American Gun Culture, School Shootings, and a “‘Frontier Mentality’”: An Ideological Analysis of British Editorial Pages in the Decade After Columbine

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The problem of school shootings has attracted extensive media attention, especially since the Columbine shooting, a watershed event that pushed the issue of school shootings to the forefront of media coverage. This paper examines the themes present in British editorial coverage of school shootings in the decade between April 1999, the month of the Columbine shooting, and April 2009, using ideological analysis to identify themes present in British editorial newspaper coverage. Articles were drawn from the Times of London and the Independent. Major themes that emerged were widespread disgust with a disordered and unhealthy American gun culture and firearms legislation, a focus on gratuitous and violent entertainment media, and a frustration with unethical media coverage of these tragic events.

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The 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, was not the first of its kind. Dozens of similar shootings preceded it, both in the United States and Europe. But the Columbine shooting was notable in one striking way: It was the first to play out before live audiences on cable news. The themes present in the prolonged media narrative that emerged in the wake of the shooting set the stage for coverage of future school shootings that soon followed. It was, in many ways, an analog to the paradigm shift that accompanied news coverage of the first Gulf War—the exhaustive, cyclical, round-the-clock news coverage that followed the shooting represented a permanent change in public discourse about school shootings. Columbine marked a watershed in coverage of these kinds of tragedies.

Another thing that set Columbine apart was its scale. At the time, it was the deadliest school shooting in American history, and European media—especially British media—were quick to decry an “epidemic of teenage gun violence” (Whittell, 1999),