

**The Binary Problem:
Marginalizing Important Issues Related to Gun Violence**

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Articulation of Question

How do America's mainstream media outlets influence how we think through complex issues related to gun violence? Specifically, how does the media's common use of the binary frame influence the process? Mainstream media exerts tremendous influence on how we think and talk to each other not only in local public spheres but also in broader efforts to craft policies to prevent future gun violence. Attention should therefore be paid to how the media frames issues.

Analysis

In binary framing, issues related to social events are represented in either/or positions. There are several problems with binary thinking, two of which are especially detrimental to public discourse. First, when binaries are established, there is pressure to resolve them—to find the “correct” answer. In the media, the process of resolving reductive binaries can be easily leveraged to underscore competition and struggle, resulting in news coverage preoccupied with drama and conflict. Importantly, when one side of the binary is deemed “correct”, the other side of the binary, the other issue-at-hand, is steadily pushed out of the media spotlight, to the detriment of a fuller understanding of the social event. The marginalization of the “losing” side of the binary flattens important public conversations, rather than broadening and deepening them, by effectively removing significant components of the discussion.

Second, binaries ignore the fact that issues can be interrelated. How issues of difference are interrelated in public discourse and how such positioning affects the atmosphere of public conversations is an abiding concern of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as prescribed by sociolinguist Norman Fairclough. In *Analyzing Discourse*, Fairclough calls our attention to how differences can be “accentuated” or “negotiated”.¹ On the “accentuation” side of the spectrum, “difference, conflict, [and] polemic” are underscored; discursive representations emphasize “a struggle over meaning, norms, [and] power”. On the “negotiation” side of the spectrum, the “orientation to difference” is characterized by “an openness to, acceptance of, [and] recognition of difference”—and, therefore, a high degree of what Fairclough calls (invoking Bakhtin) “dialogization”—which makes it more probable that social actors will explore their differences together in order to “resolve or overcome” them. If how we approach differences determines how likely we are to dialogue and work together, the effect of binary framing—which, per Fairclough's definition, is an “accentuated orientation”—is to discourage meaningful engagement.

Binary framing therefore undermines public discourse in two ways: first, it limits the issues on the table, thereby creating artificial constraints on the breadth of the dialogue, and, second, it decreases the probability that citizens will come together in dialogue because mutually exclusive differences are accentuated rather than differences being meaningfully explored to find common ground and potential interrelations.

With respect to the issue of gun violence, the media has sometimes established false binaries around the issue of causality. For instance, in the wake of the Tucson rampage shooting in January 2011, which gravely wounded Representative Gabrielle Giffords and killed six bystanders, the media pitted the potential influence of the perpetrator's (Jared Lee Loughner) psychological problems against the potential influence of hateful political “vitriol”. As

Loughner's psychological problems were discovered and well documented in the press, the issue of hateful rhetoric was swept off the table of media coverage and serious public consideration. But it does not follow that because one issue in a gun violence case is significant (i.e., mental health) that other issues should be quickly eclipsed in terms of research efforts, public conversations, and policy deliberations. The issue of whether political vitriol may have influenced Loughner to act on his hatred of Giffords is also significant.

Remembering that Congresswoman Giffords was identified by authorities as Loughner's "target"ⁱⁱ, it is worthwhile to consider the provocative political speech and acts which occurred in the months leading up to Loughner's attack.

- At a campaign fundraiser just months before the shooting, Giffords's challenger, Jesse Kelly, gave donors the opportunity to fire an M-16 with him.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Sarah Palin's national map for Republican legislative takeover highlighted Giffords's Eighth Congressional District in Arizona using the gun-related symbol of a cross-hair. This website "targeting" was echoed, on the same day, with a one-word instruction that Palin posted on her Twitter account: "RELOAD."^{iv}
- Markos Moulitsas Zuniga— founder of the Democratic left-of-center Daily Kos blog—published a map which also used a martial visual metaphor (a bullseye) to "target" the districts of Democrats who voted for a surveillance law he strongly disliked. One of Moulitsas' targets was Gabrielle Giffords.^v
- On the night after Giffords voted in support of President Obama's federal health care reform bill, the front door of her Tucson Congressional office was smashed in.^{vi}
- Of course, targeting and death threats were not limited to Democrats like Giffords. House Majority Leader, Republican Eric Cantor, was a frequent target of such threats. The most serious source of these threats, Norman LeBoon, was arrested in Philadelphia and pleaded guilty in March 2010.^{vii}

Immediately after the shooting, the issue of political vitriol and its relevance to the Tucson shooting was easily found in the media. For instance, the January 9, 2011 issue of *The New York Times* printed the following excerpt from the National Jewish Council's official statement (Giffords was the first Jewish woman elected to Congress from the State of Arizona): "It is fair to say—in today's political climate, and given today's political rhetoric—that many have contributed to building levels of vitriol in our political discourse that have surely contributed to the atmosphere in which this event transpired."^{viii} Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik was also widely quoted from his news conference on January 8, 2011 when he made the following observation: "I'd just like to say that when you look at unbalanced people, how they are—how they respond to the vitriol that comes out of certain mouths, about tearing down the government, the anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous"^{ix}.

However, as more information about Loughner's mental state emerged, binary framing increasingly appeared in mainstream print accounts of the mass shooting. This framing was used—in different ways—to shift away from serious consideration of the causal force of hateful political rhetoric and toward Loughner's mental illness. For instance, in a news article published in *The Christian Science Monitor* on January 12, 2011, four days after Loughner's shooting rampage, the headline reads: "As portrait of Loughner sharpens, 'vitriol' blame fades." The binary frame is apparent in the verbal pairing of sharpens/fades, with the implication that there is only a

fixed amount of energy that can distribute across these two causal forces. The construction of the following sentence from the piece's initial paragraphs also clearly sets the binary frame:

"[E]merging information about primary suspect Jared Loughner suggests that he was motivated not by a climate of hate but rather by his own troubled mind." Both the headline and the "not by/but rather" construction set up the binary frame here as a zero-sum game^x, with the "vitriol" cause clearly on the "losing" side. Such a set-up also works, implicitly, to justify decreased coverage of the political rhetoric cause.

A second example appeared in a January 14, 2011, *USA Today* article, which used a different discursive strategy to justify its decreased focus on the vitriol cause. The article—"Politics aside, the focus turns to mental illness"^{xi}—maintains in its lead that, "Evidence from the past week indicates that the Tucson shootings had little if anything to do with political rhetoric and everything to do with mental illness." The next sentences provide evidence of Loughner's illness but do not provide evidence substantiating that political rhetoric had "little" to do with the shooting rampage. In a frame which does not allow for multiple important causes, providing evidence to support one cause is tantamount to disproving the other cause. Regarding this type of discursive move, Fairclough highlights the problem of the "generalized description" which uses "a high degree of abstraction from the concrete".^{xii} At this level of high abstraction, events and processes are represented as "simply given" without the need for explanatory analysis. In this case, the significance of the cause of political vitriol is summarily dismissed without evidence, without elaboration.

Yet a third instance of binary framing is seen in a January 15, 2011, *The New York Times* article which ran with the headline "Looking Behind the Mug-Shot Grin". The lead of this article describes Loughner's disturbing but "spellbinding" mug-shot: "his slightly blackened left eye all but winking at the wholesale violence that preceded the camera's click."^{xiii} The article leverages the mug-shot to set up an either/or frame: "Does the grin convey a sense of accomplishment, or complete disengagement from the consequences of his actions?" This either/or question is a subtle invocation of the binary of politics (the assassin has "accomplished" his mission) versus insanity (a state which obscures the recognition of "consequences"). In this binary, only two alternatives are referenced in terms of causality. Obviously missing from the analysis is the call from significant social actors in this public event (e.g. Pima County's Sheriff Dupnik, referenced above) for serious consideration of how political vitriol *interacts* with mental illness to increase the probability of material violence. This oversight is especially surprising since this is one of the longest articles (5,000+ words) *The New York Times* published during the week following the shooting. Fairclough calls this type of orientation to different perspectives "bracketing"^{xiv}. "Bracketing" occurs when social reporters or institutions (in this case, both are at play) highlight certain voices in the public sphere while dismissing others, often acting as if these other voices don't even exist. This article ignores the voices of those who are interested in how major causal forces like hateful political speech and mental illness might interact and perhaps increase the likelihood of material violence. This article also illustrates an important nuance: alternative positions are more effectively covered over when binaries are constructed in a way that precludes middle ground. That is to say, the binary is constructed to indicate that the two positions are mutually exclusive.

The above examples illustrate how language—in this case, media language—can and does exert significant social effects in terms of how we represent, think through, and talk about

gun violence. Digging analytically into the details of this language—like the construction and effects of binary frames—excavates exactly how we are being influenced by it.^{xv} Until we do the work of engaging such media language at a detailed level, and identifying the problems with how it often works (e.g., zero-sum relationships, avoidance of evidence-based explanations, and the suppression of a multiplicity of social perspectives), we will be doomed to repeat and mimic its patterns.

Recommendations

Two recommendations emerge from this analysis with respect to conducting public, local discussions. First, journalists from mainstream media newspapers and TV stations should not serve as facilitators of public discussions in relation to gun violence, given that the position of facilitator is one of neutrality. Instead, journalists should be invited to explain and defend their coverage, framing, and analysis in relation to gun violence, in exactly the same way that we invite political representatives to explain and defend their positions on gun violence.

Second, public discussion should be informed by the work of researchers, experts and commentators who have investigated how different causal forces in relation to gun violence might interact and interrelate. Such citizens can model for us all how differences can be “dialogized”—as Fairclough puts it—and not just polemicized. In this dialogue, in this openness to different perspectives, in this identification of where ideas overlap and interrelate, we might begin to craft collective responses that are more likely to protect us all, and substantially prevent innocent suffering and death.

ⁱ Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003).

ⁱⁱ Marc Lacey and David M. Herszenhorn, “Congresswoman Is Shot in Rampage Near Tucson,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 9, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sam Dolnick, Katherine Q. Seel Ye, and Adam Nagourney, “Polarized, tense, and, now, deadly slice of U.S.: Shootings reveal a corner of Arizona riven by anger and political volatility,” *The International Herald Tribune*, Jan. 12, 2011.

^{iv} Frank Rich, “No One Listened to Gabrielle Giffords,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 16, 2011.

^v David Von Drehle, “The Real Lesson of the Tucson Tragedy,” *Time Magazine*, Jan. 24, 2011.

^{vi} Sam Dolnick, Katherine Q. Seel Ye, and Adam Nagourney, “Polarized, tense, and, now, deadly slice of U.S.: Shootings reveal a corner of Arizona riven by anger and political volatility.”

^{vii} Andrew Heining, “Arizona Shooting: Seven times politics turned to threats or violence last year,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 10, 2011.

^{viii} Carl Hulse and Kate Zernicke, “Bloodshed Puts New Focus on Vitriol in Politics,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 9, 2011.

^{ix} Peter Wallsten, “In the Wake of Tragedy, an Outspoken Sheriff Steps into the Spotlight,” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 10, 2011.

^x The Oxford English Dictionary explains that the concept of “zero-sum” is used in reference to situations “in which advantage to one participant necessarily leads to disadvantage to one or more of the others”. This zero-sum positioning is also underscored by the use of “As” which kicks off this article’s headline. When used to lead off a subordinate clause, as it is here, the Oxford English Dictionary reminds us that “as” works to “express the manner, degree, time, place, reason, purpose, or result, of the main clause”. In this case, I would argue that the “As” is operating to imply that the subordinate clause is the “purpose” for the main clause: that is, “vitriol blame” is “fading” *because* the Loughner “portrait” (a euphemism for his psychological maladies) is “sharpening”.

^{xi} “Politics Aside, the Focus Turns to Mental Illness,” USA Today, Jan. 14, 2011.

^{xii} Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*.

^{xiii} Jo Becker, Serge F. Kovalski, Michael Luo, and Dan Barry, "Looking Behind the Mug-Shot Grin," The New York Times, Jan. 15, 2011.

^{xiv} Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*.

^{xv} I am guided, here, by what Fairclough writes in his conclusion to *Analysing Discourse*: “It is a matter of, on the one hand, recognizing that it is often social theorists [like Foucault] who produce the most interesting critical insights about language as an element of social life, yet, on the other hand, challenging them and helping them to engage with language in a far more concrete and detailed way than they generally do. Without detailed analysis, one cannot really *show* that language is doing the work one may theoretically ascribe to it” (204).