

# JUMPING THE GUN ON MENTAL ILLNESS: HOW TELEVISION NEWS COVERAGE OF RAMPAGE VIOLENCE PROMULGATES THE STEREOTYPE THAT PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS ARE VIOLENT

## Assessment of the Associated Press Style Guide Update, and Suggestions for Improvement

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### ABSTRACT

The news media portrays mental health issues in a predominantly negative manner. Common negative depictions involve violence. Data shows that coverage of “rampage violence,” large-scale attacks resulting in numerous fatalities, tend to generate the most adverse depictions of mental illness. To capture the public’s attention, media outlets sensationalize the role of mental illness through questioning public safety and emphasizing conflict. Misleading coverage runs the risk of damaging not only the public’s perspective of mental illness, but also those living with mental

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conditions’ self-images. This Note uses examples of news coverage of three incidents of rampage violence to assess the effectiveness of two efforts to respond to misleading coverage—the Associated Press’s Guidelines for Mental Health and the Entertainment Industries Council’s Mental Health Style Guide—finding that there has been a moderate improvement in accuracy since their respective publications. Additionally, this Note suggests improvements to the guidelines and alternative methods to increase public understanding of mental health, such as giving airtime to individuals with personal experience with mental illness, directing viewers to internet resources, and emphasizing emotional and circumstantial factors that motivate violence rather than mental illness.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

General patterns have emerged concerning the behaviors of both journalists and the general public in the portrayal and consumption of media of rampage violence and mass-shootings.<sup>1</sup> The media puts forth portrayals and often sensationalizes tragedy, which may maintain and engage audiences.<sup>2</sup> Viewers attempt to make sense of these tragedies by categorizing the perpetrators into out-groups and distances themselves from the wrongdoer to establish a more organized idea of a “villain.”<sup>3</sup> These rationalizations may implicate countless issues, with the most notable being gun control laws and the politics behind their creation and enforcement. However, it is unclear how portrayals of violent news stories impact other individuals with mental health problems that are invariably classified in the same (albeit over-broad) category as such violent perpetrators. Through the themes of sensationalism, fear, and mental illness, the media may not only be supporting stigma concerning the mentally ill, but also be missing out on an opportunity to mitigate such stigma. This has implications on the community’s perception of mental health, the self-image of those suffering from mental illness, as well as on the propensity of the untreated to seek help.

Nearly one in five Americans suffers from some form of mental health issue.<sup>4</sup> Despite this prevalence, the media has failed to address mental illness effectively.<sup>5</sup> This failure is alarming, given the unique and powerful role that the media plays in shaping viewers’ opinions.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is important to analyze the intersection between mental health and the media — specifically, how the media’s portrayal of mental illness impacts viewers’ (both who do and do not experience mental health issues) perceptions of mental illness and the individuals who experience it. While multiple mediums of media shape the public’s perception of mental illness, broadcast news is particularly significant due to its prevalence and public

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<sup>1</sup> See Heather Stuart, *Media Portrayal of Mental Illness and Its Treatments: What Effect Does It Have on People with Mental Illness?*, 20 CNS DRUGS 99, 103-105 (2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 101.

<sup>3</sup> See Charlene Y. Chen et al., *Racial and Mental Illness Stereotypes and Discrimination: An Identity-Based Analysis of the Virginia Tech and Columbine Shootings*, 21 CULTURAL DIVERSITY & ETHNIC MINORITY PSYCHOL. 279, 279 (Apr. 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Victoria Bekiempis, *Nearly 1 in 5 Americans Suffers From Mental Illness Each Year*, NEWSWEEK (Feb. 28, 2014), <http://www.newsweek.com/nearly-1-5-americans-suffer-mental-illness-each-year-230608>.

<sup>5</sup> See Stuart, *supra* note 1, at 99-100.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 103.

perception.<sup>7</sup> A principle danger in broadcast news, relative to, for example, entertainment television, is that people trust broadcast news as a source of reliable information regarding breaking and developing news stories.<sup>8</sup>

The reliance on media is alarming considering that television news providers have interests that run contrary to factual accuracy. One social scientist commented that a journalist's job is to *sell* rather than *tell* the news—that harnessing public attention trumps factual accuracy and impartiality.<sup>9</sup> Capturing the attention of the public often requires journalists to either emphasize conflict or question public safety.<sup>10</sup> Over-exaggerating or jumping to conclusions regarding the role of mental illness in news stories is often a way to highlight the conflict and safety concerns in the story, and is especially salient in reports on violence.<sup>11</sup>

Several key problems arise in news portrayals of violent crimes. First, viewers perceive news as a source of “factual evidence,” which leads them to rely on and trust in the information provided.<sup>12</sup> Such reliance is problematic because a significant amount of news coverage of mental illness connects it with violence, which leads to stereotypes that disproportionately emphasize fear and do not reflect reality. Second, journalists often fail to offer multiple perspectives on mental illness, a measure that is usually employed to add balance to other stories.<sup>13</sup>

#### A. FACTS ON COVERAGE

The degree of negativity with which the media reports mental health issues is overwhelming. The Washington Post analyzed 30,000 New York Times articles covering mental health issues between 1985 and 2014, comparing the prevalence of negative words (“dangerous” or “fear”) versus positive words (“calm” or “improved”) to measure the articles’ overall tones.<sup>14</sup> The study found that during the worst point in the early 1990s, the average article about mental health contained 11 more negative words than

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<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 101.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> Stuart, *supra* note 1, at 101.

<sup>11</sup> See *id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> Denver Mcnenny & Stephanie Parent, *How News Coverage of Violent Rampages Stigmatizes People with Mental Illness*, WASH. POST (Oct. 5, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/10/05/how-news-coverage-of-violent-rampages-stigmatizes-people-with-mental-illness/>.

positive words.<sup>15</sup> To put this in perspective, even during the worst part of the “Great Recession,” the average article of the same length about the economy only contained four more negative words than positive words.<sup>16</sup> In those articles, positive words may have been mentioned to suggest possibilities for economic improvement or projections about the possibility of improvement. In such a period of national crisis, the media perhaps felt a responsibility not to exacerbate public economic uncertainties by being too negative, and instead, keep readers hopeful about the future. Unfortunately, when it comes to mental health, the media is not similarly concerned about adverse public repercussions of its coverage. This disparity illustrates the low priority placed on mental health.

Notably, the prevailing negative attitude toward mental illness in media coverage comes from reports that tie mental illness to violent behavior.<sup>17</sup> The media’s actions are understandable, because news agencies are expected to cover “breaking news” based on what viewers find the most important. Thus, insofar as the types of stories that viewers find important are those that are unexpected, it makes sense that the media reports stories that tie mental health to these shocking events more heavily reported than those that are more neutral and mundane. The most shocking stories are often the most tragic, involving acts of violence such as mass shootings. Data shows that coverage of “rampage violence”—larger scale attacks on institutions such as schools, resulting in an average of around nine fatalities—correlates with mental health coverage that is more negative than average.<sup>18</sup> A possible explanation for this is that violent rampage coverage is the reason why the average number of negative words is so high across all coverage of mental health (other more mundane stories are positive or neutral, but rampage violence coverage brings up the average).<sup>19</sup> This data suggests that even if the media does not *systematically* cover mental health in a negative light, and only covers it negatively when it is linked to large-scale violence, the likelihood of stigma still remains. In fact, the stigma’s potency is strengthened by that reading, and suggests a more significant problem. For one, due to the pure shock of mass violence, it is likely that viewers pay much more attention to news stories surrounding rampage

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<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> See Emma McGinty et al., *Effects of News Media Messages About Mass Shootings on Attitudes Toward Persons with Serious Mental Illness and Public Support for Gun Control Policies*, 170 AM. J. PSYCHOL. 494, 499-500 (2013).

<sup>18</sup> Mcneney & Parent, *supra* note 14.

<sup>19</sup> McGinty et al., *supra* note 17.

violence than they do with more mundane stories. This could impact the strength with which the information is inputted in viewers' minds and work to solidify stigmas overtime. Further, insofar as viewers experience strong emotions such as fear and anger in response to shocking news of rampage violence, they may project these reactions onto the "mentally ill" perpetrator, and, more importantly, onto the mentally ill population as a whole. Over the course of multiple reports of violence, these responses may lead viewers to internalize not only a negative generalized stigma towards mental illness, but also more accurately, a stigma associated with violence. Due to sheer volume, along with the basic human tendency to pay more attention to, and better retain shocking information than neutral information,<sup>20</sup> these reports reinforce many negative stereotypes. They strengthen the public's connection between mental illness and negative assumptions of violence, create a stereotype that people with mental disorders are dangerous, and increase the likelihood that the public will ostracize the mentally ill.

#### B. A HISTORICAL POINT OF REFERENCE

The media's treatment of mental illness bears similarities to its coverage of the AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s.<sup>21</sup> During that time, AIDS-related stigma was rampant throughout the US and international communities.<sup>22</sup> This stigma and fear was based largely on ignorance as well as the fact that AIDS was most prevalent among groups that were already targets of prejudice—namely, gay men and drug users.<sup>23</sup> A meta-analysis of newspaper and magazine coverage of AIDS during that time period illustrated that the coverage caused false public beliefs regarding how AIDS is transmitted.<sup>24</sup> Notably, the relationship in that case was unidirectional—news content influenced false public opinions, but public opinions did not impact news content.<sup>25</sup> Evidently, when existing prejudice and newfound

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<sup>20</sup> See Darren W. Dahl et al., *Does It Pay to Shock? Reactions to Shocking and Nonshocking Advertising Content Among University Students*, 43 J. ADVERTISING RES. 268, 268 (2003) (finding that shocking content significantly increases attention and subsequent memory for shocking content).

<sup>21</sup> See James K. Hertog & David P. Fan, *The Impact of Press Coverage on Social Beliefs: The Case of HIV Transmission*, 22 COMM. RES. 545, 562-63 (1995).

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> Gregory M. Herek & Eric K. Glunt, *An Epidemic of Stigma: Public Reactions to AIDS*, 43 AM. PSYCHOL. 886, 887 (1988).

<sup>24</sup> Hertog, *supra* note 21, at 545.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

fears intersect, the public is especially vulnerable to stigmatizing opinions.

When comparing patterns of AIDS stigmatization upon mental illness coverage, the prejudiced group are those suffering from mental illnesses at large in which the public attach stigmas from mass murder media coverage, and the stigmatized disease are general mental illnesses. The stigmatized illnesses are grossly overgeneralized, in that it ignores distinct conditions and nuanced symptom expression within the group. The stigmatizing effect of AIDS coverage on public opinion toward over-generalized groups should bear as a warning to journalists and the general public alike. If truth and fairness are valued, then the news media should recognize its power to influence public opinion and tread carefully when it comes to its coverage of mental illness.

### C. FURTHER FRAMING OF THE ISSUE

It is important to address the popular misconception that people with mental illnesses are more dangerous and violent than the general public. This narrative, put forth as reality, suggests that it would be unfair to expect the media to avoid this correlation simply for the sake of political correctness.<sup>26</sup> While it would be inaccurate to deny altogether the link between particular mental illnesses and violent behavior, it is important to consider the statistical fact that the vast majority of people with mental illnesses will never commit the heinous crimes that their group are most often associated with.<sup>27</sup> In most cases, other factors such as poverty, unemployment, drug abuse, and a history of “violent victimization” are significantly stronger predictors of individuals’ propensity to commit violent acts.<sup>28</sup> In fact, after controlling for those characteristics, the risk of violent behavior in individuals with psychosis or major mood disorders was the same as general population.<sup>29</sup> The evidence suggests that it is an interplay between various risk factors, rather than mental illness alone, that causes violent behavior. Perhaps because mental illness, being perceived as rare, or the most mysterious of the aforementioned categories, leads people to latch onto it as the commonality between individuals that commit

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<sup>26</sup> Maria Konnikova, *Is There a Link Between Mental Health and Gun Violence?*, NEW YORKER, (Nov. 19, 2014), <http://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/almost-link-mental-health-gun-violence> (stating that nearly half of the population believes that people with mental illness are more dangerous than other people, and that eighty percent of the population believes that mental illness is at least partially to blame for mass shootings).

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

violent acts. This pervasive public opinion is not supported by facts.<sup>30</sup>

In an effort to produce clear narratives of complex tragedies of mass violence, both media and politicians zero in on a narrow set of issues with which to “explain” these stories to the public.<sup>31</sup> How the media chooses to frame its coverage of rampage violence (namely, guns and mental health) determine the issues that politicians prioritize in lawmaking, in order to please their media-influenced constituents. The point of drawing this correlation is not to undermine the pertinence of mental health in the development of effective gun-control laws. Even though lawmakers can and should consider mental health in their gun control initiatives, this ongoing debate should have little bearing on the attitudes with which the media approaches and portrays the group in connection with specific instances of violence. The topic is of independent significance, and is of significant concern in mass communications research.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, for the purpose of clarity, whether and to what extent lack of control over access to guns by mentally ill individuals could be the source of rampage violence should be excluded from this discussion. The focus of this Note will be on the media’s fixation on mental illness in its coverage of violent rampages and how it promotes a negative, violent stigma that adversely impacts the community as a whole, including for those who suffer from mental illness and those who do not.

## II. EXAMPLES OF RAMPAGE VIOLENCE COVERAGE

### A. BEFORE RECENT STYLISTIC CHANGES IN THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

#### i. Virginia Tech

The deadliest shooting rampage in United States history occurred on April 16, 2007 at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (“Virginia Tech”).<sup>33</sup> A student, Seung-Hui Cho, killed 32 people and injured 17 in two violent rampages over the course of two and a half hours before

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<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> See Jaclyn Schildkraut & Glenn W. Muschert, *Violent Media, Guns, and Mental Illness: The Three Ring Circus of Causal Factors for School Massacres, as Related in Media Discourse*, 10 FAST CAPITALISM, no. 1  
[https://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/10\\_1/schildkraut10\\_1.html](https://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/10_1/schildkraut10_1.html) (2013).

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> CNN Library, *Virginia Tech Shootings Fast Facts*, CABLE NEWS NETWORK (Apr. 13, 2015), <http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/31/us/virginia-tech-shootings-fast-facts/>.



turning the gun on himself.<sup>34</sup> He also sent a package, time-stamped in between his two rampages, to NBC News in New York City, containing a multimedia manifesto of video, photographs, and writings.<sup>35</sup> NBC decided to release the manifesto and which garnered disapproval from the public and victims' families. To justify his network's decision to release the footage, NBC News President Steve Kapas stated, "[t]his was as close as we'll ever come to being in the mind of a killer."<sup>36</sup> The public's concern and obscene obsession with understanding the thought process behind mass murders has led to the increasingly popular understanding of mental health as the critical factor that precipitates rampage violence. The media relies upon its viewers' interest in shocking content, and it is likely that NBC and other stations broadcasted the footage to boost their viewership or ratings.

The media's investigation into Cho's mental history revealed that he had been suffering from a range of illnesses including selective mutism and major depression, since at least the age of eight.<sup>37</sup> While enrolled at Virginia Tech, he was hospitalized and found to be "an imminent danger to himself as a result of mental illness," but ultimately avoided involuntary commitment due to lack of space in state psychiatric hospitals.<sup>38</sup> Further, classmates and professors expressed fear of being around him due to his bizarre, violent, and anti-social tendencies.<sup>39</sup> Through this inquiry into Cho's mental health history, the media created a narrative of failed opportunities, with mental illness as a central explanatory frame for the crime.

It is an over-simplification for the media to suggest that mental illness was *the* causal factor in Cho's rampage. By contrast, a critical analysis of the facts leads to a more nuanced narrative—that it was not Cho's mental health issues in isolation, but rather, the ways in which other factors interacted with them, that led to the Virginia Tech Massacre. Rather than being an exemplar of a severely depressed individual, he may have been a statistical rarity.

As a preliminary point, each mental disorder manifests itself differently in each individual, which means that terms themselves are over-

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<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*

<sup>36</sup> Howard Berkes et al., *NBC Defends Release of Va. Tech Gunman Video*, NPR (Apr. 19, 2007), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9604204>.

<sup>37</sup> Schildkraut, *supra* note 31.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

simplifications of complex issues.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, merely naming the disease in a news broadcast is grossly insufficient to offer information regarding how the symptoms exhibited themselves in Cho. Additionally, based on the information outlined above, there are other factors that, in their intersection with Cho's mental condition, contributed to the crime. For one, the fact that he was not detained at various junctures in his life when he was clearly exhibiting warning signs to receive proper help is indicative of issues of broader societal consequence. For example, the inadequate capacity in state psychiatric hospitals/funding, lack of awareness of warning signs, and the failure of his academic institution to provide proper support for its students.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, rather than being an example of how people who are anti-social, depressed, and don't fit in are more violent than "normal" people, this is an example of the system failing and allowing one person who suffered from a particular set of mental illnesses to continue to develop ideas and be exposed to aggravating factors without being monitored.

Uninformed or inadequate reporting can negatively impact both people who are affected by mental illness, as well as those who are not. This may further alienate those suffering similar symptoms and make them less likely to seek help. Being placed into a group with an individual like Cho may be both ostracizing and frustrating. People with no experience with mental illness would be unlikely to notice anything wrong with the coverage because they do not have any information with which to compare. Due to their lack of knowledge, compounded with their feelings of fear and anger in the wake of the tragedy, the general public may be resistant to any plausible explanation regarding mental illness.

## ii. Sandy Hook

Five years later, the country was shocked by another school shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut.<sup>42</sup> The perpetrator in that case, Adam Lanza, exhibited signs of multiple mental conditions, including Asperger's Syndrome, a high functioning form of

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<sup>40</sup> National Institute of Health, *Information about Mental Illness and the Brain*, NATIONAL CENTER FOR BIOTECHNOLOGY INFORMATION, (2007), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK20369/> ("[a]s with many diseases, mental illness is severe in some cases and mild in others. Individuals who have a mental illness don't necessarily look like they are sick, especially if their illness is mild. Other individuals may show more explicit symptoms... Each illness alters a person's thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors in distinct ways.").

<sup>41</sup> See Schildkraut, *supra* note 31.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

autism.<sup>43</sup> Mental health was a significant part of the media's narrative. Although the media handled it imperfectly, the way mental health was depicted in the coverage as a whole was different than in past incidents such as Virginia Tech.<sup>44</sup> In this case, the media notably shifted the emphasis in its coverage from the perpetrator to the victims.<sup>45</sup> This shift was from "offender-centered" reporting to "victim-centered reporting," where, as the term suggests, reporters emphasize those who were injured or killed by the perpetrator over the perpetrator himself.<sup>46</sup> Victim-centric reporting personifies the victims of the crime, which could lead to more sympathy towards them. However, while the victims were given more attention, news stations still gave airtime to the perpetrator.<sup>47</sup> A now famous headshot of Lanza, looking wide-eyed and deranged was shown to accompany speculation of his motive and mental state.<sup>48</sup>

The potential danger in this sort of coverage is that drawing attention to the victims could increase anger towards the perpetrator. Coupled with "experts" opining of the perpetrator's laundry list of mental problems, this public anger toward the perpetrator could easily translate to increased stigma toward the entire perceived "class" of individuals with mental illness. In this case specifically, autism would be the target of the stigma, which Lanza was speculatively diagnosed with. In light of the fact that autism is a relatively common mental illness that is considered on a spectrum, rather than an all-or-nothing blanket condition, the connection between extreme violence and such a broad classification represents an oversimplification that could create damaging stigma towards people who fall within the spectrum but experience vastly different symptoms.

#### B. ASSOCIATED PRESS STYLE GUIDE UPDATE

Over the past decade, government and trade agencies alike have recognized the potential for media portrayals of mental health to influence the public's attitudes.<sup>49</sup> Agencies such as the Associated Press (AP) and the

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<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>47</sup> Schildkraut, *supra* note 31.

<sup>48</sup> Sasha Goldstein, *Adam Lanza College Records: Newton Shooter's Bizarre Questionnaire Answers, Good Grades and Creepy ID Photo Paint Shocking Portrait*, N.Y. DAILY NEWS (Apr. 2, 2013), <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/lanza-college-records-suggest-troubling-state-mind-article-1.1305968>.

<sup>49</sup> See Cal. Dep't of Health Care Serv., Mental Health Services Act,

Entertainment Industries Council (EIC) have produced guidelines for coverage of mental health in general, with some specific guidance for its coverage in the context of violence.<sup>50</sup> The agencies' recognition of this issue represents an increased awareness of the problem of ignorant coverage of mental illness and its potential adverse effects on society. However, the substantive thoroughness of the guidelines, as well as whether or not the media actually chooses to apply them, poses an additional hurdle in the pursuit of a more informed public and reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness. An examination of mass shooting coverage before and after the guidelines were created, as informed by relevant psychological theories, helps to determine the central problems with media portrayals of mental illness, their potential effects on the mentally ill as well as the general public, the effectiveness of the guidelines, and how they could be improved.

Perhaps the most well-known organization in the industry to join the push toward guiding the media's portrayal of mental health is the Associated Press (AP), a predominant global newsgathering agency.<sup>51</sup> The AP is a 170 year-old not-for-profit collective of news organizations, operating in more than 100 countries, that gathers and distributes news globally.<sup>52</sup> Recognizing the importance of its role, the AP emphasizes its responsibility to provide unbiased reporting and responding to evolving cultural attitudes, especially in times of cultural unrest. The AP has been known to rapidly respond to changing norms in terminology, adding new terms to their stylebook before other linguistic standards such as the Merriam Webster Dictionary.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to its internal guidelines for its own reporters, the AP produces the "Associated Press Stylebook" ("Stylebook") as a standard for reporting.<sup>54</sup> The Stylebook includes substantive and stylistic guidelines for reporting on topics ranging from sports to business, as well as standards

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[http://www.dhcs.ca.gov/services/mh/Pages/MH\\_Prop63.aspx](http://www.dhcs.ca.gov/services/mh/Pages/MH_Prop63.aspx) (last visited May 11, 2016); See also Nat'l Ctr. for Disability Journalism, *Disability Language Style Guide*, <http://ncdj.org/style-guide/> (last visited May 11, 2016).

<sup>50</sup> Style Guide: Reporting on Mental Health, ENTERTAINMENT INDUS. COUNCIL, <http://www.eiconline.org/teamup/wp-content/files/mental-health-reporting-style-guide.pdf> (last visited Mar. 3, 2017).

<sup>51</sup> Our History, ASSOCIATED PRESS, <https://www.ap.org/about/our-story/> (last visited May 11, 2016).

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*

<sup>53</sup> Steve Myers, *Game Changer: AP Stylebook Moves Faster Than Merriam-Webster as Linguistic Authority*, POYNTER (Aug. 14, 2012), <http://www.poynter.org/2012/game-changer-ap-stylebook-moves-faster-than-merriam-webster-as-linguistic-authority/185026/>.

<sup>54</sup> ASSOCIATED PRESS, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS STYLEBOOK (2016).

such as the proper information to include in a photograph caption.<sup>55</sup> It also reflects and addresses evolving cultural issues.<sup>56</sup> The Stylebook also includes a “Briefing on Media Law” (“Briefing”) in which the authors explain legal and ethical issues facing journalists, and provides standards of reporting meant to avoid legal liability.<sup>57</sup> However, these guidelines are standards of best practice, and the AP has no authority to enforce them outside of their own employees.

Each year, the AP releases a new edition of the Stylebook with updates based on suggestions from its users and its own analysis regarding shortcomings and developments and terminology to be addressed. The 2013 edition of the Stylebook included an entry on mental health.<sup>58</sup> In the entry, the AP directed reporters to consider the relevance of mental illness to the story at hand and the reliability of any diagnosis before including it in a report, while providing reporters with guidelines for establishing both.<sup>59</sup> If a reporter determines that mental illness is pertinent and its diagnosis is reliable, the Stylebook provides further guidance regarding the substantive information that the report should convey to viewers.<sup>60</sup> According to the Stylebook, the report should identify the specific condition that has been diagnosed rather than use the blanket term “mental illness.”<sup>61</sup> The report should also identify the source of the diagnosis, provide examples of symptoms associated with the condition, and when possible, allow people with mental illness to discuss the condition.<sup>62</sup> Also, reports should follow proper tone and terminology for reporting on mental illness, avoid descriptions that imply pity and the use of derogatory terms such as “insane.”<sup>63</sup> Lastly, the Stylebook explains that reporters should not assume that mental illness is a factor in violent crimes, adding that studies have shown that violence is not usually perpetrated by people suffering from mental illness, and that most mentally ill individuals are not violent.<sup>64</sup>

In association with the AP, the Entertainment Industries Council

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<sup>55</sup> *Id.*

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

<sup>57</sup> *Id.*

<sup>58</sup> *Entry on Mental Illness is Added to AP Stylebook*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Mar. 7, 2013), <http://www.ap.org/content/press-release/2013/entry-on-mental-illness-is-added-to-ap-stylebook>.

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*

<sup>60</sup> *Id.*

<sup>61</sup> *See id.*

<sup>62</sup> *Id.*

<sup>63</sup> *Id.*

<sup>64</sup> Associated Press, *supra* note 58.

("EIC"), a non-profit organization that advocates for fair and accurate depictions of social and health issues in the media, has conducted outreach and released additional reporting standards to reduce stigmatization in mental health reporting.<sup>65</sup> Echoing the main points of the Stylebook entry on mental illness, the EIC's "Style Guide: Reporting on Mental Health" ("EIC Style Guide") instructs journalists to ask three questions when covering mental health-related stories: (1) "Is mental illness relevant to the story?"; (2) "What is your source for the mental illness diagnosis?"; and (3) "What is the most accurate language to use?"<sup>66</sup> The EIC Style Guide goes on to define relevant terms and their possible misuses, as well as address general issues in mental health coverage.<sup>67</sup> Notably, the EIC addresses "balance," recognizing that the prevalent connection between dramatic events and mental health issues could lead to "distorted view[s] of mental illness."<sup>68</sup> In response to this potential imbalance, the EIC suggests that journalists include more practical, neutral information such as available treatments for the particular condition, or by publishing profiles of people with similar conditions living productive lives in the community.<sup>69</sup> The EIC Style Guide also stresses the importance of verified diagnoses as opposed to mere speculation, stating that if reporters are unable to obtain an accurate diagnosis from a proper medical professional, they should avoid speculating about an individuals' mental health altogether.<sup>70</sup> Further, the EIC recognizes that viewers' cultural and ethnic backgrounds affect their perceptions of mental illness and, relatedly, the methods used to treat those illnesses.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, the organization suggests that journalists refer to mental health professionals who are sensitive to the relationship between mental health and culture when they are constructing their reports.<sup>72</sup>

While both the AP and EIC guidelines offer suggestions that could potentially promote more accurate reporting and assuage negative stereotypes about the mentally ill, news outlets are not required to apply them. Thus, the question becomes whether the media has applied these

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<sup>65</sup> Entertainment Industries Council, *Mental Health*, ENTMT INDUS. COUNCIL (Dec. 15, 2010), <http://www.eiconline.org/topic-areas/mental-health>.

<sup>66</sup> Entertainment Industries Council, *Style Guide: Reporting on Mental Health*, ENTMT INDUS. COUNCIL, <http://www.eiconline.org/teamup/wp-content/files/mental-health-reporting-style-guide.pdf> (last visited Mar. 3, 2017).

<sup>67</sup> *Id.*

<sup>68</sup> *Id.*

<sup>69</sup> *Id.*

<sup>70</sup> *Id.*

<sup>71</sup> *Id.*

<sup>72</sup> Entertainment Industries Council, *Style Guide*, *supra* note 66.

standards and changed its approach toward mental health and more specifically, its coverage of violent rampages. Since the guidelines are new, evidence is limited, and may not reflect their full potential impact as norms change overtime.

#### C. POST-ASSOCIATED PRESS STYLE GUIDE UPDATE

In 2015, America was struck with another instance of rampage violence, when a student at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon killed nine people and injured nine more on campus.<sup>73</sup> Based on a manifesto left at the scene of the crime and evidence from online posting leading up to the shooting, Christopher Harper-Mercer had similar feelings of being ostracized, rejected, and revenge as was common with Lanza and Cho.<sup>74</sup> He believed the world was excluding and working against him, was angry that he did not have a girlfriend, and had become interested in past high-profile rampage violence incidents.<sup>75</sup>

While there has not been a meta-analysis of news coverage of the Oregon shooting, analysis of individual news reports in the days following the event found mixed results. For one, the victim-centric shift that occurred with Sandy Hook was less apparent. Likely due to the lack of information regarding the shooter, much of the coverage was devoted to motive speculation and facts about his upbringing.<sup>76</sup> Mental health was mentioned in relationship to motive, although there was no mention of specific conditions.<sup>77</sup> The mental health issue was mostly alluded to through anecdotal evidence about Harper-Mercer's upbringing from former neighbors, who stated that he was withdrawn and that his mother was protective of him.<sup>78</sup> Some commentators, perhaps influenced by the political debate surrounding gun laws, seemed to place more significance on the issue of gun control, and most mentions of mental illness tended to be couched in discussions of gun control.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Sara Sidner et al., *Oregon Shooting: Gunman was Student in Class Where He Killed 9*, CABLE NEWS NETWORK (Oct. 2, 2015), <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/02/us/oregon-umpqua-community-college-shooting>.

<sup>74</sup> Jack Healy & Ian Lovett, *Oregon Killer Described as Man of Few Words, Except on Topic of Guns*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 2, 2015), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/03/us/chris-harper-merc-umpqua-community-college-shooting.html>.

<sup>75</sup> *Id.*

<sup>76</sup> See Sidner, *supra* note 73.

<sup>77</sup> *Id.*

<sup>78</sup> Healy, *supra* note 74.

<sup>79</sup> See *id.*

Some written news sources showed a reluctance to speculate about Harper-Mercer's mental condition.<sup>80</sup> When these journalists did speculate, they tended to be factually accurate regarding the causal connection between speculated mental conditions and violence.<sup>81</sup> Other journalists used the mere fact that his social media screen name was "lithium love" to suggest that he was taking lithium for a psychiatric problem.<sup>82</sup>

### III. ASSESSMENT OF AP GUIDE EFFECTIVENESS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Whether directly in response to new guidelines or due to a general increase in mental health awareness, a moderate improvement is apparent in the media's coverage of mental illness in relationship to rampage violence. However, there is still much room for improvement. Therefore, the next step is to determine whether the AP and EIC guidelines would be sufficient, and assuming they too can be improved, how they can be modified to most effectively diminish the stigma of violence and mental illness. This requires understanding the role of the media in impacting public opinions, and in executing that role, what its goals should be in its portrayal of mental health and violence. As media permeates our entire culture and plays a substantial role in shaping our attitudes, the ideal news organizations would use their influence to shape how communities view those with mental illness.

#### A. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION & ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

As a preliminary point before assessing the AP guidelines, it is important to first address the two fundamental American rights that are at odds in determining what action, if any, is appropriate to address the media's shortcomings in this area. Freedom of Expression, as established by the First Amendment and propagated through American culture, requires the individual right to speak her mind, subject to discrete and limited

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<sup>80</sup> German Lopez, *Umpqua Community College Shooting in Oregon: What We Know*, VOX (Oct. 7, 2015), <http://www.vox.com/2015/10/1/9434549/school-shooting-oregon-umpqua-community-college>.

<sup>81</sup> *Id.* ("A published notice in the California-based Daily Breeze listed the shooter as one of the five students in the 2009 graduating class of a school or people with emotional issues and learning disabilities . . . [b]ut online postings, reportedly linked to his mother, suggested he had Asperger syndrome, which generally doesn't increase the chances of violent crime.").

<sup>82</sup> Laura Gunderson, *The Oregon Shooter: New Details Emerge About Chris Harper-Mercer*, THE OREGONIAN (Oct. 2, 2015), [http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2015/10/new\\_details\\_emerge\\_on\\_umpqua\\_c.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2015/10/new_details_emerge_on_umpqua_c.html).



exceptions.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, the fight to expand the ideal of equal rights and anti-discrimination, as was set forth by our founders, has been an overarching theme in America's narrative. Freedom of expression leans in the direction of deregulation, and anti-discrimination tugs in the direction of paternalistic guidance.<sup>84</sup> To police the balance between the two rights, the Supreme Court has intervened in cases involving policies that promulgate discriminatory practices and attitudes, illustrating that the right to free speech is not absolute when its exercise stands in direct opposition to the principles that America stands for.<sup>85</sup>

One key issue is, "*quia custodiet custodies?*," or "[w]ho is to oversee the censor?"<sup>86</sup> In the case of AP guidelines news content, the censor is not the government, but rather, a conglomeration of media outlets and organizations, which minimizes the risk of over censorship based on a political or otherwise selfish agenda. The proposed solution is not a strict prohibition of topics or words, but instead, a call upon news agencies to provide more information in their coverage of this discrimination-inducing topic. A key insulating factor in this particular analysis is that the AP guidelines are not mandated by the government or otherwise required in order to avoid punishment, and are simply standards of best practice for journalists.

## B. SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

In its coverage of rampage violence, the news media should try to provide well-informed, helpful information that will: (1) boost the self-perception of those afflicted with mental illness and encourage them to seek help should they need it; and (2) increase knowledge about mental illness

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<sup>83</sup> David E. Bernstein, *Antidiscrimination Laws and the First Amendment*, 66 Mo. L. Rev. 83, 101 (2001).

<sup>84</sup> The press has been allotted the same Constitutional protection as individual speakers under The Free Press Clause. *Branzburg v. Hayes*, 408 U.S. 665, 667 (1972). However, when it comes to broadcast stations, the government, through the FCC has engaged in content regulation based on the argument that there are a finite number of channels. See *Miami Herald Publ'g Co. v. Tornillo*, 418 U.S. 241, 256-57 (1974). For a description of the general analysis applied in First Amendment cases involving discrimination, see *Bob Jones Univ. v. United States*, 461 U.S. 574 (1983).

<sup>85</sup> The court has considered broader policy interests in weighing First Amendment and anti-discrimination. See *Bob Jones University v. United States*, 461 U.S. 574 (1983) (finding that a private Christian school that banned interracial dating was not allowed tax-exempt status because its exercise of free speech was overcome by the government's "fundamental, overriding interest in eradicating racial discrimination in education").

<sup>86</sup> Kevin Boyle, *Overview of a Dilemma: Censorship Versus Racism*, STRIKING A BALANCE: HATE SPEECH, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND NON-DISCRIMINATION 1, 3-4 (Sandra Coliver et al 4 (Sandra Coliver ed., 1992)).

within the general population to promote informed opinions about mental health, reduce fear, and increase acceptance.

- i. Boost the self-perception of those afflicted with mental illness encourage them to seek help should they need it

When a mass shooting occurs, social and political actors jump at the opportunity to use the event to take advantage of fears in order to support their respective agendas.<sup>87</sup> From a practical standpoint, these selfish responses do not do much to achieve the assumed overarching goal—to eliminate mass shootings.<sup>88</sup> Rather than ostracize people struggling with mental health by stigmatizing their group, the media should focus on the factors that actually lead to violent rampages, and how those factors played into the tragedy at hand.

Perhaps the best place to start is to consider how experts generally suggest people to encourage their loved ones to seek mental help. The most common suggestion is to reserve judgment and make the person aware that they are supported.<sup>89</sup> A person who feels judged is less likely to accept or seek help. In fact, people who need help are more likely to seek help if the responsibility for failure was attributed externally, rather than internally.<sup>90</sup> In other words, the threat to self-esteem that is inherent in help-seeking inhibits one's propensity to do so. Therefore, if the goal is to promote mental health, then the news media should avoid judging mental illnesses by projecting information regarding a particular shooter onto mental illness as a whole. If the media does not plant these judgments, people who deal with such issues will perceive the issue with less judgment, and thus be better equipped to ensure that help will be obtained.

#### *a. The Pseudocommando*

The term “pseudocommandos” refer to mass murderers who plan their killings in advance, kill in public and carry a large arsenal of weapons (common in most instances of rampage violence), and tend to share similar

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<sup>87</sup> James Alan Fox & Monica J. DeLateur, *Mass Shootings in America: Moving Beyond Newtown*, 18 HOMICIDE STUD. 125, 126 (2014).

<sup>88</sup> *Id.*

<sup>89</sup> Psych Guides, *How to Find Help Treating a Mental Health Problem*, PSYCHGUIDES.COM, <http://www.psychguides.com/guides/how-to-find-help-treating-a-mental-health-problem/> (last visited May 11, 2016).

<sup>90</sup> See Richard C. Tessler & Shalom H. Schwartz, *Help Seeking, Self-Esteem, and Achievement Motivation: An Attributional Analysis*, 21 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 318, 318 (1972).

motivations.<sup>91</sup> Studies have identified five primary motivations for mass murder: power, loyalty, terror, profit, and most prevalently, revenge.<sup>92</sup> The desire for revenge is one of the most intense and pervasive emotions, and tends to stem from narcissistic injury, meaning damage to one's ego. When the ego is damaged, survival instincts kick in, and the damaged individual attempts to save her ego by attacking those who define it—"striving for an enduring sense of self which is an object of value in a field of social meanings."<sup>93</sup> Since the narcissistic ego is defined by those around it, and the lack of acceptance renders it valueless, the ego is threatened or hurt to the extent that the only option is to destroy those who reject it.<sup>94</sup> This pattern is a common thought process in daily life, although most people are better able to manage it.<sup>95</sup> With pseudocommandos, the ego is especially fragile, which in turn makes the ego attacks feel extreme, leading to fixation on hate and fear towards the attackers.<sup>96</sup> This slowly devolves into outright obsession, and eventually, the violent outburst.<sup>97</sup>

First, the above studies highlight the potential danger of overly-general, false, and stigmatizing news coverage of mental illness in connection with rampage violence. Placing the perpetrator in a distant outgroup further alienates a group of people whose very motivation is their alienation from society. By focusing on traits that separate perpetrators and the general public, portrayals of rampage violence exacerbate the sense of alienation felt by individuals who share the speculated disorders. This, in turn, runs the risk of breeding disdain toward the society that rejects them. Thus, in playing to viewers' fears, common portrayals somewhat counter-intuitively encourage the very behaviors that their viewers fear.

Second, the above findings represent inroads into developing a dialogue that will minimize public stereotyping, minimize self-degradation for those dealing with mental illness, and in turn, create an environment in which they feel comfortable seeking help. If the average person is capable of understanding these themes in a more thoughtful manner as compared to the meaning of mental conditions, then reporters should analyze the event with respect to such themes rather than mental illness. One obstacle might

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<sup>91</sup> James L. Knoll, IV, *The "Pseudocommando" Mass Murderer: Part I, the Psychology of Revenge and Obliteration*, 38 J. AM. ACAD. PSYCHIATRY AND THE L. 87, 87 (2010).

<sup>92</sup> Fox & DeLateur, *supra* note 87 at 127.

<sup>93</sup> Knoll, *supra* note 91 at 89.

<sup>94</sup> *Id.*

<sup>95</sup> *See id.* at 89-90.

<sup>96</sup> *Id.*

<sup>97</sup> *Id.*

be reporters' and viewers' reluctance to see parallels between themselves and violent perpetrators. Yet, revenge, power, loyalty, terror, and profit are basic human motivations, which impact everyday decisions. Most people would be able to identify times in which they made regrettable decisions based on these motivations. Therefore, seeing these motivations as explanations for such heinous behavior would require drawing a parallel between themselves and a criminal that they may be unwilling to make. However, from a functional standpoint, the themes are much more effective in identifying and educating the public about warning signs. These themes also work in distancing the speculative role of mental illness from the conversation, especially before such a connection has been made.

- ii. Increase knowledge about mental illness within the general population to promote informed opinions about mental health, reduce fear, and increase acceptance

If mental health is in fact relevant to the story, exploring perpetrators' motives using commonly understood emotions could lead to a better understanding of the underlying conditions. In doing so, news coverage of mass shootings could be used as a way to open the door to conversations regarding mental illness, rather than sensationalize the event and the mental health of the perpetrator.

While the degree to which revenge is experienced differs amongst the pseudocommando who commits the rampage violence, the emotion felt is not foreign to the average individual. In fact, it is central to the human psyche.<sup>98</sup> The only difference is that for the average person, the source of the revenge is not as inextricably tied to their sense of self, and therefore does not cause such an extreme reaction. This is not to say that all calm, rational people are one step away from mass murderers. It is also not to claim that revenge is the sole cause of rampage violence, or to excuse mass murderers simply because their psyches may be more fragile. There are various other factors, such as upbringing and past trauma, that contribute to the frailty of their egos. There are also contributory factors wholly unrelated to ego. Though it would be impossible to produce a definitive list of factors that lead to rampage violence, highlighting common emotions like revenge can allow the public to make better sense of the tragedy and the person behind it. The purpose is by no means to encourage sympathy towards the murderer, but instead to incite a more rational assessment of the individual. By anchoring the assessment in a common emotion rather than a complex

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<sup>98</sup> *Id.* at 89.

disorder that laypeople rarely understand, this sort of coverage would redirect anger, fear, and hatred to the individual, rather than the individual as a representative of mental illness. Highlighting this common emotion and separating it from mental illness would be progress towards a more rational assessment of the pseudocommando as separate from his speculated mental disorders, and in turn lead to a decreased propensity to stigmatize the group.

As articulated in above, this is not a call to neutralize or engender undue censorship in the media. A key danger to recognize here is that it is impossible for the media to be completely “neutral” in its coverage of any event.<sup>99</sup> The goals should thus be to understand the main points at which opinion and cultural beliefs intersect with news coverage, and address deficiencies at those junctures. The more shocking and remote the event is, the more the public relies on the media for information, because it is impossible and impractical to gather the information themselves. Even though we cannot expect people to try to gather direct information regarding national news themselves, we can at least encourage viewers to be wary of possible biases in the media and do their own research when they think it might be necessary.

In light of the reliance on national media outlets such as CNN and Fox News for up-to-date coverage of rampage violence, it may be helpful for these outlets to frame mental health as an issue that affects many people rather than to emphasize mental illness solely as it relates to the perpetrator. For example, in Sandy Hook, if it was confirmed that Lanza was diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome and Anorexia, and a reporter judged that mental health was significant to the story, then the reporter would not merely mention the disorders without explanation, or accompanied by speculation. Instead, the journalist, or ideally, an expert, would offer an informed description of common symptoms of the disorders, how symptoms may manifest differently in different individuals, and treatment options. By focusing on the facts behind mental disorders, this frame shift in coverage would separate the disorders from the tragedy and in turn promote fact-based understandings of mental illness rather than visceral fear-based ones. In this frame of mind, viewers would be better able to accept the widespread nature of mental illness, and over time, build working understandings of mental illness that would decrease their propensity for promulgating ignorant stigma.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> See Catherine Happer & Greg Philo, *The Role of the Media in the Construction of Public Belief and Social Change*, 1 J. SOC. & POL. PSYCHOL. 321, 321 (2013).

<sup>100</sup> This recommendation based on and incorporates the 2013 AP stylebook updates.

*a. The Internet*

The Internet could offer an expansive platform for the exchange of ideas and promotion of realistic, factual accounts of mental illness, and provide the public a broader selection of ideas than just those of network television. It has become increasingly common for people to use the internet to discuss their own experience with mental illness.<sup>101</sup> Typically, individuals will tell stories, provide suggestions, and even use their blogs to conduct surveys.<sup>102</sup> Not only can these examples be therapeutic for people who deal with mental health issues first hand, but they can also provide invaluable insight to individuals who are curious about particular conditions (after, for example, hearing about them on the news) and would like to learn more. Many bloggers also speak publicly about mental illness at various events, and thus would also be good candidates to provide first-hand knowledge on the news. Additionally, mental health organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness and the One Mind Institute have interactive websites with informational videos, research results, links to support resources, and interactive chat options.<sup>103</sup> Based on the wealth of information on the internet and the availability of individuals who care about spreading their knowledge of mental illness, there is little excuse for journalists to be uninformed about the mental conditions about which they are reporting. If agencies do not invite experts on their shows, they can, at the least, utilize online resources by directing their viewers to them.

*b. Local Stations*

Another possible solution could be to delegate more coverage responsibility to local channels, rather than a few national stations that syndicate content to local stations. Due to nation-wide interest and efficiency reasons, local stations rely almost solely on their national affiliates in coverage of rampage violence. This, however, leads to a lack of diversity in ideas. The local station must trust the reasoning, assignment of blame, and creation of narrative regarding the violent event to a small group

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<sup>101</sup> Joseph Rauch, *The Best Mental Health Bloggers You Need to Follow*, TALKSPACE (Jan. 15, 2016), <https://www.talkspace.com/blog/2016/01/the-best-mental-health-bloggers-you-need-to-follow/>.

<sup>102</sup> See e.g., Natasha Tracy, BIPOLAR BURBLE BLOG, <http://natashatracy.com> (last visited May 11, 2016); Therese Borchard, <http://thereseborchard.com> (last visited May 11, 2016).

<sup>103</sup> National Alliance on Mental Illness, Home Page, NAMI, <https://www.nami.org> (last visited May 11, 2016); One Mind Institute, Home Page, One Mind Institute, <https://www.onemindinstitute.org> (last visited May 11, 2016).

of people with similar motives. A historical point of comparison worth noting is national and local newspaper coverage of racial violence during the Civil Rights Era.<sup>104</sup> During that time, perhaps motivated by the public's attraction to tragedy, national newspapers tended to place riot stories on the front page, while local papers from the affected areas tended not to.<sup>105</sup> Commentators have noted that a possible reason for this difference in emphasis was that local papers recognized their inability to do civil rights stories justice due to the lack of African American journalists.<sup>106</sup>

National news outlets are likely to focus on the most dramatic stories because one of their central goals is to sell the news. Doing so requires appealing to the lowest common denominator within the largest number of people possible and tragic, shocking stories provide the perfect means to do so. This, however, entrusts the power to determine which stories reach the public within a small class of people. This wastes intellectual resources in that it prevents less recognized or well-connected, local commentators from reaching the public. Subsequently, the public is robbed of obtaining the breadth of information required to develop a well-informed understanding of events. The effects of this lack of information are exponential, as news stories are not merely isolated events, but instead fit into larger ongoing sociocultural narratives. Each time the national media reports on mental illness as the causal factor in instances of violence, it contributes to a broader narrative that people with mental illness should be feared. Over time, as the narrative strengthens, the stories lose their novelty and viewers begin to rely on their deeply engrained assumptions rather than pay attention to the nuanced differences between each story.

Increased reliance on local stations could decrease stereotyping in various ways. While certain core values are stable throughout America, values vary between regions. Thus, one-size-fits-all journalism, although practical, is not ideal in all situations. Specifically, with regard to sensitive or unfamiliar topics such as mental health, how information is delivered could play a significant part in how it is received by local audiences. If local stations brought on their own analysts, they could cover mental illness as it relates to rampage violence in a way that is tailored to their viewers. Local experts would likely have a better understanding of their local culture, and

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<sup>104</sup> Audie Cornish, *How the Civil Rights Movement was Covered in Birmingham*, NPR Southern California Public Radio (June 18, 2013), <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/06/18/193128475/how-the-civil-rights-movement-was-covered-in-birmingham>.

<sup>105</sup> *Id.*

<sup>106</sup> *Id.*

naturally express information in a way that local viewers can relate to. While it would be unrealistic and superfluous to expect local news stations to travel the nation to gather information that could easily be delivered via national news outlets, national news networks can utilize their existing structures (networks of national and local stations owned by the same network) to delegate responsibility. For example, the national news outlets could gather detailed information regarding the facts of the story, which would be distributed to their national and local stations. Local stations could then be encouraged to bring on their own analysts. This system would at least increase the volume and diversity of ideas about the event.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The media and the public alike have a lot to learn about mental health. Similar issues exist in film and entertainment television, as well as in non-violent news topics such as education and health care. While each medium and topic may have its own unique issues, all media share the widespread public misunderstanding and fear that stands behind these shortcomings. This misjudgment feeds, and is fed by, the way the media chooses to portray mental illness, which creates a negative feedback loop that only deepens stigma. This further strengthens barriers between those with and those without mental health issues, and discourages people from seeking help. The result is harmful for our entire population.

The media has a responsibility, as an all-encompassing force that shapes public attitudes and government policies, to avoid taking advantage of mental illness and the public in its coverage of rampage violence for the sake of ratings. Moreover, as the sole or central source of information about current events, reporters have a duty to promote public understanding of mental illness in a way that will encourage an open public dialogue and awareness surrounding mental health. This shift will have twofold positive results. First, the general public will be less fearful of people with mental disorders, more sensitive to the fact that those around them may be dealing with mental health issues, and better equipped to handle situations that implicate mental illness. Second, people who may be dealing with mental illness will also be better informed, feel less alone in their struggles, and may be more likely to seek necessary help. Together, this will create a climate surrounding mental health in our country that is sensitive to the media's shortcomings in its coverage of mental health, which will in turn feed back into the loop between the public and the media, prompting a more sensitive media.

For the purposes of clarity and specificity, the focus of the instant



analysis has been on the media as the source of a problem and also a source of change. However, that is not to imply that change is solely in the hands of the media. As a society, we should question the media, and not allow the depth of our knowledge to be determined—and therefore, stunted—by the information the media finds appropriate or convenient to disclose. Therefore, this analysis should not be read to undermine the importance of the public in minimizing ignorant stigmatization by questioning the media, being vigilant for oversimplifications of issues, or seeking out additional information, especially when media sources appear suspect. While it would be ideal for the public to be able to trust reporters to provide balanced, well-founded information, the reality is that media reliability is often unviable. In light of mounting evidence undermining the methods applied and conclusions of the news media, it is becoming increasingly irresponsible for the public to do so. Therefore, it is extremely important for people—laypersons and scholars alike—who have information that challenges media coverage to ensure that their voices are heard. Specifically, researchers, scholars, and people with first-hand knowledge of mental illness should serve as advocates for their community and increase public awareness. In turn, the public will build a healthy distrust of the media and become more aware of its shortcomings. This will inspire people to take personal responsibility for the validity of the information they receive.

Whether it is the media itself, self-aware of its shortcomings and its negative impact on society, or the public, dissatisfied with its inability to trust the news media to provide accurate, reliable coverage, both entities can weaken existing mental illness stereotypes. Ideally, if both sides take responsibility and work in tandem, we can quickly begin to assuage the stereotype that the mentally ill are violent, and ultimately minimize the stigma of mental illness.