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## **ABSTRACT**

An Analysis of the Media's Coverage of the Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School Shootings  
(Under the direction of Dr. Kathleen W. Wickham)

The primary purpose of the current research was to determine what ethical challenges have evolved for journalists covering breaking news stories, focusing on the differences in print coverage between the 1999 Columbine school shooting and the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting.

A total of 435 news stories originating from the *Denver Post*, the *Hartford Courant* and the *Chicago Tribune* were used in the analysis, categorized by type, main point, length and tone of each article.

Overall, several of the findings were consistent with the literature. Two results hold major implications for the journalism field. First, the increase in interpretative, opinion pieces shows a change in the role of the modern journalist, such that journalists now place a higher priority on telling the public what to think, rather than what to think about. Second, the advent of online and social media has created new obstacles for journalists covering breaking news.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Journalism has experienced a profound and fast-paced evolution over the past thirteen years, embarking on an ever-changing journey to disseminate information to the public in the most rapid, attention-grabbing way. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the media has continued to adapt to a twenty-four-hour news cycle, now benefit with blogs, social media and a rabid cable news network, shedding an increasing amount of light on the currency of fundamental ethical principles of reporting.

The impact of these changes can be viewed from the print coverage of two major news events: the 1999 Columbine High School shooting and the December 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Because of the sheer magnitude of coverage across all media platforms, the research will focus primarily on print coverage of these events while examining the effects of other mediums on print publications.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature will first explore the key ethical principles of American journalism and media coverage, as defined by organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists and authors such as Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel. The purpose is to provide the standards journalists are challenged to hold. Secondly, the review will examine the basic similarities and differences between the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings, delving specifically into the coverage of these events in order to assess journalists' adherence to these ethical standards in their reporting. Next, the review will analyze the evolution of print media coverage in the new millennium, focusing on an increasing emphasis on interpretative over informational reporting, the effects of technological advances that led to the Internet explosion, increases in citizen journalism and the continued corporate conglomeration of news organizations. Lastly, the literature will review the challenges and ethical concerns of today's reporting, comparing and contrasting the print coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook to assess if there has indeed been an ethical downfall within the media in recent years, and if so, what solutions are available to combat the challenges technology and new media have presented to the press.



## Key Ethical Principles of Journalism

The Society of Professional Journalists asserts that “public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy.”<sup>1</sup> From the inception of the earliest forms of journalism to today’s modern media, journalism has been for the people, a backbone of conversation and community that empowers citizens to use their voices and listen to those of others. A journalist carries the responsibility of informing, influencing and inciting the public to action. Thus, journalists must carry out their democratic mission with the assistance of carefully crafted moral guidelines in order to best serve the public’s interests.

Although several journalistic codes of ethics and spoken and unspoken professional guidelines exist, the literature will focus on the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics—henceforth referred to as “the code”—as a benchmark for the expected level of integrity journalists should maintain in their reporting, for “professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist’s credibility.” The code is composed of four broad-sweeping mandates: (1) Seek Truth and Report It; (2) Minimize Harm; (3) Act Independently; and (4) Be Accountable.<sup>2</sup> The full code is attached in Appendix B.

The following subsections summarize the key points of the code and put them in context of *The Elements of Journalism*.

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<sup>1</sup> Society of Professional Journalists. “SPJ Code of Ethics.” <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp> (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

### ***Seek Truth and Report It***

Authors Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel of *The Elements of Journalism* state, “Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.”<sup>3</sup> Without truth and verification of fact, journalism dissipates into ordinary communication, entertainment and even fiction.<sup>4</sup> This particularly applies to coverage of Sandy Hook, where reports seemed more focused on simply maintaining the public’s interest than providing them with useful, accurate information.

The code compels journalists to “be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information,” listing duties such as “test the accuracy of information from all sources,” “identify sources whenever feasible” and “distinguish between advocacy and news reporting.”<sup>5</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel explain the importance of these items in their discussion of anonymous sourcing. The authors encourage that this method generally be avoided, insisting that news organizations wait to run stories until they have been independently confirmed and sources have been corroborated. The use of confidential or anonymous sources ultimately weakens the journalist’s credibility and relationship with his or her audience.<sup>6</sup>

Journalists’ commitment to accuracy is not a new concept. As democratic theory took hold, editors of some of the earliest newspapers in England, France, Germany, Spain, America and beyond promised to rely on strong sources and fervently pursue the truth. Kovach and Rosenstiel state that these newspapers knew

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<sup>3</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. *The Elements of Journalism*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Society of Professional Journalists. “SPJ Code of Ethics.” <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp> (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. 106-109.

the importance of credibility, even if their publications sometimes strayed from the truth.<sup>7</sup>

Now, as new information technology and conglomeration of news outlets test the age-old principle of truth, the authors assert the inherent need of this value to uphold journalism and society in their entirety: “Accuracy is the foundation upon which everything else is built: context, interpretation, debate, and all of public communication. If the foundation is faulty, everything else is flawed.”<sup>8</sup> In the case of Sandy Hook, providing citizens with inaccurate, incomplete information more quickly (via social media) did not serve the public’s best interests. It only diminished credibility and damaged the media’s relationship with its primary stakeholder, the public.

### ***Minimize Harm***

The code describes the principle of minimizing harm as treating “sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.” Specific examples of minimizing harm that especially pertain to coverage of the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings include showing “compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage,” showing “good taste” and avoiding “pandering to lurid curiosity.”<sup>9</sup> Both school shootings involved minors, and in the case of Sandy Hook, young children. Reporters had to take into consideration that interviewees were grieving family members, friends and five-year-olds.

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<sup>7</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Society of Professional Journalists. “SPJ Code of Ethics.” <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp> (accessed October 15, 2013).

### ***Act Independently***

As news conglomerates challenge the independence of journalists, the code encourages the media to be “free of obligation to any interest other than the public’s right to know.” Journalists should “avoid conflicts of interest” and “disclose unavoidable conflicts” with their audience and employers. They must also “remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility,”<sup>10</sup> including collaboration with other news organizations or wire services. Kovach and Rosenstiel touch on the concept of independence, encouraging journalists to do their own work rather than rely on stories already “out there.”<sup>11</sup> A heavy reliance on already-published stories doomed Sandy Hook coverage, for instead of independently verifying information, organizations chose to publish immediately for the sake of time.

### ***Be Accountable***

Journalists’ first loyalty is to the public, thus, the code insists that journalists “admit mistakes and correct them promptly,” “expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media,” and abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.”<sup>12</sup> Promoting this level of transparency and accountability in the newsroom allows the public to understand that news organizations are putting forth their best effort, even if mistakes arise.

Kovach and Rosenstiel state, “The key element of credibility is the perceived motive of the journalist. People do not expect perfection. They do expect good

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. 99.

<sup>12</sup> Society of Professional Journalists. “SPJ Code of Ethics.” <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp> (accessed October 15, 2013).

intentions.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, being accountable implies that the journalist do his or her best in verifying and reporting the news. The facts should be verified, sources should be checked and corroborated, and the story must be truthful and relevant to the audience. If a reporter has done his or due diligence to put forth a complete and accurate story, the public will recognize these efforts.

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Each of these ethical standards came into question throughout the evolution of media between the Columbine shooting of 1999 and the Sandy Hook shooting of 2012. To better understand journalism’s ethical dilemma at hand, the literature will next examine the essential differences between the two events and their coverage.

### **Differences Between Columbine and Sandy Hook**

The Columbine massacre occurred April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado. Two high school students, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, shot and killed twelve students and one teacher and eventually killed themselves. With 24 others from the school injured, the media immediately focused its undivided attention on the shootings. In Dan Trigoboff’s cover story published a year after the shooting, "Lessons Of Columbine," he states:

[The shootings] held a national television audience transfixed and somber. Clearly, it was not the first tragedy covered live, nor was it the first school shooting. But the combination of children in the crossfire, a comfortable suburban venue, vivid and memorable images, and an unpredictable drama

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<sup>13</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. 213.

played out in real time before local and national network cameras created an indelible image for television.<sup>14</sup>

Television and newspaper coverage of the major news event was constant, with roughly a month being dedicated mostly to the shootings and ensuing questions and public outcry.<sup>15</sup> Media coverage exhausted both the public and the news outlets themselves as second, third and fourth-day stories were released and new angles on the shooting explored.<sup>16</sup>

Journalists swarmed Littleton, doing whatever it took to get the story from victims, neighbors and others. Trigoboff's article states, "In the hours and days following the shootings . . . the town was flooded with reporters, and students and their family were inundated with flowers, fruit baskets and good wishes on behalf of famous journalists seeking 'the get.'"<sup>17</sup> The "get" is an industry term used by national reporters to underscore the push for exclusive interviews with major sources in a fast-breaking, natural story.

This bombardment of media coverage resulted in a "drawing in" of the Littleton community, still reeling from the aftershocks of the massacre. "The

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<sup>14</sup> Trigoboff, Dan. "Lessons of Columbine." *Broadcasting & Cable* 130, no. 14 (April 3, 2000): 26-31. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/225323288?accountid=14588> (accessed March 6, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Strupp, Joe. 1999. "Denver news overload." *Editor & Publisher* 132, no. 18: 12. Vocational and Career Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Moses, Lucia. 2000. "High tragedy spurs Denver coverage." *Editor & Publisher* 133, no. 16: 28. Vocational and Career Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Trigoboff, Dan. "Lessons of Columbine." *Broadcasting & Cable* 130, no. 14 (April 3, 2000): 26-31. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/225323288?accountid=14588> (accessed October 15, 2013).

phenomenal attention given the community in its time of deepest tragedy . . . made residents wary of the media, particularly the national media.”<sup>18</sup>

Over thirteen years later, shootings had become more common, as seen at Virginia Tech on April 17, 2007, Fort Hood on November 5, 2009, and a Colorado movie theater on July 20, 2012. The media was more saturated than ever before. On December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza shot and killed twenty children and six faculty members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, killing his mother and himself.<sup>19</sup> The shooting became known as the second deadliest school shooting in American history, falling only to the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre in Blacksburg, Virginia, where 32 people were killed before the shooter committed suicide.

News of the shooting spread instantaneously with the contagious nature of the Internet and social media hubs such as Facebook and Twitter. Cable news networks also broadcasted the first information made available, focusing more on the dissemination of information rather than the actual *accuracy* of said information. As Simon Houpt noted:

[Multiple] media outlets were forced to apologize to viewers and readers—and, in the case of some popular blogs, to take the unusual step of deleting stories—after much of the information that emerged . . . was discounted.

Elements of the story that were initially reported inaccurately included the suspect's name, his mother's affiliation with the school, his own affiliation

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> "Sandy Hook's little heroes; Massacre Kids Back At School." *Daily Mirror*. January 4, 2013 Friday. [www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic](http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic) (accessed October 15, 2013).

with the school, how he gained entry to the school and the murder of his brother (who is alive and well).<sup>20</sup>

The misinformation had grave consequences, drawing harsh criticism for news organizations' recklessness in prioritizing speed in reporting above truthfulness and accuracy and for the subsequent "witch-hunt" for the suspect's brother.<sup>21</sup>

## **Evolution of Media Coverage in the New Millennium**

### ***Interpretative v. Informational Reporting***

Based on the code, analysis and commentary should be clearly distinguished from traditional news writing. However, by the late '90s, broadcast news in particular had departed from straight news talk, instead focusing on an Argument Culture where news personalities were pitted against each other in advocating opposite sides of controversial issues. In print, columns, op-eds and commentary often frequent newspapers, not always clearly marked as the opinion pieces they are. While journalists easily make the distinction between news and opinion, the public becomes lost in an era where the "mass media no longer help identify a common set of issues."<sup>22</sup>

Kovach and Rosenstiel state, "One of the risks of the new proliferation of outlets, talk programs, blogs, and interpretative reporting is that these forms have

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<sup>20</sup> Houpt, Simon. "Messy media coverage's trail of mistakes; News outlets and social media rush to deliver details, spreading misinformation as events unfolded." *The Globe and Mail (Canada)*. December 17, 2012.

[www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic](http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic) (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. 174.



left verification behind. A debate between opponents with false figures or purely on prejudice fails to inform. It only inflames. It takes the society nowhere.”<sup>23</sup>

Instead of providing citizens with a public forum where information is clear and accurate, journalists focused on debate and over-analysis perpetuate a system of a “diminished level of reporting” and in turn “disenfranchise people from the public discussion that the media [...] need for their own survival.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***The Internet Explosion***

The trail from the Columbine shootings to the Sandy Hook massacre involved a whirlwind of technological advances, corporate mergers and dramatic changes to the journalism field. Within the roughly thirteen-year time frame, cable news remained a dominant force, the Internet became a greater news source than ever before, and social media made news more interactive and fast-paced. Computer scientist Vinton G. Cerf states:

Technology is changing the economics of journalism. In radio and television time is limited. In print journalism space is limited. But on the Internet there is essentially an unlimited amount of time and an unlimited amount of space. The limitation is the attention span of the Internet users.<sup>25</sup>

This makes for an exponential amount of news exposure, creating a more complex, media-imbued world.

Maxwell E.P. King, former editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, adds, “[This

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<sup>23</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. 175.

<sup>25</sup> Cerf, Vinton G. "How the Internet Is Changing the Concept of Journalism." Speech. Third Conference on Innovative Journalism. <http://innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-3-4/cerf.pdf> (accessed October 15, 2013).

age] is frightening in its rapidly increasing complexity, and it challenges our faith in the straightforward values of the simpler time at which our country was founded.”<sup>26</sup>

Not only has technology changed the way the public receives news, but online reporting also obligates reporters to create more engaging, eye-catching stories, headlines and photography, while also maintaining the traditionally painstakingly high standard of accuracy. King continues, “This kind of journalism takes relentless, driving reporting, fueled by passionate commitment to digging at and into the truth.”<sup>27</sup>

The balance between vivid, exciting reporting and truthfulness has presented significant challenges in the journalism field, apparent in the coverage of Columbine and garish in the Sandy Hook reporting.

### ***Citizen Journalism and the Power of News Conglomerates***

Citizen journalism and news conglomerates also play a significant role in today’s dissemination of news. Bloggers, social media gurus and everyday people take to the Web daily, creating and sharing news just as quickly—if not more so—than a traditional news outlet. In an interview, Tom Rosenstiel said:

We now live in a user controlled media world. People are their own editors, and the ability of the press to function as a gatekeeper over what the public sees, or to force-feed the public what it should know, is over. Our public discourse is now going to be a collaboration between citizens and consumers

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<sup>26</sup> King, Maxwell E.P. 1995. "The evolution of journalism." *Vital Speeches Of The Day* 62, no. 5: 150-152. Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

of information, and the sources from which they get that information.<sup>28</sup>

Although this collaboration has its benefits, in the case of the Sandy Hook shooting, inaccurate reports flooded social media networks such as Twitter, where news organizations and citizens alike spread misinformation and rumor. Journalistic principles of accuracy and verification were seemingly irrelevant.

Public interest cyber-lawyer Paul Alan Levy addresses citizen journalism and traditional ethical guidelines as they pertain to bloggers, writing, “I don’t find any distinction between journalism and blogging. The same rule applies equally to journalism and the other people because the First Amendment applies to everyone.”<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the danger in citizen journalism rests in that those lacking journalistic training or principles perpetuate a system of sloppy, often inaccurate journalism that fails to meet the public’s needs.

As for the conglomeration of news organizations, these monopolies hurt journalistic independence and allow multiple connected news outlets to reproduce the same inaccurate or incomplete stories. News corporations place emphasis on the financial aspect of journalism, rather than on newsroom and story quality.

Writer and editor Dean Starkman quotes the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s 2008 report: “In today’s newspapers, stories tend to be gathered faster and under greater pressure by a smaller, less experienced staff of reporters, then

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<sup>28</sup> Silverman, Craig. “Q&A: Blur Author Tom Rosenstiel.” *Columbia Journalism Review*.

[www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/qa\\_blur\\_author\\_tom\\_rosenstiel.php?page=all](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/qa_blur_author_tom_rosenstiel.php?page=all) (accessed December 5, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Wickham, Kathleen. “Social Media & Online News.” Lecture from University of Mississippi, Oxford, Miss., November 19, 2013.

are passed more quickly through fewer, less experienced, editing hands on their way to publication.”<sup>30</sup>

This “great pressure” is a direct result of the conglomeration of the news media into business-oriented practices. As journalism becomes a business, pressure to make profits seems to take precedence over journalistic ethics. However, the ethical principles corporations might ignore are the key to maintaining the credibility with the public that ultimately keeps the journalism business afloat.

### **Challenges and Ethical Concerns of Today’s Media Coverage**

The ethics dilemma in media coverage is simple: with a growing need to beat corporate competitors in reporting while simultaneously sensationalizing a story to pique interest, values such as accuracy and correctness fall by the wayside. In the case of the Columbine coverage—when Internet media was not nearly as prominent—many praised the local and national news outlets for their sensitivity. News editor and former reporter Lucia Moses states, “Both [The *Denver Post* and the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*] said they strived to be complete, but, above all, sensitive in their coverage.”<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, Dennis Foley, who examined Columbine coverage in the *Orange County Register* in California, references editor John Doussard, who states:

From the moment [the Columbine shooting] happened, we knew we needed to do two things. One, we needed to give people the news they needed to know without sensationalizing, but with full depth and context. The other

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<sup>30</sup> Starkman, Dean. “The Hamster Wheel.” *Columbia Journalism Review*. [www.cjr.org/cover\\_story/the\\_hamster\\_wheel.php?page=all](http://www.cjr.org/cover_story/the_hamster_wheel.php?page=all) (accessed December 5, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> Moses, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

thing we needed to do—knowing people would have some sense of what happened from television, radio, the Internet—was realize that our main task in using our reporters was to try to find ways to help people the next morning not only understand what happened, but help them find ways to deal with it in their own lives.<sup>32</sup>

Some even advocated that the coverage of Columbine served as a form of psychotherapy, helping victims and their families deal with the trauma of the massacre. “Networks and network reporters note that all such interviews are conducted with the consent of adults and that people are often eager to talk to reporters. Talking about a loved one and about their loss can be cathartic.”<sup>33</sup>

This proactive, sensitive coverage exhibited one of the strengths of Columbine coverage, while one of the media’s most-criticized reporting methods involved a live television newsfeed that broadcasted the hiding places of students and footage of the injured and dead to the world.

Trigoboff continues, “While Denver news organizations were praised for extensive, thoughtful and sensitive reporting, the coverage also came to symbolize some of the problems that accompany technological advances in both newsgathering and personal communication.”<sup>34</sup>

The article “A Paper’s Painful Duty” also explains that although delving deep into the traumatic and often fresh experiences of these victims might seem

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<sup>32</sup> "Examining coverage of Columbine." *Orange County Register (California)*. [www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic](http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic) (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Trigoboff, Dan. "Lessons of Columbine." *Broadcasting & Cable* 130, no. 14 (April 3, 2000): 26-31. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/225323288?accountid=14588> (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

insensitive, failing to seek and report this information is a failure of the journalist to do his or her duty. The article, with regard to unsealing the autopsy reports of the victims of the Columbine shooting, states, "We should not pretend that the truth will somehow lessen the pain of families who lost children so senselessly. It won't. But secrecy, which spawns speculation in a vacuum of unanswered questions, has surely proven no salve either."<sup>35</sup>

Regardless of the highly criticized live coverage of Littleton's reaction to the Columbine massacre or the outcry at the media's perhaps *too in-depth* reporting, Trigoboff asserts that Columbine coverage remained on the ethically sound side of the figurative moral line—a line that Sandy Hook coverage perceivably crossed. Interestingly, Trigoboff's commentary—published in 2000—implies that journalistic ethics were headed in a desirable direction following Columbine. He states, "[Given] the scope of the event, television news coverage of Columbine was more careful than crazed. And in live coverage of other outbreaks of mayhem since, TV news seems to be behaving responsibly, making the lives of the threatened, not beats or the sensational story, its top priority."<sup>36</sup> However, with the social media boom of the mid-2000s, it appears as though sensationalism has ironically become the top priority Trigoboff spoke against over a decade ago. Any mistakes made before or during the Columbine coverage dulled in comparison to those in the Sandy

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<sup>35</sup> "A Paper's Painful Duty." Editor & Publisher, December 11. 16. Vocational and Career Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> Trigoboff, Dan. "Lessons of Columbine." *Broadcasting & Cable* 130, no. 14 (April 3, 2000): 26-31. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/225323288?accountid=14588> (accessed October 15, 2013).

Hook reporting, showing a digression from the trend toward compassionate, empathetic coverage and, in turn, a push toward reporting quickly at all costs.

The Sandy Hook massacre, riddled with misinformation and blatant mistakes, confused an entire nation in an instant as coverage swept the Web and cable news. Reporter Joanne Ostrow noted:

Television did its usual best and worst [that] morning to relay information of the latest national horror. For hours, a confusing array of raw information, much of it unconfirmed, was pushed through social media and TV outlets. More questions than answers kept the spectacle a blur. Were there multiple shooters? How many fatalities? How many of them children? Did the killer or killers have a connection to the school?<sup>37</sup>

Rather than wait for confirmation, the media prioritized timeliness over truthfulness. "While the media awaited word from tight-lipped authorities, reporters filled in with commentary and questions. For hours, the media got the shooter's name wrong. The Internet provided quick, incorrect misinformation. Speed trumped accuracy."<sup>38</sup>

For days, even print articles claimed Lanza's mother had some sort of prior connection to Sandy Hook Elementary School, from being a kindergarten teacher to a substitute to ultimately having no relation to the institution at all.

Rosenstiel adds that the media's dependence on others to provide them with verifiable information also hinders quality journalism.

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<sup>37</sup> Ostrow, Joanne. "News media do their best -- and worst." *The Denver Post*. December 15, 2012. [www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic](http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic) (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

The conventional press has historically always been too reliant on authority, on taking people's word for things just because they were officials, and being a conduit for those powerful voices... If you're moving very quickly and you're passing things along as quickly as can, you have less time to prove and investigate... That's accelerated now through digital technology.<sup>39</sup>

Reporters also toed the ethical boundary lines by interviewing children and family members of victims during a raw live broadcast, raising concerns about the genuineness and compassion of media news outlets in the obviously grieving, if not terror-stricken, Newtown community. Ostrow continued:

Does it serve any journalistic purpose to put children on live television in the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting? Is it ethically permissible to put shocked parents on live TV, to give the nation a taste of the horror?

Clearly, it serves no purpose other than titillation to put shocked, underage and vulnerable people on live TV in the moments after a massacre. Consequences? Those come later.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, it appears as if Sandy Hook coverage took a more sensationalized approach than Columbine coverage in an attempt to garner the nation and world's attention in the already news-saturated Internet age, regardless of accuracy. In order to capture the world's eye, the media—in all mediums—placed emphasis on fast, fanatical news, not factual reporting.

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<sup>39</sup> Silverman, Craig. "Q&A: Blur Author Tom Rosenstiel." *Columbia Journalism Review*.

[www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/qa\\_blur\\_author\\_tom\\_rosenstiel.php?page=all](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/qa_blur_author_tom_rosenstiel.php?page=all) (accessed December 5, 2013).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*



Nevertheless, despite the error-filled reporting evident in the Sandy Hook coverage, some believe the criticism against journalists concerning accuracy is too harsh. The Topeka Capital-Journal took on the criticism in the editorial "Journalism Will Survive Media's Evolution," asking, "Are papers sometimes wrong? Do some reporters embarrass the rest? Is bias a problem? Yes, yes and yes, of course. Journalists are not saints, but they do perform a valuable service for which the rewards are few."<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, in *The Globe and Mail*, Simon Houpt wrote, "It's part of news literacy today . . . to know that any story is a changing and moving object, and that what gets passed around instantly is not necessarily the final fact of it."<sup>42</sup>

In Trigoboff's cover story, he quotes media ethics expert Bob Steele of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies regarding the imperfections within the journalism world, especially when covering sensitive issues such as the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings. Steele states:

Any television network has to accept that there is a possibility of exploitation of coverage of these stories. Coverage of these stories can certainly be legitimate. But we should not take advantage of these people. What vulnerable people need most is the care and sympathy of people who are close to them. When the journalists leave, the pain and problems will continue. The national press, the networks have a role to play, but journalists

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<sup>41</sup> "Journalism Will Survive Media's Evolution." *Topeka Capital-Journal (Kansas)*, sec. opinion: 4. January 9, 2009. (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> Houpt, Simon. "Messy media coverage's trail of mistakes; News outlets and social media rush to deliver details, spreading misinformation as events unfolded." *The Globe and Mail (Canada)*. December 17, 2012. [www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic](http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic) (accessed October 15, 2013).

who come from faraway must bring with them a heightened sense of compassion and responsibility.<sup>43</sup>

Lastly, Maxwell E.P.King adds to his assertion that stories should include not only factual writing, but also *good* writing, stating, “We can’t take refuge in the excuse that we got all the facts straight in today’s story.”<sup>44</sup>

Media coverage of both the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings holds significant implications for the future of journalism in the ever-evolving technological world. While Columbine reporters were praised for their empathy in covering the massacre, even the 1999 coverage had weaknesses, some of which were only heightened with the onset of more saturated, instantaneous coverage on the Internet and social media over the course of the next thirteen years. By December 2012, the media had become nothing less than a hypercompetitive market for pandering to lurid curiosity, and this competition further exposed—if not worsened—the fractures in the ethical foundation upon which journalism is based. However, despite its flaws, the field is an imperfect work-in-progress, and reporters will have to continually adapt to technological changes affecting the world of journalism and its delicate ethical balance in the future.

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<sup>43</sup> Trigoboff, Dan. "Lessons of Columbine." *Broadcasting & Cable* 130, no. 14 (April 3, 2000): 26-31. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/225323288?accountid=14588> (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> King, Maxwell E.P. 1995. "The evolution of journalism." *Vital Speeches Of The Day* 62, no. 5: 150-152. Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed October 15, 2013).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The role and types of media have changed drastically over the past thirteen years, from the increasingly saturated cable television news networks to the more recent advent of social media powerhouses such as Facebook and Twitter. Media coverage and subsequent public perception of sensational news such as school shootings has also changed, especially when examining the media's evolution from the Columbine High School shootings of 1999 through the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, in late 2012.

Coverage of the Columbine shootings over thirteen years ago still haunts the American public. One of the first major school shootings to draw what was considered *heavy* media coverage at the time, Columbine set the standard for news coverage of similar events to come. At the time, print coverage of Columbine was threatened by cable news. Now, with the twenty-four-hour news cycle in full swing, not only does coverage of sensationalized events run incessantly, the level of accuracy and integrity in reporting has seemingly declined in the race to produce news before competitors on every news platform, including online.

Although newspapers might have the advantage of time in order to properly fact-check, print journalism has also fallen victim to speed over accuracy in reporting. Newspapers employ online publications in between print editions to remain relevant in the Age of Social Media.

Thus, the purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between today's media and hypersensitive issues like the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings. The intent of the manuscript is to compare and contrast the coverage of each shooting, beginning with the actual events and concluding with an observation of the media's handling of each event. This leads to the first research question: (1) What are the similarities and differences of the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings in terms of the events themselves and type, main point, length and tone of news coverage?

The second research question seeks to answer the following: How prominent was interpretive, analytical reporting in 1999 versus 2012? The second research question is: (2) How has print media coverage of these crises evolved since 1999, with special regard to interpretative reporting?

The third research question seeks to bring the research into the present, asking: (3) What challenges has online media created for journalists and their ethical principles, especially concerning today's hypercompetitive nature of reporting and its tendency to produce more erroneous news stories?

Sources for the research include—but are not limited to—newspaper microfilm from the selected print publications, journalistic texts such as Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel's *The Elements of Journalism*, online resources such as the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics and other academic journals and commentary from journalism experts such as Bob Steele of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and Maxwell E.P. King, former editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer.

To complete the research, three print newspapers were analyzed for accuracy, types, main points and tones of articles related to the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings within the first week of reporting for each event.

*The Denver Post* served as the source of regional Columbine coverage, as it is “Colorado’s media leader, reaching more Denver-area adults than any television show, radio program, publication or website.”<sup>1</sup> The *Post* has the largest print audience in Colorado, with over 500,000 daily readers.<sup>2</sup>

The *Hartford Courant* served as the source of regional Sandy Hook coverage. The *Courant* is the top newspaper in central Connecticut and has a daily audience of 320,465.<sup>3</sup>

Lastly, The *Chicago Tribune* functioned as the control source and national perspective of coverage for both events. The *Chicago Tribune* was selected because of its central location both in the United States and between the two shootings. The *Tribune* is currently ranked eleventh in average daily circulation among U.S. daily newspapers.<sup>4</sup>

The first step involved locating archived print material from *The Denver Post*, dating from April 21, 1999, through April 27, 1999, to evaluate the characteristics of regional Columbine coverage. Note that coverage begins April 21 and not April 20

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<sup>1</sup> *The Denver Post*. “*The Denver Post* Media Kit.” [mediakit.denverpost.com/audience.html](http://mediakit.denverpost.com/audience.html) (accessed Dec. 5, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Hartford Courant*. “*Hartford Courant*.” [trb365.com/pdfs/hartford\\_overview.pdf](http://trb365.com/pdfs/hartford_overview.pdf) (accessed Dec. 5, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> *Chicago Tribune*. “*Chicago Tribune* Business.” [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-04-30/business/chi-newspaper-circulation-20130430\\_1\\_newspaper-circulation-neal-lulofs-chicago-tribune-media-group](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-04-30/business/chi-newspaper-circulation-20130430_1_newspaper-circulation-neal-lulofs-chicago-tribune-media-group) (accessed Dec. 5, 2013).

(the day of the shooting) because the event occurred between the April 20 and April 21 print final editions. Although stories were originally published in print, these archives were accessed through [extras.denverpost.com/news/shotarch.htm](http://extras.denverpost.com/news/shotarch.htm).

The second step involved analyzing the control, or neutral, newspaper, the *Chicago Tribune*, to distinguish differences in the Columbine reporting in Denver from a national standpoint. The researcher chose the *Chicago Tribune* as the control newspaper due to its relatively central location both in the United States and between Denver and Newtown. Articles were accessed by microfilm through the University of Mississippi's Interlibrary Loan Program.

Step three included the location of Sandy Hook print media, observing the qualities of the *Hartford Courant* newspaper in Connecticut and its coverage of the shooting from December 15, 2012, to December 21, 2012. Although the research focused primarily on print stories, online material was taken into consideration for context in the accuracy of Sandy Hook coverage. Articles were accessed both by microfilm through the University of Mississippi's Interlibrary Loan Program and by online archive.

Lastly, much like step two, the research returned to the *Chicago Tribune* to evaluate differences in Sandy Hook coverage in close proximity to the event and on a more national scale.

A codebook was constructed to assist in the analyses, assessing a total of 435 stories based on the type of story, main point, total length and tone. The material was coded by two researchers, the author and a trained second reader. The codebook categorized stories based on references to the respective shooting event

and name of the city and school in which the shooting occurred. The codebook is in Appendix A.

For Columbine, words such as “massacre,” “horror,” “death,” “rampage,” “carnage,” “gun violence,” “killing,” “bombing” and variations of each were accepted as reasonable references with proper context to the shooting. “Littleton” and “Columbine” were used as city and school references. School abbreviations such as “CHS” were also accepted.

For Sandy Hook, similar descriptions to those of the Columbine shooting were accepted, with the exception of references to bombs or bombings. “Newtown” and “Sandy Hook” were used as city and school references. The school abbreviation “S.H.” was also accepted.

By coding each story according to its various criteria, the researcher and second coder were able to determine patterns and differences in coverage of the two shootings, specifically regarding the number of articles published and the amount of interpretative, opinionated articles in relation to hard news reporting.

## **RESULTS**

The intent of this project was to determine what ethical challenges have evolved for journalists covering breaking news stories, focusing on the differences in coverage between the 1999 Columbine shooting and the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting. Three questions were developed to guide the research. These were chosen in order to focus on the obstacles facing print journalism since the advent of online and social media.

The three research questions were: (1) What are the similarities and differences of the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings in terms of the events themselves and type, main point, length and tone of news coverage? (2) How has print media coverage of these crises evolved since 1999, with special regard to interpretative reporting? and (3) What challenges has online media created for journalists and their ethical principles, especially concerning today's hypercompetitive nature of reporting and its tendency to produce more erroneous news stories?

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question concerned making basic distinctions between the shootings and categorizing coverage based on type, main point, length and tone of print articles.



***Similarities and differences between the Columbine High School shooting of 1999 and the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting of 2012***

For the purposes of this section, data will focus on victims killed within each school, not including the shooters. Both the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings mainly claimed the lives of minors, with 10 of the 13 Columbine victims and 20 of the 26 Sandy Hook victims being under the age of 18. Each shooting also raised questions concerning previous mass shootings, gun control and mental health.

One of the most striking differences between the two events includes the ages of the shooting victims, where the mean age of Columbine victims was 16 years old and the mean age of Sandy Hook victims was 6 years old. Whereas only one faculty member of Columbine High School was killed, five Sandy Hook staff members fell victim to the shooter's attack. Lastly, although Newtown, Connecticut, is larger in area than Littleton, Colorado, its population according to the 2010 census was 27,560. Littleton's 1999 population was 41,297. See *Table 1: A Comparison of Fundamental Differences in the Columbine and Sandy Hook Shootings*.

Table 1: A Comparison of Fundamental Differences in the Columbine and Sandy Hook Shootings

<b>Details</b>	<b>Columbine</b>	<b>Sandy Hook</b>
Mean victim age	16 years old	6 years old
Number of faculty dead	1	5
Population of town	41,297	27,560

***Type of Coverage***

For the purposes of this section, the results will be discussed in the following order: (a) *Denver Post* coverage of Columbine (b) *Hartford Courant* coverage of Sandy Hook (c) *Chicago Tribune* coverage of Columbine and (d) *Chicago Tribune*

coverage of Sandy Hook. Comparisons will be drawn between regional coverage by the *Denver Post* and the *Hartford Courant*, followed by comparisons between the *Chicago Tribune's* coverage of each shooting. Percentages drawn are based on coding analysis rounded to the hundredth place.

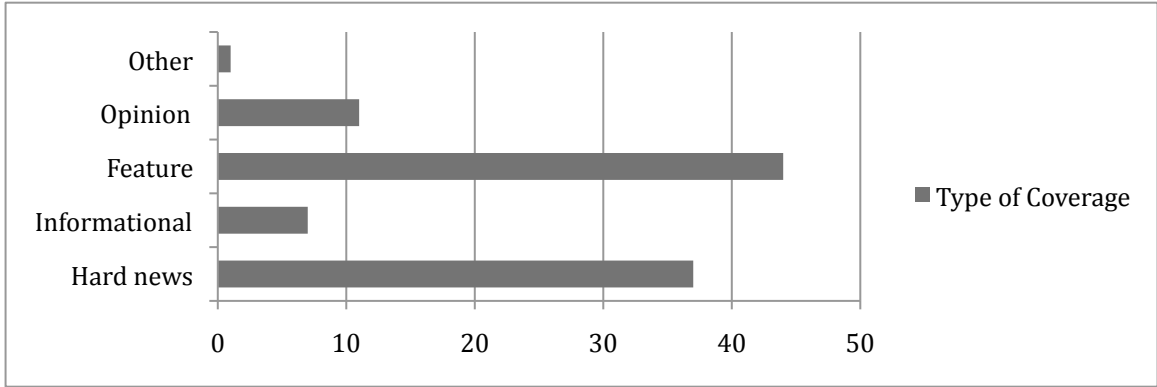
Types of coverage were divided into five categories: (1) hard news (2) informational (3) feature (4) opinion and (5) other. An article was categorized as hard news if it offered straightforward facts such as shooting details and only voiced interviewees' opinions, rather than the journalists' own thoughts. Articles were deemed informational if the majority of their content referred to maps, infographics and information on other shooting events. Stories were categorized as informational if they did not include breaking news details and instead were written in a story-telling format. Many opinion pieces were labeled as such in opinion sections of each newspaper. If an article expressed a journalist's own perspective, critical or positive, regarding the shootings, the article was deemed opinion. The majority of stories categorized as other were verbatim transcripts of speeches that offered no additional information from the journalist.

#### *The Denver Post's Columbine Coverage*

In the case of the *Denver Post's* Columbine coverage, 37.23 percent (70 of 188) of the articles coded were deemed hard news. About 6.91 percent (13 of 188) of the articles were categorized as informational. The majority of the articles, 44.15 percent (83 of 188), were deemed feature news. About 11.17 percent (21 of 188) of the articles were coded as opinion news. Lastly, .53 percent (1 of 188) of articles

reviewed were categorized as other. See *Figure 1: Types of Articles in Denver Post Columbine Coverage*.

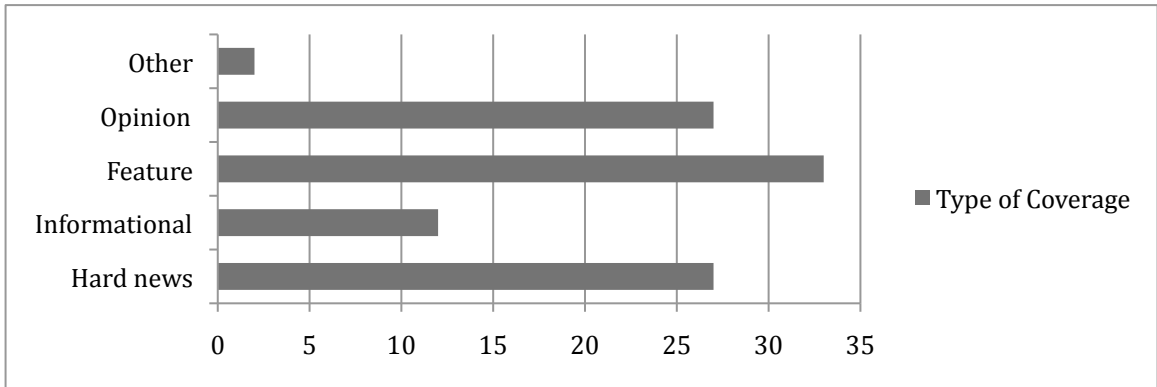
Figure 1: Types of Articles in *Denver Post* Columbine Coverage



#### *The Hartford Courant's Sandy Hook Coverage*

The *Hartford Courant's* coverage of Sandy Hook yielded different results. Only 26.56 percent (34 of 128) of the articles were deemed hard news. About 11.72 percent (15 of 128) of the articles were coded as informational. Like the *Denver Post*, the majority of the *Hartford Courant* articles, 32.81 percent (42 of 128), was categorized under feature. About 27.34 percent (35 of 128) of the stories were deemed opinion news. About 1.56 percent (2 of 128) were coded as other. See *Figure 2: Types of Articles in Hartford Courant Sandy Hook Coverage*.

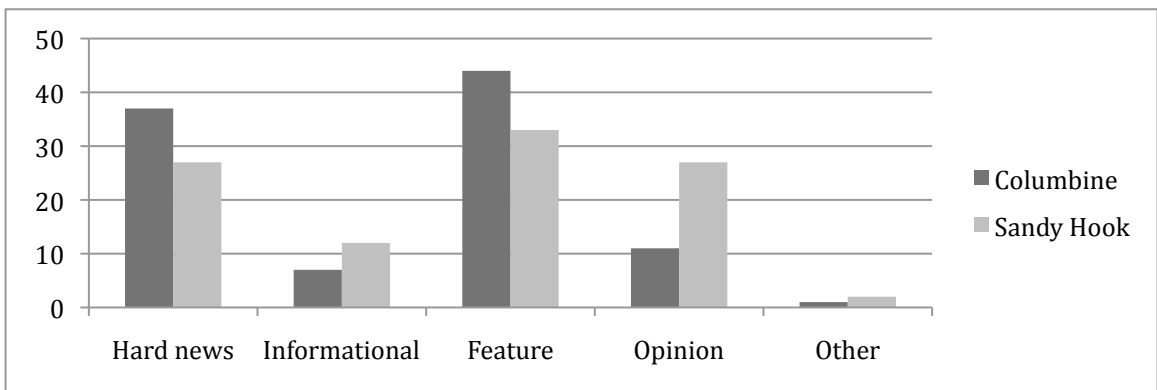
Figure 2: Types of Articles in *Hartford Courant* Sandy Hook Coverage



*Comparing Regional Columbine and Sandy Hook Coverage*

The most notable differences in the type of regional coverage between the *Denver Post* and the *Hartford Courant* involve the percentages of hard and opinion news. The number of hard news stories from 1999 to 2012 decreased by 10 percentage points. The number of opinion news articles rose by 16 percentage points. See *Figure 3: A Comparison of Types of Articles in Denver Post and Hartford Courant Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook*.

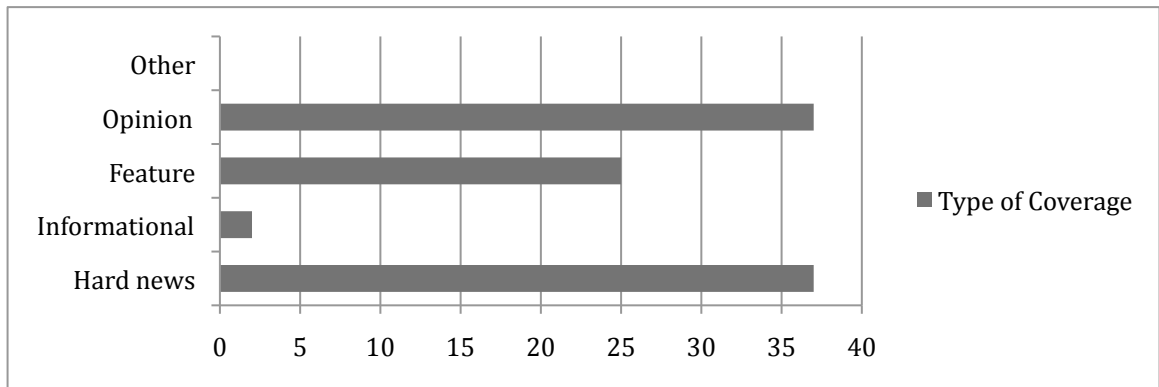
Figure 3: A Comparison of Types of Articles in *Denver Post* and *Hartford Courant* Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook



### *The Chicago Tribune's Columbine Coverage*

As for national coverage of the shootings, the *Chicago Tribune* offered other findings as well. In the case of the Tribune's Columbine coverage, 36.54 percent (19 of 52) of the coded stories were deemed hard news. About 1.92 percent (1 of 52) of the stories were categorized as informational. Twenty-five percent (13 of 52) of the articles were determined to be feature stories. About 36.54 percent (19 of 52) of the articles were coded as opinion news, and no stories were deemed other. See *Figure 4: Types of Articles in Chicago Tribune Columbine Coverage*.

Figure 4: Types of Articles in *Chicago Tribune* Columbine Coverage

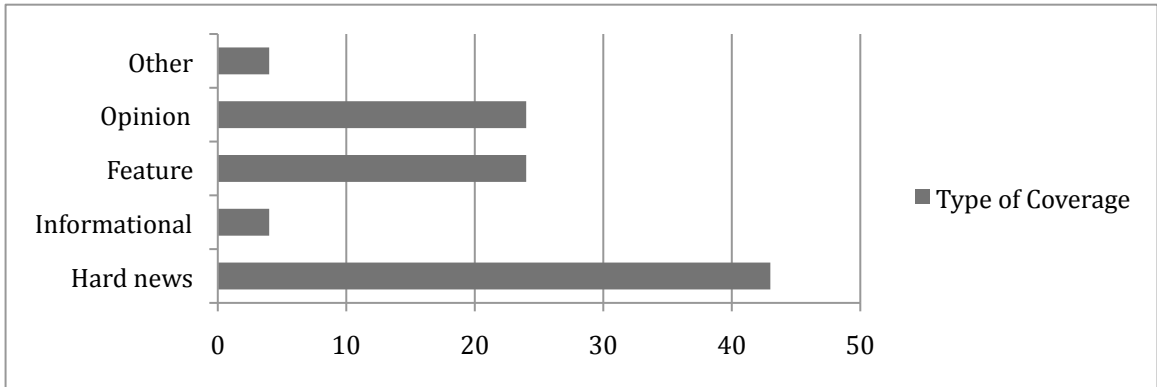


### *The Chicago Tribune's Sandy Hook Coverage*

In the Tribune's coverage of Sandy Hook, the majority of the stories, 43.28 percent (29 of 67), were determined to be hard news. About 4.48 percent (3 of 67) of the articles were deemed informational. About 23.88 percent (16 of 67) of the articles were categorized as feature stories. About 23.88 percent (16 of 67) of the stories were deemed opinion news. Lastly, 4.48 percent (3 of 67) of the articles

were coded as other. See *Figure 5: Types of Articles in Chicago Tribune Sandy Hook Coverage*.

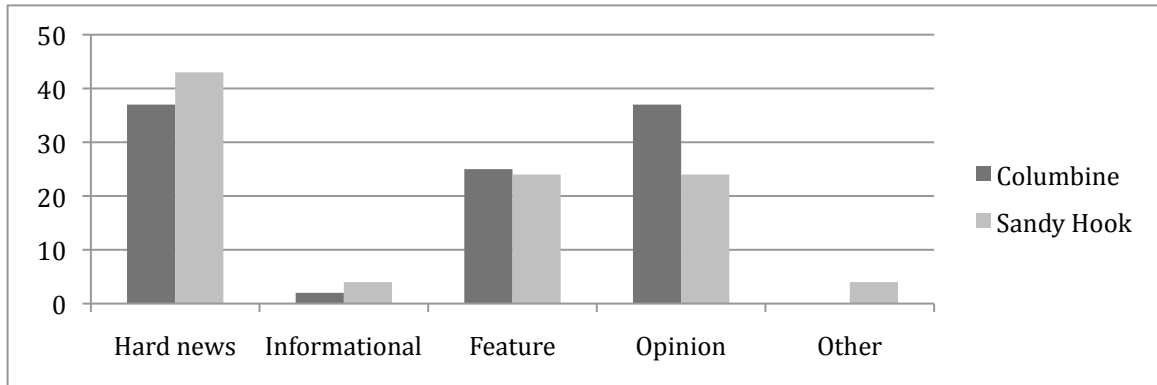
Figure 5: Types of Articles in *Chicago Tribune* Sandy Hook Coverage



#### *Comparing National Columbine and Sandy Hook Coverage*

These findings appear to contradict the results of the coded regional stories. The number of hard news stories from 1999 to 2012 increased by 6 percentage points. The number of opinion articles decreased by 13 percentage points. And the majority of articles were not feature stories in either case. See *Figure 6: A Comparison of Types of Articles in Chicago Tribune Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook*.

Figure 6: A Comparison of Types of Articles in *Chicago Tribune* Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook



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As for the seven days of coverage, no obvious connection appeared between the type of coverage and the appearance of each type throughout the week observed for any paper.

### ***Main Point of Coverage***

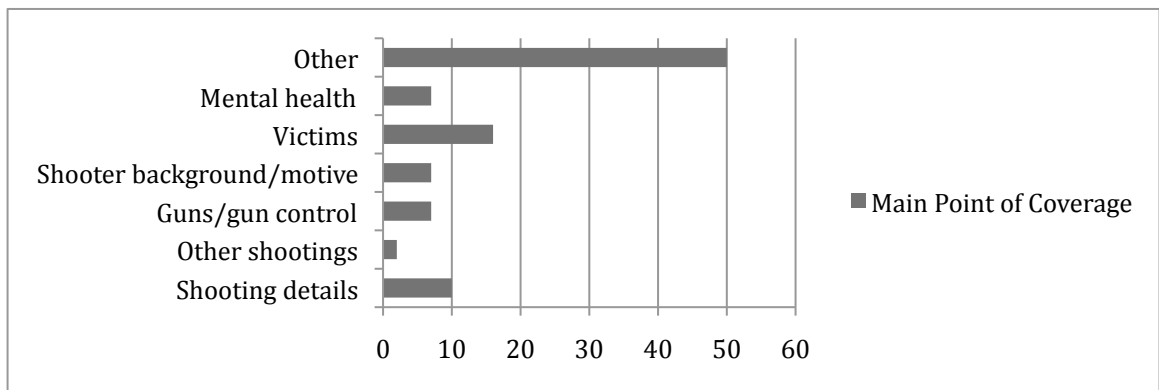
For the purposes of this section, the results will be discussed in the order of (a) *Denver Post* coverage of Columbine (b) *Hartford Courant* coverage of Sandy Hook (c) *Chicago Tribune* coverage of Columbine and (d) *Chicago Tribune* coverage of Sandy Hook. Comparisons will be drawn between regional coverage by the *Denver Post* and the *Hartford Courant*, followed by comparisons between the *Chicago Tribune's* coverage of each shooting. Percentages drawn are based on coding analysis rounded to the hundredth place.

Main points of coverage were divided into seven categories: (1) shooting details (2) other shootings (3) guns/gun control (4) shooter background/motive (5) victims (6) mental health and (7) other.

### *The Denver Post's Columbine Coverage*

In the case of the *Denver Post's* Columbine coverage, 10.11 percent (19 of 188) of the articles focused on shooting details. About 1.60 percent (3 of 188) of the articles emphasized other shootings. Guns/gun control was the main point of 6.91 percent (13 of 188) of the stories. Shooter background/motive was the main point of 7.45 percent (14 of 188) of the stories. About 16.49 percent (31 of 188) of the articles focused on victims of the shooting. About 6.91 percent (13 of 188) of the articles had a main point of mental health. Lastly, over half (95 of 188) of the coded articles, 50.53 percent, emphasized some other point such as general school safety and sports cancellations or tributes. See *Figure 7: Main Points of Articles in Denver Post Columbine Coverage*.

Figure 7: Main Points of Articles in *Denver Post* Columbine Coverage



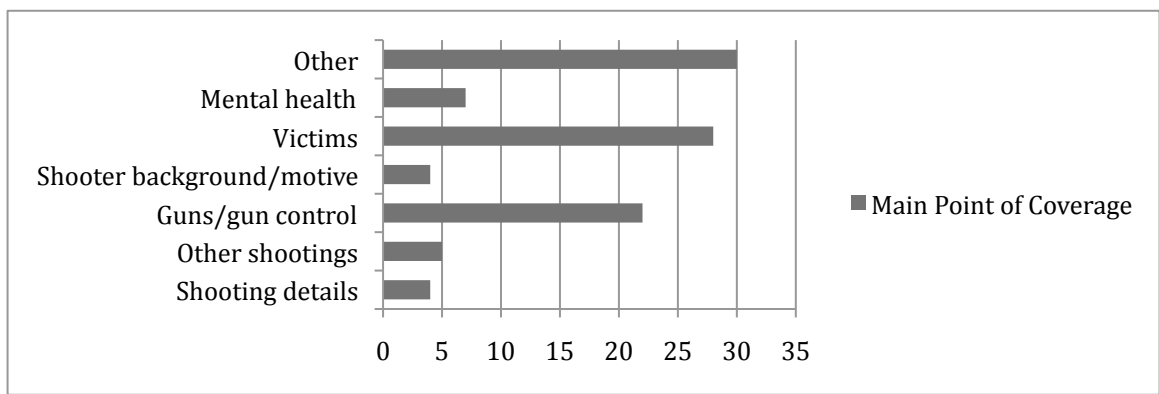
### *The Hartford Courant's Sandy Hook Coverage*

Results of the *Hartford Courant's* coverage of Sandy Hook showed 3.91 percent (5 of 128) of the stories with a main point of shooting details. About 4.69 percent (6 of 128) of the articles focused on other shootings. Roughly 21.88 percent (28 of 128) of the articles had a main point related to guns/gun control. About 3.91



percent (5 of 128) of the stories focused on shooter background/motive. Roughly 28.13 percent (36 of 128) of the articles centered on victims. Mental health was the main point of 7.03 percent (9 of 128) of the articles coded. The majority of the stories, 30.47 percent (39 of 128), were coded as other. See *Figure 8: Main Points of Articles in Hartford Courant Sandy Hook Coverage*.

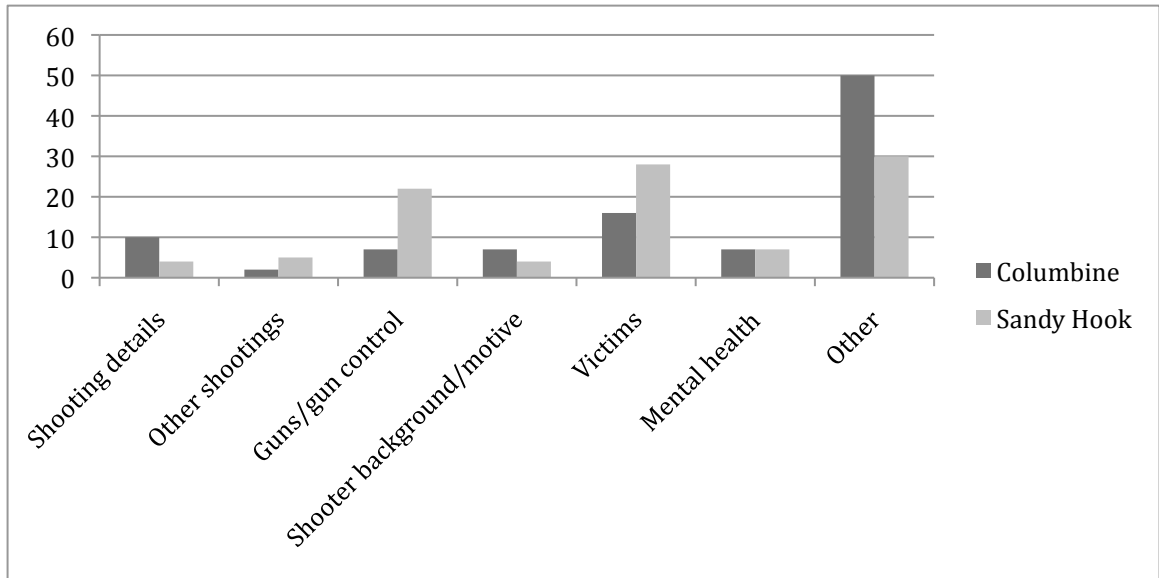
Figure 8: Main Points of Articles in *Hartford Courant* Sandy Hook Coverage



### *Comparing Regional Columbine and Sandy Hook Coverage*

Interesting differences in coverage of the two shootings include the percentage of stories related to shooting details, guns/gun control, victims and mental health. From 1999 to 2012, the number of stories with a main point of shooting details decreased by roughly 6 percentage points. The number of stories related to guns/gun control increased by roughly 15 percentage points. The number of articles focused on shooting victims increased by 12 percentage points. Lastly, the number of stories centered on mental health also rose slightly. See *Figure 9: A Comparison of Main Points of Articles in Denver Post and Hartford Courant Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook*.

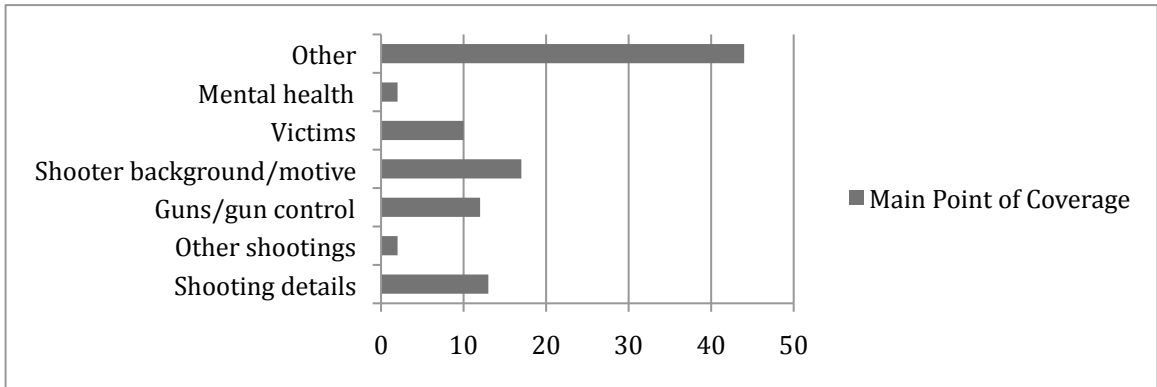
Figure 9: A Comparison of Main Points of Articles in *Denver Post* and *Hartford Courant* Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook



#### *The Chicago Tribune's Columbine Coverage*

As for national coverage of the shootings, the *Chicago Tribune* offered similar findings. In the paper's Columbine coverage, 13.46 percent (7 of 52) of the stories focused on shooting details. About 1.92 percent (1 of 52) of the articles had a main point of other shootings. Roughly 11.54 percent (6 of 52) of the articles centered on guns/gun control. Shooter background/motive was the main point of 17.31 percent (9 of 52) of the articles coded. About 9.62 percent (5 of 52) of the stories focused on shooting victims. Roughly 1.92 percent (1 of 52) of the stories centered on mental health. The majority of the articles, 44.23 percent (23 of 52), had a differing main point. See *Figure 10: Main Points of Articles in Chicago Tribune Columbine Coverage*.

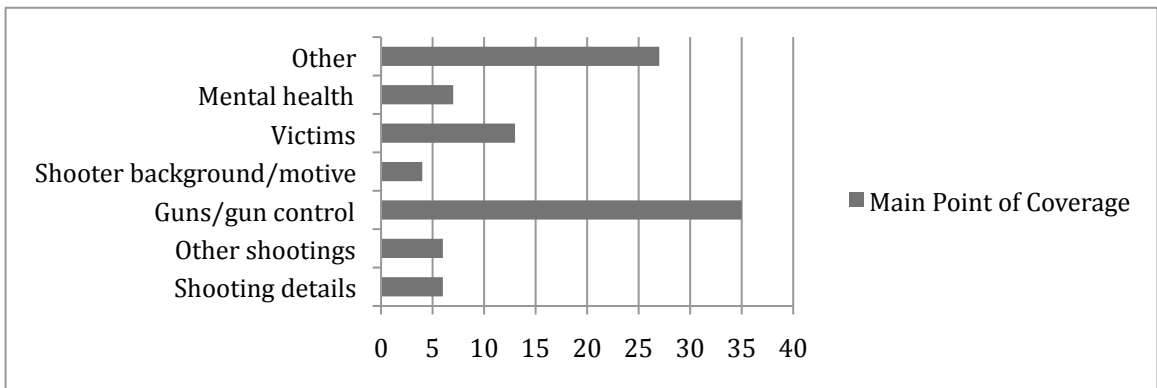
Figure 10: Main Points of Articles in *Chicago Tribune* Columbine Coverage



*The Chicago Tribune's Sandy Hook Coverage*

In the case of the Tribune's Sandy Hook coverage, 5.97 percent (4 each of 67) of the articles focused on shooting details or other shootings. Over one third (24 of 67), the majority, of the stories had a main point of guns/gun control at 35.82 percent. Roughly 4.48 percent (3 of 67) of the articles centered on shooter background/motive. About 13.43 percent (9 of 67) of the articles focused on victims. Mental health was the main point of 7.46 percent (5 of 67) of the stories. Roughly 26.87 percent (18 of 67) of the articles centered on other main points. See *Figure 11: Main Points of Articles in Chicago Tribune Sandy Hook Coverage.*

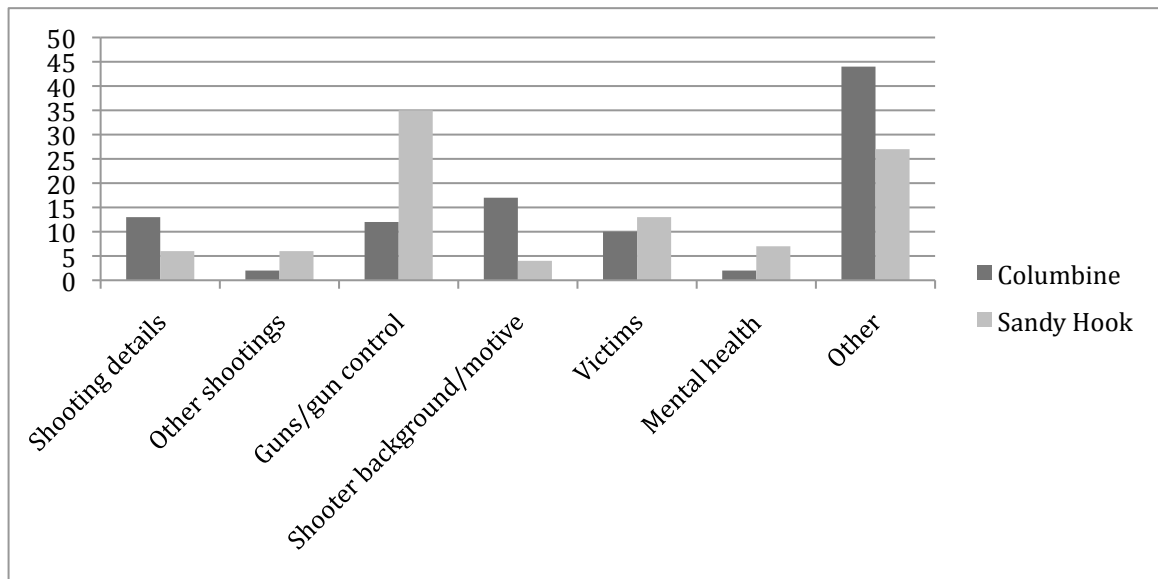
Figure 11: Main Points of Articles in *Chicago Tribune* Sandy Hook Coverage



### Comparing National Columbine and Sandy Hook Coverage

The Tribune’s coverage demonstrated similar increases in articles related to guns/gun control, shooting victims and mental health. From 1999 to 2012, the number of articles focused on guns/gun control tripled. The number of stories related to victims increased by 3 percentage points. The number of articles centered on mental health increased by 5 percentage points. And like the regional coverage, the number of articles related to shooting details decreased by 7 percentage points. See *Figure 12: A Comparison of Main Points of Articles in Chicago Tribune Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook*.

Figure 12: A Comparison of Main Points of Articles in *Chicago Tribune* Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook



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With regard to the first seven days of coverage, the only obvious connection that appeared between the main point of coverage and the appearance of each main point throughout the week observed for any paper was found in the shooting details

category. The number of stories related to shooting details fell as the week continued. These results were expected, as second-day and third-day stories often look for fresh angles following the initial details of an event.

### ***Length of Coverage***

The length of articles was examined primarily to find connections between the type and main point of an article and that article's length. For instance, a newspaper might have had more hard news stories than opinion; however, the opinion stories were all longer than those categorized as hard news. Findings related to length hold implications in terms of the amount of space devoted to a particular type of story, showing an increase in the level of interpretative reporting.

For the purposes of this section, length of articles was not compared between *Denver Post* Columbine coverage and *Hartford Courant* Sandy Hook coverage because of the unavailability of print copies of the *Denver Post*.

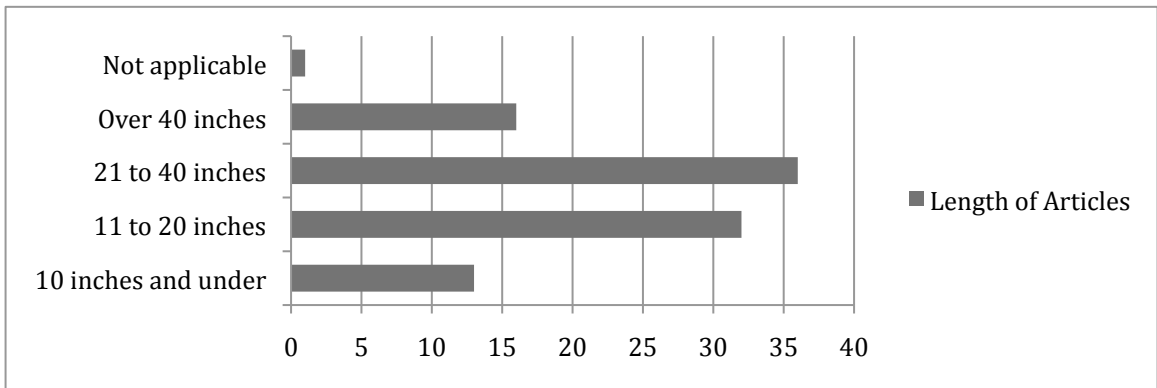
Length of articles was divided into five categories based on traditional newspaper column inches: (1) 10 inches and under (2) 11 to 20 inches (3) 21 to 40 inches (4) Over 40 inches and (5) Not applicable. All *Denver Post* articles were deemed not applicable.

#### ***The Hartford Courant's Sandy Hook Coverage***

Roughly 13.28 percent (17 of 128) of the *Hartford Courant's* articles were deemed 10 inches or shorter. About 32.03 percent (41 of 128) of the articles were 11 to 20 inches long. Opinion, hard news and feature stories were among the shortest. Prominent main points in the shorter articles included guns/gun control, victims and other.

About 36.72 percent (47 of 128) of articles were deemed 21 to 40 inches long. In this category, the majority of stories were feature, opinion and hard news. Roughly 16.41 percent (21 of 128) of the stories were over 40 inches long. Among the longest were mainly feature stories. Prominent main points in the longer articles included guns/gun control, victims and other. About 1.56 percent (2 of 128) of the stories were deemed not applicable. See *Figure 13: Length of Articles in Hartford Courant Sandy Hook Coverage*.

Figure 13: Length of Articles in *Hartford Courant* Sandy Hook Coverage



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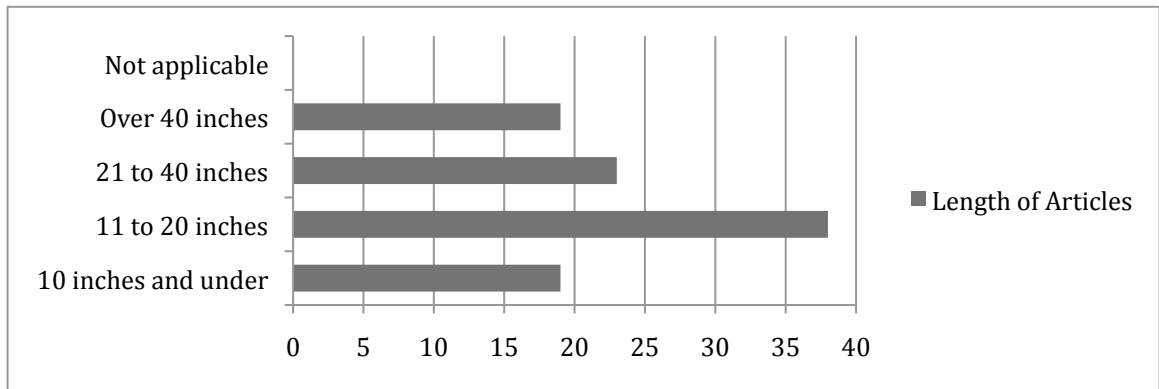
Based on the results, there is no obvious connection between the length of stories and their type and main point.

*The Chicago Tribune's Columbine Coverage*

Roughly 19.23 percent (10 of 52) of the *Chicago Tribune's* Columbine articles were deemed 10 inches or shorter. About 38.46 percent (20 of 52) of the articles were 11 to 20 inches long. Hard news and opinion articles were among the shortest. Prominent main points in the shorter articles all fell into the other category.

About 23.08 percent (12 of 52) of the articles were deemed 21 to 40 inches long. In this category, the majority of stories were either feature or opinion. Roughly 19.23 percent (10 of 52) of the stories were over 40 inches long. No stories were categorized as not applicable. See *Figure 14: Length of Articles in Chicago Tribune Columbine Coverage*. Among the longest were hard news stories. Prominent main points in the longer articles included shooting details and victims.

Figure 14: Length of Articles in *Chicago Tribune* Columbine Coverage



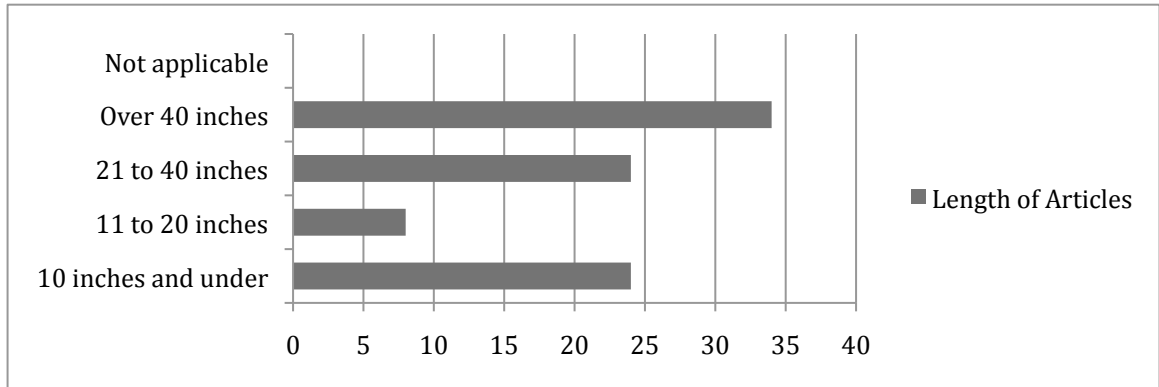
### *The Chicago Tribune's Sandy Hook Coverage*

About 23.88 percent (16 of 67) of the *Chicago Tribune's* Sandy Hook articles were deemed 10 inches or shorter. Roughly 17.91 percent (12 of 67) of the articles were 11 to 20 inches long. Hard news stories were among the shortest. Prominent main points in the shorter articles included guns/gun control and other.

About 23.88 percent (16 of 67) of the articles were deemed 21 to 40 inches long. In this category, the majority of stories were hard news, features or opinion. Roughly 34.33 percent (23 of 67) of the stories were over 40 inches long. No stories were categorized as not applicable. See *Figure 15: Length of Articles in Chicago Tribune Sandy Hook Coverage*. Among the longest were hard news stories and

features. Prominent main points in the longer articles included guns/gun control and victims.

Figure 15: Length of Articles in *Chicago Tribune* Sandy Hook Coverage



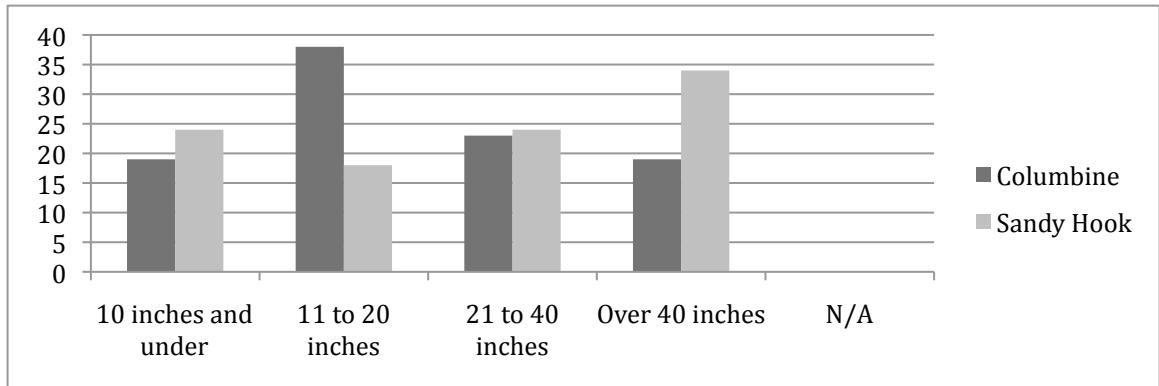
#### *Comparing National Columbine and Sandy Hook Coverage*

In comparing the *Chicago Tribune's* coverage of each shooting, the most significant change can be seen in the longest stories, categorized as more than 40 inches long. Seventy percent of Columbine coverage was hard news, while the remaining 30 percent was dedicated to feature stories. No *Chicago Tribune* story on Columbine exceeded 40 inches in length.

Sandy Hook coverage yielded different results. Only 43 percent of the longest stories were hard news. Thirty-nine percent of stories were features, and 17 percent of stories were opinion. See *Figure 16: A Comparison of Length of Articles in Chicago Tribune Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook*. The spike from zero lengthy opinion pieces to 17 percent and the decline from 70 percent hard news stories to 43 percent raise questions about the priorities of today's journalists in how they report the news.



Figure 16: A Comparison of Length of Articles in *Chicago Tribune* Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook



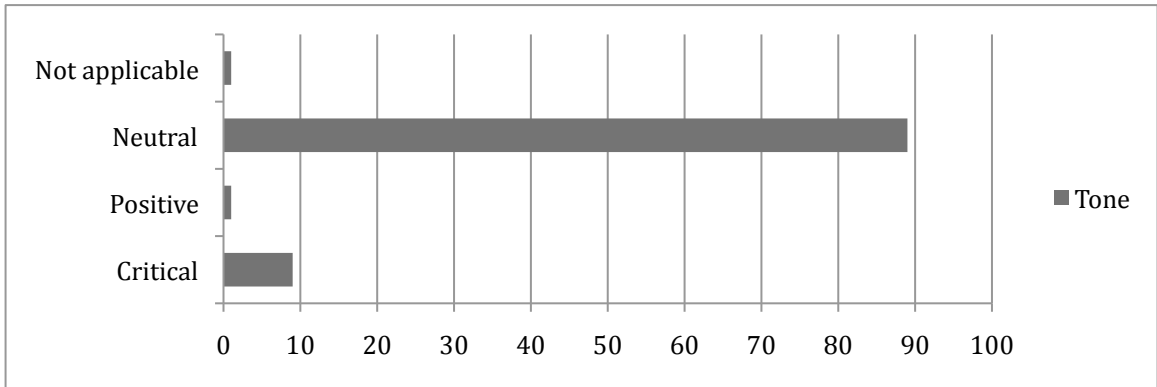
### ***Tone of Coverage***

The tone of each article was divided into one of four categories: (1) critical (2) positive (3) neutral and (4) not applicable. Articles deemed not applicable were generally transcripts of speeches that had little to no input from the newspaper itself. Thus, it was determined that those articles did not apply to the focus of the research. The tone of the articles in each paper’s coverage of the two shootings was overwhelmingly neutral.

#### *The Denver Post’s Columbine Coverage*

The *Denver Post’s* Columbine coverage was 89.36 percent (168 of 188) neutral articles, followed by a distant 9.04 percent (17 of 188) critical. About 1.06 percent (2 of 188) of the articles were positive, and .53 percent (1 of 188) were deemed not applicable. See *Figure 17: Tone of Articles in Denver Post Columbine Coverage*.

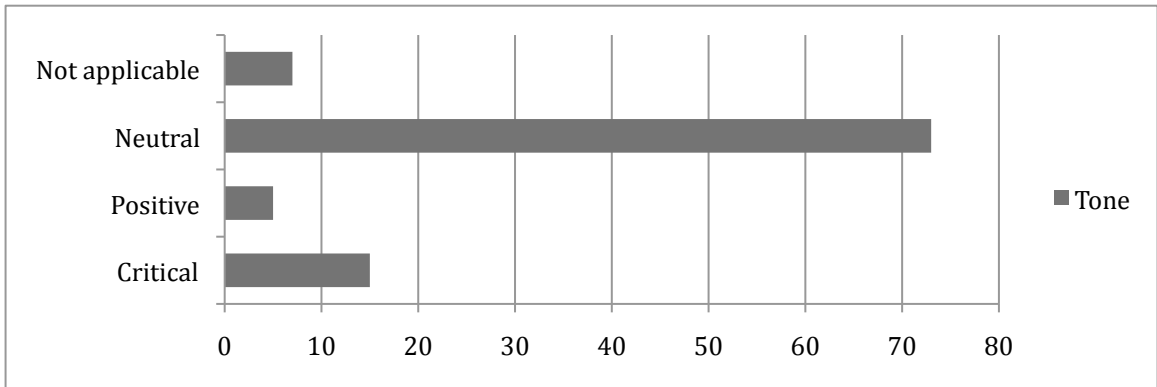
Figure 17: Tone of Articles in *Denver Post* Columbine Coverage



*The Hartford Courant's Sandy Hook Coverage*

The *Hartford Courant's* Sandy Hook coverage was 73.44 percent (94 of 128) neutral articles. About 14.84 percent (19 of 128) of the articles were deemed critical. Roughly 4.69 percent (6 of 128) of the stories were categorized as positive, and 7.03 percent (9 of 128) were deemed not applicable. See *Figure 18: Tone of Articles in Hartford Courant Sandy Hook Coverage*.

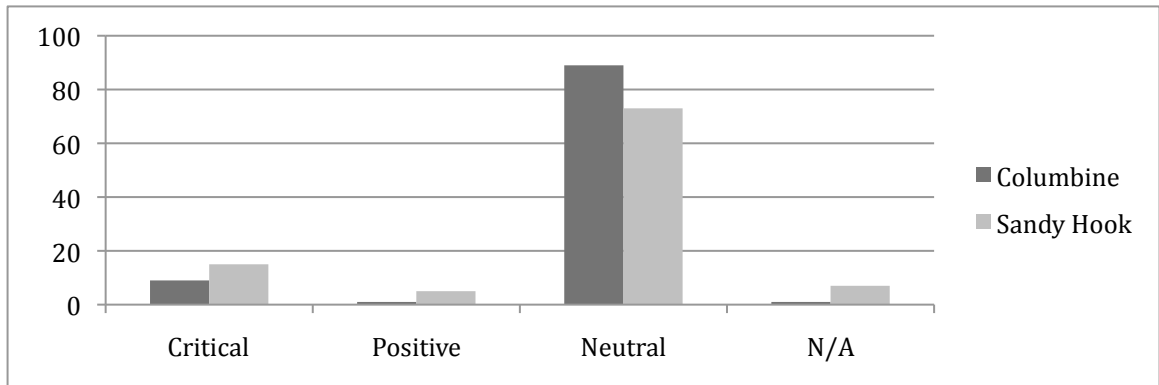
Figure 18: Tone of Articles in *Hartford Courant* Sandy Hook Coverage



### *Comparing Regional Columbine and Sandy Hook Coverage*

The increase in opinion-type articles from the *Denver Post*'s coverage in 1999 to the *Hartford Courant*'s coverage in 2012 corresponds with this increase in critical and positive articles. Between Columbine and Sandy Hook, there was a 6-percentage point increase in stories with a critical tone and a 4-percentage point increase in stories with a positive tone. See *Figure 19: A Comparison of Tone of Articles in Denver Post and Hartford Courant Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook*. With the exception of two *Hartford Courant* stories, every story denoted critical or positive was an opinion piece.

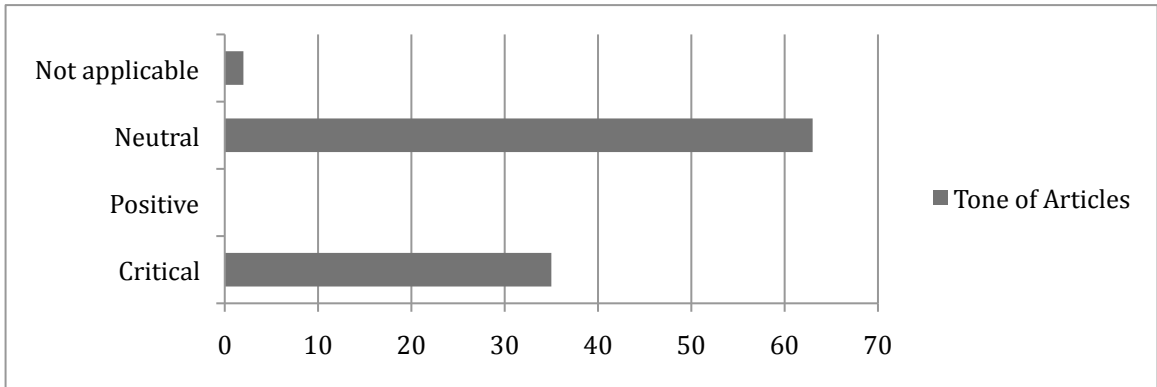
Figure 19: A Comparison of Tone of Articles in *Denver Post* and *Hartford Courant* Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook



### *The Chicago Tribune's Columbine Coverage*

The *Chicago Tribune*'s Columbine coverage was 63 percent (33 of 52) neutral articles. Less than 35 percent (18 of 52) of the articles were deemed critical. Less than 2 percent (1 of 52) of the articles were categorized as not applicable, and no stories were deemed to have a positive tone. See *Figure 20: Tone of Articles in Chicago Tribune Columbine Coverage*.

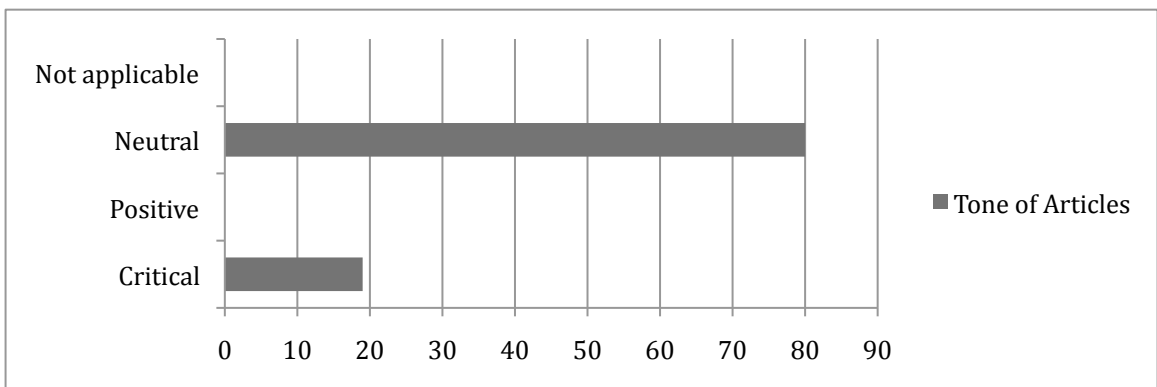
Figure 20: Tone of Articles in *Chicago Tribune* Columbine Coverage



### *The Chicago Tribune's Sandy Hook Coverage*

The *Chicago Tribune's* Sandy Hook coverage was 80.60 percent (54 of 67) articles. About 19.40 percent (13 of 67) of the stories were deemed critical. No articles were categorized as positive or not applicable. See *Figure 21: Tone of Articles in Chicago Tribune Sandy Hook Coverage*.

Figure 21: Tone of Articles in *Chicago Tribune* Sandy Hook Coverage

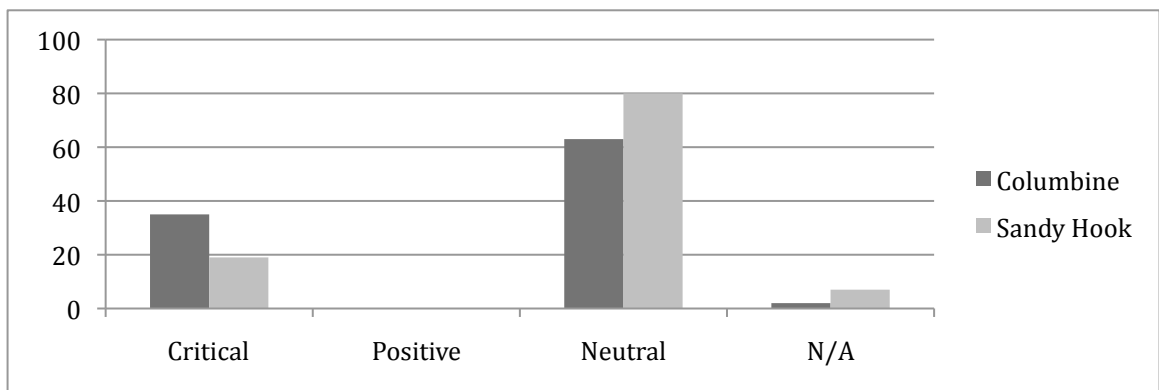


### *Comparing National Columbine and Sandy Hook Coverage*

Much like the comparison of the regional coverage of the shootings, the decrease in opinion-type articles from the *Tribune's* Columbine coverage in 1999 to

its Sandy Hook coverage in 2012 corresponds with this decrease in critical articles. Between Columbine and Sandy Hook, there was a 16 percent decrease in stories with a critical tone. See *Figure 22: A Comparison of Tone of Articles in Chicago Tribune Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook*. With the exception of one *Chicago Tribune* Columbine story, every article denoted critical was an opinion piece.

Figure 22: A Comparison of Tone of Articles in *Chicago Tribune* Coverage of Columbine and Sandy Hook



## Research Question 2

The second research question sought to determine the ways in which media coverage of school shootings has evolved since Columbine, especially when observing interpretive reporting's effect on print publications.

### *Interpretative v. Informational Reporting*

As is seen in the regional coverage of the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings, articles related to Sandy Hook took an increasingly more interpretative, opinionated approach from 1999 to 2012. This change can be seen in Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3. Overall coverage of Sandy Hook also put a heavier focus on guns/gun control, victims and mental health, implying a more politicized and less

private journalism field. Together, the increase in opinion pieces and decrease in hard news items show a shift in the priorities of the modern journalist, from telling the public what to think about to telling the public *how* to think about it.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question asks what challenges the Internet and social media pose for journalists and their traditional ethical principles today.

#### ***Social Media's Effect***

Reviewing the findings in both the literature and the codebook, it becomes apparent that prioritizing speed over accuracy is perhaps the most blatant threat the Internet and social media pose for journalists in the Digital Age.

Sandy Hook is the primary example of the beauty and the beast that is social media. Whereas the public was informed of the shooting within minutes, much of the information was inaccurate. Research showed that several coded newspaper articles referred to shooter Lanza's mother as a teacher at Sandy Hook – a mistake brought on by online rumor.

As Joanne Ostrow states, "While the media awaited word from tight-lipped authorities, reporters filled in with commentary and questions. For hours, the media got the shooter's name wrong. The Internet provided quick, incorrect misinformation. Speed trumped accuracy."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ostrow, Joanne. "News media do their best -- and worst." *The Denver Post*. December 15, 2012. [www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic](http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic) (accessed October 15, 2013).

The research indicates that the constant competitive pressure of the Internet and social media ultimately leads to errors and sloppy journalism. And this sloppiness does not stop online.

## **DISCUSSION**

The primary purpose of the current research was to determine what ethical challenges have evolved for journalists covering breaking news stories, focusing on the differences in coverage between the 1999 Columbine shooting and the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting. Three questions were developed to guide the research. These were chosen in order to focus on the obstacles facing print journalism since the advent of online and social media.

The three research questions were: (1) What are the similarities and differences of the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings in terms of the events themselves and type, main point, length and tone of news coverage? (2) How has print media coverage of these crises evolved since 1999, with special regard to interpretative reporting? and (3) What challenges has online media created for journalists and their ethical principles, especially concerning today's hypercompetitive nature of reporting and its tendency to produce more erroneous news stories?

### **Interpretation of Results**

Overall, several of the findings were consistent with the literature. Two results hold major implications for the journalism field. First, the increase in interpretive, opinion pieces shows a change in the role of the modern journalist.



Second, the advent of online and social media has created new obstacles for journalists covering breaking news.

### ***Interpretive Reporting***

Kovach and Rosenstiel state, “One of the risks of the new proliferation of outlets, talk programs, blogs, and interpretive reporting is that these forms have left verification behind. A debate between opponents arguing with false figures or purely on prejudice fails to inform. It only inflames. It takes the society nowhere.”<sup>1</sup>

Analyzing rather than informing citizens conflicts with the journalist’s loyalty to the public. A journalist’s job is to attain the information or news accurately, honestly and ethically and then supply the public with this information.

As the code says, journalists should “distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context. Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.”<sup>2</sup>

A news outlet’s mission is not to analyze this information. A journalist is expected to respect the public enough to allow citizens to draw conclusions from the provided news and make informed decisions of their own.

Journalists are considered the sense-makers, not simply talking heads forcing their opinions on others or only reinforcing preexisting opinion. In the public forum that journalism provides, “the journalist must not only make sense of the world but also make sense of the flood of information as it is being delivered to citizens.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Society of Professional Journalists. “SPJ Code of Ethics.” <http://www.spj.org/code.asp> (accessed October 15, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. 247.

Journalists must clearly separate fact from gossip or rumor; the media's role is not to dictate how the public reacts to or feels about the news.

Perhaps a better direction for journalists in the case of school shootings would be to focus on victim testimony and drawing comparisons to past shootings. By focusing on these present and historical facts and distancing themselves from analysts' speculation and journalists' own commentary, news organizations have the opportunity to maintain their integrity and credibility with the public.

### ***Speed v. Accuracy***

The Internet has come quite a long way since 1999, when news organizations were still becoming comfortable with the virtual universe. The speed of the Internet in spreading news allows citizens to receive their information more quickly and efficiently. Not only is the news spread instantaneously, a greater variety of news is also supplied to the public.

This instant, more robust news benefits the public by allowing people to access more information from any place at any time. Citizens no longer have to wait for the next day's paper or an evening broadcast to learn of the day's events. The Internet puts the news at the public's disposal, easily accessed by smart phone, tablet or computer.

Now, because of the advent of social media, journalists are considered forum moderators rather than gatekeepers of information. Major newspapers have websites and social media profiles that demand a higher level of efficiency and speed than daily papers ever have.

However, the Internet has its downfalls. Because online news travels so

quickly, speed, sensation and conjecture are often emphasized over accuracy and even-handedness. Many news organizations are more focused on “getting the scoop” than serving their first loyalty: the public.

Kira Goldenberg, associate editor at the *Columbia Journalism Review*, states, “Too often, online coverage becomes an absurd dash for clicks on incremental scoops.”<sup>4</sup>

Sandy Hook coverage demonstrates this mismanagement of priorities. What began as unverified social media posts carried over into daily newspapers, perpetuating rumor and erroneous information. As Houpt noted:

[Multiple] media outlets were forced to apologize to viewers and readers—and, in the case of some popular blogs, to take the unusual step of deleting stories—after much of the information that emerged . . . was discounted. Elements of the story that were initially reported inaccurately included the suspect's name, his mother's affiliation with the school, his own affiliation with the school, how he gained entry to the school and the murder of his brother (who is alive and well).<sup>5</sup>

The coding process of this research revealed errors regarding the shooter's mother's affiliation with the school in the newspapers—indicating that the error-prone stories of the Internet are not exclusively an online phenomenon.

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<sup>4</sup> Goldenberg, Kira. “Journalism ethics in a digital age.” *Columbia Journalism Review*. [www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/journalism\\_ethics\\_in\\_a\\_digital.php?page=all](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/journalism_ethics_in_a_digital.php?page=all) (accessed December 3, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Houpt, Simon. “Messy media coverage's trail of mistakes; News outlets and social media rush to deliver details, spreading misinformation as events unfolded.” *The Globe and Mail (Canada)*. December 17, 2012. [www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic](http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic) (accessed October 15, 2013).

News organizations that provide this unverified material to their audience are only perpetuating the public's ignorance. The news media should always aim to accurately inform, rather than quickly misinform.

### **Strengths of the Current Study**

The current study had several strengths. By comparing not only regional coverage of the shootings, but also national coverage, findings were further corroborated, demonstrating ethical issues that face the journalism field on a national scale. Additionally, coding based on the type, main point and length of stories revealed in-depth results related to the amount of space dedicated to interpretive reporting and more politicized coverage. Third, the use of two coders allowed for more accurate coding and more discussion of the stories at hand.

### **Limitations**

Although this research contributes preliminary insight to assist journalists in addressing ethical challenges, it is not without limitations. The most obvious of which is the use of an online archive for coding of articles from the *Denver Post*, which may or may not be an accurate depiction of the original print articles covering Columbine. It should be noted that the online archive contained minute errors in some articles, indicating that the stories had not been edited since their original publication.

### **Implications**

The large effects observed here hint at the ethical dilemmas that journalists face today. Journalists must reevaluate their role in the public discourse and prioritize accurate, informational reporting above opinion, conjecture and speed.

By addressing these priorities with professional journalists, familiarizing journalism students with a modern ethical code, and educating the corporate sector of the media of the importance of journalistic ethics, present and future reporters can take advantage of all print and online journalism have to offer, while also abiding by the ethical guidelines that have helped maintain credibility with the public for years.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Columbine Coding Guidelines**

1. Type: Place appropriate number in each box. Code all stories.
  1. Hard News (straight facts)
  2. Informational (i.e., something about other mass shootings in the U.S., something useful to public)
  3. Feature (will start with soft lead, giving background or anecdote)
  4. Opinion (will appear as commentary/opinion/editorial)
  5. Other
  
2. Main point of story: Place appropriate number in each box
  1. Shooting details
  2. Other shootings
  3. Guns/gun control
  4. Shooter background/motive
  5. Victims
  6. Mental Health
  7. Other
  
3. Total length: Based on estimated column inches
  1. 10 inches and under
  2. 11-20 inches
  3. 21-40 inches
  4. 40+
  5. Not applicable (i.e., for online publication)
  
4. Reference to Columbine shoot/kill/massacre: Place appropriate number in each box.
  1. First paragraph
  2. Second paragraph
  3. Grafts 3-5
  4. Grafts 6-10
  5. 11+
  6. Not applicable (At this point, the others are no longer coded.)
  
5. Reference to Littleton: Place appropriate number in each box.
  1. First paragraph
  2. Second paragraph
  3. Grafts 3-5
  4. Grafts 6-10
  5. 11+
  6. Not applicable (At this point, the others are no longer coded.)



6. Reference to Columbine: Place appropriate number in each box.
  1. First paragraph
  2. Second paragraph
  3. Grafts 3-5
  4. Grafts 6-10
  5. 11+
  6. Not applicable (At this point, the others are no longer coded.)
  
7. Tone (applies only to stories coded for having reference to shooting, Littleton or Columbine): Place appropriate number in each box.
  1. Critical (negative, appalling, it figures)
  2. Positive (i.e., focus on progress)
  3. Neutral
  4. Not applicable (Topic does not apply to research focus)

Table 2: Denver Post Columbine Coverage Codebook

#	Type	Main Point	Length	Re: shooting	Re: Littleton	Re: Columbine	Tone
1	1	1	5	1	6	1	3
2	1	1	5	1	6	1	3
3	1	4	5	1	5	1	3
4	3	4	5	1	6	1	3
5	3	7	5	1	6	1	3
6	3	1	5	4	6	1	3
7	1	4	5	1	4	1	3
8	1	4	5	1	6	1	3
9	3	1	5	1	4	3	3
10	3	7	5	3	6	2	3
11	3	1	5	3	6	6	3
12	3	6	5	3	6	1	3
13	1	7	5	1	3	1	3
14	2	6	5	1	6	1	3
15	2	2	5	1	1	6	3
16	3	7	5	6	6	1	3
17	1	3	5	1	1	1	3
18	4	7	5	1	6	6	1
19	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
20	1	7	5	3	6	1	3
21	2	7	5	6	6	3	3
22	3	1	5	5	6	1	3
23	2	6	5	6	5	6	3
24	4	7	5	4	6	6	1
25	3	7	5	2	5	2	3
26	3	7	5	4	6	4	3
27	1	1	5	1	5	1	3
28	1	3	5	1	6	1	3
29	1	4	5	1	6	1	3
30	3	4	5	3	5	3	3
31	3	1	5	4	6	6	3
32	2	7	5	1	4	4	3
33	3	6	5	3	6	2	3
34	3	1	5	1	6	1	3
35	3	5	5	1	6	1	3
36	1	4	5	1	6	1	3
37	1	7	5	3	6	1	3
38	1	1	5	1	6	2	3
39	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
40	1	7	5	4	6	4	3
41	1	5	5	2	6	1	3
42	3	7	5	1	5	1	3

Table 2: Denver Post Columbine Coverage Codebook

43	1	7	5	6	6	1	3
44	3	7	5	2	6	1	3
45	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
46	3	1	5	1	1	3	3
47	1	1	5	1	6	2	3
48	1	5	5	1	6	6	3
49	1	7	5	1	5	1	3
50	2	6	5	2	6	2	3
51	1	7	5	2	6	2	3
52	3	7	5	3	6	2	3
53	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
54	1	7	5	1	3	1	3
55	2	7	5	1	6	1	3
56	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
57	1	3	5	1	6	1	3
58	3	1	5	1	2	2	3
59	4	7	5	1	6	1	1
60	4	7	5	2	6	2	1
61	4	7	5	2	6	1	1
62	4	7	5	1	6	1	1
63	4	7	5	2	6	1	1
64	4	3	5	2	6	5	1
65	1	7	5	1	4	1	3
66	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
67	3	7	5	1	3	1	3
68	3	7	5	1	6	1	3
69	3	7	5	1	1	1	3
70	1	1	5	1	5	1	3
71	1	3	5	1	6	1	3
72	1	3	5	1	6	1	3
73	3	4	5	2	6	2	3
74	1	4	5	1	6	1	3
75	1	4	5	1	6	1	3
76	3	5	5	1	6	1	3
77	1	1	5	1	6	1	3
78	3	7	5	3	6	1	3
79	3	7	5	3	6	2	3
80	1	7	5	1	6	2	3
81	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
82	3	7	5	5	4	5	3
83	3	2	5	1	5	1	3
84	1	7	5	3	6	1	3
85	1	7	5	1	6	1	3

Table 2: Denver Post Columbine Coverage Codebook

86	1	3	5	1	6	1	3
87	3	7	5	3	6	3	3
88	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
89	2	7	5	2	4	1	3
90	2	5	5	4	4	5	3
91	4	7	5	3	6	2	1
92	4	7	5	3	6	3	3
93	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
94	1	7	5	2	6	1	3
95	1	1	5	1	6	1	3
96	3	7	5	1	6	1	3
97	1	1	5	1	6	2	3
98	1	4	5	1	3	1	3
99	3	7	5	2	6	2	3
100	1	3	5	1	6	1	3
101	1	7	5	2	6	2	3
102	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
103	3	5	5	1	6	1	3
104	3	5	5	1	6	1	3
105	3	5	5	3	5	3	3
106	3	5	5	1	6	1	3
107	3	5	5	1	6	2	3
108	2	5	5	1	6	6	3
109	3	7	5	1	6	1	3
110	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
111	3	1	5	3	6	1	3
112	3	7	5	1	4	1	3
113	3	7	5	3	1	3	3
114	3	2	5	2	1	2	3
115	3	7	5	1	6	1	3
116	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
117	1	7	5	1	3	1	3
118	3	7	5	3	4	1	3
119	4	3	5	6	6	6	1
120	1	7	5	2	4	1	3
121	1	4	5	1	6	1	3
122	1	3	5	1	6	4	3
123	1	3	5	4	6	1	3
124	1	7	5	3	6	3	3
125	3	7	5	3	6	3	3
126	1	5	5	1	1	1	3
127	3	5	5	2	6	2	3
128	3	5	5	2	6	1	3

Table 2: Denver Post Columbine Coverage Codebook

129	2	5	5	1	6	6	3
130	3	5	5	2	6	2	3
131	3	7	5	2	5	3	3
132	3	7	5	1	6	1	3
133	3	7	5	4	6	4	3
134	3	7	5	6	6	3	3
135	3	6	5	1	6	1	3
136	3	6	5	1	6	1	3
137	3	7	5	1	4	1	3
138	3	7	5	4	6	4	3
139	1	7	5	3	3	1	3
140	4	6	5	1	2	1	3
141	4	6	5	1	6	1	2
142	4	7	5	1	4	1	1
143	4	3	5	2	6	2	1
144	4	7	5	3	2	2	1
145	3	5	5	6	6	4	3
146	4	7	5	4	6	4	1
147	3	5	5	1	5	1	3
148	1	4	5	1	6	1	3
149	3	5	5	1	6	1	3
150	3	7	5	3	5	3	3
151	3	5	5	3	5	1	3
152	5	7	5	4	6	1	4
153	3	5	5	1	6	1	3
154	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
155	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
156	3	4	5	2	5	2	3
157	3	6	5	1	6	4	3
158	3	5	5	3	6	3	3
159	3	7	5	1	6	1	3
160	1	7	5	4	6	4	3
161	2	5	5	1	6	1	3
162	4	7	5	1	6	1	1
163	4	7	5	1	6	1	2
164	4	7	5	3	6	3	1
165	1	3	5	1	6	1	3
166	3	7	5	3	6	3	3
167	3	7	5	1	6	1	3
168	3	5	5	2	6	1	3
169	3	5	5	1	5	1	3
170	3	5	5	1	6	1	3
171	3	5	5	1	6	1	3

Table 2: Denver Post Columbine Coverage Codebook

172	3	5	5	1	6	1	3
173	3	5	5	2	6	2	3
174	3	5	5	1	6	1	3
175	3	7	5	4	5	1	3
176	3	6	5	6	6	3	3
177	1	7	5	4	6	1	3
178	3	7	5	3	6	1	3
179	3	6	5	6	4	1	3
180	3	1	5	1	6	2	3
181	3	6	5	6	6	1	3
182	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
183	3	7	5	1	6	1	3
184	1	7	5	1	6	3	3
185	1	7	5	1	6	1	3
186	2	5	5	2	6	1	3
187	1	7	5	3	6	3	3
188	4	7	5	4	6	4	1

Table 3: Chicago Tribune Columbine Coverage Codebook

#	Type	Main Point	Length	Re: shooting	Re: Littleton	Re: Columbine	Tone
1	1	1	4	1	6	3	3
2	1	1	4	1	5	1	3
3	1	4	1	4	6	1	3
4	1	7	2	2	1	1	3
5	3	2	2	1	1	1	3
6	1	4	4	1	5	4	3
7	3	7	3	2	2	4	3
8	1	1	4	1	5	1	3
9	4	7	1	1	6	6	1
10	4	7	2	1	4	6	1
11	1	3	1	1	3	6	3
12	1	3	2	1	6	6	3
13	4	7	3	1	3	6	1
14	3	5	3	3	6	4	3
15	1	4	2	1	5	1	3
16	1	7	4	1	1	6	3
17	3	7	1	1	1	6	3
18	3	6	2	1	5	6	3
19	4	3	2	4	1	6	1
20	4	7	2	1	2	6	1
21	4	7	3	3	3	6	1
22	1	1	2	2	6	4	3
23	1	1	4	1	5	1	3
24	3	5	3	2	4	1	3
25	1	4	2	2	6	2	3
26	3	7	3	1	1	2	3
27	4	3	2	2	2	2	1
28	4	3	2	3	3	6	1
29	1	1	2	1	5	1	3
30	3	5	4	2	3	2	3
31	1	7	1	1	3	3	3
32	3	7	2	2	2	6	1
33	1	4	4	1	5	1	3
34	3	5	4	3	3	3	3
35	4	7	2	4	6	4	1
36	4	7	1	1	3	6	1
37	2	1	2	1	1	1	3
38	1	7	1	2	2	6	3
39	4	7	2	1	1	1	1
40	4	7	2	2	2	2	1
41	4	7	3	1	6	6	1
42	4	7	3	1	1	6	3

Table 3: Chicago Tribune Columbine Coverage Codebook

43	4	7	1	1	6	1	4
44	4	7	2	1	2	1	1
45	3	5	4	2	5	2	3
46	3	4	3	1	3	1	3
47	3	4	2	2	2	2	3
48	1	7	1	1	6	1	3
49	4	7	3	1	1	6	1
50	1	4	3	1	5	1	3
51	4	4	1	3	3	4	1
52	4	3	3	3	3	3	1



## **Sandy Hook Coding Guidelines**

1. Type: Place appropriate number in each box. Code all stories.
  1. Hard News (straight facts)
  2. Informational (i.e., something about other mass shootings in the U.S., something useful to public)
  3. Feature (will start with soft lead, giving background or anecdote)
  4. Opinion (will appear as commentary/opinion/editorial)
  5. Other
  
2. Main point of story: Place appropriate number in each box
  1. Shooting details
  2. Other shootings
  3. Guns/gun control
  4. Shooter background/motive
  5. Victims
  6. Mental Health
  7. Other
  
3. Total length: Based on estimated column inches
  1. 10 inches and under
  2. 11-20 inches
  3. 21-40 inches
  4. 40+
  5. Not applicable (i.e., for online publication)
  
4. Reference to Sandy Hook shoot/kill/massacre: Place appropriate number in each box.
  1. First paragraph
  2. Second paragraph
  3. Grafts 3-5
  4. Grafts 6-10
  5. 11+
  6. Not applicable (At this point, the others are no longer coded.)
  
5. Reference to Newtown: Place appropriate number in each box.
  1. First paragraph
  2. Second paragraph
  3. Grafts 3-5
  4. Grafts 6-10
  5. 11+
  6. Not applicable (At this point, the others are no longer coded.)
  
6. Reference to Sandy Hook: Place appropriate number in each box.
  1. First paragraph
  2. Second paragraph

3. Grafts 3-5
  4. Grafts 6-10
  5. 11+
  6. Not applicable (At this point, the others are no longer coded.)
- 
7. Tone (applies only to stories coded for having reference to shooting, Newtown or Sandy Hook): Place appropriate number in each box.
    1. Critical (negative, appalling, it figures)
    2. Positive (i.e., focus on progress)
    3. Neutral
    4. Not applicable (Topic does not apply to research focus)

Table 4: Hartford Courant Sandy Hook Coverage Codebook

#	Type	Main Point	Length	Re: shooting	Re: Newtown	Re: Sandy Hook	Tone
1	1	1	4	1	1	1	3
2	3	5	4	3	1	3	3
3	3	1	4	1	2	2	3
4	3	7	4	3	3	3	3
5	3	5	3	1	1	6	1
6	2	2	2	1	6	6	3
7	4	5	4	1	1	6	4
8	2	2	2	1	6	6	3
9	4	3	1	1	1	3	1
10	4	3	3	1	1	3	1
11	3	5	4	1	1	1	3
12	3	5	4	1	1	1	3
13	2	6	4	2	1	6	3
14	5	7	2	6	6	1	4
15	2	7	2	6	1	1	3
16	2	2	1	1	6	6	3
17	2	2	2	1	6	6	3
18	1	1	4	1	6	1	3
19	3	4	4	3	1	3	3
20	3	5	4	1	3	1	3
21	4	3	3	5	5	6	1
22	4	5	2	1	1	6	4
23	1	7	3	2	2	2	3
24	1	3	4	1	6	1	3
25	3	5	4	2	4	2	3
26	3	5	3	2	3	6	3
27	1	7	1	3	1	3	3
28	4	3	4	1	1	6	1
29	4	3	2	3	4	4	1
30	4	5	3	1	1	6	4
31	3	5	3	1	3	3	3
32	1	7	3	1	1	1	3
33	3	7	4	4	4	4	1
34	3	3	4	2	2	4	3
35	4	5	2	1	2	3	4
36	1	3	2	1	1	4	3
37	3	5	4	1	3	1	3
38	1	1	4	1	1	2	3
39	3	5	3	3	3	3	3
40	4	3	2	2	2	2	1
41	4	7	3	2	1	1	2
42	2	5	3	1	1	3	3

Table 4: Hartford Courant Sandy Hook Coverage Codebook

43	4	5	3	2	3	3	4
44	3	7	3	3	3	6	3
45	4	5	2	1	1	1	4
46	3	5	4	2	5	3	3
47	1	5	4	2	5	1	3
48	1	6	2	2	1	2	3
49	4	5	1	1	1	6	2
50	2	5	3	1	2	1	3
51	3	7	4	4	4	4	3
52	3	5	3	3	3	3	3
53	2	6	3	1	4	4	3
54	4	3	1	2	2	6	1
55	4	3	3	2	2	2	1
56	4	7	3	2	2	2	2
57	1	3	2	2	2	2	3
58	1	3	3	2	5	1	3
59	4	3	3	1	1	6	3
60	1	4	3	1	2	1	3
61	3	1	2	2	6	1	3
62	1	7	4	3	3	1	3
63	4	3	3	3	3	3	1
64	5	5	2	1	3	1	4
65	3	5	3	1	1	1	3
66	2	6	4	1	1	1	3
67	3	7	4	2	3	2	3
68	3	3	4	3	3	1	3
69	3	5	4	2	4	2	3
70	1	4	3	1	5	1	3
71	2	5	3	1	5	1	3
72	1	3	2	1	1	5	3
73	1	3	2	1	1	3	3
74	1	7	4	2	1	2	3
75	2	6	3	1	4	4	3
76	1	3	3	1	1	6	3
77	1	3	3	1	3	1	3
78	4	7	2	2	1	2	2
79	4	3	3	3	1	1	1
80	4	3	4	1	1	6	1
81	4	3	2	1	1	6	1
82	4	7	2	1	1	1	1
83	1	7	2	1	1	6	3
84	1	7	2	4	4	4	3
85	1	7	3	1	1	6	3

Table 4: Hartford Courant Sandy Hook Coverage Codebook

86	1	6	2	1	1	6	3
87	3	7	3	2	2	2	3
88	3	5	2	2	1	2	3
89	4	2	3	2	5	2	1
90	1	3	4	1	1	3	3
91	3	5	4	1	1	1	3
92	1	4	3	1	1	3	3
93	3	4	3	1	5	6	3
94	2	5	4	1	5	1	3
95	3	7	2	3	3	3	3
96	3	7	1	1	6	3	3
97	1	2	1	1	3	1	3
98	3	7	4	2	2	4	3
99	3	7	1	2	1	2	3
100	1	5	3	1	1	4	3
101	4	6	1	1	6	1	1
102	4	7	2	1	1	6	2
103	4	7	2	1	1	6	3
104	1	3	2	3	3	6	3
105	3	7	3	3	1	3	3
106	3	7	2	2	2	6	3
107	3	5	2	2	1	6	3
108	3	5	1	3	2	3	3
109	3	7	4	1	1	1	3
110	3	7	2	2	1	2	3
111	4	7	2	4	1	6	3
112	1	3	3	1	1	4	3
113	3	5	4	1	4	1	3
114	2	7	3	3	1	1	3
115	2	5	4	1	3	1	3
116	1	5	1	1	1	2	3
117	1	3	3	1	1	6	3
118	3	6	3	1	1	2	3
119	3	7	3	3	1	3	3
120	4	7	2	1	3	6	3
121	4	6	2	2	2	2	1
122	4	7	3	3	3	3	3
123	4	7	3	2	2	6	3
124	1	3	2	1	1	1	3
125	3	5	2	2	4	2	2
126	4	7	4	1	1	5	4
127	1	7	4	5	5	5	3
128	4	7	3	3	3	6	1

Table 5: Chicago Tribune Sandy Hook Coverage Codebook

#	Type	Main Point	Length	Re: shooting	Re: Newtown	Re: Sandy Hook	Tone
1	3	7	4	2	5	6	3
2	1	1	4	1	2	2	3
3	2	6	1	1	6	6	3
4	1	1	4	1	1	2	3
5	1	7	3	1	2	6	3
6	1	4	3	3	3	3	3
7	4	7	1	2	2	6	1
8	3	2	3	1	3	6	3
9	1	1	4	1	6	1	3
10	1	7	3	2	2	2	3
11	4	2	4	1	6	1	1
12	1	3	4	1	6	6	3
13	3	3	1	3	3	6	3
14	2	6	2	1	6	6	3
15	1	3	1	3	3	6	3
16	4	7	4	1	5	1	3
17	4	5	4	2	4	6	1
18	1	1	4	1	3	3	3
19	1	7	1	1	2	6	3
20	1	5	4	1	4	1	3
21	3	4	4	3	1	3	3
22	2	2	2	1	1	6	3
23	1	3	3	1	5	3	3
24	1	7	1	2	2	6	3
25	3	7	2	1	4	4	3
26	3	7	4	1	1	4	3
27	3	5	4	1	1	1	3
28	1	7	1	1	1	1	3
29	1	4	2	3	1	6	3
30	1	3	1	1	4	6	3
31	4	3	2	4	6	6	1
32	4	7	1	1	1	1	3
33	5	3	1	1	1	6	3
34	1	3	4	2	2	6	3
35	3	5	4	2	2	3	3
36	1	3	4	1	3	6	3
37	1	7	2	3	3	6	3
38	1	3	3	1	2	2	3
39	1	7	3	1	1	6	3
40	1	3	1	2	2	6	3
41	4	3	3	1	6	5	1
42	4	3	3	4	4	6	3

Table 5: Chicago Tribune Sandy Hook Coverage Codebook

43	4	7	2	2	6	2	1
44	5	7	1	2	2	6	3
45	1	3	4	1	1	6	3
46	4	3	3	2	6	3	1
47	3	2	4	3	6	6	3
48	3	5	4	3	2	3	3
49	1	3	1	1	6	6	3
50	3	5	3	1	1	3	3
51	1	3	2	1	1	6	3
52	1	6	2	1	5	6	3
53	4	6	4	3	3	6	1
54	4	3	2	4	4	4	1
55	5	7	1	2	2	6	3
56	1	3	4	3	5	5	3
57	3	3	4	3	2	3	3
58	3	5	4	2	2	2	3
59	4	3	2	1	1	6	1
60	4	3	3	1	1	6	1
61	1	3	3	3	3	6	3
62	3	5	3	1	3	1	3
63	1	3	1	1	6	6	3
64	3	5	3	2	2	2	3
65	3	6	2	3	6	6	3
66	4	7	1	1	1	6	1
67	4	7	3	3	3	6	1

## **APPENDIX B**

### **SPJ Code of Ethics**

#### ***Preamble***

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

The SPJ Code of Ethics is voluntarily embraced by thousands of journalists, regardless of place or platform, and is widely used in newsrooms and classrooms as a guide for ethical behavior. The code is intended not as a set of “rules” but as a resource for ethical decision-making. It is not – nor can it be under the First Amendment – legally enforceable.

#### ***Seek Truth and Report It***

Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information



as possible on sources' reliability.

— Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.

— Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.

— Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.

— Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.

— Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story

— Never plagiarize.

— Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.

— Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.

— Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.

— Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.

— Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.

— Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.

— Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between

the two.

— Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

### ***Minimize Harm***

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.

Journalists should:

— Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage.

Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.

— Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.

— Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.

— Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.

— Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.

— Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.

— Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.

— Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

### ***Act Independently***

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.

Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

### ***Be Accountable***

Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.

Journalists should:

- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

*The SPJ Code of Ethics is voluntarily embraced by thousands of writers, editors and other news professionals. The present version of the code was adopted by the 1996 SPJ National Convention, after months of study and debate among the Society's members.*

*Sigma Delta Chi's first Code of Ethics was borrowed from the American Society of*

*Newspaper Editors in 1926. In 1973, Sigma Delta Chi wrote its own code, which was revised in 1984, 1987 and 1996.*