A New Argument for the Link Between Media and Violence: The Tucson Mass Shooting and the Social Learning Theory

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On January 8, 2011, in Tucson, AZ, a gunman opened fire at a constituent event held by Rep. Gabrielle Giffords. Six people were killed and 13 wounded, including Giffords who was shot point-blank in the head. Police arrested the suspect, Jared Loughner, after bystanders had overpowered him (*Arizona Daily Star* 2011).

The Tucson mass shooting and Giffords’ continuing recovery from her brain wound have comprised America’s dominant news story in January 2011. In the aftermath of the attack, media commentators, elected officials, and members of the public speculated about the influence of extremist political rhetoric on the suspected shooter. Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, founder of *The Daily Kos*, tweeted: “Mission accomplished, Sarah Palin” (Von Drehle 2011).

In the last decade, social media has combined with the established channel of cable news and the even more venerable channel of talk radio to create an unprecedented stream of political and social commentary. Numerous observers have cited the rancor and partisan divide in the overall political dialog. Connecting the tone and content of these communications—particularly those attributed to right-wing leaders and pundits—to the shootings in Tucson cites a long-standing premise that exposure to certain media can prompt violent behavior.

The social learning theory, originated in the 1970s by noted psychologist Albert Bandura, has been used as a framework for studying
links between media and violence. This theory is based on “modeling” in which people emulate behaviors observed in others. The core social learning process entails four successive stages, resembling the “flow chart” of signature actions seen in other communication theories:

- **Attention**: the observer must engage the communication or actions in question.
- **Retention**: a cognitive process of remembering and mentally rehearsing observed behaviors.
- **Reproduction**: recreating the observed behavior.
- **Motivation**: the desire to recreate observed behavior based in part on perceived rewards or punishments (Dainton and Zelley 2005).

Bandura and others have used social learning theory to show how violence on television, in both entertainment and news content, precipitates violent acts among observers by presenting violence with attendant rewards (e.g., “good guys” who use violent tactics being honored for defeating “bad guys”). Bandura concludes that “viewing violence is conducive to aggressive conduct” due to the accepting portrayal of “aggressive lifestyles” (Dainton and Zelley 2005).

Those who assert that political rhetoric compelled Jared Loughner to attack Rep. Giffords and her gathering are espousing social learning theory, knowingly or not. Certain observers have cited “gun oriented,” combative messages from prominent conservatives. Rep. Michelle Bachman was quoted
as saying “I want people armed and dangerous” in their opposition to President Obama’s climate control initiatives (Lewis 2011). Former vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin has used phrases such as “locked and loaded” in describing supporters’ resolve in countering the Obama administration’s policies. Most notably, she identified Democratic members of the House of Representatives vulnerable for defeat in the 2010 midterm elections on an online map with crosshair graphics overlaying their districts. Gabrielle Giffords was among this group (Lewis 2011).

The linkage between right-wing rhetoric and the Tucson shootings has been called “non-scientific” (Cloud 2011) and deemed a form of charged rhetoric in itself. Elected leaders and commentators have criticized Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik for publicly questioning “how unbalanced people respond to ‘the vitriol that comes out of certain mouths about tearing down the government’” (Evans 2011). Instead of official attempts to apply the social learning theory to the attack, analysis has extensively focused on the mental health of suspect Jared Loughner and his pattern of alarming behavior in the lead-up (Cloud 2011). Jason Karpf, author of Anatomy of a Massacre, blogged that Loughner’s unheeded actions and statements mirrored those of other mass killers, including the subject of his book, George Hennard (2011).

Public perceptions regarding the Tucson mass shooting are being monitored. A CBS News poll found that nearly 60 percent of the country
does not blame political rhetoric for the attack (Carty 2011). Public perceptions are also key to political leaders who have been part of the coverage and debate surrounding the Tucson mass shooting. President Obama has been widely praised for the speech he gave in Tucson on January 12; his poll numbers have risen, due in part to the public’s favorable reaction to his speech and its reassuring themes (Harwood 2011). Sarah Palin has received less favorable reaction to her communications after the attack. Her web video was criticized for its release on the day of the president’s speech, its rebuke of the media, and its use of the term “blood libel,” which certain Jewish leaders identified with anti-Semitic propaganda (Oliphant 2011).

The negative effect of media on impressionable minds has been debated for decades. Concerns coalesced in the 1970s with Bandura’s social learning theory. By blaming political rhetoric for the Tucson mass shooting, some observers have invoked the tenets of this theory. The American public, numerous journalists, quoted experts, and the husband of Gabrielle Giffords, Capt. Mark Kelly (Blackburn 2011) have rejected this idea of causality. Nevertheless, the Tucson mass shooting and political communications will be tied going forward, as shown in President Obama’s effective speech calling for national healing and Sarah Palin’s ongoing defense of her positions and tactics.
References


