



Published on Thursday, January 13, 2011 by YES! Magazine

Words Matter: How Media Can Build Civility or Destroy It

The media can, as we know, promote fear, hatred, and extremism. Can it also lead us to greater civility and more productive debate?

by Sarah van Gelder and Brooke Jarvis

"Just as media outlets have been used to create a pervasive sense of fear, they have also been used to convince people that conflict is inevitable. This leaves media consumers resigned to the notion that conflict will happen."

Those words could have been used to describe an increasingly hostile and provocative media in the United States. In fact, they were written to describe the use of the media to incite Hutus to slaughter their Tutsi neighbors in Rwanda, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths.

After Jared Loughner opened fire at a political event for Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in Tuscon, Arizona, attention quickly focused on the role that divisive and aggressive media may have played in his actions. Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik lamented "the vitriol that comes out of certain mouths about tearing down the government."

Members of the media were quick to defend themselves. Any discussion of possible political motives, the editors of the *National Review* wrote, constitute a "vile attempt to tar the opposition with the crimes of a lunatic so as to render illegitimate the views of about half of America."

The reasons for Loughner's actions are still unclear, and evidence suggests that he is mentally ill. We can't know at this point what role media provocation may have played in his decision. Indeed, his actions raise as many questions about our policies on gun ownership and mental illness as they do about our political climate.

At the very least, though, this should be a moment to reflect on the role that media can play in directing the political dialogue in this country. It can, as we know, promote fear, hatred, and extremism. Can it also lead us to greater civility and more productive debate?

Violence and the media

Sadly, the Arizona shooting is only the latest evidence that words do have consequences.

On July 18, Byron Williams was approached by California state police for driving erratically on Interstate 580. A firefight ensued-remarkably, all survived -- and Williams later admitted he had been on his way to attack the ACLU and the non-profit Tides Foundation. Why Tides?

According to Media Matters [5], Fox News commentator Glenn Beck had verbally attacked the Tides Foundation 29 times in the 18 months before the attempted shooting.

After then-vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin accused presidential candidate Barack Obama of "palling around with terrorists," the Secret Service reported a dramatic increase in

threats against Obama.

There are [many more stories](#) of threats and vandalism directed at private citizens and public officials, and the links to the violent rhetoric from right-wing media personalities and politicians is chilling. One Texas man, who called the office of Senator Debbie Stabenow and threatened "We'll get you ... like we did RFK; like we did MLK," [told](#) [8] FBI officers he was worried the government would take Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh off the air as a result of the "Fairness Doctrine."

Another way

The media can choose to provoke the least stable, most trigger-happy sectors of the population. Or it can choose to strengthen democracy, civility, and the rule of law. When the former Yugoslavia was erupting in ethnic cleansing and massacres, Macedonia's ethnically diverse population remained at peace. South Africa made the transition from Apartheid to majority rule largely without violence. In these and other places, media that highlighted the humanity of all involved played a role, [according to](#) the U.S.-based Search for Common Ground.

Instead of simply repeating the anger and allegations of each side-which may have the effect of deepening the conflict or inciting violence-journalists are in a unique position to uncover the causes of conflict and discover opportunities for finding common ground. The Conflict Resolution Network [advises](#) journalists to:

- Focus on the root causes of problems, not just positions or back-and-forth arguments.
- Ask questions that get people thinking about solutions and common ground: "What would be possible if this problem were fixed?" "What would it take to solve this problem?" "What is it that you *do* want?" "What would satisfy you?"
- Avoid simplistic divisions between good and bad. Don't encourage or sensationalize personal attacks.
- Report areas of agreement as well as disagreement.
- Think of emotions as symptoms that point to where the real problems are. What clashes of values, needs, or scarce resources are causing an emotional response?

Disagreement over policy is part of a healthy democracy, and conflict is human. But whipping up fear and hatred, demonizing those with conflicting opinions, using violent language, playing on the insecurity and distrust that so easily arise during difficult times-these are irresponsible and wrong. Especially when the media is capable of so much more.

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Article printed from www.CommonDreams.org

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