

David Castillo

Mary Scherer

Sociology 103

April 26, 2019

### Social Problems and the Role of News Media

The rapid development of technology over the past 30 years brought on the rise of news media and cable news networks, as well as Internet news sources, many of which are "niche" news (employing audience segmentation) (Best, 138). Since human beings often filter what they see and hear through the prism of their own values and beliefs, news stories are often biased, even when the author attempts to avoid bias (Best, 128). This paper examines three versions of a news story, comparing and contrasting them to determine how each one tells the story in a different fashion, producing a bias in the direction of conservative or liberal views, depending on the source. This paper also considers the theoretical underpinnings of variance in news coverage.

The main news story is about gun control legislation: in April 2013, nine gun-related bills were defeated in the U.S. Senate because none of them received the 60 votes required to proceed to debate. The news stories were taken from *The New York Times* (a liberal paper), *The Daily Beast* (a liberal-leaning source) and *The Washington Times* (a conservative-leaning source).

The three stories examined dealt with three key themes: 1) the highly emotional nature of the gun control debate, illustrated by the use of emotion-laden words (e.g., *The NYT*: "wrenching," "20 children dead," "speeches from both sides meant to stir emotions," "modest steps;" *The DB*: "castigated," "parents of Sandy Hook children who lost their lives," "assailed NRA and gun lobby;" *The WT*: "devastating blow," "advocates struggling," "blaming,"

"mocking," "December rampage,"), 2) the then President Barack Obama at the center of the debate (e.g., *The NYT*: 3 paragraphs related to Obama's speech, a photo of Obama with Sandy Hook families; *The DB*: "visibly angry Obama," all 7 paragraphs mentioned Obama's speech; *The WT*: 6 paragraphs about Obama's speech, the headline reading, "Senate...angers Obama"), and 3) the failure to proceed with the bill for political reasons, rather than substantive reasons (e.g., *The NYT*: "Faced with a decision either to remove substantial new gun restrictions from the bill or to allow it to fall to a filibuster next week, Senate leaders plan to put it on hold;" *The DB*: "wishes of 90 percent of the American people can't be translated into Senate action;" *The WT*: Obama quoted, "It came down to politics.").

Recurring patterns in coverage of this gun control bill, which were seen to some degree in all three articles, included the focus on the then President Obama's goals rather than the goals of the Senate itself, a lack of explanation for the 60-vote requirement, the emphasis on the politics of the vote as seen in the 60-vote rule and voting primarily along party lines, and references to motivating events such as the Sandy Hook shootings. For both conservative and liberal media coverage, the gun control bill was "piggybacked" onto the general negative or positive bias about the then President Obama (Best, 49). The frequent mention of Sandy Hook suggests that the story of Adam Lanza shooting children and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School was a landmark narrative for the topic of gun control (Nichols, 324). These themes and patterns formed the basic core of news shared by the objective *New York Times*, as well as the conservative paper (*The Washington Times*) and the liberal paper (*The Daily Beast*).

Divergence among the three papers began with their explicit arguments for and against the gun control bill. For example, *The Washington Times* – a conservative and pro-gun rights

source – emphasized pro-gun rights arguments, stating that background checks, a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, and the fact that other measures in the bills 1) "would do nothing to stop gun violence, 2) could infringe on 2nd amendment rights, 3) were the first step to a national gun registry, and 4) could not have stopped the Newtown shooting" (Sherfinski).

These are the claims set forth by the pro-gun rights lobby. Similarly, *The New York Times* quoted Senior Republican Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa as saying, "Criminals do not submit to background checks now...they will not submit to expanded background checks" (Weisman).

However, *The Daily Beast*, a liberal and pro-gun control source, suggested that the gun control measures, described as "exceedingly modest," represented "the wishes of 90% of the American people" and that opponents "have no coherent argument" (Clift). This source presented the counterclaims of the pro-gun control movement (Best, 51).

All three articles included photos which suggested differences in their intended emotional tones. *The Daily Beast* and *The New York Times* featured photos of Obama with survivors and victims in the Rose Garden where he spoke, creating emphasis on the emotional pain suffered by the survivors. On the other hand, *The Washington Times* had a photo of Manchin and Toomey, the authors of the background checks amendment, which lacked the emotional appeal of the other two newspaper photos (Sherfinski). In fact, *The New York Times*, considered to be the most objective source, included the most information about the survivors and their families – 6 paragraphs (although this could be because the entire story was longer than the story from the other two sources) (Weisman). *The Daily Beast* (Clift) followed with 4 paragraphs, and *The Washington Times* (Sherfinski) trailed with 2 paragraphs.

An analysis of the three news stories with regard to claims making, frames, and frame

alignment reveals potential differences that may not be immediately obvious in the surface text. And although the media outlets discussed here are identified with a pro-gun control vs. pro-gun rights dichotomy, the truth is more complex than that. *The New York Times* (liberal) discussed primary claims from both sides (pro – "it is shameful not to pass gun control," "gun control will reduce homicides," "gun control will protect children," con – "criminals will still get guns," "gun control is against civil rights") with a slight advantage to the gun control side. *The Washington Times* (conservative) also presented nearly equal primary claims (pro – "gun control will protect children," "it is shameful not to pass gun control," con – "gun control is against civil rights," "gun control will not change the homicide rate," and "criminals will still get guns") with a slight bias against gun control. On the other hand, *The Daily Beast* (liberal) only presented primary claims on the pro-gun control side ("gun control is good for society," "gun control will reduce homicides," "gun control will protect children," and "it is shameful not to pass gun control"), which suggests that its viewpoint, at least on this issue, is more liberal than that of *The New York Times*. Obviously, there are gray areas to this topic; the question of gun control is not "black or white."

All three sources included secondary claims that interpret or evaluate primary claims. An example of a secondary claim that was seen in all three sources is "the ultimate decision on gun control legislation was political." Another, in *The Daily Beast*, referred to the expansion of background checks as "exceedingly modest;" likewise, *The New York Times* described legislation, such as increased mental health programs and stronger measures against gun traffickers, as "modest steps," and *The Washington Times* identified the background check amendment as "the chief showdown."