

WHEN CONSPIRACY THEORISTS ALIGN WITH THE EXISTING LAWS: THE PUBLIC AND COUNTERPUBLIC RHETORIC OF GUN CONTROL AFTER SANDY HOOK

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Introduction

In the United States, we experience tragic events behind the barrel of the gun. According to Rood, “the gun debate has been at the forefront of American politics for the last 50 years.”¹ One shooting that tore at America’s heartstrings was the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, which claimed the lives of 26 people, a majority of whom were children. The gun debate was significantly prominent in the months following Sandy Hook. I have categorized four New York Times articles published after that fateful day on December 14, 2012, in relation to their viewpoint of the ever-present issue of stricter gun laws. I argue that by dividing multiple audiences into strong/weak publics and counterpublics it can reveal how small screens allow extremely divisive discourse in response to a complex social issue. My analysis contributes to rhetorical theory by exposing the complexity of counterpublics and how screens can bring to light extremely polarized counterpublics. My analysis addresses the opposing viewpoints of family members of Sandy Hook victims, politicians for stricter gun laws, politicians against laws, as well as conspiracy theorists who are extreme Second Amendment supporters. First, I will provide a brief description of each article. Next, I will go over contextual information on the public, counterpublic, public sphere, and the public screen. I

¹ Craig Rood, “‘Our Tears Are Not Enough’: The Warrant of the Dead in the Rhetoric of Gun Control.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 104, no. 1 (2018): 1. doi:10.1080/00335630.2017.1401223.

then categorize each article based on their viewpoints and explain how these categorizations are relevant. Finally, I will reveal how my findings contribute to rhetorical theory.

Description of the Artifact

I found four news articles that best represented four different viewpoints. I looked at many different articles on the New York Times website before deciding on these four. All four articles were published between January 16, 2013, and April 17, 2018. Article one titled “Private Pain and Public Debate Take Toll on Newtown Parents” revolves around the perspectives of Sandy Hook parents just over a month after the shooting. While the parents are still grieving the loss of their children, many are taking a stand for stricter gun laws. Article two titled “Obama to put ‘Everything I’ve Got’ into Gun Control” summarizes the viewpoints of politicians after Obama announces that he plans to ask Congress to toughen gun laws. According to this article, many politicians stand with Obama while others do not. The third article is about a radio host who claims that the Sandy Hook shooting was a hoax orchestrated by opponents against the Second Amendment. It’s titled “Sandy Hook parents sue Alex Jones for defamation.” The fourth article is similar to the third wherein it is also about a sheriff who believed that Sandy Hook did not occur. Specifically, he maintained that the Sandy Hook parents were actors. This article is titled “Oregon Sheriff shared Sandy Hook Conspiracy Theory on Facebook.” I chose these articles because they revealed four varied groups with opposing attitudes. Specifically, I selected each article to analyze its stance on the gun law debate. After a tragedy like Sandy Hook, many people reevaluated their views on guns. The gun debate is a political issue that has consumed media for years. Though the Sandy Hook shooting occurred almost seven years ago, it is something that is historically significant, especially for Generation Z. This shooting was the first to involve elementary school children. The gunman killed a majority of Sandy Hook’s first graders, who were six to seven years old. This tragedy is something that has been widely studied for a variety of reasons. There is a wide array of articles out there that cover the tragedy from other frames as well, but my artifacts are four New York Times articles that have been published from 2013-2018.

Publics and Counterpublics

Everyday talk occurs without us being aware of it. It just happens; one person starts a conversation regarding current news or something as simple as the weather and another person responds. There are communication terms used to describe when this occurs; they are publics and counterpublics. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch identify publics as “formed by people coming together to discuss common concerns, including concerns about who they are and what they should do.”² Publics allow others to share their beliefs and concerns within society with people who have similar ideals. Publics display people who want to be present and participate in forming societal norms and societal culture. Counterpublics, on the other hand, are defined by Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch as, “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourse to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”³ Publics recognize most viewpoints. Counterpublics form when there are viewpoints that differ from the general public. Public opinion is not always perceived as the right opinion. Counterpublics challenge the norms. Counterpublics are allowed to share ideas that may disagree with the public, but their ideas are still valid. Counterpublics go against the majority and allow there to be an argumentative discourse that effects change.

Both publics and counterpublics influence democracy. Citizens form the public to reinvent political power and authority by talking about topics relevant in society and contributing to the resolution of problems.⁴ Counterpublics are formed with a similar definition, but they are, “voicing the oppositional needs and values, not by appealing to the universality of the public.”⁵ Politics and counterpublics are both questioning the dominant public/group within society. Counterpublics challenge the public and democracy meant for everyone to have a voice.

² Catherine Helen Palczewski et al., *Rhetoric in civic life*. (State College, PA: Strata Pub, 2016): 266.

³ Ibid, 273.

⁴ Melanie Loehwing, and Jeff Motter, “Publics, Counterpublics, and the Promise of Democracy,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 42, no 3 (2009): 227. doi:10.1353/par.0.0037.

⁵ Ibid, 228.

Publics and counterpublics can be categorized as either weak or strong. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch define weak publics as, “publics whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision making,” while strong publics are defined as, “publics whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making.”⁶ (p. 271). The main difference between strong and weak publics is who has the power to make a decision or change a decision. An example of a strong public/counterpublic would be a politician, because he/she has the ability to create and change laws, something that people without power in our society cannot do.

Public Sphere and Public Screen

Publics and counterpublics are only useful if people have a place to communicate their concerns. This is where the public sphere comes into play. The public sphere is defined as a, “network for communicating information and points of view.”⁷ The ideal public sphere is open to all, addresses matters of general interest, and opinions are free from coercion.⁸ Free and open communication allows for honest opinions to be made by people because people will speak their mind if they feel comfortable and safe to do so. No one should feel forced to say something or agree with someone. Without a public sphere, there is no place for people to speak their minds. When Jurgen Habermas first came up with the idea of the public sphere he thought of it as a physical place such as coffee shops or diners. These are places where people can meet to discuss something as serious as politics or as lighthearted as the weather. serious such as politics or something more lighthearted such as the weather. We no longer view places like coffee shops as public spheres, instead, we look to digital spaces to engage in public discourse.

With the turn of the 21st century, public spheres have changed. Technology has made communicating with others easier than ever. Face-to-face interaction is no longer seen as the only means to communicate; that is a thing of the past. Public spheres have changed from coffee shops to online. No longer does there have to be a

⁶ Palczewski et al., 271.

⁷ Rood, 3.

⁸ Palczewski et al., 269.

physical destination to voice your concerns; with social media you can do it from anywhere. Constantinescu describes the effect technology has made on the public sphere: “in the past years, the public sphere has moved from a tangible form to a virtual one, via new media.”⁹ This leads us to a new concept: the public screen. The public screen is defined by DeLuca and Peeples as “public discussions [that] take place via “screens”-- television, computer, and the front page of newspapers.”¹⁰ We are in an age where we stare at screens all day, whether it’s our laptop, our phone, or our television. It has never been easier to voice your opinion. With a simple click, your thoughts can be out on the internet for anyone and everyone to see. Murray argues that social media “fosters a norm of perpetual participation.”¹¹ Through social media everyone’s voices can be heard, and no one wants to give up their voice. Now, both publics and counterpublics have the same opportunity to voice their opinions on various screens. Counterpublics benefit from the public screen because social media allows multiple counterpublics to become known.¹² Once something is on the internet it is there forever. This is beneficial to counterpublics because they can get their message out without the public suppressing it. After the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, I discovered multiple counterpublics that emerged on social media.

Divisive Discourse after Sandy Hook

The Sandy Hook Shooting was a new category of violence that

⁹ Sorana-Alexandra Constantinescu, “Public Sphere and New Media Case Study: WikiLeaks,” *Journal of Media Research* 5, no. 3 (2012): 95. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=83431236&login.asp&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁰ Kevin M. DeLuca, and Jennifer Peeples, “From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the ‘Violence’ of Seattle.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 2 (2002): 131. doi:10.1080/07393180216559.

¹¹ Billie Murray. “The Sphere, the Screen, and the Square: ‘Locating’ Occupy in the Public Sphere,” *Communication Theory* (1050-3293) 26, no. 4 (2016): 450–68. doi:10.1111/comt.12101.

¹² Enderle, T. “A rhetorical analysis of the public sphere through the #Metoo movement,” *Quest: A Journal of Undergraduate Research* 6 (2018): 64.

America had not seen before: the killing of young children between the ages of six and seven years old. I realize that the magnitude of this tragedy and its extensive ‘screen time’ allow for the formation of extremely divisive discourse. In this analysis, I divided the four articles I found into strong and weak publics and counterpublics. The table below illustrates how I categorized each article.

	Strong	Weak
Public	Obama and Gun Control Laws: politicians who disagree with Obama and support the gun laws already in place.	Conspiracy theorists/extreme Second amendment supporters: people like Alex Jones and John Hanlin believe Sandy Hook was a hoax to persuade the government to enact stricter gun laws.
Counterpublic	Obama and Gun Control Laws: Obama and other politicians who are advocating for stricter gun laws.	Private Pain for Newtown Parents: parents of Sandy Hook victims who are now using their newfound popularity to show their support for Obama and his plan for stricter gun laws.

All four of these groups have something in common: they used ‘screens’ to get their message out to the public. Screens have become our new public sphere. The virtual worldwide web has become the prime destination for people to let their metaphoric voices be heard. Due to the unprecedented nature of the shooting, it captivated the news. Sandy Hook occurred on a Friday and CNN broadcasted nothing but the coverage of the event the whole weekend. People then had to form their opinion about gun laws, and this, in turn, led to different publics and counterpublics.

The first article I analyzed, which I named “Private Pain for Newton Parents,” was based on the perspective of Sandy Hook’s parents. It was published one month after the tragedy occurred. These parents are still going through the grief process and trying to comprehend how this tragedy occurred. While grieving, the families found themselves, “caught between private healing and public participation, between the need to take care of themselves and the

pull of voices demanding that the tragedy produce public change.”¹³ Because of this, I categorize the parents of Sandy Hook as a weak counterpublic, Social media has put Sandy Hook parents on the front page of every newspaper. People heard nothing but “Sandy Hook” because their ‘public screens’ discussed nothing else. This constant exposure made people very knowledgeable about the tragedy, especially the idea that stricter gun laws could have prevented this tragedy. Many of the parents used their newfound popularity for public participation. Sandy Hook parents openly announced their support of Obama and his campaign for stricter gun laws. One uncle of a Sandy Hook student stated that “we [other Sandy Hook parents] have to make something positive come of this, and I feel a need to advocate for change right away.”¹⁴ Although it is admirable that some parents are trying to get gun laws to change, they are a weak counterpublic, which means that they have no power to make the change. They are doing what they can do though, which is attempting to use their newfound celebrity status to persuade strong publics to enact strict gun laws.

The second article, which I name “Obama and Gun Control Laws,” specifically outlined Obama’s plan to ask Congress for stricter gun laws. When Obama was reelected, he never planned to address stricter gun laws. He was originally part of the strong public, but Sandy Hook changed his mind. He watched alongside America as Sandy Hook’s parents were broadcasted on all news stations. He watched parents try to be strong as they described their child that they would never get to see again. Obama’s children were not the same age as the victims of Sandy Hook, but he could still relate as a parent. He could sympathize and mourn with the parents, and that made him decide to put “everything I’ve got” into the fight for stricter gun laws.¹⁵ This shift redefined Obama as part of the strong counterpublic. Obama now wants to change laws and because of his status as President, he has the power to do just that. Because of this

¹³ Peter Applebome, and Elizabeth Maker, “Private pain and public debate take toll on Newtown parents,” *The New York Times*, last modified January 20, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Peter Baker, and Michael Shear, “Obama to put ‘everything I’ve got’ into gun control,” *The New York Times*, last modified January 16, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/>

change in publics, Obama is an example of a complex public.

Although “Obama and Stricter Gun Laws” center around Obama, it also includes reactions from other politicians. From “Obama and Stricter Gun Laws,” I distinguished politicians who agreed with Obama and wanted stricter gun laws and those who disagreed with Obama and did not want change. The politicians who sided with Obama are considered a strong counterpublic. Senator of Pennsylvania and gun rights supporter Bob Casey stated he had to reevaluate his stance on gun laws after Sandy Hook. “I was shaken by it, and that caused me to think in a much more probing way about the policy.”¹⁶ Casey looked at Sandy Hook like Obama and the rest of the world did: with shock and sadness. “I think the ground shifted a lot,” Casey states, meaning that he was not the only politician to change his minds about the issue.

Some politicians, though, stuck to their original beliefs. These politicians support the Second Amendment. They could be labeled as a strong public. They argued that stricter gun laws would not prevent future school shootings: “President Obama is targeting the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding citizens instead of seriously addressing the real underlying causes of such violence.”¹⁷ As already stated, they have the power to create and change laws, but they support something that is already codified in the law. The Second Amendment is a part of our government because the public believed, and still believes, that Americans have a right to own guns.

The third and fourth articles represent a radical group: conspiracy theorists, which are extreme Second Amendment supporters. Radio host Alex Jones and Sheriff John Hanlin believe that the Sandy Hook School Shooting was a hoax. They both believe that Sandy Hook parents, “are actors in an elaborate scheme to enact stricter gun control laws.”¹⁸ This group would be considered a weak public. These conspiracy theorists believed the same thing as the politicians who did not want gun laws to change that “gun control is NOT the answer

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Matthew Haag, “Sandy Hook parents sue Alex Jones for defamation.” *The New York Times*, last modified April 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com>

to preventing heinous crimes like school shootings.”¹⁹ Conspiracy theorists have the laws they want, but the fact that the Second Amendment is being questioned makes this group so worried they start to deny reality. Their motive behind this theory is due to the fact that they did not want stricter gun laws, which goes along with the ideas of the public. Conspiracy theorists do not have the power to keep stricter gun laws from being enacted, but because of public screens, they are able to get their idea out into the world. I would never have even considered the idea that Sandy Hook did not happen, but it was able to become public knowledge due to screens.

Overall, this argument illustrates the different types of publics and counterpublics that emerged after the Sandy Hook School Shooting. Public screens play a huge role in getting the message of multiple publics and counterpublics out to the general public. Obama, due to his political power and the power of screens, was able to build awareness for the issue of gun violence, and also was able to promote the counterpublic of stricter gun laws. Publics like conspiracy theorists, who are extreme Second Amendment supporters, were able to share their radical opinions and perhaps even gain a following. These four publics and counterpublics are just a few of the countless publics and counterpublics that were formed after Sandy Hook.

Contribution to Rhetorical Theory

This analysis of four different articles relating to the Sandy Hook School Shooting reveals how screens publicize extremely polarized counterpublics. This analysis also reveals that a viewpoint can be categorized as a public and a counterpublic, such as Conspiracy Theorists/Extreme Second Amendment supporters. Conspiracy theorists ultimately do not want gun laws to change, so in those regards, they could be considered a part of the public opinion. However, the way the conspiracy theorists go about revealing their stance is extreme. To say that one of the deadliest school shootings was staged, or did not occur, is far-fetched. People can say all they want about Sandy Hook, but to say it did not happen is reaching far beyond public opinion. These conspiracy theorists could be

¹⁹ Robert Mackey, “Oregon sheriff shared Sandy Hook conspiracy theory on Facebook.” *The New York Times*, last modified October 2, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/>

considered an extremely polarized counterpublic. The only reason this polarized opinion is known is because of public screens. Public screens are how conspiracy theorists get their message out there, and it is how they have convinced other people to join their viewpoint. Guns are difficult to regulate. The Second Amendment: the right to bear arms has been a part of our Constitution since the beginning. There are other ways to argue that gun laws should not be changed. In *Obama and Stricter Gun Laws*, politicians came up with different arguments that did not attack the credibility of the Sandy Hook School shooting. Florida Senator Mark Rubio stated that “nothing the President [Obama] is proposing would have stopped the massacre at Sandy Hook.”²⁰ It is interesting that the outrageous claim that Sandy Hook was staged did not hurt the credibility of mainstream arguments to keep gun laws as they are. Even with Obama’s best efforts, stricter gun laws have not been enacted. The public has won out, and the counterpublics have not grown strong enough to change the public mind. Even though conspiracy theorists are extremely polarized publics with a far-out claim, they have succeeded in their goal: to keep gun laws the way they are.

Conclusion

In summary, I argue that by dividing multiple audiences into strong/weak publics and counterpublics I reveal how multiple counterpublics and small screens allow extremely divisive discourse in response to a complex social issue. Four New York Times articles published after that fateful day on December 14, 2012, were categorized in relation to the ever-present issue of stricter gun laws. Small screens such as television, internet, and the newspaper allowed multiple audiences to emerge after the tragic killings of 26 people, a majority who were children under the age of seven. The articles were emphasizing the viewpoints of family members of Sandy Hook victims, politicians for stricter gun laws (like Obama), politicians against laws, and conspiracy theorists who are extreme Second Amendment supporters. Although Sandy Hook occurred almost seven years ago, there has been no change to the Second Amendment. The counterpublics have not convinced the public to give up their rights to bear arms. Sandy Hook is an event that Americans will never

²⁰ Baker and Shear.

forget, and we must learn from our past in order to avoid a tragedy like that in the future.

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