

**Parkland: How Media Influences the Gun Debate**

A Thesis Presented

by

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Submitted to the School of Public and Environmental Affairs  
Indiana University-Bloomington in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

HONORS PROGRAM

April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018

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Approved as to style and content by:

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Mentor

## **DEDICATIONS**

This thesis is dedicated to the entire community of Parkland, Florida. The students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School have truly inspired me throughout the production of this research. The activism and strength displayed by the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas in the past two months indicates that a new generation of advocates will ensure their voices are heard. May we all never turn a blind eye to what is right, and not stop fighting until tragedies like these become part of the past. #NeverAgain.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Thank you to my academic mentor, Paul Helmke for guiding me through this semester. I sincerely appreciate all of the support, advice, and time you spent on making this thesis come to life. Your knowledge of the subject and policy was extremely crucial throughout the development and execution of this assignment. It was truly an opportunity to learn from you on a level that not many undergraduate students have the chance to do. Thanks to Mr. Helmke and the rest of the School of Public and Environmental Affairs Honors Program, I've been able to complete one of the greatest feats as well as successes of my Undergraduate experience.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Parkland: How Media Influences the Gun Debate**

MAY 2018

JADE MASTROPIETRO, B.S.P.A, INDIANA UNIVERSITY-BLOOMINGTON

Under the direction of: Paul Helmke

This thesis presents the media's, specifically television's, role in presenting the tragedy of Parkland to the greater public. News networks that resonate with particular ideologies have displayed the tendency to differentiate in reporting styles. The networks reviewed for the purposes of this study were FOX and CNN due to their particular "bias", and political views of their audiences. Previous work has not yet addressed tragedies as recent as Parkland, and this thesis presents a unique case study on how observable a network's stance on guns is. The topic was further developed by researching media bias, analyzing transcripts, and generating network coverage volume of "gun control". In the weeks after the tragedy, FOX news did mention "gun control" more than their ideological opposite, CNN. The frequency of the phrase "gun control" was a deflection mechanism and had no correlation with the network's beliefs. FOX had a tendency to attribute the causation and solutions to Parkland as issues that do not pertain to guns. CNN typically proposed action for gun legislation. The thesis further delves into a review of network programs that occur to generate discussion as well promote a particular issue as salient. Lastly, the partisan split furthered by the network's reporting styles has implications for the future of media and subsequent public opinion. It is imperative for viewers of both networks to understand the origin of their news and to remain politically curious when seeking knowledge.

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## INTRODUCTION

On Valentine's Day 2018, the gun debate would be changed forever as seventeen people, both students and faculty of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School were senselessly murdered by a formerly expelled student. Parkland, Florida, is an affluent suburb that around thirty-two thousand people call home. In 2017, the National Council for Home Safety and Security ranked Parkland as the number #1 Safest City in Florida, a figure based on the rarity of violent crimes that occur within a town. In a matter of days, a once safe-haven for families became a hotbed for political debate.

Almost twenty years ago, a shooting at Columbine High School, appalled the nation and became the worst high school shooting in the history of the United States. As of February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School ousted Columbine as one of the ten deadliest mass shootings in modern U.S. history. Out of these ten shootings, seven occurred in the new millennium and six of them in just this decade. Three of the shootings that occurred in this millennium were on school property, including primary, secondary, and higher education facilities. Following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012 that took the lives of twenty children ranging in ages from six to seven, the debate for gun control was reignited. To dismay of many, no piece of legislation was able to pass on a national level despite that tragedy.

Since Sandy Hook, yet another school and community has had to suffer the repercussions of a tragic mass shooting due to the lack of gun regulations in this country. Unlike Sandy Hook, the students of Parkland are much older, have access to social media, and have the competency to vocalize the injustices they are witnessing. School shootings are appalling regardless of political affiliation, but subsequent proposals for change typically are tied to the orthodoxies of one's party. Parkland, like every mass shooting that has occurred before, is in the limelight. The

tragedy is dominating headlines, generating news alerts on cell-phones, and is highly contested on Facebook news feeds. The way in which various media outlets project the Parkland debate will have an impact on what the public finds to be salient and the response that follows.

Television was the media outlet of choice for the purpose of this analysis because there are only so many events a network can report on in a day. Hence, networks have to be particularly selective about what topics they deem relevant enough to occupy their reports on a given day. This paper will delve into how television has the ability to dictate to the general public which issues should be of concern by employing different tactics. A network's ability to achieve the latter will be further discussed by retracting statistics on coverage volume, analyzing archived transcripts, and interpreting the subsequent effects on the public and their consumption habits.

## **TELEVISION NEWS**

In the wake of the Parkland massacre, the general public has been exposed to the ills of media partisanship in television news. The differences in reporting, coverage, and proposed solutions have furthered the ideological divide amongst the public. The manner in which these news stations project the debate on the true causes behind the massacre and whether guns are actually the source to blame is evidence of networks pursuing their broader agendas. Whether the general public agrees with or doubts the issues proposed by a network is dependent on direct experience, external knowledge, common sense, and emotional thresholds like fear or anger.<sup>1</sup> In order to be a well-rounded citizen, it is beneficial to consider and formulate arguments on all sides of the gun debate. Exposure to a multitude of opinions is necessary, especially when it

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Happer and Greg Philo, "The Role of Media in the Construction of Public Belief and Social Change," 1 (2013): 328.

comes to guns, because it is such a highly contested argument, and there is no clear-cut policy solution on either side.

Television news networks tackled and reported the various causes and details on Parkland shooting in accordance with a particular angle. A television network's stance on the Parkland debate can be determined through the Global Database of Events, Language and Tone (GDELT) project, and conducting further textual analysis of transcripts retrieved from LexisNexis. For purposes of this analysis, the news stations under evaluation will be FOX news and CNN after careful consideration of multiple media bias information outlets. According to the Media Bias Chart for 2018, CNN skews Neutral to Liberal, while FOX is Hyper-Partisan Conservative (Figure 1). The Media Bias/Fact Check website, groups CNN with a Left Bias because of its

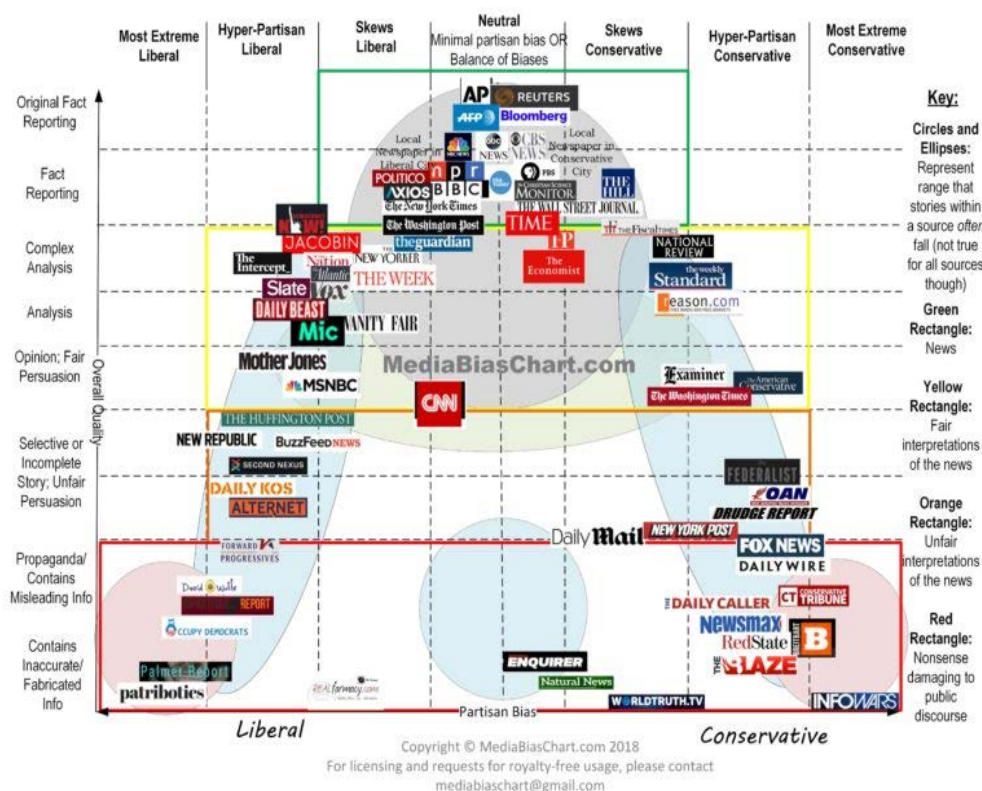


Figure 1: Media Bias Chart (Source:www.allgeneralizationsarefalse.com)

liberal agenda-setting tendencies. The Media Bias/Fact Check website administers FOX a Right Bias because of its conservative agenda-setting tendencies. Lastly, the American Press Institute, a non-profit that conducts educational research on news media, statistically categorized the ideologies of audiences varying by their news source of choice. The results generate the percent of people who get their news from a particular source and their corresponding political affiliations. The study concluded that, “Republicans are more likely to name FOX (40 percent) than either Independents (16 percent) or Democrats (7 percent). Democrats, by contrast, are more likely to name CNN (30 percent) than independents (20 percent) or Republicans (18 percent).”<sup>2</sup> The partisan split in viewership amongst Democrats and Republicans has its consequences, because viewers are only exposed to certain issues that were deemed salient by their particular network of choice.

#### COVERAGE HABITS OF NETWORKS

The manner in which a network covers Parkland can reveal the underlying purpose behind their particular stance. The GDELT project Television Explorer retracts data from the platform’s online-based Television News Archive. A Volume Timeline (Figure 2) compares airtime across the days entered into a search query and then produces a visualization of the time and the percent of airtime devoted to a term or terms of interest. Upon entering a query, the platform extracts the requested term from the Archive and divides the transcripts into 15-second increments. The percentage generated is the amount of airtime in those 15-second blocks that reported on the term of interest.

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<sup>2</sup> “How Much Republicans and Democrats Trust ‘Their’ Media,” 31 May 2017, [www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/political-party-trust](http://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/political-party-trust).

To measure the percent of airtime spent on gun control, the inputs into the GDELT query are as follows: “gun control” AND (Station:CNN OR Station:FOX NEWS) AND PublicationDate>=02/14/2018 AND PublicationDate<=03/06/2018. For clarification, entering the search is extremely simple, and it is done through a drop-down menu, where this specific input into the GDELT explorer. The platform then generates the request and produces the search results.

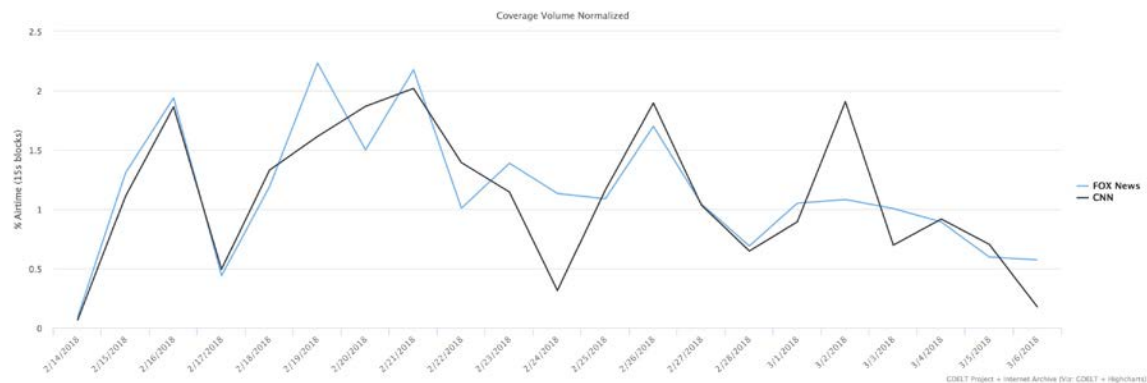


Figure 2: Coverage Volume of “gun control” by date and % of airtime

The Station Chart (Figure 3) is automatically depicted under the Coverage Volume chart in the results. The only difference is, the Station Chart combines the dates entered into the search, which were from the day of the shooting on February 14<sup>th</sup> to March 6<sup>th</sup>. The Station Chart organizes the data in a bar chart by news station which enables direct comparison between the

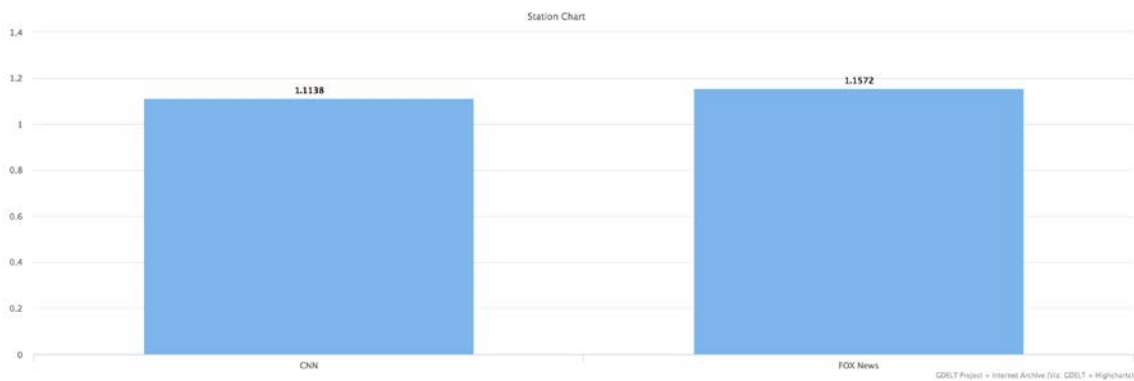


Figure 3: Station Chart of “gun control” by % of airtime

news station coverage on “gun control”.

The results of the query show that the frequency of the phrase “gun control” is extremely prevalent among the networks after the Parkland shooting. According to the results of the GDELT Television analysis query, the right-leaning news station, FOX, mentioned the phrase “gun control” slightly more than its left-leaning competitor, CNN. An advantage of the GDELT query is that it enables extraction of data into an Excel spreadsheet in order to conduct further statistical analyses. To arise at more statistically sound figures to conceptualize the amount of airtime spent on “gun control” on a given day, a pivot table was generated and all numbers were converted into percentages. By converting the numbers into percentages, comparisons and further conclusions on airtime can be generated.

The spikes in airtime as displayed on the Coverage Volume chart correlate with the newly calculated percentages, displaying the largest gaps in coverage below. According to Figure 4, on February 24<sup>th</sup>, the phrase “gun control” was mentioned almost four times more on FOX than on CNN on that day. The figure calculated in the Grand Total was generated from all the dates in the query, and it still depicts a slight domination of airtime devoted to “gun control” compared to CNN.

Date:	2/24/18	3/2/18	3/5/18	Total:
CNN	21.75%	63.80%	68.19%	49.68%
FOXNEWS	78.25%	36.20%	31.81%	50.32%
Grand Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Figure 4: Comparison in percentages of airtime devoted to “gun control” depicting the most prominent differences.

CNN’s largest hike of mentions on the dates of March 2<sup>nd</sup> and March 5<sup>th</sup> (Figure 2) were attributed to an Anderson Cooper segment questioning Trump’s stance on “gun control” after his

meeting with the NRA<sup>3</sup>. The latter was to discuss the Florida State legislatures measures to pass a “gun control” bill in light of the Parkland shooting while simultaneously pinning Trump’s measures against action already taken<sup>4</sup>. The accrual in mentions on CNN were applicable to the events occurring on the given day.

FOX’s political inclinations do not align with the data (Figure 4) that accrued as a result of the increase in mentions of the phrase “gun control”. Due to FOX’s right-leaning bias, it’s typically unexpected that FOX would spare airtime to discuss something they so inherently oppose. In order to debunk that notion, it is imperative to conduct a textual analysis of news transcripts to determine the causation behind these large differences in reporting. LexisNexis is one of the largest online database services in the world and has transcripts of a wide variety of news. To find these transcripts for February 24<sup>th</sup>, the necessary input is to search “gun control” and narrow the results down by “news transcripts”, “FOX News Network”, followed by the date in question “2/24/18-2/24/18”. The result was one transcript, titled “Trump calls for hardening schools. Did FBI miss the signs?” In the transcript, the phrase “gun control” was mentioned 7 times in the 13 minutes and 45 second duration of the segment.

Although the phrase “gun control” was mentioned more on FOX in total, and extremely frequently on the 24<sup>th</sup>, this does not mean that right-leaning news stations are necessarily for it. Essentially, without GDELT’s feature of “Top Clips” at the bottom of the generated query search, and further textual analysis of the transcript on LexisNexis, one could be inclined to assume that FOX’s stance on gun control is similar to that of CNN’s.

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<sup>3</sup> “NYT: Trump Asked Kelly For Help Pushing Out Ivanka, Kushner; NRA: Pres. Trump Doesn’t Want Gun Control.” *CNN*, 2 March 2018, *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

<sup>4</sup> “Winter Olympics Reopen Relationship with South and North Korea.” *CNN*, 5 March 2018, *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

FOX's mentions of the phrase "gun control", specifically on February 24<sup>th</sup>, was evidence of deflecting and further application of the cause and reasoning behind the Parkland massacre to another attribute. The continuous mention of "gun control" was to critique the concept and bolster the argument that guns were not to blame for the Parkland massacre. The more the host and guests questioned and criticized proposed gun control measures opened the dialogue for other solutions. This was done by citing mental illness among other causes and by rendering gun control as something that either won't be passed or breaks the law. To introduce the story after Trump proposed new measures, the host, Paul Gigot questioned "whether or not this event in Florida has really changed fundamentally the politics of gun control."<sup>5</sup> The frequency of the mentions of "gun control" was to relay to the viewers the importance of the debate, and the threat by left-leaning ideologies to the preservation of the Second Amendment. FOX contributor Dan Henninger from the Wall Street Journal stated that when "you raise the word ban, you also raise the Second Amendment and Republicans fall off the train of doing anything about gun control...once the Democrats start pushing bans, the issue falls apart."<sup>6</sup> Throughout the report, debate ensued resonating with the station's ideological stance by pitting Republicans and Democrats against each other. The frequent mentions of "gun control" was evidence of provocation and was used to further political divisions among party ties and the opinion on guns.

#### TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF NETWORK ANGLE

Following the critical analysis of transcripts, video, and hard data it is clear that news stations such as FOX and CNN depending on their agendas and ideological splits have different proposals as to what the possible solution to the Parkland debate and the future implications of

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<sup>5</sup> "Trump calls for hardening schools. Did the FBI miss the signs.", *FOX News Network*, 24 Feb. 2018, *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



guns is. As shown by news transcripts, CNN's proposals for change typically included those that would lessen the severity or mitigate the chances of future incidents. CNN typically called for action, activism, and advocacy in lieu of the tragedy. When searching the LexisNexis database with the search query of "gun" and "Parkland", with extra search terms as "action" and "advocacy" or "activism" and "change", through specifically CNN news transcripts from the dates of the incident, up until March 6<sup>th</sup>, CNN newscasters and guests proposed mobilizing for the gun control cause. Habitual CNN commentator Angela Rye on February 21<sup>st</sup>, a week after the incident stated that current proposals will not be successful, and that "We have to do something that results in real change."<sup>7</sup> On March 4<sup>th</sup>, CNN hosted Governor Dannel Malloy of Connecticut, a leader in the gun-control movement, to comment and he suggested that "We have to get serious about changing our culture" because in some states, including his, the perpetrator could have never purchased a gun to begin with<sup>8</sup>. Having commentators who agree with the networks ideologies furthers their stance on the gun debate.

CNN on-air has proposed mostly gun-related legislation as the ultimate solution, whether that would be restricting the power of the gun itself or making it harder for people to get guns. This information was obtained through a query search on LexisNexis by searching "Parkland" in the main bar, specifically news, and additional search key words pertaining the exact phrases "assault weapons ban", "raising age to 21", "magazine restrictions", "background checks", "permit", "license", "CDC", "waiting period" from the date of the incident to March 6<sup>th</sup>, only searching CNN transcripts. This query resulted in 376 mentions.

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<sup>7</sup> "Parkland Survivors Rally, Demand Reforms At State Capitol." *CNN*, 21 Feb. 2018, *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

<sup>8</sup> "Trump Praises Chinese President For Ending Term Limits" *CNN*, 4 March 2018, *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

A common proposal from the left is the assault weapons ban, and CNN strategically inserted that proposition into their segment on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, by introducing Brian Mast, “a Florida Republican congressman and army combat veteran now says he supports the ban of future purchases of AR-15 style weapons – assault weapons.”<sup>9</sup> By inserting commentary from the assumed ideologically opposite side, CNN took a more bi-partisan stance in their delivery while still securing their message.

A less common proposal mentioned in the query, but a useful one to consider would be the issue of whether the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) should be able to conduct research on gun violence. On February 26<sup>th</sup>, Charles Blow, an outspoken columnist for the New York Times and frequent CNN commentator stated his reasoning behind why no solutions to gun violence have arose. Blow identified that “...they [Republicans] don’t want to even start with this very basic concept – allow the CDC to study how we stop gun violence in America.”<sup>10</sup> As debate ensues, Mr. Blow continues on saying that finding out these facts will contribute to learning of the true causation behind these incidents like Parkland. A study conducted after the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting was to determine the media’s agenda setting role before and after the occurrence. It was concluded that the news media did “...not frequently report aspects of the public health approach when discussing gun violence.”<sup>11</sup> The report stated that the media has the potential to contribute positively to public opinion by emphasizing the gun control debate as a public health issue rather than a debate over

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<sup>9</sup> “Delta, United Join List Of Companies Cutting Ties With NRA.” *CNN*, 24 Feb. 2018, *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

<sup>10</sup> “Trump on Gun Reform: It’s OK Sometimes to Fight with NRA” *CNN*, 26 Feb. 2018, *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

<sup>11</sup> Jared Jashinsky, et al. “Media Agenda Setting Regarding Gun Violence before and after a Mass Shooting.” *Frontiers in Public Health*, 4.1, 9 Jan. 2017.

ideologies.<sup>12</sup> By the news media proposing and framing the solution more often like Charles Blow did on CNN, a pressing need can ensue for more research to be conducted by the CDC.

As found in GDELT's news clip archives, FOX has proposed and discussed solutions to the Parkland debate pertaining to anything but guns. LexisNexis was employed to further analyze the remainder of the transcript. FOX had a tendency to deny the idea that America's mass shooting problem is in fact a gun issue. Emily Jashinsky, a writer for the Washington Examiner and a commentator on FOX News, stated on the FOX Media Buzz segment that the gun debate reveals a lot of media bias because liberal commentators do not take into consideration the differences in gun culture around the country when suggesting that gun control is the ultimate solution. She then concludes by stating that if one believes in more control and "... accept[s] that premise, the coverage changes dramatically."<sup>13</sup> Regardless of location, Ms. Jashinsky has revealed that the gun debate has a partisan split that is furthered by the media.

Instead, FOX has emphasized coverage of alternative solutions that specifically pertain to securing schools. On February 25<sup>th</sup>, on FOX News Sunday, a debate ensued after Governor Rick Scott of Florida was discussing gun control with Christopher Wallace. The father of late Parkland student, Meadow Pollack, was featured expressing that gun control was not the answer. Andrew Pollack stated that "The American people, we could get together on school safety, but when you polarize it, this event and every other media, we don't care about gun control right now."<sup>14</sup> Mr. Pollack further contributed to the many points that FOX wanted to emphasize, by framing the segment to propose gun control resulting in a distraught father's outcry. This opened

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<sup>12</sup> Jashinsky, et al., Op. Cit.

<sup>13</sup> "Trump Seizes Spotlight on Guns; Media Hit Trump Russia Claim." *FOX News Network*, 25 Feb. 2018, *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 25 April 2018.

<sup>14</sup> "Interview with Gov. Rick Scott." *FOX News Network*, 25 Feb. 2018, *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

up the floor for more propositions of school safety throughout the debate and the rest of the day. Two hours later, a Media Buzz frequent guest commentator discussed what occurred on the Christopher Wallace show that morning and the juxtaposition between his opinion and the gun control debate. Mr. Wallace went on to state that “He [Andrew Pollack] said this is not a gun issue, this is about school safety. So, we are seeing both sides of that debate. But maybe not so much of the other.”<sup>15</sup> The pertinent question to this debate is to inquire as to whether FOX knew that Mr. Pollack was going to take that stance. Regardless, the situation contributed to FOX’s agenda to get people’s minds off the idea of gun control.

FOX has consistently reported on other causes to the massacre as new stories were revealed, and none of them had to do with guns as the true source. The purpose of the constant media mentions of other solutions is to have people detach from the gun’s role in the Parkland tragedy. On February 16<sup>th</sup>, news broke that the FBI failed to follow-up on a tip from a close source to the perpetrator about his lunacy, gun ownership, and the possible potential of him being able to conduct a school shooting. Vox.com, a considerably left-leaning source, did in fact use the GDELT project to measure the airtime and the resulting trend of FOX news’ report on

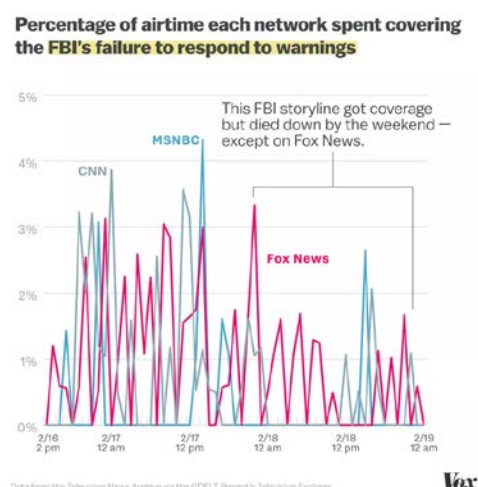


Figure 5: Percentage of airtime on FBI warnings (Source [www.vox.com](http://www.vox.com))

<sup>15</sup> “Trump Seizes Spotlight on Guns,” Op. Cit.

the FBI tip. Figure 5, displayed below indicates that FOX spent more time than liberal leaning news stations reporting on the FBI's mishap. By spending an increasingly amount of time reporting on a story a few days old, indicates that FOX was deflecting from the gun debate and engaging in more dialogue pertaining to other factors.

Another commonality amongst FOX's coverage of the Parkland debate was the frequency of mentioning mental illness as the true cause behind the perpetrator's actions. Sean Hannity, host of his own FOX show, relayed the day after the massacre that "Aside from the obvious fact that anyone that would commit these horrible acts of evil and violence are completely deranged, the one commonality between the gunman and Parkland...are mental health issues and mental illness."<sup>16</sup> Hannity in this statement listed other massacres (omitted by the ellipses) that occurred in the millennium and compared them to Parkland. He stated the reason behind Parkland and the preceding tragedies were indeed issues of lack of psychiatric care to the perpetrators. Additionally, Kimberly Strassel, a FOX news contributor stated on February 25<sup>th</sup> that the a failure in the mental health care system has been the cause of mass shootings like Parkland.<sup>17</sup> Ms. Strassel affirms that "...those with severe mental illness and how we both have to get treatment for these people...but make sure that they do not have easy access to guns."<sup>18</sup> This statement had nothing to do with restricting the power of the actual gun, and instead citing it as an issue of a mentally ill person obtaining the actual firearm. In this quotation, Ms. Strassel was deflecting attention from the prevalence of gun violence in America and shifting the focus to the prevalence of mentally ill with access to firearms.

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<sup>16</sup> "Judge Jeanine: Our kids deserve our protection" *FOX News Network*, 25 Feb 2018, *FOX News*, Web.

<sup>17</sup> "Interview with Gov. Rick Scott." *FOX News Network*, 25 Feb. 2018, *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

FOX is most certainly not alone in this trend of citing mental illness as an issue behind tragedies like Parkland. A study conducted after Sandy Hook measured the correlation between news media framing and mental illness from a variety of sources related to mass shootings occurring from 1997-2012. The study revealed that “A higher proportion of news stories mentioned dangerous people with SMI [Serious Mental Illness] as opposed to dangerous weapons as a cause of gun violence.”<sup>19</sup> It was also revealed that gun restrictions to those with mental illnesses was the most frequently cited policy solution rather than other gun policy proposals that would restrict the power of firearms.<sup>20</sup> The probability of a news sources citing mental illness as a cause of gun violence was 57%, while the probability of mentioning a gun restriction proposal was 10%.<sup>21</sup> Gun restriction proposals that were measured are the “...policy to ban assault weapons or ammunition, policy to expand the background check system for gun sales and policy to allow concealed carrying of guns in public places.”<sup>22</sup> The trend of the association between mental illness and gun violence is astonishing, and there are many people who will absorb this information.

The manner in which the news media frames mentally ill perpetrators of shootings can affect the public opinion of the mentally ill. A study was conducted with a control group where participants read about the same shooting with one story focusing only on the mentally ill perpetrator, a story with proposal for gun restrictions for the mentally ill, and lastly a story with a proposal to ban of large-capacity magazines. The results were that “...the story about a mass shooting heightened respondents’ negative attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness

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<sup>19</sup> Emily E. McGinty, et al. “News Media Framing of Serious Mental Illness and Gun Violence in the United States, 1997-2012,” 104 (2014): 406-413.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

and raised support for gun restrictions.”<sup>23</sup> This element is of concern for viewers of news networks, because if exposed to this information, one can easily be inclined to stigmatize the mentally ill. Additionally, “News media coverage of gun violence by persons with SMI may lead the public to view SMI as an important cause of gun violence, when in reality other factors—such as criminals’ easy access to firearms—are more strongly associated with violent crime”<sup>24</sup> Viewers should be cautious and knowledgeable of a network’s agenda prior to engaging with the source, and expose oneself to multiple viewpoints. If not, a person can potentially be misled by a news media’s agenda.

## ADVOCACY BY NETWORKS

A little over a week after the Parkland massacre, CNN hosted a town hall forum featuring the victims and their families and the political stakeholders in this debate. The town hall, intentionally dubbed “Stand Up: The Students of Stoneman Douglas Demand Action” was moderated by CNN’s Jake Tapper, one of the networks more popular hosts, and the face of other town halls. The forum began by featuring Florida senators Bill Nelson (D-FL) and Marco Rubio (R-FL), as well as Florida Congressman Rep. Ted Deutch (D-FL) who represents the district that includes Broward County. The second half of the program introduced National Rifle Association (NRA) spokeswoman Dana Loesch and the Broward County Sheriff, Scott Israel, who has received a lot of criticism based on his department’s lack of mobilization on information retrieved about the perpetrator of the massacre. President Donald Trump and Florida Governor Rick Scott were also invited to join but declined the invitations. The town hall was intense and

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<sup>23</sup> Emily E. McGinty, et al. “Effects of News Media Messages about Mass Shootings on Attitudes.” 170 (2013): 494-501.

<sup>24</sup> Emily E. McGinty, et al. “News Media Framing of Serious Mental Illness and Gun Violence in the United States, 1997-2012,” Op. Cit.

conjured up painful emotions regarding the tragedy. CNN was prepared for this by providing grief counselors to the audience and a mental health expert to consult Jake Tapper on what he should expect throughout the duration of the program.<sup>25</sup> The town hall sustained the networks role in advocating toward regulations on guns.

CNN has hosted many town halls in the past for presidential races and scandals to grant the public an opportunity to ask pressing questions to legislators that otherwise may have never been answered. CNN is “holding more town hall-style events-- 23 in 2017, and more than 15 in 2016 – as viewers seek access to lawmakers and other influential figures in a format that avoids having a traditional sit-down with an anchor or correspondent.”<sup>26</sup> The increasing popularity of the format can be attributed to public frustration with the lack of government action. This broadcast was evidence of the network’s activism and “...has become one of CNN’s go-to programming formats in the Trump era, as the network tries, more and more, to place political opponents in the same room in the name of dialogue.”<sup>27</sup> Mark Preston, CNN’s Executive Director of Political Programming, admits that strategy is necessary to determine if the issue is relevant enough across the nation to be covered in its own program<sup>28</sup>.

The manner in which CNN has conducted certain network interventions in the past shows that the gun debate is no different. When reporting on tragedies in Bosnia in the late 1990’s, CNN coverage was more dramatic and presented implications for immediate action to be taken.<sup>29</sup> CNN’s style has proven to be no different today, as coverage of the Parkland tragedy

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<sup>25</sup> Brian Steinberg. “Inside CNN’s Gut-Wrenching Florida Town Hall.” *Variety*. 24 Feb. Op Cit.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>27</sup> Todd VanDerWerff. “CNN’s Town Hall on gun Violence Was the Network at Its Best – and Worst.” *Vox*, 25 Feb. 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Steinberg, Op. Cit.

<sup>29</sup> Piers Robinson. *The CNN Effect: the Myth of News, Foreign Policy, and Intervention*. 2006, pp. 90.



implied that stricter gun regulations are of the utmost importance as a preventive mechanism for future attacks. CNN's coverage of tragedies occurring all over the world is no different than the coverage that occurs at home. The town hall is an example of how CNN's "...media coverage 'enables and creates conditions...[by building] a domestic constituency for intervention.'"<sup>30</sup> By conducting extensive coverage of the Parkland tragedy, and initiating a town hall that ignites debate through a different lens, CNN was able to relay their message proactively to encourage the general public to sympathize with their views.

CNN's arrangement of the program had the ability to establish a dialogue on the true nature behind the tragedy, as well as provide viewers with the sense that CNN is a politically reliable network. CNN has "...latched onto the town hall format in the wake of Trump's victory: They allow the network to continue to portray itself as the fundamentally rational center of American politics."<sup>31</sup> By moderating the interaction between the victims and their families against those preventing further progress on solving the gun issue, CNN establishes their position as a network promoting reason and sound evaluation of current policies. Due to CNN's activism and strategic arrangement of the town hall, CNN was able to push their narrative and increase network credibility by presenting themselves as a network that caters to the general public welfare.

The CNN effect is a concept introduced when twenty-four-hour news stations made their debut, which networks, specifically CNN, can cause a stir in the current political climate and can eventually influence government decision making. To evaluate the CNN effect theory is first to acknowledge that "The question at the heart of the CNN effect is, who controls that

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pp. 40.

<sup>31</sup> VanDerWerff, Op. Cit.

capacity [to influence]. Believers in the CNN effect claim that the roles of the professional policy expert and diplomat have been undermined by the media.”<sup>32</sup> The program expresses a strong CNN effect because it is an event that indeed presented the network’s nature of the gun problem in America to almost three million viewers. The CNN effect can be understood through the lens of the town hall because in this case, the network is setting the agenda, while simultaneously rendering politicians in this debate as ineffective advocates for the greater constituency.

The news media, specifically CNN, can affect the policy process. In Piers Robinson’s evaluation of the CNN effect, he discovered that “...the greater the level of uncertainty over policy within the executive, the more vulnerable the policy process is to the influence of negative media coverage”<sup>33</sup> The only aspect of the gun debate in the United States on a national scale that is certain is the fact that most legislators who propose solutions will get shut down, and others don’t bother proposing legislation because it will ignite more political polarization. The unique difference with the town hall is that the negative sentiment that viewers have towards legislators when it comes to guns in America is directly getting presented to these legislator’s faces when most of them don’t have an answer on what the exact solution can be. The forum provides a space where “...media coverage can influence the policy process...by providing additional bargaining power to those policy-makers seeking intervention or as a result of policy-makers being pressured to come up with a response to critical coverage.”<sup>34</sup> The arrangement of the program sped up the process of intervention by presenting legislators who are either looking for a solution or are appearing on the program to save face with challenging

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<sup>32</sup> Robinson, Op. Cit., pp. 21.

<sup>33</sup> Robinson, Op. Cit., pp. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, pp.4.

inquiries, which would otherwise require a legislator to reach out to a press secretary to formulate the most proper response.

The town hall procedure is unique because it has the power to galvanize politicians. Devoting a large window of airtime to a program consisting of extensive “...media coverage might affect the policy process through the process of enabling policy-makers to pursue a particular course of action.”<sup>35</sup> The town hall is an example of a program that was structured with the intentions to convince the stakeholders on stage as well as back in Washington, D.C. to fight for gun legislation in lieu of the tragedy. Research conducted by Kovach and Rosenstiel (qt. in Van Aelst, et al.) states that in a political information environment, “...media coverage should help people to make informed choices and hold politicians accountable, in essence providing people with the information they need to be free and self-governing.”<sup>36</sup> The town hall meets this criterion because it presents an instance where CNN has the opportunity to guide viewers through these elements of uncertainty with the government. The program also affirms that the general public backed by media’s willingness to intervene can pressure politicians and cause them to rally behind a cause like never before.

The concept of town halls are particularly unique because of the little social distance between families, victims, and relevant actors. Participants in “Stand Up”, “Freed from the burden of typical talking points—which are mostly disseminated by television, after all—[the teens] were armed with facts and statistics and a directness rarely seen in politics.”<sup>37</sup> The professionalism maintained by the students throughout the forum increased CNN’s credibility in delivering their intended message. According to the literature on the CNN effect, “...news media

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<sup>35</sup> Robinson, Op. Cit. pp., 40.

<sup>36</sup> Van Aelst, et al., Op. Cit. pp., 5.

<sup>37</sup> VanDerWerff, Op. Cit.

influence is greatest when coverage is framed so as to criticise existing government policy and empathise with the plight of suffering people.”<sup>38</sup> The program achieves both of those feats simultaneously in a live and nearly unscripted manner.

Marco Rubio, as the only Republican politician on stage, was the most uneasy from the direct exchanges with the victims. Although Senator Rubio is an experienced politician, it is difficult to gauge before the program how to react to such raw emotional interactions. The dramatic effect of these “...moments were all the more extraordinary given that teenagers were the ones putting Rubio and others on the spot to respond to their questions, following up and pressing them when they dodged giving full answers.”<sup>39</sup> Student Cameron Kasky of Marjory Stoneman Douglas was one of those teenagers granted the opportunity to ask Senator Marco Rubio pressing questions. Kasky certainly did his research prior and asked if Senator Rubio would be accepting a National Rifle Association (NRA) donation in the future. This question is extremely significant, because throughout Senator Rubio’s career, according to a spreadsheet generated by OpenSecrets.org<sup>40</sup>, Rubio has received a total of \$3,303,355.00 from the NRA as of February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Rubio, throughout the intense exchange, “...repeatedly deflected the question, citing his commitment to the Second Amendment, adding: ‘People buy into my agenda... The influence of these groups comes not from money. The influence comes from the millions of people that agree with the agenda.’”<sup>41</sup> Kasky also went as far to say that, “I bet we can get people in here to give you exactly as much money as the NRA would have...”<sup>42</sup> Rubio

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<sup>38</sup> Robinson, Op. Cit. pp., 25.

<sup>39</sup> Johnson, Op. Cit.

<sup>40</sup> “Gun Rights vs Gun Control.” Edited by Geoff West, *OpenSecrets*. Web. Feb. 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Sam Levin. “Six Things We Learned From the Florida Town Hall on Gun Control.” *The Guardian*. Web. 22 Feb. 2018.

<sup>42</sup> “Read Stoneman Students’ Questions at the CNN Town Hall.” *CNN*, 22 Feb. 2018.

throughout the exchange, never directly answered the question if he was ever going to accept NRA money again, instead replying that “There is money on both sides of every issue in America” and consistently reiterating that he supports the Second Amendment.<sup>43</sup>

Marco Rubio’s noticeable avoidance of the original question implies that he was saving face, and for the first time in the program, had absolutely no premeditated answer to a question. On the other hand, “What the Florida teens have on their side is moral clarity, a sense that taking money from the NRA should be seen as so wicked that it becomes politically devastating.”<sup>44</sup> The feeling of disappointment and lack of initiative from policymakers certainly resonated with the three million viewers of the program. Political critics stormed to social media websites after the event, like New Yorker contributor Evan Osnos who tweeted “Watching a teenager fundamentally challenge Rubio’s talking points feels like watching a generation call B.S. on a whole form of politics. For years, Rubio’s weakness has always been inauthenticity, but no journalist (including this one) has evoked it as vividly.”<sup>45</sup> Rubio’s ethics were tested in this exchange, as well as his ability to maintain his composure throughout these heated interactions.

These moderately-facilitated encounters with the victims and their families, in turn, can pressure politicians. This is because the town hall presents “...a scenario where news media pressure is head to head with official policy, [where] policy-makers might feel forced to change course especially if other factors are in play such as public or congressional pressure.”<sup>46</sup> The combination of CNN’s influence, pressure from victims and challengers, all occurring in a high-

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> VanDerWerff, Op. Cit.

<sup>45</sup> @eosnos. *Twitter*, 21 Feb. 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Robinson, Op. Cit., pp. 31.

stakes media environment can sway politician's views. The victims within this exchange have been able to reiterate directly to politicians the public outcry for change. The pressure derived from political opponents is also seen in the forum by presenting the Florida Senator, Rubio, with his ideological opposite, Senator Nelson, as well as Rep. Deutch, on stage prepared to counter his statements.

Marco Rubio was publicly challenged on his previous stances and his affiliation with the gun rights lobby but did express some new policies during the program. On an NPR (National Public Radio) segment, Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA) stated that "One of the things that I think was interesting is a lot of times when politicians go into these events, they don't necessarily go in to change their minds. They go in to defend their positions. And at this event, Marco Rubio appeared to soften his prior stances on gun rights on a number of issues."<sup>47</sup> Rubio, a long-time political ally of the NRA, shockingly proposed policies that could potentially make guns less accessible. Numerous times throughout the program, Marco Rubio proposed raising the minimum purchasing age and stated, "I believe that we could potentially have 60 votes at the federal level to change the age from 18 to 21 on the purchase of any rifles."<sup>48</sup> One must be 21 to purchase a handgun from a licensed retailer under federal law, but currently for rifles, including assault-style weapons, the minimum age from an authorized dealer is 18. This statement although impressive to come from Rubio, still is obscure as to whether this would apply only to licensed dealers or all sellers.

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<sup>47</sup> Susan Davis. "Sen. Marco Rubio Backs Down On Some Gun Ownership Restrictions At CNN Town Hall." *NPR*, 22 Feb. 2018, Transcript.

<sup>48</sup> Daniella Diaz. "6 Key Things Rubio Said on Guns at CNN Town Hall." *CNN*, 22 Feb. 2018.

Another proposal Rubio stated he would back is the improvements to the background check system. Rubio said he “...will support changing our background system so that it includes more information than it includes now and that all states across the country are required or incentivized to report all the information into it.”<sup>49</sup> Rubio called for the improvement of the current background check system but did not call for universal background checks for all gun purchases. Additionally, Rubio expressed support for the Gun Violence Restraining Order that would enable parents, police, and administrators to report and prevent a party of concern from purchasing or possessing firearms.<sup>50</sup> These proposals are most certainly a step in the right direction. Rubio backed the Fix NICS Act of 2017 and proposed a Gun Violence Restraining Order as promised.

Rubio expressed a change of heart during the forum and proposed policies that would reduce the power of certain firearms, such as the AR-15 used in the attack. Although it’s unconfirmed how much ammunition the perpetrator had in his ammunition magazine, Rubio stated in the town hall that he is reconsidering his position on magazine size. Rubio explained, “I am willing to reconsider because I do believe that in this instance, it didn’t prevent – it wouldn’t have prevented the attack but it made it less lethal.”<sup>51</sup> Rubio did not provide any details about any actual measures, but the proposal is noteworthy because it is not one of the typically suggested gun violence measures by members of his party<sup>52</sup>. The last proactive gun proposal that Rubio spoke on that evening regarded bump stocks. Rubio claims, “I will support the banning of bump stocks and I know that the President has ordered the Attorney General to do it and if he

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<sup>49</sup> Diaz, Op. Cit.

<sup>50</sup> “Read Stoneman Students’ Questions,” Op. Cit.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Diaz, Op. Cit.

doesn't, we should do it by law.”<sup>53</sup> This statement is a large step for a conservative politician to take, but bump stocks are not a topic of concern in the Parkland shooting, but rather the Las Vegas shooting.<sup>54</sup> Rubio's new stances can be attributed to a loss for words triggered by “...policy uncertainty (or policy panic)...when the news media covers unexpected events and politicians literally do not know how to respond.”<sup>55</sup> Policy uncertainty can explain why Rubio has changed his mind on many of his previous stances, stuttered in his speech throughout the program, and why he lacked any official commitments to these new positions.

Unfortunately, just because Rubio stated during the town hall he was going to support these new policies, does not necessarily mean he will follow through. It is important to consider, especially in politics, that words are not always enough to prove there will be an action that follows. In an NPR segment on the forum, host Ari Shapiro states that “Marco Rubio's critics have accused him in the past of taking politically convenient positions depending on which way the winds are blowing.”<sup>56</sup> This is a fair assumption because during the town hall, Rubio said he “...absolutely believe[s] that in this country if you are 18 years of age you should not be able to buy a rifle.”<sup>57</sup> Three weeks later, Rubio appeared on CBS and stated that the bill signed by Florida Governor Rick Scott that raised the age to 21, shouldn't include shotguns and bolt-action rifles and that teenagers can still possess and borrow rifles, but can't be the owner.<sup>58</sup> Rubio's spokesperson, Olivia Perez-Cubas said on Rubio's behalf that his “...comments on

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<sup>53</sup> “Read Stoneman Students' Questions,” Op. Cit.

<sup>54</sup> Christopher Brennan. “Five Things Rubio Said Could be Done” *NY Daily News*, 22 Feb. 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Robinson, Op. Cit., pp. 26.

<sup>56</sup> Davis, Op. Cit.

<sup>57</sup> “Read Stoneman Students' Questions,” Op. Cit.

<sup>58</sup> Alex Daugherty. “Here's What Kind of Weapons Marco Rubio Thinks” *Miami Herald*, 9 Mar. 2018.



Friday did not represent a change in his position from his comments during the town hall.”<sup>59</sup> In her e-mails with the Miami Herald, Ms. Perez-Cubas clarified that “It’s important to remember the context of the town hall, which was about an assault weapons ban – he was using the term ‘rifle’ in that regard... Bolt action and shotguns are not semi-automatic. As he’s said consistently... he supports raising the age but would want to see exemptions for bolt action, shotguns, and for people who hunt.”<sup>60</sup> Rubio never clarified throughout the town hall that he believes some rifles should be exempt from the age increase, and never once mentioned “bolt action” or “shotgun” in his discourse. It is safe to assume, that Rubio backed some if not all positions, just because of the situational pressure, and not because he’s had a complete change of heart. The truth behind Rubio’s proposals will be determined in the following months by whether he votes on any gun legislation regardless of his political affiliation with the NRA.

FOX News was exceptionally critical of CNN’s town hall because it challenges the network’s ideologies. In the days following the event, FOX newscasters meticulously assessed and reported on their dissatisfaction with the program and how it was run. For example, Tucker Carlson, on his show, brought Colton Haab, a student from MSD who stated that CNN producers rewrote one of his questions. The family of Colton Haab also provided an e-mail with CNN producer Carrie Stevenson about one of Colton’s questions. In the e-mail it looks as if, Colton’s questions were rejected and that Ms. Stevenson was creating her own questions. Carlson, after hearing Haab’s discourse replied “It’s shocking to us too – trust me – in the actual journalism business.”<sup>61</sup> CNN later released their version of the e-mail, which proves that Colton Haab’s

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<sup>59</sup> Daugherty, Op. Cit.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> “Tucker: ‘CNN’ town hall was act of ritual public humiliation.” *FOX News Network*, 22 Feb. 2019, *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

father, Glenn, doctored the e-mail before submitting it to Tucker Carlson. The actual e-mail includes that Colton did in-fact already submit the question alongside with four other questions, which led Ms. Stevenson to reply “That really is way too long. These are quick questions so that we can get to as many people as possible.” Also featured in the e-mail were revisions to one of the questions in the previous e-mail that she and Colton further discussed while on the phone. Without an actual transcript of the phone correspondence, it is difficult to be absolutely certain as to what was agreed on. The most unsettling aspect of this narrative is the fact that Tucker Carlson actively pursued a story on his competitor because it discredited his competitor without actually knowing the truth to the matter. Even when proven wrong, Carlson the following week reported on Colton’s claims and “...saved the story until the very end of the program, when he briefly addressed the issue of the doctored email and accused CNN of unfairly attacking Colton.”<sup>62</sup> Carlson, despite this new information, still questioned CNN’s integrity by accusing a victim of being untruthful.

*The Five* is another show on FOX, where there are five hosts who discuss current events. On February 22<sup>nd</sup> segment, *The Five* discussed their views on the town hall. One of the hosts, Kimberly Guilfoyle, criticized the program and stated that it was put on like a show, “...when I see something like this, it just becomes almost like Roman theater. Are they going to feed the lions next?”<sup>63</sup> Ms. Guilfoyle went on to say that she respects Rubio and the NRA spokeswoman, Dana Loesch, for appearing and that they were not given enough time to speak. Ms. Guilfoyle stated, “...you’re not getting as much out of the CNN town hall because people

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<sup>62</sup> Eliza Relman. “Parkland Shooting Survivor's Family Shops Doctored Emails with CNN to Media Outlets.” *Business Insider*, 23 Feb. 2018.

<sup>63</sup> “President Trump meets with state and local officials about school safety.” *FOX News Network*, 22 Feb. 2018, *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

were just very rude and disrespectful, and I don't like that at all.”<sup>64</sup> During that same segment, one of the other *Five* hosts, Greg Gutfeld expressed, “I feel very strongly about the CNN town hall. I thought it was absolutely awful.”<sup>65</sup> Mr. Gutfeld throughout the segment stated the town hall provided a false feeling of action, and that Trump's meetings were bringing more hope of action, and that the CNN town hall ruined it. Gutfeld further discredited CNN by stating that “CNN has a habit—it's a pattern of taking contentious issue under the guise of concern and then inflaming it. And I remember this with the police shootings.”<sup>66</sup> Gutfeld continued to say that CNN has a pattern of overreacting to certain topics. The manner in which newscasters on FOX express their animosity towards CNN and the town hall program, will be reflected on their viewers. FOX's newscasters are appealing to their conservative network base, and criticisms on CNN are commonly seen on the FOX news network, regardless if the town hall was successful or not. The increasing polarization in American politics is already concerning, and news networks further that divide by reiterating their distrust in other modes of programming.

#### PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE GUN DEBATE

The manner in which news networks such as FOX and CNN portray their stories and report on Parkland will affect how the public perceives the gun debate in America. The partisan split in network viewership contributes to further polarization and division on the gun debate. As mentioned previously, news networks possess a partisan shift in viewership, where more Republicans prefer FOX, while more Democrats prefer CNN as their main source of news. Depending on how networks like CNN or FOX report, the “...differences in the amount of news coverage of a topic influences knowledge differences across groups. Simply put, the more

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<sup>64</sup> “President Trump meets with state and local officials about school safety,” Op. Cit.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

extensive the coverage, the less sizable the knowledge differences are between groups.”<sup>67</sup> CNN and FOX noticeably differ in how and what topics they report. Both networks express different political ideologies and are firm on the positions they take most of the time. The issue at hand is “...that partisan news networks cause viewers to have less understanding of opposing political opinions, making them more polarized.”<sup>68</sup> The American Press Institute conducted a study on trust in the media varying by party ties. Respondents were asked whether they felt if the news media in general and their preferred outlets were either too liberal, in the middle, or too

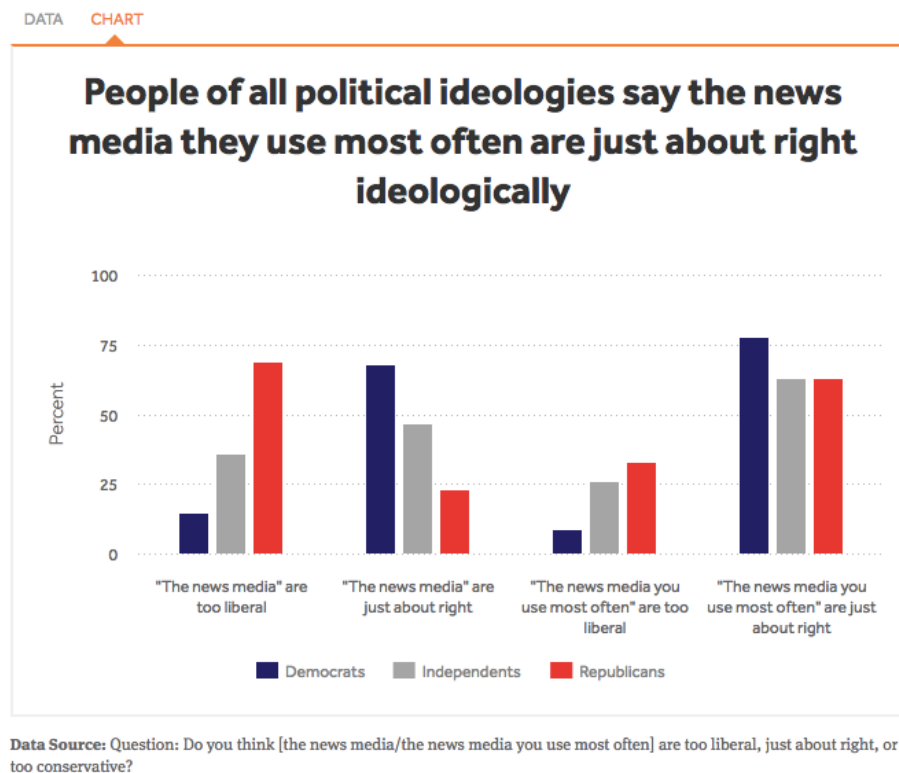


Figure 6: People of all political ideologies (Source: [www.AmericanPressInstitute.org](http://www.AmericanPressInstitute.org))

conservative. According to Figure 6, both Democrats and Republicans believe that the source they use the most often is just about right. Due to the correlation between political ideologies and

<sup>67</sup> Van Aelst, et al., Op. Cit. pp., 18.

<sup>68</sup> “9.2 The Relationship Between Television and Culture.” *Understanding Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication*, University of Minnesota Libraries, 2016.

network viewership, this finding is concerning. The fact that a large majority of Republicans believe that the news media in general is “too liberal”, but the outlets they use the most often are considered in the middle, implies that there is a knowledge gap either caused by lack of exposure to other sources, or too much exposure to one.

A study done by the University of Maryland in 2010, “...concluded that FOX News viewers were more likely than others to hold a wide-ranging set of mistaken beliefs.”<sup>69</sup> This could possibly be attributed to reports similar to Tucker Carlson’s that were conducted without knowledge of all the facts. These mistaken beliefs contribute to the fact that “...partisan bias has produced a media fragmentation of which FOX News has been the biggest beneficiary.”<sup>70</sup> FOX news and their constant criticism of CNN, liberals, and Democrats attribute to the furthering of this partisan knowledge gap.

The manner in which FOX and CNN set their agendas and frame their arguments eventually has an effect on the attitudes of the public. News networks convey “...information in two steps: (1) they select topics to tell the audience ‘what to think about,’ which is precisely what agenda setting attempts to theorize; and (2) they reconstruct an internal structure of the selected topics in a way that some topics become attributes of others, so as to suggest to the audience ‘how to think about it.’”<sup>71</sup> Essentially, since the general public is more inclined to watch and trust a station that aligns with their ideologies, they’re also going to be more inclined to believe whatever a network conveys about gun legislation. Viewers of the networks, depending on the

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<sup>69</sup> Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson. *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?: Partisan News in an Age of Choice*. pp., 75.

<sup>70</sup> Mitchell J. Malcheff. ““Public Perception or Media Manipulation: The Power of the Agenda-Setting Function of the Press Examined An Exploratory Pilot Study of Media Bias.” pp. 16.

<sup>71</sup> Lei Xie, et al. “Agenda-Setting and Rhetorical Framing by Semantic Proximity: Multi-Dimensional Concept Mapping of Network TV News.” pp. 5

views they're exposed to, can either believe that gun legislation or securing schools would be the ultimate solution to a tragedy like Parkland. Similarly to how gun control was mentioned more on FOX, but never in a positive light, an earlier study found that Fox's coverage on Democratic candidates associated with the use of pessimistic rhetorical style in reporting.<sup>72</sup> Rhetorical style is how the greater media uses language in order to persuade, such as using word devices like hyperboles to exaggerate or metaphors to make a comparison, although not true. By conveying these negative views through rhetoric, networks essentially tell their viewers what to believe by using persuasive linguistic techniques.

In order to avoid the chokehold of the greater mass media, viewers must be politically curious and should constantly expose themselves to new information. Viewers that "...chronically expose themselves to news (i.e., news-seekers) are regularly exposed to messages that could influence their attitudes, but because they possess very well-formed opinions, they cannot be easily influenced."<sup>73</sup> It is important for a viewer to constantly seek new information, especially in the Parkland debate, because networks are so ideologically divided on the causation and solutions. A way to avoid the effects of media framing is to be politically educated.<sup>74</sup> Viewers should be wary of not only the network, but also the journalist who is conveying this information. In order to be a conscientious viewer, Cook (qtd. in Robinson) "...argues, 'journalists should not be considered the passive recipient of political information but as active

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<sup>72</sup> Lei Xie, et al., *Op. Cit.*, pp. 17.

<sup>73</sup> Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson. *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?: Partisan News in an Age of Choice*.

<sup>74</sup> Ferguson, Henry, "Partisanship in the Media: A Comprehensive Look at the History and Potential for Bias in News Media" (2016). *Advanced Writing: Pop Culture Intersections*. 17. pp. 15 [http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/engl\\_176/17](http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/engl_176/17)

participants functioning as a political institution in their own right”<sup>75</sup> Viewers must concern themselves with the network’s agenda and ideologies, and should not trust everything that is said by a journalist, just because they’re on television. Viewers must be responsible when navigating their media environment, and establish which journalists they trust to deliver their information. There is truth in today’s media environment, one just has to learn how to seek it by remaining wary of their news sources, and what is being conveyed.

## LIMITATIONS

For the purpose of paper length, television news was the platform of choice to study the Marjory Stoneman Douglas tragedy. There are many other avenues for research pertaining to navigating the media environment on Parkland and the gun debate. Other research was conducted that delved into the online media habits of audiences, as well as the implicit bias that online news sources possess. In today’s fast-paced and technologically inclined society, online media plays a role in generating discussion about current events. The trends on display from online news stories reflect that Parkland can potentially be the change due to the media habits on display from the Generation Z teens. Online media coverage of recent mass shootings were tracked, and it was found that more online news stories about Parkland were generated and stayed in the news longer compared to other, more fatal tragedies<sup>76</sup>. The trend of Parkland remaining in the news can be attributed to the fact that online news stories can be easily shared throughout social media platforms, as well the fact that the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School have become social media activists and recognized names. Social media

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<sup>75</sup> Robinson, Op. Cit., pp. 15.

<sup>76</sup> Siegel, Rachel. “Analysis: The Parkland Shooting Is Different. The News Coverage Proves It.” *The Washington Post*, 2 Mar. 2018.

has rose in the ranks as a platform to share news, and the interchangeability between news shared on social media feeds versus credible news sources opens further avenues for research. Parkland was particularly unique, and has proved to inspire other movements months after the fact. Further research can additionally be done on how the teens mobilized and used social media to inspire a national movement. The teens of Marjory Stoneman Douglas have become extremely well known, and research on how they used all types of media to get to that point would reveal implications about the evolution of media habits and the future of activism.

Additionally, when working with media and “bias” it was crucial to navigate all different types of media landscapes. Media “bias” of a network is essentially an opinion, and it was crucial to this research to encounter many different types of opinions on where a news source skews on the ideological spectrum. Since the events described in this paper were unravelling throughout the duration of this thesis, there was a lot of information to sort through and double check to ensure that facts were retained. Avoiding personal opinion, especially when discussing bias is difficult, since all angles and viewpoints had to be considered. Throughout this assignment, due to the lack of gun policy research on mass shootings, public opinions are difficult to determine, or too old to cite. Lastly, the evolution of gun debate underway is an issue that is situational and difficult to conclude when doing a case study specifically on an event that is still so new.

## CONCLUSIONS

Television news is strategically limited in programming per day. The frequency of reports on Parkland showed that news media featured the stories whether small or groundbreaking, truth or fib. Today, Americans are divided more than ever across party lines on almost every single topic including gun control. If audiences only expose themselves to one



network regularly, and thoroughly believe what is reported, this will further the already highly-contested sense of partisanship in this country. Preferring one network over another is okay, but without knowledge of other viewpoints or solutions, one may be inclined to believe whatever is relayed to them within the confines of their particular bias. Depending on coverage style and consumption habits, a viewer may be inclined to view the student activists as heroes or conspirators, gun policy as hopeful or irrelevant, and the town hall as genuine or fake.

Parkland has contributed to an impressive amount of activism already, such as passing legislation in Florida, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington. The NRA was boycotted by previous partners, and stores like Dick's and Kroger decided to stop their sale on guns. The March for Our Lives organized by students in the Midwest achieved national impact and got the attention of many celebrities who were then inspired to join and perform. The students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School have made the cover of "Time", appeared on primetime news, and have gone viral on social media. The fight is not over for the victims and their families. Whether any significant national legislation will pass, despite bold proposals in the aftermath, has yet to be seen. There is still hope, as gun control has become a hot topic of discussion for the midterm elections. The founder of Moms Demand Action, Shannon Watts mentioned that four million seventeen year olds will be eligible to vote during this year's midterm<sup>77</sup>. These students have all grown up in a time where mass school shootings have become more prevalent. The future of gun restrictions looks more promising than it has in decades, but whether the reporting habits and opinions projected by the mass media will necessarily support or block this is yet to be seen.

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<sup>77</sup> Melissa Jeltsen and Jennifer Bendery. "The Parkland Shooting May Have Just Cemented America's Newest Voting Bloc." *The Huffington Post*, 3 Mar. 2018.

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