



**Markkula Center**  
for Applied Ethics  
*at Santa Clara University*

# Mass Shootings Coverage Ethics

*Mass Media and Social Media*



**Subbu Vincent, Director, Journalism and Media Ethics**

Markkula Center for Applied Ethics  
Santa Clara University



# Outline: Mass Shootings Coverage Ethics

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- Our questions
- Case: Lewiston shooting
- What ethics is and what it isn't
- Framing
- Social Media
- Some ways forward
- Takeways: The questions revisited

# Our questions

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- How does social media impact mass media?
- Given the ability to rapidly and immediately disseminate information, what are the ethics and responsibilities of news media organizations?
- Should the public get detailed information regarding perpetrators?
- Should unsubstantiated theories regarding the mental health of perpetrators be part of the story?



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# Case: Breaking News Phase of the Lewiston Shooting Coverage



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Weds & Thurs: October 25<sup>th</sup> and  
26<sup>th</sup>.



### Multiple victims reported following shootings in Lewiston

sunjournal.com



### news Alerts

NBC News  
2 min



### At least 22 killed, dozens wounded in Lewiston, Maine shootings - NBC

Reuters  
3 min



### Active shooter situation in Maine, hospital says 'mass casualty, mass shooter' event



### Maine police investigating "active shooter" at multiple locations in Lewiston



### Multiple Mass Shootings In Maine Town, Suspect At Large

LEWISTON-AUBURN &gt;

Posted Yesterday at 8:07 PM | Updated 1 min ago

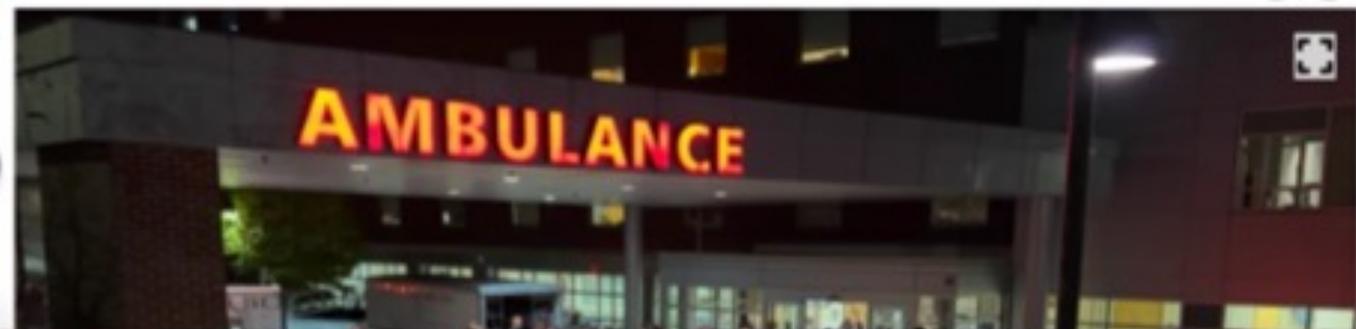
INCREASE FONT SIZE 

# At least 22 dead in multiple Lewiston shootings; police give few details on overnight search for gunman

State police named Robert Card of Bowdoin as person of interest while all of Androscoggin County remains on lockdown. Residents are being told to stay in their homes and keep doors locked.

BY [MARLA HOFFMAN](#) , [MARK MOGENSEN](#) , [JOE CHARPENTIER](#) , [JUDITH MEYER](#) SUN JOURNAL, [STEVE COLLINS](#) AND [KENDRA CARUSO](#) SUN JOURNAL

1 of 11

**BROWSE MORE IN NEWS**[MAINE NEWS](#)[COMMUNITY NEWS](#)[CRIME & COURTS](#)[OXFORD HILLS NEWS](#)[NATION/WORLD NEWS](#)[FRANKLIN NEWS](#)[RIVER VALLEY NEWS](#)[READ THE EPAPER](#)

Active shooter situation in Maine,  
hospital says 'mass casualty, mass  
event'

shooter  
Lewiston

zerohedge

LEWISTON — At least 22 people were killed in multiple shootings Wednesday night in Lewiston, Androscoggin County Sheriff Eric Samson confirmed.

That number could rise, he said.

Maine State Police are searching for Robert Card, 40, in connection with the two shootings at Sparetime Recreation and Schemengees Bar & Grille.

Card, who lives in Bowdoin, is a trained firearms instructor who police believe is in the U.S. Army Reserve out of Saco. He recently reported mental health issues, including hearing voices, and made threats to shoot the National Guard base in Saco, according to state police, who said he spent two weeks at a mental health facility this summer.



Robert Card Courtesy of Maine State Police

They warned the public that Card should be considered armed and dangerous.

The car police believed he was driving, a white Subaru Outback, was found near the Lisbon boat dock on Frost Hill Avenue near Route 196. Police were knocking on doors of nearby homes while helicopters remained in the area Wednesday night

Wednesday. Here's what you need

3 Chase starts in Franklin County, en  
in Auburn

4 Auburn-Lewiston YMCA acquires s  
downtown Rumford building

5 Lewiston man admits to child porn

Oct 25, 11:45 PM EDT

## Person of interest served in military, is a firearms instructor: Sources



Police in Maine have identified a person of interest in the shooting, according to multiple law enforcement sources.

The person of interest has a history of military service and is a firearms instructor, the sources said.

The sources said he also has a mental health history, including a two-week stay this summer at a mental health facility after he allegedly made threats about carrying out a shooting at a National Guard facility.

Authorities have traced his white Subaru to a location in Lisbon, Maine, sources said.





State Police have identified 40-year-old Robert R. Card II as a person of interest in the shootings that rocked the city of Lewiston Wednesday night. The [Bangor Daily News](#) was the first to report the identity.

Card, a resident of Bowdoin, is a firearms instructor trained by the military, according to a police bulletin viewed by the [Associated Press](#), and was committed to a mental health facility for two weeks this past summer.

“The document also said Card had reported hearing voices and had threatened to carry out a shooting at the military training base in Saco, Maine,” the AP reported.

A lockdown has been called across Androscoggin County, with police asking people to shelter in place, lock their doors and stay inside late Wednesday evening. People are asked to stay off the streets so police can defuse the situation.

A vehicle of interest was located in Lisbon, according to a notice distributed to The Maine Monitor, and law enforcement is asking Lisbon residents to shelter in place as authorities work in the area to locate Card.

Those who notice anything suspicious are asked to call 911.

*From Maine Monitor reporter Emily Bader:* Auburn Mayor Jason Levesque said that about 40-50 people were reunified with their worried loved ones at Auburn Middle School shortly after midnight Thursday. They had been brought over by a city bus after giving statements to police.

“At this point, there is a significant amount of shock going on with people that were actually witnesses...,” Levesque said. “Obviously when I was bringing people in that were looking for their loved ones, there is fear, there is panic, there’s worry. Understandable.”

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The Associated Press, citing a state police bulletin, said Card is a firearms instructor trained by the military and was recently committed to a mental health facility.

The police intelligence bulletin was being circulated to law enforcement officials on Wednesday night. It says that Card had been trained as a firearms instructor at a U.S. Army Reserve training facility in Maine. The document says Card had been committed to a mental health facility for two weeks in the summer of 2023. It did not provide specific details about his treatment or condition.

The document also said Card had reported hearing voices and had threatened to carry out a shooting at the military training base in Saco, Maine.

## Schools will be closed Thursday

Public schools in Lewiston will be closed tomorrow, the district's superintendent announced Wednesday night.

"There remains a lot of unknowns at this time. Information moves quickly but not always accurately," Lewiston Public Schools Superintendent Jake Langlois said in a



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network to clou  
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1 hour ago

John Ismay and Patricia Mazzei



## The suspect appears to be an Army reservist. Here's what we know about him.

The authorities in Maine said an arrest warrant citing eight counts of murder had been issued for Robert R. Card, the 40-year-old man they were seeking in connection with the shootings Wednesday night at a bowling alley and bar in Lewiston.



Robert Card.  
Lewiston Maine Police Department, via Associated Press

But officials declined to say much about him at a news conference Thursday morning, other than that his location remained unknown and he should be considered armed and dangerous.

“We believe this is someone that should not be approached,” Col. William G. Ross of the Maine State Police said, urging the state’s residents to be careful.

The U.S. Army’s public affairs office at the Pentagon said that a man named Robert Russell Card II, whose birth date matches that of the suspect, is a sergeant first class in the Army Reserve who enlisted in December 2002. He was trained as a petroleum supply specialist, whose work involves shipping and storing vehicle and aircraft fuel.

He has not served on any combat deployments, according to Pentagon records.

Law enforcement agencies posted a [photo](#) on social media of the man they said they were seeking, wearing a brown hooded sweatshirt and carrying a military-style semiautomatic rifle.

Mr. Card was last known to be driving a white Subaru Outback with a black bumper, officials said. That vehicle was later found in the town of Lisbon, prompting a lockdown there. Colonel Ross confirmed that a vehicle found at a boat landing in Lisbon was connected to Mr. Card.

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Saturday October 28<sup>th</sup>.

# Maine Sheriff Says He Sent Statewide Alert About Gunman Last Month

Saturday Oct 28th.

The sheriff said the gunman had made threats against the Army base where he was assigned, prompting an alert to all law enforcement agencies in the state weeks before the mass shooting.

 Share full article    513



Saturday, Oct 8th

During a recent visit to a National Guard training facility outside Peekskill, N.Y., Mr. Card had a run-in with officials and was later evaluated at a mental health facility, according to a senior law enforcement official. Mr. Sauschuck said he had no information to suggest that Mr. Card had ever been forcibly committed for mental health treatment.

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Saturday, Oct 8th

In Maine, officers must seek a medical professional's opinion in order to take weapons away from people who are suffering mental difficulties and are considered a danger to themselves or others. That's more stringent than some states with so-called red flag laws that allow the police or the public to petition for the temporary removal of a person's guns.



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# The Mental Health frame



# Causation or Correlation or Coincidental or Casual?

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- How should we cover such claims in Breaking News
- How should we not cover?
- Should we take responsibility for implying a connection (causal or correlated) between mental health and mass shooter behavior
- Should we simply disclose what we don't know, i.e. not certain?

# Causation or Correlation or Coincidental or Casual?

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- Who made the claim on “mental health” as a background fact to the shooter?
- What was nature of the claim?
  - Fully detailed?
  - Partially?
  - Explained



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# Ethics



# Ethics, Journalism and Social Media

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- What ethics is and isn't
- What drives journalistic coverage?
- A brief on news framing
- What drives social media posting? (“User Generated Content”)
- Social media pressure on journalistic practice

# What ethics is not

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- Not feelings
- Not religion
- Not the same as legal or lawful (laws can become ethically corrupt)
- Not "what society wants"
- Not science
- Ethics knowledge is not technical knowledge

Manuel Velasquez, Claire Andre, Thomas Shanks, S.J., and Michael J. Meyer

Hans-George Gadamer

# What is ethics?

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- Regulates power used to take decisions (e.g. journalistic power)
- Standards of right and wrong
  - What humans ought to do
  - Usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues
- The study and development of one's ethical standards
  - Striving to ensure that we, and the institutions we help shape, live up those standards
- Ethics is rehabilitated common sense
- Individuals interrogate situations and *in the process* come to know what is right

Manuel Velasquez, Claire Andre, Thomas Shanks, S.J., and Michael J.Meyer

Ted Glasser

# What is an ethical dilemma?

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- Specific situation (not a general question with moral underpinnings)
- "Should" questions
  - Should I publish this or not?
    - Both options are legal
- "Ought" questions
- Usually multiple alternatives

# Six Sources of Ethical Standards

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- Utilitarian Approach
- Rights Approach
- Fairness/Justice
- Common Good
- Virtue Approach

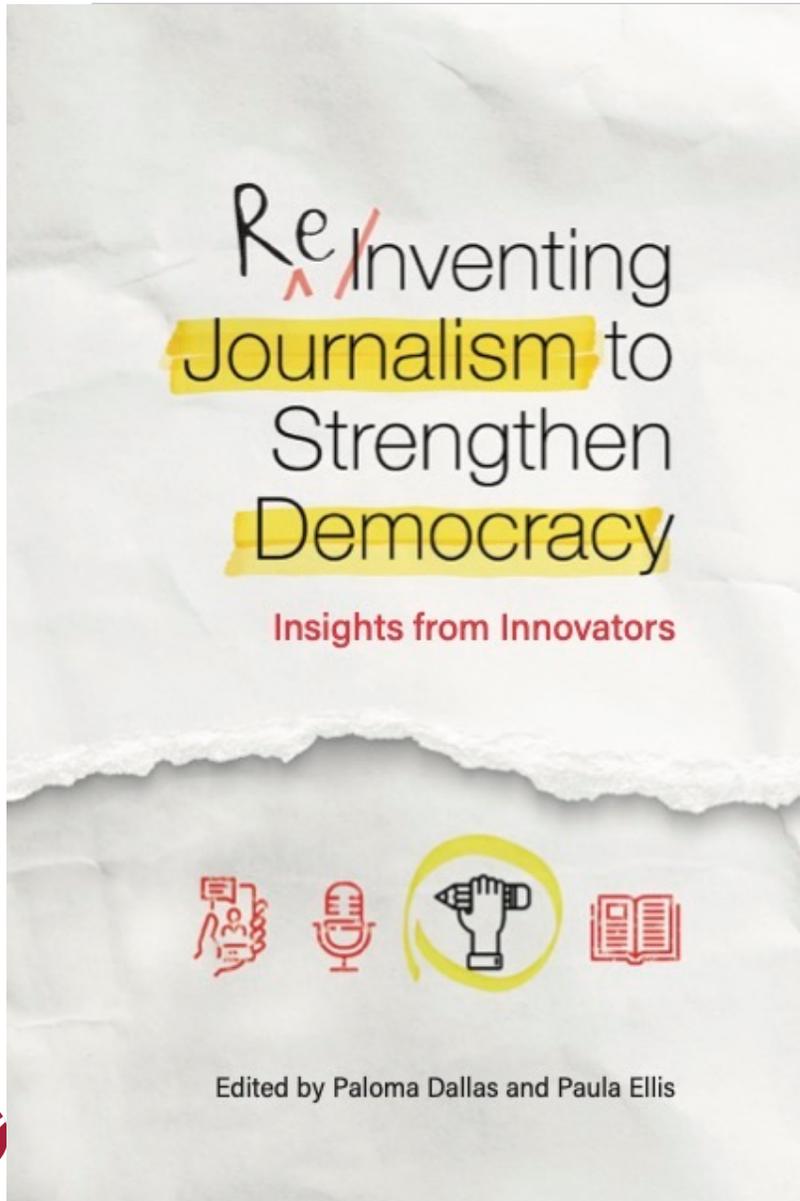
*Markkula Center for Applied Ethics Framework for Decision Making*

# What drives traditional journalistic coverage?

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- **Newsworthiness** (Connects to ratings, engagement, eye balls, attention)
- How does the news industry traditionally determine newsworthiness?
  - News values: Conflict, Controversy, Bad News, Celebrity, Good News, Catastrophe, Corruption, Crime.
- Traditional news values have not been subjected to ethical review.
  - E.g. Is every controversy a real controversy? E.g. climate change.

# Journalistic power: The Invisible Decisions



- How and when does a development become newsworthy?
- What represents fact and what represents a *claim*?
- Which facts **and claims** are elevated, and which ones are not?
- Which narratives are pushed, and which are sidelined?
- Whose perspectives are centered, and whose are not?
- Whose frames are adopted, and whose are not?
- Whose lived experiences count, and whose do not?
- Which cultural threats are exposed and labeled, and which ones are ignored?
- Who is quoted at length and extensively, and who is paraphrased?
- When does the headline match the story in the body, and when does it spin misinformation?
- When must a piece be labeled opinion, and when not?
- Whose stock pictures are depicted when reporting about a profession, and whose are not?





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# Revisit: Lewiston shootings



# Lewiston: Causation or Correlation or Coincidental or Casual?

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- Who referred to a “mental health” fact/claim about the shooter?
  - A Maine local authority posted a bulletin.
  - Where: Facebook
  - Why: They were responding to the fact that they had some info about the shooter.
  - Who picked it up: A ton of news media organizations
  
- What was nature of the claim?
  - Reference to mental health in a “concern” like fashion
  - Caveats not listed
  - Speculative value for the media

# Law enforcement actors are official authorities

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- History of trying to influence the narrative early on in the story
- Hard to reset the narrative later when public attention as diminished and more facts come out.
- Journalists lean heavily during breakings news periods to "credentialed" public authorities – elite bias.

# Why focus on the shooter and the chase?

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- News Values
  - Public safety: Armed and dangerous
  - Dramatic, the chase
  - Ratings
  - People looking for certainty of cause. "Why did he have to kill 18 people?"

# Breaking News

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## Conventional journalism

- What, Who, When, Where, Why, How
- Break the facts as they emerge
- All the breaking facts are equal
- Consequences of portrayal inaccuracy have mattered less
- Centering the shooter and the police
- Keep people (watching the news) hooked to the chase

## Responsible journalism

- Which official statements released have unanswered questions?
- Claims vs facts
- What do we know and what do we not know?
- Who should we center now?
- What is likely to become clear only after a fuller investigation?



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# Framing and the News



# Framing (verb vs noun)

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- Framing essentially involves selection and salience.

Hellsten, Dawson, Leydesdorff (ref.to Entman)

- “To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.*”

Entman

- Frames are not static but develop over time with the coverage of a specific topic.

Hellsten, Dawson, Leydesdorff

# Framing

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- Frames in the news can be examined and identified by “the presence or absence of **certain keywords**, **stock phrases**, **stereotyped images**, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments.”

Entman

- “Framing devices” condense information and offer a “media package” of an issue.
  - (1) metaphors, (2) exemplars, (3) catch- phrases (4) depictions, and (5) visual images

News Framing Effects

# Apply this Mass Shootings News Framing

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- A central organizing idea or story line
  - that **provides meaning to an unfolding series** of events
  - weaving a connection among them.
  - Profiling the mass shooter, framing in mental health as a factor
- Frames may suggest the essence of the issue

*(Gamson & Modigliani, 1987).*

*(News Framing Effects, 2019)*

# Mental health or illness frame

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- Does the “mental health” aspect fully capture the whole person behind the mass shooter and their motivations?



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# The Role of Social Media



# Social media upsides

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- Everyone in countries with enforced free speech protections has a voice and hence some communication power.
- Grassroots populist and anti-elitist communication power can break narrative control that elite politicians, CEOs, officials have to put own their version of things.
- Speed and friction-lessness of design (upside and downside)

# Social media downsides

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- Design: Equal opportunity to sellers of “Big Lies,” conspiracy theories, and political disinformation.
- Triggers “fast thinking” (emotional, instinctive, feelings-driven) instead of “slow thinking”

# Fast Thinking and Slow Thinking

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- Daniel Kahneman: *Thinking Fast and Slow*
  - Our brains operating in two systems, System 1 and 2, both influencing each other.
  - System 1 is the faster, emotional, instinctive, and intuitive brain.
  - System 2 is the slower, lazier, but more deliberate and reasoning brain. On belief, discussing the work of
- Psychologist Daniel Gilbert: “Even nonsensical statements evoke initial belief.”
  - “Understanding a statement must begin with an attempt to believe it.
  - “You must first know what the idea would mean if it were true!”
  - “Only then can you decide whether or not to unbelieve it.”

# Fast Thinking and Slow Thinking

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- Kahneman
  - The initial attempt to believe is System 1 in action.
  - System 2 of our brain is needed to undo it.
  - System 1 does not keep alternatives for critical or deliberate comparison.
  - System 2 does. But if System 2 is busy, System 1 will jump to conclusions.

# Fast Thinking

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- Mis-framed and misleading claims are easier to take in as “facts”
- “Mental health” – easier to make people believe it if they are rapidly and worriedly reading the articles
- Social Media privileges fast thinking

# News Publishers and Social Media

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- Distribution Incentives: Unethical newsworthiness on steroids
- Stories on political controversies, conflict, etc., tend to get more engagement
- Clickbait on social media as traffic pullers

# The Problem: Social Media hurts Democratic Culture

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- Democratic culture:
  - Human rights values (individual): Dignity, Equality, Liberty.
  - Collective/community values: Justice, Truth, Cooperation, Persuasion, Peaceful negotiations, Attention to the most vulnerable, etc.
- Modern democracies rely on discourse
- Discourse helps find common ground, persuade, etc.

# Discourse ethics

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- Discourse is a process of argumentation where claims (e.g. the Big Lie/Stolen Election) are vetted for:
  - Authenticity
  - Validity
  - Correctness.

*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

- **REALITY:** Both Journalistic and Social Media Spread Unvetted Claims.
  - Social Media much more.
  - Discourse is broken



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# Some Ways Forward

## *Different Approaches*



ARE YOU SAFE? WHERE ARE YOU? ARE YOU ALONE? **GUYS I'M SO FUCKING SCARED.** HEY- COME ON SWEETHEART- I NEED TO HEAR FROM YOU. CAN YOU HEAR ANY GUNSHOTS? **PLEASE STAY SAFE.** BARRICADE THE DOOR OR IF YOU THINK YOU CAN RUN AND GET TO A PLACE THAT CAN LOCK DO SO. MY TEACHER IS ACTING LIKE NOTHING IS HAPPENING AND I'M LOWKEY FREAKING OUT. **I WISH THESE NEVER HAPPENED.** STAY CALM AND SAFE - WE LOVE YOU. I AM SO SORRY THIS IS HAPPENING. **I LOVE YOU.** WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING? MULTIPLE VOICES AND LOUD BANGING. I'M IN CLASS EVERYONE IS LOSING IT PEOPLE ARE LITERALLY SHAKING. STILL GOING ON AND COMING CLOSER, HOPING IT'S COPS. I'M GONNA FUCKING THROW UP. KINDA WISH I HAD SOMEONE ELSE HERE THOUGH. **PLEASE PRAY FOR US.** PLEASE STAY WHERE YOU ARE AND KEEP YOUR DOORS LOCKED OR FORTIFIED. LOVE YOU SO SO MUCH. ARE YOU HOME? **SOMEONE IS ALREADY SHOT.** IT'S ALSO SCARY HOW UNPREPARED OUR TEACHERS AND STAFF WERE FOR THAT. I'M LISTENING ON THE SCANNER. **I HAVEN'T HEARD ANYTHING YET.** IT WILL BE OK MY LOVE JUST STAY PUT. THERE'S SOMEONE ARMED ON CAMPUS. YOU HAVE A WHOLE COMMUNITY IN THE SAME BOAT WITH YOU. ARE U HIDDEN? LONGEST HALF HOUR OF MY LIFE. I'M SO SCARED TO LEAVE. STAY DOWN. **DO YOU HEAR SHOOTING?** PLEASE LET ME KNOW WHEN YOU ARE SAFE. HEY ARE YOU DOING ALRIGHT. LIKE MENTALLY, THIS SHITS SCARY. I LOVE YOU. IM SAFE STILL. MY TEXTS WON'T GO THRU. I AM SAFE. ACTIVE SHOOTER ON CAMPUS. I'M IN DEY RN BUT I CAN SEE PEOPLE RUNNING AND HEAR SCREAMING. GET UNDER THE DESK!!!! OR RUN IF YOU CAN! PUT STUFF IN FRONT OF THE DOOR! PLEASE BE CAREFUL. I'M SCARED. I'M SO SCARED RN. **OMG. I'M SO SCARED.** HOLY FUCK SOMEONE'S IN MY BUILDING. SAFE? YES YOU? YES. CHECKING IN JUST HOPE Y'ALL ARE SAFE WHEREVER Y'ALL AT. APPARENTLY SOMEONE WAS SHOT IN CAUDILL. POLICE SCANNER SAYS 1 PERSON DOWN NO PULSE. PLEASE STAY THERE WHERE YOU'RE SAFE. ARE YOU SAFE RIGHT NOW? ARE YOU SAFE? **PLEASE SEND LITERALLY ANYTHING.** I HEARD SOMEONE GOT SHOT. CAN YOU CALL ME? ARE YOU OKAY?? IDK WHAT TO DO. I WISH I COULD JUST COME GET YOU. DON'T STOP TEXTING ME.

## Whose voices?

- Centering voices of the impacted people
- Design choices
- Community member vs Detached Observer (*Objectivity*)

COLLECTION

# Preventing Mass Shootings

Solutions Journalism Network

SOURCE: SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM NETWORK

Story

## Kids saving kids: How statewide reporting tools can help prevent, stop school shootings

Safe2Tell is a unified statewide system where students can anonymously report gun violence or threats, since research shows other students often know about a threat before it is carried out. Teams trained in risk assessment intervene before an attack can happen by contacting



Story

## A Florida School Received a Threat. Did a Red Flag Law Prevent a Shooting?

Amidst gun violence and mass shootings, 19 states and D.C. have enacted red flag laws, or extreme risk protection orders, that allow law enforcement to mitigate threats of gun violence by removing guns from a person's possession. Studies in states that have...

Story

## Pediatricians are giving out free gun locks to approach the gun violence epidemic as a public health crisis

In an effort to encourage gun owners to safely store their firearms and keep them away from children, free gun locks are available with no questions asked at the St. Louis Children's Hospital in Missouri. The pediatricians are trained to have non-judgmental

KDKA INVESTIGATIONS >

# Kids saving kids: How statewide reporting tools can help prevent, stop school shootings

KDKA  
NEWS

BY STEPHEN STOCK

SEPTEMBER 1, 2022 / 7:25 PM / CBS NEWS





### Solidarity Reporting Guide

November 10, 2021

Solidarity in journalism is practiced through newsworthiness judgments, sourcing, and framing that center the lived experiences of people subjected to unjust conditions....



### A Primer on Empathy and Empathy Fatigue

November 10, 2021

Empathy and solidarity are often mistaken for each other, but empathy and solidarity focus our attention on different aspects of care....



### Making Newsworthiness Decisions in Solidarity

November 21, 2022

What makes a story newsworthy? Solidarity reporting moves away from novelty & elite involvement, and toward ongoing issues & community cohesion....

## SOLIDARITY JOURNALISM INITIATIVE, UT-Austin, Dr Anita Varma



# Framing awareness and literacy for everyone

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- Skills
  - Spotting frames: “Framing literacy”
  - Avoid uncritical acceptance of source-side framing
    - E.g “partisan review” or “audit” (Wisconsin Milwaukee Journal Sentinel e.g.)
  - Help complicate narratives and open up conversations out of false binaries
  - Prevent stonewalling, talking past each other
  - Guidance: What is “ethical framing”?
- For both journalists and public



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# Concluding: Questions Revisited



# Revisiting our questions

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- How does social media impact mass media?
- Given the ability to rapidly and immediately disseminate information, what are the ethics and responsibilities of news media organizations?
- Should the public get detailed information regarding perpetrators?
- Should unsubstantiated theories regarding the mental health of perpetrators be part of the story?

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# What are the ethics and responsibilities of news media organizations?

# Applying Ethics to Breaking News Coverage

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## Conventional

- Break the facts as they emerge \* All the breaking facts are equal
- Consequences of portrayal inaccuracy \* Centering the shooter/police
- Keep people (watching the news) hooked to the chase

## Ethical concerns

- Officialdom's narrative
- Not synthesizing new frames
- Misplaced fairness around breaking facts
- Disproportionality

## Responsible

- Which official statements released have unanswered questions?
- Claims vs facts \* What do we not know?
- Who should we center now

- Normative

- Centering impacted people
- Humility
- Decide to defer more complex facts which might change
- Vet official claims / drop uncorroborated ones

# Should the public get detailed information regarding perpetrators?

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- In the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting, no.
- Profile details are complicated and tend to change over the first few weeks of investigation.
- State what we don't know, or could not corroborate upfront. Frame into the factual claim.
- If the mass shooter is still at large, police may want to put out alerts with detailed info to help people stay out of harm's way.
- Ask what info is actually needed for the public to stay out of harms way?

# How does social media impact mass media?

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- Competing for attention and “engagement”
- Social media trending topics are a metric for journalism
- Competing for relevance
- Pressure on journalists social media editors, and journalistic practice
- Unethical pressure: Framing around racy factual claims, speculation.

**Should unsubstantiated theories regarding the mental health of perpetrators be part of the story?**

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**No.**

**Speculation in breaking news almost always inaccurate.**



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**Thank you!**

