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How the media can defang poisonous political discourse

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PHILADELPHIA - Following the shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D.-Ariz., Saturday in Tucson, many people asked: Did the violence of U.S. political rhetoric have anything to do with this? Did a gunman try to kill Giffords because there is so much toxic language, such hate in our political discourse? And if our discourse is toxic, what should change in the way we talk, the way we disagree?

No one knows whether there was a link between this country's raging politics and the shooting. Like many acts of horrific violence, however, the shooting has prompted many to wonder whether the U.S. discourse of constant threat, fear, and rage may have stoked the attack. And by definition, the media, especially in news and commentary, mediate much of that discourse.

Since the shootings, many columnists and talk-show hosts have questioned the media's role in fostering a culture of violent rhetoric. On a special Saturday edition of his show "Countdown," voluble MSNBC commentator Keith Olbermann issued a "Special Comment" in which he said, "The rhetoric has devolved and descended, past the ugly and past the threatening and past the fantastic and into the imminently murderous."

Including himself among the offenders, Olbermann said, "Violence, or the threat of violence, has no place in our democracy, and I apologize for and repudiate any act or any thing in my past that may have even inadvertently encouraged violence."

Mainstream media are famous for professional breast-beating, for after-the-fact agonizing over every decision, every move. What, exactly, should the media do?

-Go on metaphor alert. It will be news to few that U.S. culture is drenched in military language. "Let's face it," says Michael Tremoglie, former editor of the conservative website FrontPage.com, "this country has been in a lot of wars, and it shows: Our taste for violence pervades everything, and it's used to sell everything."

William Lutz, professor emeritus of English at Rutgers University, says, "The problem is that we live in an age where we see violence as a solution: You see it in our foreign policy, you see it on TV shows and movies, you see it in the home. ... In the movies, the hero is always that