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Open Fire: A Portrait of Gun Control in U.S. and International Newspaper Articles after the  
2011 Arizona Mass Shooting

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Communication  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Professional Communication

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by  
Heidi Smathers  
May 2012

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John King, Chair  
Steve Marshall  
Kelly Price

Keywords: gun control, framing theory, content analysis, politics, crime, mass shooting,  
Gabrielle Giffords

## ABSTRACT

Open Fire: A Portrait of Gun Control in U.S. and International Newspaper Articles after the  
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This studies purpose was to explore media framing theory, which asserts that the media portray certain items in a way that affects salience and tone of those items. Mass shootings, particularly at the 2011 Tucson, Arizona mass shooting, are of interest in media framing because of the graphic and often senseless nature of the crime.

A content analysis of articles between February 7, 2010, and November 8, 2011, was conducted to explore media framing of gun control after the 2011 Tucson, Arizona mass shooting.

Results showed that tone shifted to being more frequently neutral after the shooting. The topic shifted toward legislation, adding further support to media framing theory. These findings have impacts for media and public relations.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The residents of Tucson, Arizona woke to a bright and peaceful day on January 8, 2011. Unsuspecting of anything other than a typical meet-and-greet with a U.S. Representative, residents gathered in a small shopping center for the event. They could not have known that this community would soon be shaken to its core by a single man. On this day, 6 people were murdered and 13 more were injured in a mass shooting in Tucson, Arizona. As United States Representative Gabrielle Giffords began the meet-and-greet, Jared Lee Loughner allegedly opened fire on the crowd (Arizona Shooting, 2011). Unfortunately, mass shootings are no longer an unknown concept for many people today. Prior mass shootings such as the one at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech still remain fresh on many Americans' minds.

The goal of this study was to explore the impact that one mass shooting had on media framing of gun control as an issue. Gun control has long been a hot topic not only in politics, but in media. The danger of guns and the devastating effects they can have on human lives has been central to the gun control debate. This debate is furthered by public mass shootings that can take so many lives in a very short amount time. While there is never a question about the sadness that follows these events, the reaction to them has become the source of research.

Media framing theory provides one explanation as to the changes in media portrayal after such an event, suggesting that by exploring guns as a cause of the event, media may influence public perception on gun control. Framing, first introduced by Erving Goffman, asserts that media control the way a story is portrayed based on their agendas. Media have evolved into a major force in the political world, giving air time and assigning importance to issues through



public attention. The ability to control what the public sees and how it is portrayed is an invaluable asset.

With the unfortunate increase in mass public shootings, these events have become of particular interest to researchers. Mass murders are different in that they involve killing numerous victims in one location (O'Connor, 2011). Recent research has looked at mass shootings in the areas of media agenda setting and media priming, but there has been little as it relates to media framing. The Tucson, Arizona shooting is of particular interest because the supposed target of the attack was a U.S. Representative, which added a level of celebrity to the event.

Researchers explored the media framing of gun control after the 2011 Tucson, Arizona shooting. Through content analysis researchers looked at an equal timeframe of articles before and after the shooting. Results supported several of the hypotheses, reinforcing the media framing theory.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Framing Theory*

First introduced by Goffman (1974), framing is the "process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (Entman, 2007, p.164). Entman (1993), a leading researcher on framing theory, further defined framing as selecting an aspect of reality and making it more salient "in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation" (p.52). Framing, at a very basic level, is about altering statements or presentation (Coleman & Thorson, 2002) in an attempt to influence or change the way the listener perceives the issue. While this suggests a possible negative connotation, framing can be used simply to provide better understanding to a complicated situation, allowing listeners to make better sense of a confusing world (Coleman & Thorson, 2002). By making issues more salient, media "help define problems and call attention to some things while obscuring others" (Coleman & Thorson, 2002, p.405).

Defining framing is not always a simple process, however. Entman (1993) "referred to framing as a scattered conceptualization" (p.51), pointing out that "nowhere is there a general statement of framing theory that shows exactly how frames become embedded within and make themselves manifest in a text, or how framing influences thinking " (p.51). McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (1997) went so far as to state that framing is an actual extension of agenda setting and not an independent theory. Framing has been associated with other media theories, mainly agenda setting, issue-attention, and priming (Scheufele, 2006). Recent studies have focused

exploring areas of agenda setting and priming (Weaver, 2007) and commonly joining one of these with framing theory.

Saliency, a key component to framing, is making a topic "more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences" (Entman, 1993, p.53). This allows the listener to better focus when the topic comes up again, retrieving previous information and using that information to assist in forming opinions or new thoughts. Saliency can be achieved in several ways by using better placement, repetition, or even symbolic association (Entman, 1993). Saliency deals not only with increasing the importance of a topic but also with making a topic more accessible in the listener's memory (Altheide et al., 2001). It is the attempt to raise the "apparent importance of certain ideas, activating schemas that encourage target audiences to think, feel, and decide in a particular way" (Entman, 2007, p.164).

It is also important to understand the actual function of framing. Entman asserts framing has four basic functions: to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993). In defining problems framing seeks to highlight what an agent is "doing with what costs and benefits" (Entman, 1993, p.52). Framing helps to diagnose causes by assisting the listener in determining what created the problem in the first place. Framing assists in making moral judgments by allowing the listener to "evaluate casual agents and their effects" (Entman, 1993, p.52). Finally, framing assists in suggesting remedies by offering solutions and predicting effects (Entman, 1993). Once an issue is framed, the listener can then either consciously or subconsciously choose what frame to take, which may differ from the frame intended by the communicator (Entman, 1993).

It is also important to understand that framing can be used in many different ways and with many different messages. Strong frames generally are the most used and one way of

creating strong frames is through linguistic alterations that allow shifting of reference points and thus behavior (Terkildsen & Schell, 1997). Also, strong frames generally come from public discussions, but building a frame around an issue does not mean it will be effective (Chong & Druckman, 2007). It can be confusing when small changes in presentation produce large shifts in opinions (Chong & Druckman, 2007). If something is not framed well, it stands that the information may not be stored and available for processing in the future. Strong frames help eliminate confusion and enable connections in the brain (Dodge, 2008).

Although frames are generally effective on large audiences, this does not imply a "universal effect on all" (Entman, 1993, p.54). An individual's personal frame of thought will impact the way the frame is received (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Opinions are based largely upon "available and accessible considerations without conscious deliberation" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p.110). Influences upon frames often include motivation, exposure, current knowledge, values, predispositions, the strength of the frame and other information available (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The listener will choose the frame that is most consistent with current values and principles and will even seek frames that strengthen these ideas (Chong & Druckman, 2007). It is important to also point out that not all beliefs and values are always accessible, thus allowing framing to work on "making new beliefs about an issue, making certain available, beliefs accessible or making beliefs applicable" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p.111).

The foci of much framing research are the political effects and uses of framing. One way of using political framing is to use encoded terms such as "affirmative action" (Entman, 1993, p.55). These widely recognized terms activate other areas of memories and beliefs, thus strengthening the frame. Another way of using political framing is to present multiple frames. By framing an issue in multiple ways, each citizen is more likely to consider the frame within his

or her own beliefs (Terkildsen & Schell, 1997). This shows that there is a "complex interaction between the media, government actors, and interest groups" (Terkildsen & Schell, 1997, p.882) all seeking to show the audience one side of the story. These stories don't always offer information, though, and can often lead to confusion. Political frames seek to capitalize on this internal struggle and provide "direction by assigning relative importance" (p.522), with those who are anchored in their beliefs or "political predispositions" often sidetracking political framing (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001, p.522). Media may even be a predominant source in suggesting not only decisions on issues but also "which issues to use in evaluating political actors" (Weaver, 2007, p.145). Political framing is often portrayed in a negative light with the idea that there is a certain amount of political manipulation in media coverage (Chong & Druckman, 2007), but political framing is more about strategy than manipulation (Reese, 2007). There are many actors involved in creating frames, and the public reaction to a certain frame will then feed media and political frames in the future (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Listeners often have competing opinions within themselves, and there is often an internal struggle to justify beliefs and views. Many superficial views that are not connected to other values and beliefs will not be defended if challenged (Chong & Druckman, 2007). So by challenging the views that are not as strongly held political frames have greater impact. Those who have strong attitudes or beliefs about a topic are more likely to recognize which frame is most consistent with their beliefs and provide a cognitive reasoning to the actual frame, rejecting inconsistent information (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Finally, political frames can be best seen in controversial issues or events. These frames are typically most visible, containing more prominent actors and a wider array of frames (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). Does all of this imply that this is a

conscious choice by media personnel to manipulate the public? What is the actual role of media in Framing?

### *Media Role*

Media constantly seek to answer how to make something more interesting to provide both news and entertainment (Altheide, 1997). More often than not, the lines between truth and fiction are blurred and the "line between the journalist and the event has essentially disappeared" (Altheide, 1997, p.651). Event-driven media is an especially difficult territory to navigate, as the need to tell grand tales is often driven by the need to gain profit. This is shown in how stories are presented, what stories receive prominence, and how the information is given. This amount of control in the media often confuses journalism with policy making, giving journalists the power to "not only decide which problems will occupy their respective agendas, but how to define those problems" (Birkland & Lawrence, 2004, p.1194). There is a delicate balance that lies in presenting information to the public and meeting all the needs involved with that process. Often media organizations are inundated with press releases, requests for more attention to a topic, or more air time for an official. With most media being profit agencies, there is often a rift between driving the bottom line and maintaining ethical standards (Muschert, 2007). This often undermines the facts of an event and the true analysis that is needed (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). Even in trying to present pure factual information many journalists maintain that they also play an interpretive role in presenting the news (Leavy & Maloney, 2009).

When an event falls within close geographic range, there is more salience in the news coverage and the public is able to garner more information (Altheide, 1997). This, in turn, allows for more diverse opinions and information, allowing the receiver of that information to form more personal thoughts. When an incident occurs outside of close geographic range,

judgments and ideas are more closely founded upon the information received through media (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2002). This allows media to be a large factor in political thoughts and opinions, especially when events occur in farther locations.

It is this distance from events that causes individuals to seek more information. Newspaper use is often associated with information seeking and political information seeking. In fact, many studies have shown that newspaper reading is "a significant predictor of political knowledge" (Chaffee & Frank, 1996, p.52). Studies have also shown that television news is used to "enhance political knowledge" (Chaffee & Frank, 1996, p.53). Once the information is given the audience can then process it in three different manners. Those who actively process information will seek additional sources and information, knowing that media information is typically skewed (Scheufele, 2006). Reflector interrogators will consider the information and then discuss it with peer groups. Selective scanners will just use mass media as the primary source for information and thought formation (Scheufele, 2006). All of this begs the question of how media is formatted to have such an effect?

Media attention, an entertainment driven industry, is often gained through the problem frame (Altheide, 1997). The first key is an 'absence of ordinary', followed by behavior outside of the routine and audience willingness to 'suspend disbelief' (Altheide, 1997, p.652). All of these factors allow for the audience to process an event as something newsworthy and thus not question the attention it is given. The basic elements of the problem frame include a "narrative structure, universal moral meanings, specific time and place, unambiguous meanings, a focus on disorder and are culturally resonant" (Altheide, 1997, p.653). There are also five factors that have been determined that potentially influence frames: "social norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, pressures of interest groups, journalistic routines, and ideological or

political orientations” (Scheufele, 2006, p.109). It is the actual organization of media and the way that certain items take precedence that should be most concerning to framing researchers (Reese, 2007). By making news stories more prominent, media are assigning importance and story preference compared to other stories that day. Media also overwhelmingly use episodic frames when reporting crimes, which also contribute to the entertainment value and the personal blame of the criminal (Dodge, 2008). It is not as easy as simply suggesting a problem or solution, however. In order to gain the appropriate attention for change, there must be an event that media can tie into.

Cohen (1963) said that, "the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (p.13). Media gain power through the ability to dictate what the important events of the day are (Ruddock, 2001) usually including the most dramatic events. Often dramatic events contribute to the social construction of a problem, often spring-boarding the problem into public attention (Muschert, 2008). Media often look for "hot moments" because these have more perceived journalistic and commercial value (Leavy & Maloney, 2009, p.275). Dramatic events are often "social disruptions and therefore their 'newsworthiness' seems natural and is likely to go unquestioned" (Leavy & Maloney, 2009, p.275). This also allows media to portray images and information in a more fluid manner, open to more interpretation. Descriptions of characters involved are often more embellished and events are portrayed as more desperate. These 'false and hysterical' images are part of the media effort to influence public policy and shape public opinion (Calvert & Richards, 2002, p.216). National events that involve crime are the perfect outlet for media and political actors as they contain both drama and policy issues. Due to the high entertainment and attention values of crime, news coverage of crime is disproportionately



higher than actual crime rates. "While crime has gone down over the past decade, crime reporting actually has increased and today dominates local news broadcasts" (Calvert & Richards, 2002, p.230). Higher political stakes also tend to gain more media attention to policy changes (Birkland & Lawrence, 2004).

Crime events, however, are becoming a harder issue to frame for media as technology expands and people begin to gain knowledge through other outlets (Chaffee & Frank, 1996). A major source of information during the 2009 Iranian presidential protests was social media outlets such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Although one study revealed that this was not the case for media, and professionals will not use social media content. Media were actually less likely to use citizen-generated content during the beginning coverage of an event than later on in the coverage cycle (Wigley & Fontenot, 2011). Recent trends show that this may not actually be the case though. Many media have come to embrace social media as a trend creating segments around twitter feeds, using posts to find future stories and trending to decide top stories (Lewis, 2009). Regardless of the method, though, crime in any form will continue to draw public attention.

### *Media and Crime*

"If public perceptions of crime are formed partly on the basis of media information then, over time, media messages that emphasize certain information about crime and violence create a framework for thinking about solutions" (Coleman & Thorson, 2002, p.404). By inundating listeners with certain perceptions and ideas, media present an image of crime that can often be difficult to overcome. One content analysis showed that most portrayals focused on violent crimes (Coleman & Thorson, 2002) and with the plethora of crime being put forth in media, it is hard to avoid. There are four primary types of crime myths related to portrayal including

identifying the innocent, the appearance of the brave and heroic, a threat to the norm, and identification of those responsible (Muschert, 2007). The focus of many of these portrayals is less about the crime and more about the victim.

Print news, television shows, dramas, movies, magazines, and reality television all portray a universal victim status (Altheide et al., 2001). How the victim is portrayed is often a primary determinant of the amount of coverage a news item may get (Altheide et al., 2001). Victims are often shown as being helpless and innocent (Altheide et al., 2001). The audience perception of the victim, including his or her involvement in the crime, will determine the response to the story and the victim (Altheide et al., 2001). One example of audience response to a victim can be seen in the Matthew Shepard murder. On October 6, 1998, Shepard was leaving a bar when Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson attacked and brutally beat him. They then tied Shepard to a fence post and left him there. Shepard was found later but died from his wounds 5 days later (Moen, 2008). Shepard was beaten to death by two attackers, and in what played out as a painful media account, he was deemed a martyr for homosexual rights (Aoki & Ott, 2002). Shepard gained much media attention because the public could relate to him and the narrative was very dramatic. By being the boy next door Shepard's murder was an even more frightening tale (Aoki & Ott, 2002). The story of the victim does not negate other sides of the tale, and often these portrayals lead to issues of blame (Altheide et al., 2001). The public will seek reasoning and justice, both for the victim but also for themselves. There is a need for reassurance that a similar event will not happen again. Blame also allows for victims and groups a sense of closure, allowing those involved and society to shed fear (Altheide et al., 2001). Unfortunately, many violent crimes are not isolated incidents and do eventually reappear, both in life and in living rooms.

One theory asserts that what comes through our televisions into our daily lives affects who we are and our perception of reality. George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory asserted that one's perception of reality would be directly affected by the amount of television that is viewed (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Cultivation theory has been the source of much research, seeking to determine the correlation between what is being shown on television and how that is affecting perceptions of reality. Crime on television has been a direct target for cultivation theorists hoping to show that in viewing more crime on television perceptions will shift toward thinking society is more violent than not. The television has become a source for value and belief formation, implying that watching television is not a passive process but an interactive process (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). In watching the news each night, viewing these mass shootings and other violent events, the information is absorbed and used to form future opinions.

One example of a reappearing crime in media is school shootings. There are five types of school-related shootings: "rampage shootings, school-related mass murders, terrorist attacks on schools or school children, school-related targeted shootings, and government shootings taking place at schools" (Muschert, 2007, p.4). Nickel Mines School, Virginia Tech University, and Columbine are all mass school shootings committed in the last 10 years. On October 2, 2006, Charles Carl Roberts IV attacked the Nickel Mines elementary school, binding and shooting 10 girls. Five of them died from their wounds and Roberts turned the gun on himself (Hall & Hampson, 2006). The event rocked the small Amish town, leaving many to wonder if even the most peaceful populations were safe. The next year a lone gunman started a morning shooting rampage on April 16, 2007, at Virginia Tech University by killing two students in a dorm. He then traveled across campus to a classroom building and began firing as many shots as possible. When the bullets stopped 30 more people were dead with 25 injured. The Shooter, Cho Seung-

Hui, then turned the gun on himself and ended the bloodiest mass shooting on American soil (Hauser & O'Conner, 2007). Framing effects can immediately be seen in that Nickel Mines and Virginia Tech were not largely framed as school shootings but rather as mass shootings (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). Even though Virginia Tech was the deadliest mass shooting in American history (Hauser & O'Conner, 2007), it is the Columbine shooting that first began to draw attention to school violence.

"Columbine was the bloodiest school violence incident in the 1990s" and created "a particularly strong urge to determine what caused it" (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009, p.1406). On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold planned and carried out what was the worst school shooting to date. Armed with multiple weapons, the pair created a plan that if it had succeeded would have killed a large number of students and rescue personnel. The two planted bombs in the cafeteria and left to wait for survivors. When the bombs did not explode, they returned to the school and opened fire. By the time the two killed themselves, 13 people had been shot (Rosenberg, 1999). Many of the scenes from that day were broadcast live into the homes of Americans, making this a very public event and playing out in the "societal present" (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009, p.1408). As stories from the day unfolded, Columbine quickly became the best-known school shooting. With the rush to find meaning in this event, a skewed picture of the event and its victims evolved (Calvert & Roberts, 2002). Most stories centered on victims and accounts of the day, but there was little mention of the perpetrators (Muschert, 2008). With the large amount of coverage it received, Columbine has also been the source for many studies (Muschert, 2007) and debates on related issues. One timeline shows a progression of coverage beginning with victim coverage and event details, moving to memorials and victim stories, and finally ending with coverage of issues stemming from the massacre (Muschert,

2007). The frames of the coverage changed over time, initially focusing on the event but gradually shifting towards reactions and commentary (Muschert, 2008). This shows that while the initial frame was focused on the event, the frames shifted toward the impact that this event could have on society (Muschert, 2008). One study found that of the newspaper coverage 72.1% of story leads were focused on reactions to the shooting with most seeking possible causes (Muschert, 2008).

After a mass shooting, the issue of gun control found light in public discussion and was thrust onto center stage. The number of people who felt that violence and gun control was an important issue for government increased dramatically after the shooting (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001). Even with the amount of coverage Columbine received, there is still a gap in research on alternative issue frames concerning public policy and gun control (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001). In fact, Columbine was not a significant trigger for policy changes concerning gun control (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). In raising great debates about school violence and solutions, ultimately, "the effect of Columbine on the nature of state and local school policies relating to school violence was quite limited" (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009, p.1412). One study found that only 6% believed that tougher gun control laws would prevent a similar situation, showing that the public ultimately "framed Columbine differently than media did" (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009, p.1411). Another poll conducted after the shooting found that when respondents were asked an open-ended question about cause, only 1% blamed guns. It is no surprise, however, that these mass shootings caused great debates over gun control and laws. "Mass public shootings have sparked a great deal of debate over gun control" (Duwe, Kovandzic, and Moody, 2002, p.271) and garnered much media attention to the issue over the years.

## *Gun Control*

After Columbine, there were several legislative efforts attempting to make getting a gun more difficult. One such law presented by President Bill Clinton would have raised the age of ownership, required background checks, and allowed charges to be filed against parents whose guns were used in the commission of a crime (Leavy & Maloney, 2009). As many journalists pointed out, the only requisite for a school shooting is the availability of a gun (Muschert, 2007), and while gun control was a major frame of Columbine, the Red Lake Shooting was rarely framed this way (Leavy & Maloney, 2009). Making gun control a central issue in violence is not a new frame. Rather, "stricter gun control has long been advocated as a solution to a range of social problems from robbery to assassination" (Birkland & Lawrence, 2004, p.1201). In 2000 there were 28,663 firearm related deaths in the United States (Smith, Ashby, Newstead, Stathakis & Clapperton, 2004) with one study showing that 34%- 45% of American households have at least one gun (Jacobs & Villaronga, 2004). In 2002 there were almost 250 million privately owned guns, 95 million of which were hand guns (Jacobs & Villaronga, 2004). With the Second Amendment in hot debate from individual rights to states' rights (Cornell & DeDino, 2004), gun control continues to be a hot topic in public policy and in the media. One study indicated that media gun frames do influence public opinion (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001). Politicians are attempting to capitalize on this fact, suggesting that the gun control debate will become a key issue and thus a newsworthy item (Birkland & Lawrence, 2004). Public officials have also become less responsive to public opinion on gun control, hoping to lead the debate instead of following the public (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001). If officials can lead media in the debate and thus in framing the issue as they want, public opinion could follow suit. One study on right to carry concealed weapons laws found that these laws, in fact, do not increase or decrease mass

public shootings but may only discourage large venues for violence. There was no evidence that fewer people carrying guns reduced deaths in mass shootings or that an increase in carrying weapons increased the number of shootings with greater availability (Duwe et al., 2002). Another study found that framing is essential in gun control debates, but external factors also play a role. By framing these laws as essential to public safety, respondents were less supportive, but in right to bear arms frames, respondents showed less opposition. The study also found that group affiliation contributed to the blame placed on guns and gun control. Women and Democrats were more likely to blame guns; whereas, Republicans and Independents were more resistant to that frame. Results showed that while the frames are less effective when attributing responsibility, they are largely effective in enforcing existing ideas (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). Even with this information, the debate on gun control laws continues to come up in media after mass shootings, and events that are deemed of national importance typically serve as vehicles of change for political groups (Leavy & Maloney, 2009) and sources of revenue for media.

#### *Tucson, Arizona*

One such shooting event, and the subject of this study, happened on January 8, 2011. United States Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was preparing for a public meet-and-greet when Jared Loughner allegedly approached Giffords and shot her above the eyebrow (Arizona Shooting, 2011). At that point the suspect opened fire on the surrounding crowd killing 6 and wounding 13 people. Those killed included 9-year-old Christina Greene, Gifford aide Gabe Zimmerman, U.S. District Judge John Roll, 76-year-old Dorothy Murray, 76-year-old Dorwin Stoddard, and 79-year-old Phyllis Scheck. Two men tackled the gunman and detained him until police and medical teams arrived (Espo & Myers, 2011). Giffords was immediately transported

to the hospital, where it was discovered that the bullet had gone through her brain (Herszenhorn & Lacey, 2011). Giffords soon rose in the public eye through her recovery, making remarkable progress through the next few weeks (Fisham, 2011). Giffords's husband, NASA astronaut Mark Kelly, assisted with Giffords's recovery and provided constant support. In May 2011 Kelly went on a shuttle mission, leaving Giffords to continue with rehabilitation. In her November 2011 interview with Diane Sawyer, Giffords made her first public appearance since the shooting, showing her recovery and also the long road ahead in recovery (Martel, 2011). Giffords continued to struggle with speech and could not form full sentences (Martel, 2011), but she is still working with rehabilitation and moving on with life. Loughner, suspected of nearly taking her life, awaits trial as his competency is debated in court. Loughner, a schizophrenic off his medication, has started another round of debates about gun control and gun safety with the added issue of mental health (Fox, 2011). While Loughner is still waiting on his day in court, the court of public opinion continues to struggle with making sense of this heinous crime. Giffords's continues to regain the life that was nearly taken from her and most recently made the decision to resign her congressional seat and not run for reelections. While she continues to heal every day, Giffords still has a long road ahead of her to reach full recovery (Somashekhar & Kane, 2012).



## CHAPTER 3

### HYPOTHESES

The prior literature review and news coverage of the 2011 Tucson, Arizona shooting led to the development of six hypotheses.

**H1: The tone of the mentions of gun control will more frequently be positive after the Arizona shooting than before.**

The purpose of this hypothesis is to show how the shooting event can change how the topic of gun control is framed in the media based on the tone of the mention.

**H2: Mentions of gun control in news articles will most frequently have a neutral tone compared to editorials.**

The purpose of this hypothesis is to show how the shooting event can affect the tone of mentions in both newspapers and editorials.

**H3: Mentions of gun control will more frequently fall in the headline of an article after the Arizona shooting than before.**

The purpose of this hypothesis is to show how the topic becomes more prominent in the article after the shooting event.

**H4: Mentions of gun control will more frequently be on a front or section front page after the Arizona shooting than before.**

The purpose of this hypothesis is to show how the mention is to show how the mention will become more prominent in the newspaper after the event.

**H5: The topic of the sentence will most frequently focus on the shooting after the event.**

The purpose of this hypothesis is to show how the shooting event can take coverage away from other topics. This is part of the public relations term share-of-voice.

**H6: Mentions of gun control in news articles will most frequently have the shooting as a topic compared to editorials**

The purpose of this hypothesis is to show the differences in the topics focused on by newspaper articles and editorials.

CHAPTER 4  
METHODOLOGY

*Variables*

The researcher reviewed other content analysis studies to develop the coding sheet and to assist in determining variables such as one content analysis by John King (2008). The first variable is an I.D. variable in which the I.D. number of story number was coded. The independent variables included the date of publication (coded as mmddyy), the title of the publication, the location of the publication and the story type (news or editorial). The dependent variables included the tone of the mention (negative, neutral, or positive), where the mention fell in the story (headline or lead), the page the article fell on (inside page, section front, or front page) and the topic of the sentence in which the mention fell (Giffords, legislation, Arizona shooting, other Arizona victims, other mass shootings, other school shootings, and other topics)

Examples

- Positive:
  - “even if gun control only saved one life a year, the legislative measures would be worth it” (Stewart, 2011, p. A13)
  - “Gun-control advocates and some congressional Democrats are pushing for legislation” (Wallsten & Bacon, 2011, p. A02)
- Neutral:
  - “legislation that could open a new front in the state’s decades-old gun control debate” (McGreevy, 2011, p. AA1)
  - “U.S. justices review gun control legislation” (Knowlton, 2010, p. 4)

- Negative:
  - “The Harper government’s tabling of a bill to repeal federal Liberal gun control laws will bring out the worst in Canadian politics” (Editorial, 2011, p. A25)
  - “Whether it’s the economy or gun control, liberals rarely consider the consequences of their misguided schemes” (Editorial “No gunfights at the saloon”, 2011, p. B2).

### *Trials and Training*

Researchers started by pulling a simple random sample of 30 articles before February 7, 2010, and coding each article. Articles were chosen in this time frame as to not overlap the timeframe of the actual research analysis. Agreement for the first trial overall was 92.3%. After discussing the thought process put into coding each variable, a second simple random sample of articles prior to February 7, 2010, was pulled and coded. Total agreement of 98.1% was reached in this trial. Articles were divided in half, with each coder coding half of the article set independently. Coders included the primary researcher a 27-year-old female and a 26-year-old female

Intercoder reliability was determined by using the Holsti formula (Nuendorf, 2002),  $2M/N1+N2$ . In this formula M= decisions that both coders agreed on, N1= the total decisions made by coder 1 and N2= the total decisions made by coder 2. Results from trial 1 can be seen in Table 13 (See Appendix). After discussion it was discovered that there was confusion on determining story placement and story type. After clarification another trial was conducted. Results from trial 2, in which agreement was reached, can be seen in Table 14 (See Appendix).

Each mention of “gun control” in a headline or lead was coded. If a mention was questionable, the coders discussed the mention to determine best fit and had to agree completely before coding. Articles were pulled from 70 different publications (see Appendix, Table 15) both nationally and internationally, using the whole population within the timeframe. The five publications with the most mentions were the Washington Post, the New York Times, the National Post of Canada, the Christian Science Monitor, and the Toronto Star.

### *Methodology*

Researchers used LexisNexis to search for “Gun Control” mentions from February 7, 2010, through November 8, 2011, with each mention being the unit of analysis. Lexis/Nexis was used because it is considered the most comprehensive database of newspaper articles. The time frame was used to give an equal amount of time before and after the shooting. After discovering many of those articles contained no mentions, only topics of Gun Control in the footnotes and related topics sections, the search was changed to include each mention in the Headline or Lead of the article. This search yielded population of 454 articles. After removing articles with extraneous mentions of “gun control”, mentions falling outside of the lead or headline, and mentions in lists or calendars, the sample yielded 514 mentions of “gun control”. The dates of the articles were condensed to include before the shooting (January 7, 2011 and before) and after the shooting (January 8, 2011 and after). Locations of publications were condensed to include articles in the USA and international articles. The page the article fell on was condensed to include an inside page or a front page (section or front page). Finally, topics were condensed to include legislation, the Arizona Shooting, other mass shootings, or any other topic. SPSS was used to analyze the data.

## CHAPTER 5

### RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section reports the findings of this study along with frequency results, Chi-Square tables for hypothesis and exploratory questions.

#### *Frequency Results*

All of the 514 mentions were coded and entered into SPSS for analysis for frequency analysis. Chi-Square analysis was used as all information was coded as nominal. Frequency tables detailing the mentions are included. Story # was an ID variable coded by the number given in Lexis/Nexis Database. Publication date was coded as *mmdyy*, with a leading digit in front of single digit months.

#### *Independent Variables*

Before analysis dates were separated into before and after the Arizona shooting, results showed that there was a slight increase in the number of articles after the shooting (52.3%) than before (47.7%) as (see Appendix, Table 1).

Location was coded as the two-letter state abbreviation or IT for international publications. Upon reviewing data, most states contained cells less than 5 and, therefore, were collapsed to yield U.S. publications (53.1%) and international publications (46.9%) (see Appendix, Table 2).

Story type was coded as news or editorials. The article was considered an editorial if it was stated in the information as an editorial or if the article was largely based on opinion and was written in first-person point-of-view. All other articles were coded as news. Results showed that the majority of articles were in fact editorials (56%) (see Appendix, Table 3).

### *Dependent Variables*

Tone was coded as positive, neutral, or negative. In terms of determining tone, only the sentences before the mention, including the mention, and after the mention were read.

Frequency analysis showed a nearly equal number of articles being negative (46.3%) or neutral (46.1 %), with less than 10% being positive (7.5%) (See Appendix, Table 4).

Mentions were coded as being in the headline of the story or the lead when looking at prominence within the article. A lead was determined as the first paragraph of the article or the first three sentences if the article was split by sentence and not by paragraphs. As expected, the majority of mentions fell in the lead of the story (68.9%) (see Appendix, Table 5).

On what page the article containing the mention fell was determined from information in Lexis/Nexis. If the article was listed as being on A1 or Front Page, it was coded as front page; if it was listed as B1, C1, ect., or Section Front, it was coded as section front, and if it was listed as any other page number or had no page number, it was coded as an inside page. After reviewing the data, articles on a front page has a count of less than five, so these were condensed to articles on a front page or section front for analysis (8%) (see Appendix, Table 6).

When determining topic, only the sentence the mention was in was read. Initially topics were coded for Giffords or her recovery, legislation, Arizona shooting, other Arizona shooting victims, other mass shootings, other school shootings, and other topics. Other mass shootings was coded as a separate topic in hopes of identifying any articles stemming from the recent mass shooting in Norway on July 22, 2011. Upon review, Giffords, other victims, and other mass shootings all had counts of less than five. These were condensed to include Legislation, Arizona shooting and all victims, other mass shootings, and all other topics. Results showed that

legislation was most frequently the topic (42.6%), while the Arizona shooting and other mass shootings were the least frequent topic (7%) (see Appendix, Table 7).

### *Hypotheses*

*H1: The tone of the mentions will more frequently be positive after the Arizona shooting than before.*

This hypothesis was supported as positive mentions increased after the shooting. It should be noted that the majority of mentions before the shooting were negative, but after the shooting, the majority of mentions was neutral. Results are shown in Table 8.

**Table 8**

#### *Effects of Tucson Shooting on Tone*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Positive</b>
Before Shooting	123 (50.2%)	109 (44.5%)	13 (5.3%)
After Shooting	115 (42.8%)	128 (47.6%)	26 (9.7%)

**Note: n=514,  $X^2=5.02$ , df=2, p<.05**

*H2: Mentions in news articles will most frequently have a neutral tone than editorials*

This hypothesis was supported as News articles were more frequently neutral and editorials were more frequently negative.

**Table 9**

#### *Article Type by Tone*

<b>Type</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Positive</b>
News	77 (34.1%)	128 (56.6%)	21 (9.3%)
Editorial	161 (55.9%)	109 (37.8%)	18 (6.3%)

**Note: n=514,  $X^2=24.28$ , df=2, p<.001**



*H3: Mentions will more frequently fall in the headline of an article after the Arizona shooting than before.*

This hypothesis was supported as mentions in the headline increased after the shooting. It is interesting to note that the difference between articles in the headline or lead was equal both before and after the shooting. Articles in the headline were 8% more prominent after the shooting, whereas articles in the lead were 8% less prominent as seen in Table 10.

**Table 10**

*Effects of Tucson Shooting on Story Placement*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Lead</b>
Before Shooting	66 (26.9%)	179 (73.1%)
After Shooting	94 (34.9%)	175 (65.1%)

**Note: n=514,  $X^2=3.83$ , df=1,  $p<.05$**

*H4: Mentions will more frequently be on a front or section front page after the Arizona shooting than before.*

Results were not statistically significant as to the page the articles fell on before or after the shooting. This hypothesis was not supported.

*H5: The topic of the sentence will most frequently focus on the shooting after the event.*

This hypothesis was not supported as the topic of the majority of mentions after the Arizona shooting was legislation. There was also a slight increase in mentions of other mass shootings, which could be attributed to the Norway shooting. These results, as shown in Table 11 indicate that the focus of the Arizona shooting drew attention from other topics instead of other shootings

or legislation. The two mentions of the Arizona shooting prior to the actual shooting are actually mentions of Congresswoman Giffords and her stance on gun control.

**Table 11**

*Effects of Tucson Shooting on Topics*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Legislation</b>	<b>Arizona Shooting</b>	<b>Other Shootings</b>	<b>Other</b>
Before Shooting	101 (41.2%)	2 (.8%)	15 (6.1%)	127 (51.8%)
After Shooting	118 (43.9%)	63 (23.4%)	21 (7.8%)	67 (24.9%)

**Note: n=514,  $X^2=77.17$ , df=3, p<.001**

*H6: Mentions in news articles will most frequently have the shooting as a topic than editorials*

This hypothesis was not supported as news articles most frequently had legislation as the topic. Editorials most frequently had other topics followed by legislation as seen in Table 12.

**Table12**

*Article Type by Topic*

<b>Type</b>	<b>Legislation</b>	<b>Other Topics</b>	<b>Arizona Shooting</b>	<b>Other Mass Shootings</b>
News	105 (46.5%)	66 (29.2%)	41 (18.1%)	14 (6.2%)
Editorial	114 (39.6%)	128 (44.4%)	24 (8.3%)	22 (7.6%)

**Note: n=514,  $X^2=19.21$ , df=3, p<.001**

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION

#### *Major Findings*

This research provided insight into how media framed gun control after the Tucson shooting in several ways. Results showed that there was more attention given to the subject after the shooting, increasing the discussion on legislation and the shooting. This in turn took space away from other topics. There was also more prominence both within the story and in the paper after the shooting, suggesting that coverage of other topics and events lost prominence after this event.

After the shooting gun control became more of a topic of discussion, with the tone shifting towards more positive. This relates to share-of-voice for public relations professionals and shows the impact that this event can have on their efforts. Where previously other topics were making it into the news, now the topic has shifted to cover legislation. Knowing this, the public relations professional can use the news events of the day to either put out a relating press release or gain coverage for an event that fits with the leading topics. Additionally, the professional can know when it may be more effective to hold a release or wait to hold an event until the coverage of a major event has died down.

These results indicate that media framing can be significantly impacted by the major events of each day. If cultivation theory is also considered with framing theory, it stands to reason that these frames could eventually play into our thoughts and perceptions about these topics. It is hard for most to make sense out of a crime that seems so senseless. There is a need to reason, and find peace with these horrible events. Turning to news to give information assists in making sense out of the madness and finding reason. Media can help further add sense to

these events through the way the story is framed. By further understanding the role that media play in public perception and framing, government officials and law enforcement can use media as a tool to effectively communicate information to the public.

### *Limitations*

One limitation to this study was the use of Lexis/Nexis database. Lexis/Nexis is still considered the best and most comprehensive database for publication research (Nuendorf, 2002); however, it does not include all U.S. or International publications. In fact, Lexis/Nexis excludes the majority of local publications, smaller publications, and periodicals. Using the search in Lexis/Nexis also yielded a limitation in the need to look only at mentions in the headline or lead. This limited the articles coded and could have produced skewed results. This study was time bound, which was also a limitation. By not comparing more dates, articles were limited. Additionally, this study only involves a single mass shooting. Greater reliability of results could come from comparing two or more shootings. Finally, the author of this study was a coder of the data and a trainer of the second coder also. This could possibly have produced skewed results.

### *Recommendations*

As previously stated, there are many gaps in research of mass shooting events and media framing. A future study that could produce more results would include a focus on school shootings alone. When violence involves children solely, the event may receive greater media coverage. While the Arizona shooting did involve the death of a young child, the shooter was primarily targeting adults. Another study could compare a school shooting to an adult targeted mass shooting such as the Arizona shooting. This could provide greater insight into the differences between media framing of events involving children and events involving adults. As previously mentioned, during the timeframe that was coded the worst mass shooting in the world

occurred in Norway. This involved the murder of adults and children. A study on this shooting could provide greater insight into media framing of a violent incident involving both adults and children. Finally, because the Norway shooting was an international event, a comparison study of it with a U.S. mass shooting may provide light on the difference of how the events are framed and covered in the U.S. and internationally.

While all of these incidences are a great tragedy and a sad loss, it is important to gain knowledge from violent events so we can begin to answer why such events possibly occur. It is also the hope of this author that through studies like this one, we can learn how media framing affects the perception of the public. If we know what impact the reaction to the event has, we may also be able to change how we present news items and make sense out of such violent events.

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APPENDIX

Additional Tables

**Table 1**

*Frequency of Mentions*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Before Shooting	245	47.7
After Shooting	269	52.3

**Note: n=514**

**Table 2**

*Frequency of Publication Location*

<b>Location</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
U.S.	273	53.1
International	241	46.9

**Note: n=514**

**Table 3**

*Frequency of Article Types*

<b>Article Type</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
News	226	44.0
Editorial	288	56.0

**Note: n=514**

**Table 4**

*Frequency of Tone*

<b>Tone</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Negative	238	46.3
Neutral	237	46.1
Positive	39	7.5

**Note: n=514**

**Table 5**

*Frequency of Placement in the Story*

<b>Placement in Story</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Headline	160	31.1
Lead	354	68.9

**Note: n=514**

**Table 6**

*Frequency of Page Placement*

<b>Page</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Inside Page	473	92.0
Front Page or Section Front	41	8.0

**Note: n=514**

**Table 7**

*Frequency of Topic*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Gun Control	219	42.6
Arizona Shooting	65	12.6
Other Mass Shootings	36	7.0
Other	194	37.7

**Note: n=514**

**Table 13**

*Trial 1 Results*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Formula</b>	<b>Agreement Percentage</b>
Date	$2(39) / 39+39$	100%
Publication	$2(39) / 39+39$	100%
Location	$2(39) / 39+39$	100%
Story Type	$2(33) / 39+39$	84%
Tone	$2(29) / 39+39$	74%
Story	$2(36) / 39+39$	92%
Page	$2(39) / 39+39$	100%
Topic	$2(33) / 39+39$	84%
Gun Type	$2(39) / 39+39$	100%

**Table 14***Trial 2 Results*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Formula</b>	<b>Agreement Percentage</b>
Date	2 (31)/ 31+31	100%
Publication	2 (31)/ 31+31	100%
Location	2 (31)/ 31+31	100%
Story Type	2 (31)/ 31+31	100%
Tone	2 (28)/ 31+31	90%
Story	2 (31)/ 31+31	100%
Page	2 (31)/ 31+31	100%
Topic	2 (29)/ 31+31	93%
Gun Type	2 (31)/ 31+31	100%

**Table 14***Frequency of Publications*

<b>Publication</b>	<b>Count</b>
The Washington Post	52
The New York Times	51
National Post Canada	49
The Christian Science Monitor	36
The Toronto Star	35
The Washington Times	26
The Philadelphia Inquirer	22
USA Today	21
St. Petersburg Times	17
The Gazette Montreal	17
National Post	15
The Gazette	15

The International Herald Tribune	11
Daily News New York	8
Wall Street Journal	8
The Globe and Mail Canada	7
Los Angeles Times	6
The Dallas Morning News	6
The Guardian London	6
The Times London	6
Newsweek	5
The Age Australia	5
The Express	5
The Sunday Times of London	5
The Daily Telegraph London	4
The Independent	4
The Irish Times	4
The Sun England	4
Belfast Telegraph	3
Business Day	3
Canberra Times Australia	3
Africa News	2
BBC Monitoring	2
Daily News	2
Farmers Weekly	2
Financial Mail	2
Hobart Mercury Australia	2
Jerusalem Post	2
Korea Times	2
Manila Standard	2
Sunday Express	2
The Australian	2
The Courier Mail	2
The Daily Telegraph Australia	2
The Herald Glasgow	2
The New Zealand Herald	2
The Times	2
Advertising Age	1
BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union	1

Birmingham Evening Mail	1
Daily Post	1
Daily Record	1
Daily Variety	1
Evening Times	1
Itar-Tass	1
New Straits Times Malaysia	1
Newsday	1
Northern Territory News Australia	1
South China Morning Post	1
Sunday Age	1
Sunday Herald Scotland	1
The Daily Yomiuri	1
The London Times	1
The Straits Times	1
The Straits Times Singapore	1
The Sunday Mail Australia	1
The West Australia	1
The Western Hall	1
This Day Lagos	1
Wall Street Journal Abstracts	1

## VITA

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