Tales of a Tragedy: Evaluating How College, Local and National Newspapers Covered the Virginia Tech Shootings

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This study evaluates 30 articles published about the April 16, 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech that left 33 people dead. The analysis focuses on articles published in Virginia Tech’s student paper, The Collegiate Times, as well as in the local newspaper, The Roanoke Times, and nationally-circulated USA Today.

Qualitative content analysis was used to evaluate the tone and topic in the articles. The researcher determined if each article had a negative, neutral or positive tone. A negative article would be characterized by graphic descriptions of the violence and words with a distressing or negative connotation. A neutral article would focus on just the facts with no loaded language. A positive article would leave the reader with an inspired attitude, and may include tributes to the lives of the victims, accounts of heroism at the scene or explanations of how the college community came together. The researcher also noted the overall topic or main focus of each article, and examined how often race was mentioned in each article.

The results reflect the strengths and weaknesses of newspapers at every level. The Collegiate Times was the least biased of all three newspapers. It was far more likely to feature stories with a positive or neutral tone than the other two papers, and was less likely to refer to racial clichés or use sensationalist words. USA Today was the most likely to mention race in its articles, and was more likely than The Roanoke Times to publish articles with a positive or neutral tone. The Roanoke Times published articles that commonly featured loaded, sensationalist language and referred to race frequently. It was also more likely than the other two newspapers to publish stories with a negative tone.

In the aftermath of the campus shootings, The Collegiate Times received international acclaim for the way that the student journalists covered the shootings. The findings presented by this research emphasize the strengths of The Collegiate Times in a way so that they can easily be applied to Elon University’s student media outlets. This research also provided information on the individual strengths and weaknesses of each type of newspaper, allowing readers to make a more informed decision on where to read the news.