



How the media can defang poisonous political discourse

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By **John Timpone and Tirdad Derakhshani**

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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 meek, mild-mannered guy who's pushed too far and suddenly pulls out an AK-47 and blows away a dozen bad guys."

How do the media fight against all that? A number of commentators suggest: Stop using warlike metaphors for almost everything, and be vigilant against them.

Dom Giordano, host of "The Dom Giordano Show" on talk radio WPHT-AM in Philadelphia, says, "I am against images of gun sights used for political purposes, of 'blowing the opposition away,' 'battle to the death,' 'nuclear option,' that sort of rhetoric. I'm against portraying the other side as the enemy."

He says such talk celebrates brute force as a political solution. "I won't allow any jokes about violence on my show," Giordano says. "Nobody gets to say he wishes someone would shoot the president. Not the president, not anyone."

"The media gatekeepers," says Tremoglie, "are the ones best placed to say so when this talk goes too far."

Name names. Marty Kaplan, a media professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, says professionals in TV, radio, and newspapers should "hold public figures accountable for their language. Don't give an amplifier to inflammatory publicity-seekers." Too much airtime is devoted, he says, to the loudest, most extreme views. He singles out Terry Jones, pastor of a Florida church, who threatened last year to burn a Koran on church property.

Mika Brzezinski and Joe Scarborough, cohosts of MSNBC's "Morning Joe," say it's time to stop giving loudmouths and bullies "a media free pass" and name names. "We in the media have to start calling out the bad actors," Scarborough says, "both the conservative talk-show host who says Obama is a racist" — a reference to a July 2009 performance by Fox News' Glenn Beck — "and the liberal host who compares George Bush to Hitler" — as Progressive Radio host Mike Malloy did in November.

Don't celebrity. Many commentators think suspects, gunmen and terrorists become sensationalized. Many killers kill "to have their 15 minutes of fame," according to Christopher Harper, associate professor of journalism at Temple University. They must be reported on — but the media have a way of turning them into celebrities. Jon Friedman, senior columnist for MarketWatch, wrote Monday that "now you can become a celebrity by killing innocent people. It's a damn shame and it has to stop." He makes the radical suggestion: Don't publish the names of such suspects.

Giordano says Jared L. Loughner, the suspect in the Arizona shootings, "has gotten way too much loving attention already, and it goes way beyond the news to almost prurient interest."

Ironically, portraying killers as unusual is a way to distance ourselves from them, to dismiss them. David Schmid, associate professor and associate chair in the department of English at the University at Buffalo, says the media too often rush to find what's abnormal about the killer and what's normal about the victims. "The question we should ask is: How is this individual like other people? How is he representative of our cultural context?" says Schmid, who studies the portrayal of killers in literature. "Then it becomes much more difficult to dismiss him."

Blunt the crossfire. Not all disagreement is total, and not all counterargument is nuclear war. But the so-called "Crossfire" mentality (referring to the old CNN show) pervades many media presentations of discussion, political or otherwise. All talk, it seems, is just another kind of fight, giving permission to violence.

Markos Moulitsas, proprietor of the liberal Daily Kos website, says it's crucial "to get away from the insipid 'both sides do it' false equivalency."

Giordano says, "So many shows bring on only people who are diametrically opposed, and that's wrong. All you get is preprepared talking points, and from there it's just yelling. That's the worst. I want more nuance, more unpredictability. It's truer to life, and it's better for all of us."

Stop and think. "Old media have a great chance to redefine themselves," says Barbie Zelizer, professor of communication at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Center. "Instead of always trying to be first," Zelizer suggests, "be the most reliable. Be what media used to be." That, she says, will do a lot to tone down the rashness of the rhetoric out there.

The media world is now in 24/7 "regurgitation mode," she says, in which older media, trying to keep up with the newer, pass along whatever new media do, "with a loss of context, a loss of thoughtfulness." More of both could have helped in reporting the Giffords story, she says, especially in its early stages.

Harper says such rashness led to bad mistakes: "The journalist community should be ashamed of themselves for jumping to conclusions that the congresswoman was dead. And they should be ashamed of themselves for how they jumped to the conclusion that the assassin was involved in some kind of political retribution. It's just been dreadful."