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In Social Media and Opinion Pages, Newtown Sparks Calls for Gun Reform

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

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Overview

The shooting rampage in a Connecticut elementary school last week triggered a conversation different from those that followed other recent U.S. gun tragedies. In addition to an outpouring of emotion, social media and the opinion pages of newspapers were used immediately to tackle the polarizing issue of the nation's gun laws, according to a special report by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.

On both blogs and Twitter, the gun policy discussion accounted for almost 30% of the social media conversation examined by PEJ, exceeding even prayers and expressions of sympathy in the three days following the December 14 massacre that left 26 dead at the Sandy Hook Elementary School. And, within that discussion, calls for stricter gun control measures exceeded defenses of current gun laws and policies by more than two to one.

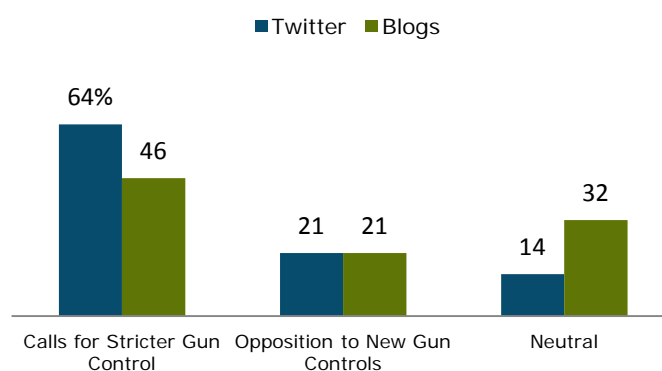
This social media response is far different than what occurred following the January 8, 2011 shooting outside a Tucson Arizona mall that killed six and badly wounded Congresswomen Gabrielle Giffords. In the first three days after that tragedy, the discussion about our country's gun laws was barely present – representing just 3% of the social media conversation in all. Instead, bloggers and Twitter users posted mainly about the heated political discourse in our country and its possible relationship to the shooting. Similarly, in the social media response to the shooting of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin in February 2012, outrage at the alleged perpetrator and the role of race in the incident overshadowed questions surrounding gun rights and Florida's Stand Your Ground statute.

The heavy emphasis on gun policy—and support for stricter laws and enforcement—also played out in the nation's newspaper opinion pages in the days immediately after the Newtown tragedy. An examination of op-ed columns and editorials in 11 of the nation's newspapers from December 15-18 found that the discussion of gun laws was far more prevalent than other aspects of the tragedy, such as mental health or even sympathy for the victims. And, while just a snapshot of newspaper opinion pieces around the country, the tone was clear: those calling for stricter gun control outnumbered those defending current laws by a margin of more than 6 to 1.

The tragedy was also a top news event on YouTube. The most watched video by far, seen more than seven million times in the five days following that tragedy, was President Obama's initial four-minute

Calls for Gun Law Reform Dominate Social Media

Percentage of Assertions



Date Range: December 14 (10 am ET) – December 17 (noon ET), 2012
PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon Technology

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[statement](#) from the White House which he delivered hours after the news had broken, fighting off tears as he spoke.

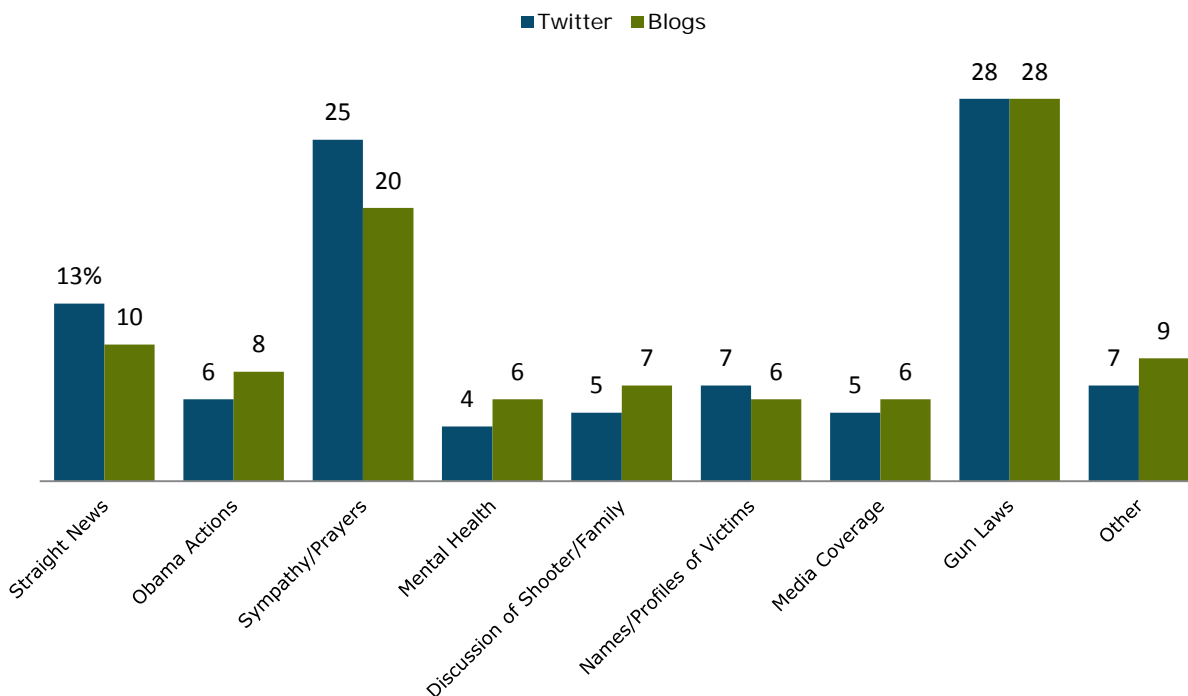
These are some of the findings from a special PEJ report, which used several methods to examine different parts of the media reaction to the Connecticut shooting in the subsequent three days. For examining the response on Twitter and blogs, PEJ used a mix of traditional human coding with technology from the firm Crimson Hexagon. For the study of newspaper editorials and op-eds, researchers coded each of the relevant articles found in a sample of eleven newspapers spread throughout the country.

The Social Media Response

From the news of the shooting on Friday afternoon through noon on Monday, the discussion on blogs and Twitter paralleled each other closely. The discussion about our country's gun laws ranked first on each platform, accounting for 28% of the overall conversation about the tragedy. And, the focus remained remarkably steady over the course the three days, already registering at a quarter of the conversation on each platform by midnight on Friday.

Storylines on Twitter and Blogs

Percentage of Assertions



Date Range: December 14 (10 am ET) – December 17 (noon ET), 2012
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What stood out even more was the degree to which the users advocating for more gun control were more numerous than those defending the current gun laws. On Twitter, the gap was three-to-one: 64%

of the gun law conversation called for reform versus 21% that defended gun rights and 14% that was neutral. Similarly, 46% of blogs posts during this time called for reform while 21% opposed them and 32% took neither side.

Gun control has only risen to the top of social media discussion a few times over the last several years, according to PEJ's New Media Index. But in those cases, gun rights advocates have been as likely as those calling for stricter controls to carry the conversation. Following the [2010 Supreme Court ruling](#) limiting cities' and states' ability to prohibit gun ownership, for example, the vast majority of blog posts came from cheering gun rights supporters.

In the case of the Connecticut shooting, it was those calling for reform that carried the strongest voice.

“Gun law is just ridiculous, no man, regardless of their history, should be allowed to walk into a shop and purchase an object built to kill,” tweeted @bucketmunt.

The Knowledgeaction blog offered a list of demands to be made, including, “The activation mechanism must be designed to be defeated within an electronic protective fence” and “All schools and other designated areas must have such an electronic fence.”

And from @Neiley83, came “Don't pray, change your looney gun laws.”

Those that did defend guns rights tended to make the point that more laws would not solve the problem. “You really think a gun regulation bill is going to stop criminals? Hate to break it to you, but they're not afraid of breaking the law,” tweeted @NicoletFinger.

Expressions of sympathy ranked second on both platforms—25% on Twitter and 20% on blogs. On Twitter, these posts were heavily concentrated on the day of the tragedy with sentiments like “Thoughts and prayers to those involved the shooting that just happened in #Connecticut. Children should never be harmed,” from @JewelsAutomatic.

In contrast to other breaking news events like Superstorm Sandy or the Arab uprisings, the sharing of facts and information proved to be a lesser component of this social media narrative: only 13% of the conversation on Twitter and 10% on blogs, very little of which came from eyewitness accounts. Some of this could be tied to the confusion surrounding details of the event as outlets of all kinds [reported inaccuracies](#).

No other aspects of the event—from President Obama's public speeches to mental health issues to the assessment of the media's performance in covering the story—amounted to more than 8% of the conversation on either platform.

The heavy and immediate emphasis on gun laws stands in contrast to the social media conversation following the Tucson and Trayvon Martin shootings. While each of these events had its own tragic elements, the issue of gun control was inherent in all of them. But, the volume and intensity of the discussion in the Newtown case far exceeded that of the Tucson or Martin shootings.

In the three days following the Arizona killing spree, politics filled the social media space. Discussion of the state of political discourse in our country, including its role as a potential catalyst for the shooting, accounted for 34% of the discussion on blogs and twitter combined¹. Straight facts about the shooting were a close second at 29%. Gun law on the other hand drove a mere 3% of the social media response – the smallest of any of the categories studied.

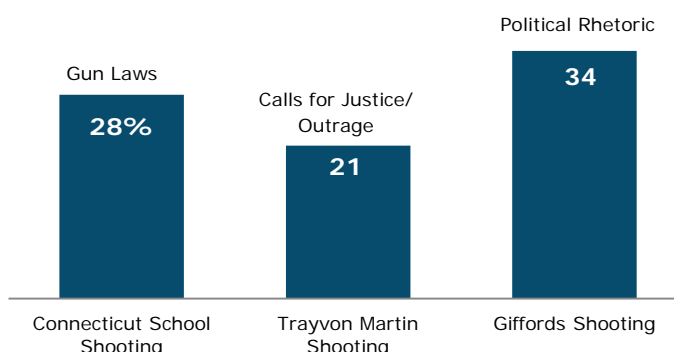
News of the Trayvon Martin shooting came to the public's

attention differently. While the shooting occurred on February, 26, 2012 it was roughly three weeks later, when the 911 tapes were released, that the story exploded on Twitter. When it did, outrage at the Martin's alleged killer, George Zimmerman, accounted for 21% of the conversation from March 17-28,

2012, followed by sympathy for the victim at 19%. The issue of gun laws, on the other hand, and specifically Florida's Stand Your Ground statute which gives citizens the right to use deadly force when they believe they are being threatened, accounted for just 7%. On blogs, the gun issue generated a little more attention, 11%, but was still surpassed by other aspects: namely the role of race in the shooting and outrage at Zimmerman.

Top Responses on Twitter to Recent Shooting Events

Percentage of Assertions



Date Ranges: For the Connecticut shooting, the dates were December 14-17, 2012. For the Martin shooting, the dates were March 17-28, 2012. For the Giffords shooting, the dates were January 8-11, 2011.

Note: The data for the Gabriel Giffords Shooting is from Twitter and blogs combined PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon Technology

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Top Themes Online Following the 2011 Tucson Shooting

Percentage of Assertions in Twitter and Blogs Combined

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Role of Political Rhetoric | 34% |
| Straight News | 29 |
| Obama's Actions/Speech | 16 |
| Wishes/Prayers/Vigils | 8 |
| Gun Laws | 3 |

Date Range:

January 8-11, 2011

PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon Technology

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Newspaper Opinion Pages

In addition to the social media analysis, PEJ examined the opinion pages of a mix of 11 newspapers of different sizes from across the country ranging from the New York Times to the Orlando Sentinel to the Traverse City Record-Eagle. Here, gun control was an even more dominant element of the conversation

¹ Analysis of the social media response to the Tucson shooting combined Twitter and blogs into one measure.

about the Newtown massacre than in social media. And nearly all of the gun control opinion pieces called for reform.

Overall, 33 of the 51 op-eds and editorials written about the shooting (65%) focused on the gun law element. And the vast majority of them, 25, advocated for stricter gun control or enforcement. Just four of them defended current gun rights while four others discussed the issue in general rather than taking sides.

The breakdown holds true for op-eds and editorials separately. Looking first at op-eds, which are the signed opinion columns reflecting the views of their authors, 18 of the 31 pieces discussed gun law with calls for reform outnumbering supporters of the status quo by 14-to-3 (One op-ed talked about the issue in neutral terms).

One such call came from the New York Times' Nicholas Kristof who wrote: "We even regulate toy guns, by requiring orange tips—but lawmakers don't have the gumption to stand up to the National Rifle Association."

"Really guns don't kill people," declared Richard Cohen of the Washington Post. "Apathy does."

An opposing view came from Larry Pratt, the executive director of the Gun Owners of America, who wrote in USA Today that, "Hopefully, the Connecticut tragedy will be the tipping point after which a rising chorus of Americans will demand elimination of the gun-free zone laws that are in fact criminal-safe zones."

The other aspects of the tragedy that got some attention in the op-ed columns were sympathy for the victims (four pieces in all), mental health (three in all) and an assessment

Newspaper Editorials and Op-eds about the CT Shooting Focused on Gun Control

Number of Articles

| Subject | Editorials | Op-eds | Total |
|-------------------------------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| Calls for Gun Reform | 11 | 14 | 25 |
| Opposition to New Gun Control | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Gun Law in General | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Sympathy/Prayers | 5 | 4 | 9 |
| Mental Health | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Media Coverage | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Other | 0 | 4 | 3 |
| Total | 20 | 31 | 51 |

Date Range:

December 15-18, 2012

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Who Showed up on TV News

When a major news event occurs, the lineup of guest commentators and experts on television news programs helps dictate the tenor and topics of coverage. Some of this is based on programming decisions, but some is also dependent on who agrees to appear. PEJ analyzed more than 200 guest appearances related to the Newtown tragedy on the three cable news networks (CNN, Fox News and MSNBC) as well as five broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox and PBS) from Friday, December 14 through the morning of Monday, December 17.

The type of expert suggests a relatively wide range of voices discussing a variety of elements related to the tragedy. Political officials and law enforcement or school security professional appeared most frequently (47 and 46 appearances, respectively). Next came mental health and children's health workers (32) and journalists and authors (31). Another 16 experts were either mass killing survivors or relatives of those killed or attacked, 13 were academics and 11 were members of the clergy. Sixteen in all represented advocacy groups connected to gun policy.

Whether by programming decisions or guest availability, the predominance of voices calling for stricter gun laws found in social media also seems to be reflected in the cable and network guests who appeared during this time. Among the 16 appearances from individuals tied to gun law advocacy groups, those on the side of gun control were twice as prevalent as those representing gun rights groups (11 versus 5). Of the 47 political officials who appeared, 32 were Democrats, 12 were Republicans and three were Independents including New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who is a vocal gun control advocate. It is worth noting that many of the politicians who made the television rounds were from Connecticut, a blue state that has two Democrat senators, a Democratic governor and an all Democratic Congressional delegation. And, on the December 16 edition of NBC's "Meet the Press," host David Gregory made a point of saying that none of the Senate's 31 pro-gun rights senators would agree to appear on the show.

of the media's performance (two).

The unsigned editorials, which represent the institutional voice of the papers, concentrated even more on the gun law debate: 15 of the 20 editorials from December 15-18. And when it came to tone, there was a single editorial defending gun rights—from the Eagle Tribune of Lawrence, MA on December 16. It stated, “Laws didn’t stop the Newton school shooter. Such laws never have any effect on those determined to do evil.”

Eleven editorials took the side of reform with statements such as the one in the Traverse City Record-Eagle declaring, “The shootings in Newtown can’t just be another page in America’s long, long history of gun insanity, soon forgotten.” Three of the editorials remained neutral on the question of gun policy.

YouTube

On the video sharing site YouTube, the school killings dominated the roster of most viewed news videos in the days that followed. From the time of the shooting through Wednesday, Dec. 19th, three of the top six news videos were about the Connecticut shootings – and one video was viewed far more than any other.

The most watched video, seen more than seven million times in the five days following that tragedy, was President Obama’s initial four-minute [statement](#) which he delivered from the White House hours after the news had broken.

“They had their entire lives ahead of them,” spoke the President as he fought back tears. “As a country, we have been through this too many times...And we’re going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics.”

The next most popular video on the subject, viewed more than 700,000 times, took a much different tone. Radio talk show host [Alex Jones](#), a self-described libertarian, produced a low-tech video of himself talking directly into a camera. Jones accused Obama of faking his tears. Jones also accused the “government-run media” had declared war on the Second Amendment, and that President Obama was using this tragedy to take people’s guns.

The third video on the subject was an interview from the December 14 edition [ABC World News Tonight](#) with Kaitlin Roig, a first grade teacher at Sandy Hook Elementary school who rushed 15 children into the bathroom in order to protect them.

“There are bad guys out there now, we need to wait for the good guys,” Roig recalled telling the kids.

**Most Viewed News & Politics Videos on YouTube
Related to the Connecticut Shootings
As of Wednesday, December 19, 2012**

1. Obama's December 14 statement on the shootings from the White House
2. Radio talk show host Alex Jones claims that Obama is using the shooting to take away gun rights
3. ABC News interview with Kaitlin Roig, a teacher who rushed 15 children into a bathroom to save their lives
4. The opening of the December 15 edition of Saturday Night Live that featured a children's choir singing in memory of the victims
5. News report from Russia Today on the shootings

Methodology

This special report by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism on media reaction to the shootings in Newtown, Connecticut uses data derived from four different methodologies.

Data regarding the tone of conversation on social media (Twitter and blogs) were derived with a combination of PEJ's traditional media research methods, based on long-standing rules regarding content analysis, along with computer coding software developed by [Crimson Hexagon](#). That software is able to analyze the textual content from millions of posts on social media platforms. Crimson Hexagon (CH) classifies online content by identifying statistical patterns in words.

Data regarding the framing of coverage in the newspaper editorials and op-eds were derived from the PEJ's in-house coding operation.

Data about the guests on cable and network television news programs were compiled through the use of transcripts and recorded broadcasts of the relevant shows.

Finally, data on the views on YouTube were collected from that site's publicly accessible lists.

Coding of Social Media Using a Computer Algorithm

For determining the tone of the conversation on social media, the study employed media research methods that combine PEJ's content analysis rules developed over more than a decade with computer coding software developed by [Crimson Hexagon](#). This report is based on separate examinations of more than 11 million tweets and 45,000 blog posts.

Crimson Hexagon is a software platform that identifies statistical patterns in words used in online texts. Researchers enter key terms using Boolean search logic so the software can identify relevant material to analyze. PEJ draws its analysis samples from several million blogs, all public Twitter posts and a random sample of publicly available Facebook posts. Then a researcher trains the software to classify documents using examples from those collected posts. Finally, the software classifies the rest of the online content according to the patterns derived during the training.

According to Crimson Hexagon: "Our technology analyzes the entire social internet (blog posts, forum messages, Tweets, etc.) by identifying statistical patterns in the words used to express opinions on different topics." Information on the tool itself can be found at <http://www.crimsonhexagon.com/> and the in-depth methodologies can be found here <http://www.crimsonhexagon.com/products/whitepapers/>.

Crimson Hexagon measures text in the aggregate and the unit of measure is the 'statement' or assessment, not the post or Tweet. One post or Tweet can contain more than one statement if

multiple ideas are expressed. The results are determined as a percentage of the overall conversation.

The time frame for the analysis began at 10 am ET on December 14 and went through noon ET on December 17.

PEJ used Boolean searches to narrow the universe to relevant posts. Common terminology posted by users varies for each platform. Therefore, PEJ used slightly different search filters for each.

For Blogs, PEJ used the following search filter:

(Newtown OR Newton OR Connecticut OR gun OR guns OR amendment OR Lanza OR “mental health” OR “sandy hook” OR Obama)

For Twitter, the search filter was:

(Newtown OR Newton OR CT OR Connecticut OR gun OR guns OR control OR amendment OR 2nd OR second OR shooting OR weapon OR Lanza OR mental OR health OR sandy OR hook OR Obama)

Human Coding of Newspaper Editorials and Op-eds

The list of eleven newspapers used in this sample included a variety of geographic locations, ownership groups and circulation sizes. The sample is the close to the same one used in [PEJ's weekly News Coverage Index](#) (NCI), the [methodology](#) of which explains the newspaper selection process.

The eleven papers used in this study were as follows:

The New York Times
Los Angeles Times
USA Today
The Wall Street Journal
The Washington Post
The Denver Post
Dallas Morning News
Orlando Sentinel
Traverse City Record-Eagle (MI)
The Daily Herald (WA)
The Eagle-Tribune (MA)

All editorials and op-eds from the print copies of these papers from December 15 to December 18 were examined. Hard copies of the papers were either delivered to the PEJ offices in Washington, D.C., or digital versions were acquired through the papers' websites or the web service [Pressdisplay](#).

Experienced human coders determined the frame and tone of each relevant article. PEJ has used similar variables in previous studies, and intercoder testing has revealed that such coding meets rigorous academic standards.

Data Regarding the Guests on Television News Shows

PEJ recorded the guests on television news shows on eight channels: ABC, NBC, CBS, PBS, Fox, Fox News, CNN and MSNBC.

All guests who discussed an issue relevant to the Connecticut shootings were included in the tally. Regular contributors to the programs were excluded, as were people directly involved with the incident such as eye-witnesses and family members.

Broadcasts from noon ET on December 14 through 10 am ET on December 17 were included.

PEJ was able to review recorded broadcasts or transcripts of most of the national news programming on each of the seven channels during that time.

For some channels, transcripts and digital recordings were not available and could not be included in our sample.

The programs and times examined were as follows:

Cable

Friday, December 14

Fox News

Daytime shows from noon to 3:00 pm ET

All evening shows from 5:00 pm until 11 pm ET

MSNBC

All programming from noon to 11:00 pm ET

CNN

All programming from 10:30 am to 10:00 pm ET

Saturday, December 15

Fox News
America's News HQ
Fox & Friends Weekend
Huckabee
Greta

MSNBC
Up w/ Chris Hayes
Elementary School Tragedy
Andrew Mitchell Reports
Melissa Harris-Perry

CNN
All programming from 7:00 am to 11:00 pm ET

Sunday, December 16

Fox News
Fox News Sunday

MSNBC
The Chris Matthews Show

CNN
All programming from 6:00 am to 11:00 pm ET

Monday, December 17

CNN
All programming from 6:00 am to 9:00 am ET

Network

Friday, December 14

ABC
World News Tonight
20/20 Special
Nightline

CBS
CBS Evening News
CBS News Special

NBC
NBC Nightly News
NBC Dateline Special

PBS
PBS NewsHour

Saturday, December 15

ABC
Good Morning America
World News Saturday

CBS
CBS This Morning
CBS Evening News
48 Hours Special Edition

NBC
Today Show
NBC Nightly News

Sunday, December 16

ABC
Good Morning America
This Week with George Stephanopoulos
World News Tonight

CBS
Face the Nation
60 Minutes

NBC
Today Show
The Chris Matthews Show
NBC Nightly News

Fox
Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace

Monday, December 17

ABC

Good Morning America

CBS

CBS This Morning

NBC

Today Show

Data on YouTube Views

On Wednesday, December 19, at 1:30 pm ET, a PEJ staff member captured the [list of most viewed news and politics videos](#) on YouTube over the previous week. These videos are categorized as such on the YouTube site and are often a mix of mainstream news reports, raw footage relating to breaking events, or other types of public affairs clips. PEJ determined the most viewed videos as they are listed on YouTube's page at the time of capture.