

Loaded Words: NRATV and the Making of Liberal America as a Public Enemy

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This research examines the recently suspended online channel of the National Rifle Association, NRATV, through the frame and rhetorical analysis of 220 videos shared on its Twitter channel. The study provides systematic evidence to articulate how the NRA used the mantle of an online network devoted to guns to espouse hostile political discourses about liberal America. The study reveals a broadcast acutely dedicated to the discussion of perceived “enemies”—media outlets, Democrats, and social movements like the Women’s March—rather than subjects of gun rights or gun ownership. The findings established a rhetorical pattern by which these subjects were discussed, not as political opposition, but as domestic threats and public enemies. The research then explored the communication strategy of frame bridging, which NRATV hosts used often to align the so-called “violent left” with global threats, and to present liberal America as dangerous and anti-American. By explicitly linking the NRA platform to this series of anti-liberal themes, NRATV hosts were no longer advancing the organization’s core message of personal self-defense, but rather an ideological case for imminent national defense against the American left.

Keywords: National Rifle Association (NRA), gun rights discourse, frame bridging, far-right politics, inciting hostility.

The National Rifle Association (NRA) has long been recognized as first and foremost a gun rights lobby. Indeed, the well-established profile of this 150-year-old organization, as fierce defender of the Second Amendment, has all but erased its original mission as that of a rifle club whose members once promoted hunting and marksmanship.¹ But following the passage of the Gun Control Act in 1968, the NRA dramatically recast itself as the nation’s leading advocate for the right to bear arms, first launching a lobbying arm, and then sharpening its tone accordingly. Notable works have examined the NRA’s subsequent voice in American politics, focusing on its rhetoric, media, and cultural impact.² Often viewed as one of the most influential organizations in Washington, DC, Scott Medlock writes, “When the NRA speaks, legislators listen.”³ But then, at the height of the 2016 presidential election, the NRA’s profile shifted once more – this time, from strict gun-rights advocate to outright and declared enemy of the American left.

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¹ Emilie Raymond, *From My Cold, Dead Hands: Charlton Heston and American Politics* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 243.

² Michael J. Hogan and Craig Rood, “Rhetorical Studies and the Gun Debate: A Public Policy Perspective,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2015): 359-71; Scott Melzer, *Gun Crusaders: The NRA’s Culture War* (New York: NYU Press, 2009); Michael Pfau, “Bright Lines or Blurred Lines? Universal Background Checks and the NRA Slippery Slope Argument,” *Argumentation & Advocacy* 53, no. 4 (2017): 253-70.

³ Scott Medlock, “NRA = No Rational Argument? How the National Rifle Association Exploits Public Irrationality,” *Texas Journal On Civil Liberties & Civil Rights* 11 (2005): 43.

This research explores the most recent manifestation of NRA communications, through the frame and rhetorical analysis of its latest media operation, NRATV. The NRA's online video channel premiered in late-2016 as an extension to its website. It quickly expanded into every major streaming service on the web, including Amazon, Apple, Google, Roku, as well as a substantial following on YouTube and Twitter, before it was abruptly suspended in 2019.⁴ But more than a new platform, NRATV represented a new direction for the gun lobby. It became a powerful media stage, evidently purposed to deliver anti-liberal messages and provocative claims about the American left. This study investigates how NRATV content, its messaging and video packages, showcases a new persona for the association that centers far less on firearms than it does on a perceived ideological enemy in liberal America; targeting new offenders from critics of President Trump, to proponents of cultural diversity, to movements like the Women's March and Black Lives Matter.

While the NRA's rightwing agenda has been well established in American politics,⁵ what has changed under this new regime is the extreme forms of discourse that take the NRA outside its element as principally a gun lobby, and into the far-right sectors of culture war, nationalism, and conspiracy theory rhetoric. Moreover, this study examines how the NRA's latest campaign has aligned the proposed threat of leftwing America with their core message of the necessity to arm one's self, thereby setting up an evocative insinuation. Broadcast consistently to a vast and dedicated audience, such rhetoric potentially moves beyond advocacy and in the categorical direction of incitement. This research will explore this strategic pairing of ideas – liberal threat and necessary gun protection – along with others, as a provocative form of frame bridging, defined as the “linkage of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem.”⁶ Here, the study was concerned with how the NRA's positions endorsing firearm ownership were linked to a series of anti-liberal themes that advanced not the traditional message of personal self-defense, but rather an ideological case for imminent national defense.

Such rhetoric, more commonly associated with antigovernment militias, was expressed often through NRATV videos in 2018 at the height of much political discord across the country. This study set about collecting and analyzing 220 of these videos that were posted over a six-month period on the NRATV Twitter account. The very same videos were also shared via their streaming services. Specifically the research sought to learn the following: Which groups, issues, or institutions, did the NRA spokespersons identify as America's enemies and how did they frame that alleged opposition? What central claims and appeals did NRA hosts circulate to their 1.1 million Twitter followers? And how were messages about “the left” rhetorically aligned with other positions promoted by the NRA?

In the context of the ongoing epidemic of mass shootings in America, and the current hyperpolarized political climate, these research questions encircle one of the most influential voices inside both arenas. The NRA has consistently inserted itself into the national conversation surrounding gun violence and, subsequently, major political election cycles. It is therefore critical to examine the nature of this group's amplified and imposing message within the public sphere, especially if

⁴ Though NRATV was compelled to suspend its operations on June 25, 2019, NRATV content is still available online. Currently the videos remain freely accessible via the gun lobby's YouTube channel and Twitter page @NRATV.

⁵ Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*.

⁶ David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 624.

it is evolving into something more far-reaching than gun rights alone. Has the leading gun organization inflated what it means to be “pro-gun” and “anti-gun” in America, broadening the boundary between the two to create more culturally divisive terms?

The research questions further aim to expose the strategies of a political movement that engages in enemy-based rhetoric in order to mobilize its followers. As such, this study seeks to contribute to a body of literature dealing with the framing of adversaries in politics in ways that could potentially incite violence.⁷ Examinations into the practice of frame bridging may help to illuminate the ways that the NRA is elevating liberal America into the so-called “violent left,” and potentially igniting a proverbial stick of dynamite for the gun lobby’s followers who may interpret such rhetoric as a justifiable call to arms.

“Gun Rights” Discourse

Speaking after the deadly school shooting at Umpqua Community College in 2015, President Barack Obama offered this stark observation: “Somehow this has become routine. The reporting is routine. My response at this podium ends up being routine...And what’s become routine, of course, is the response of those who oppose any type of common-sense gun safety legislation.”⁸ The now common occurrence of mass shootings in American schools, movie theaters, clubs, and concerts, has brought persistent attention to the sources, as well as the politics, of gun violence in an attempt to make sense of the senseless. Subsequent communication research has therefore tried to cut through the noise to examine some of the arguments and logic being espoused on both sides of the debate.⁹

One observation of many of these studies concerns the nature of a gun rights advocacy that has gradually become more cultural than policy-based. J. Michael Hogan and Craig Rood described how Second Amendment activists perceive any suggestion of gun regulation as “a broader assault on their constitutional rights, their personal identity, and their way of life.”¹⁰ They write, “For some gun rights activists, any talk of ‘gun control’ represents the entering wedge of a conspiracy to destroy their culture and traditions.” Likewise, in her study on the rhetoric of “rights talk,” Laura Collins found that most Second Amendment discourse concerned the prospect of that right being taken away from the group, rather than a celebration of its established place in society. The notion of gun culture and heritage being under constant assault serves what Collins explains is an identity-forming function of rights talk:

⁷ Nathan Kalmoe, “Fueling the Fire: Violent Metaphors, Trait Aggression, and Support for Political Violence,” *Political Communication* 31, no. 4 (2014): 545-63; Matthew A. Baum and Tim Groeling, “New Media and the Polarization of American Political Discourse,” *Political Communication* 25, no.4 (2008): 345-65.

⁸ Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on the Shootings at Umpqua Community College, Roseburg, Oregon,” (speech, The White House, Washington, DC, October 1, 2015).

⁹ Justin Eckstein and Sarah P. Lefevre, “Since Sandy Hook: Strategic Maneuvering in the Gun Control Debate,” *Western Journal of Communication* 81, no. 2 (2017): 225-42;” Hogan and Rood, “Rhetorical Studies and the Gun Debate;” Brett Lunceford, “Armed Victims: The Ego Function of Second Amendment Rhetoric,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2015): 333-45.

¹⁰ Hogan and Rood, “Rhetorical Studies the Gun Debate,” 360.

[I]f it is a settled matter that the right is protected and that all are free to exercise that right, the political movement around it collapses. In this sense, a politics oriented toward the preservation of a right requires the perpetuation of that tension rather than the achievement of a goal or purpose.¹¹

The NRA in particular has embraced a tone of unrest for its community, shifting its rhetoric over time from one that once celebrated the freedom of the right to bear arms to today's message, that gun rights are in serious jeopardy. For a telling comparison, an NRA television commercial from 1986 once emphasized the Second Amendment as "An American Tradition," and the association as its standard bearer. Four years later, another television ad campaign celebrated the identity of gun ownership in America, proclaiming that the NRA is "Preserving Your Heritage."¹² But over the two decades that followed, and under the new leadership of NRA President Wayne LaPierre, the association would adopt a more antagonistic tenor. A commercial from 2013 asks, "Are [President Obama's] kids more important than yours? Then why is he skeptical about putting armed security in our schools, when his kids are protected by armed guards at their school?" The ad concluded with the NRA's new slogan, "Stand and Fight."¹³

The fight declaration has consumed much of the modern gun debate, which is no longer centered on defending against dangerous criminals. Rather, the attention of firearm advocates has shifted to the so-called "gun grabbers," politicians and gun control activists.¹⁴ According to Brett Lunceford, groups like the NRA are setting up a new discourse wherein "those in favor of gun control are doing so not out of concern for public safety but to destroy the nation."¹⁵ It is within this conspiratorial framework that NRATV launched a new series of attacks against its critics and opponents of gun rights, who are being cast as enemies of the United States.

Frame Bridging

As a political strategy, the latest focus of the NRA's opposition might seem altogether off-message. For example, a 2018 NRA video featured a blistering critique of the children's show *Thomas & Friends* after that series had introduced a new female character from Kenya. NRA host Dana Loesch decried, "Thomas the Tank is now bringing gender balance to the show by adding girl trains. Seriously. One of those trains, Nia, will be from Kenya to add ethnic diversity to the show."¹⁶ In an attempt at satire, the segment also featured a cartoon of Thomas and his friends wearing Ku Klux Klan hoods as they rolled along burning train tracks. Hyperbole aside, the material question of what this commentary has to do with gun rights was raised by several news outlets,

¹¹ Laura Collins, "The Second Amendment as Demanding Subject: Figuring the Marginalized Subject in Demands for an Unbridled Second Amendment," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 17 (2014): 737–56.

¹² NRA commercials can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sr3tKACUBH8> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Chf4TQIVup0>. These early ad campaigns featured gun ownership as "An American Tradition," and the NRA mission as "Preserving Your Heritage."

¹³ Paul Harris, "The NRA Goes on the Deeply Offensive with its 'Stand and Fight' Ad," *The Guardian*, January 16, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/16/nra-offensive-stand-fight-ad>.

¹⁴ Lunceford, "Armed Victims," 335.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Jenna Amatulli, "NRA's Dana Loesch Rants About 'Thomas & Friends' Characters, Puts Tanks in KKK Hoods," *Huffington Post*, September 18, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/nras-dana-loesch-rants-about-thomas-friends-characters-puts-tanks-in-kkk-hoods_us_5b9a68c8e4b05092ceee0d45.

such as a CNN article titled, “What’s behind NRATV’s grotesque take on 'Thomas & Friends'?”¹⁷ The answer may lie in a rhetorical device known as frame bridging.

Snow et al. describe frame bridging as a strategy of political outreach that is often achieved by way of media networks, aiming to link the cause of one social movement with potential “sentiment pools” or “aggregates of individuals who share common grievances.”¹⁸ Connections are sought based on the assumption that distinct interests and segments of the populace will in fact share the same motivations, such as a common disdain for progressivism. Pierre Monforte explored frame bridging as a communicative strategy often used in European politics to help forge “a collective identity” for “common causes” that could reach across borders.¹⁹ And Hyun Park examined how social movements use frame bridging on the web to bring together “issue-related advocate groups who, unorganized before, now are connected through hypertext links providing a feeling of togetherness.”²⁰ Such is evidently the consensus-building strategy that has been adopted by the NRA online. In the example of the gun lobby’s takedown of *Thomas & Friends*, the apparent assumption being made is that advocates of the Second Amendment will share a collective contempt for political correctness and multicultural initiatives in America. Thus, tapping into these latter grievances would hypothetically help cultivate support for the former.

Frame bridging is not just a technique for broadening the message. Rather, it is more about adjoining different public interests toward the “construction of a collective identity.”²¹ For the NRA, a group that is universally recognized as a gun rights advocacy, the reach of its message is ostensibly limited to those audiences to which issues of gun ownership or Second Amendment rights matter most. So in order to grow that base, the organization has had to build rhetorical inroads to other causes, unrelated to guns, but that it believes are somehow peripheral to its mission. For example, Medlock examined how the NRA once “generated 400,000 postcards to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)” to oppose media consolidation, noting how the campaign was “not the organization’s usual bailiwick.”²² But he explained:

Whether the NRA was actually concerned about FCC rule changes was irrelevant because the debate gave the NRA the opportunity to reinforce its message that the media lies about gun control issues. This criticism of the media allows NRA supporters to pretend that gun violence is not a problem in this country—if they can ignore everything the “biased” media says about firearms, they can conveniently ignore the problem.²³

As an example of frame bridging at work, the NRA’s opposition to big media has allowed it to attract new supporters who are presumably already distrustful of the media for other reasons, and might therefore align themselves with the NRA. Monforte explains how “a good indicator for a

¹⁷ Robert J. Spitzer, “What’s behind NRA TV’s grotesque take on 'Thomas & Friends'?” *CNN*, September 15, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/13/opinions/nra-thomas-the-tank-engine-its-about-trump-spitzer/index.html>.

¹⁸ David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Steven K. Worden, and Robert D. Benford, “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation,” *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (1986): 467.

¹⁹ Pierre Monforte, “The Cognitive Dimension of Social Movements Europeanization Processes. The Case of the Protests against ‘Fortress Europe’,” *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 15, no. 1 (2014): 132.

²⁰ Hyun Park, “Case study: Public consensus building on the Internet,” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 5, no. 3 (2002): 235.

²¹ Monforte, “The Cognitive Dimension,” 132.

²² Medlock, “NRA = No Rational Argument?,” 57.

²³ *Ibid.*, 58.

process of frame bridging is that new frames are added to those traditionally used in their traditional discourses.”²⁴ Much like a Venn diagram, one would find an overlapping of concerns being expressed about two or more unrelated subjects, like gun rights and free speech. Therefore, one of the operational questions at the center of this study is, what kinds of non-gun-related discourses or nontraditional advocacies did the NRA assume, and why?

Priming the Audience

Beyond message, the tone of a political or social movement also plays a critical role in representing the character of its mission. The NRA’s tone, as described, has sharpened since the organization’s early campaigns that celebrated the nostalgia of gun ownership in America. In contrast, the 21st century NRA is an advocacy seemingly engaged in a perpetual battle against opposition from political, legal, and ideological forces. In his study on the defensive posture of the NRA, Lunceford writes, “Fighting an enemy, even an imagined one, keeps the focus on the enemy and allows gun-rights advocates to more easily maintain the illusion of a unified aggrieved class of citizens.”²⁵ Indeed, bellicose discourse has become commonplace in the hyperpolarized state of American politics, where an antagonistic tone has consumed many policy debates from gun control, to healthcare, to immigration. Nathan Kalmoe writes, “Political leaders regularly promise to “fight” for noble causes, “combat” pressing problems, and declare “war” on a plethora of social ills.”²⁶ But fight rhetoric can take on different degrees of intensity, and research has shown how exposure to hostile political discourses has the ability to prime audiences into aggressive mindsets.²⁷

While the present study is not an audience analysis, the effects of priming have important implications for the magnitude of the NRA’s widely transmitted message. With media priming, the emphasis is on the potential of media to activate certain audience cognitions that can later inform their judgments and even behaviors. So for the gun-rights advocate who comes to NRATV for gun-related content, but receives instead messages about America’s enemies, liberal threats, and culture wars, the mechanism of priming suggests that these narratives may plant the seeds of hostility in that viewer that can later grow into expressed outrage. Craig Anderson et al. explain, “[E]xposure to violent scenes may activate a complex set of associations that are related to aggressive ideas or emotions, thereby temporarily increasing the accessibility of aggressive thoughts, feelings, and scripts (including aggressive action tendencies).”²⁸

One critical aspect of fight rhetoric is the type of opposition to which the movement’s fight is being directed. The targeting of an opposing position, like gun control, would suggest an ideological battle to be waged in the political arena. But identifying an expressed public enemy, such as liberal Americans, could imply other forms of response. For example, another recent NRATV video featured host Greg Stinchfield standing beside a television set showing clip after clip of

²⁴ Monforte, “The Cognitive Dimension,” 123.

²⁵ Lunceford, “Armed Victims,” 339.

²⁶ Kalmoe, “Fueling the Fire,” 546.

²⁷ Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon, “News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion: A study of Agenda-setting, Priming, and Framing,” *Communication Research* 20 (1993): 365-83; Jon A. Krosnick and Donald R. Kinder, “Altering the Foundations of Support for the President through Priming,” *American Political Science Review* 84 (1990): 497-512.

²⁸ Craig A. Anderson, Leonard Berkowitz, Edward Donnerstein, L. Rowell Huesmann, James D. Johnson, Daniel Linz, Neil M. Malamuth, and Ellen Wartella, “The Influence of Media Violence on Youth,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 4, no. 3 (2003): 95.

cable news and late night show hosts being critical of President Trump. After a moment, Stinchfield picks up a sledgehammer and swings it into the TV set, sending it across the room.²⁹ This form of fight rhetoric is notable for two reasons that will be explored in the following study. First, it directs the NRA's ire towards a people rather than a policy or political position. The NRA is telling its audience that their enemy also includes journalists and media personalities who are critical of President Trump. Second, and more germane to the element of tone, the nature of the communication is overtly inflammatory. Rather than simply shutting off the TV as a means of silencing the opposition, the NRA introduces the element of violence as the solution to these noise-makers, by metaphorically smashing their faces.

Certainly one factor to consider in this or any research on political extremism is whether a video that engages in such hyperbole would be taken seriously. But in his work on the use of violent political metaphors, Kalmoe was able to "cast doubt on the claim that violent metaphors are harmless."³⁰ By examining the "mildest, most common forms of violent political metaphors," in this case, those found in campaign ads, he was able to show that "citizens with aggressive personality traits expressed significantly greater support for political violence, and their support doubled when they were exposed to political messages infused with violent metaphors."³¹ While this study does not presume that NRA's audiences are more likely to have "aggressive personality traits," priming research has shown that the mere sight of guns can activate hostility.³² Moreover, Kalmoe's work indicates that giving certain "violent cues," such as a pretext for necessary national defense, can prime an audience's rationale for supporting political violence as a justifiable action.

Methodology

Snow and Benford describe frame alignment as a common practice of social movements working to assign meaning to issues "in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists."³³ This study was concerned with the meaning the NRA was assigning to its opposition for the sake of stoking outrage among its followers. In order to deconstruct the character of NRATV content, a frame analysis was first conducted of 220 video messages that were posted to the network's Twitter channel in summer 2017 into 2018. This time period was marked by heightened attention to NRATV following a controversial segment it released in which host Dana Loesch raised the specter of liberal threats in America. The video spread quickly through social media, accumulating over ten million views, and drawing national media coverage. In it, Loesch declared:

They use their media to assassinate real news. They use their schools to teach their children that the president is another Hitler. They use their movie stars and singers and comedy shows and award ceremonies to repeat their narrative over and over again. And then they use their ex-president to endorse "the resistance." All to make them march. Make them protest. Make them scream racism and sexism

²⁹ Danny Gallagher, "Former NBC 5 Reporter Explains Why He Sledgehammers the Messenger in NRA TV Ad," *Dallas Observer*, February 24, 2018, <https://www.dallasobserver.com/news/former-reporter-grant-stinchfield-smashes-big-screen-in-anti-media-nra-tv-ad-10389327>.

³⁰ Kalmoe, "Fueling the Fire," 557.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 556.

³² Craig A. Anderson, Arlin J. Benjamin Jr., and Bruce D. Bartholow, "Does the Gun Pull the Trigger?" *Psychological Science* 9, no. 4 (1998): 308.

³³ David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance and Participant Mobilization," *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988): 198.

and xenophobia and homophobia. To smash windows, burn cars, shut down interstates and airports, bully and terrorize the law-abiding—until the only option left is for the police to do their jobs and stop the madness. And when that happens, they’ll use it as an excuse for their outrage. The only way we stop this, the only way to save our country and our freedom, is to fight this violence of lies with the clenched fist of truth. I’m the National Rifle Association of America. And I’m freedom’s safest place.³⁴

Using this video segment as an example, this research employed a mixed methods design beginning with the frame analysis to identify the *types of opposition* that were targeted in the NRA broadcasts and the *characterization of those adversaries*. A deeper rhetorical analysis then examined the most common messages to understand how NRATV hosts were appealing to their followers, and potentially aligning the focus of their opposition with other stances promoted by the NRA, such as self-preservation. In the example above, numerous antagonists were cited, including the media, entertainment community, universities, and President Obama. Each was bracketed categorically into a larger analysis of the 220 video posts to reveal reoccurring frames of these subjects or their alleged actions, which, in the case above, included descriptors like “bully and terrorize.” Further, when included, visual elements were also collected and analyzed, as they added to the overall tone of the message. Here, the video post featured scenes of angry protestors marching, a burning car, a smashed window, and standoffs with police.

Collectively, these spoken, textual, and visual elements informed the overall frame analysis of the message, which, in this case, was one about hysteria, danger, and defense. Audiences are being told that this liberal collective—“they”—present a material threat to “law-abiding” citizens and law enforcement, and must be stopped. Incidentally, that was the takeaway of several news outlets after the provocative video first aired, such as one *Vox.com* article titled, “This chilling NRA ad calls on its members to save America by fighting liberals.”³⁵ The lead of this particular news story may seem to go one step further than the actual statements made, but that perception could be the result of effective frame bridging at work inside the message.

Thus, the next stage of this study focused on the rhetorical nature of the larger message being delivered by the NRA, with particular emphasis on the device of frame bridging, or those *implicit communication structures that linked together two or more positions* inside one broadcast. Here, the goal was to determine whether the NRATV content was aligning new issues and concerns, such as civic resistance to President Trump, with conventional NRA positions, like public safety, self-defense, or gun ownership.

Monforte’s guiding principle that “a good indicator for... frame bridging is that new frames are added to those traditionally used,” helped to provide a basis for identifying when distinct messages were being aligned.³⁶ In the sample segment, the message of ‘liberal threats on the rise’ is coupled with another, more traditional NRA position. We see scenes of police officers confronting dangerous protestors and hear statements like “stop this,” “save our country,” and “fight this violence of lies.” Such rhetoric echoes the latest NRA refrain of “Stand and Fight” which, tied to the theme of menacing liberals, led audiences to perceive the greater message to be “save America by fighting liberals.”³⁷ During the study, these and other rhetorical bridges were accounted for by recording

³⁴ William Cummings, “NRA Video Declares War on Liberals, Critics Say,” *USA Today*, June 30, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2017/06/30/controversial-nra-video/441506001/>.

³⁵ Zack Beauchamp, “This Chilling NRA Ad Calls on its Members to Save America by Fighting Liberals,” *Vox*, June 29, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/6/29/15892508/nra-ad-dana-loesch-yikes>.

³⁶ Monforte, “The Cognitive Dimension,” 123.

³⁷ Beauchamp, “This Chilling NRA Ad.”

the presence of two or more connected narratives within a single broadcast. The research examined the four most common of these co-narratives, and the underlying message they delivered.

Finally, while NRATV could have been analyzed on any number of platforms, it is significant that Twitter was selected as the medium from which to follow its content. First, Twitter provides data on the total following for each account, which for @NRATV, and @NRA circulating its content, represented 1.1 million followers. But more importantly, Twitter represents a space where content can travel and coalesce with other political interests, and that allows NRATV to extend beyond its own immediate community. Research has shown that conversations trending on Twitter are now framing political discussion well beyond the web, demonstrating the site's potential to inform public discourses from the internet out.³⁸ Studies have also highlighted the site's mobilizing power for social movements that is made possible by its topical connectivity through hashtags.³⁹ For NRATV, these factors lent themselves to greater outreach, which was often observed during this study when a provocative video would be retweeted by public figures like President Trump, thus illustrating the impact of this content.

Framing Liberal America

The study of the NRATV content initially set about deconstructing each video post and accompanying text to determine its focus, and thereby, the primary areas of focus for this rolling broadcast. One of the most pronounced findings of the investigation could be observed early on in the network's disproportionate emphasis on anti-liberal themes. Inside the NRATV brand, it was almost difficult to locate the firearm advocate or rifle enthusiast from the flood of anti-left messages that consumed this space. In fact, a general content analysis of the 220 NRATV videos found that only twenty-four posts, or approximately one in every ten, dealt with issues related to gun ownership or Second Amendment liberties. The remaining 196, or almost 90% of the posts, were concentrated on ideological enemies, effectively trading the NRA's core message of gun rights for a persistent vilification of leftwing America.

Over the six-month time span, NRATV hosts Loesch and Stinchfield, along with guest commentators like former Sheriff David Clarke and veteran Navy SEAL Dom Raso, collectively targeted 15 dominant adversaries. These subjects of opposition included groups, individuals, and institutions that were criticized or mocked for reasons mostly unrelated to their stance on guns or the NRA. Rather, the targets were vilified for their political ideas and identities. But among those traditional NRA topics, a visitor to the channel could occasionally find a post about the necessity to bear arms, typically couched in a story of a victim's self-defense. These standalone messages included testimonies such as, "I didn't truly understand the #2A, until I was stalked." An apparent outreach to female supporters was also detected in such messages that spoke to "American moms" protecting their families. Sporadic appeals to African-American audiences were also evident through provocative statements like, "You can't lynch people who are armed. You can't burn crosses in the yards of people who are armed." And beyond self-defense, a handful of messages also celebrated the tradition of gun ownership, discussing topics like marksmanship, the thrill of

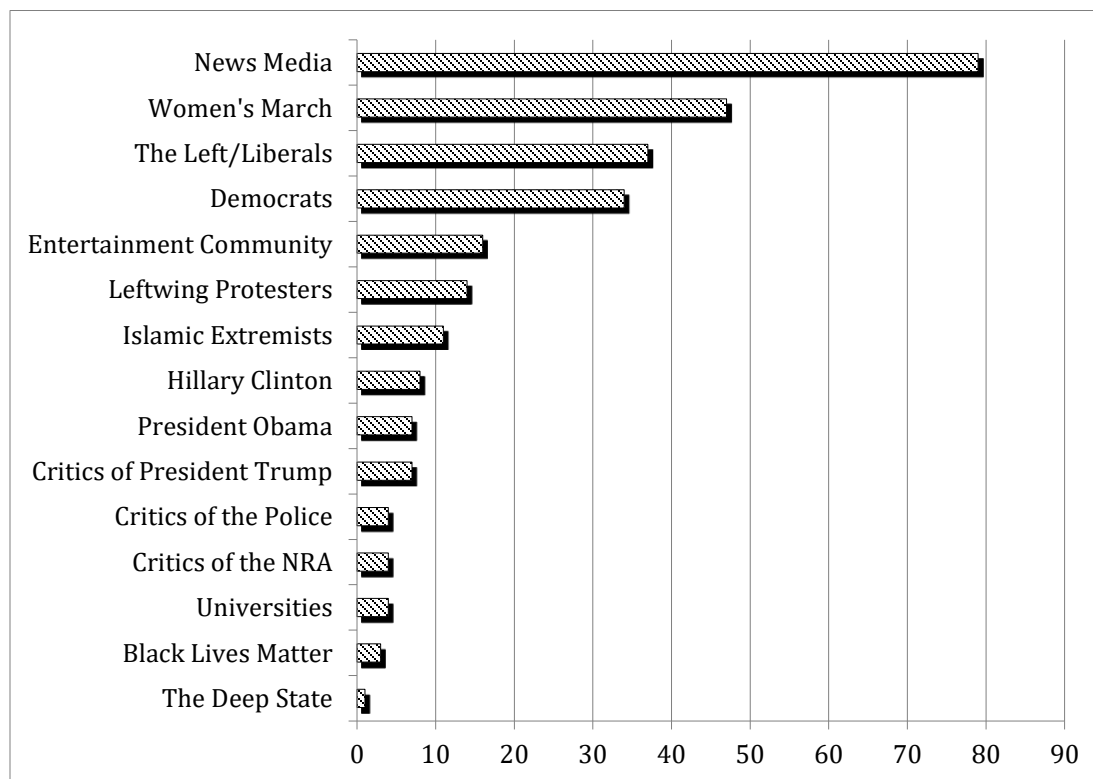
³⁸ Laura Burch, Evan Frederick, and Ann Pegoraro, "Kissing in the Carnage: An Examination of Framing on Twitter During the Vancouver Riots," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 3 (2015): 399-415; Alecia Swasy, "A Little Birdie Told Me: Factors that Influence the Diffusion of Twitter in Newsrooms," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 60, no. 4 (2016): 643-56.

³⁹ Greg B. Leichty, Margaret U. D'Silva, and Matthew R. Johns, "Twitter and Aam Aadmi Party: Collective Representations of a Social Movement Turned Political Party," *Intercultural Communication Studies* 25, no. 2 (2016): 32-45.

elephant hunting, and hypothetical scenarios such as, “What gun would you want to survive the apocalypse?”

But if the gun advocate was visiting NRATV to hear more exchanges about what the NRA stands for, he or she would instead find a space principally dedicated to those parties the association stands against. Figure 1 breaks down the identity of these antagonists; a compilation that includes well-established organizations like the *Democratic Party*, as well as more amorphous groups such as *Liberals*, *Critics of Donald Trump*, or the *Deep State*.

Figure 1. Subjects of opposition targeted by NRATV



n = 276 denunciations of alleged enemy groups, individuals, and institutions

Often the videos focused on more than one group, such as the *News Media* and its purported sanctioning of “violent” *Leftwing Protesters*, or the *Women’s March* supposedly being “founded by” *Islamic Extremists*. The combining of rivals into clusters created the sense of a fusion of adversaries, as opposed to just one designated opposition, as was formerly the anti-gun movement. Along the same lines, the common use of vague pronouns such as “they” and “the left” helped to denote an enemy that is both widespread and interconnected. “They’re becoming unhinged,” alleged Stinchfield. “They use their schools to teach children that their president is another Hitler,” Loesch proclaimed. And guest pundit Nick Adams asserted, “America is really a conservative oasis in a world socialistic desert...If you were to say you were a great American, they’d take it as an insult, wouldn’t they?” By repeatedly reciting what Cummings described as “a list of alleged atrocities committed by an unspecified ‘they,’”⁴⁰ NRATV projects the idea that this ideological menace is an interwoven and existential threat to America.

⁴⁰ Cummings, “NRA Video Declares War.”

Turning Political Opponents into Public Enemies

To better illustrate the tenor and tone of NRATV, Table 1 represents the language hosts use to describe their four most concentrated targets. Collectively, the focus on the news media, the Women’s March, American liberals, and the Democratic Party accounted for 71% of the 276 denunciations of alleged enemy groups. The news media, often dubbed the “hateful leftist news,” was well established as enemy number one. The almost daily barrage of video diatribes on news outlets like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and CNN, sought to paint these organizations as extremist, dangerous, dishonest, and unpatriotic. More than any other group, the NRATV hosts addressed the news media directly, and even at times, personally, demonstrating the gun lobby’s intention to be heard by them. One post from Dana Loesch forewarned, “A message for the NYT: We’re coming for you.” Similar messages included, “A stern warning to @washingtonpost & the liberal media,” and, “Your paper’s new slogan may read Democracy Dies in Darkness. It should say Journalism Dies at the @washingtonpost.”

Table 1. NRATV’s framing of the alleged enemy and themselves

Main Subjects	Common Descriptors
News Media 79 references (28.6% of sample)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hateful leftist MSM; Deceitful; Fake news; Spewing lies - Motivated by extreme ideology; Dangerous; Unhinged - Propagandists like ISIS; Organized anarchy; Sick - Weaponized First Amendment; Abusers of public trust - Well-orchestrated attack on our democracy; anti-police - Have hatred for freedom loving patriots & military - A Message for the NYT: We’re coming for you
Women’s March 47 (17%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dangerous; Founded by Jihad/Terrorist-supporter - Violent and fear-mongering; Bigoted; Anti-Semitic - Calling for Jihad on the White House; Violent agenda - Naïve; Ridiculous; Hypocritical; Fake feminists - Claim to be anti-gun but travel with armed security
The Left/Liberals 37 (13.4%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Violent Left; Terrorizing; Dangerous; Radical - Crazy liberals; More threatening than North Korea - Anti-American; Fascism; Anti-freedom elitists; Rich - At war with police; Hysterical; Hypocritical; Liars; - Look down on gun owners; Don’t represent our values - Look down on Trump supporters and non-coastal states - Targeting the NRA as never before; Bully
Democrats 34 (12.3%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elites that threaten our survival; Part of a leftist war - Hate the American people and look down on them - Obstructionist politicians; Propagandists; Cowardly - Condemning America’s police; Encouraging protests - Enemies; Enemy of the Black community; Gun-hating - Don’t have best interest of the president; Anti-freedom
The NRA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fighting back; Hitting back; Never stop fighting - America’s safest place; Always on defense - Clenched fist of truth; Truth on our side - Freedom loving; Protecting freedom; We the People - For the President; Aligned with military; With the police - Under fire; Targeted by leftists; Need to defend ourselves

Like the media, the Women’s March was predominantly framed as dangerous, with repeated claims that its leaders, Tamika Mallory and Linda Sarsour, were supporters of “Jihad” and “Sharia law.” The leftwing movement, which had protested against the NRA earlier in the summer,⁴¹ was subsequently admonished on a regular basis in posts that described their campaign as fear-mongering, violence-supporting, anti-Semitic, and fake feminist. “We exposed @womensmarch leaders for their support of sharia-law, calls for jihad & hatred of our police,” one post declared. NRATV hosts also attempted to draw a wedge between the Women’s March and its supporters by advancing the theory that Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan was really “the man behind” the organization: “@DLoesch tells @TamikaDMallory "You let a racist anti-Semitic man use your womanhood to push his own, twisted vision for America.”

Next to the Women’s March, a less frequent but more extensive encapsulation of the America left was expressed often. Liberals or “the Left” were cast as radical, dangerous, fascist, elitist, dishonest, and un-American on several fronts. Such representations had virtually no expressed connection to the issues of gun rights. Rather, liberal Americans were typically chastised for their values in statements like, “To every member of the violent left... You look down on gun-owners, Trump supporters, and states without coasts.” A later post, also addressed to the “violent left,” described this segment of the populace as, “those who don’t represent me or my values.” It was evident that some discussion of liberals overlapped with criticisms of related targets, such as leftwing protesters or the Democrats. But the significance of coding references to “the left” and “liberals” as a category unto itself is underscored by what this purposeful generalization represents. By targeting leftwing America en masse, NRATV is suggesting that the underlying issue is about a cultural ideology rather than some policy-based opposition.

The Democratic Party and its leaders represented the fourth most targeted subject of the NRATV broadcasts. More in line with the style of discourse used to describe the news media, Democrats were treated as public enemies through labels like, “elites that threaten our survival” and “part of a leftist war,” or simply as “Enemies.” Effort was further made to often juxtapose Democrats with American ideals, like freedom, or select communities like African Americans and law enforcement. One message declared, “The #NRA isn’t the one telling me I shouldn’t own guns because I’m black—white liberal politicians are.” Another video, directed at a US Congresswoman who had been critical of the NRA, illustrates how the narrator seeks to brand Democrats as the antithesis to American ideals:

Let me remind you, we are the American people; the ones you look down on; the ones you hate so much; the ones you declare as enemies of the United States, the very country which we love so much... We will vote you and your leftwing, gun hating, anti-freedom cohorts out of office.

In addition to NRATV’s depiction of its perceived enemies, it was also important to collect the occasional characterizations offered of the NRA itself. Table 1 further illustrates some of the hosts’ descriptions, which painted the gun organization as a fighting defender of American freedoms and public safety. Its latest slogan, “I’m the NRA, and I’m freedom’s safest place,” represented the NRA as an almost militant body, ready to protect. To that end, several video posts aligned the organization with the US military and law enforcement community, in such statements as, “We are Americans, and we are the American police officer. We stand with the #NRA and the

⁴¹ Tamika Mallory, “Why the Women’s March is taking on the NRA.” *Time*, July 14, 2017, <https://time.com/4857055/womens-march-nra-demonstration/>.

NRA stands with us.” Moreover, phrases like “hitting back” and “fighting back” suggested that the NRA was now on the defensive, which implied a justified position.

In contrast to its portrayal of the opposition, the NRA’s depiction of itself communicated a counter message. On one end, NRATV has defined the opposition as public enemies through language that centered on leftwing forces threatening American freedoms. Set against that insurgency, the NRA presents itself, “always on defense,” “a clenched fist of truth,” “protecting American freedoms,” while also “under fire” and “targeted by leftists.” Collectively, the pairing of these messages sets up a problem-solution narrative, and a potentially provocative one at that, wherein liberal America is the problem, and the defending gun community, its solution.

Appealing to Fear and Outrage of Gun Owners

Beyond the overarching emphasis on domestic threats and ideological enemies, NRATV constructed a series of narratives that played to new nationalist and conspiratorial themes of the NRA brand. The following rhetorical appeals consisted of reoccurring claims made by the hosts, and within them, the emotional cues that were delivered to audiences. The second section of this analysis will then focus on the observed alignment of disparate causes intended to strategically bridge together common grievances and collective identities under the NRA banner.

“What we’re seeing in America is an organized anarchy”

The frequent refrain that leftwing groups are radical and riotous, but also organized in their mission, underscored one of NRATV’s most predominant community appeals. In one video post that also featured images, we see veteran Navy Seal Dom Raso firing off a semiautomatic handgun into a series of targets. We then hear his narration: “What we’re seeing in America is an organized anarchy led by people who hate our president and who hate those who support him.” He goes on to speak of “a media motivated by an extreme ideology” and “government officials using propaganda and actually encouraging protests.” Raso contends that, “These conditions were common in every radical Islamic country I spent time in.” By framing citizen protests and media criticism of President Trump as “organized anarchy,” the fundamental assertion is that these actors and events are working in concert, as if a coup is underway. Such messages were threaded throughout the NRATV broadcasts, and often reposted several times a day to drive home this sentiment. From the “organized riots” of leftwing protestors, to the more encompassing “organized anarchy of the violent left,” this rhetorical strategy demonstrates one of Collins’ earlier findings about Second Amendment discourse; that it builds identity and purpose among its community by stoking their fears rather than celebrating their rights.⁴²

Additionally, in examples like the Dom Raso video, a second appeal is being delivered: fight back. As the Navy Seal airs many non-gun-related grievances – flag burning, angry protesters, obstructionist politicians – his words are married to images of him engaging in target practice with a semiautomatic. His final words, “I for one will not tolerate it,” are followed by the screen caption, “Will you?” The question fits squarely into the NRA’s “Stand and Fight” campaign, and it reflects an earlier observation about gun rights rhetoric. Lunceford explained, “Fighting an enemy, even an imagined one, keeps the focus on the enemy and allows gun-rights advocates to more

⁴² Collins, “Rights Talk.”

easily maintain the illusion of a unified aggrieved class of citizens.”⁴³ But in this case, the aggrieved class of citizens are the NRATV audience, gun owners and activists, who are being told that a true conspiracy is underway; that it is an “organized anarchy,” “extreme” like that of a “radical Islamic country,” and that ultimately, it should not be tolerated.

“Anti-freedom elitists choose to undermine our president”

If the prior series of video messages was about inserting fear into the community, the “anti-freedom elites” frame is about sowing populist anger. Cas Mudde described populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite.’”⁴⁴ In the NRATV’s consistent rhetoric about the rise of “anti-freedom” groups and “elitist” factions in America, the broadcast is demonstrating Mudde’s principle of strategic separation. To its followers, the NRATV hosts are speaking – not of gun rights – but of class and values. The label of “elitist” is repeated often and assigned to Democrats (“the elitist opposition”), Hollywood actors (“elitist cringe-worthy celebrities”), and mainstream media (“elite MSM”). Other descriptors like “anti-freedom” drew a further line of separation between those who stand with the NRA, and those who do not. In this paradigm, the NRA is the patriotic common man and woman, while the left, the anti-American highbrow class: “You look down on gun-owners, Trump supporters, and states without coasts.”

To further tap into rightwing populist anger, NRATV saw opportunity in another series of messages regarding President Trump. Over thirty posts featured discussion of President Trump, mostly focusing on his critics. One tweet reads, “Hateful leftist #MSM are willing to let America burn in their quest to remove @realDonaldTrump from office.” A couple video posts mentioned President Trump’s backing of the NRA, one even retweeting a supportive post made by the President. But while a connection between President Trump and the NRA would seem logically premised on publicizing his good will toward them, the overwhelming focus of these messages once again emphasized shared grievances. The NRATV’s assertion is that opposition to the President is synonymous with hostility to the NRA community. As NRATV host Grant Stinchfield declared, “They don’t just hate Donald Trump. They hate you, his supporters.”

For the NRA, the Trump alliance offers the gun lobby the opportunity to tap into the president’s enormous base of supporters. Thus, many of the populist refrains voiced by NRATV parallel themes that have been a hallmark of the Donald Trump presidency, such as ‘the common man versus the liberal elite,’ or ‘the conservative patriot versus the radical left.’ From its Twitter network, the NRA can align itself with the president’s populist brand directly by showcasing his endorsement of their message. One NRATV segment shared a video from the ongoing Trump campaign that railed against “the media attacking our president.” Latching itself onto that message, the NRA tweet added, “If #MSM & the left is determined to lie in order to bring you down & you don’t respond, than that’ll become accepted truth.”

“They are going to go after the right”

Finally, feeding further into the culture wars, another series of videos centered on one underlying theme; that conservative America and its values are under assault. This claim was crafted in posts that focused on citizens’ freedoms under siege. Among these, NRATV hosts delivered diatribes

⁴³ Lunceford, “Armed Victims,” 339.

⁴⁴ Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 562.

about universities denying conservative speakers like Donald Trump Jr. the right to speak at their campuses. Another sequence of posts focused on the Boy Scouts, sharing the message, “Educate yourself about what happens to freedom when the right to bear arms is stripped away.” Other institutions purportedly under cultural assault included religion, the press, the American flag, and patriotism. In a segment titled “The Changing Face of Patriotism,” the speaker explains that America is really a “conservative idea.” He says, “It’s the most optimistic place, it’s the most patriotic place, it’s the most religious place, and all of those kinds of cultural influences have come to be the enemy of the left.” Such language effectively situates the NRA within conservative America, but more deliberately, it reinforces a central claim that America is being changed from within.

In form, such nationalistic rhetoric is more indicative of far-right patriot groups like the Oath Keepers, or white nationalist clubs like the Proud Boys.⁴⁵ But for a gun lobby to engage in language that suggests America’s conservative citizens are facing a cultural assault represents a major departure from the NRA’s former mission of promoting personal self-defense from criminals. Instead, these claims forewarn of a public enemy weakening the nation, thus priming the audience into a state of alarm and paranoia. Speaking about the media, one host asserted, “They’ve made a business decision that they are going to go after the right.”

A Rhetorical Strategy of Frame Bridging

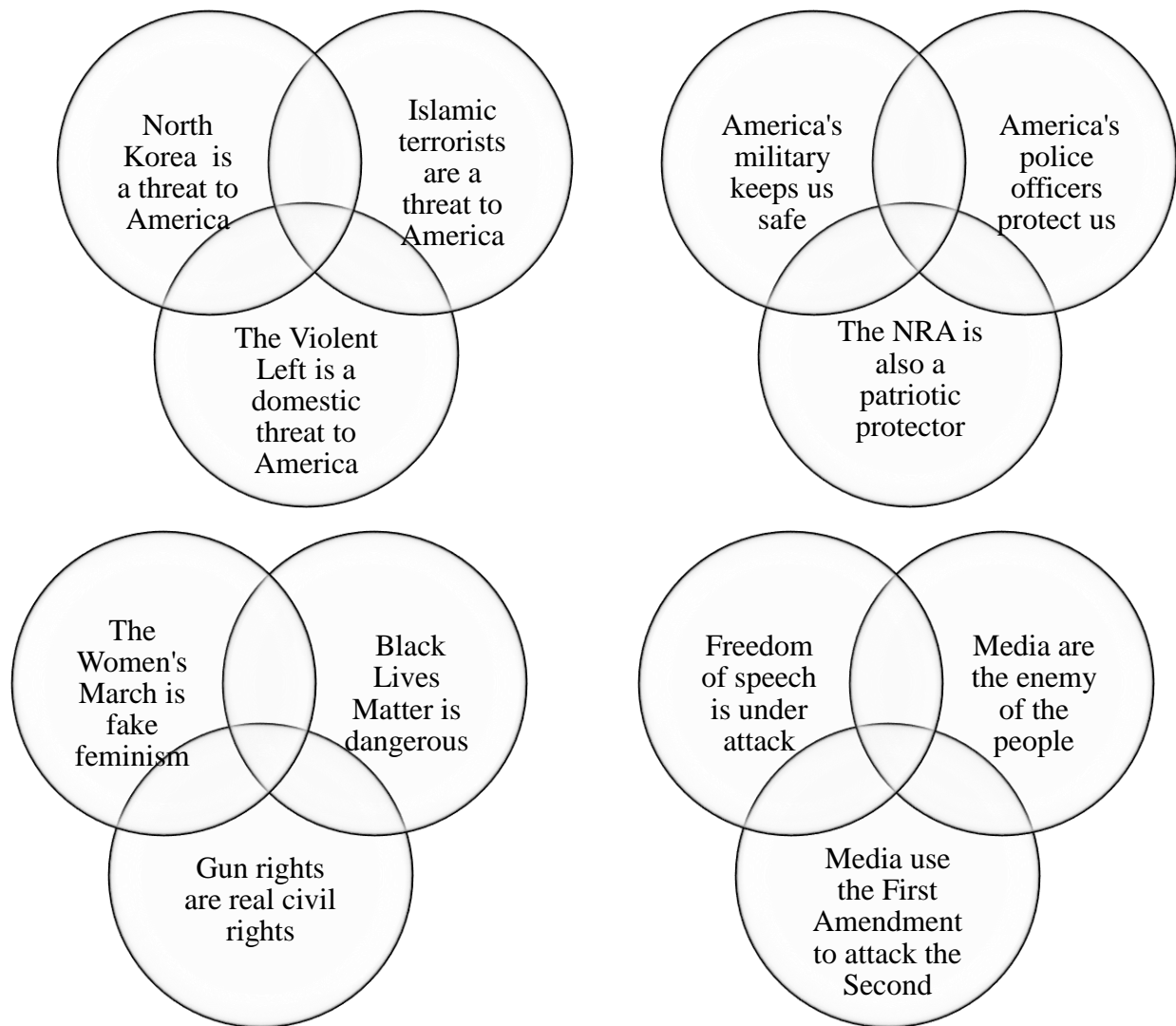
For a special interest group to spend its valuable media time and political capital discussing issues unrelated to its central mission would, on the surface, seem like the messengers are straying off topic. But as a strategy for building new coalitions among bases that may share some of the same grievances, deviating off topic is an intended course of action. We have already seen such examples of non-gun-related issues having a prominent place in the NRATV broadcasts, from flag burning, to anti-Trump protests, to the Boy Scouts. Following Snow and Benford’s principle that politically-like minds can be found amongst distinct “sentiment pools,”⁴⁶ the assumption being made by NRATV is that the very same audiences who loathe flag burning, or love Donald Trump and the Boy Scouts for that matter, will also support gun rights.

Frame bridging is about outreach and identity building, and thus, for the NRA and other movements, Twitter represents the ideal platform for special interests to converge, and common politics to coalesce. In the first part of the study, the research established how NRATV spent most of its time denouncing subjects of opposition. The analysis now examines how some of those subjects were integrated with core positions of the NRA within the same broadcasts. These co-narratives, or bridges, go one step further than the exclusive vilification of an adversary or promotion of an ally. Together, issues like free speech *and* gun rights, contain a common thread (see Figure 2). For the NRA, these threads come in the form of thematic grievances that embody the organization’s new platform.

⁴⁵ Adam Klein, “From Twitter to Charlottesville: Analyzing the Fighting Words between the Alt-Right and Antifa,” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 297-318.

⁴⁶ Snow and Benford. “Framing processes,” 468.

Figure 2. Frame bridging at work in the NRATV broadcasts



The Threat of North Korea, Islamic Terror ... and the Violent Left

For a national organization, the NRA's channel dedicated substantial time to issues of international concern, primarily on the subject of foreign threats. The discussion of Islamic extremism, for example, was among the more prominent topics of the NRA Twitter feed: "We're at war with a growing evil culture that wants you dead," exclaimed Dom Raso to viewers. Also of special concern to the broadcast was "the very real possibility of a nuclear attack" from North Korea. But in context, these issues were seldom addressed unto themselves, but rather as part of a larger message being crafted about leftwing America.

In the first example, Raso begins his warning about Islamic extremism with the following address: "In the midst of a growing anarchy, obstructionist politicians are now putting American security at risk in exchange for a cheering crowd and photo-op, like you Chuck Schumer and Elizabeth Warren." From there, a rhetorical bridge is built between the Islamic terrorists entering the

country and the Democratic politicians who allegedly allow it to happen. Another tweet directed at the mainstream media reads, “@DomRasoJr tells #MSM: ‘If you want to know what it's like to be under attack, go to Syria, Iran or another Islamic-controlled country’ #NRA.”

The same rhetorical pattern can be observed in the NRATV discourse surrounding the nuclear conflict building between the United States, North Korea, and its two leaders. In a video segment that was reposted several times, Grant Stinchfield delivers the following declaration:

What scares me more than the North Korean crazed tyrant? The violent left and the crazed liberals who lead them. They, like North Korea, also pose a clear and present danger to America ... Make no mistake, the lying leftist media, the elitist cringe-worthy celebrities, and the anti-American politicians—who make up the violent left—don’t just hate President Trump, they hate you.

This excerpt provides a model encapsulation of frame bridging at work, as it intentionally ties together different narratives to produce one core message. In North Korea and the threat of a “crazed tyrant” building nuclear weapons, audiences are presented with a security threat that is well established on the world stage. But from there, that same fear appeal is coupled to another threat—the “violent left”—explicitly defined here as comprising the liberal media, celebrities, and politicians who “also pose a clear and present danger to America.” Rhetorically, the NRA is using the global menaces of terrorism and nuclear proliferation to position leftwing America as its own legitimate threat to the country. From a perspective of propaganda, this device is better known as the transfer technique, wherein the messenger tries to tap into an audience’s preconceived feelings or ideas about one subject in order to transfer that response onto another subject they are framing.⁴⁷

America’s Embattled Police and Armed Forces Protect Us ... and So Does the NRA

If the previous narrative is about transferring notions of national peril, then discourses about America’s law enforcement and military are about invoking thoughts of public protectors. America’s police and military were one the few protagonists recognized by NRATV hosts amid a daily broadcast otherwise consumed by diatribes about the opposition. But even here, occasional declarations of support for these communities were accompanied by a second narrative about their common enemy: “We commend the courage of those who wear the badge, especially in this time when their bravery has come under scrutiny. Help us #BackOurBlue.” Another video implored, “Our police risk their lives to protect those in need—including the ungrateful who unjustly condemn them.”

In fact, these sentiments served to position the nation’s guardians against the *NRA*’s critics, implying they share a common enemy. This frame is another example of how the gun lobby has detoured from its original platform, promoting guns to protect us from the criminal element, to citing a new kind of danger. Here, it is the dissenting public that the organization is aligning against, using the police and military as rhetorical props. “Your true hatred of freedom loving patriots, of the military is now exposed,” one Tweet charged. Another declared, “There is most certainly a war on cops underway. I salute all of them who wear the badge.”

But the ‘patriotic protector’ was also an identity that the *NRA* sought to embody, and even at times appropriate, through video segments that featured Sheriff David Clarke as both a member of law enforcement and a direct representative of the *NRA*. Clarke, who had recently become a spokesman for the *NRA*, directed a series of messages at an alleged common rival:

⁴⁷ Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006), 227.

You critics don't define our honor. You try to shame us for doing our job. You teach children to fear us, crowds to attack us, good people to doubt us. But we will never back down from our sworn duty to uphold the Constitution of the United States of America... We stand with the National Rifle Association of America and the NRA stands with us. Together we are America's safest place.

With a defensive tone, Clarke represents the work of America's law enforcers, and protectors that include the NRA, thus merging together these institutions. For its part, NRATV set about consistently echoing that refrain, positioning itself as a safeguard for the public: "The NRA is going to fight every day...to expand the freedom to protect yourself and your family."

Black Lives Matter and Women's March Aren't really about Civil Rights ... but the NRA Is

In addition to America's protector, NRATV also sought to sow its image as a true civil rights defender. And to do this, the hosts once again relied on a foil. Of all the issues it covered, NRATV's fixation on the Women's March and Black Lives Matter movements seemed furthest removed from its central platform. Seldom were these two campaigns, which address equal rights and racial injustice, ever discussed with regard to gun-related issues, except to point out an apparent hypocrisy in the Women's March organizers who, though critical of the NRA, were escorted by armed bodyguards. But over the investigation, NRATV hosts distributed fifty posts (nearly one-fifth of the sample) focusing on the Women's March and Black Lives Matter, casting these movements as fraudulent and dangerous. From Dana Loesch, who frequently called the Women's March a "fake feminist" "anti-all women group," to Sheriff Clarke, who designated the Black Lives Matter movement a "dangerous, hateful, destructive ideology." The NRATV broadcasts were direct in their attempt to define these social justice campaigns as illegitimate causes. "Instead of talking about the truth all sides can agree on we're fighting over a made-up accusation about racial division," one segment declared.

But at the same time, another narrative was being established. In a related post, NRATV contended, "The Second Amendment was a great equalizer for black Americans and it can still be so." Days later, on the subject of women's rights, host Loesch declared, "Real empowerment looks like millions of American moms...taking our lives and our families' lives into our own capable hands." Another segment shared the story of 1960s freedom marcher Josephine Byrd, who said: "I marched behind Martin Luther King at Selma. I know my rights. Now I have my gun. I am the #NRA. And I'm Freedom's Safest Place." In these stories and statements, the NRA was simultaneously crafting a singular message: That gun rights are real civil rights.

In terms of strategy, this use of "civil rights" rhetoric well exemplifies what Monforte called the "construction of a collective identity."⁴⁸ On one hand, the NRA is calling into question the legitimacy of two movements currently at the center of equal rights and racial justice debates across the country. Simultaneously, NRATV is rolling out a new claim, evidently positioning gun rights and gun ownership as a genuine source of female empowerment and African American freedom. From Tweets that declared, "You can't lynch people who are armed," to stories of women who stood up to their stalkers, "I will never be unarmed, or utterly vulnerable, ever again." For the NRA, this collective identity is about reshaping its own cause as a civil right, while trying to grow its membership among women and African Americans.

⁴⁸ Monforte, "The Cognitive Dimension," 132.

Media Are Weaponizing the First Amendment ... So They Can Go after the Second

Finally, the institution that NRATV dedicated the most time to disparaging was also the focus of their foremost co-narrative. The mainstream media was NRATV's most concentrated target, accounting for 28.6% of the channel's posts. While NRATV hosts went about casting the "hateful leftist media" as the "enemy of the people," "unhinged," and "willing to let America burn," they often centered these charges on the claim that the press was actively weaponizing the First Amendment. "You people do more to damage our country with a keyboard than every NRA member combined has ever done with a firearm," Grant Stinchfield demanded. The notion of a corrupt media weaponizing their industry and "destroying the truth" enabled the NRA to then build a rhetorical bridge to its second underlying claim: that the press was coming after the Second Amendment next.

NRA President Wayne LaPierre offered a special video segment directed at "every dishonest member of the failing American news media." In it he charged, "You weaponized the First Amendment against Second." The same co-narrative can be heard in Grant Stinchfield's video that exclaimed, "For years, The Washington Post has tarnished gun owners in an effort to take away our Second Amendment freedoms." And it could be read in tweets like, "If gun owners abused #2A the way you abuse your paper & #1A, our rights would have been taken away." The rhetorical logic of this two-pronged assault is that it establishes the media are not to be trusted, that they are detrimental to our democracy where the First Amendment is concerned. Therefore, they are detrimental to our freedoms where the Second Amendment is concerned.

In many ways, this final appeal underscores the true function of NRATV, which was not gun advocacy, but rather to neutralize its critics, the greatest of which it perceives to be the press. Addressing the media, LaPierre continued: "If the fate of individual freedom had rested in your hands, America would have fallen long ago. But Americans put their trust somewhere else. And now, in that place, stands the most trusted defender of individual freedom in American history."

The final catchphrase of this and many other NRATV video segments ties together the message: "We're the National Rifle Association of America and we're freedom's safest place." It implies that American liberty itself is now in need of the NRA's guardianship. By itself, the statement is innocuous. But surrounded by a litany of domestic threats, as identified by NRATV—the media, the Democrats, the activists, the liberals—the idea of freedom's apparent endangerment takes on a whole new meaning.

Conclusion

In 2018, NRATV became the subject of national attention. In the wake of the school shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School, which claimed seventeen lives, student survivors and gun control advocates began a campaign aimed at dislodging the influence of the NRA by boycotting those businesses that supported it. This included calling on companies like Amazon, Google, Twitter, and Roku to remove NRATV from their platforms, as it was held that these web hosts effectively allowed the gun lobby to distribute its message. But despite petitions from groups like Everytown for Gun Safety and Moms Demand Action, which cited the channel's "violence-inciting programming" and "dangerous rhetoric," the #DumpNRATV campaign failed to persuade the platforms to

pull NRATV content.⁴⁹ Roku released a statement explaining that it did not censor content based on viewpoints, and NRATV had evidently not violated its terms of service.⁵⁰

The disputed question at the center of this event is in many ways reflective of the question at the heart of this research. What is the nature of NRATV content, and can it really be interpreted as “violence-inciting programming”? This research showed how the NRA’s online channel represented a stunning departure from a mission that was once chiefly dedicated to rifle ownership and Second Amendment advocacy. The six-month frame analysis captured a decisively hostile broadcast, fixated on perceived political enemies and far-right culture wars rather than guns. There was a predominant focus on so-called liberal or leftist enemies, as ascribed to a series of groups, from the media to anti-Trump protestors to the Women’s March. The research also revealed that NRATV hosts were dispensing more blanket attacks on the American Left, thereby broadening the designation of “enemy” to include one-half of the U.S. electorate. The study further established a pattern by which these subjects were being framed, no longer simply as political opposition, but more universally as domestic and public threats using labels like dangerous, extremist, unhinged, violent, crazed, terrorist supporting, radical, and anti-American (see Table 2). Set against these descriptors, the NRATV hosts cast the gun organization as fighting back, protecting, defending America, and freedom’s safest place.

The rhetorical analysis then explored the community appeals and strategic messaging of the NRATV broadcasts. The research showed how NRATV hosts emphasized an “organized” nature behind these leftwing forces that were “coming after” American freedoms, conservative traditions, and President Trump. Hosts also used the communication strategy of frame bridging to position “the violent left” as more in line with foreign threats than with America, while further framing the media and other perceived rivals as anti-police, anti-gun owner, and anti-democracy. And as these videos steadily raised alarm among the community, stoking populist outrage over the “elites [that] threaten our survival,” the NRA offered a counter narrative, presenting itself as the public’s safe harbor, patriotically aligned with our police and military defenders.

Returning to the earlier question of impact, these dire narratives that depict liberals as a “clear and present danger to America” could well be understood as a form of incitement depending on how seriously the audience interprets them. Kalmoe found that even using violent metaphors in political speech has the capacity to increase an audience’s support for political violence.⁵¹ Thus tone becomes a critical factor, and perhaps equally as instructive as the message. In this study, the level of animus expressed toward the opposition was often of an extreme nature. Dana Loesch referred to the mainstream media as “the rat bastards of the earth” whom she was happy to see “curb stomped.”⁵² She later warned that government officials, media, universities, and other saboteurs who defied President Trump would “perish in the political flames of their own fires.”⁵³ Such provocative rhetoric should prompt the need for further research of the NRA’s latest brand of communication, but from a perspective of audience effect. Given this community’s size and devotion, it is critical to learn whether such hostile hyperbole, coupled with narratives that pit the “violent left” against the “defending NRA” has the capacity to *evoke* the same level of outrage that NRATV is expressing.

⁴⁹ Sean Burch and Reid Nakamura, “Roku Rejects Calls to Dump NRA TV Channel from its Devices,” *Yahoo*, February 27, 2018, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/roku-rejects-calls-dump-nra-tv-channel-devices-224822058.html>.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Kalmoe, “Fueling the Fire.”

⁵² Jeannette Cooperman, “The Making of the NRA’s Dana Loesch,” *St. Louis Magazine*, September 13, 2018, <https://www.stlmag.com/longform/the-making-of-dana-loesch/>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Beyond impact, future studies might also examine the reach of NRA communications inside social networks like Twitter, where hashtags offer the ability for extremist discourses to travel and intermix with mainstream political interests. With its employment of frame bridging strategy, co-opting non-gun-related issues like civil rights, and reposting tweets from assumed allies like President Trump, it became evident that the NRA was attempting to build bridges to broader political bases. Thus, to what degree are the NRA's online operations succeeding in spreading its message and outreach across this media landscape?

A final factor to consider beyond the message, its tone, and potential to prime an audience, is the messenger itself. Inflammatory rhetoric that targets a political rival or appeals to violence, even figuratively, can be problematic when it comes from any organization. But declarations about an "organized anarchy underway," "crazed liberals," and the "need to defend ourselves," may enter new ground when it emanates from a gun lobby. Rather than political commentators, the NRA carries the mantle of authority on gun rights and armed self-defense. In this context, the appeals that the NRA disseminates – its new "Stand and Fight" mantra – may sound less like a figurative slogan, to some, and more like a justified course of action.

As an addendum to this research, on June 25, 2019, the NRA announced it was halting production of future NRATV episodes for now. The organization cited financial reasons, but also acknowledged that, "Many members expressed concern about the messaging on NRATV becoming too far removed from our core mission: defending the Second Amendment."⁵⁴ Though NRATV was compelled to suspend its operations, NRATV content is still freely accessible via the gun lobby's YouTube channel and Twitter page.

⁵⁴ Danny Hakim, "NRA Shuts Down Production of NRATV," *New York Times*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.ny-times.com/2019/06/25/us/nra-nratv-ackerman-mcqueen.html>.