

The stoneman douglas high school shooting



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Introduction

Online media is an ever-growing platform. In today's world mass media has the ability to turn disasters in local areas into international wide events within a few minutes, by doing so sending the impact of a local disaster further to people who are not directly exposed to the tragedy. With the constant rise of terrorist attacks and acts of pure violence, it is the media's role to report the true nature of all these events. However, often times the media's way of portraying the events that have taken place can have an impact on the audience's perception of their own safety. In light of the February 14th 2018 Florida Parkland shooting, there has been an abundance of articles online with the purpose of educating people on the incident that occurred. By reading these articles it is possible that the audience can experience negative psychological impacts.

The idea to be explored here is to what extent media coverage on traumatic events has negative psychological impacts on the readers/viewers.

Nowadays in the media, we are exposed to a great deal of traumatic and horrifying events that happen every day around the world, what we are, unfortunately, unaware of are the possible psychological impacts reading and watching recounts about such events may have on us. These news agencies use their bulletins and images to appeal to their readers in a way that will get their message across. It is important for us as readers to know what possible psychological impacts reading traumatic news can have on us.

The people who were most impacted by the 2018 Florida Parkland shooting were the citizens living within Florida, in particular, the parents and children

of that particular school. On top of the actual traumatic event, these individuals had to also go through the consistent reporting of the event itself. The images used in each and every one of these articles are upsetting enough to leave psychological marks. As well as the local region, the effects of these school shootings can also be reached in many schools around the world, while they will not have been as severe, with the use of the media and the images used it is more than possible for students around the world to feel remorse and sympathy for the children in Parkland. Student's around the United States of America itself have expressed their anger and sympathy for the students in Florida, sparking the interest of many around the US to make sure such a horrific event does not occur again.

While it is possible for these TV bulletins and traumatic pieces to leave a psychological mark on their readers it can also be said that the psychological mark may have already been there and may not have been caused by reading such articles.

The News Agencies Aim

News agencies aim to instil fear in their readers when reporting news on terrorism or violent attacks. Articles are often violent and emotionally charged in efforts to make sure their readers are engaged and feel the true impact of the horrific events they are talking about. "Terrorism is newsworthy because it is inherently dramatic and threatening," as said by political scientist Shana Gadarian in The Washington Post in October. Often times journalists find that writing about horrific events, categorized as "bad news" by Galtung and Ruge, contributes to making that piece of news more "newsworthy". In order to make sure their readers are engaged and are

involved in the news they are displaying Shana Guardian states that, “journalists and editors have incentives to use emotionally powerful visuals and storylines to gain and maintain ever-shrinking news audiences.”. The media feeds on the fears of their readers. By doing so, writers use their bulletins and subheadings to instil worry within the general audience. Often, in order to instil the fear within the readers, it is found that journalists tend to report on events that have fatalities. By reporting on fatalities it triggers an emotional response from the readers, therefore, increasing the impact of their article.

In fact, according to a search conducted in 2017, it was found that a news bulletin containing the word “killed” and “terrorist attack” yielded a higher reader count in comparison to a bulletin that contained “terrorist attack” and “wounded”. Knowing about killings in areas that are close by can increase a person’s sense of unsafety, anxiety, vulnerability and powerlessness. In relation to the Florida shooting, many were deeply impacted by this school shooting, it resulted in the death of 17 people including both teachers and students. The media coverage of this event was widespread and the event was covered by a broad range of media outlets. The one thing each article had in common was the mention of the number of fatalities and “deaths” and how 17 people were “killed”. The use of these words in the bulletin alone triggers a sense of disparity in the readers as they start to have feelings for remorse and sympathy. Not only this, but the readers who resided in Florida would, upon reading the bulletins, have an increased sense of vulnerability and lack of feeling safe in their own homes.

The media purposely uses hyperbole to appeal to their readers and trigger their sense of disparity and sadness. Within each article, there is a consistent use of hyperbole to accentuate the horrific incident they are talking about. By referring to the attack as “catastrophic” and the “deadliest” since 2012 emphasises how terrible the attack that unfolded is. The journalist smartly uses these quotes to attract and appeal to the readers, it is very important for journalists to capture the attention of their reader with just their bulletin. Due to this often times, the bulletins and article titles contain a hyperbole. A hyperbole has the ability heighten the magnitude of a situation, in this case instilling more fear in the readers than needed.

Negative TV Bulletins and their impact

In order to see the psychological impact of negative TV news bulletins Wendy M Johnson and Graham C. L. Davey conducted a study on three groups. The three groups were shown 14 minute TV news bulletins that were edited to display either positive, neutral or negative valenced material. A total of 30 participants took part in the study, all of whom were undergraduate students at City University. Their ages ranged from 18 - 26 years, 15 of the participants were female while the other 15 male.

In order to construct the videos, a number of news items were selected and shown to four independent raters in order to obtain an objective and independent evaluation of the results given by participants. After watching each news item the raters were asked to rate them on 3 100-point analogue scales. These scales were used to assess the videos along the guidelines of (1) positive/negative (2) pleasant/unpleasant and (3) calm/ excited. After this

process, the 3 14-min videos were achieved. Each tape contained 7 news items within it.

In order to judge the impact of watching these news bulletins before the experiment, they were told to talk about their personal anxiety and worries and were then told to write down their 3 most pressing worries at the current moment in order of importance. As well as this prior to the experiment they were also asked to complete the Spielberger STAI Y-2, the Beck Depression Inventory and the Penn State Worry Questionnaire as measures of anxiety, depression and pathological worrying. After doing so, they answered on a scale their current levels of anxiety and sadness on two separate 100 point analogue scales. Upon seeing the videos they were told to answer the levels of anxiety and sadness analogue scales for the second time.

What was found was that for the group that was shown the relatively positive news bulletin their anxiety and sadness measures did not alter that much, in fact, their measure of sadness went down after showing the video in comparison to before they were shown the video. In terms of the anxiety ratings a significant group x rating interaction ($F(2, 27) = 3.85, p < .05$) was exhibited whereby the Negative group was significantly more anxious than the groups Positive and Neutral. Whereas for the sadness aspect of the rating, pairwise comparisons showed that the group that saw negative videos gave much higher sadness ratings than both the groups who saw positive videos and the groups that saw neutral videos. From the results of this study, we can conclude that watching predominantly negative news programmes can raise measures of anxious and sad moods, therefore, leading to catastrophizing of personal worries.

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Another study conducted by Joseph T F Lau et al was done to “ investigate the prevalence and associated factors (media coverage in particular) of stress-related responses to the December 2004 tsunami”. A cross-sectional telephone study was conducted on an anonymous population. The way the PTSD was measured was by a locally validated “ Chinese Impact of Event Scale (CIES), measuring whether the participants were disturbed or horrified due to the impact of the tsunami. In relation to media coverage, the frequency of exposure and level of distress caused by images as well as the contents of the news itself were measured. The study took place in Hong Kong and China with a total of 604 participants. The results obtained showed that intensive coverage by the media was strongly associated with “ different types of tsunami-related stress indicators”. The results being that participants who were more intensely exposed to tsunami-related news (> 10 times a day), suffered from more severe PTSD, with “ 30% of the males and 39. 5% of the females experiencing mild post-traumatic stress disorder” and “ 5. 9% of the males and 8. 7% of the females experiencing moderate to severe PTSD”.

With the increase in outlets available for news to spread there has been a rise in the epidemic known as vicarious trauma (Perlman & Saakvitne, 1995), vicarious trauma “ is the emotional residue of exposure”. This meaning that those exposed to disastrous events, even if they are not directly exposed to the issue at hand, have an emotional attachment to the issue due to the fact that they have been exposed to the stories and scenes of those who are directly impacted by the event. This is most commonly seen in practitioners who work with victims of traumatic events, they are exposed to the stories of

these patients, this being their most intimate thoughts and struggles. Due to this many practitioners also start to feel remorse affecting their own personal lives. Through media today many victims personal struggles are also talked about at a more international level, due to this it is possible for viewers/readers to struggle from vicarious trauma as well. Those who are directly impacted by the traumatic events being covered on media have an even higher risk of developing severe re traumatisation and are at the risk of developing depression.

The impacts of traumatic images

News agencies don't always use their article titles and bulletins to attract readers, often times they use images. Images that are often placed on purpose to reel in readers as they are very visually enticing. Media is not always only pertaining to written articles but also online video coverage, in terms of this often times the news agencies will use particularly emotionally charged videos in order to make an impact on their viewers.

In order to see the impact of watching traumatic images, Jennifer Ahern et al conducted a study to see whether more frequent viewing of television images of the 9/11 attacks in New York City would be associated with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. The researchers conducted a survey on their participants to find out how frequently they would have seen certain images for example: in relation to the 9/11 attacks, a very common images that were being circulated was the image of the plane crashing into the two buildings. Within this survey they were asked to record how many times they had already seen the image, the options being 0, 1-7, more than 7. The image of the planes crashing into the World Trade Centre was seen

more than 7 times by 87% of the participants in this study, and the image of buildings collapsing was seen more than 7 times by 82.9% of the participants. The results of this study showed that participants who had seen the image of buildings collapsing and planes colliding into the towers more than 7 times tended to have a higher risk of depression in comparison to those who saw it less than 7 times in the week after the attack. This study supports that there is a strong correlation between frequent image viewing and both PTSD and depression. A problem faced in this study is that the participants were asked about their media viewing the week after the attack but their levels of depression and PTSD were assessed 5-8 weeks after the attack occurred, this could have had an effect on the results received as the depression and PTSD levels could have been higher closer to the attack.

Media has allowed many viewers to view extremely horrific content almost 24 hours a day with the introduction of daily news. This meaning that with the click of a button it is possible for a person to see the disastrous events happening around the world. In viewing images of others in anguish has the ability to affect our daily lives. News agencies harness the power of images to send a message to their readers and viewers quickly and efficiently. In fact "articles with images get 94% more total views" (jeffbullas.com) Images have proven to often be more powerful than words when an agency is aiming to promote an article often times images are what separates one article from another. "Images help us become involved" (biomedcentral.com), the use of images helps the readers and viewers put a face to a problem that they often read or hear about. Putting an image into something you read about helps to make an issue more personal to you.

Pam Ramsden from University of Bradford conducted a study to investigate whether “ people would experience longer lasting effects such as stress and anxiety and in some cases post-traumatic stress disorders from viewing these [traumatic] images.” (sciencedaily. com). Within the study a sample of 189 participants was used with a mean age of 37 years old with an equal split between male and female, they each completed a clinical assessment for PTSD, a personality quiz, a vicarious trauma assessment and a questionnaire concerning different violent news events on the internet. The events included were the 9/11 Twin Tower attack, school shootings and suicide bombings. After further analysis of the results, it was found that 22 per cent of the participants were affected by the media events. The individuals who were deemed affected scored high on clinical measures of PTSD even though none of them had experienced personal trauma prior to the experiment, the participants were also not directly impacted by the traumatic events mentioned above, the only connection they had to the events was the online media coverage of them.

Further research has been conducted to explore whether television and news exposure can be included as exposure in the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. A study conducted after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and after the 2001 9/11 attacks have reported that there is a correlation between television viewing of traumatic incidents and symptoms of PTSD. However, as said by Pfefferbaum et al, that the way media coverage impacts viewers can differ between viewers who have had direct exposure to the incident and viewers who have had indirect exposure to an incident. In relation to viewers who have been directly affected by an incident, the

effects of repeated viewing of media coverage could be a revival of past trauma. Whereas the impact of repeated viewing of media coverage for those who are not directly affected by the incident could be the initial horror and shock they have towards the event which could be the primary trauma caused by watching footage of the event itself. According to Pfefferbaum et al indirect victims only become victims to the event if and when they see and hear about the event itself. As stated by the American Psychiatric Association 1994, p. 42) as well as exposure to the event, to diagnose PTSD the individual would also need to have a reaction of “ intense fear, helplessness, or horror” to the event taken place.