

“If It Bleeds, It Leads” Vs. #Hesstonstrong: A Fantasy-Theme Analysis of Local and National News Coverage of the 2016 Hesston, Kansas Shooting

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The sleepy Mennonite town of Hesston, Kansas was suddenly disrupted on February 25th, 2016 when an employee of Excel Industries entered the company plant with an AK-47 and a Glock 22 semi-automatic pistol and opened fire. Three employees were killed and fourteen injured before the assailant was killed by local law enforcement. The tragedy made local and national news by the early evening and coverage continued for weeks. Amidst national scrutiny, which hastily and incorrectly associated the tragedy with Kansas' open-carry gun laws, Hesston citizens and community leaders chose to contest fallacy rhetoric propagated by national news by creating a #HesstonStrong campaign with a heightened focus toward forgiving the perpetrator, providing for the victims, and promoting the town's unity. This research uses Bormann's fantasy-theme rhetorical analysis to examine local and national media messages, extracting the dramatic elements that operate within the narratives. The implications of framing rural community tragedies through national, politically-based narratives contrasted with locally focused contextual analyses are discussed with an eye toward supporting rural communities in maintaining identity and culture in the face of national scrutiny. Strategies for community response to national narratives are outlined.