



May 14th, 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM

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Becca Freimuth
Western Washington University

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Freimuth, Becca, "The Golden Boy: An examination of framing in national and local news coverage of Jaylen Fryberg" (2015). *Scholars Week*. 34.
https://cedar.wvu.edu/scholwk/2015/Day_one/34

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The Golden Boy: An examination of framing in national and local news media

BECCA FREIMUTH
DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM
WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



*Photos from Seattle Post-Intelligencer and social media

INTRODUCTION

School shootings have become a constant in news coverage in the last decade. After the 1999 Columbine shooting, school shootings became a national concern in America (Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project Staff, 2013). Muschert and Schildkraut (2013) discovered a shift in the conversation around these devastations, where violent media, mental health and gun control are often found in the media discourse.

In mass media scholarship, media frames are central to understanding the effects news media has on the public response of a newsworthy event. Frames within a story defines problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993). Depending on what the frames highlight determines what becomes meaningful and memorable to the audience. Public opinion of school shootings often shift depending on the specific event (Drake, 2013).

CONCEPTUAL ARGUMENT

School shootings in news coverage

FRAME CHANGING: Columbine shooting evolved to stories about what the U.S. is doing to deal with the effects of shooting on the nation. The focus on this type of shooting having the possibility of happening anywhere, and created the “Columbine-type violence” as salient in news coverage (Muschert, 2009).

CONSISTENT THEMES: One study found two reoccurring themes in news media. One, news media is driven by violence and gore; “if it bleeds, it leads.” Two, media reflects a “herd mentality,” in that all media is depended on the same sources (Maguire, Weatherby, and Mathers, 2002). In addition they found that stories followed the same recipe: “Initially there is a description of events, followed by attention to reactions, and concluding with analysis as to why this case, and others like it, have taken place.”

Finger pointing in news media

Other scholars have looked at “how journalists dealt with the task of addressing the issue of why [Columbine] ocured” (Scharrer, Weidman, and Bissel, 2003). The discovered the first coverage covered who, what, when, where, and how; the blame solely on the gunman. After that news coverage was “dominated by placing blame and assigning responsibility to various people, institutions, and entities,” often focusing on popular-culture and entertainment-media. Later stories focused on the “complex issue of why,” and the researchers found an “eerily familiar formula as sources and reporters struggled to make sense of Columbine.

Twitter as a source in news coverage

Researchers discovered that “Twitter has become a regularly used source for newspaper journalists” (Broersma and Graham, 2007-11). Reporters often use tweets as quotes for three reasons: (1) tweets give reporters access to well-known, newsworthy people; (2) reporters use tweets to “flavor news stories with quotes that express opinion”; and (3) tweets trigger news stories themselves because they are newsworthy.

Native American representation in news coverage

Weston (1996) looked at the representation of Native Americans in 20th century press. She argued that the repetition of inaccurate images has been a consequence for the news process. “The practices, traditions, and forms of journalism, rather than challenging the stereotypes in popular culture, have repeated and reinforced them. By doing so, the press has given these images the weight of factuality.”

Local versus national news coverage on mass murders

METRO COVERAGE OF SMALL TOWN VIOLENCE Frank (2003) found four reoccurring characterizations of small-towns: small towns are “close-knit,” small towns are safe, small towns are “sleepy” and often “nestle” into the landscape, and terrible things are not supposed to happen in small towns.

COVERAGE OF MASS MURDERS Nearly all mass murders were covered locally but only a small minority were nationally newsworthy (Duwe, 2000). She credits mass murders that gain national exposure to the fact that they are “riveting, emotionally evocative incidents that epitomized news as theater-- a morality play involving pure, innocent victims and offenders who seemingly went ‘berserk’ in a public setting.”

FINDINGS

I found 4 main reoccurring themes in the coverage of Jaylen Fryberg

GOLDEN BOY News media painted Jaylen as an all around good kid, and often contrasting him with the so-called “typical” school shooter. Mentions of homecoming prince, football team, and popular were scattered throughout all of the articles and videos.

TRIBAL IDENTITY Jaylen’s tribal identity was very present in the coverage, often referring to how “prominent” the Tulalip tribe is in the community. Many articles referenced how he could have become the tribe leader in the future.

PREMEDITATED MURDER After the police discovered his phone records a lot of the reporting discussed how he “lured” his friends to the cafeteria to “open fire” on them. Another thing that I saw in nearly all of the articles was a phrase along the lines of “before turning the gun on himself.”

NEWS MEDIA TRYING TO FIND AN ANSWER A lot of the coverage was latently, or sometimes blatantly, about making sense of why a “good kid” would do something like this.

SOCIAL MEDIA became a subcategory of this because it seemed like all four outlets used it as a sort of “evidence” to Jaylen’s character. Facebook showing a happy kid, and twitter showing anguish and a “more troubled image” as CNN reported it.

EXCERPT FROM THE SEATTLE TIMES

Three months before Friday’s shooting, Jaylen Fryberg celebrated his birthday by posing with a hunting rifle that he called “the best present ever.”

“i just love my parents!!!!” he posted in an online message.

An adored child from a prominent Tulalip Tribes family, Fryberg loved life with his girlfriend, classmates, teammates and hobbies. A week before the shooting, he was crowned freshman homecoming prince. A day before the shooting, he danced joyfully through football practice.

One tribal resident called Fryberg “a golden boy.” Another thought he was a potential future tribal leader. Despite his promising life trajectory, conflict at school had left Fryberg stewing, friends said.

This research examines how a variety of news media covered the 2014 school shooting at Maryville-Pilchuck High School in Marysville, Washington where Jaylen Fryberg invited his friends to the school cafeteria and shot them before shooting himself.

Within a few hours, both national news media and local news media were covering the shooting in some way. Bringing awareness to the shooters’ “rising star” qualities, the media tried to find answers to why Jaylen Fryberg would have done such a thing.

With the hopes of exploring the various frames used in the media discourse to describe Jaylen Fryberg, this study hopes to evaluate if there is a difference between coverage of national media and local media of the same event, and if any of the frames align with what previous research has found to be the “master narrative” of mass shooting stories.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How did the largest daily newspaper in Washington State (The Seattle Times) coverage of the Marysville-Pilchuck High School shooting represent Jaylen Fryberg compare to the coverage and representation from one of the largest national daily newspapers (The New York Times) during the first week of coverage? What frames were present?

How did local network television news (KIRO news) portray Jaylen Fryberg in its coverage compared to national network television news (CNN) during the first week of coverage? What frames were present?

Did the coverage from these four outlets follow the master narrative previous scholarly research has found to exist in news coverage of mass murder shootings?

METHODOLOGY

“Frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is subject of communication, thereby elevating them in salience” (Entman, 1993).

Examining what facts about Jaylen the news media made prominent in its coverage offers an insight into the possible public opinion on his character and motives. Framing allows for a way of describing the power text has (Entman, 1993). Using Entman’s model, this study examines what the news media deemed as the “problem,” how they diagnosed the “cause,” made moral judgements, and suggested remedies all through the frames they chose to illuminate in their coverage.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS Emphasizes that texts provide traces of socially constructed realities by considering the words, concepts, ideas, themes and issues in the text.

Local vs National: Print and Broadcasting media

THE SEATTLE TIMES: Most read paper in Washington State in 2014

KIRO: No. 1 newspot in the Seattle area in 2014

THE NEW YORK TIMES: 3rd most read newspaper in the US in 2014

CNN: No. 2 ranked in most watched national news station in 2014

- Searched each publications’ online database for “Jaylen Fryberg”
- Looked at staff-written articles during the first week of coverage (Oct. 24- Oct. 31)
- Must have had a strong focus on Jaylen Fryberg in first 3 paragraphs

THE SEATTLE TIMES 8 articles
THE NEW YORK TIMES 3 articles
KIRO 5 videos
CNN 7 videos

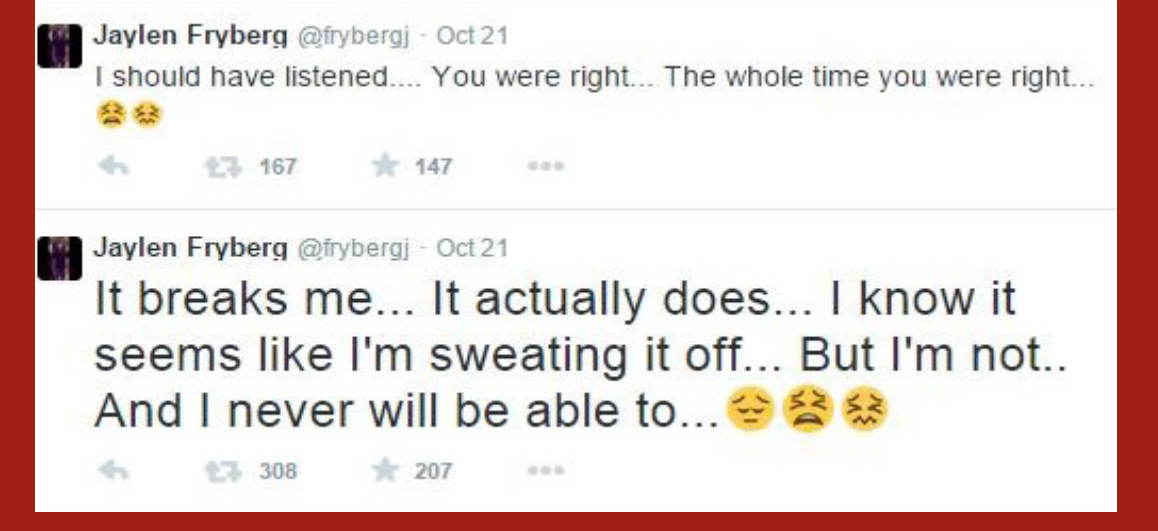
DISCUSSION

- News media portrayed Jaylen Fryberg relatively the same regardless of national vs. local or television vs. print. However, depending on the publication, the prominent frame changed
- The media was unable to focus on the “Columbine-like shooter” as described in Muschert’s study
 - Not only did his popularity shock the community as someone who could commit this crime, but it also shocked the news media forcing the coverage to stray from the “typical” narrative found in most mass murder news stories.
- HERD MENTALITY All four outlets used a lot of the same sources, tweets, and motive ideas. The result of a herd mentality in news media can be dangerous. With the lack of new ideas and opinions, the news cycle can get wrapped up in a cyclone of possible inaccurate information.
- SOCIAL MEDIA One of the most interesting findings was KING 5’s use of social media and the discussion they formed around it. In one video segment they latently proposed that social media was a cause for the shooting and that it could have been easily used to stop the shooting.
- ANSWERING “WHY?” The way news media tries to find the answer to the question of “Why?” should not be its responsibility, especially when the police haven’t suggested a motive:
 - “At a news conference Friday night, Marysville Police Chief Rick Smith said despite media and eyewitness reports, he did not want to confirm Jaylen Fryberg as the shooter, nor provide any information about him or his motive. Devoting any time to the shooter, Smith said, ‘would simply dramatize someone who perpetuated a violent crime, cruel act, in a place where children should feel safe.’” (The Seattle Times, 2014)

CONCLUSION

News media should focus on communicating the facts that have been clarified by officials, not high school students who are in shock from arguably the most traumatic moment of their young lives. This study adds to the conversation of the responsibility media has when it comes to covering crime stories. Becoming aware of the potential effects framing has on the stories and the subject within the stories, can only help news media continue striving towards a better, more truthful practice.

Photo: Two of Jaylen’s most quoted tweets in news media



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