

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

When the shooting broke out in Parkland, Florida, last February 14, Miranda was already underway with research for an essay about *A Beautiful Mind*, a 2001 film about the schizophrenic mathematician John Nash. Continuing with that worthy project would've been the easiest way for her to complete the assignment. But in the wake of Parkland, Miranda's motivation to understand the power of media representations of mental illness gave her the courage to change her approach midstream and to dive into a controversial political issue. Her choice paid off with the compelling and timely essay you are about to read. In Miranda's words, "It is possible to start somewhere and then end up in a completely different place, and that is sometimes the best way to develop a project."

On March 24, as students across the country gathered for the March for Our Lives, Miranda was making the last round of revisions to her prizewinning essay "Representations of Mental Illness Within FOX and CNN: The Parkland Shooting." It too can be understood as a form of civic engagement. In this paper, Miranda presents new data she collected about news coverage of the Parkland school shooting and uses the kind of critical information literacy skills that are essential to responsible citizenship. In doing so, she contributes to both scholarly and public conversations about gun violence and mental illness.

Her portfolio makes the connection between scholarly and public discourse explicit when she describes how she drew on knowledge from her research to respond to an acquaintance's Instagram post blaming gun violence on mentally ill people in especially derogatory terms. Miranda reflected, "With news media constantly projecting this image of the mentally ill as violent and committing crimes, it is no surprise that this post showed up on my newsfeed." I am thrilled that Miranda's essay was recognized by the editorial board, but if it generates more thoughtful conversation about this topic through the *WR* readers she reaches here, that will be the best prize.

Sarah Madsen Hardy
WR 150: Representing Illness

FROM THE WRITER

As a student mostly interested in science and math, I have always thought of writing as something I simply was not good at. This WR 150 class, “Representing Illness,” altered my view of what it truly means to be a writer. In the beginning, I was terrified of coming up with my own topic, carrying out my own research, and ultimately, attempting to write on an issue that I did not only believe to be important, but also relevant. I originally went down a few different paths, getting a bit lost in the large realm of mental illness, a topic I knew to be extremely interesting. After meeting with our class librarian, Ken Liss, I began to discover my interest in uncovering the misrepresentation of mental illness in our society. I slowly immersed myself in the current news stories of the Parkland shooting, and in formulating my research topic, I learned that I am much more passionate about writing than I had thought. I have begun to understand that writing is not as hard as I imagined it to be, and that even if you are not sure what or where you are going with something, in simply starting it, you are already on the path to success, no matter the road you take to getting there.

MIRANDA MELICI is a rising sophomore from Basking Ridge, New Jersey studying Health Science in the College of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences at Boston University. As a student hoping to pursue a career in medicine, Miranda has always been interested in culture surrounding diseases and illnesses. She would like to thank Professor Madsen Hardy, Ken Liss, and her peers for their endless and wonderful guidance, support, criticisms, and kind words throughout WR 150.

MIRANDA MELICI
Prize Essay Award

REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS ON FOX AND CNN: THE PARKLAND SHOOTING

According to the National Center for Health Statistics in a gun homicide study, less than 5% of 120,000 gun-related killings were committed by people diagnosed with mental illness. (Metzl 241). Despite this statistic, many Americans still believe that those with serious mental illness are dangerous, perpetuating stigma towards persons affected by mental illness (McGinty 498). These beliefs are widely influenced by mass media, specifically news media. Communications research provides evidence that the public's attitudes towards specific groups of people are "heavily influenced by news media portrayals," especially if they have "little experience with the group in question" (McGinty 406). With the recent school shooting in Parkland, Florida, the influence of news media portrayals of violence in association with mental illness becomes more relevant. News sources have covered and continue to cover this event, framing and reframing the facts of the mass shooting with relation to mental illness, influencing public perception of the event. Currently, scholars discuss the misrepresentation of persons that are mentally ill as violent and criminal within news media, and the resulting perception of the mentally ill as dangerous (McGinty 401). However, the Parkland shooting raises the question of the relationship between political views of news outlets and representations of mental illness. With the audience members of FOX and CNN labeling the sources as conservative and liberal, respectively (Allsides), the different "leanings" of news media outlets may significantly impact the representations of those with mental illness, which may further perpetuate stereotypes and stigmatization, skewing public views of gun violence and mass shootings as associated with mental illness. With an increase in stigmatization comes poorer treatment rates and less recovery (Wahl 10), along with the false belief that denying the mentally ill access to guns will decrease the likelihood of mass shootings significantly (McGinty 431). As demonstrated by the coverage of the Parkland shooting, FOX News perpetuates the belief that mental illness is the main reason for gun violence and mass shootings more so than CNN, leading to an increase of stigmatization of the mentally ill and a distorted belief of the relationship between gun violence and mental illness by their viewers, which has serious negative consequences for those affected by mental illness.

As Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist, political activist, and sociologist, argues, "we give things meanings by how we represent them" (Hall xix). Hall places the importance of representation above all else, claiming that representation constitutes the very essence of the thing that one is trying to present (Hall xxi). Thus, nothing has meaning until it is represented. Susan Sontag furthers this argument of representation as constituting meaning with regards to illness. Sontag analyzes the representation of illness as a metaphor, "the disease itself becom[ing] a metaphor", and "adjectival." She notes that feelings of "evil are projected onto a disease" (Sontag 711). And because disease is represented in a way to give it meaning, the disease is then "projected onto the world" (Sontag 711). Sontag emphasizes the negative connotations that society has towards specific diseases, simply because society has given these diseases meaning. Within the world of news media, representation

becomes especially crucial. News media outlets give the general public the necessary information they need about the society they live in, such as weather, stocks, politics, and crime. As such, news media viewpoints influence watchers and readers, as an “agent of socialization that critically shapes an individual’s perceptions and beliefs” (Bunting 3). News media represents these events, thus giving them meaning, and providing the public with a sense of what they are supposed to know and feel. In the case of disease and illness, news media thus shapes societal perceptions of people affected by these illnesses, and the viewpoints that these media outlets take on further public opinions.

Previous research on the representation of gun violence in relation to mental illness focuses on news media coverage and the public’s perception of mass shootings in previous years. Emma McGinty and her colleagues conducted three studies with regard to public perception of mental illness and violence, one in 2013, one in 2016, and one in 2018. McGinty’s study in 2013, with the title “Effects of News Media Messages about Mass Shootings on Attitudes Toward Persons with Serious Mental Illness and Public Support for Gun Control Policies” had alarming results. The study analyzed public views of events involving mass shootings in relation to negative attitudes towards persons with mental illness by distributing news stories involving gun violence by a mentally ill perpetrator, and surveying respondents to determine their attitudes towards the mentally ill. A baseline was established for the views of the public, which revealed that before respondents even read stories involving mental illness and violence, forty percent of the survey respondents believed persons with mental illness to be “far more dangerous than the general population” (McGinty 496). This baseline is already concerning, considering less than three to five percent of crimes in the United States involve persons with mental illness (Metzl 241). After the respondents read the news stories involving gun violence and mental illness, they illustrated “heightened negative attitudes” towards those with mental illness. Respondents also reported a “higher perceived dangerousness of persons with serious mental illness” (McGinty 496-497). McGinty concluded that news media representations of mass shootings by the mentally ill “play a critical role in influencing...negative attitudes towards persons with serious mental illness” (McGinty 498).

McGinty’s second and third studies, conducted in 2016 and 2018, “Trends In News Media Coverage Of Mental Illness In The United States: 1995-2014” and “News Media Framing of Serious Mental Illness and Gun Violence in the United States, 1997-2012” respectively, touch more deeply upon the media’s role directly in relation to public discourse. The study conducted in 2016 found that, generally, news stories covering the mentally ill “emphasized interpersonal violence”, and found that “dangerousness was the most common theme in coverage” (McGinty 1122). Even further, news media that covered interpersonal violence and mental illness “focused on gun violence and mass shootings” (McGinty 1125). The coverage that continues to connect interpersonal violence with mental illness is extremely “disproportionate to actual rates of such violence” within the United States (McGinty 1128). The results of the study conducted in 2018 continue to support the notion that the public is regularly presented with information that connects those with serious mental illness and gun violence in mass shootings. The findings suggest that the connection within news media coverage between serious mental illness and violence contributes to negative public views of persons with mental illness, which leads to a whole host of issues for those with mental illness, including lack of support, increased stigma, and lower treatment rates (McGinty 410). The public may also view mental illness as a cause of gun violence, with the study providing evidence that a “higher proportion of news stories mentioned dangerous people with SMI [serious mental illness]” more so than dangerous weapons as a contributor to gun violence (McGinty 431). The results of Emma McGinty’s three studies consistently showcase the persisting negative attitudes and stigma

surrounding those with mental illness, emphasizing the news media's role in perpetuating stereotypes and beliefs about the mentally ill that do not reflect their actual non-violent tendencies.

Despite the existing studies on news media coverage of gun violence and its effect on public perception of the mentally ill, McGinty does not comment on the differing political biases that may affect the representations of mental illness within different news media sources. These news sources typically cover similar events, but may reflect and emphasize different parts of the story. An example of such an event is the Parkland shooting. On February 14th, 2018, Nikolas Cruz shot 17 students and faculty at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida. There were 14 children and 3 adults killed with a semi-automatic AR 15, making it one of the deadliest mass shootings in American history. Because of the intense nature of the event, news outlets covered this story at length. The coverage of the Parkland shooting reached many different media sources, including the networks Fox Broadcasting Company (FOX), and Cable News Network (CNN). FOX and CNN both reach millions of viewers, ranking first and second overall in number of audience members, as of March 22nd, 2018 (Adweek). FOX news is typically regarded as a right-leaning network that caters to a conservative audience, whereas CNN is often referred to as the opposite, with a more liberal demographic (Allsides). Because of these political biases, the information that they present to their audiences may differ. In the case of the Parkland shooting, the networks' differing political affiliations affect the way they represent mental illness with relation to the shooting. When examining the coverage of the shooting across the two networks, it becomes apparent that FOX overemphasizes the connection between mental illness and violence, specifically within the context of mass shootings, more so than CNN.

As a way to study the different styles of coverage, twenty-two Fox News transcripts were analyzed through the website "Nexus Uni," along with twenty-two CNN news transcripts. The transcripts were selected by a search of "Parkland Shooting" within the database. The methodology includes an analysis of the average number of times the word "mental" is used per transcript, and also analyzes the syntax and diction within the transcripts themselves. The general terms to describe the syntax and diction will be a positive, negative, or neutral "slant" to the words within the transcripts. A positive slant means that mental illness is mentioned in a way that supports the mental health community and provides a positive image of those with mental illness. In other words, they do not attribute the shootings to a mental health issue. A neutral slant refers to the idea that mental illness is mentioned in a non-harmful way and does not have any positive or negative connotations — or example, simply mentioning that the shooter had mental health issues, but not describing it as a cause for the mass shooting. Lastly, a negative slant indicates that mental illness is mentioned in a way that harms the image of those with mental illness, and that may increase stigmatization of the community, and that the source identifies mental health issues as the cause of mass shootings. These three categories allow for a complete and simple understanding of how news media represents mental illness with regards to gun violence. As Hall notes, representations will thus provide insight to how the public interprets the event, and as Sontag argues, these interpretations will allow for an understanding of what meanings and connotations are given to mental illness by society.

Within the news transcripts that are related to the Parkland shooting, FOX News transcripts have shown to represent mental illness with a greater connection to the shooting and gun violence than CNN. FOX mentions the word "mental" 7.27 times on average per transcript, with 15 transcripts with a negative slant, two neutral slants, and one positive- and negative-slanted transcript. There were four articles that did not mention the word "mental" with a connection to the Parkland

shooting. CNN mentions the word “mental” 2.95 times on average per transcript, with eight transcripts with a negative slant, six neutral, and four positive slants. There were four articles that did not mention the word “mental.” As is evident by simply the number of times the different news sources mentioned the word “mental,” FOX News mentions the word 2.5 times more than CNN does per article. This evidence is substantial in the sense that the public will hear that mental illness is related to the shooting, regardless of the specific positive and negative slants to the articles. When considering this in conjunction with Hall’s and Sontag’s notion of society adapting meanings to things as they are represented, it is not surprising that people would identify mental illness as constitutive of the shooting. Sontag even further develops this representation of diseases as evil, with society giving the diseases meaning, and cementing these representations as “definitions” (Sontag 711).

Along with the number of times the word “mental” is mentioned within the transcripts on average, the specific positive and negative slants are extremely important in determining the effect of political biases on their representations of mental illness and the connection to the Parkland Shooting. FOX News has 3.75 times more articles with a negative slant than does CNN. Within the 22 FOX transcripts analyzed only one of the transcripts had a positive slant to it, though it still began with a negative characterization of mental illness. The reporter for FOX specifically mentions that the “one commonality between the gunman” and various mass shootings, is “mental health issues,” along with mental illness (FOX, “Missed Warning Signs”). This statement leads the public to believe that there is a correlation between mental health issues and mass shootings. The negative slants of the FOX News transcripts in general will produce a stigmatizing representation of the mentally ill, furthering the belief that the main cause of gun violence and mass shootings is in the issue of mental health. FOX News transcripts covering the Parkland shooting repeatedly quote President Donald Trump, who makes the statement that he is working with legislation to “help secure our schools” and additionally, to “tackle the difficult issue of mental health” (FOX, *The Day After*). This direct quotation from the President of the United States reaches the audience of FOX, which is reportedly the top viewed basic cable network, as of March 22nd, 2018 (Adweek). The negative slant of the President’s statement is obvious—he attributes gun violence and mass shootings to a lack of regulation on the mentally ill, specifically stating that that this “difficult issue” must be dealt with so as to keep the schools safe. And as the President of our country, his opinions of an event become even more vital to society’s understanding of it; he is supposed to represent the American population.

In contrast, CNN news transcripts have four times as many positively slanted transcripts as FOX transcripts. One of CNN’s positively slanted transcripts mentions that the gun violence issue is not “because we have more mentally ill people,” it’s “just absolutely not true” (CNN, *Trump Focuses*). This transcript makes a point of demonstrating that the mass shootings are not singularly due to mental health issues. The transcript also mentions multiple other causes of gun violence, taking the cause of the shooting away from the mentally ill, referring to the availability of “extremely lethal weapons,” and the lack of regulation among “control[ling] the access” to these “widespread” and “available” weapons (CNN, *Trump Focuses*). CNN presents a radically different picture of the connection between gun violence and mental illness. In another positively slanted article, the reporter mentions that there has been a lot of focus on the mental health issues of the shooter, but then asks, “is that fair to focus on?” (CNN, *Mueller Charges*). Evidently, from not only the lower average number of mentions of the word “mental,” CNN also has significantly more articles that are

positively slanted than FOX, which may be due to their more liberal slant, as opposed to FOX's more conservative slant.

FOX News promotes the connection between gun violence and mental illness more than CNN, which leads to an increased stigmatization of persons with mental illness. This results in the skewed belief that a major cause of gun violence is mental illness, which has extremely negative consequences for the mentally ill. Increased levels of social stigma leads to lower rates of treatment seeking, and creates a multitude of "negative outcomes," like "homelessness, unemployment, and criminal justice involvement" (McGinty 1128). Additionally, the higher levels of stigma contributes to less "public support for policies that benefit" the mentally ill (McGinty 1128). Those with mental illness are also living with an increased amount of anxiety, and may experience more "discomfort, shame and loss of self-esteem" with an increased amount of stigma, as they feel that they are working to keep their mental illness a secret. This may lead to "chronic stress" that will "undermine both their mental and physical health" (Wahl 10) The negative view of the mentally ill will not only increase social stigma, but also lead to a view that those with serious mental illness are a "threat to public safety" (McGinty 2018). And because most persons with mental illness are nonviolent (Metzl 241), FOX News's representation of the mentally ill is not representative of the population, leading to political decisions that may not reflect the actual necessary decisions that will legitimately decrease gun violence.

The news' political leanings are especially important in determining the roots of misinformation and misrepresentation that leads to social stigmas demonstrated by this study. It is vital that these news outlets recognize that the mentally ill are not to blame for gun violence. This will increase support for policies that help the mentally ill and also will help to lessen stigma against them, leading to increased treatment rates and less anxiety. It is important that further research focus on the actual public responses to these different news media framings of conservative and liberal sources, so as to determine how the differing viewpoints are actually being interpreted and spread throughout society.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bunting, Amanda Marie. "Attributing Blame: A Content Analysis of the Media's Portrayal of School Shootings." Order No. 1558276 University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 2014. Ann Arbor: *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Mar. 2018.

Scholarly article. Research that analyzes mass shootings and the media's portrayal of the shooter, examining the different attributions given to the shooter based on race. The results found that the media attributed the shooters motivation to internal or external causes based upon race. Mental illness was a frequently cited attribution given to Caucasian shooters. Serves as a background and introductory source for my research, and also as a source that emphasizes the importance of media as a source that shapes public perceptions and beliefs.

CNN Newsroom. FDCHeMedia, Inc, Feb. 2018. *LexisNexis Academic*, advance-lexis-com.ezproxy.bu.edu/bisacademicresearchhome?crd=456a709a-f5b5-48e6-956f-74f5dbf9fc9a&pdmfid=1516831&pdisurlapi=true. Accessed 29 Mar. 2018. Transcript.

News source, transcript. Provides coverage for events that are relevant to the public. The transcripts cover the Parkland shooting, reporting the facts of the event, policy, and politics. The twenty-two transcripts selected from CNN will serve as the liberal side of the spectrum for the research project, analyzed with respect to their use of the word "mental" and negative, neutral, or positive slants to the transcripts. They are exhibit sources, and are the other half of the primary source of research for the project.

FOX News Network. FOX News Network, Feb. 2018. *LexisNexis Academic*, advance-lexis-com.ezproxy.bu.edu/bisacademicresearchhome?crd=456a709a-f5b5-48e6-956f-74f5dbf9fc9a&pdmfid=1516831&pdisurlapi=true. Accessed 29 Mar. 2018. Transcript.

News source, transcript. Intends to provide coverage for events that occur that are relevant to the public. These specific transcripts cover the Parkland shooting, both in reporting on the facts of the event, and debating policy and politics. The twenty-two transcripts selected from FOX will serve as the conservative side of the spectrum for the research project, analyzed with respect to their use of the word "mental" and negative, neutral, or positive slants to the transcripts. These serve as exhibit sources, and are the primary source of research for the project.

Hall, Stuart. "Introduction." *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage, 1997. Print.

Provides analysis of culture as shared meanings, and language as central to culture and representation. Presents the co-constitutive nature of representation and meaning, with which cultural practices give meaning to. Intends to make clear the importance of meanings and cultures as shaping society and as a part of representation. Serves as a resource to analyze representation and meaning with regard to social life and societal values.

Katz, A.J. "Scoreboard: Thursday, March 29." *TV Newser*, Adweek, 29 Mar. 2018, www.adweek.com/tvnewser/scoreboard-thursday-march-29/360720. Accessed 29 Mar. 2018.

Website article. Reports on the ratings of major news networks, determining which networks were watched most frequently. Provides data for the number of audience members watching the major networks. Serves as a reference source, that proves how the misrepresentation of illness by these media outlets will reach many people around America, furthering the necessity of correcting the information and representation given by these sources.

McGinty, Emma E., Daniel W. Webster, and Colleen L. Barry. "Effects of News Media Messages about Mass Shootings on Attitudes Toward Persons with Serious Mental Illness and Public Support for Gun Control Policies." *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 170, no. 5, 2013, pp. 494–501, *ProQuest*.

Scholarly article. Research intends to discover the effects of news stories that cover mass shootings on public attitudes towards the mentally ill, along with support for gun control policies. The results concluded that news stories generally exacerbated negative attitudes towards persons with serious mental illness. The research also mentions negative attitudes and stigma as linked to poor treatment rates, with a call for future research on mental illness and news media coverage to lessen stigma. The source is extremely useful, as it provides a framework for existing research on the effects of mass media in relation to gun violence and shootings.

McGinty, Emma E. et al. "News Media Framing of Serious Mental Illness and Gun Violence in the United States, 1997–2012." *American Journal of Public Health* 104.3 (2014): 406–413. *PMC*. Web. 21 Mar. 2018.

Scholarly article. Research analyzes news media framing of the relationship between serious mental illness and gun violence. The results concluded that the public is more often exposed to mental illness and gun violence framed in the context of mass shootings. The article touches upon the serious consequences of this exposure, including less support for treatment of mental health issues and policies and false information about the main causes of gun violence. This serves as a resource that frames my own research, serving as background information on the existing news coverage in connection with mental illness and gun violence.

McGinty, Emma E, et al. "Trends In News Media Coverage Of Mental Illness In The United States: 1995–2014." *Health Affairs (Project Hope)*, vol. 35, no. 6, 2016, pp. 1121–9.

Scholarly article. Research on the trends of news coverage of mental illness through a period of 19 years. Results found that the coverage of mental illness has trended down since 1995, and that the content within these stories has stayed relatively similar. The research found that the most frequently mentioned topics within mental illness coverage included violence, suicide, and treatment of mental illness. This serves as another source of background information within the scholarly community that analyzes the existing news content, and discovered the link between coverage of mental illness as including violence.

“Media Bias Ratings.” *Allsides*, AllSides, 2018, www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-ratings. Accessed 29 Mar. 2018.

Website article. Collected data on the different biases thought to impact news coverage. Rates the biases of each network, and then has a public response to these ratings, where Americans can vote on their opinion of the biases. Evidence shows that CNN is liberal and left leaning, and FOX is conservative and right leaning, rated both by the Allsides experts and the public. Extremely important to the project as it provides a framework for my research question of whether political bias affects news coverage of mass shootings in relation to the mentally ill; I must have information about which networks are biased, and in which ways.

Metzl, Jonathan M, and Kenneth T Macleish. “Mental Illness, Mass Shootings, and the Politics of American Firearms.” *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 105, no. 2, 2015, pp. 240–9.

Scholarly article. Analyzes the connection between mental illness and gun violence. Discusses the relationship between mental illness and mass shootings within the context of politics and gun control. Provides evidence for the beliefs held by Americans about the causes of mass shootings, and the actual statistics of mental illness in relation to gun violence. Important in determining the prevalence of mental illness as it relates to mass shootings, with actual data to support the notion that mental illness is not a primary cause of mass shootings.

Otto F. Wahl. “Stigma as a barrier to recovery from mental illness”. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Volume 16, Issue 1, 2012, Pages 9–10. ISSN 1364-6613. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2011.11.002>. (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S136466131100235X>)

Scholarly article. A source that analyzes how stigma affects treatment and recovery from mental illness. Describes how stigma negatively impacts those with mental illness, including issues with anxiety, chronic stress, and lower treatment adherence and acceptance. Serves as a source for understanding the wider significance of misrepresentation of mental illness within society. Provides information on stigma and how it affects those with mental illness at a personal level.

Sontag, Susan. “Illness as Metaphor.” *Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 70s*, edited by David Rieff, Library of America, 2013, pp. 677–719.

Book. Analyzes illnesses and the metaphors associated with them. Provides information about the harmfulness of metaphors with regards to specifically cancer and tuberculosis, but also reaching out to diseases in general, and how they carry meaning with how we represent them. Touches on the evils of metaphors in describing illness, and the longevity with which these metaphors last. Useful for my own research as an argument for the harmfulness in misrepresenting illness, and the general consequences socially that occur.