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# **Critical Discourse Analysis of online News Headlines: A Case of the Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting**

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# Abstract

This thesis is a critical investigation of the language used in online news headlines to report the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, which took place on February 14, 2018 in Florida, United States. By analyzing 50 online news headlines, published by five of the most popular national and local news outlets, the purpose of this study is to understand how the words chosen by the journalists contribute to creating particular meanings, or representations of the event, and if through these representations any hidden ideologies are put forward. The framework used to carry out the research combined Fairclough's critical discourse analysis with van Dijk's sociocultural approach, resulting in the study of three different but interrelated elements of discourse: sociocultural practice, or the social and cultural context of gun ownership in the U.S.; discourse practice, hence the processes behind the production of online headlines and the cognitive processes behind their interpretation; and finally, a linguistic analysis of the text itself. The analysis found that, despite the anticipated neutral stance of news journalists, dictated by professional values such as integrity and objectivity, hidden meanings and ideologies necessarily transpire in the language used to describe the violent event, and to represent victims and attacker.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, sociocognitive approach, online news, news headlines, representation.

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# 1. Introduction

In the last few years, news headlines in the United States have been increasingly dominated by school shootings. Since 2013 over 300 gun-related incidents have been registered in schools all over the country (Every Town, 2018). In comparison with other countries, the United States shows a frighteningly high rate of school shootings. Between 1966 and 2008, for example, 44 school shootings took place in the U.S., around one episode per year. During the same time frame, seven shootings were registered in Canada, and seven in all of Europe (Preti, 2008). One tragic story invaded the news, for days on end, towards the beginning of 2018: the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. With 17 dead and 17 more wounded, this school shooting classifies as one of the deadliest in recent U.S. history, sharing the grim title with Columbine High (occurred in 1999), Virginia Tech (occurred in 2007), and Sandy Hook elementary (occurred in 2012) (Ranker, 2018).

The Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, which took place in Parkland, Florida, on February 14, 2018, constitutes not only a dark moment for humanity, but perhaps also a turning point for the gun control debate. Started from the distraught students who witnessed the shooting, a storm of anger against gun violence virtually and physically mobilized the masses. Other students, teachers, parents, and even celebrities showed their support by marching on the streets and sharing their indignation online through social media networks, leaving behind a slight but hopeful wind of change. Simultaneously the persistent news coverage of the shooting, which outlasted the coverage of other mass shootings over a 14-day period (Siegel, 2018), confirmed the gravity and symbolic importance of the event.

Influenced by its undeniable significance, and by the impact online news have in spreading information on a large scale, I use this thesis to investigate how the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting was represented in online news headlines and why. Specifically, I apply Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, supported by the sociocultural approach put forward by van Dijk, to study the language used by a selection of national and local online news outlets to cover the event. While social media platforms are important indicators of what the public opinion is on school shootings or gun violence in general, I focus on online news because they constitute, at least on paper, an objective and unbiased source of information. Through critical discourse analysis my aim is to verify this objectivity by understanding why journalists represent the Stoneman Douglas School shooting in a certain way, and uncovering what meanings and ideologies emerge from their word choices.

I decided to study headlines and disregard the content of the articles altogether, because I believe they play an increasingly fundamental role in today's fast-paced and multi-stimulating online environment. Headlines constitute the first lines of text readers scan through before diving into an article, and arguably the only sentences of the article they will ever read (Dor, 2003). This is ever so true in the world of virtual news influenced by social media networks, where users scroll through their feeds and stop only when something

interesting catches their attention. According to Kuiken et al. (2017) in fact, the primary aim of a headline on the internet, more than to give readers a clear idea of what the article is about, is to catch their attention, to lure them into the story. By studying online news headlines as a separate unit from their corresponding articles, I aim to demonstrate how even just those few catchy words chosen by the journalists to attract attention to a particular piece of content, hide ideological meanings, regardless of whether the ideologies uncovered demonstrate a direct correlation to the corresponding article.

The choice of topic derives from my personal interest in the issue of gun violence and my past experience as a high school student in the United States, where walking the halls next to an armed police officer struggled to become normality for an Italian exchange student such as myself. Furthermore, increasing coverage on school shootings and the heated online debates that follow, stemming from either pro or anti-gun ideologies, made me curious of the ways in which official national news sources tackled them and why.

In the following section I dive deeper into the research purpose of this thesis and introduce the research questions that support my critical investigation. The following chapter presents the key concepts I rely on throughout the thesis, setting the means of interpretation for its theoretical structure. I then proceed to lay out the analytical framework that guides my analysis. The next chapter is dedicated to the methodology, where I explain my research approach and philosophical stance as a researcher and introduce in detail the process applied to the collection and analysis of data. Before diving into the analysis, I touch on the ethical issues encountered throughout the study. As for the following chapter, it includes the analysis itself, from the macro to the micro aspects of critical discourse analysis. Finally, I discuss my findings, draw conclusions and reflect on limitations.

## Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to understand how the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting is represented in online news headlines and why. Specifically, this critical investigation is aimed at understanding how the violent act is depicted, what kind of identities are constructed for victims and attacker, and what ideologies, if any, are implied in the words used by the journalists. To reach this goal I look into 50 online news headlines concerning the tragic event, published between February 14 and 17 on some of the most popular online news sources in the United States. The study uses Fairclough's theoretical framework to look into: a) the sociocultural context surrounding the violent event (sociocultural practice); b) the processes of text production and consumption involved in producing news online (discourse practice); c) the text itself (text). Integrated into this framework is van Dijk's sociocultural analysis, through which the cognitive processes behind the consumption of text are studied and understood. I aim to explain the context of gun ownership in American society (sociocultural practice), identify the publication policies, production processes and news values involved in the production of online headlines (discourse practice), examine the audience and the cognitive processes behind the consumption of the headlines (Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach), and finally study the word choices of the journalists (text).

## Research questions

To guide my research, and understand how the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting is represented in online news headlines and why, I developed three research questions:

- a. How is the violent act described?
- b. What kinds of identities are set up for victims and attacker by the journalists?
- c. What ideologies, if any, are implied in the words used by the journalists?

## 2. Literature review

This chapter is dedicated to the review of previous literature surrounding the representation of school shootings in online news. I will first look at the main findings concerning the phenomenon of school shootings in the United States to understand its recent history, causes and typologies. Subsequently, I will review studies focused on the mediatization of such tragic events. Then, I will report the main studies concerning the digitalization of news and the importance of headlines, thus relating the representation of school shootings not only to the historical and sociocultural context, but also to the processes of text production and consumption online. Lastly, I will present relevant studies that used critical discourse analysis to uncover ideologies hidden in the language of news headlines in order to validate my research aim and method.

### School shootings in the United States

When looking at different studies researching school shootings, it is difficult to find a univocal definition of the phenomenon, a struggle that might be given by the research question being asked (Harding et al., 2002). Gerard et al. (2016), define school shootings at their most basic level as incidents involving at least one person intentionally using a gun and shooting at least one other person on school grounds. Journalistic studies such as the one made by Every Town (2018), use a similar definition of school shootings: “any time a firearm discharges a live round inside or into a school building or on or onto a school campus or grounds.”

An in-depth research by Muschert (2007, p.63) goes on to classify school shootings into five different types: “rampage shootings, school-related mass murders, terrorist attacks on schools or school children, school-related targeted shootings, and government shootings taking place at schools”. This classification offers an interesting insight into the status of the shooter, if member of the school community or an outsider, and the reasons behind the choice of targets, if specific or symbolic (Muschert, 2007). According to the author, rampage school shootings are non-targeted attacks made by a current or former member of the school community for symbolic reasons, without a specific victim in mind. Because of their symbolic motives, rampage school shooters have also been labeled “classroom avengers” by McGee and DeBernardo (1999). Targeted school shootings, on the other hand, are described as not random and generally aimed at seeking revenge for a real or perceived maltreatment. Terroristic school shootings are identified as random and highly symbolic, but they differ from rampage shootings because the attacker is an outsider. Finally, government shootings are equally random, but they are acted out in response to a crisis of government legitimacy (Muschert, 2007).

According to this classification, the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, taken into analysis in the current study, perfectly falls into the typology of rampage shooting. The 19-year-old perpetrator, Nikolas Cruz, walked into his former high school and shot any student or teacher he saw walking in the hallways or on school grounds.



Several authors seem to agree that the phenomenon is assuming ever greater dimensions, and that this is to be connected also to the widespread of firearms their accessibility. Kellner (2018, p.53), goes so far as to declare school shootings and gun violence in general “a plague on our schools and society in the USA today”. In his study, the author points to the proliferation of shootings and gun violence in schools in recent times, relating the phenomenon to a crisis in masculinity among white men, and to the excessive gun ownership, or “out-of-control gun culture” in the United States (Kellner, 2018, p.63). In trying to find compelling generalizations among the different episodes of rampage school shootings, Warnick et al. (2018) also point to socially disturbed white men, and easy access to powerful firearms as common denominator. If we consider that gun ownership is more common among men, particularly white men, than women, that 30 percent of American adults own a gun, that is three-in-ten, and that another 11 percent say they live with someone who does, than these theories seem to have substance (Parker et al. 2017a). By the people who knew him, Nikolas Cruz was in fact described as a “troubled kid” who liked to show off his firearms (Haag and Kovaleski, 2018).

## Representation of school shootings in news

While the data compiled by Paradise (2017) on school shootings demonstrates how these violent episodes have been registered in the United States and in Europe as far back as 1840, it is only in recent history, precisely starting in the early 2000s, that they’ve become cause for strong public outcry, motivating much of the contemporary social science research (Muschert, 2007). Muschert (2007, p.65) connects the increased interest in the phenomena as social problem to the role played by the media in reporting such events, rather than by an actual increase of violence in educational facilities. The author points out how journalists are in fact often “caught between the need to garner attention for a profit-oriented industry and the need to maintain the ethical standard of their profession”, risking to highlight the dramatic details of the single event, instead of offering an objective examination of the phenomenon as a whole (Muschert, 2007, p. 65). A study conducted by Silva and Capellan (2018) on newsworthiness of public shootings, indicates how journalists are more likely to cover school shootings, and in general shootings that involve higher casualties and injuries. This results in a discrepancy between the considerable amount of media coverage of the shootings and the actual number of incidents that take place, and therefore in the wrong perception of them by the public opinion. Burns and Crawford (1999) relate this discrepancy to the monetary interest of media outlets, given that violent crime stories spark the public’s attention and in turn earn them profit. Maguire et al. (2002) found in fact that media tend to report on school shootings because they are violent, unusual and sensational, but also because such stories retain interest over a longer period of time.

Looking at what topics news media tend to focalize upon when covering school shootings, McGinty et al. (2014) identified issues such as the widespread availability of guns, violent video games, bullying or gang involvement, childhood neglect and abuse and serious mental illness. Two further studies (Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001; Lawrence and Birkland, 2004) found weak and uneven gun control legislations across states to be one of

the main problems addressed by mass media when reporting on school shootings. At the same time, a study conducted by Lankford and Madfis (2017), points to the media themselves as being among the main instigators of school shooters. According to the authors by extensively covering these violent events and publishing names and pictures of the perpetrators, news outlets give them fame, generate competition for victim maximization, and encourage copycats.

While most of the scholarly research focuses on why school shootings are of particular interest for the media, or investigates into how journalists choose to report them, few studies are dedicated to an analysis of the words used to do so. The goal of the current study is to fill this gap. In focusing on the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting as a recent example of rampage shooting reported by the news, I will weigh the words chosen by journalists to report the violent event in online news headlines to uncover possible underlying meanings and ideologies. My rationale is that media coverage of such tragic episodes, in particular the language used to report them, cannot only influence future shooters, like Lankford and Madfis (2017) suggest, but also affect the general opinion on matters of national relevance such as gun accessibility and regulations.

## The digital environment of online news

Studies revolving around online news have focalized on the transition from paper to digital news and their competitive environment (Boczkowski, 2004; Newman et al., 2017; Denicola, 2013), on the innovation processes of online journalism and the influence of technology (Pavlik, 2000; Conboy and Steel, 2008), and finally on the new practices of news production and consumption (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999; Karlsson and Strömbäck, 2010; Choi and Kim, 2017).

Online news is a cluster of information published on different platforms, from digital versions of traditional print and broadcast news outlets, to news aggregators, social media networks, and blogs, all available in one click through the world wide web. The author points out how with a laptop and a good internet connection any regular citizen can become a journalist, redefining not only the notion of news, but also the figure of the journalist. According to Newman et al. (2017), online news constitutes the biggest source of information today, while printed newspapers have seen a significant drop in readership in the past decade. Boczkowski (2004) argues that the transition from paper to digital news was pushed by competitive dynamics. He explains how traditional newspapers mainly developed online versions as a reaction to numerous new digital competitors. Denicola (2013), reached similar conclusions when looking into the fragile status of print newspapers, pointing to substantial losses in readership and advertising funds to online sources, as causes.

While some studies identify technology it as the main driver for innovation, others see it simply as an enabler. Pavlik (2000, p. 229) is firm on the idea that “journalism has always been shaped by technology”, and that technological change influences the way journalists work, the type of content they write, the news industry in general, and the relationship

between news organizations, journalists and readers. Conboy and Steel (2008, p.655) see instead technological transformation as “part of the continuous development of capitalist production relations”, technology may facilitate new commercial undertakings, such as the development of online news outlets, but it is ultimately the market who drives them.

The variety of sources available online, according to Choi and Kim (2017), has however not only reshaped the way in which readers consume news, focusing on individual items rather than reading the newspaper as a fixed set of stories, but consequently also redefined the journalistic practices behind news production. The authors point out how even the core journalistic value of immediacy has taken a new role in online news, referring not to the mere practice of rapidly informing people on breaking news, but to the new frantic routine of updating content constantly. Karlsson and Strömbäck (2010) identify interactivity as another key feature of online news: while immediacy allows readers to be informed on the latest news in real time, interactivity allows them to actively choose the content they are interested in. Furthermore, Kovach and Rosenstiel (1999) found that to stay afloat and compete for readership, online news outlets sometimes set aside values such as inquiry, independence and verification, to prioritize eye-catching and shareable content.

### Critical discourse analysis of news headlines

Immediacy, interactivity and shareability are fundamental ingredients when writing headlines for online news articles. Conboy (2007) reports that headlines serve three main functions: they provide a brief overview of the main news, they constitute an indicator of the style and values of the news outlet, and finally they catch the attention of the reader. This last aspect, according to Blom and Hansen (2015), is what makes online news headlines, and therefore online news articles, profitable. The authors explain how journalists use different techniques to catch the reader’s interest with their headlines, from narrative mechanisms to sensational or provoking words (Blom and Hansen, 2015). Reis et al. (2015, p.357) strengthen the concept by pointing out that since “people are only willing to spend a limited time for consuming news, it is critical for news sites to have effective strategies to catch people’s attention and attract their clicks.” Because they are designed to stick out and attract the reader’s attention, headlines are a litmus test for the underlying interests of news outlets.

Past studies employing critical discourse analysis to uncover ideologies hidden in the words used by the media practitioners in news headlines are numerous, and mainly focus on printed news sources. Taiwo (2007, p. 218), for example, studied the language of 300 Nigerian newspaper headlines to identify ideologies and power relations hidden behind their structuration, concluding that headlines are an “emotion-inducing strategy in the hands of the editor used to initiate, sustain discourse and shape the views of the readers on national issues”. Headlines are of particular interest to the author not only because they are able to reach a wider range of readers compared to the articles attached to them, but also because he believes they “reveal the social, cultural and national representations circulating in a society at any given time” (Taiwo, 2007, p. 222). A thesis by Duanprakhon

(2012) undertakes a similar approach, studying headlines of youth crime news published in Thailand to expose the ideology put forward by the journalists when portraying those who committed the crimes. The author explains how the words used in the headlines create a particular ideological image about who the young criminals are in the reader's mind, who then relies on it and believes it, without needing to further understand the event by reading the whole story reported in the article (Duanprakhon, 2012). Furthermore, according to Fogec (2014, p.8 ) a headline is "both connected and disconnected from the article it refers to". In analyzing tabloid front-page headlines through critical discourse analysis, the researcher explains how these particular headlines are detached from the article they refer to, because they appear on a different page of the magazine, but at the same time it clearly refers to its content.

While these studies demonstrate how critical discourse analysis of headlines can contribute to uncover ideologies hidden in the words chosen by media practitioners, they all research printed newspapers and tabloids. The current study, is instead interested in online news headlines, given that online news is becoming an increasingly important source of information today. Nonetheless, this analysis relies on similar assumptions that: a) online headlines are able to reach a broader audience than the articles themselves; b) that the words used in the headlines alone contribute to creating particular ideological representations of the events, regardless of whether the article is read further; c) headlines do refer to the content of the article, but can be considered as a separate unit, especially in the online environment where all we see is those few words of the headlines, whether it is on social media networks or on Google Search results. The aim of this thesis is therefore to focus solely on online headlines, understanding how these represent the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, disregarding the articles attached to them, relying on the rationale that it is starting from these few words that journalists contribute in creating particular meanings and spreading particular ideologies.

### 3. Theoretical framework

This chapter introduces key concepts and theories that serve both as foundation and springboard for my research. I will start by addressing the notion of ideology, how it constitutes a core theory in critical discourse analysis and what it means in this study. Secondly, I will clarify the concept of representation as developed and applied in media discourse studies. Thirdly, I will narrow down the meaning of identity and relate it to my research questions. Subsequently, I will introduce the theory of discourse. Finally, and before jumping into the analytical framework of critical discourse analysis, I will connect the theoretical concepts to the current study as a way of tying up all the loose ends.

#### Ideology

For the purpose of this study, I will interpret ideology according to van Dijk's (2006) multidisciplinary framework that combines a social, cognitive, and discursive element, in the attempt to clarify the notion and its theoretical function in critical discourse analysis. According to the author, ideologies are a system of beliefs that define the social identity of a group, controlling and organizing its actions, aims, norms and values (van Dijk, 2006). It is important to point out that the author of the study refers to a "group" as a social or professional collectivity, and not as a cultural community which does not necessarily develop a shared ideology (van Dijk, 2006). Journalists, for example, form a social and professional group, they recognize themselves as part of this group, and share an occupational ideology that constitutes the backbone of journalistic values such as immediacy, objectivity, independence, and legitimacy (Deuze, 2005). All English speakers are instead part of a cultural and linguistic community, which might divide into different political, religious, social and professional groups, therefore living by specific yet different ideologies. Furthermore, Ideologies are not to be mistaken for sociocultural knowledge or social attitudes, they are rather a system of abstract ideas that control and organize socially shared beliefs and attitudes (van Dijk, 2006). Knowledge is also socially shared, but contrary to ideology, which appertains to members of a particular group, it is acquired by all members of the same community. To give a practical example, and one that applies to this study, a pro-gun ideology supported by gun owners as a social group, may control attitudes towards gun ownership and gun control, while knowledge allows all members of the community, for example all Americans, to understand what gun control is in the first place.

As van Dijk (2006) points out ideologies are expressed, reproduced, acquired and confirmed through social practices, the most important of which are language and discourse. It is through written and spoken language in fact that members of a social group share ideologically based opinions (van Dijk, 2000). Discourse is therefore not always ideologically transparent. According to the context, the system of belief behind a certain language use might be explicit, such is the case with political propaganda, or not recognizable at first glance, for example in news reports. It is in analyzing the discourse structures, strategies, and context, hence in critically investigating the words used in a text, and the sociocultural and discourse practices surrounding that text, that potential hidden

ideologies rise to the surface. Furthermore, it is important to understand the cognitive processes behind language use and comprehension, which are part of the discourse practice, to uncover ideologically biased discourse (van Dijk, 2006). Language use in fact depends on, and at the same time influences, how individuals interpret its content, and how they perceive the communicative situation.

## Representation

Hall (1997, p.61) defines representation as “the process by which members of a culture use language to produce meaning”. In expressing through words what we think and feel about something, such as an object, person or event, how we categorize it, and what values we place on it, we represent that something in a particular way and therefore give it meaning (Hall, 1997). Stemming from a constructionist perspective, or the idea that representation is part of the very constitution of things, this definition implies that objects, people, events and experiences do not themselves carry any meaning, but it is us as individuals, who create their meaning by connecting together the world of things, the mental concepts we have in our heads, and the language we use to communicate these concepts (Hall, 1997). At the base of representation theory is the Saussurean distinction between signifier and signified: the signifier is the means of representation, in the case of a text the actual words; while the signified is the concept that is represented, or the meaning given or attributed to those words (Hodkinson, 2011). When using particular arrangements of words (signifiers) in news headlines, journalists aim to convey certain meanings (signified), therefore offering a specific representation of the current event they are covering.

In media studies, the notion of representation is used to analyze and understand media messages as more than a mere reflection of reality, but rather as a way of constructing reality and contributing to the normalization of specific ideologies (Fürsich 2010). In other words, media representations can contribute to the establishment of norms and common sense about individuals and society (Fürsich 2010). According to Hodkinson (2011) representation is in fact a key element in understanding the circular relationship that exists between media, content and society, where society is intended in the broad sense as culture. While other scholars see media as either shaping society, arguing that their content has the ability to influence the audience, or as shaped by society, therefore solely reflecting it as it is, Hodkinson (2001) believes that both processes coexist through representation. Therefore, in representing or manufacturing a version of reality by actively selecting what event they will cover and how, media producers necessarily base their content on real events and social trends. At the same time, by being constructed versions of reality, hence portraying facts from a specific angle or only partly, representations have the potential to influence the audience (Hodkinson, 2011).

Hodkinson's theory stems from Hall's (1982, p.60) view of media representations as versions of reality achieved through the active processes of “selecting and presenting, structuring and shaping”. When referring to online news headlines, these processes can be translated into the selection, presentation, and structuration of current events through

specific words and sentences. Simply put, when we read an online headline reporting a current event, we are reading its representation, or the meaning that particular event has been given by the media practitioner or outlet. In publishing a title such as *Coach dies after shielding students from Florida shooter*, the day after the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, New York Post (2018a) was reporting reality, therefore facts. At the same time, by focalizing on the word *coach* or the verb *shielding*, for example, the author actively chooses to highlight the victim from a particular point of view, identifying him through his social role of *coach* and implying his heroic behavior with the verb *shielding*. In constructing reality media representations can, on one hand, contribute to the perpetuation of specific ideologies and therefore the reinforcement of power relations, where power relations stand for assumptions about rights, relationships, knowledge and identities between groups of people (Fairclough, 1995). On the other hand, media representations can also play an important role in steering attention to and from public issues, often determining which problems will be tackled or ignored by society (Fürsich 2010). News outlets can therefore influence society by choosing to give priority to mass shootings rather than general shootings, leading the audience to believe that the phenomenon is increasing, and at the same time focalizing on mental health issues as possible causes for such shootings, steering public opinion away from gun control regulations, for example. It is through such representations of reality that the media, and behind them governmental and non-governmental lobbies, play a role in defining how audiences understand an issue of public concern (Fürsich 2010).

## Identity

Another key concept in the study of language, and closely related to representation, is identity and it's defined by Djité (2006, p.6) as "the everyday word for people's sense of who they are". According to the author, identity is about belonging to a social group, but also about standing out in one's own uniqueness. Kroskrity (2000) explains how it is through language that we construct and communicate who we are as individuals and as members of a social group. Words such as coherence, faithfulness, discretion, sensitivity, incorporate those concepts that allow individuals to define their self-conception in relation to a group. This definition of identity, and nexus to language, suggests that identities do not exist on their own, but it is us individuals that construct them and use language as a tool to do so. Baggioni and Kasbarian (1996) make a distinction between personal and social identity and explain how it is through the process of identification that individuals position themselves in relation to a group. The personal identity, or concept of self, can be described as a set of ideologies, attitudes and values that each individual holds to be true about him or herself (Purkey, 1988), while the social identity is how people evaluate themselves in terms of memberships in social groups and categories (Terry et al., 1999). In the most basic sense, personal identity is someone's own name, while somewhat more intangibly it is that person's nature and uniqueness (Joseph, 2004). Social identity is instead the identification of an individual according to social categories such as age, sex, nationality, ethnicity, political orientation, career, and so on (Joseph, 2004). Nevertheless, Identities are not fixed but they can change according to our roles with regards to others, depending on the context we can be students, teachers, children or parents, for example

(Joseph, 2004). Moreover, identities can be constructed onto us by others according to their own perception and version of who we are (Joseph, 2004). When journalists of The Wall Street Journal (2018a) write *Gunman Kills 17 in Florida High School Shooting*, they identify the perpetrator of the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting as hit man, but Nicolas Cruz is also a *troubled kid*, and a *former student*, according to other journalists.

## Discourse

Difficult notion to pin down, discourse is perhaps best defined by van Dijk (1997) as a form of language use that can be spoken or written, or better a communicative event. Fairclough (1995) went a step further and extended the meaning of discourse to include visual images and non-verbal communication. In discourse studies the word discourse refers to a specific way of using language in a specific context for a specific purpose, “a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society” (Hall, 1997, p.6). Examples of form of language use or discourses can be interviews, formal speeches, editorials, or news reports, each of which involves the use of specific language structures, implies different meanings and functions, and requires a specific interactive behavior. News discourse, for instance, has the function of informing people on current events, it is mainly characterized by assertions of non-persuasive nature, and it is organized in a precise and recognizable structure or schemata, presenting first a summary or headline, the main events of the story, the background or context, and finally the consequences and comment (van Dijk, 1988).

As language use, discourse is characterized by three main dimensions which include the act of talking or writing, the communication of ideas or ideologies, and the social interaction (van Dijk 1997). Furthermore, according to Fairclough (1995, p.55) “discourse is always simultaneously constitutive of: social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief”. From the moment in which language becomes discourse, in fact, those who express it cannot but connote it with the characteristics of their social identity, that is, the role they play in society, or rather the one they identify with. Discourse is therefore necessarily influenced by the network of social relations in which those who articulate it are immersed and can only express arguments that will be the result of their knowledge and ideologies. Central to Fairclough’s approach is the definition of discourse as a social practice which shapes knowledge, identities and social relations including power relations, and simultaneously is also shaped by other social practices and structures (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). Discourse is therefore in a dialectical relationship with other aspects of society, it is seen as constitutive but also as constituted (Fairclough, 1995). In essence, and as a way of connecting the different concepts addressed in this section, we can say that through the use of language members of a culture, and therefore bearers of particular systems of beliefs, produce and consume specific discourses (news reports), in specific contexts (online for example), and through these create and interpret versions of reality or representations.



## From theoretical to analytical

As stated in chapter 1, the aim of this study is to understand how the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting is represented in online news headlines and why, using critical discourse analysis to uncover ideologies hidden in the words that describe the violent act and identify victims and attacker. Applying the concept of representation as a constructed version of reality to the current study, I analyze online headlines as bearers of subjective truths and ideologies. In practice, I focus on the language used in the headlines to try and uncover how particular nouns, adjectives, verbs and syntactic structures contribute to creating specific versions of reality. Therefore, I analyze the words (signifiers) used in online news headlines to represent the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, in order to understand the meaning (signified) conveyed by the journalists. Specifically, I look into what identities media practitioners set up for the people they report on, and how these constructed identities may imply and convey specific ideologies. My rationale here is that identity is multifaceted and constructed, constituting one of the many variables in discourse that contribute to sharing underlying messages and ideologies, and because it is constructed it can also be strumentalized.

Furthermore, when analyzing text through critical discourse analysis it is important to take into account the type of discourse analyzed and its context. The discourse studied in this thesis can be defined as news discourse, more specifically it falls into the genre of hard news. According to Patterson (2000, p. 3), hard news cover “breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life”, while soft news comprises everything that is not hard news, such as the entertainment articles, sport sections, and celebrity gossips. The distinction however is not always as simple. A research by Reinemann et al. (2011) reviews the two concepts and suggests that depending on the topic covered and the ways of framing it, whether it is linked to the public interest, policy issues or society at large, the two genres might overlap. The online news headlines I sampled for the purpose of this thesis cover the violent events of the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, one of the deadliest school shootings in recent history, therefore, in theory, a perfect example of hard news. Throughout the analysis I look at the text trying to identify lexical choices or syntactic structures that could categorize the discourse of the headlines as hard news, or otherwise indicate an overlap with soft news.

Concerning the context which frames the analyzed text, I focus on the virtual environment that characterizes online news and how it influences practices of text production and consumption. Elaborated further in the macrostructure analysis, specifically in the discourse practice, this virtual environment is influenced not only by internal journalistic and editorial structures and systems, such as publication policies and news values, but also by external factors related to the technology used and consequent online unspoken rules and competitiveness. The words chosen by journalists are therefore not only the result of their creativity and ideology, but also of the news publication’s style and ideology, of the journalistic values to which it adheres, while at the same time it is influenced, and in some way conditioned, by the complex mechanism of online search engines, first of all Google, and by the perennial race to the last click contended with other online sources.

## 4. Analytical Framework

This study relies on the research methodology of critical discourse analysis (CDA), more specifically it combines the three-dimensional analytical framework developed by Fairclough (1995) to study media discourse, and the triangular sociocognitive approach advanced by van Dijk (2008). The following sections focus on introducing the general concept of discourse analysis, and subsequently put forward the two approaches used throughout this study, explaining how they support and complement each other.

### Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis studies structures and patterns of language across texts, taking into account the social and cultural contexts in which they are used (Paltridge, 2006). Discourse analysts are therefore not solely interested in studying language as an abstract system, but in understanding how common knowledge and context come into play in the use of certain types of discourses (Johnstone, 2008).

The term discourse analysis was first introduced by Zellig Harris in 1952, as a way of defining the study of connected written and spoken language (Paltridge, 2006), and constitutes today an umbrella term for different analytical approaches. While most types of discourse analysis aim to offer a better understanding of the sociocultural aspects that characterize and influence texts (Kress, 1990), they each rely on specific approaches which can be classified mainly into: non-critical and critical. Non-critical approaches to discourse analysis focus on descriptive goals, illustrating and explaining language use (Johnstone, 2008); critical approaches, on the other hand, are interested in why specific word choices are made, aiming to reveal power structures in the language and understand how these shape and are shaped by society (Fairclough, 1995). Critical discourse analysis, as the name suggests, constitutes a critical approach to the study of written and spoken texts.

### Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis studies discourse as social practice with the aim of understanding the power language exercises in society. It tries to uncover ways in which the dominant forces in a society create versions of reality that favor their interests through spoken or written language (McGregor, 2018). According to Fairclough (1995), relationships between the use of language and the exercise of power are often not apparent, and it is through CDA that the researcher can identify them. Researchers of this field of study, go one step further than just observing and describing language use in particular contexts, they consider their work as a political and moral task, and see themselves as agents of change (van Dijk, 1997). As research method, CDA is a way of studying any kind of text critically to see how it influences or is influenced by society.

In practice, this research method, as developed by Fairclough (1995), studies three different but interrelated dimensions of a communicative event: text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice (as shown in Figure 1). The first dimension is concerned with the

meaning and form of written or spoken language, the second one focuses on practices of text production and consumption, while the final dimension broadens the scope of the research to observe the situational context surrounding the text (Fairclough, 1995).

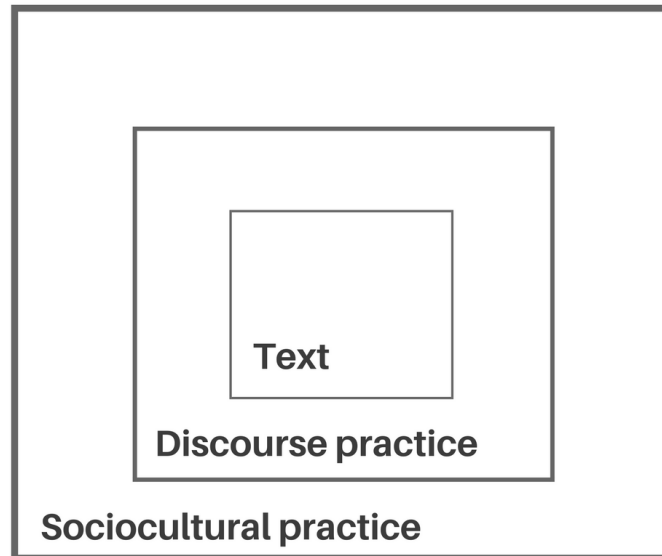


Figure 1: Fairclough's framework for critical discourse analysis of a communicative event (Fairclough 1995)

Analysis of texts is a linguistic analysis, in a broad sense, concerned with vocabulary, semantics and grammar, as well as with the meanings and forms of words and sentences (Fairclough, 1995). At this stage of the analysis the researcher looks for used and missing words, focusing specifically on how they present facts and ideologies, what identities they construct for the participants in the communication, and what relationship they establish between writer and reader of the communicative event (Fairclough, 1995). Applied to this particular thesis, this stage translates into the analysis of the language used in online headlines concerning the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. My goal throughout this process is to understand how the violent act is described, what identities are set up for those involved in the shooting, what ideologies, if any, are implied in the words used by journalists, and finally why certain words are used or avoided.

In terms of discourse practice, critical discourse analysis is interested in the processes of text production and consumption, which include the practical institutional routines involved, as well as the transformations texts undergo during these processes (Fairclough, 1995). The analysis of discourse practice studies how authors make use of already existing discourses to create a text, and how readers or receivers of those texts employ available discourses when consuming and interpreting them (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). When looking into the discourse practice surrounding the empirical data of my thesis, I analyze the production and consumption of news headlines in the digital environment. Specifically,

I am interested in publication policies of the media outlets, production processes, and news values involved in the creation of online news headlines.

This dimension of discourse analysis is a fundamental one to understand not only the meaning behind chosen words in a text, but to find out how these meanings are influenced and influence the wider sociocultural context. This brings us to the third and final dimension of Fairclough's analytical framework: the sociocultural practice. The relationship between texts and sociocultural practice is in fact mediated through discourse practice (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002): properties of sociocultural practice frame and condition texts, and they do so not directly, but by influencing how such texts are produced and consumed (Fairclough, 1995). When analyzing the sociocultural practice of a communicative event the researcher can explore different layers such as the immediate situational context, the context of institutional practices the event is enclosed in, or the wider frame of society and culture (Fairclough 1995). The analysis of sociocultural practice in this study is done by analyzing the relationship Americans have with guns.

While Fairclough's is a detailed and exhaustive framework, it fails to provide a clear analytical tool to understand the cognitive processes behind the consumption of text, and how these constitute the missing link between discourse structures and social structures. It is at this point that the sociocognitive model put forward by van Dijk, and presented in the following section, comes into play.

## Sociocognitive approach

The sociocognitive approach advanced by van Dijk (2009), studies the relations between discourse and society as cognitively mediated. Between what people say or write and the sociocultural context within which discourse is produced, processes concerning ideologies, knowledge, and interpretation have a key role. Focused on the dimension of discourse practice, the sociocognitive approach provides a tool to study how processes of text production and consumption are related to the interpretation and understanding of discourse, and therefore to cognitive processes. An analysis of the cognitive link between discourse and society, not only offers methodological grounding for many discourse structures, but also reveals how discourse is able to exercise power in society (van Dijk, 2009).

Van Dijk (2009) visualizes a triangular framework for the study of language use which has discourse, cognition, and society at its extremities (as shown in Figure 2). In practice, this three-steps approach studies: a) the discursive components and structures of a text, analyzing semantics, grammar, and word choices; b) the ways in which such discursive structures are interpreted in terms of underlying socially shared knowledge and ideologies and how these influence the mental models of language users; c) how such discourses and their underlying cognitions are socially and politically functional in the reproduction of power relations and inequalities (van Dijk, 2009).

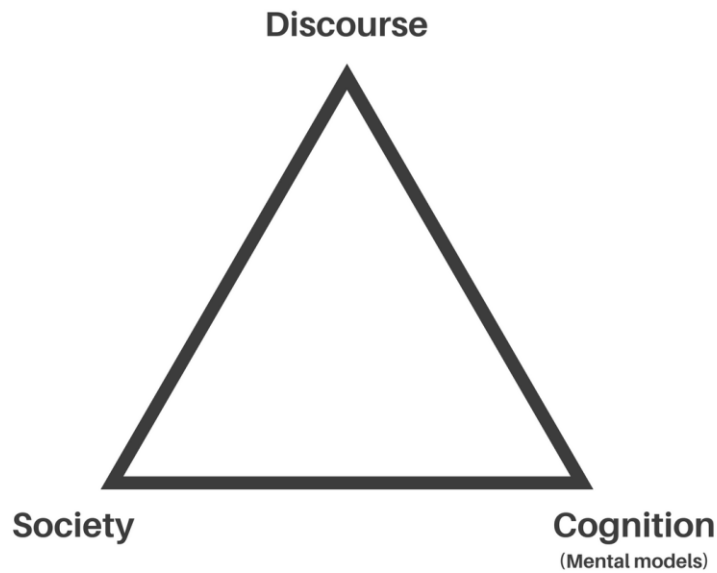


Figure 2: graphic representation of van Dijk's sociocognitive approach to the study of discourse (van Dijk, 2009)

Central to this triangle, and strictly related to the cognitive element, are the notions of mental models and context models. Mental models are the subjective ways in which individuals represent, and consequently understand, a situation in their Episodic memory, according to their observation or participation in it (van Dijk, 2016). Thus, different writers or readers develop different personal mental models of the events or situations they write or read about (van Dijk, 2016). Context models on the other hand, are a specific type of mental model that represent instead the ongoing communicative situation or experience in which language users are involved, they are subjective representations, and they regulate how discourse is processed or adapted according to the social environment (van Dijk, 2009). Writers or readers construe context models about the communicative situation in which they are participating (Dijk, 2016). This type of mental model demonstrates how it is not some kind of objective social fact that regulates how we talk or write, but rather our subjective way of understanding or constructing this social fact (van Dijk, 2008).

The current study integrates van Dijk's cognitive element into the three-dimensional analytical framework developed by Fairclough and presented in the previous section (see Figure 3 for a graphical representation). More specifically, the analysis is divided into two parts: macrostructure (sociocultural practice and discursive practice), and microstructure (textual analysis).

The macrostructure analysis is where critical discourse analysis and the sociocultural approach intertwine. It includes the study of sociocultural practice, hence the context of gun ownership in the United States, and the study of discourse practice, thus the production and consumption of online news headlines. While the text production analysis takes into account procedures of online news production, the text consumption analysis is

achieved by applying the sociocognitive approach, thus in studying the target audience and understanding how subjective mental models and context models influence the interpretation of a text. The current study touches upon media consumption in providing further explanation on how the average audience of the news outlets analyzed could interpret the headlines sampled, and in offering examples of subjective mental models and context models that could influence their interpretation. Nonetheless, the prime focus of the discourse practice analysis will be media production, given that to really understand how readers interpret news discourse more suitable research methods would need to be employed, involving the use of questionnaires and surveys directed at the target audience to gather primary data.

The microstructure analysis, on the other hand, focuses on the language used in the online headlines sampled, uncovering semantic and lexical structures, and understanding how used or missing words imply specific meanings or ideologies. The data will be studied from the broadest to the narrowest dimension of CDA. Therefore, sociocultural practice will be analyzed first, discursive practice will follow, and the text itself will be analyzed last.

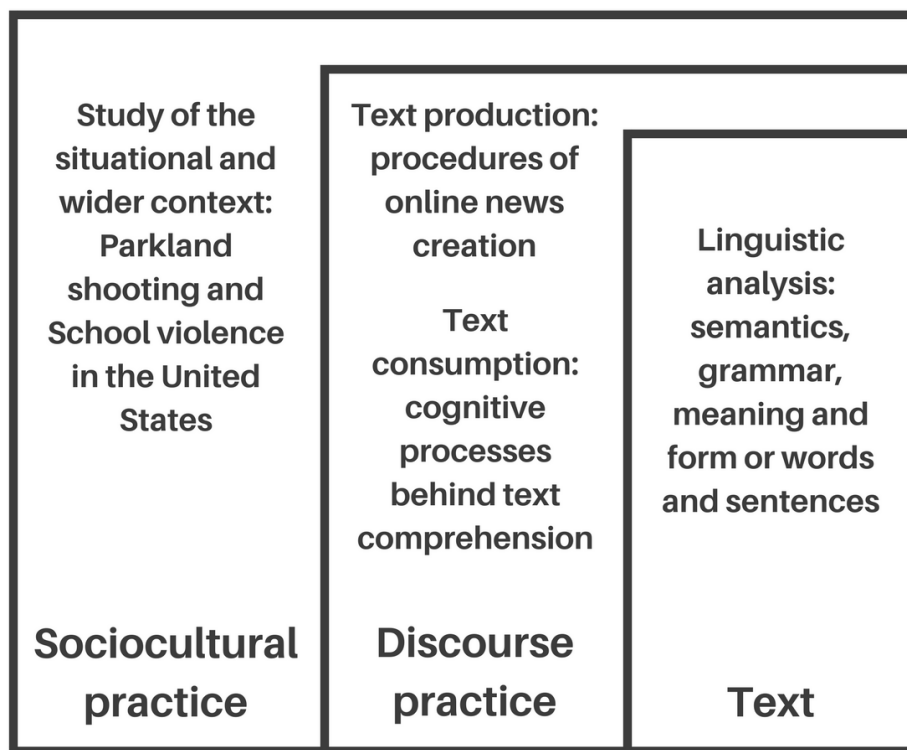


Figure 3: graphical representation of the analytical framework combining CDA with van Dijk's sociocognitive approach.

## 5. Methodology

The following chapter is dedicated to the clarification of my research approach, starting from the research method and philosophical stance employed to analyze the empirical data, to a detailed description of the processes of data collection and analysis.

### Research approach

To understand how online news headlines represent the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, and emphasize how interpretations of such headlines may contribute to spreading or reinforcing particular ideologies, I use the qualitative research method of critical discourse analysis. To carry out this method I use an inductive research strategy, focusing on the context within which the research takes place, more than on the need to make generalizations from collected data. I start by collecting empirical data (online news headlines), proceed to critically analyze it, and as a result try to develop a theory, therefore my research approach is inductive rather than deductive. While this approach requires a systematic analysis of the selected data, it focuses mainly on identifying meanings and forms of words and phrases, and interpreting them according to practices of text production and consumption, and to the situational context in which they are embedded, adhering to the research paradigm of interpretivism.

The premise of interpretivism is that reality is a world interpreted by the meanings its inhabitants produce and reproduce as a necessary part of their everyday interactions (Blaikie, 2010). Reality can therefore be accessed only through social constructions such as language and shared meanings (Myers, 2009). Interpretivist researchers aim, through the observation and interpretation of such social constructions, to understand a phenomenon as it is experienced and made meaningful by human beings (Collins, 2010). In interpreting the language used in online headlines, I aim to understand how the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting is represented or made meaningful by journalists, and consequently how these meanings can be interpreted by readers.

Ontologically, I draw upon the idealist assumption that there is no one reality, but rather that reality consists of various interpretations, constructions and representations of the world by social actors (Blaikie, 2010). Epistemologically, I rely on the constructionist assumption that all social enquiry is subjective, influenced by background knowledge and past experiences, and reflects the view of the researcher (Blaikie, 2010). Thus, this study will provide a way to interpret and give meaning to the representations of the Parkland shooting. Interpretation of the online news headlines sampled is subjective and can change according to the readers' system of belief and background. At the same time, I recognize that the openness to different readings applies to myself as a researcher as well, and therefore I will strive, throughout the analysis, to remain open to interpretations and viewpoints that depart from my initial understandings.

## Data collection

The data selected and analyzed in this study consists of online news headlines covering the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, which took place on February 14, 2018, in Florida, United States. Specifically, I collected 50 headlines from the most popular national and local online news outlets: USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, New York Post, and Tampa Bay Times (Agility PR, 2017; Cision, 2016). The criteria I used to select the news sources was by their circulation, since that implicates their popularity, and therefore a higher number of readers, and therefore impact. The sampled headlines, 10 for each of the selected outlets, were published between February 14 and 17, 2018, and included the following topics:

- Description or unfolding of the violent event (7 articles)
- Description of victims and attacker (22 articles)
- Reaction of the President (7 articles)
- Political discussion (8 articles)
- Other (6 articles)

For the collection of empirical data, I relied on the world wide web. While headlines constitute the foreground of this thesis, it is their online nature that makes up its backbone, informing my critical discourse analysis. Therefore, I conducted an online research to find information on the Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting, consult statistics on the popularity of the different news sources, and retrieve articles from their online archives.

A practical limitation I encountered during this process was given by news outlets that entailed an access fee after a certain number of consulted articles. Where possible, I avoided this obstacle by choosing news sources that offered unlimited free access, yet still adhered to my selection criteria. In the case of The Wall Street Journal and Los Angeles Times, I proceeded in signing a limited paid subscription and saving copies of the articles for when the subscription would expire. Furthermore, I encountered some difficulties in pinning down the exact publishing dates of the articles. This was mainly due to the fact that online news is constantly updated by journalists with new information. For this purpose, I relied on the date shown on each article.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis is divided in two sections: macrostructure and microstructure analysis. The macrostructure analysis is itself divided into three sections: sociocultural practice, discourse practice of text production, and discourse practice of text consumption. For the sociocultural practice I researched the history of gun ownership in the United States, with the aim of understanding the relationship American society has with guns and how this relationship might influence the representation of school shootings in online news headlines, and their interpretation. For this part of the analysis I relied on the data of academic journals, official government websites, professional associations, and statistics sources. The discourse practice of text production brought me to explore the publication policies of the different news outlets selected, the editorial practices involved in the



creation of texts online, and finally the most important news values for an online editorial board. Here I relied on the official websites of the news outlets selected, different academic studies, and websites specialized on online content dos and don'ts. As for the discourse practice of text consumption, I analyzed how different mental models could influence the interpretation of the online headlines, and for this purpose I relied on previous studies and academic journals.

Once framed into its sociocultural and discursive context, I looked at the data sample at a linguistic level. For this microstructure analysis I first divided the 50 online news headlines into five different categories according to their main focus: description of the violent event, description of victims and attacker, reaction of the President, political discussion, and other. To have a clear overview of the data I created five different tables, according to the focus of the headlines, as well as two bigger tables including all 50 headlines, one ordering them by news outlet, and the other by date. Subsequently, I came up with a set of questions that would help me identify hidden messages or meanings in the language, and therefore answer my main research question: how is the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting represented in online news headlines? The questions I asked the text while analyzing it linguistically are the following:

1. What are the most used words to describe the victims and why?
2. What are the most used words to describe the attacker and why?
3. What words are missing when identifying victims and attacker?
4. What verbs, adjectives, or adverbs define the violent event and why?
5. What words are missing when defining the violent event?
6. Are there common patterns between the different news outlets?

## 6. Ethical considerations

The fundamental principles of research ethics any researcher should abide to are: respect for persons, justice, and beneficence (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). That means the researcher must respect and protect participants, make sure benefits of the research are distributed equally, and ultimately aim at doing good (Collins, 2010). Considering I have not used primary data, or data collected through surveys and questionnaires, ethical issues and considerations are limited and not concerned with the treatment of participants.

For the collection of data I relied on internet research. According to Markham and Buchanan (2012, p.4), internet research, among other things, “employs visual and textual analysis, semiotic analysis, content analysis, or other methods of analysis to study the web and/or internet-facilitated images, writings, and media forms”. Ethical issues concerning internet research of written texts include the authorization to access certain websites and use specific data, as well as the recorded consent of any person that might be involved with or have rights on the content collected. The headlines I sampled for this study were all written by consenting authors whose work was available on online public domains. Nonetheless, I was careful to refer to the publications in the sources and insert a direct links to the single articles.

Other ethical issues tied with internet-based research include reliability and availability of the content. For this reason, I made sure to check the validity of the sources and whether they rightfully published their content, and saved copies of the selected headlines and articles in case these would be taken down from the pages of their respective media outlets.

## 7. Analysis

The following chapter presents my analysis as divided into two main sections: macrostructure and microstructure. The macrostructure analysis includes the sociocultural and discourse practice dimensions of critical discourse analysis, that means the social and cultural goings-on surrounding the communicative event, and the processes involved in producing and consuming the text (Fairclough, 1995).

### Macrostructure analysis

#### **Sociocultural practice - The right to bear arms in the United States**

In the early afternoon of Valentine's day, February 14, 2018, Nikolas Cruz walked inside the Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida, with an AR-15 rifle, and started shooting students and teachers, allegedly without any precise target in mind (Hobbs et al, 2018). The 19-year old former student left 17 dead and 17 wounded in a rampage shooting that is considered among the deadliest in recent US history (Stanglin and James, 2018). Backed up by frightening data, school shootings in the United States have generated widely spread public attention, fear, and rage in recent months: from January 1 to April 30, 2018, 37 gun-related accidents were registered in schools all over the United States, that is almost 10 school shootings per month, resulting in 28 deaths and 49 injuries (Every Town, 2018; Wikipedia, 2018). Tracking gun-related incidents in American schools and universities from 2013 to 2015, Every Town (2015) found a total of 160 incidents, resulting in 59 deaths and 124 injuries. In the first four months of 2018 the death toll in school-related shootings reached almost half of the casualties left behind by episodes that took place during the three-year time span between 2013 and 2015. Although every school shooting is characterized by its own unique features, causes and consequences, they all have one element in common: the use of guns. Therefore, while these numbers help create a general picture of the frequency and casualties involved in school shootings that took place in the country in recent times, it is necessary to take a step back and look at gun ownership in the United States, and at the relationship Americans have with guns in general, to understand the wider sociocultural context surrounding these violent events.

History teaches us that the United States, as a young nation of conquest, has a deep and rather steady relationship with guns. Integral part of the country's culture and society since the dawn of its history, guns constitute a symbol of freedom and safety for many Americans. The second amendment on the right to bear arms, passed by congress back in 1789, reads the following: "a well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed" (Constitution Center, 2018). Being part of the Bill of Rights, the right to own a gun is therefore placed on the very same plane as freedom of expression and religion, and the right to a civil trial (Constitution Center, 2018). Written in the late eighteenth century by the Founding Fathers, after the Declaration of Independence and therefore at the beginning of the Indian Wars, the second amendment has revolutionary-colonialist cultural roots. During the revolutionary war it was up to groups of armed men, or "militia" to protect their towns and

colonies, which would eventually form the United States, therefore arms were believed to be a necessary defense tool (History, 2018). At the same time, according to Dunbar-Ortiz (2018), the second amendment reflects the dependence on individual armed men to bear and use arms in the appropriation of native land.

Today, the country's relationship with guns is an ambivalent one. The right to bear arms still stands and is a point of pride for many Americans who use them for hunting or sporting purposes, or own them preventively for personal protection (Parker et al. 2017b). This strong bond is reflected in the words journalists use or avoid when describing violent events related to guns such as the case analyzed. Headlines such as *This is the maniac charged with murdering 17 people in a Florida high school* (New York Post, 2018b) or *'Something was off' about shooting suspect* (Tampa Bay Times, 2018), clearly attributing mental health issues to the attacker, rather than focusing on the fact that he was able to buy a gun in the first place. Nevertheless, strong counter movements exist of American citizens pushing for stricter gun regulations that are unified across states, such is the case with *Every Town* (2018). It is often violent episodes, such as mass school shootings, that shake the nation and spark animated discussions between pro and anti-gun supporters. When looking at the empirical data, this is reflected in headlines such as *Florida School Shooting Renews Debate Over Gun Access and Mental Health* (The Wall Street Journal, 2018b) or more direct references to activist movements like *Florida school shooting: Moms march on state lawmakers, demand action* (USA Today, 2018a) and *'We call BS': Fed-up Florida students take gun violence protest to the street* (Los Angeles Times, 2018a). Indeed, policies concerning firearms vary from state to state: it is possible to buy guns all across the country, yet some states have stricter laws on background checks, firearms registration, the permission to carry guns in the open, age limitations, and so on (Guns to Carry, 2018). Florida gun laws, for example, do not require background checks for private guns sales, nor the registration of purchased firearms, furthermore the state imposes no limit to the number of guns that may be purchased at once (Giffords, 2018). California, on the other hand, imposes background checks for private gun sales, demands for the purchase to take place through licensed dealers only, and require proper registration of the firearm (Guns to Carry, 2018). Despite the sometimes more rigid regulations, the number of registered firearms in each state of the United States in 2017 is alarming: California is second by number of registered weapons and counts 344,622, Florida is third with 343,288 guns registered, while at the top of the chart we find Texas with a total of 588,696 (Statista, 2017). When looking at the first 40 countries for civilian gun ownership, a Small Arms Survey (2011), reveals the United States as number one, with 270,000,000 guns owned by civilians (89 guns per 100 people); Germany ranks 15th with around 25,000,000 registered civilian firearms (30 guns per 100 people); Russia ranks 68th with circa 12,750,000 guns owned by civilians (9 guns per 100 people).

Because guns are so deeply implanted in American culture and society, the gun industry represents a big part of the U.S. economy. According to a report published in 2017 by the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), companies that manufacture, distribute and sell firearms and ammunition employ up to 149,113 people across the United States and

are responsible for 51.41 billion dollars of the country's total economic activity (NSSF, 2018). Advocates for the right to bear arms, and main supporters of the gun industry are gun lobbies such as the National Rifle Association (NRA). Founded in 1871 with the primary goal to "encourage rifle shooting on a scientific basis", the NRA's business today is aimed at promoting public safety, train civilians and members of law enforcement agencies, support and encourage shooting sports, and educate hunters (NRA, 2018). This gun lobby represents only 19% of all gun owners in the United States (Igielnik and Brown, 2017), and yet spent around 5.1 million dollars in lobbying in 2017 (Open Secrets, 2018), constituting one of the most powerful gun lobbies in the country. A research conducted by Musa (2016), showed in fact how the NRA has a budget of over 250 million dollars a year, and spends most of it on lobbying, advertising, and political action committees, strongly influencing the outcome of state, local, and national elections. Because of this influence, gun lobbies such as the NRA are often held responsible, by anti-gun supporters and the press, of blocking or limiting any gun regulation or gun violence research proposed after violent episodes such as the Florida school shooting (Independent, 2018; NPR, 2018; Raphelson, 2018).

It is through the lenses of this sociocultural context that I conduct the microstructure analysis of the sampled headlines. In breaking down the text into smaller components and looking at words used to identify victims and shooter, my aim is to reconstruct the elements that emerged in this macro scenario. The sensitive issue of gun ownership, and the value American society assigns to the right to keep and bear arms, cannot but emerge in the way media outlets portray violent events involving firearms, such as the Florida school shooting.

### **Discourse practice - Text production**

This section analyzes the processes involved in the production of the online headlines, focusing on the publication policy of the news outlets selected, the processes of online news production, and finally their newsworthiness and news values.

The online news outlets behind the headlines selected for this study are: USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Post, and The Tampa Bay Times. Among the most read sources of information nationally and locally, these publications are of different nature in terms of content and publication policy. USA Today, WSJ, The LA Times, and Tampa Bay, according to their imprint, constitute award-winning and quality-journalism news outlets, covering daily news, as well as politics, culture, lifestyle, and sports with integrity and in the interest of the public (USA Today, 2018b; Dow Jones, 2018; Malmkjær b; Times Publishing, 2018). The New York Post, on the other hand, is a tabloid or popular newspaper and, as stated in its media kit, publishes "news, pop culture and entertainment stories like only the Post can: with wit, irreverence and authority" (New York Post, 2018c). Connell (2014) points to sentimentalism, sensationalism, and a populist style as the main features distinguishing tabloids from the soberer style of quality journalism. Because of this fundamental difference in publication style and policy, the news articles, and therefore headlines, published by these outlets

necessarily approach the same news differently. At the same time, these differences are not always apparent when looking into word choices and semantics. Several scholars argue in fact that quality journalism is “softening” and undergoing processes of tabloidization, blurring the fine line that separates it, at least on paper, from popular press (Deuze, 2005; Connell, 2014; Otto et al., 2017).

When looking at the data sample, the most salient differences in terms of writing style, were found when comparing headlines published by The Wall Street Journal and New York Post. Table 1 below shows and compares headlines from these two publications.

The Wall Street Journal	<p><b>Gunman Kills 17</b> in Florida High School Shooting</p> <p>A Call from a <b>Child</b> During the Florida School Shooting: a <b>Parent’s</b> Story</p> <p>Shooting <b>Victims</b>: a <b>‘Jokester’ Coach</b>; an <b>Avid Soccer Player</b>; <b>Youth Volunteers</b></p> <p>Police report: Nikolas Cruz <b>confessed</b> to Florida high school shooting, <b>hiding extra ammunition</b> in his backpack</p> <p>Florida <b>Suspect</b> Was <b>‘Really Fascinated by Guns’</b></p> <p>Florida School Shooting <b>Renews</b> Debate Over <b>Gun Access</b> and <b>Mental Health</b></p> <p>After Florida Shooting, Trump <b>Plans</b> Summit on <b>School Safety</b></p> <p>Trump <b>Visits</b> Injured <b>Victims</b>, First Responders of Florida School Shooting</p> <p><b>Missed Warnings</b> in the Florida School Shooting</p> <p>The Parkland <b>Massacre</b> and the Air <b>We</b> Breathe</p>
New York Post	<p>17 <b>killed</b> in Florida high school shooting, one of <b>deadliest</b> in history</p> <p><b>Suspect</b> in Florida school shooting <b>pulled</b> fire alarm to create <b>panic</b></p> <p><b>Coach</b> dies after <b>shielding students</b> from Florida <b>shooter</b></p> <p>Second alarm <b>spurred hero teacher</b> into <b>action</b> during Florida shooting</p> <p>Family mourns <b>‘unimaginable’</b> death of Florida shooting <b>victim</b></p> <p>This is the <b>maniac</b> charged with <b>murdering</b> 17 people in a Florida high school</p> <p>Florida school shooting <b>suspect</b> is <b>‘troubled’ former student obsessed with guns</b></p> <p><b>Cop</b> said shooting <b>suspect</b> looked like a <b>‘typical high school student’</b></p> <p>Trump: <b>Mental illness</b> is the reason why teen <b>shot up</b> school</p> <p>Trump <b>orders</b> flags at half-staff to honor Florida <b>massacre</b> victims</p>

Table 1: Headlines of The Wall Street Journal and New York Post compared.

From the first headlines published on the violent event, to the headlines reporting the words of the President of the United States, the two news sources show clear differences in style and tone. The language used by journalists of New York Post is charged with emotion, with words like *deadliest*, *panic*, *maniac* and *hero*, while The Wall Street Journal reveals a more neutral and formal tone of voice. Nonetheless, there is a tendency of sensationalizing the event and its victims, by using strong words to describe them, even in The Wall Street Journal, shown in the use of words like *massacre*, *jokester coach*, *avid soccer player*.

The publication policy of a news outlet is deeply intertwined with the actual production processes involved in the creation and publication of content, especially in the online environment. Journalists today are faced with a 24/7 news cycle and the convergence of different media formats such as text, video, and audio (Foust, 2017). Online news practitioners are expected to be constantly updated on the latest news and trained to deal with multiple and diverse tasks (Magee, 2006). Because of the fast-paced nature of the digital environment, online news articles have become modular, that means they are made up of smaller individual components that can be updated, modified and merged to create new pieces of content quickly when needed, usually through a content management system (CMS) software, (Foust, 2017). Furthermore, new analytic tools allow news practitioners, pressured by advertisers, to monitor their online traffic and adjust the content strategy according to audience preferences (Lee et al., 2014). The online traffic monitored can be either direct or organic. Direct traffic is generated by returning users that know the online news outlet and reach it by writing their web domain (URL) directly in the browser. Organic traffic, on the other hand, comes from a referring source, such as a link shared on social media, or, in most cases, a keyword search launched on Google (Cox, 2015). In thinking about the audience in terms of numbers and economic value, and fighting for clicks in a highly competitive market, journalists are therefore encouraged to feature certain news stories over others, and to use specific keywords in the text. The data sample shows how the most common term used by journalists to define the violent event is *school shooting*, this combination of words has a search volume of 60.5K on Google, while school massacre, for example, even if of greater emotional impact, shows a much lower search volume of 720 (SemRush, 2018). Because they attract the attention to the whole article, summarize it (Ifantidou, 2009), and constitute the first lines of text visible to the reader, online news headlines are particularly important drivers of traffic. Therefore, to make the readers click, but also to make sure the article appears in the top results for relevant search queries, journalists conduct keywords researches and structure their headlines methodically.

When looking at the news outlets analyzed in the current study, USA Today, Los Angeles Times, and Tampa Bay Times rely heavily on organic traffic, including social media, while The Wall Street Journal and New York Post show a substantial base of direct users (Similar Web, 2018). The traffic sources of these publications and relative percentages are summarized in Table 2.

	<b>USA Today</b>	<b>WSJ</b>	<b>LA Times</b>	<b>Tampa Bay</b>	<b>NY Post</b>
<b>Direct traffic</b>	31,08%	47,97%	26,86%	35,94%	32,74%
<b>Organic traffic</b>	46,68%	26,17%	51,91%	37,68%	25,34%
<b>Social Media</b>	10,28%	10,69%	12,03%	17,61%	16,19%

Table 2: Traffic sources and percentages for the news outlets analyzed (Similar Web, 2018)

Thus, whether the main source of traffic is organic or direct could influence the choice of words used in online news headlines. Online headlines from USA Today or LA Times might show a higher number of popular keywords or catchier phrases than The Wall Street Journal, for example.

Another important part of the news production process is the assessment of newsworthiness of the story. Every day journalists actively choose which story they will cover and which they will ignore, and they do so according to a set of news values. A fairly recent study conducted by Harcup and O'Neill (2016) found that to be considered newsworthy by journalists, news stories must: be exclusive, have particularly negative or positive overtones, cover controversies or conflicts, have an element of surprise, be shareable on social media, be entertaining, concern dramatic events, be follow-up stories, concern the elite or celebrities, be familiar to the audience, be significant or of impact, and fit the organization's own agenda. In addition to these general values, crime stories, as the one analyzed in this thesis, are considered to be highly newsworthy because of their negative essence (Jewkes, 2015). Furthermore, if confronted with the choice between "regular" crimes and particularly dramatic and significant crimes, as is the case of a school shooting, news practitioners will choose to give priority to the second (Jewkes, 2015). Thus, the weight of news values, influenced partly by the subjective choice of the journalist, and partly by the interest of the readership, is an element that comes into play in the equation of news discourse.

### **Discourse practice - Text consumption**

While this section offers an overview of how the online news headlines selected can be understood and therefore cognitively processed by the audience, relying on van Dijk's sociocognitive approach presented in detail in chapter 4, it does not presume to offer a more detailed analysis, achievable only with the support of more empirical data and the use of a different research methods such as focus groups or interviews addressed to the interested parties, for example.

To understand the cognitive processes behind the interpretation of the online headlines sampled, it is necessary to identify the average audience of the different news outlets being analyzed. What does the typical reader of USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, Tampa Bay Times and New York Post look like? Table 3 below, summarizes, where possible, the demographic profiles of each publication.



	<b>USA Today</b>	<b>WSJ</b>	<b>LA Times</b>	<b>Tampa Bay</b>	<b>NY Post</b>
<b>Men/Women</b>	59% / 41%	63% / 37%	51% / 49%	37% / 63%	-
<b>Average age</b>	42 yrs	43 yrs	47 yrs	40 yrs	-
<b>Average HHI*</b>	\$85,548	\$256,239	\$86,000	\$58,500	\$120,068
<b>College education</b>	52%	81%	57%	29.0%	-

Table 3: Audience demographics of the different news outlets analyzed (USA Today, 2007; The Wall Street Journal, 2016; Los Angeles Times, 2014; Tampa Bay Times, 2017; New York Post, 2018d).

A 43 years old, well-educated man, with a fairly high household income, who represents the average reader of The Wall Street Journal, will probably understand and interpret a headline concerning the Florida School Shooting differently than, for example, the average 40 years old woman, with no college education and a household income that is about four times lower, reading a very similar headline on the Tampa Bay Times.

Besides gender, age, education and career, however, the headlines can be understood differently according to different subjective mental models, and context models. Depending on the reader's personal experiences and how these are represented in his or her Episodic memory, thus forming personal mental models, a school shooting headline could take on different meanings (van Dijk, 2016). A person who was directly involved in a similar violent event, might perceive a news headline concerning the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in a considerably different manner than someone who was not. Working together with subjective mental models, context models help readers to decipher the discourse in front of their eyes according to the ongoing communicative situation (van Dijk, 2016). Because of its distinctive structure and position, it should be clear to all news readers what a headline is in terms of communicative situation, thus the way it should be approached and understood. Nevertheless, depending on the context model developed by the reader on a particular news outlet, the text might be interpreted as more or less authoritative or trustworthy, for example. Readers of The Wall Street Journal might look at a headline published by New York Post, a tabloid, with distrust according to their context model. Vice versa, readers accustomed to reading news on New York Post, might judge the communicative situation proposed by The Wall Street Journal as dry and detached.

### Microstructure analysis

The microstructure analysis critically investigates the online headlines selected to identify meanings and ideologies emerging from their language. Mindful, on the one hand, of the relationship Americans have with guns, which is deeply rooted into their culture and integral part of their society, and on the other hand of the processes involved in the production and consumption of text online, I break down the headlines into smaller components and analyze them linguistically to answer my research sub-question:

- ❖ How is the violent action described?
- ❖ What kinds of identities are set up for victims and shooter?
- ❖ What ideologies, if any, are implied in the words used by the journalists?
- ❖ What influences the word choices of journalists?

### **Text analysis**

From the analysis of the 50 sampled online news headlines, five different categories emerged depending on their main focus:

1. Description or unfolding of the violent event (7 articles)
2. Description of victims and attacker (21 articles)
3. Reaction of the President (7 articles)
4. Political discussion (8 articles)
5. Other (7 articles)

As a first step I examine the data sample as a whole, pinpointing word choices and structures that are common to all categories. Subsequently, because of their evidently different nature, I analyze the first four categories separately. The category *Other* includes headlines that were not clearly recognized as any other type, such as titles concerning missing warnings before the attack and possible preventive police measures, considerations on safety, or national mourning. For this reason, these titles will not be analyzed as a separate group, but their words and sentences will contribute to forming the general overview.

### *General overview*

All of the online news outlets taken under analysis present at least one headline for every category. The main bulk of headlines, 30 out of 50, was published on February 15, the day after the school shooting, and cover all categories, from descriptions of the event to political discussion. 10 articles were published on the same day of the shooting, and mainly concern the unfolding of the event (6 out of 10), but a few headlines also focus on the attacker (3 out of 10). The headlines published on New York Post pop out as the most emotionally charged, with superlatives, comparatives and dramatic nouns and adjectives describing victims, attacker, or shooting. Nevertheless, all outlets, show some degree of sensationalism or tabloidization, even the Wall Street Journal, which appears to be the most sober and neutral source, uses words such as *massacre* and *gunman*, or witness quotes like *Really Fascinated by Guns*, when describing the event or attacker. The most frequently used word to describe the violent act is *shooting*, (35 times in 50 headlines), and in most cases in the official formula of *campus* or *school shooting* (26 out of 35 headlines). The word *gun* or *gunman* instead appear in only eight headlines. Concerning the victims, particular focus is put on the *football coach* who lost his life *shielding his students*, while the other victims are referred to as a group and are mainly identified according to their social role. In mentioning to the attacker, only eight percent of the headlines (4 out of 50) use his full name, *Nikolas Cruz*, while the rest indicate him as *suspect*, or *former student*.

Moreover, 42 of the analyzed titles inform readers that the shooting took place in *Florida*, while the name of the school is never mentioned. Lastly, two different ideologies of the journalists come through when looking at the data sample: some online headlines, intentionally focus on the psychological status of the attacker, by using words such as *troubled* or *mentally disturbed*, other headlines focus instead on gun violence, mainly reporting on students taking *gun violence protest* to the street or begging to *do something about guns*. The different categories tackled below will further analyze these findings.

*Description or unfolding of the violent event*

The first category includes the online news headlines describing the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, or explaining to some degree how the events unfolded. Among the 50 headlines sampled I identified seven that fit into this particular category, and all except one were published on the same day the violent event took place. Table 4 below presents the headlines included in this category and highlights the words on which I dwelled throughout the analysis.

Headlines	
1	<b>Gunman Kills 17</b> in Florida High School Shooting
2	<b>17 killed</b> in Florida high school shooting, one of <b>deadliest in history</b>
3	<b>I'm sick to my stomach': 17 dead</b> in Florida high school shooting; <b>former student</b> in custody
4	'We've seen the <b>worst of humanity,</b> ' Florida school official says as <b>17 killed</b> in campus shooting
5	<b>17 dead</b> in Florida high school shooting; <b>suspect</b> is a <b>former student</b> who was <b>expelled</b>
6	<b>17 dead, 15 wounded, former student</b> in custody after Broward school shooting
7	<b>Worse than Columbine:</b> Parkland school shooting one of the <b>deadliest in U.S. history</b>

Table 4: Stoneman Douglas High School shooting headlines describing the violent event

It is clear from looking at the table above that the main burden of focus is on the number of people killed or wounded in the shooting. Six of the seven headlines use the verb *to kill*, or the nouns *dead* and *wounded*, followed or preceded by the number of victims involved. This choice of words highlights and strengthens the gravity of the event, setting it apart from other “minor” crime news. Moreover, three of the six articles using this formulation, have it at the beginning, thus attracting the attention of the reader from a first glance. All of the headlines in table 4 identify the type of violent event as a *school* or *campus shooting*, using a widely recognized terminology and therefore attracting as many clicks as possible. Relying heavily on organic traffic, hence on Google searches, news publications are in fact aware that this particular combination of words is the most typed into the search bar when looking for information on such news. The keyword *school shooting* has in fact a an search volume of 60.5K on Google, while *school massacre*, for example, even if of greater emotional impact, shows a much lower search volume of 720 (SemRush, 2018). Three of

the seven headlines listed in table 4 use superlative or comparative sentences such as *deadliest in U.S. History*, *worse than Columbine*, or even *worst of humanity*, to further enhance and dramatize the seriousness of the event, but also to relate it and compare it to one that is already familiar to the readers, following two of the fundamental values of news: significance or impact, and familiarity (Harcup and O'Neill, 2016). It is important to note that all headlines indicate the location where the violent event took place, specifying the city (*Parkland*), county (*Broward*), or state (*Florida*), but never indicating the name of the high school. This choice might be dictated by the headline's word limit: on Google one character over 50/60 cuts the title, adds three dangerous dots at the end, and decreases the chances for the headline to rank on the first result page (Moz, 2018). Florida occupies in fact a lot less space, in terms of characters, than the name Stoneman Douglas High School, giving journalists more room to create short and attractive headlines, while at the same time inviting readers to open the story to know more details on the location.

*Description of victims and attacker*

This second category includes two subsections: the news headlines which focus on the school shooting victims, and the ones which refer instead to the attacker. Of the 50 headlines sampled I included eight in the victims' subcategory, and 13 in the attacker's. Table 5 shows the headlines included in the first subcategory and underlines the words taken into analysis.

Headlines	
1	Shooting <b>Victims</b> : a ' <b>Jokester</b> ' Coach; an <b>Avid Soccer Player</b> ; <b>Youth Volunteers</b>
2	<b>Coach</b> dies after <b>shielding students</b> from Florida <b>shooter</b>
3	Second alarm <b>spurred hero teacher</b> into <b>action</b> during Florida shooting
4	Family mourns ' <b>unimaginable</b> ' death of Florida shooting <b>victim</b>
5	Florida high school <b>football coach 'died a hero'</b> while <b>shielding students</b>
6	<b>Victim and hero</b> : Florida <b>football coach</b> ushered his <b>students</b> to safety before the <b>gunman</b> came for him
7	Of the Florida school shooting's 17 <b>victims</b> , seven of them were just <b>14 years old</b>
8	Amid <b>massacre</b> , a story of <b>courage</b> : Reports say <b>football coach stepped in front of bullets</b>

Table 5: Stoneman Douglas High School shooting headlines describing the victims and attacker.

Despite the great number of people involved in the violent event, five of the eight online headlines focusing on victims prioritize the story of a *football coach* who died protecting his students. This alone demonstrates how journalists are not simply reporting the events impartially, but are carefully selecting and framing those aspects that are sure to attract the reader's attention. Of already great emotional impact, the story is inflated and turned almost into legend with words such as *hero* and *courage*, or epic actions like *shielding students* and *stepped in front of bullets*, or *spurred into action*. Moreover, the table shows how all headlines refer to the victims in terms of their social identity and therefore

membership in social categories (Terry et al., 1999): *coach, soccer player, volunteers, students, teacher, 14 years old*. Journalists might focus on these type of identities, perhaps so that readers can recognize themselves, or someone they hold dear, in those terms, and therefore perceive the story even more intensely. A 14-year-old, a coach, or a student have in fact the same value across the spectrum of readers, whether it is a well educated top manager or a low income waiter approaching the headline. When looking at all 50 headlines, it is interesting to notice how in some cases victims are just a number, *17 dead* or *17 killed*, an anonymity which might be dictated by the immediacy with which the journalists publish articles after an event such as this one takes place, or a weighted choice aimed at reinforcing the gravity of the crime.

Table 6 below displays the headlines included in the sub-category focusing on the attacker.

Headlines	
1	Police report: Nikolas Cruz <b>confessed</b> to Florida high school shooting, <b>hiding extra ammunition</b> in his backpack
2	Florida <b>Suspect</b> Was ' <b>Really Fascinated by Guns</b> '
3	This is the <b>maniac</b> charged with <b>murdering</b> 17 people in a Florida high school
4	Florida school shooting <b>suspect</b> is ' <b>troubled</b> ' <b>former student obsessed with guns</b>
5	<b>Cop</b> said shooting <b>suspect</b> looked like a ' <b>typical high school student</b> '
6	' <b>Disturbing</b> ' Instagram posts: What Nikolas Cruz, <b>suspected</b> in Florida shooting, did online
7	<b>Suspect</b> in Florida school shooting <b>pulled</b> fire alarm to create <b>panic</b>
8	Florida school shooting <b>suspect</b> ordered a drink at Subway after <b>deadly assault</b>
9	Florida school shooting <b>suspect</b> visited a Subway and McDonald's after his <b>deadly rampage</b>
10	Here's what we know about Nikolas Cruz, charged with killing 17 in Florida school shooting
11	' <b>Something was off</b> ' about shooting <b>suspect</b>
12	Florida <b>shooter's</b> lawyers <b>admit</b> he did it; their <b>only</b> goal is to keep him off death row
13	What we know about Florida school shooting <b>suspect</b> Nikolas Cruz

Table 6: Stoneman Douglas High School shooting headlines describing the attacker.

The data above shows how 10 out of 13 headlines use the word *suspect*, in the form of noun or verb, when referring to the offender. The use of this word, and the absence in many headlines of further details on the identity of the offender, might be due to the insufficiency of more concrete information on the case at an early stage. At the same time, in headlines published when the identity of the shooter had already been disclosed, this might represent an editorial maneuver to avoid giving too much importance to the shooter, avoiding future copycats or gruesome competitions (Lankford and Madfis, 2018). Two articles refer to the attacker as *troubled former student* or a *maniac*, shifting the attention towards issues of mental illnesses and away from gun regulations and accessibility. Other

words used to describe the attacker are *typical high school student*, as quoted from a witness, which highlight the offender’s belonging in the school community, but also imply the shock and surprise given by this sudden and unexpected act of violence. Finally, five out of all 50 headlines analyzed refer to the attacker as either a *shooter* or a *gunman*, and while the first word has the more neutral meaning of someone who shoots, the word *gunman* has a negative connotation to it, and is of common use when referring to terrorist attacks.

### *Reaction of the President*

The third category collects the online headlines concerning the reaction of the President of the United States to the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. Among the 50 headlines sampled, seven fit into this particular category, and are shown in table 7 below.

<b>Headlines</b>	
1	After Florida Shooting, Trump <b>Plans</b> Summit on <b>School Safety</b>
2	Trump <b>Visits</b> Injured <b>Victims</b> , First Responders of Florida School Shooting
3	Trump: <b>Mental illness</b> is the reason why <b>teen shot up</b> school
4	Trump <b>orders</b> flags at half-staff to honor Florida <b>massacre</b> victims
5	'No child, no teacher should ever be in <b>danger</b> in an <b>American school</b> ,' Trump <b>says</b> after Florida shooting
6	After the <b>tragedy</b> in Florida, Trump <b>struggles</b> to show his <b>empathetic side</b>
7	Trump: <b>so many signs</b> the Florida school <b>shooter 'was mentally disturbed'</b>

Table 7: Stoneman Douglas High School shooting headlines concerning the reaction of President Trump.

In the sampled headlines, the President of the United States is always referred to as *Trump*, no formal title or further appellative is used. This choice of words highlights the popularity of the public figure, who needs no introduction, and at the same time is aimed at diminishing the distance between the public figure, the government, and the common people. Moreover, it is remarkable how all verbs referring to the President are in the active indicative form, as to underline the fact that he is taking action, is *plans*, *visits*, *orders*, and *says*. Three of the seven articles report a direct quote from Trump, and while two point out his remarks on *mental illness*, one deliberately quotes him on *danger in American schools*, avoiding more politically charged words. Furthermore, it is interesting to see how when mentioned, mental illness is given as a certain cause, with *so many signs* pointing to it. Headline six in the table above seems to go against the flow, making a direct attack on the President, stating how he *struggles to show his empathetic side*. Instead of reporting his speech, the journalist behind this headline is giving his or her opinion on how the President reacted to the Florida school shooting.

*Political discussion*

The fourth and last category analyzed includes the online headlines concerning political debates stemmed from the events of the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. Of the 50 headlines sampled, eight fit into this particular category, and are shown in table 8 below.

Headlines	
1	Florida School Shooting <b>Renews</b> Debate Over <b>Gun Access</b> and <b>Mental Health</b>
2	Florida school shooting: <b>Moms</b> march on state <b>lawmakers</b> , demand <b>action</b>
3	Let's mourn <b>our losses</b> , celebrate <b>our children</b> before <b>turning</b> Florida shooting <b>political</b>
4	<b>Horrified</b> Florida students <b>beg</b> the <b>adults</b> : Please, do something about <b>guns</b>
5	<b>We call BS'</b> : Fed-up Florida students take <b>gun violence</b> protest to the street
6	School shooting <b>survivors beg</b> for <b>action</b> : <b>'When you're killing children... you're killing our future.'</b>
7	<b>Florida, angry and grieving</b> , takes <b>gun protest</b> to streets
8	A <b>rattled</b> Florida Legislature <b>concedes</b> it should do more to address <b>mental health</b> after Parkland school shooting

Table 8: Stoneman Douglas High School shooting headlines concerning political discussion.

By looking at the headlines above it becomes clear that the main debates provoked by the Florida school shooting concern: gun access and mental health. Four of the eight headlines specifically refer to *gun access*, *guns*, *gun violence*, or *gun protest* when describing the public opinion or action. Headline one, in particular, states how the debate over the two issues is *renewed* after the Florida school shooting, using that particular verb to emphasize the fact that America has been here before, discussing about similar tragedies and what shall be done about them. At the same time, it directly connects gun access to *mental health issues*, weakening in a way the primary role of guns in the tragedy. Headlines 2 and 6 report on school shooting survivors and mothers demanding or begging for *action*, a clever way of avoiding to specify what exactly people are protesting about. This again could be a strategy to hook the readers and make them click on the story, or a subtle way of hiding a pro-gun ideology. Furthermore, It is interesting to notice that some adjectives and verbs have particularly negative connotations, implying in a way the point of view of the journalist. Words such as *horrified*, *angry and grieving*, and *fed-up* are used to describe the emotions of *survivors*, *students*, and *Florida* as a whole, who *beg* for change and *take gun protest to the streets*. While on the other end of the spectrum, the word *rattled* defines the status of the Florida Legislature, who *concedes* the need to address mental health. Headline number 3 is particularly interesting, because in a way it scolds the readers telling them to focus on the victims before making the event about politics. Different elements stand out in this headline: a) the use of the pronoun *our* which includes the readers in a group, in this case the nation, and creates a polarization with an implied *their*, outsiders (van Dijk, 2000); b) the contrast between *our losses* and *our*

*children*, where the word *losses* has the task of making the dead less impactful, while *children* paints the picture of an actual person being alive and well; c) using the phrase *turning Florida shooting political* to imply that a school shooting has nothing to do with politics in the first place.



## 8. Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to understand how the words chosen by journalists in online news headlines contribute to creating particular meanings, or representations, of the events reported, and if through these representations any hidden ideologies are put forward. The Stoneman Douglas High School shooting has been used as a case study for this research, a choice stemmed from the increasing public attention school shootings have gained in the past few months, and from my personal experience and interest in the subject. The framework used to carry out the research integrated Fairclough's critical discourse analysis with van Dijk's sociocultural approach, resulting in the study of three different but interrelated elements of discourse: 1) sociocultural practice, or the social and cultural context of gun ownership in the U.S.; 2) discourse practice, hence the processes behind the production of online headlines and the cognitive processes behind their interpretation; 3) linguistic analysis of the text. To guide my analytical process I used the following research questions: a) how is the violent act described in the online news headlines sampled?; b) what kinds of identities are set up for victims and attacker?; c) what ideologies, if any, are implied in the words used by the journalists? In this last chapter I intend to answer these questions by reviewing and connecting the findings revealed by the three-dimensional analysis.

The text analysis has shown how the violent act has been most commonly referred to as *school shooting* in the data sample, a combination of words that has apparently no ideological undertone to it. Sometimes it is however at the absence of words or at neutral connotations that one must look to find underlying meanings of discourse. The sole existence of an official and somewhat uninvolved term such as *school shooting* can be connected to the sociocultural context analyzed, and therefore indicative of the deep and long-lasting relationship Americans have with guns. Headlines such as *17 dead in Florida high school shooting*, surely put the emphasis on the significant number of victims, while the violent act itself, the fact that someone armed with a gun entered the premises of a school and started shooting at random, becomes secondary, almost as if school shootings were the normality. The term *gun*, even when included in the compound word *gunman*, appears seldom, exactly because it points directly to firearms as the main cause of all evil.

Further demonstration of how journalists do not simply report the events impartially, but are carefully selecting some of their aspects, were found in the way victims were portrayed in the online headlines. Of the 17 people tragically involved in the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, to make the news was the story of a *hero coach* who *shielded his students*. This story is in fact particularly newsworthy when looking at fundamental news values such as impact and drama, and even familiarity, considering the victim's social role of football coach. Journalists deliberately chose to portray the heroic gestures of this particular victim aware of its emotional but also monetary worth. The other "less newsworthy" victims instead blend together, and are mostly identified according to their belonging in a social group: *students*, *teacher*, *soccer player*. These words do not solely serve the purpose of contextualizing the event, but also create a direct connection with the

reader who can easily relate to them. The offender, on the other hand, is identified as *suspect* in the majority of headlines. The contrast between the creation of a persona through social roles for the victims, and the intentional anonymity and mysterious connotation of the word *suspect* used instead for the offender, might reflect the intention of the journalists to deny the killer the attention he seeks, and avoiding potential copycat effects.

In terms of underlying ideologies, it became clear from analyzing the online headlines that the majority of journalists highlighted the shooter's mental health as main cause of the shooting, whether reporting the words of others or directly calling the attacker a maniac. This, more than a matter of impartiality on the part of the soberer news outlets, seems to be a matter of cultural background. Guns have always been part of American society and owning a gun is a civil right, therefore avoiding school shootings is a matter of better regulating access to firearms and making sure mentally disturbed people cannot buy them, not to take that right away completely to everyone else. Only a handful of headlines address gun violence specifically, and mainly when referring to the action taken by students of the Stoneman Douglas High School. If on the one hand the dominant ideology seems to be that which attributes the cause of what happened to a mental health problem, with headlines exhorting to *mourn our losses* and thus diverting attention from the fact that the shooting is already *turning political*, on the other hand another ideology makes its way into public opinion and is reflected in the headlines. The *debate is renewed*, *moms march*, *students beg adults*, *survivors beg for action*, *Florida, angry and grieving, takes gun protest in the streets*. These titles collect and relaunch the will of a minority to change once and for all the regulation of the use of weapons in the country. The answer to this overbearing need is represented, not without a certain irony, by a *rattled Florida legislature* that *concedes*, it seems from the title almost unwillingly, that something more should be done to solve the problem.

My research has therefore shown that, despite the anticipated neutral stance of news journalists, dictated by professional values such as integrity and objectivity, hidden meanings and ideologies necessarily come to the surface when critically investigating the words used. In focusing on the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting as a case study, this thesis demonstrates how by describing an event and identifying the people involved in that event, online news headlines do not solely reflect reality, but create a version of reality that is ideologically biased.

The need to have an ever-growing number of readers, the willingness to please their point of view and their ideological orientation, means that, as has been reported many times, the relationship of influence between the writer and those who benefit from this writing is reciprocal. The internet makes available to us several news sources far superior to that of the past, sources that we come across without even searching for them. This allowed ideology to cross the boundaries of the printed page and to be omnipresent, even if hidden behind apparently impartial words. The overcoming of this or that ideology today is no longer placed (and perhaps never has been) in the journalist's commitment to always give

a character of impartiality and objectivity to his articles, but rather precisely in the flourishing and spreading of so many different news outlets to communicate daily events. This kaleidoscope of different sources, while unavoidably influencing the readers in one direction or another, allows the most resourceful users to reach a completeness of information, despite the more or less hidden intentions of the single news pieces.

## Limitations and further studies

In critically investigating and interpreting the online headlines sampled, I necessarily relied on my own subjective mental models and context models. While I tried to remain as impartial as possible, using different sources as guidance and support to my analysis, my experience as a High School student in the United States, my European upbringing, and therefore my own system of beliefs, might have biased the results. Furthermore, in being a case study, my data sample is limited to the online news headlines concerning one particular event, and includes exclusively national news outlets. A more extensive research, considering additional and different sources, or a bigger pool of data, might have allowed me to reach further and more diverse outcomes on the matter. Lastly, the use of critical discourse analysis as research method constitutes in itself a limitation. Because of the interpretative nature of this method, and the lack of an explicit, structured, and unified approach (Morgan, 2010), the same data sample can be analyzed through different interpretative lenses.

Future studies could include a parallel between national and international representations of the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. In comparing the national news discourse with the news discourse of a German outlet, a country with a different relationship with guns than the United States, the research could perhaps show opposing ideologies. Another future study could focus on the consistency between online news headlines and the corresponding article, to see if the same ideology emerges. Because of the impact of headlines, and their role of attracting readers, particular sensationalist word choices could in fact imply a different ideology than the one suggested instead by the complete article. Finally, to verify the real impact of shareability and immediacy in the digital environment, it would be interesting to juxtapose online news headlines to headlines published on printed newspapers concerning the same event. This type of analysis could reveal how much the discourse practice involving processes of text production online actually influence the words chosen by journalists, and if the tabloidization showed in some headlines stems from the need to generate clicks, or actually reflects the ideology of the media practitioner.

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## 10. Appendices

### List of selected headlines by publication

News Outlet	Focus	Headline	Published
<b>The Wall Street Journal</b>	Unfolding of the events	Gunman Kills 17 in Florida High School Shooting	14.02.2018
	Victims	A Call From a Child During the Florida School Shooting: a Parent's Story	14.02.2018
	Victims	Shooting Victims: a 'Jokester' Coach; an Avid Soccer Player; Youth Volunteers	15.02.2018
	Attacker	Police report: Nikolas Cruz confessed to Florida high school shooting, hiding extra ammunition in his backpack	15.02.2018
	Attacker	Florida Suspect Was 'Really Fascinated by Guns'	15.02.2018
	Political debate	Florida School Shooting Renews Debate Over Gun Access and Mental Health	16.02.2018
	Reaction of President Trump	After Florida Shooting, Trump Plans Summit on School Safety	15.02.2018
	Reaction of President Trump	Trump Visits Injured Victims, First Responders of Florida School Shooting	16.02.2018
	Other	Missed Warnings in the Florida School Shooting	15.02.2018
	Other	The Parkland Massacre and the Air We Breathe	15.02.2018
<b>The New York Post</b>	Unfolding of the events	17 killed in Florida high school shooting, one of deadliest in history	14.02.2018
	Unfolding of the events	Suspect in Florida school shooting pulled fire alarm to create panic	14.02.2018
	Victims	Coach dies after shielding students from Florida shooter	15.02.2018

	Victims	Second alarm spurred hero teacher into action during Florida shooting	16.02.2018
	Victims	Family mourns 'unimaginable' death of Florida shooting victim	16.02.2018
	Attacker	This is the maniac charged with murdering 17 people in a Florida high school	15.02.2018
	Attacker	Florida school shooting suspect is 'troubled' former student obsessed with guns	14.02.2018
	Attacker	Cop said shooting suspect looked like a 'typical high school student'	15.02.2018
	Reaction of President Trump	Trump: Mental illness is the reason why teen shot up school	15.02.2018
	Reaction of President Trump	Trump orders flags at half staff to honor Florida massacre victims	15.02.2018
<b>USA Today</b>	Unfolding of the events	I'm sick to my stomach!: 17 dead in Florida high school shooting; former student in custody	14.02.2018
	Unfolding of the events	Warning signs for suspect in Florida school shooting: When can police act?	15.02.2018
	Victims	Florida high school football coach 'died a hero' while shielding students	15.02.2018
	Victims	Florida school shooting: Nation mourns on social media	15.02.2018
	Attacker	Disturbing' Instagram posts: What Nikolas Cruz, suspected in Florida shooting, did online	15.02.2018
	Attacker	Florida school shooting suspect ordered a drink at Subway after deadly assault	16.02.2018
	Political debate	Florida school shooting: Moms march on state lawmakers, demand action	15.02.2018
	Political debate	Let's mourn our losses, celebrate our children before turning Florida shooting political	15.02.2018

	Reaction of President Trump	No child, no teacher should ever be in danger in an American school,' Trump says after Florida shooting	15.02.2018
	Other	Florida school shooting: Parkland known as a safe place to live	15.02.2018
<b>Los Angeles Times</b>	Unfolding of the events	'We've seen the worst of humanity,' Florida school official says as 17 killed in campus shooting	14.02.2018
	Unfolding of the events	17 dead in Florida high school shooting; suspect is a former student who was expelled	14.02.2018
	Victims	Victim and hero: Florida football coach ushered his students to safety before the gunman came for him	15.02.2018
	Victims	Of the Florida school shooting's 17 victims, seven of them were just 14 years old	16.02.2018
	Attacker	Florida school shooting suspect visited a Subway and McDonald's after his deadly rampage	15.02.2018
	Attacker	Here's what we know about Nikolas Cruz, charged with killing 17 in Florida school shooting	15.02.2018
	Political debate	Horrified Florida students beg the adults: Please, do something about guns	16.02.2018
	Political debate	'We call BS': Fed-up Florida students take gun violence protest to the street	17.02.2018
	Reaction of President Trump	After the tragedy in Florida, Trump struggles to show his empathetic side	15.02.2018
	Other	FBI was warned about Florida school shooting suspect 5 months ago	15.02.2018
<b>Tampa Bay</b>	Unfolding of the events	17 dead, 15 wounded, former student in custody after Broward school shooting	14.02.2018
	Unfolding of the events	Worse than Columbine: Parkland school shooting one of the deadliest in U.S. history	15.02.2018

	Victims	Amid massacre, a story of courage: Reports say football coach stepped in front of bullets	15.02.2018
	Attacker	'Something was off' about shooting suspect	14.02.2018
	Attacker	Florida shooter's lawyers admit he did it; their only goal is to keep him off death row	16.02.2018
	Attacker	What we know about Florida school shooting suspect Nikolas Cruz	15.02.2018
	Political debate	School shooting survivors beg for action: 'When you're killing children... you're killing our future.'	15.02.2018
	Political debate	Florida, angry and grieving, takes gun protest to streets	17.02.2018
	Political debate	A rattled Florida Legislature concedes it should do more to address mental health after Parkland school shooting	15.02.2018
	Reaction of President Trump	Trump: so many signs the Florida school shooter 'was mentally disturbed'	15.02.2018
	Other	'It is a question of when': How Tampa Bay school districts are responding to Parkland school shooting	15.02.2018

### Links to selected headlines

News Outlet	Link
The Wall Street Journal	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/shooting-at-florida-high-school-authorities-report-1518638881?mod=searchresults&amp;page=1&amp;pos=15">https://www.wsj.com/articles/shooting-at-florida-high-school-authorities-report-1518638881?mod=searchresults&amp;page=1&amp;pos=15</a>
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