# Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold: Antiheroes for outcasts

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**Summary:**
The ethics of publishing mass shooter created media and concerns about victims dominate debates about the journalistic ethics of covering mass shootings. However, entire online communities revolve around the mythology and history of mass shooters and their media texts. Columbine, in particular, has spawned an online community devoted to understanding the shooters, correcting misconceptions about the shooting and their community, and teaching others the facts about the shooting inflected with empathetic interpretation. On the social media platform Tumblr, this community receives a large amount of criticism that stems from misconceptions about the community's goals. In this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with individuals in this community in order to better understand the boundary work that goes into defining and protecting an online culture commonly perceived as deviant. I investigated the relationship between the perceived deviance of this community and the ways that members refigure news frames about Columbine to inject empathy and understanding into reading the motivations of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Personally inflected interpretations lead these individuals to actively educate others about the shooting and potential ways to prevent future shootings.

**Keywords**: Columbine, Mass Shootings, Social Media, Tumblr, Ethics, Pedagogy

Individuals that empathize with criminals or have an interest in true crime are largely stigmatized in cultural discussions about prevention and activism in response to these crimes. Several academic and popular media articles have discussed online communities that empathize with and create media about different sorts of criminals. In particular, those interested in the Columbine Massacre have suffered extensive scrutiny. This community has been referred to as 'Disgusting,' (Moritz, 154) 'weirdos and outcasts,' (Harmon, A14), 'potentially harmful communities' compared to 'hate groups and terrorists' (Oksanen, 56),

and a 'disturbing cult' (Rico); these are just some of the emotionally loaded terms used to describe young adults who have an interest in Columbine, or more precisely, the emotional lives of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold leading up to the massacre. According to existing academic and popular accounts of this community, these individuals represent a deviant population that valorizes the murder of 13 through their empathetic engagement with the shooters. This study questions those assumptions through a series of in-depth interviews with individuals who discuss the events of Columbine and empathize with the shooters on the social media platform Tumblr. These interviews offer a very different picture that answers one important question: What is the function of what have casually been labelled 'fan' activities in the personal and social lives of those who show a so-called 'deviant' interest in Columbine? This interview project found that this community studies Columbine with more intellectual self-reflexivity than previously assumed. Through both factual and empathetic engagement, these individuals offer an alternative understanding of the Columbine Massacre rooted in negotiated and oppositional readings of central news frames that solidified in early news coverage of the case including the dehumanization of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the array of common misconceptions about the shootings that persist in popular memory, and the neglect of practical reactions to warning signs by authorities and their implications for the prevention of future mass shootings.

As an academic interested in Columbine and the true crime genre more generally, I have the privilege of sharing my research with an audience that understands the motivation behind my interests; to stimulate a more complex cultural dialogue about sensationalized crimes like mass shootings. Without that legitimation, many of the individuals I spoke with in this study are dismissed in their attempts to educate outsiders like teachers, parents, and even academics due to their empathetic insights into the shooting. The Emotional attachment and identification of 'fans' with Eric and Dylan has been undervalued as a source of information in studies of Columbine communities online, primarily colored by the assessment of such activities as 'deviant'. Personal experience has been increasingly legitimated as valued empirical evidence through identity discourses in disciplines like gender, queer and ethnic studies. As a result, academics have seen that social insights can be further expanded through the personal. Feminist scholars like Elspeth Probyn assert that 'experience itself speaks of the composition of the social formation [and] can be overwhelming and work to conceal the connections between different structures [through the] disjuncture between the articulated and the lived' (21-22). I believe that my findings challenge the assumptions that have so far grounded academic understandings of these communities as deviant by highlighting the incongruity between these assumptions and this community's 'lived' experience. Instead, this study reveals the value of these individuals' passionate interest despite the largely unquestioned stigma they face.

## Methods
While looking for information about Columbine for my own research on mass shootings, I stumbled across the Tumblr community for Columbine 'fans'. I saw that some members of

this group use the term 'Columbiner' and searched more deeply for a representative hashtag. The posts in the tag represented a community in dialogue that could not be reduced to a group of fans valorizing the shootings. I also searched for similar communities on other social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. There are also communities on these forums and previous studies have engaged these platforms as well as Deviant Art, Blogspot, and YouTube (Oksanen, Rico). However, I chose to interview individuals on Tumblr for three reasons. 1. I am familiar with the platform and would easily be able to create a blog with a permanent URL for interested interviewees to find more information. 2. I found that Tumblr had a more active community than these other platforms, an observation supported by research conducted by Atte Oksanen and Andrew Rico. Reddit includes a subreddit /r/columbiners with only 20 members and threads posted only every few months. Facebook has several 'fan pages'—their term for groups—with infrequent posts that are primarily geared towards victims and memorial events. These groups do not offer the fertile level of conversation that Tumblr does. This observation leads to my third point. 3. It would be hard to maintain anonymity—an important consideration for these interviewees—on a platform like Facebook that uses individuals' personal information or Reddit which shares which subreddits users follow with other members of the community. The tendency for these Columbine communities to gravitate towards more insular and anonymous social media platforms has also been observed by Oksanen. Proceeding from these previous insights as well as the Tumblr users' position as a population of convenience, this platform was chosen to target interviewees.

Tumblr is a blogging platform where users create a private archive of material that interests them through 'likes' as well as a public archive through 'posting' or 'reblogging' any kind of media they would like. Tumblr is a multi-media platform that supports text posts, images, videos, links and more. The Columbine community exists primarily in the searchable #Columbine and #Columbiner 'tags'. Tags allow users to look up a topic and then interact with other people discussing this topic. You can interact with other users in a variety of ways; messaging users privately (anonymously or not), reblogging a post from a user to add your own insights or questions, or posting your own information. The exclusivity of tags and the ability to interact anonymously means that generally people do not come across the Columbine community unless they are looking for it or they follow a user who reblogs something about Columbine. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, very few people blog about Columbine unless their blog is themed around Columbine. The tags also allow people inside or outside of the community to filter out things like 'fan art' or 'fanfiction' if they are not comfortable with those fan activities. The platform also offers a large amount of anonymity. No one can access your email, name, age, gender or other identifying information unless you choose to share it. The presence of the community primarily in the tags section of the site and its anonymity allows people to 'lurk' more easily than other social media sites like Facebook or Reddit. 'Lurking' is a general internet term for someone who reads, likes, or generally follows the community from a distance.

An underestimated weakness in previous analyses of Columbine interest groups is the researchers' dependence on second-hand textual analyses that do not account for how these participants understand their own activities.  This study expands on these methods using interviews with members of the Tumblr Columbine community. I recruited interviewees voluntarily by setting up a Tumblr blog that explained the purpose and goals of my study; to examine stigmas about the Columbine community and delve deeper into the experiences and opinions of its members. I conducted 12 interviews with individuals ranging from 18-32 years of age both inside and outside of the United States. These interviews took place over Skype and were solely text-based. Instead of transcribing my interviews, I simply copied and pasted the chat text into a word document. I used a qualitative in-depth interview style and asked a variety of questions about participants' involvement in and perceptions of the Tumblr Columbine community, the shootings, and Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. The loose interview outline is included as an appendix to the article. Some of the interviewees shared their own media products with me, including fanzines, body art, and fan art.

A breakdown of the characteristics of these interviewees is represented below in **Table 1**. It would be difficult to create a more general picture of the size and characteristics of the Tumblr Columbine community because of Tumblr's insulated and anonymous qualities. The ability to stay anonymous and police boundaries allows this community to flourish and, at the same time, these qualities make it difficult to say with any accuracy how many people consider themselves members of the Columbine community. Other studies have also identified the difficulties of pinpointing the size and demographics of this community (Oksanen). This community also exists within a larger network of true crime communities and in relationship to communities dedicated to other mass shooters (ex. Holmies who are interested in the Aurora Theater shooter James Holmes). Many of these communities overlap in terms of membership. At the peak of user interest in this project, 88 people followed my research blog. However, this number may not be representative of the community's breadth or size. It is also hard to tell the gender or ages of members since they do not necessarily post that information. I have witnessed as many males as females in the community of people interested in Columbine as I searched for secondary material. However, my sample is highly skewed towards female interviewees (10 females, 1 male, and 1 other), at least in part because men do not volunteer for surveys and especially not in-depth interviews as often as women. Because the study only included volunteers, this gender discrepancy indicates a need for further research on male members of this community and this study refrains from making gendered generalizations.

In order to analyse the interviews, I separated the interviews of those that self-identified as Columbiners from the interviews of those that self-identified as interested in Columbine. These different labels indicated some significant differences in interest and practice that are discussed further below; essentially, Columbiners primarily interpret the shooting using emotion supported by research, whereas those interested in Columbine primarily interpret the shooting using research supported by emotion. However, both

groups value emotional identification and research as sources of interpretive information. I identified the emergent themes in each group of interviews through traditional textual analysis. First I copied and pasted the interview answers into a spreadsheet based on the similarity of each comment's content. I arranged the spreadsheet based on the similarity of these comments across interviews; one section included commonalities between comments of Columbiners and another section included commonalities between the comments of those interested in Columbine. Then I considered the overlap between the emergent themes from each group. Once I identified key differences in the discourses used by each of the two groups, I re-read all the interviews in the order in which they were conducted. Re-reading the early interviews with the benefit of my experience from later interviews highlighted themes that I may not have noticed when conducting these interviews because these patterns only emerged after several interviews. This linear approach also refreshed my memory of the early interviews in order to highlight things that also appeared in later interviews. I then identified and recorded in the spreadsheet the universal themes and narratives that applied equally to both groups by creating a separate section for these comments.

**Table 1: Demographics of the participants**

| Interview Order | Age | Gender | Location | Self-identified Columbiner or Interested in Columbine? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 32 | Female | From the US | Columbiner |
| 2 | 25 | Female | Outside the US | Interested in Columbine |
| 3 | 22 | Other | From the US | Columbiner |
| 4 | 18 | Female | Outside the US | Interested in Columbine |
| 5 | 18 | Female | Outside the US | Columbiner |
| 6 | 19 | Female | From the US | Columbiner |
| 7 | 19 | Male | Outside the US | Columbiner |
| 8 | 20 | Female | Outside the US | Columbiner |
| 9 | 27 | Female | From the US | Columbiner |
| 10 | 18 | Female | Outside the US | Columbiner |
| 11 | 18 | Female | From the US | Interested in Columbine |
| 12 | 19 | Female | Outside the US | Interested in Columbine |

I also analysed how the interview themes compared to newspaper frames from *The New York Times* coverage of the Columbine Massacre because the interview transcripts revealed the Tumblr Columbine community's consistent scepticism of journalists. In this study, framing is utilized as both a theory and a method. Methodologically speaking, framing analysis was first coined by Jim A. Kuypers. The process involves identifying narrative patterns across a variety of texts in order to assess the underlying rhetorical importance of these narratives; what is emphasized and why. Kuypers explains that '[frames] operate by

making some information more salient than other information… We rarely notice this process, especially the omission of information, because our public attention is highly selective' (186). This inattention doubles when narrative frames reinforce already dominant cultural beliefs. Audiences had no reason to question dominant assumptions in news coverage of Columbine because their attention was arguably directed towards discerning the motives and factors that led to the shooting. However, these questions cannot be answered in any straightforward factual way but must be interpreted, a process which involves time and accurate information rather than the speculation that dominated media sources.

The important role of media frames lies in their unspoken, hegemonic assumptions. These hegemonic assumptions represent precisely the 'problem' of news media that the Columbine community identifies and resists. Todd Gitlin explains the invisibility of hegemonic frames stating, 'Media frames, largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organize the world both for journalists who report it and for us who rely on their reports. Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol handlers routinely organize discourse' (6-7). The Columbine community reacts specifically to the 'unspoken' and 'unacknowledged' character of news frames about Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. They struggle against these dominant readings, in order to bring their mythical and inaccurate quality into common consciousness, a goal that not even Dave Cullen's corrective journalistic account, *Columbine*, thoroughly accomplished. This struggle explains the general scepticism of the Columbine community towards the media as well as their continuing attempts to expose the myth-making process that underlines still-dominant narratives about Columbine.

Speculation played a heavy role in establishing myths about Eric and Dylan during this early information cycle. In Dave Cullen's account of the shooting, he speaks extensively about this phenomenon. He states, 'All the Columbine myths… sprang to life incredibly fast… Few people knowledgeable about the case believe those myths anymore… And yet most of the public takes them for granted. Why?' (Cullen; 149). He calls these myths 'colourful' and admits that they fit into pre-existing narratives about school shooters and youth more generally (149). The solidification of these myths persists in public memory due to the brevity of the issue-attention cycle in news coverage investigated by Anthony Downs. The early emergence of these hegemonic frames gave them a lasting impact on public memory about the shooting. Framing analysis identifies these originally solidified discourses and the way that they became fixed for this dominant audience; an audience that lies in direct opposition to the Columbine 'fan' community.

After acknowledging that media coverage played a key role in the community's interpretation of Columbine, I chose news articles for a framing analysis. *The New York Times* was chosen because it is generally viewed (in media circles) as a paper with a reputation for ethical, fair, and balanced coverage which should indicate a shying away from sensationalism (a key theme of criticism from interviewees). I gathered the first week of news coverage after the shootings, the period when most narratives about the shooting

solidified and public attention to the case was at its peak. I purposively sampled the articles by choosing those that included references to the shooters in the headlines (sample size: 17). In order to be more specific about what frames the Columbine community resists, I had to analyse these 17 *New York Times* articles about the shooters. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold hold the primary interest of the Columbine community and therefore articles describing them hold the most importance as potential sites of resistance. I followed the typical process of framing analysis when looking at these articles. I read all of the articles once before identifying frames. This first examination revealed, unsurprisingly, a primarily negative viewpoint towards Eric and Dylan. On my second examination of the articles, I identified themes about the shooters discussed more fully below. These themes consist of 'key words, metaphors, concepts, symbols, and visual images' such as the assessment that the shooters were 'weird,' targeting jocks, racist, part of a gothic clique, gay and the culturally resonant symbolic image of the trench coat (Kuypers, 191; Toppo; Cullen). After examining the new articles for themes, I engaged in what Kuypers calls a 'comparative analysis of rival frames' (Kuypers, 192). I compared the news frames I identified with the themes I found in my traditional textual analysis of the interviews. In this case, the themes in the interviews happened to align closely with news media frames that the Columbine fan community actively resisted. Three important dichotomies between the Columbine community and the news frames were empathy vs. dehumanization, journalistic scepticism vs. myth-making, and holistic vs. single-factor preventative arguments. These tensions illuminated patterns of dominant, negotiated, and resistant readings by the Columbine community, in the theoretical tradition of Stuart Hall, which I discuss in detail below.

## Literature: Fan Cultures, Deviance, and Framing Theory

Previous 'fan' studies of those interested in Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold have focused primarily on second-hand analyses and interpretations of fan activity. Oksanen's study uses a mixed methods approach to examine YouTube networks and comments about the shooting. This study usefully outlines the boundary policing activities and symbolic exchanges within the community and also provides insights into the condition of anonymity surrounding these groups. The tendency to hide or obscure personal information that he identifies is amplified by Tumblr's social media platform. However, this article makes assumptions about the 'cause' of those interested in Columbine (a vague undefined term for goals), ignores the reciprocal hatred from those outside the community that reinforces solidarity within the community, and conflates sympathy or empathy for Eric and Dylan with admiration or glamorization.

Similarly, Paton's mixed method study of YouTube acknowledges the importance of identification with shooters (in particular Eric and Dylan) and boundary work in the fan community, including the censure of other fans who participate in certain activities like 'hero worship' of shooters. While the article doesn't conflate sympathy or empathy with glamorizing shooters, it does insist that these practices support shooters. She states that 'users show sympathy for perpetrators, an attitude leading them to undermine the human

and social consequences of their actions' (Paton, 222). The implication is that these social media participants in some way validate shooters. Indeed, the article repeatedly refers to social media behaviors, including discussions of very common mental health issues such as depression and suicidal thoughts, as 'producing violence'. This jump in logic recalls the flawed model of media effects that needs to be questioned in mass shooting research due to the mass media's unsupported connections between violent media representation and actual acts of violence (Gauntlett). Both of these articles judge common news discourses about mass shootings and the behaviors of 'fan' communities from a normative perspective, one that casts 'fans' as inherently deviant.

Very recently, Andrew Rico (2015) has suggested that negative connotations commonly connected to what he calls 'dark fandoms,' like the Columbiners, should not stop academics from engaging with these fans' products and practices. His conclusion stems from the observation that these fans represent a commonly shared cultural interest in crime and tragedy using Mark Seltzer's well-known concept of 'wound culture' (Rico). While Rico's approach remains more sympathetic than previous studies and does attribute value to these fan activities, his method still remains at a remove from the fan culture in question. He qualitatively examines fan art and conversations across various forums. However, this recent work offers a very important entry point for more compassionate analyses of this community. First of all, he acknowledges that 'it is also common for blogs and Web sites dedicated to these Columbine shooters to have a disclaimer stating that the user does not condone the massacre but merely expresses an interest in the two boys' (Rico). This statement radically undermines assumptions made by Oksanen and others that an interest in Eric and Dylan automatically equates to tacit support of their actions. Rico makes another important point that this study aims to complicate—that the boys 'serve as points of identification—largely as a result of the media's framing'. Rico correctly identifies the emotional quality of these fans' connection with Eric and Dylan. However, he misattributes this connection to the fans' agreement with media framing, an assumption that underestimates the community's scepticism of media and their level of intellectual engagement with information about the shooting not present in media coverage. This study complicates Rico's conclusion while strongly supporting his call for less negatively inflected work about this community and others like it.

These previous studies identify Columbiners as a community of deviants that exists at the intersection of the history of subcultural and fan studies. Academics in history of fan studies and its predecessor, subcultural studies, have actively struggled to shed stigmatization of their subject's symbols, practices, and passionate interest in media figures and texts. Henry Jenkins, a key figure in establishing the importance of fan studies, addressed these initially negative assessments of fan communities. He states that the term ''fan'… never fully escaped its earlier connotations of religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness' (Jenkins, 12). True crime fan groups tend to be aware of the continuing perception that their interests are 'strange or disturbing' (Browder; 2006; 933, Rico) despite a general decrease in this cultural pattern of stigmatizing

fans. This level of self-reflection about the stigmatization of these interests occurs within these groups leading many members to shy away from the term 'fan'. Stigmatization continues in academic studies of these communities due to the methodological disassociation between researchers and participants. Paul Hodkinson, a leading researcher on spectacular subcultures, states that in the sorts of textual analyses examined above 'there is a tendency to assume either that the lived experiences of insiders are consistent with the interpretations of the analyst or that participants are ignorant of the true significance of their activities' (562). However, in these interviews, the hesitance to be called a 'fan' shows that participants understand their activities in fundamentally different ways than researchers have previously concluded. One good example is particularly embodied in the tensions surrounding self-identification as either a 'Columbiner' or 'interested in Columbine'; a distinction based on members' primary association with more 'fan'-related emotion versus research.

True crime fan groups demonstrate the continuing salience of distinctions between now mainstream fan interests and 'deviant' fan groups. As Rico points out, 'fandoms such as that of the Columbine shooters still lack acceptance and legitimization by society, and their fans appear to still largely be dismissed. Perhaps this is because the objects of such fandoms are particularly challenging'. As such, the tension between subcultures or fan groups as valid interest groups that help people cope and connect with others versus dangerous and potentially violent threats to the social order still defines these less acceptable groups. These groups embody two different historical threads of the term deviant as outlined by (post) subcultural theorist Shane Blackman. He states that 'there remains a trace of the British biological theory… where subcultural commitment is… understood as a social and moral danger [but also] deviant subculture has its own politically enticing permanent cultural logic,' what Durkheim called a sense of 'belonging'' (Blackman; 508, 500). Even Oksanen's critical account of individuals who are interested in Columbine acknowledges that the group shares a larger 'cause' (57) even though he fails to define what that cause might be. This study uses the idea of frames and subcultural analysis to further pinpoint what 'cause' connects individuals within the Columbine community.

Framing as a theory reveals the importance of news frames in these 'deviant' subcultures. Framing theory offers a good basis for discussing events that are rare, exceptional, or prototypical. The frames used to describe an event during its initial shocking occurrence often establish repeated, long-term definitions for these events. Reese defines frames using several major components; 'frames are *organizing principles* that are socially *shared* and *persistent* over time, that work *symbolically* to meaningfully *structure* the social world' (Reese, 5, emphasis in the original). Frames make sense of new or traumatic events because they organize the unknown based on previously existent social narratives. In the case of Columbine, three narratives appeared that corresponded to interview themes; the demonization of Eric and Dylan, an array of misinformation that remains salient in popular memory today, and the lack of accountability on the part of the school, police, and other authorities in the case. To solidify such frames, the media repeats these narratives over the

course of several similar events. These themes define not only the Tumblr Columbine community's basic understanding of the event but also the understanding of our larger society.

## Interacting Frames: Dehumanization as a result of Misinformation and a Lack of Accountability

Newspapers used pre-existing narratives that naturalize high school hierarchies and cliques to discuss the Columbine Massacre. These narratives were already '*shared* and *persistent*' because they appear in popular media such as film and television (*Heathers*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson's Creek*). These representations of teenagers experienced a particular boom in popularity during the 1990s leading up to the shooting although these representations notably censored the topic of delinquency (Shary, 5). These narratives appealed to journalists who covered Columbine because they were already part of our popular imagination. Columbine journalists used established narratives about high school to demonize the shooters as 'outsiders' and promote information about the tragedy that encouraged a speculative approach to the motivations of the shooters. These narrative frames established a negative and dehumanizing view of the shooters, perhaps, in part, because only normative narratives were dominant in the popular imagination of the time.

Framing is particularly salient to the Columbine narrative because of the event's contributions to narratives about future mass shootings; it is often viewed as the 'prototypical' school shooting. These narratives also produce counter-narratives (or in Stuart Hall's terms, oppositional readings) in a small subset of audience members, in this case, the Tumblr Columbine community. Framing helps explain the relationship between dominant and counter-narratives because 'When viewed as the interplay of media practices, culture, audiences, and producers, the framing approach guards against unduly compartmentalizing components of communication… we must consider what aspects of the social world are better explained with it, and which are obscured' (Reese, 1). In the case of Columbine, the speculative nature of initial accounts of the shooting and the lack of effective responses to subsequent shooting events suggest that scholars should consider counter-narratives about Columbine as a way to better understand the mass shooting phenomenon.[1]

Several academics such as Douglas Kellner and Michael Kimmel have only quite recently argued for a view of mass shootings that recognizes the complexity and multi-dimensional quality of these events as attributed to a 'toxic climate' of factors (Kimmel, 92). Indeed, a very insightful op-ed was published in *Harpers* during July 1999 that argued similarly for a variety of prevention plans. Thomas de Zengotita's comments reflect on the fractured nature of responses to school shootings and states that 'half-convinced, perhaps, you ask, 'What is to be done?' And the answer must be, 'Don't ask *that* question so fast'' (58). Oppositional readings of Columbine bring to light the substance of media materials (the boys' journals, their home videos, police reports, etc.) that have been undervalued in official media accounts of the shooting. These readings linger on the why in order to better

understand the complexity of what can be done. The Tumblr Columbine community inflects these symbolic resources with an empathetic reading of the shooters' psyches that can help better identify troubled students and/or prevent future shootings; a goal that many Columbiners attempt to promote themselves using their specialized skills and alternative point of view. This community's insider knowledge helps them dwell on the whole picture rather than the fractured narratives that emerge when the ethics, particularly of the shooters' media, pull focus.

The most pertinent counter-narratives in the online Columbine community act as mirrors to mainstream narrative frames about the event. In order to understand the significance of supposedly deviant oppositional frames, an initial examination of the mainstream media frames must occur. These mainstream narratives include the demonization of Eric and Dylan as well as certain subcultures (Goth in particular), ignorance towards the obvious risk factors and prevention techniques relevant to the case, and the use of inaccurate information (likely due to the haste of reporting and dependence on eye-witness accounts of teens at the scene) to entrench certain myths. All of these themes appeared prominently in *The New York Times* during the first week of news coverage about Eric and Dylan. Phrases like, '[these boys] obviously had fundamental failures in the development of their sense of reality and fantasy,' 'the [Trench coat Mafia is] devoted to dark, Gothic music and culture, computer video games with names like Doom, and all things German, including Hitler,' and 'their tongues were dripping with hatred for racial minorities and athletes' suggest that Eric and Dylan's anger could not be explained by normal teenage psychology and problems (Goode, 30; Wilgoren, 30; Pulley, A17). Instead, these comments focus on exceptional aspects of the case. Speculation also plagues these comments because further investigation discovered that targeting minorities, Eric and Dylan's association with the Trench coat Mafia, and even attributions of the media they enjoyed were incorrect in these initial reports (Toppo).

This speculation also led to misconceptions about the prevalent risk factors in the case. For instance, *The New York Times* focused on a variety of issues tangential and simplistic in comparison to later findings. Later findings focused on a complex variety of factors, some of which (bullying, delinquency, and mental illness) produced warning signs and moments for potential intervention. Instead, the sensationalism surrounding the case created a broader moral panic about crime that spread directly through an abstract popular media culture of violent television and film (Sternheimer). This moral panic also focused on the freedom of the burgeoning internet culture. One expert said the event:

> raise(d) wider questions about how adults can best help children negotiate the difficult tasks of adolescence. Among those tasks is learning to sort through and deal with strong emotions and fantasies -- and to control the impulses to act on them -- in a society where images of violence are ubiquitous, morality increasingly relative, and the stresses on teenagers much greater than they once were (Goode, 30).

These comments focus on the role of individual parents rather than the society's responsibility to youth at large. These statements also appeal to an abstract sense of morality rather than concrete warning signs or intervention techniques.

From the first days of news coverage about Columbine, journalistic accounts acknowledged a burgeoning online community intent on reinterpreting the motivations of the Columbine shooters. However, *The New York Times* exhibited mixed reactions to these counter-narratives due to the inclusion of the burgeoning internet technology as a potential media threat to youth in the case. The news speculation about the shooter's motivations and a variety of misinformation about Eric and Dylan also contributed to these reactions. Mixed reactions may seem to acknowledge and validate alternative viewpoints but they can also serve dominant narratives. Stuart Hall offers a useful description of the cycle through which the appearance of journalistic balance limits counter-narratives. He states that 'the structure of 'balance' requires the admission of alternative definitions, but these… reply on terrain already marked out by the primary definitions; and they, too, must come from accredited alternative sources (organizations or 'experts'), and not from 'deviants' themselves' (Hall, 75). In the only *The New York Times* article about online discussions of Columbine, alternative definitions remain 'balanced' by the statements of adults, forum moderators, and news editors who comment on the moral implications of these alternative definitions. For instance, after acknowledging the opinions of those that sympathized with Eric and Dylan, the article diverges to 'wide-ranging opinions' that include

> quick reminders from others that Mr. Harris and Mr. Klebold were not simply victims of senseless teasing. 'They were not 'cool different,' they were racists,' said one Georgia Tech student on alt. pro-wrestling. Still, the event seemed to open a vein of troubling introspection that is perhaps remarkable only because instead of taking place between small circles of friends, it is on display for the public (Harmon A14).

The appearance of balance ultimately marginalizes alternative definitions of Columbine by reminding readers of speculative (and later disproved) pre-existing frames as if they are 'fact'. While certain narratives, in particular the understanding of Eric and Dylan as isolated outsiders, facilitate emotional connections for empathetic members of the Tumblr Columbine community, these readings are negotiated in ways that undermine the journalistic distance from the shooters produced by these terms. The appearance of balance in this single article undermines the already meager exposure of audiences to counter-narratives about Eric and Dylan. The dominant narrative reappears even in articles purportedly reserved for counter-narratives. Still, this article establishes the sympathetic and critical counter-narratives that the Columbiner community on Tumblr still expands upon today.

The Columbiner community engages in extended community building by negotiating and debating oppositional readings of the event. Subcultures labelled as deviant commonly engage in this type of resistance. Stuart Hall explains this practice stating that these viewers 'understand both the literal and connotative inflection given by a discourse [but] decode the message in a *globally* contrary way. He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework,' (Hall 103, emphasis in the original). Individuals in the Columbine community conduct their own research, often because their own experiences do not match the frames of the dominant narrative. Some commonly accepted sources of information include the official police report, Jeff Kass' novel *Columbine: A True Crime Story*, and Brooks' Brown's book *No Easy Answers*. In the only early news article acknowledging the online community that empathized with Eric and Dylan, hints about the three major interview themes appeared; relating to the killers personally, searching for negotiated or oppositional accounts of the shooting, and a sense that youth marginalization presents a major problem. The article states that:

> Almost all of the electronic empathizers were quick to repudiate the killings. But many wrote of identifying with the harassment that the two presumed killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, appear to have been subjected to before they acted. At a time when it might be easiest to simply dismiss the two as freaks, a number of young people seemed to see pieces of their own experience reflected in that of the boys (Harmon A14).

These comments indicate that online communities empathized with Eric and Dylan due to their own sense of difference or experiences with bullying, unfortunately still common experiences for teenagers. This personal identification also supports the Columbine community's sense that something needs to change or be done to address this type of marginalization. For instance, the article states that 'teachers lamented the sense that teenage cruelty is accepted as a fact of life and worried over students who describe themselves as 'outcasts and weirdos'' (Harmon, 24 Apr. 1999, A14). Although this phrase favours the voices of those in a position of authority over youth, this phrase does acknowledge the issues of bullying and alienation that could have been prevented in this case and others like it. The Tumblr Columbine community online continues to promote awareness and prevention due to their empathy with Eric and Dylan, their personal education about the events, and their belief that something could have been done to stop the shooting and similar subsequent events.

## Columbiner or Not?: Boundary Work in the Community
The term 'Columbiner,' a name often used to self-identify as part of the Columbine Tumblr community, exists in a state of tension. Comparing interviews with those that self-identified as Columbiners versus those that identified as interested in Columbine indicated that self-identification defensively communicates an individuals' position to others inside and outside

of the community. CCCS member Phil Cohen discusses this type of subcultural boundary work in physical space. He states:

> It is through the function of *territoriality* that subculture becomes anchored in the collective reality of the kids who are its bearers, and who in this way become not just its passive supports but its conscious agents. Territoriality is simply the process through which environmental boundaries (and foci) are used to signify group boundaries (and foci) and become invested with a subcultural value (Cohen, 85).

Environmental and group boundaries appear in virtual space as well. Certain practices (fan art, discussion, making graphics, etc.), relationships with certain users, and the use of certain informational websites or communities signal a Columbiner's level of knowledge and commitment to those inside and outside of the community. Columbiners consciously manage this space through self-identification. This process can help distance users from certain common fan behaviours which may help to limit their vulnerability to outsiders who criticize the Columbiner community.

Self-identification allows Columbiners to discuss their interest with people who share their goals and reasons for studying the event. In fact, the use of this label was the only significant and extensive difference between those interviewees that identified as Columbiners versus those that identified as interested in Columbine. Still, the power to self-identify offers two advantages to members of this particular community; the maintenance of secrecy and the maintenance of (in their words) objectivity. Most of the Columbiners interviewed either used the label hesitantly or differentiated themselves from certain sections of the community. Invariably, the Columbiners interviewed mentioned the presence of 'fangirls' as either harmful within the community or misunderstood by those outside the community. One self-identified Columbiner stated:

> To me, Columbiners are just people on Tumblr who like to discuss Columbine. That's it. That's also where I see myself fitting as Columbiner. HOWEVER. In more recent times (the past year or year and half) the tag has been bombarded with people who moreso fit the label of 'fangirl'. The ones who talk about how 'godlike' and 'perfect' Eric and Dylan are. They also tend to say pretty insensitive things about the shootings. Those people, unfortunately, are the new face of Columbiners and likely the reason why the greater part of Tumblr (and society in general) dislikes us... To me that implies a negative connotation. 'Fan' would imply that I condone what they did. Which I don't. (619FUS)[2]

Other individuals were highly ambivalent about the label:

> would I call myself a columbiner? maybe... I mean, a lot of the people on #columbine are the coolest and nicest people I've ever met but I think a lot of it is just the generic tumblr fangirl mentality that you see with people like cumberbatch or peg. It's like, lol they shot up a school, there are plenty of kids like them who are still alive and have not shot up a school, what's the logic? (719MNOUS)

The only individual I spoke with that admitted to identifying as a 'fangirl' or part of this section of the community also maintained this distinction between her beliefs and those of the Columbine community at large:

> I consider a Columbiner to be someone with an interest in Columbine or Eric and Dylan... (It's a pretty wide ranging label). Some people think it is people infatuated by them etc... but I think it can be people who just like true crime etc. I think I fit because I have an intense interest in it, and I do - as I (this sounds terrible) believe I am a hybristophile - consider them attractive as a result of their crimes... (1018FNOUS)

This individual was the only one to identify as attracted to Eric and Dylan and she still participated in the boundary work common to others in the community. She admits that her own interest 'sounds terrible' and that the Columbiner label is much more 'wide-ranging' than simply applying to 'fangirls'. In this way, even 'fangirls' attempt to protect the wider Columbine community from stigmatization.

These quotations summarize the general tension that drives the separation between Columbiners and those interested in Columbine. The implications of many of these statements are outward facing; the Columbiner label carries automatic assumptions from outsiders about 'fangirls' and the appropriateness of typical 'fan' behaviors in this context. These stigmatized 'fangirls' reflect the outsider perspective of the community. They are the 'face of the Columbiners'. The outside Tumblr community and (as several articles and these interview statements suggest, society) assumes that Columbiners condone Eric and Dylan's actions (Moritz). Dave Cullen has actively attacked the community in his journalistic work about Columbine and many previous academic studies also collapse these individuals' interest in Columbine with the idea of glamorization and attraction to the shooters (Bogart). However, only one of my interviewees openly condoned their actions and this interviewee self-identified as interested in Columbine. This label represents an orientation towards society rather than other individuals in the Columbine community.

This preoccupation with outsider perceptions of the community does explain why only 6/12 of those interviewed self-identified as Columbiners during my pre-screening but 8/12 of those interviewed self-identified as Columbiners when they had the opportunity to further explicate their personal understanding of the label. Oksanen discusses this boundary policing in controversial fan communities stating there is an 'in-group (us) and out-group

(them)' and 'if group members are partially or fully anonymous, it will have an impact on group behavior within the network. In theory, anonymity will increase the importance of shared symbols and codes' (56). In this case, certain opinions are associated with the group denigrated as 'fangirls'; they condone the shooting and they are primarily interested in the case because they find Eric and Dylan attractive. The fact that these commonly described characteristics of 'fangirls' in the Tumblr Columbine community align with public perceptions of the group is unlikely to be accidental. The community is acutely aware of the assumptions outsiders make about the group (one reason that the community expresses vitriol towards Dave Cullen).

Considering the rarity of self-identifying as a 'fangirl' by interviewees, this subset of the community certainly exists but also functions as a negative definition, a 'straw man' of sorts that allows the community to distance themselves from outsiders' symbolic perception of them. Williams discusses this type of judgment within fandom as 'accidental anti-fandom'. She states that such censure within a fan community 'acts out of necessity and to protect against interloping fans rather than an active desire to dismiss or deride other objects and communities' (335). In the case of the Columbine community, the fangirl is more of an idea or set of behaviors that must be dismissed as an act of self-protection and legitimization. For the Columbiners, self-identification doubles as a protective act of discretion.

Those who identified as interested in Columbine shared one other self-identified characteristic. They all described their goal: to view the case objectively despite the fact that, like all of the self-identified Columbiners, they shared an emotional connection to the case. The idea that 'objectivity' in the journalistic sense invoked by community members cannot be concomitant with emotional attachment and inflection is outdated even in journalistic ethical terms. In the current era, it is much more common for journalists to acknowledge 'that journalism is an active, interpretive cultural activity. All works of journalism are regarded as interpretations in that there is an element of interpretation in even the most basic reports' (Ward; 138). While perhaps these individuals are not aware of this discourse, this community's awareness of the emotional and sensational language used by journalists to report the shooting would explain their own ease with interpretations grounded in emotional experience. Individuals interested in Columbine stated:

> the way I originally understand the Columbiner label is that it includes anyone who has an interest in the case to the point where they have researched it and formed a well-rounded opinion on the subject that goes beyond the standard cookie-cutter image provided by media and authorities =)... I attempt to remain as objective as possible in the expression of my opinions on the case (225FNOUS).

> Then there are those who purely post knowledge/facts on the subject and most of the people you'll see actively in the community fit into one of these 2

categories.  But there are also a huge group of people who just sort of silently keep themselves in the loop. I would say the majority of people are these people, but they fade into the background for obvious reasons. (418FNOUS)

Another individual with wide-spread true crime interests discussed the problem of 'objectivity' relating it to similar 'fan' research about 9/11. She compared approaching Columbine with a preconceived notion of the events to approaching 9/11 with the perception that the event was a conspiracy:

> I believe that's a dangerous idea to have in your mind at the start of your research. Through that lens it's very easy to find a conspiracy theory that fits the narrative. There's a book called *True Enough* by Farhad Manjoo. He's a journalist who explores how technology influences belief over fact. In it is a chapter about 9/11, very good read, but basically how people can witness the exact same event and see something completely different. More footage of events helps more than it hurts! (1118FUS)

The ability to think for themselves against the official media narrative of Columbine also defined self-identified Columbiners. However, those interested in Columbine used the term 'objective' to describe their conclusions. They begin by focusing primarily on 'research' with an open mind and also often apply this method of thinking to their other true crime interests (9/11, serial killers, etc.). Ultimately, the difference between Columbiners and those interested in Columbine lies in the primacy of their identification with either emotions or more factual interpretations of the events. Still, both groups engage in emotional *and* research-oriented practices in the community.

Self-identification leads to many diverse interpretations of the term 'Columbiner'. In this community, practices common to all Tumblr fan communities become hierarchized based on their level of acceptability and appropriateness. One Columbiner offered a thick description of these practices. They stated:

> It's all in degrees--you have the chill people who have mostly fallen out of it that are still representing their fandom-ness via icon/username/whatever, and then there are the people whose entire blog is 24/7 Columbine and every detail of their existence is Columbine. Some people have t-shirts and other merch/memorabilia. Personally, I have a lot of books, all the related media downloaded onto my PC, a backup of the 26k files, a set of pins, and the fanart people have sent me… I get really sick of seeing the same stuff gif'd and just reposted incessantly. I like those stupid collages people do though with the candy hearts and flowers, those are a weakness in any fandom I like. And I'm really partial to stupid memes... Oh, and there are RP blogs… and of course

trolls. Standard fandom fare. It's really astonishing how mundane our fan-crap is in comparison to everybody else's fan-crap. (322OUS)

The use of the term 'mundane' to describe the Columbiners' fan practices highlights the fact that any fan community on Tumblr displays this same variety of practices. However, similarities between 'deviant' fan cultures like the Columbiners and common fan cultures on Tumblr have been assessed as inappropriate and sensational (and therefore contributing to outside perceptions of deviance) in previous studies of this community (Oksanen; Rico). However, Paul Hodkinson has also noted the similarities of texts and practices between spectacular and more general fan communities, dubbing them 'content neutral features' (558). In this way, he condones a viewpoint that may help these practices be understood as less deviant. Keith Kahn-Harris also suggests that these common and 'mundane' practices help members integrate their extreme interest into everyday practice. 'The logic of mundanity moves scene members towards an 'everyday' experience of the scene. Most members attempt to make their experience of the scene 'normal,' uncomplicated' (Kahn-Harris; 112). These Columbiner activities reflect the 'everyday' practices of other Tumblr fan communities. Yet outsiders, academics and other Tumblr users alike, assess these practices as inappropriate in this context. At the same time, these practices allow insiders to connect with each other like any fan community.

Due to perceptions of 'deviant' fan activity, members of the Columbine community define themselves based on how they participate. Most of the individuals interviewed either participated solely in the hash tag #Columbine (a place viewed as insulating and protective for the community), instead of their personal blogs, or they had separate blogs where they could participate in these fan practices without attracting criticism from users outside of the community. The power to self-identify enables this community to fulfill a variety of individualized needs. These needs relate to the counter-frames created by the community, largely drawn from earlier internet counter-narratives. Some individuals participate to feel less emotionally alienated (anti-demonization), others participate in order to gain and spread knowledge (against misinformation), and others participate because of injustices they've experienced or observed that relate to the causes of the shooting (interest in under-emphasized issues). All of these purposes depend on a different but often complimentary set of blogging behaviours.

## Anti-Demonization: Humanizing Eric and Dylan

Little to none of the news coverage in the first week after Columbine explains Eric and Dylan's motivations with any psychological depth or complexity. Despite journalists' acknowledgement that any discussions of the boy's motivations would be purely speculative, many articles from psychologists and profiles of the school attempted to explain the boys' psychological state as 'troubled,' 'disturbed,' and 'weird' (Goode 30; Wilgoren 30; Johnson A1). However, few details were released during this period about the materials that most Columbiners engage with to form a connection to Eric and Dylan; their

journals and self-made media (online posts, home movies, etc.). These personal artefacts tell a different story about the shooters, one that articles about the ethics of journalism label as taboo because they express the shooter's own opinions. Moritz states that:

> among the key questions [journalists] must confront are who committed this crime and why. The video diaries offer some answers to those questions... Nonetheless, allowing school shooters to circulate heroic self-portraits in which their alienation is valorized and their depression and psychological ills are masked is no doubt difficult for audiences to see at a moment of communal crisis (Moritz 153).

These comments and academic studies by Paton and Oksanen neglect the reality that individuals online often empathize with but do not valorize shooters. Instead, these individuals engage with the very psychological profile of the shooters that Moritz claims is hidden within heroic self-portraits. The Columbiners acknowledge the potential benefit of discussing the topics of alienation and depression and believe that mental illness is one of several neglected causes of mass shootings. Despite journalists' belief that the shooters' ideas are dangerous and in some sense even contagious, Columbiners use their knowledge of the boys' personal lives to better understand the causes of Columbine.

In contrast to societal misconceptions, of those Columbiners interviewed, only one interviewee admitted they had planned violence in the past and one other interviewee admitted they condoned Eric and Dylan's actions. Furthermore, both of these individuals offered societally oriented and psychologically complex explanations for their beliefs based on their own experience as well as information about the risk factors that authorities neglected in the case. These individuals, and other interviewees that related to Eric and Dylan's anger, admitted to being fearful of themselves at the times when they experienced such strong emotions. This self-awareness and concern for their own mental health and others' safety suggests that researchers like Paton are short-sighted when they interpret these comments as proof that 'this form of violence supports the scaffolding of various themes derived from violence, such as depression and contemplation of suicide, or its role in the history of mankind' (Paton, 222). Contemplating violence is not any indication that these individuals view violence positively.

Columbiners and non-Columbiners alike lamented the use of demonization narratives in media discussions of the case because these narratives contribute to later similar events. In response to the demonization narrative, Columbiners create counter-frames and oppositional readings to acknowledge what made Eric and Dylan empathetic and their motivations understandable. One individual who self-identified as interested in Columbine described how their emotional reaction changed over the course of their research. They stated:

At first … I thought Eric and Dylan were terrible monsters to do something like that.  As I researched, I realized that happy, healthy people don't just go and kill a bunch of their classmates and I started to humanize them more and more.  That's the problem with this case… and why it keeps happening.  They dehumanize the perpetrators…  I'm not saying they were good people, but they were still people.  If society cannot recognize that these sorts of crimes are committed by seemingly normal people they will continue to happen (418FNOUS).

These individuals not only have strong feelings about media demonization of mass shooters, particularly Eric and Dylan, but these individuals are also generally critical of the media and its corporate biases:

It's not just my frustration with the media re: crime and school shootings, but my frustration with the whole media machine in general. Shouldn't news be free?... Nobody will advertise with you if they don't agree with what you're slinging. The media is fucking disgusting and that it influences so much of people's perception of things just frustrates the hell out of me. (322OUS)

All of the Columbiners interviewed showed an equally critical view of the media coverage of the event. Some individuals, like the first interviewee quoted above, began from the same emotional position as the media, while others began from a place of identification with Eric and Dylan. In either case, all Columbiners identify and value what made Eric and Dylan relatable and human.

Only one of the Columbiners interviewed had problems identifying with Eric and Dylan and this interviewee was the only one to identify as a 'fangirl'. Most of those interviewed had considered their personal connection to the boys extensively. While my own experience and understanding of the shooters caused me to anticipate that more individuals would relate to Dylan, the shooter that mass media coverage labelled more 'normal,' most of those interviewed related to both boys for different reasons and only slightly preferred one boy to the other based on their own experiences. The development of the relationship between Eric and Dylan and each individual Columbiner followed an invariable narrative. These statements reveal a pattern:

Then I started reading [Eric's] journal and holy shit was it relatable. Like some of it was like as if I had written it, some of it was as if someone had read my mind. that's when I started to get *proper* into columbine, when I looked around me after reading what Eric had said and was thinking 'maybe it's not me that's the problem… maybe it's everyone around me…' lol, writing that now sounds so disturbing (719MNOUS).

> This is a strange way to experience it, but obviously at the beginning I was learning all this stuff so fast like there wasn't time to form any concrete opinions. I was just focused on finding as much info as a could but even as I slowed down and finished the milestones of going through the 11k, watching all the documentaries, reading the journals, etc. The more I learned....the less I felt I knew (1118FUS)

> Both journals, show their loneliness in completely different ways. This towards their diaries. I really do like the school work of Eric. He was very adaptable and as far as I can see through his texts, he was a very honest person towards everyone, whereas Dylan hid everything. It's very hard to explain how they affected me emotionally since they are two completely different but unique personalities. (820FNOUS)

The narrative typically begins with each community member reading the boys' journals, which reveal their innermost thoughts, and then feeling a personal affinity with their thoughts, opinions or emotions. However, as these descriptions also show, these individuals' identification with Eric and Dylan is never unproblematic. Many of the Columbiners who acknowledged that they shared certain emotions with the boys also shared concerns that these emotions may not be healthy; they might be 'disturbing'. Others acknowledged that although they felt a connection to the boys they could not easily articulate why. Columbiners are drawn to the event because the event and the shooters illuminate their understanding of aspects of themselves that these individuals do not always feel comfortable with. These self-reflexive observations indicate that the Tumblr Columbine community gains a perspective on what makes them both similar to and different from Eric and Dylan through their emotional identification. This empathy observes the line between 'action' and 'performance', an important line to observe when focusing on a more complex picture of mass shooters (de Zengotita). Many people share these feelings and many people engage the same media and behaviors as shooters, so what makes shooters different? This question, rooted in personal identification, drives Columbiners' research.

## Against Misinformation: Research and Pedagogy

While all Columbiners acknowledge the demonization of Eric and Dylan by the media as problematic, not all Columbiners agree on what constitutes quality information about the case. Generally, 'the 11k' (the Jeffco police report, as publically released), Brooks' Brown's *No Easy Answers*, Jeff Kass' *Columbine: A True Crime Story*, and the *Zero Hour* documentary about the case are cited as the best texts. The most disputed texts are *She Said Yes*, Cassie Bernall's story, and *Columbine*, Dave Cullen's attempt at a corrective journalistic account of the case. One individual who self-identified as interested in Columbine suggested that the root of the intense disputes about Dave Cullen's book within the community may be that his narrative disconnects readers from Eric and Dylan. They state that 'I believe people get most

upset about Dave Cullen thinking Eric is a psychopath because if he was, then they lose that connection they have with Eric. Some people NEED to feel that connection. I don't' (1118FUS). The same interviewee showed journalistic scepticism despite her lack of emotional connection to Eric and Dylan. She stated, 'I didn't find Cullen's book… as bad as people say but I also take it with a grain of salt because I'm skeptical of journalists… he was trying to do something admirable by repairing the story even though he failed' (1118FUS). This observation highlights the interdependency between knowledge and emotional experience for the Columbiner community. The emotional quality of these individuals' engagement with Eric and Dylan explains the community's passionate work educating the Tumblr community and the world at large about the empathetic insight that helps them better understand the often underplayed complexity of the Columbine case. Some individuals engage in this pedagogy by separating themselves from their emotional position (mostly those 'interested in Columbine') and others depend on their emotional position to appeal to outsiders (mostly 'Columbiners').

The first wave of frame-setting new coverage about Columbine reported many facts inaccurately and portrayed Eric and Dylan's motivations reductively. Columbiners create media and engage in educated discussions on Tumblr to inform people about the facts behind the shooting; either supported by source links or signalled as personal and emotionally inflected interpretations. Indeed, most disagreements in the tag revolve around the accuracy of information. One individual who self-identified as interested in Columbine described this tension stating, 'There are some blogs who make fun of others who don't know some things… They argue over facts and think they own all the material that is available [So] the best way to get information is research on your own' (1219FNOUS). The community's keen awareness of the effect of media negligence in the case causes each Columbiner to defend the facts that shape their personal understanding of the case. Many individuals acknowledged that they would never have a full perspective on the case without certain pieces of unreleased evidence (The Basement Tapes, Eric's therapist's files, etc.) and yet all the Columbiners interviewed had personal interpretations of the causes of the event. However, Columbiners do not stop at educating outsiders about the media's negligence in virtual space.

Many individuals actively seek out opportunities to teach outsiders about their alternative understanding of the shootings that are rooted in empathetic engagement with Eric and Dylan's mindset and the legacy yet to be resolved in discussions of subsequent school shootings. Three interviewees in particular offer interesting pedagogical accounts; the play producer (a 27 year old woman from the Midwestern US), the zine writer (a 22 year old from Detroit), and the preschool staff member (A 32 year old woman from the US). All of these individuals shared stories relevant to real world applications of their knowledge as Columbiners outside of the blogging community. The play producer called

'The Columbine Project'[3] one of our most, if not the most, successful productions we've had… people weren't going for the shock value of what the

play is about they genuinely wanted to talk and learn about it… A few people from Tumblr I've met actually travelled to see it and it just warmed my heart that people from other states were wanting to make a long trip to see it and be more involved (927FUS).

The play producer talked extensively about the positive emotional reactions of adults in the audience and the sense of accomplishment these reactions gave her. The play even gave her mother a new perspective on her interest in Columbine and connected them emotionally. The play producer's comments also showed the support that the Tumblr Columbine community grants its members who travel long distances to share in their cause. This account shows the potential of the community to affect wider perceptions of the event.

However, not all of the reactions to pedagogical practice were so positive. The zine writer explained the poor reception of their work on the Columbiners:

Even my distro (distributor) doesn't want it cuz it flies in the face of everything else they do. It's not PC. It's not vegan. It makes fun of dead kids. It insults the media. It insults the police. There's gore in it. Nobody wants to touch it. So of course I sent it to the biggest, most PC punk rock fanzine in the country/world for review, and I haven't read the review yet… My friend saw the review… but he didn't tell me what it said so I'm gonna assume they ripped it to shreds, which is the best I can hope for with this thing. I did it to piss off the PC punx zine community and show some Columbiner love. (322OUS)

The zine writer also recounted their mistreatment at conventions where their work on Columbine was side-stepped or ignored by most of their customers. This type of stigmatization functions pedagogically as well. The sensitive nature of the shooting remains one of the ethical points of consideration for journalists. However, if even alternative media like zines won't discuss the emotional dimensions related to the case, what hope do the mainstream media have of discussing the importance of these dimensions seriously? Indeed, the zine writer (who also worked professionally in other alternative media platforms) represents a potential underground movement that works to expose resistant individuals to alternative understandings of the case. These alternative media venues, like online social media, offer a potentially useful platform for disseminating these narratives.

These individuals also have different reasons for educating others about the case but all their reasons stem from their personal investment in Columbine. The play producer hoped to be understood by their family and society in general. The zine writer hoped to encourage the zine community to face their own ineffectual foci. However, just entering a relevant field or position with an awareness of issues related to Columbine can act as a corrective pedagogy. One individual who works as part of the administrative/health support staff at a preschool stated, 'I work in the education field so this is particularly of interest to me… I ask, 'Who failed this child? What could have been done differently?' I think that is

part of what holds my interest in Columbine' (132FUS). Keeping these issues in mind during their own work can allow Columbiners to represent the changes they feel need to take place. They can lead by example. Indeed, when further probed, this preschool worker explained that they remain vigilant about warning signs for violence and mental illness in students even at such a young age. These stories about Columbiner pedagogy show effective manifestations of the opinions of the community and their dissemination into the wider population.

## Neglected but Important Issues: What are Columbiners Teaching About?

The Tumblr Columbine community is not solely concerned with teaching others about the relatable aspects of Eric and Dylan as people. The community also engages in discussions and interpersonal support regarding issues largely neglected by media outlets in the first weeks after the shooting. The influence of media violence and gun control attracted the majority of media speculation regarding motives due to moral panic and political rhetoric. However, Columbiners focus on some of the more minor yet persistent issues ignored in news coverage of Columbine and (to their dismay) subsequent school shootings; mental illness, bullying, and warning signs or prevention. All of these issues were discussed in the first week of news coverage about the shooting but to a much lesser degree than media influence and gun control. These issues were also discussed with a sense of detachment from the case itself by reinforcing the importance of normativity and marginalizing the shooters as disturbed. Columbiners view these issues as the most important in the case and they encourage a narrative more sympathetic to Eric and Dylan's experiences.

Mental illness remains a largely neglected cause of mass shootings. These events are exceptional and therefore caused by less universal cultural conditions than media consumption or access to guns. While the news media speculated openly about the effects of Gothic subcultures on youth, which stirred a panic that encouraged schools all over the U.S. to ban the style of dress (especially trench coats), these outlets refused to discuss the specific mental states of Eric and Dylan that led to the shooting. Expert opinions included in the news discussions of mental illness focus on the normal progression of adolescence, further emphasizing the abnormal character of the boys. One doctor stated that:

> the normal work of adolescence -- which includes achieving autonomy, building a capacity for intimate relationships, and learning to regulate emotions and impulses -- becomes derailed. And if the adolescent finds a kindred spirit who identifies with his rage and isolation, what conscience and self-control is left may erode, fantasy and reality merge. The result, in Littleton, was disaster (Goode, 30).

However, the article earlier mentions that rage, isolation, and an escape into fantasy represent normal adolescence as well. Furthermore, these comments focus on the concept of fantasy discussed primarily in conjunction with the influence of media violence in this

case. Articles addressing motivations and psychology all maintained a perception of Eric and Dylan as seriously mentally disturbed rather than normal.

Unlike the mass media, Columbiners use their own personal understanding of Eric and Dylan's emotions (mostly gleaned from their own research) in order to discuss the boys' mental states as more normative and relatable. Those that relate to these admittedly common emotions of anger and isolation discuss the persistent lack of support for youth. Several interviewees described experiencing this lack of support:

> I remember feeling that rage and that sick satisfaction seeing that someone had gotten 'revenge'. 15 years later my reason for interest is completely different. The very fact that I felt that way at the time says to me now that there was something seriously wrong with our school system and the staff were not actually invested in kids' education or mental health (which go hand in hand as we now should know), and seeing people who were very young or not even born at the time the shooting happened, now as Columbiners, it says to me that this is still not remotely close to being fixed (132FUS)

> When this shit happens to you, you see where they're coming from. It matters to you because that's you, you're looking at people that are just like (or similar enough to) yourself and you feel at least a twinge of empathy for them. Sure, you might not want to shoot your school, but you know their pain. (322OUS)

> Columbine was sort of a crutch that got me through the difficult years, and it's important for that reason (619FUS)

These statements point to a broken support system for youth that does not take into account their mental state. In fact, many of those interviewed either cited the loving support they received from parents as a factor that stemmed these negative emotions or they discussed the lack of support they experienced as a contributing factor to their thoughts of anger and violence. The uniformity of these personal anecdotes indicates that experts may not be those most qualified to talk about teenager's experiences. Instead, the voices of youth themselves must be valued by the teachers and staff in order to support students who experience these emotions.

Like feelings of adolescent angst so often dismissed as normal, bullying has been understood as a universal and naturalized teenage experience. News coverage of Columbine discussed bullying as an unfortunate fact of life. The article about online forums discussed the issue extensively stating that 'young people are engaging in what amounts to a fragmented national dialogue over social ostracism and the unforgiving hierarchies of adolescent life, all too familiar but rarely discussed so publicly' (Harmon A14). The idea that these experiences feel familiar but are not discussed recalls common clichés like 'they're

just being kids'. Adults often use these clichés to explain risky and violent behaviour in youth (Kimmel, 2006; Kellner).

Columbiners recognize that the problem is more severe than that. All the individuals interviewed related to being bullied or victimized. They varied largely in their descriptions of their victimization. Some simply said they had been bullied without offering to share more, others offered detailed accounts of the abuse they received. One interviewee was physically and emotionally abused by their classmates to the point that their family had to move to a new home. Overall, the theme of offering support and kindness appeared in response to the issue of bullying as well. One interviewee stated:

> I try my best to be nice to everyone because that's the only cure to hate and anger imo. Also, listening. If you listen to someone who is angry, just shut the fuck up and listen to them. Encourage them that they have every right to be angry but that they need to let go of it because I have been bullied. I have been in that place where I didn't want to go to school anymore because of people there. Where I hated someone so much, I couldn't sit in one classroom with them without holding my breath. (820FNOUS)

The play producer explained how her pedagogy earned support from adults and her family stating:

> A lot [of people] said before they just felt these kids were monsters that did something awful but now they see were all people and help needs to be there for people. I went home opening night after our after party and it was after 3am and my mother was still awake because she was waiting for me to come home so she could talk about the play and the shootings. She was in tears. All the shows I've done that's the one that got my mother. That's how I knew we'd done something really good XD (927FUS)

The theme of learning to be nice to everyone through their painful experiences was common for Columbiners. They also condoned this kindness as a prevention technique for later incidents, as a 'cure to hate and anger'. They see these kindnesses as lacking in those that enact bullying and victimization. The issues of mental illness and bullying become linked through an emotional understanding of Eric and Dylan's experience. The Tumblr Columbine community hopes to expose others who are uneducated about the case to alternative perspectives that take the shooters' experiences into account and may help other youth currently experiencing this victimization. They also engage within the community in order to offer one another this type of support which they find absent in everyday life.

The investigation of the Columbine Massacre revealed the inadequacy of many authorities in the years leading up to the shooting. The final police report showed that many warning signs, including juvenile delinquency, threats of violence, complaints about bullying,

and troublesome school assignments were ignored. These mistakes undermined the work of police officers, parents, the school, and the media. The Tumblr Columbine community ultimately exists to discuss these failures and how they contributed to the shooting. The final question in every interview was 'Why do you personally think Eric and Dylan committed this crime?' All of the answers were extensive, complex, and related to the interviewee's personal experience. These interviewees all stated that there was no one single cause for the shooting and that, ultimately, their research and personal understandings inflected their interpretations. Yet the similar failures pointed out by many interviewees suggest that research driven by emotional engagement can lead to a fuller picture of 'prevention' as a multi-faceted problem. These extended and well-researched engagements with Eric and Dylan's motivations question how the media's initial 'practical preoccupation with causal 'factors' distracted us, and the possibility for general synthesis was sacrificed to the need to Do Something' (de Zengotita, 55). Indeed, these individuals believe vehemently that something could and should have been done but they only came to conclusions about what those interventions might be after deep engagement with the shooters' experiences and motivations.

All of the interviewees agreed that something could and should have been done better to prevent the shooting. One self-identified Columbiner outlined several potential prevention techniques:

> Having the school take all the complaints about them more seriously. I've read a few with Eric and it feels to me like they were just written off because someone didn't want to deal with it. There were clearly signs, and I know that the parents shouldn't be blamed, but with everything they did leading up to this I feel like they should have been like 'there's something more going on here so you need to open up and tell me.' I know it's hard for a teenager to open up to people but there's plenty of things out there to help. Also, I feel like when it was happening that the police could have entered the situation waaaaay before they did. I know there was a bomb threat and they had to be careful, but like in the one interviews they said that the library door was open and kids were running out of it. They could have easily gone in and stopped it. (518FNOUS)

Another interviewee with a very detailed response to the question of why they committed the shooting summarized her beliefs stating, 'The very short answer is 'because they could'. Because nobody stopped them. Because they gave off all these warning signs and nobody reacted. Because this was something that was preventable and nobody lifted a finger against them' (225FNOUS). This response points to the failure of the police, parents, and the school to act on threats made before the shooting and it points to the failure of the police response during the incident. If Columbiners were intent on valorizing Eric and Dylan, they would most likely be discussing how the boys could have killed more people (a topic that did

appear alongside preventative discussions in two interviews) and not on how to prevent future shootings from occurring. Overall, these individuals see Columbine as a complex but explainable entity that revealed the failure of authorities (teachers, police, psychologists, etc.) to prevent the shooting at various points despite adequate warning signs.

## Limitations and Future Research

These interviews offer a new methodological consideration for those interested in researching the Columbine 'fan' community. While these interviews uncovered unquestionable common themes and experiences within the Tumblr Columbine community by engaging directly with participants, the sample remained limited in several ways. These interviews did not enable an overall demographic breakdown of the community (a problem that Oksanen and others have identified in their own research). Previous studies couldn't determine the dimensions of the community due to their remove from direct interaction with members of the Columbine 'fan' community. This study's in-depth interview methodology dependent on volunteers also limited access to a broader picture of the number of members, the age, gender, and location of members of the community. A survey method may be more suitable for obtaining this information. However, the community's scepticism of research and tendency towards privacy might undermine the validity of these results even if enough community members participated.

The interviews only included individuals over eighteen due to the complexity of obtaining consent to interview minors online. These difficulties are exacerbated when trying to interview youth about an interest that many teens likely do not share with their parents. Future research should investigate whether these themes and emotions may be more volatile in adolescents than in young adults. The interviews suggest likely differences between these different age groups due to the interviewee's often backwards looking comments about their own adolescence.

The sample was also largely skewed (10/12) towards female interviewees. Only one male respondent volunteered to interview, and they could not direct me to any other male respondents. Despite the lack of male interviewees, previous studies have noted the existence of many male members of Columbine interest groups and a good number of individuals who followed the research blog identified themselves as male on their own blogs (Oksanen). The 'fangirls' so prevalent in discussions about the 'Columbiner' label did not volunteer to interview either. The only individual who admitted to being a part of this group surmised that secrecy and a lot of attacks on this group may make them more resistant to interviewing. The descriptions of this group by interviewees also reflect common academic conceptions of female fans as more generally 'passive, and malleable, as well as histrionic, excessive, and distracted' (Driscoll; 186). This stereotyped description of a potentially limited and insulated group of women within the Tumblr Columbine community also suggests that those in the Columbine community identify practices and emotional behaviors associated with 'fangirls' simply to differentiate themselves from outsider perceptions of

the community. The opinions and experiences of male Columbiners and the potential existence (or non-existence) of self-identified 'fangirls' should be further investigated.

Despite the specificity of the Tumblr Columbine community, these observations about counter-narratives and boundary work can be generalized in some important ways. The Columbine community offers a unique subculture ripe as a basis for examining social media use by true crime interest groups in general. The stigmatization that this community faces also hinges on the existence of vitriolic online discourses that have, unfortunately, become fairly common online practice (flaming, trolling, anonymous hate, etc.). The Columbine community's concerns about self-censorship and managing outsider perceptions of deviance also pertain to other true crime subcultures like those shown in the film *Serial Killer Culture* and discussed by Laura Browder in the article *Dystopian Romance: True Crime and the Female Reader*. Browder, in particular, recounts the readers' observations that while true crime stories help them better understand the humanity of killers, others perceive their interest in crime as 'strange or disturbing,' and others assume the women are sexually aroused by the novels (Browder, 932-33). These concerns mirror those about Columbiner 'fangirls' who may or may not have a sexual or romantic attraction to Eric and Dylan. The combined stigmatization of crime and fan groups in our culture provides a larger sample set to examine these trends than has been previously recognized. The internet offers a better level of access to these groups as well. In order to remain truly ethical, investigators must examine stigmatizations of fan groups self-reflexively as well.

## Conclusions: Deviancy as Relative

Only a few of the individuals interviewed in this study actually embodied the negative stereotypes that society, academics, and the Tumblr community project onto the Tumblr Columbine community. Even those that embodied the stereotypes of condoning violence or attraction to Eric and Dylan shared more in common with the pedagogical and self-critical comments of other members of the community. Ultimately, stereotypes about Columbiners as 'deviant' harm and fragment this community by enforcing boundary work in blogging practice to separate those that use the Columbiner label from those that identify as interested in Columbine. However, these groups share many practices and beliefs, beliefs that they act upon both online and offline. Based on these interviews, I conclude that these Tumblr Columbine community participants offer important considerations that contribute to broader social discussions about school shootings. Through their combined emotional engagement and research, they promote a more complex and productive view of the Columbine Massacre. In order to expose others to counter-narratives of anti-demonization, against misinformation, and under-emphasized issues, the Tumblr Columbine community reaches out to others with their blogging activities and in their everyday life. These intelligent individuals could better impact societal perceptions about school shootings if their activities were better understood as productive, instead of being perceived as deviant.

Many studies in the past have questioned the ethical position of both researchers and participants in studies of subcultures labelled as deviant. On one side, Paton states that

'Investigating deviant groups and pursuing online ethnography requires tackling ethical issues, which in turn orient methodological outcomes. We decided to keep a low profile… One of the major advantage of this posture is the non-influential aspect of the research protocol' (207). While the benefits of remaining detached from ethnographic subjects has value, subcultural and audience studies have also undergone a transformation that sees the value in community members' conscious self-identification and their articulations of the meanings of texts, symbols, and practices. Paul Hodkinson discusses how direct contact with community members and engagement with their personal experiences can help further the goals of audience and subcultural studies more generally. He states that 'the words of participants can be compared and contrasted, not only with one another, but with direct observation of their behavior, with evidence about the broader orientation, development or impact of their subculture and with existing research and theory' (564). This study takes a first step towards understanding the insider perspective of those interested in Columbine specifically.

These observations can be applied to the field of audience studies in several ways. One, this study offers insight into how social media platforms organize fan activities in order to maintain boundaries within a community and in their orientation towards outsiders. Two, this study shows how engaging with these communities directly can complicate textual and content analyses of subcultures and fan communities. Finally, this study offers a perspective that explains how emotion and serious research can coexist, not just in academic settings but also in fan communities. These insights can help future researchers negotiating the ethical and methodological complexities of online ethnography, especially when dealing with controversial communities like the Tumblr Columbine Community.

## Biographical note:

Chelsea Daggett is a second year Doctoral Student at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She recently received her MFA in Film Studies from Boston University. Chelsea has presented papers on popular culture at several regional conferences, such as WSSA and MAPACA. Her Master's thesis discusses the U.S. adaptation of the U.K. television series Skins and Broken Britain. She is currently awaiting publication of a bullying content analysis. Her current research focuses on gender identity, subcultures, and mass shootings in public memory. Contact: Chelsea.Daggett@colorado.edu.

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## Appendix A: Interview Outline

### *Background:*

What is your age?

Are you Male or Female?

Are you living inside or outside of the United States?

Tell me a little about how and why you became interested in Columbine.

Explain your understanding of the Columbiner label and why you believe you do or do not fit it.

### *Perception of the fandom:*

How long have you been involved in the Tumblr community for Columbine?

How would you describe your position in the community? In terms of how you participate and who you associate with. Why do you hold this position?

Describe the Columbine community on Tumblr as you have experienced it.

Why do you participate in the community?

Describe the emphasis, if any, placed on the victims of Eric and Dylan on your blog and within the community in general.

### *Perception of Events:*

Tell me about your emotional journey learning about the events. How did your perspective develop and change as you learned more about the events?

Why do these events hold a personal significance or interest for you?

*Perception of Shooters:*

Tell me about your emotional journey learning about Eric and Dylan specifically. How did you engage with the material they created?

Do you relate to either of the boys? If so, do you relate to one more than the other and why?

Describe your relationship to Eric.

Describe your relationship to Dylan.

Why do you personally think Eric and Dylan committed this crime?

Concluding Considerations:

Did you experience discomfort at any point in this interview, if so why?

Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the interview process?

## Notes:

[1] Mass shootings continue to be a persistent problem in the U.S. and other Western countries such as Canada, Germany, and Norway. Other high profile events such as the Virginia Tech Shooting, the Aurora Theater Shooting, the Sandy Hook Shooting, and several very recent events such as the Chapel Hill Shooting and Umpqua Community College shooting suggest the continuing importance of discussions about prevention. The persistence of these events also shows that steps taken towards prevention so far have been inadequate. From 2000, the year after Columbine, to 2013 the initial U.S. average of 6.4 mass shootings per year has increased to 16.4 (Ehrenfreund).

[2] The interview citations represent my coding system for the transcripts. (Ex. 132FUS) The one indicates the order in which the interviews were completed. The 32 indicates the age of the respondent. The F indicates the gender of the respondent (with O for other). The US indicates that the respondent lives in the United States. International interviewees are indicated with NOUS.

[3] 'The Columbine Project' takes its inspiration from the construction of 'The Laramie Project,' a play about the murder of Matthew Shepard. The play is 'constructed his play from interviews with survivors, journal entries, news reports, 9-1-1 calls and various other firsthand sources' (Furay).