online networks. However, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* debated the issue of censorship to these suggestions and stated that free speech must be upheld. Therefore, policy debates centered on the type of offense and offender each mass shooting was labeled as, either receiving support or criticism based on the political affiliation of each news site.

## MEDIA BIAS

Based on the thematic findings, it is not hard to see that media bias is present in both mainstream news sites and far-leaning news commentary sites. All news sites presented information relating to the chosen mass shooting cases according to the political alignment of their respective news organizations. For instance, there were similarities among both conservative news sites and both liberal news sites. *Fox News* and *Breitbart* focused most of their efforts on the cases that were designated as terrorism or as religious persecution, which aligns with the conservative approach that pays more attention to threats to the American way of life and to freedom of religion. Contrastingly, *NBC News* and *Slate* heavily reported on cases that were labeled as hate crime and acts of white supremacy, which brought attention to the liberal appeal to recognize the threat of far-right extremism.

Policy recommendations also drew a hard line between the news sites along political party lines. *NBC News* and *Slate* repeatedly reported on the need for gun control following mass shootings, as well as the need to increase efforts to stem the spread of white supremacist ideology. They also stated the need to protect civil liberties when there were calls for monitoring the Muslim community, as well as the need to preserve the integrity of the United States when

calls were made to limit or cut off immigration. *Fox News* and *Breitbart*, however, used mass shooting cases to argue that gun control does not work and instead, access to firearms should be increased to arm unsuspecting victims, as well as to limit the number of gun-free zones that would in turn, deter would-be offenders. Additionally, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* proposed that churches and other religious institutions should employ armed guards, security, and protocols in the case of an emergency, also as a way to protect against religious persecution. Furthermore, these sites argued for strict immigration legislation, as well as counterterrorism efforts, such as surveillance. Although, their efforts to counter mass shootings were more focused on terrorism rather than white supremacy. Altogether, it can be seen that there were similarities among mainstream news sites and news commentary sites, but these similarities were concentrated based on the political ideology of the news organization. In other words, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* contained similar themes when compared to each other, and *NBC News* and *Slate* likewise contained similarities.

While there were similar themes across news sites, there were marked differences in how each site went about relaying their information. All news sites participated in expressing the opinion of the news organization, whether it be in discussions of the offender or of policy recommendations, although the mainstream news sites of *Fox News* and *NBC News* were more reserved overall in their use of opinions in their articles. Rather, these news articles featured quotes from politicians, celebrities, and official investigators that were used to forward the frames and narratives chosen. In other words, *Fox News* and *NBC News* used spokespeople on their sites and focused more on the facts of the case rather than venturing too far into opinion pieces. These chosen spokespeople still aligned with their political ideology, with *Fox News* often featuring statements from conservative and Republican spokespeople, and *NBC News*

relying on liberal and Democratic spokespeople. There was a change in later cases among these news sites, with more opinion pieces and poignant reporting, possibly due to the change in presidency and focus on “fake news” debates. This also coincides with a rise in reporting that centered on President Trump and his rhetoric, particularly in the Pittsburgh, PA, El Paso, TX, and Christchurch, NZ shootings. Articles that reported on rhetoric often condemned either the president himself, or fellow media competitors for playing into this narrative, and these distinctions were often made along political lines as well. As such, it can be seen that while media bias existed on these sites in all cases, there seemed to be a rise in partisan reporting that coincided with the 2016 presidential election, which further divided the mainstream news organizations of *Fox News* and *NBC News* from one another along political party lines.

Examining the two news commentary sites, which are sites that feature information along with opinion, revealed commonalities in how information was presented. For instance, both sites featured facts about the cases with supplementary opinions about the offenders, explanations, and policy suggestions, but differentiated along political party lines. Specifically, *Slate* critiqued current policy and often presented their own policy recommendations that could be used to prevent mass shootings, as well as the spread of white supremacy. *Slate* was also critical of President Trump during his term and focused on the influence his rhetoric may have had on shooters. The main focus of *Slate* articles on mass shootings was on guns and stricter gun control. *Slate* strongly favored gun control in their reports and compared the United States to other developed countries that do not have the level of gun violence that the U.S. currently does. *Slate* employed a different style of reporting from the other news sites. *Slate* often published the fewest number of articles, but these articles were longer, which allowed *Slate* to feature more quotes and focus on the facts of each case. Furthermore, *Slate* did not publish repeat articles

under different headlines, and also gave more attention to victims and communities that were affected by the shootings. Therefore, while *Slate* was equally biased in their reports toward the political left, they were composed in their reports of mass shootings.

Compared to the other news sites, *Breitbart* published the most articles and employed controversial methods. For instance, *Breitbart* headlines were often eye-catching, used individuals' names, such as celebrities and politicians, and their quotes sometimes included expletives. As such, *Breitbart* greatly participated in clickbait (Potthast et al., 2016). Clickbait refers to online advertisements or headlines that is designed to entice readers to following a link or reading an article (Potthast et al., 2016). Clickbait also encourages readers to share the article, no matter the accuracy of the information found in the article. Online news sites can thus participate in clickbait, particularly on social media, where articles can be shared and consumed at an extraordinary rate.

Additionally, *Breitbart* featured multiple repeat articles. These articles often had the same information, but the headlines had been slightly altered to appear to be a different article. This tactic utilized by *Breitbart* is also known as the illusory truth effect. The illusory truth effect posits that “repetition increases the ease with which statements are processed, which in turn is used to infer accuracy” (Pennycook et al., 2017, p. 4). This effect can be applied to “fake news” where repetition can increase the perceived accuracy of even false statements. Simply put, the repetition of information, even false information, can seem truer to consumers, especially due to the lack of firsthand knowledge and experience of many topics featured in the news media (Fazio, 2016). *Breitbart* used the illusory truth effect to their advantage, and featured multiple repeat articles for each mass shooting case. While some of the information published was true,

such as facts of the case, *Breitbart* also repeated their own claims about the shooting and policy suggestions, and thus encouraged their consumers to take *Breitbart*'s opinion as fact.

Furthermore, in rushing to publish as many articles as possible, *Breitbart* articles often had multiple grammatical and factual errors. For instance, *Breitbart* published many articles with conspiracy theories about the Las Vegas, NV shooting, such as the shooter's political orientation, his possible connection to ISIS, and that the shooter was framed by a terrorist. While none of these statements are known to be true, *Breitbart* took advantage of the lack of clear motive and published their own theories and presented them as fact multiple times to their audience. The lack of factual basis in *Breitbart* articles thus serves to jeopardize the integrity of journalism.

Finally, *Breitbart* overtly participated in criticism, both at individuals, such as politicians and celebrities, and at fellow news organizations. Much like *Fox News*, *Breitbart* articles often featured quotes from people that supported their narrative, such as Republicans. However, they also took aim at dissenting politicians, criticizing their reactions and policy discussions. Furthermore, *Breitbart* openly disparaged fellow news organizations that did not conform to their ideology, particularly *CNN*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. In these articles, *Breitbart* claimed that these organizations were not factual and were instead mouthpieces of the liberal left agenda, but also did not recognize their own bias. Therefore, it can be seen that *Breitbart* used controversial tactics when reporting on the mass shooting cases, all to push their own narrative.

The disparity seen between these news sites confirms that media bias is real and present in news media. The explosive saturation of the news media market has allowed organizations to align with their political ideology and cater to curated audiences. However, by participating in partisan reporting, these organizations are also creating distinct realities for society by only

focusing on one line of news. As such, consumers often only rely on one news source and thus buy into whatever narrative is being forwarded by their source, even if it is inaccurate. Partisan reporting thus contributes to defining an individual's socially constructed world and creates skewed realities about everyday issues.

## THEORETICAL APPLICATION

This project sought to forward media criminology by examining online news platforms rather than the traditional news media formats, such as newspaper and television. In examining news media reports of mass shootings, this project also utilized a conflict criminology framework to understand how mass shootings are presented in the media. Conflict criminology rejects the idea of societal consensus and instead posits that law is used as a tool of oppression that is linked to inherent power structures. Crime and law serve to advantage the elite while simultaneously oppressing and exploiting others. This conflict between classes inevitably leads to crime for survival, as well as criminalization of acts deemed unacceptable by those in power. The defining of social norms also serves to preserve the status quo in society, which also helps maintain current power structures. Mass media aids in defining and establishing social norms, as well as hegemony, by utilizing narratives and frames that highlight issues deemed important by claims makers, as well as showing support for the current system. Issues and opinions that contradict the majority or the current social structure are often ignored or criticized as a way of preserving the status quo. Tenets of conflict criminology and hegemony can easily be seen when examining media portrayals of crime and justice events, especially those events that are highly publicized and draw widespread attention, such as mass shootings.

Firstly, conflict criminology ideals can be seen in the way offenders are presented in the media, that often utilize the ideal offender narrative. Ideal offenders are those individuals that are

seen as outsiders, foreign, or that lack essential human qualities. These offenders are often seen as inherently evil and blights on society. Their differences are also reported on in a way that separates them from the rest of society, which serves to ease the guilt of society at large. Highlighted characteristics are often race, gender, and religion, as well as the mental state of the offender. In this project, the offenders that received the most media attention, as well as condemnation from the media, were those offenders labeled as terrorists in the San Bernardino, CA and Orlando, FL shootings. The offenders in the San Bernardino, CA shooting were a married couple, of whom the wife was an immigrant from Pakistan. The offender in the Orlando, FL shooting was a male shooter who was born in the United States. The shooters in both cases were Muslim, which contributed to their almost immediate label of a terrorist (Powell, 2011; Valcore & Buckler, 2020). The shooters in both cases had multiple articles with information about their lives, motives, and radicalization. Articles often focused on the broader implications of radical Islam and terrorism, and some even blamed the Muslim community for the actions of the shooters. Details about past statements, arguments, and violence also surfaced in these articles, further painting the offenders as inherently dangerous. Due to the race and religion of these shooters, it was easy for the media to draw lines separating them from the rest of American society. As such, these offenders perfectly fit into the ideal offender narrative that was used by the media. The remaining offenders, who were White males, were also “othered” but in less ostracized ways. Articles about these shooters often featured discussions of mental illness or framed them as “crazed lone-wolves,” which also served to separate them from society. While *NBC News*, *Fox News*, and *Slate* did discuss white supremacy and radical ideology, it was not as widely discussed as terrorism and radical Islam. As well, some articles from *Fox News* and *Breitbart* also framed the White offenders as suffering and in need of help rather than

demonizing them as they did the offenders of color in the terrorism cases. This focus on terrorism and identifiable traits serves to separate these offenders from society and place the blame on them solely, rather than recognizing larger societal issues. Furthermore, the lack of attention on white supremacy also fits into the ideal offender narrative by not addressing the threat it poses to society. This serves to preserve current hegemonic power structures, giving all attention and resources to offenders that are easily characterized as outsiders compared to those that are not.

Secondly, it can be seen that news sites also subscribed to aspects of the ideal victim narrative. Ideal victims are those rare victims that are often seen as totally innocent in the victimization and deserving of sympathy. Victims that fit into this narrative are typically children, young women, and those who are unable to defend themselves. Mass shooting victims are often seen as purely innocent due to the unsuspecting and seemingly random nature of mass shootings. As such, these victims were frequently featured in news articles and with sympathetic tones. Articles included information about the victims' lives, as well as accounts from survivors, which helped to increase the sympathy for the victims and understand the impact mass shootings have on communities. Also adhering to the ideal victim category, the Sutherland Springs, TX shooting had the most articles across all news sites talking about the victims, almost half of which were children. It can be concluded that the attention given to the victims in this case was because of the combined status of being a victim of a mass shooting, as well as a child. However, while victims were overwhelmingly treated with sympathy, some cases portrayed victims in unsympathetic tones, sometimes even blaming them for not being able to stop the shooting. For instance, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* published articles where people praised the Orlando, FL shooting because it targeted the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, the victims of the Orlando,

FL, Las Vegas, NV, and Pittsburgh, PA shootings were often blamed by *Fox News* and *Breitbart* for being gun-free zones, thus attracting shooters to them, or at least preventing victims from responding. *Fox News* and *Breitbart* went on to further blame victims for being unarmed in these instances, which led to higher casualty rates. Finally, the inclusion of secondary and ambiguous victims also serves to forward the ideal victim narrative. *Breitbart* published many articles that gave victim status to those who were not directly affected or involved with the mass shooting being reported on. For instance, following the Orlando, FL shooting, *Breitbart* placed America and White conservatives as victims of political correctness that serves to benefit the Muslim community. After the Christchurch, NZ shooting *Breitbart* also shifted the focus from the synagogue victims and onto Christians who were persecuted in Nigeria. As such, it can be seen that featuring secondary and ambiguous victims in articles allowed *Breitbart* to frame who was seen as ideal or true victims compared to those who were deemed unworthy of sympathy.

Thirdly, this project provides evidence that the media plays an important role in defining problems and suggesting solutions. Also known as agenda setting, the media is used to highlight issues that are deemed important, while simultaneously supporting policy suggestions made by claims makers. In order to build support for a cause, claims makers need the media to frame issues as urgent and in need of fixing so that their policies can gain traction. This can be seen in the articles chosen for this project, as many news sites discussed the implications of the shootings and policies that should take place. The agenda setting that took place often diverged along political party lines, but each news sites took part in forwarding claims and policy suggestions. The liberal news sites of *NBC News* and *Slate* often focused on gun control and framed each shooting as another horrible, tragic instance of gun violence. These sites published articles that discussed the history and prevalence of mass shootings, which helped to frame their

calls for gun control. *NBC News* and *Slate* placed each new shooting against a backdrop of high gun violence rates in the United States, which also allowed them to criticize lax gun laws and loopholes in background checks. These sites also featured statements from gun control advocates, which furthered their narrative. When addressing white supremacy, *NBC News* and *Slate* also stated the need to recognize the danger these hate groups pose and suggested that more resources need to be devoted to the surveillance and deterrence of white supremacists. Any attempts to deny the threat of white supremacy were criticized in these articles, which also served to forward their narratives of what issues are seen as important. Agenda setting was also seen in *Fox News* and *Breitbart* articles, where they argued for increased access to guns. Gun-free zones were often the focus of shootings, where victims were unable to defend themselves. *Fox News* and *Breitbart* gave attention to the lack of defensible space, which helped to further their claims that gun control does not work. Furthermore, these sites used the prevalence of gun violence to state that gun control legislation does not keep firearms from criminals, but instead makes law-abiding citizens more vulnerable. When addressing terrorism, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* argued for more counterterrorism and surveillance, particularly of Muslim communities, as well as enforcing stricter immigration laws. However, these same concerns were not present in cases that discussed white supremacy. As such, this shows where *Fox News* and *Breitbart* placed their issues of importance, as well as the policies they suggested that aligned with their frames and narratives.

Therefore, this project demonstrates that conflict criminology can be used as a theoretical framework to analyze online news media. The media helps frame the public's understanding of the world and crime and justice issues, thus constructing realities based on what is portrayed. The manner in which offenders are represented in the new media help define who is and is not

seen as a criminal or threat to the public. The disparity in reporting on offenders in these cases that particularly highlighted terrorists helps maintain and exacerbate the fear of those seen as outsiders, as well as continuing support for counterterrorism and strict immigration policies. Portraying the shooters who were not labeled as terrorists as lone-wolves serves to separate them from the rest of society, which also relieves blame and maintains the status quo. The disparity in victim portrayals also allows the media to define who is and is not deserving of sympathy. Victims who were attacked in religious locations often received the most sympathy, while the attention for other victims was often shifted onto other individuals and communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community, the Hispanic and Latinx community, and secondary victims. Additionally, the explanations and narratives that news sites used allowed them to also participate in agenda setting and forward policies that they aligned with. Lines were drawn when gun control was discussed, as well as recognition of the threat that terrorism and white supremacy poses to the United States. As such, this partisan reporting across news sites creates distinct realities for consumers and maintains the conflict in society. Furthermore, the various frames and narratives that are utilized create a competition in news media for who is seen as credible. The lack of support and consensus from the public thus allows for the preservation of the status quo because universal hegemony would lead to change. Conflict criminology is thus a useful framework for attempting to understand the role the media plays in perceptions of reality and policy support.

#### LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

While this research furthers media criminology by examining online news media, a few limitations exist. First, this project includes a small sample size of eight cases and excluded school shootings, which have been the central subjects of debates about gun control. The Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, FL, in particular, led to national

demonstrations and school walkouts in an attempt to bring legislative change for gun control. Additionally, the most recent case examined was from 2019, which means that more timely cases could be analyzed. For instance, since the drop in shootings during the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, there has been an increase in mass shootings, some of which targeted members of the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities (Smith, 2021). Unfortunately, there are countless cases that could be examined for media bias and disparities in the use of frames and narratives. A possible next step for future research could be to compare these shootings that were deemed hate crimes against the AAPI community with other hate crime shootings in order to assess sympathetic and unsympathetic themes for the offenders and victims, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. That said, there is nothing to indicate that more cases would lead to dramatically disparate results.

Another limitation of this study is the use of four news and commentary sites. The oversaturation of the news market means that there is a multitude of websites that could be examined. While the sites chosen for this study were selected based on comparable data, such as consumer traffic, there are other sites that receive greater attention, and as such, may have even more influence on the public. For instance, *CNN*, the *New York Times*, and *Huffington Post* all rank among the most visited news sites and their inclusion might alter the results slightly. This project recognizes that more news organizations would increase the validity of this research but, again, it is unlikely that the results would be significantly different due to the wide presence of media bias. However, this project understands that future research comparing news sites with a neutral political orientation would be illuminating.

An additional limitation was the focus on online news articles as this excluded videos, televised broadcasts, and the photographs that were used in articles. Visual criminology is an

important division of media criminology that “gives attention to the representation and images of crime and control to power” (Brown & Carrabine, 2017, p. 1). Visual criminology also seeks a more informed understanding of the role images play in maintaining power structures. As well, televised broadcasts with conversing journalists are often subjected to more commentary and opinion than written reports. These segments may also be more biased as they air live and are not subjected to editorial review or censorship prior to going on air. Television also continues to be a main source of information for many Americans, and as such, research on broadcast news is necessary. As such, the examination of videos and images would be an important line of research in understanding media bias.

This project suggests two avenues of research that will address these limitations and continue to forward media criminology. First, with the increase in access to online media and social media, a project examining the interaction between online news sites and consumers would be illuminating. For instance, comments on social media posts, as well as reactions to gauge public sentiment regarding mass shootings would forward media criminology, as well as helping understand the role social media plays in disseminating information. The use and power of clickbait in news commentary sites might also shed light on the extent to which media agendas are distributed.

A second line of research would utilize pre- and post-test procedures to gauge disparity in the understanding of issues presented by the media. In this experiment, respondents would be asked their understanding of crime and justice issues, as well as their level of support for policies that are often discussed in the wake of a mass shooting event. Afterwards, the control group would be exposed to mainstream news sites while the experimental group would be exposed to far-leaning news commentary sites. Afterwards, the post-test would then gauge their sentiments

about crime and policies to see if there was any change. As such, this experiment would help explore the influence the media has on consumers and their understanding of issues, as well as the illusory truth effect, which posits that repeated exposure to information, even false, increases the perceived truth of that information. While the suggestions mentioned here are important in forwarding media criminology, they remain outside the scope of this project, and thus, I urge future researchers to creatively and critically consider how news media can be examined for substance and meaning.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While this project did examine mass shootings and the policies that are often discussed in the media, this is not a policy piece that specifically addresses mass shootings. Instead, this project focused on media representation and bias that can affect the understanding the public has about crime and justice issues and policies. Nonpartisan or bipartisan reporting could help create a more neutral discussion of topics and issues, but there are concerns in governing media operations. For instance, given the status of the United States First Amendment that guarantees a right to freedom of the press and of speech, there is little that public policy could do in an official capacity. Governmental control of the media would violate First Amendment rights and would be considered censorship. As such, the only policy implication this project suggests is education and media literacy. The media plays a crucial role in informing the public about world events. However, as this project found, media bias is real, and is thus creating skewed realities which have dramatic implications for our society and democracy. As such, teaching research skills, media literacy, and educating the public about media bias is crucial in creating a more informed public. Media literacy is the ability to identify different types of media and critically examine the messages that are being forwarded (Livingstone, 2004). Publishing media bias guides, teaching

students how to do research, focusing on media literacy, and encouraging consumers to seek out information would allow the public to understand the reality of media bias and the need to be informed on important issues, which would lead to a better understanding of the world.

Furthermore, this education would help increase journalistic integrity as the public would know of the prevalence of media bias. This could then have the effect of creating more neutral news reporting in an effort to keep the public informed, but in a less biased manner. Therefore, this project suggests that education about media bias and research could be beneficial for both consumers and news media organizations.

## CONCLUSION

News media helps to shape the understanding the public has about crime and justice issues. The lack of firsthand knowledge leads the public to rely on the media for this information; however, this project found support that media bias does exist with respect to the presentation of ideas surrounding mass shootings and thus needs to be examined for accuracy. To explore what differences, if any, were present in the representation of mass shooting events across liberal and conservative mainstream news sites and far leaning news commentary sites, this project utilized a conflict criminology framework when analyzing media reports of mass shooting cases. Results indicated that media bias does exist in news media and their representation of mass shootings, with disparity occurring along political party lines. Finding disparities between news sites supports the application of conflict criminology to media, particularly news media and their representation of offenders and victims. Furthermore, this project recognizes the media's role in agenda setting and forwarding narratives and policies of claims makers. Altogether, these findings suggest that the media serves to maintain the status quo in their portrayals of crime and justice issues in their forwarding of claims and various

policy discussions. The conflicting narratives that are directed at consumers reduces hegemony that could affect significant policy changes, thus leaving current power structures in place. As the public increasingly relies on online media for information, the need to examine media content also increases. As such, future scholars are urged to recognize the impact the media has on the public and to continue this line of inquiry in order to have a more informed world.

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- Ph.D.           Criminology and Criminal Justice, August 2021  
                   Old Dominion University  
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- M.S.           Criminal Justice, May 2016  
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**Publications***Non-Refereed Publications*

Twitty, Elizabeth. (2020). [Review of the book *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape culture in popular media*, by Nickie D. Phillips]. *Criminal Law and Criminal Justice Books*.

Twitty, Elizabeth. (2019). A liar until proven honest: The justice system is blind and deaf for sexual assault victims. *Imagining Justice*. <http://imaginingjustice.org/blogs/liar-proven-honest-justice-system-blind-deaf-sexual-assault-victims/>.

**Selected Papers and Presentations**

Twitty, E. Disguised Eugenics: Reproductive Injustice in the Criminal Justice System.

Twitty, E & Bower, E. Migrant or Menace: Media Representations of the Migrant Caravan.

Twitty, E. “Her Body, His Problem: The policing of women’s bodies in the United States.” New Horizons in Feminist and Queer Theory: A Graduate Student Colloquium, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA.