THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICS: ON THE PUBLIC ARGUMENTATION AROUND THE DEBATE ON GUNS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

The debate on gun control in the United States has been heated recently. In the public space, this debate has an important place in getting everyone involved. The development of social media and other technologies helped the construction of specific argumentative strategies related to what we call "digital communication". The debate around gun control can be divided into two different aspects which also are the two research questions of this article: a) Which argumentative strategies are used and why they specifically fit in this new communicational environment that is the web? b) How do these strategies compare with the more "classic" aspect of the legislative debate around gun control (the interpretation of the second amendment). The quick analysis of "communicational elements" such as banners and pictures used in social media shows that strategies of digital communication are often weaker and more "populist" than in the place of a classic political debate centered around legislative aspects. The relative instability of social media partly explains this.

Keywords : gun control, social media, debate, argumentation by analogy, NRA

Introduction

The debate around gun ownership in the United States has attracted more interest lately because of the recent mass shootings in the last few years although it is not a new issue. More than a simple debate about guns and violence, the problem of weapons in the United States raises the question of law and traditions in a country where "the right to carry" is legally constructed in the Second Amendment. This reference to law is at the center of the problematic of gun control as both pro and anti-gun supporters refer to specific words of the second amendment in different interpretations. Therefore, 'words' and 'context' are at the center of the analysis in public argumentation because of the many possible assumptions and instrumentation they undergo. More recently, the debate has become increasingly a matter of public concern with the help of social media. In addition to the debate on the words of the Second Amendment,

social media is a perfect playground for different organizations to maintain their influence and views by using specific communicational strategies especially in the digital environment. Social media has helped to bring every word to the public space.

There are thus two main aspects of the debate around gun control: first, the legislative process that has more to do with political strategies and larger organizations involved in the debate. Secondly, there is the relatively free and open environment of social media that allows citizens to interact and play an important role in argumentation for or against gun control. Both aspects of this issue can be analyzed by looking at typical strategies of public argumentation. For instance, argumentation by analogy is used by some pro-gun supporters when they cite Switzerland as an example of large gun ownership without shootings in social media. Interestingly, we can also point out that both groups agree that there is a problem with guns in the United States but they do not agree on the way to solve this problem. Hence, they do provide different argumentation from termination.

The goal of this paper is thus to look at the problematic of gun-control from a communicational perspective. Whether they discuss the interpretation of the Second Amendment or other more emotional aspects of the problem, advocates and opponents to gun-control use specific argumentative strategies. After a brief explanation of the issue and how social media has played an increasingly important role in public communication, examples of use of these strategies will be analyzed deeper in order to answer two questions: a) How are typical argumentative strategies used through social media? b) How are the words of the Second Amendment interpreted by both sides of the debate? A strong focus will be put into the specific environment that is social media and how it has changed the way the debate is brought to the public.

1. General background and main actors of the debate

1.1. American "particularism"

Although the debate on gun-control is quite "democratized" in the United States, organizations, the media and political parties play an important role in the construction of argumentative strategies. These actors influence how the debate takes place in the public space. The first particularity of the debate is that

it centers mostly around one little part of the problematic (but that has a strong symbolic value): mass shootings. They are certainly the most visible events linked with the issue of gun-control. Most of the discussions are frequently centered around this problem because it is also the most reported by the media. Statistically, mass shootings are defined as such when they result in at least four victims (it means injuries or deaths). However, by taking this definition, mass shootings are only a small part of deaths and injuries related to firearms. According to an article of *The Guardian* about gun related deaths in the United States in 2017, only 1,5% of the deaths that occurred that year because of weapons were mass shootings. The rest consists of homicides, suicides and accidents (Mona Chalabi 2017). It is thus important to point this out: the media have an important role in building the debate around gun violence. If we counted the amount of time suicides (which represent two thirds of casualties by weapons) are covered compared to mass shootings we would probably get a largely unbalanced result. Mass shootings are used as symbols for argumentation even though they are not the biggest problem statistically. Argumentative strategies that relate to this issue are thus marked by highly emotional and passionate feelings.

In addition to this focus on one specific aspect of the problem, the debate on gun-control is also notable in how organizations and individuals are involved in argumentative strategies. The main actors of the debate can simplistically be divided into pro and anti-gun control although they are not homogeneous groups. However, the United States has lobbies that are well organized when they must protect their interests and build a symbolic argumentation that speaks for the whole group. The main lobby that can be identified as reluctant to more gun control is the National Rifle Association (NRA). Generally portrayed as a conservative association in the media, it was founded in 1871 and seeks to "protect the second amendment" as stated in its website. More generally, it organizes rallies and other events that seek to promote and inform the public on gun ownership. It is also a commercial organization that supports the large market of firearms in the United States. At the other side of the picture, we have the CSGV (coalition to stop gun violence) as one of the numerous associations that want to open the debate about gun control. These two examples are only here to provide an idea of how the typical arguments of both sides are set. Therefore, it is necessary to understand that the analysis of the arguments is not only based on these two associations (or lobbies) as interlocutors of public

communication. This paper focuses on the general trends that regulate the debate in the context of public communication although these two broad groups are never homogeneous.

In their insightful essay on organizational social marketing, C.B. Bhattacharya and Kimberly D. Elsbach (2002) studied the importance of the process of identification/disidentification to an organization by focusing specifically on the NRA. They argue that people who disidentify with the NRA display specific behavioral traits and are more prone to talk publicly about the matter than people who are simply neutral (Bhattacharya & Elsbach 2002: 34). In other words, negative reactions can be displayed when looking at patterns of dissociation by advocates of gun-control. As a result, specific strategies are used in relation to these organizations. With the help of social media, it becomes easier to display publicly one's belonging to a group or organization. Some of these visual strategies will be further explained when looking at examples of attacks towards the NRA. Most of the examples of argumentative strategies relate to this process of identification with one organization.

1.2. Social Media and the political debate as public communication

In order to analyze this issue by using communicational theories, it is necessary to reflect on the different aspects of social media and how it does affect the political debate (around guns or other matters). This brief chapter aims to answer the simple question: How can the content of social media be considered a matter of public communication? A whole essay would not be enough to reply accurately to this question but the most important aspects of the relationship between social media and public communication need to be clarified.

The first element that needs to be highlighted is the natural exposure and the "blurriness" of the border between "privacy" and "public" in social media. In his essay on how digitalization will affect historiography from a communicational perspective, Christian Schwarzenegger talks about the "hybridization and amalgamation of private and public spheres on the web" (Schwarzenegger 2012: 119). In other words, it is becoming increasingly harder to differentiate what is the matter of public and what has to do with one's private life or opinions. This element is crucial in understanding how the social media acts as a carrier of public content.

The result of this lack of clear differentiation has already had an impact on law and how politics use social media as a playground for influencing the population. For instance, laws trying to protect one's "privacy" have been increasingly promoted to counter the use of private data from large companies such as Google, Facebook or Apple. In the United States, the first bill that sought to protect individuals' privacy online was the Online Privacy Protection Act of 2002 in California. However, what is interesting in this bill, is that it does not forbid any website to collect private information from the consumers[1]. In other words, Internet is a public space by definition. It has no boundaries between nations (unless it is strictly controlled by the state) and collects information from individuals. As a result, all users of social media and Internet in general are included in this gigantic communicational space.

Lastly, it is not surprising to see that recently, personal data and politics have been also increasingly connected. The Presidential Election of 2016 in the United States is probably the first one that generated so much controversy about the use of personal data in social media. Cambridge Analytica (a data analysis company) was accused to use personal data collected from users of Facebook to influence the election of Donald Trump. This issue has been more than a simple attack on Trump's administration. For many observers, it is also the proof that politicians are now well accustomed to social media and its possibilities. The high presence of Trump in social media has attracted both criticism and praise from his supporters. Overall, this case illustrates how social media is at the center of a fight for political influence. Not only argumentative strategies can be useful but also personal data and algorithms that can be controlled in a digital environment.

1.3. Corpus for the analysis

The examples of argumentative strategies that will be used for the analysis are mostly taken from the websites of the two main organizations involved in the debate: the CGSV and the NRA. Additionally, some Facebook posts that were widely shared are also taken into account to look at the importance of social media in the debate. Such sources demonstrate the weaknesses and limitations of argumentation although they are made public by the nature of

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[1] Whole text of the bill available online at:
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=BPC&sectionNum=22575

social media. These sources reveal how easy it is for organizations and individuals to use specific strategies in the public space even if they have weaknesses.

2. Strategies of argumentation

2.1. Pro-Gun attempt of argumentation by analogy Online

The basic scheme behind public interaction can be summarized easily. To take political decisions (in the case of the debate around guns), one agent A must convince agent B that he is going to take the right decision as he needs agent B to fulfill his goals. Therefore, arguments are needed and especially in the case of political debates such as this one. This typical scheme of interaction is in fact more complex in real situations, but it is useful to oppose two arguments or simply to look at how they are constructed to achieve one agent's goals.

One of the most common types of loci in public argumentation is called "argumentation by analogy". As suggested by its name, arguments that use this process try to demonstrate that a similar decision was taken somewhere else with positive results. In the case of pro-guns in the United States, one argument that often arises is the one citing Switzerland as an example and model of safety with a large portion of the population owning guns. In this strategy, arguments must find what is called a "functional genus" in order to demonstrate the possible analogy between two different spaces. In this case, large gun-ownership is the functional genus. Janet E. Rosenbaum's essay centers around the idea of "gun utopias" (as seen by pro-gun supporters) in Switzerland and Israel. One of the first problem that is pointed out in Rosenbaum's paper is the numerical difference between the large U.S. population and the one of Switzerland and Israel which is more than forty times lower (Rosenbaum 2012, 47). This difference already generates some questions about the analogy. Even though statistics may show some similarities, the situations are difficult to compare because of this difference. As a result, the business of weapons in Switzerland is clearly not as massive as it is in the United States.

Subsequently, Rosenbaum debunks many myths about gun ownership in Switzerland and Israel and how gun advocates use them wrongly without supporting their claims. For example, she demonstrates (with statistical

evidence) that the rate of firearms by inhabitant was lower for Switzerland than what it was for the United States in 2007: 31-60 firearms per inhabitant in Switzerland against 83-97 in the United States (Rosenbaum 2012: 49). Although these numbers are more than ten years old, the situation is believed to be quite similar nowadays. Also, Switzerland has decided in the last decades to reduce the size of its army. As a result, the number of weapons per household has also probably fallen. Finally, Rosenbaum attacks the myth of the supposed tradition of guns in Switzerland. She points out that not all men who have accomplished their military service keep their weapons at home. In fact, only cantons that do not possess local gun depots requires reservists to keep their rifle in their household (Rosenbaum 2012, 53).

Figure 1: Example of a picture shared in social media about gun-control in Switzerland

(https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/dare-to-compare/)

In this example, the comparison focuses on the crime rate of Switzerland and Honduras. The analogy is again relatively biased as it does not take any contextual information into account. The populist element[2] is notable in the choice of words as it reads that "citizens are required to own guns in Switzerland" which is obviously wrong. Argumentation by analogy has thus an inherent populist element in this case. Social media helps to make such analogies public and they are likely to be taken as "correct information" from people who identify with the NRA.

Therefore, the use of argumentation by analogy can reveal many problems related to false or inaccurate information. The main weakness of such strategies

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[2] A « populist element » in the context of public argumentation refers to something that often seeks a strong reaction from supporters without necessarily doing any research. Populist argumentation can also be seen as a simplification of more complicated situations to gain support from a large audience.

in the case of gun control is that it tends to ignore the specificities of the American nation and that they need contextual information to be reinforced at first. These are the same specificities that are brought up by pro-gun supporters when they talk about the second amendment as an American tradition. The laws in Switzerland and Israel are in fact misinterpreted maybe deliberately as the public has no knowledge about these countries policies. In all cases, argumentation by analogy requires some research from the public to look at its feasibility in another context. Another point that is always ignored because it is overshadowed by mass shootings: suicide with firearms. Rosenbaum highlights the important rate of gun related suicide in Switzerland compared to other European countries (Rosenbaum 2012, 51). But again, the United States' debate focuses more around the problematic of mass shootings. As a result, argumentation by analogy is inherently limited on one aspect of the problem in this case. Moreover, this example of simple argumentation by analogy reveals that the contextual information about other countries is ignored.

2.2. Public argumentation and attacks to opponents from Anti-Gun associations Online

In such a strong topic, there is inevitably an emotional dimension around the debate as pointed out earlier. The families of the victims of mass shootings often take part in public rallies. The emphasis on the victims (and especially children) is often used in political and public communication. For instance, in the case of wars, images of children or even just the mention of young casualties is almost always a clincher to generate the interest of the audience. In the case of gun control, it is used by both sides even though the anti-gun supporters are more likely to use this strategy for their purpose.

More recently, this emotion-based argumentation has been criticized due to the last shootings. Some ironically described the "thoughts and prayers" reaction as useless and that political action had to be taken. The CSGV argumentation as displayed on its website is precisely focusing highly on the more political side of the matter. Its main target is the NRA and the influence of the lobby on gun policies in the United States. The strategy aims to generate disidentification among the public by using specific symbols. The following example taken from the CSGV's website home page shows how the emotional component can be both highlighted and criticized by advocates of gun-control:

Figure 2 One of the banners that appears on CSGV's website https://www.csgv.org/ (March 2018)
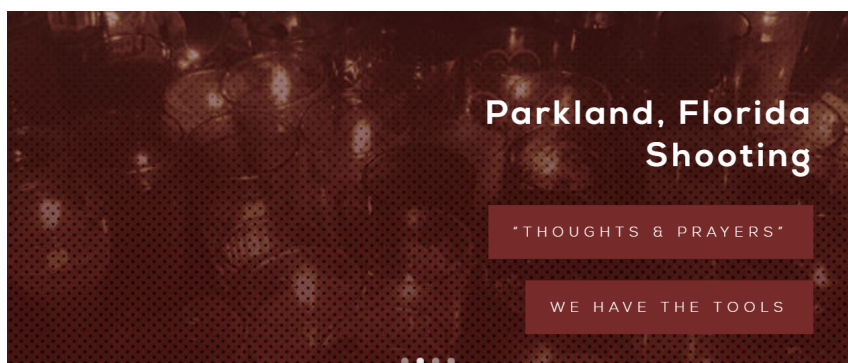
The example of the banner is a great one because it points out what was said earlier. The emotion-based reaction of "thoughts and prayers" is clearly defined as useless while they affirm that they "have the tools" (political tools in this case) to change the gun policy. In this regard, the CSGV is somehow using the argumentation from authority strategy as they place themselves as the owners of the solution. Again, they are trying to convince their interlocutors. By focusing on the legal aspect of the matter, gun-control advocates want to demonstrate that their action is not only motivated by emotional considerations. In this regard, their communication differs strongly from the one that was seen in the first example in which false information and myths were brought up in social media.

In this other example, the csgv aims a NRA figure that allegedly used money from Russia for his campaign:

Figure 3: Another banner on csgv's website https://www.csgv.org/ (March 2018
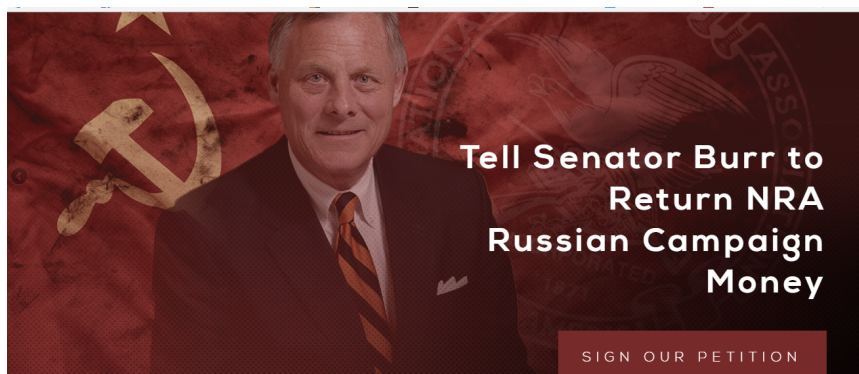
The CSGV goes further by stating that Russia directly financed the NRA. By doing so, the CSGV tries to destroy the credibility of the NRA by attacking its patriotic nature. The NRA plays on its patriotic identity and often positions itself as the defender of the patriotic values of the United States and the preservation of the second amendment. Visually, the communist flag is an important device here. The CSGV deliberately uses a wrong flag to increase the fear in the public

as it is commonly associated with the enemy of the Cold War. Again, think about the agent A tries to convince agent B here. As the NRA supporters are mainly said to be Republican, the CSGV aims to demonstrate to the patriots that the NRA's strategy is not honest and contrary to their beliefs. Their aim is thus to deconstruct the identification of many individuals to the NRA who do it because of patriotism.

Similar to the CSGV, NRA (at least on its website) has a similar take on the debate as it also attacks its opponents and the gun control advocates. One of the most common arguments of the NRA is also present in the home page of their website. According to gun advocates, arming citizens also increases the possibility of direct action against an armed threat to the community. Similarly, to the CSGV, the NRA uses the emotional factor for its argumentation, as shown in figure 4.

Figure 4: One of the banners appearing on the home page of the NRA website

website https://home.nra.org/ (March 2018)

Here, the NRA suggests that arming schools make them safer and more likely to resist any shooter. Mass shootings happening on schools have been largely at the center of the media and therefore the NRA also focuses on this dimension.

Looking at both sides arguments in the perspective of public communication, we can see the main types of loci used for policy-making. Typically, the locus for final cause is used by the CSGV and the NRA. The main common point between them is that they agree on the goal but not on the instruments to achieve this goal. They both want to save lives (particularly in the mass shootings) but they have different propositions on how to stop mass murders. In the "Y" structure of the locus for final cause, the NRA provides the typical counter argument to the idea that gun owning should be reduced in the United States. The endoxon for the NRA can be defined as follows: protection

from mass shooters can be provided by guns and well-trained citizens. The maxim would be that citizens are not trained and cannot impede gun violence**.** As the final conclusion to its argument, the NRA supports that gun control is not necessary to stop violence it shouldn't be harder for citizens to own a gun. Therefore, guns should not be banned. The endoxon plays a crucial role here in these strategies as it is precisely the first element in which the CSGV does not agree. According to them, guns are the source of all violence. Their maxim would say that reducing the number of guns will reduce gun violence as a result. Then, they need to ban guns or providing restricting laws to reduce crime as a conclusion.

Although it is also possible to take some arguments as loci from termination and setting-up, it is the notion of "goal" in the locus from final cause that matters here because both strategies have precisely the same goal but with different instruments. These arguments are put here in a simplistic manner to follow the typical schemes of public argumentation, but they are obviously more refined that this. However, as shown by the websites of the two organizations, short and concise argumentation like the one explained in the Y scheme is needed to catch the eye of the public. This is also why these strategies have many weaknesses and are often considered to be at the source of many populist ideologies because of its simplicity.

2.3. The Second Amendment and the Debate Around Words

At the hearth of the debate also stands the interpretation of the second amendment. For gun advocates, the second amendment is an undebatable right to bear arms in all circumstances because it is how America was thought to be by its first known figure. For gun-control advocates, this interpretation of the Second Amendment does not take the context into consideration.

This debate shows perfectly how some specific words can be understood differently and used in public argumentation. In another aspect, the Second Amendment also raises more questions than just interpretations of words. According to Jack N. Rakove in his essay about the book Arming America, the interpretation of the Second Amendment has been centered mostly on words, but the behavioral study of Arming America also matters significantly. Rakove (2002) argues that it is idealistic to think that the militia present in the Revolution was a militia of all adult men (Rakove 2002, 209). In other words,

the Second Amendment never encouraged the whole population to own a gun according to Rakove's analysis.

The importance of context in public communication is thus crucial in understanding words differently. The opponents of the Second Amendment argument could for instance emphasize the fact that only men were able to carry at the time whereas pro-gun associations also encourage women to carry to defend themselves. The construction of an argumentative strategy based on law and tradition has to be supported by contextual evidence in order to be stronger. Nevertheless, the idea that these arguments cannot be supported in another way is not necessarily true. Culture and tradition also play an important role here. Gun advocates and NRA supporters do not automatically need a justification other than "it's part of the American tradition". The right to bear arms is here seen as a fundamental act that must never be violated even to deal with issues of violence. This process can be compared to the one happening in Jamaica where God has a tremendous importance in regulating natural or human disasters. In such cultures, there is no need for regulation as it would go against the law of God. The Constitution of the United Stated is thus unwavering and does not need to be changed according to the pro-guns' arguments. Any attack to the Constitution would go against the ideal of the nation. At the opposite, gun-control advocates support the idea that stricter laws on guns would be a simple adaptation of the Constitution to the contemporary issues. They also point out the fact in many occasions that the founder of the United probably did not think that firearms would be that destructive and accurate as they are nowadays (Rakove 2002, 206). Totally opposed argumentative strategies can thus be based on the same piece of writing but with different objectives and instrumentations of words and context. Culture and tradition always matter in policy-making for conservatives. In this case, argumentation of pro-guns suggest that tradition is more important and that it should be respected no matter how.

The main difference that exists between law and online sources in the debate is that the first is stable and the latter is not. Quoting Ankerson (2012), Schwarzenneger also points out this crucial difference. Websites and posts are inherently unstable objects (Ankerson 2012: 124). As a result, argumentative strategies that rely on the legal aspect have more to do with interpretation of a stable public object (in this case the Second Amendment) while websites and posts that focus on social aspects and results of gun control are more connected

with the emotional component of the debate. For the public, it is likely that the latter is much more valuable although the NRA and pro-gun advocates highlight the importance of the Second Amendment for the American culture.

Conclusion

By looking at websites from the two sides of the debate, some similarities in the argumentative strategies appear. It seems clear that both guns and anti-guns advocates try to attack directly their opponents. The former relies on tradition and the importance of having well-trained citizens while the latter focus on the casualties and the lobbying done by their opponents. Their websites try to catch the public's eye by concise and short sentences/pictures containing key words. For instance, anti-gun advocates took the phrase "thoughts and prayers" as a key element because it is highly present in social media. There is also a strong emphasis on children on both sides. As seen earlier, children are mentioned one of the banners from the NRA website saying that their "mission" is to "protect children".

The similarities between the two sides of argumentation only exist on what key words and general themes are used but of course, they have different visions of the problem. For gun advocates, guns can be used to protect the population if citizens are well-trained because they rely on tradition and law of the Second Amendment. According to anti-gun advocates guns and their proliferation are the main issue. They all have the same goal to reduce casualties. In the locus for termination kind of scheme, the instruments used to reach the goal are different with anti-gun advocates arguing that more strict policies will reduce casualties. Taking in the perspective of the locus from termination and setting-up, the strategies differ even more because they have already polarized view on the initial situation. For example, an argument that has not been exposed earlier in this paper and that is often used by conservative in general (one picture especially used in social media) involves the numbers of death and their different causes in the United States:

Figure 5: Picture often shared in social media among conservatives showing the causes of death in the U.S. in 2016


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CAUSES OF DEATH in the USA in 2016
      (through June 15)

Abortion:                       501,325
Heart Disease:                  282,038
Cancer:                         271,640
Tobacco:                        160,680
Obesity:                        140,939
Medical Errors:                 115,439
Stroke:                          61,106
Lower Respiratory Disease:       65,623
Accident (unintentional):        62,460
Hospital Associated Infection:   45,449
Alcohol:                         45,908
Diabetes:                        35,114
Alzheimer's Disease:             42,943
Influenza/Pneumonia:             25,354
Kidney Failure:                  19,631
Blood Infection:                 15,363
Drunk Driving:                   15,521
Unintentional Poisoning:         14,580
All Drug Abuse:                  11,479
Prescription Drug Overdose:       6,886
Murder by gun:                    5,276
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Found in the fact checking website https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/causes-of-death-2016/ (March 2018)

The same picture is often seen with more direct and ironic argumentation:

This example shows how different visions of the initial situation (for the locus from termination and setting-up) exist. What these pictures suggest is that gun-control is far from being the most important matter (according to conservatives). It is not surprising to see abortion in first and murders by gun in the end. Visually, the argumentative strategy raises the question of importance in policy-making. Of course, this kind of argumentation is found more often from individuals than from associations because of its evident weaknesses and lack of fact-checking. However it is a great example of different visions of an initial situation that generate totally opposed and more violent debates about this matter. Gun advocates try to justify their positions by using (supposed) rationality as opposed to the emotion-based argumentation of anti-gun supporters.

Fact-checking seems to be a central element in this debate as social media has made possible the access to public speech for virtually anyone. The weaknesses that have been found in both sides are often linked to false

information or deliberate lack of interest for some aspects of the problem. Gun advocates avoid talking about suicides for example. It is clear that populist ideas generate from these kinds of strategies and it is due to the interest of many people in the matter and the way it is portrayed in the media with a focus on mass shootings. Social media makes it easy to quickly react to mass shootings by key words and sentences such as "thoughts and prayers" while it also allows individuals to repost and share quick and simplistic argumentative strategies that often lack contextualization.

To summarize the results of this brief review of public communication about gun-control in the public space of the US, the following can be said: a) Typical argumentative strategies used in social media include: argumentation of termination and argumentation by analogy without fact checking. It relies mainly upon emotional aspects of the debate. b) Argumentative strategies that are used in connection to the interpretation of the Second Amendment precisely try to develop contextual considerations. They appear to be more legally and socially motivated. Gun advocates often use it as an argument as tradition and the "American particularism" are emphasized by organizations and individuals who support the right to bear arms. On the contrary, advocates for gun-control point out the differences between the current American society as opposed to the one in which the Second Amendment was written. The public debate centers around different communicational processes depending on which aspect of the issue is explored.

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