# Constructing Policy Narratives in 140 Characters or Less: The Case of Gun Policy Organizations

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*This study examines interest groups' framing of gun policy issues via an analysis of nearly 10,000 tweets by the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and the National Rifle Association spanning from 2009 to 2014. Utilizing the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), I investigate the extent to which interest groups use social media to construct policy narratives. This research shows that much can be conveyed in 140 characters; both gun control and gun rights organizations used Twitter to identify victims, blame "villains," commend "heroes," and offer policy solutions. This research sheds light on the politics of gun control by revealing trends over time in groups' framing and suggests refinements for hypotheses of the NPF. Finally, this work underscores the importance of social media for public policy scholarship.*

KEY WORDS: gun policy, Twitter, social media, interest groups, Narrative Policy Framework

## Introduction

Scholars have long asserted that framing—or the way issues are interpreted and characterized through language—has a significant influence on the policy process. Among other impacts, framing can shape public opinion, structure political coalitions, and steer the selection of policy alternatives (Benford & Snow, 2000; Stone, 1989, 2002). Increasingly, social media have become important tools for the framing of public policy issues. Elected officials, news organizations, and interest groups (among other political actors) actively post on Twitter, now the eighth most popular website globally according to Alexa.com (2015). While there is a growing body of literature examining the role of social media in politics (see Gainous & Wagner, 2013; Merry, 2014a; Raynaud & Greenberg, 2014), little research has evaluated the *framing* of issues on social media (for an exception, see Guggenheim, Jang, Bae, & Neuman, 2015). In particular, do political actors use social media to construct policy narratives, or accounts defining problems, characterizing relevant participants, and proposing solutions? If so, how do these narratives vary over time, and what political strategies can be inferred from actors' narrative choices? Answering these questions, in turn,

can shed light on the impact of social media on public understanding of policy issues and on the policy process, more generally.

This research examines framing on social media through analysis of microblogging by the National Rifle Association (NRA) and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. Through a content analysis of nearly 10,000 tweets spanning from 2009 to 2014, this study evaluates the extent to which interest groups construct coherent policy narratives on Twitter. The results indicate that groups are quite adept at framing gun policy issues in 140 characters or less. The results suggest that social media are integral to interest groups' advocacy efforts and that researchers can gain critical insight into framing activities simply by reading tweets.

## Social Media and Politics

Since the advent of the Internet, scholars have recognized the Internet's potential to facilitate collective action by lowering barriers to communication (Garrett, 2006; Lupia & Sin, 2003; Shirky, 2008). The global justice movement, for instance, utilized Internet-based communication to coordinate mass protests as early as 1999, during the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle (Lievrouw, 2011). More recently, scholars have examined the unique potential of social media—or websites that emphasize user participation and user-generated content (see Tredinnick, 2006)—for facilitating social movements (see Lotan et al., 2011; Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2011). Labeled the Twitter and Facebook Revolutions, the demonstrations that swept across the Middle East and North Africa between 2009 and 2011 are often cited as examples of the power of social media to build and activate political networks (see Grossman, 2009; Hounshell, 2011).

Other scholarship has examined how social media figure into the day-to-day communication strategies of political candidates, elected officials, interest groups, and administrative agency officials, among others (see Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010; Han & Kim, 2009; Waters, Burnett, & Lucas, 2009; Waters & Williams, 2011). Much of the work focusing on Twitter has sought to characterize purposes of communication through various typologies (see Hemphill, Otterbach, & Shapiro, 2013; Lindgren & Lundström, 2011). For instance, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) identify three main functions of microblogging updates by nonprofit organizations: information provision, creating a sense of community through dialogue, and facilitating action. Similarly, analyzing tweets by members of Congress, Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers (2010) identify tweets reporting members' activities, tweets containing facts or opinions, and tweets requesting actions or donations, among other categories. While this research provides insight into the types of content political actors provide on Twitter, these broad categories do not capture the ways that actors frame specific policy issues. There is some work suggesting that groups utilize Twitter to assign blame and propose solutions in the wake of disasters (see Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012; Merry, 2013), but more work is needed to examine how groups frame specific issues, both during crises and periods of normal politics.

Twitter is a particularly relevant forum for examining how interest groups frame policy issues, given the incredible speed of communication and vast, potential

audiences. Created in 2006, Twitter gained popularity as a medium for political communication in 2008 (Marwick & boyd, 2010). It has since grown significantly in its user base, averaging over 288 million unique site visitors per month in 2015 (Twitter.com, 2015). The brevity and simplicity of tweets—limited to 140 characters—facilitate the quick diffusion of information, and the fact that most users make their tweets publicly available to anyone who chooses to "follow" them allows for communications to reach a diverse population of users, including members of the public, interest groups, policymakers, and others. For interest groups that harness this medium effectively, it is a potentially powerful advocacy tool.

## Framing and the Narrative Policy Framework

As scholars in a range of social science disciplines have noted, framing is central to politics and has a number of consequences for the policy process. First, several studies have found that framing shapes public opinion (Benford & Snow, 2000; Shanahan, McBeth, & Hathaway, 2011). In a study of public attitudes toward gun control, for instance, Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2001) found that framing influenced people's causal attributions for mass shootings. Second, it is well established that groups can build alliances and mobilize supporters through such means as defining issues broadly (see Hannigan, 1995; Pralle, 2006; Schattschneider, 1960) or vilifying their political enemies (see Jacobs & Sobieraj, 2007; Lewicki, Gray, & Elliot, 2003). Third, framing is important for shaping policy remedies (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Hajer, 1995). In particular, the way in which a problem is defined has consequences for the types of solutions that are considered and ultimately adopted (Hajer, 1993; McBeth & Shanahan, 2005; Schon & Rein, 1994). As Stone (1989, 2002) observed, causal attributions move particular policy solutions forward by indicating who (if anyone) should be punished or empowered to "fix" problems.

Seeking to push these insights further, public policy scholars have developed an overarching framework for studying the impact of framing on the policy process: the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF). The NPF assumes that narratives (or stories) are primary mechanisms by which individuals process complex information and communicate about events and issues (McBeth, Jones, & Shanahan, 2014). Further, the NPF assumes that policy actors strategically frame issues in narrative form in order to advance their policy goals. Narratives are presumed to contain structural elements that can be identified across policy contexts, including the following: (1) a setting, including "policy consequential phenomena" such as legal aspects, scientific evidence, and economic conditions; (2) characters, such as victims, villains, and heroes; and (3) a moral, or policy solution (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 228). According to Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, and Lane (2013, p. 457), a communication can be considered a narrative if it has at least one character and one reference to a policy solution.

Previous NPF research has identified narratives through analysis of "public consumption documents," such as newspaper editorials, press releases, newsletters, websites, and even YouTube videos (McBeth, Shanahan, & Jones, 2005). These studies typically aggregate media for the purpose of identifying narrative strategies, an approach that limits scholars' ability to identify variation in communication

strategies across forums and to identify nuances specific to particular venues (see Crow, 2012). Thus far, few scholars have analyzed the construction of policy narratives in social media (for an exception see Gupta, Ripberger, & Wehde, 2015). This gap likely reflects the relativeness newness of both the NPF in policy studies (dating to 2010) and scholarship on social media and politics, but may also reflect skepticism about social media—and Twitter in particular, with its 140 character constraint—as sites for framing public policy issues (see Guggenheim et al., 2015). I argue that the NPF serves as an appropriate framework for the analysis of social media for three main reasons. First, the NPF breaks narratives down into discrete components, which are, in all likelihood, easy to incorporate into the short messages on Twitter. Second, the NPF sets a clear—and fairly high—standard for the definition of a narrative and thus serves as a rigorous test of the extent to which policy actors frame issues via social media.[1] Third, NPF scholars have developed hypotheses regarding the ways that political actors use narratives; these strategies have been explored in studies of a wide range of communication media, thus offering useful comparisons (see Crow & Berggren, 2014; Shanahan et al., 2013). Social media, in turn, provide an excellent opportunity to test and refine these hypotheses, given the massive amount of communication that occurs on social media and that can be translated into quantifiable data. Further, by focusing on social media, this research can shed light on how the medium affects the message, recognizing that political actors likely shape their narratives to fit the conventions and constraints of particular forums.

## Narrative Strategies of the NPF

NPF scholars have identified several hypotheses relevant to the "meso" (or group) level of analysis. Following the work of Schattschneider (1960), NPF scholars have examined how groups or coalitions of actors seek to strategically expand or contain the scope of conflict in policy debates. Groups that perceive themselves to be on the losing side of policy debates are expected to employ narratives in ways that increase the size of their coalitions, such as by emphasizing the costs of the status quo, using dramatic language, and linking policy debates to larger, more controversial issues (Gupta, Ripberger, & Collins, 2014; McBeth et al., 2014). Conversely, winning groups are expected to contain conflict by emphasizing the benefits of the status quo and by treating policy issues as isolated problems (Gupta et al., 2014). Drawing from the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier, Hunter, & McLaughlin, 1987), NPF scholars have also examined the role of the "devil shift" in the framing of policy issues. This narrative strategy presumes that coalitions of actors typically perceive their opponents as more powerful than they actually are and, consequently, exaggerate their opponents' malicious intentions and actions while understating their own power (McBeth et al., 2014; Shanahan et al., 2013). The devil shift is expected to be higher in intractable policy debates and to be employed more often by groups on the losing side of policy debates. These narrative strategies are important insofar as they may impact the size and strength of the opposing coalitions and, in turn, their ability to steer the direction of public policy. Given that the gun policy debate is highly polarized, it is reasonable to expect these strategies to be prominent

in the rhetoric of gun policy organizations, especially as they engage in public out-reach via social media.

## The Case of Gun Policy

Gun policy represents an ideal case study for this research in large part because the policy debate plays out in full public view. As noted by Callaghan and Schnell (2001, p. 185), gun policy represents "one of the most salient and long standing debates in U.S. politics" and is a highly contentious issue in which opposing sides draw upon vastly different rhetoric. While one side emphasizes the important of sensible "gun reform" to reduce crime, the other decries "gun control" and emphasizes the right of individuals to own firearms for self-defense. Interest groups on both sides of the issue invest significant effort in building public support for their causes, working to increase their political power though grassroots mobilization and membership recruitment. In short, the issue of gun policy is one in which framing—especially in forums widely utilized by the public, such as social media—is especially important (see also Vizzard, 2000, p. 5).

While there have been numerous studies evaluating the framing of gun policy, particularly in the context of mass shootings, these have largely focused on framing by news organizations (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Spencer & Muschert, 2009). However, many scholars have placed interest groups at the center of their explanations of the dynamics of gun policy (see Goss, 2006; Spitzer, 2008). Spitzer (2008, p. 116), for instance, highlights the NRA's ability to mobilize its members through the use of alarmist rhetoric, while Goss (2006) suggests that gun control organizations made strategic errors in their choice of policy goals in the 1970s and 1980s.

Generally, the impact of interest group advocacy on the policy process is well documented. Interest group framing can have an impact on agenda setting (Andrews & Edwards, 2004) as well as on the alternative selection phase of the policy process (Kingdon, 1984; Smith, 1995). Finally, framing by one set of actors can influence framing by others, constituting a positive feedback loop (Guggenheim et al., 2015). Due to the prominence of interest groups within the gun policy debate, it is reasonable to assume that groups can influence the broader public discourse about the issue, and thus it is especially important to examine their role in framing of gun policy. Toward this end, I pose the following research questions:

1.  To what extent do gun policy groups use Twitter to construct policy narratives?

2.  How do the narrative elements in gun policy groups' tweets vary over time?

3.  Do gun policy groups' tweets evidence specific narrative strategies?

## Research Data and Methods

Data for the study were drawn from two interest groups, one representing each side of the gun policy debate: the NRA and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun

Violence. These organizations are among the largest, most well-established gun pol-
icy interest groups. Claiming more than four million members, the NRA is widely
acknowledged to be the most powerful gun rights organization in the United States,
having "dominated and defined gun politics for most of the last century" (Spitzer,
2008, p. 80). The NRA's main opponent, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Vio-
lence (known as Handgun Control, Inc. before 2001), has been active in gun politics
since the 1970s and is credited with influencing passage of gun control measures in
Congress and in many states in the 1980s and 1990s, despite having approximately
one-tenth of the resources of the NRA (Spitzer, 2008, pp. 102–03). Both organizations
have been active on Twitter since 2009 and have posted in roughly similar propor-
tions to one another.

Tweets from the two organizations were collected from July 21, 2009 through
May 24, 2014. Within this time frame, the Brady Campaign posted 5,443 tweets, and
the NRA posted 4,475 tweets, for a total of 9,918. The beginning date marked the ear-
liest date on which both organizations posted on Twitter, while the ending date was
a function of time constraints in data collection and analysis. This nearly 5-year time
span encompasses the full scope of groups' communication on Twitter, both during
periods of "routine politics" as well as in the aftermath of mass shootings and other
crises and periods of heightened policymaking activity. Notably, the time frame
includes several mass shootings—including the Tucson, Arizona shooting in 2011;
the Aurora, Colorado movie theater shooting in 2012; and the school shooting in
Newtown, Connecticut in 2012—the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in Sanford,
Florida in 2012; and the push to pass gun reform in the U.S. Congress in 2013. Fur-
ther, the analysis of *all* tweets by two the organizations—not just those about gun
policy—recognizes that groups may use Twitter for a variety of purposes, including
publicizing events and discussing shared interests (such as hunting, in the case of
the NRA). While this study does not explicitly examine these other purposes of com-
munication, the research design allows for an assessment of the strength of narrative
signals amidst the noise generated via social media.

For each organization, I collected every tweet and retweet (or reposting of
another Twitter user's content), using the web search application Topsy (http://
www.topsy.com). Topsy has indexed tweets dating to mid-2008 and allows one to
search for tweets by user and date. This search engine has been used in previous
research (see Guggenheim et al., 2015; Krieck, Dreesman, Otrusina, and Denecke,
2011) and is recommended in Twitter's official guide to journalists for researching
news topics (Boutin, 2011).

The research method used in this study is content analysis, focusing primarily
on the presence or absence of specific narrative elements, summarized in Table 1.

With each element, the tweet was coded as 1 if the element was explicitly con-
veyed and 0 if it was absent. This approach ensures that the results do not overstate
the prevalence of policy narratives in social media and, in fact, may understate it to
the extent that the coding does not capture implied meaning. As indicated in Table
1, the coding includes categories (allies, opponents, perpetrators, and events) that are
not typically identified in other NPF research.[2] Allies and opponents were included
because both organizations in the study often named their allies or opponents—

**Table 1.** Narrative Elements in the Content Analysis of Tweets

| Narrative Element | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Ally | An individual, organization, or governmental entity that is not explicitly praised, but is identified as holding a policy position with which the author of the tweet agrees. | Brady Campaign (December 13, 2014): "POTUS observes moment of silence for Newtown, calls for gun reform (via @HuffPostPol) huff.to/1ftpAo7" |
| Event | A tweet referencing a shooting incident or act of violence. | NRA (February 27, 2013): "'At Columbine, 2 killers used 4 guns. Only 1 of the guns was an –assault weapon,' and it wasn't the gun that was used to fire the most ammo" |
| Evidence | A tweet containing one of the following forms of evidence: (1) references to scientific studies, (2) statistics, (3) public opinion polls, or (4) references to legal rulings. | Brady Campaign (March 26, 2014): "94% of female homicide victims know their killer, keeping guns out of the hands of domestic abusers is so important! ow.ly/v038k" |
| Hero | An individual, organization, or governmental entity that is praised in some way. | Brady Campaign (August 29, 2012): "RT@JenniferJenkins @bradytwitt TY for 4 everything u do to make America a safer place to live. U R an inspiration! #happybdayjim" |
| Opponent | An individual, organization, or governmental entity that is not explicitly blamed, but is identified as holding a policy position with which the author of the tweet disagrees. | NRA (January 11, 2011): "King, Bloomberg Team Up to Call for New Gun Control Law http://tinyurl.com/4pe2e6v" |
| Perpetrator | An individual who commits an act of violence and is portrayed as engaging in wrong behavior. Typical perpetrators include mass shooters. | Brady Campaign (January 6, 2011): "CBS News: Omaha School Shooting: Millard South High School Shooter Left Disturbing Facebook Post http://ht.ly/3zwcU" |
| Solution | A tweet mentioning a policy solution, which can take the form of a policy proposal or an enacted policy. The tweet may or may not state a position on the policy solution. | NRA (November 12, 2009): "Time to put an end to Army bases as gun free zones: It is hard to believe that we don't trust soldiers with gun. http://bit.ly/1wT5RM" |
| Victim | Any individual portrayed as mistreated. Most commonly, victims are those injured or killed by gun violence, but the category is broad enough to include other types of mistreatment. | Brady Campaign (November 21, 2009): "VA Tech student was shot four times on April 16, 2007. Find out what happened and what he is doing now. http://ow.ly/Du17 #p2 #liberal #npr" |
| Villain | An individual, organization, or governmental entity that is blamed for some type of wrongdoing (excluding acts of violence). | NRA (August 23, 2012): "Obama's failure to defend our border from violent cartel criminals means law-abiding Americans are at risk inv.lv/SrdIZ4" |

along with their policy positions—without expressing either approval or disapproval.[3] While these characters are not portrayed as heroic or villainous, they are still relevant to groups' efforts to delineate the boundaries of their respective coalitions. Perpetrators of gun violence are coded in light of their importance to the framing of gun politics; in particular, previous research has noted the prominence of a "crime control" frame, which focuses heavily on the perpetrators of gun violence and efforts to stem their criminal acts (see Goss, 2006; Vizzard, 2000). Similarly, events are

**Table 2.** Intercoder Reliability Statistics Based on a Sample of 1,000 Tweets

| Narrative Element | % Agreement | Cohen's Kappa |
|---|---|---|
| Ally | 91.0 | .50 |
| Event | 92.5 | .66 |
| Evidence | 93.0 | .68 |
| Hero | 89.8 | .65 |
| Opponent | 99.3 | .89 |
| Perpetrator | 97.7 | .78 |
| Solution | 90.8 | .81 |
| Victim | 97.4 | .89 |
| Villain | 91.3 | .68 |

central to debates over gun politics and policy; mass shootings and other acts of violence create the "specific policy contexts" in which problems are situated and provide structure for the ensuing debate (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 228). As such, events are one element of the policy setting. Evidence is also part of the setting, and its presence in policy narratives has been included in other NPF studies, although most research has focused on the use of scientific evidence (see Crow & Berggren, 2014; Gupta et al., 2014; Shanahan et al., 2013). This study uses a more comprehensive definition of evidence, based on the work of Smith-Walter, Peterson, Reynolds, and Jones (2013).

Given the straightforward nature of the content analysis, the bulk of the coding was done by one coder. As a reliability check, a second coder analyzed a randomly selected set of 1,000 tweets. As reported in Table 2, intercoder agreement was near perfect for three variables, substantial for five variables, and moderate for one variable.[4]

## Results

### Do Tweets Contain Policy Narratives?

To determine the extent to which individual tweets contain narratives, I constructed an index of "narrativity," similar to the work of Crow and Berggren (2014) and McBeth, Shanahan, Anderson, and Rose (2012). This index represents a sum of the narrative elements outlined in Table 1 and ranges from 0 to 9. For the Brady Campaign, the mean narrativity score was 1.27, while the mean narrativity score for the NRA was .91.[5,6] Further, I calculated the percentage of tweets containing both a character and a solution—i.e., the minimum threshold for a narrative, as identified by McBeth et al. (2014). Of the Brady Campaign's tweets, 18.9 percent contained both a character and a solution, while 17.9 percent of tweets from the NRA met this threshold.[7]

At first blush, these results suggest that Twitter limits users' ability to construct policy narratives. The narrativity in tweets appears to be lower than that seen in other media; for instance, in a study of YouTube videos, McBeth et al. (2012) found that the Buffalo Field Campaign typically included between 6 and 8 narrative elements in its videos (out of 11 elements in the content analysis). Similarly, in a study

of media coverage, websites, and blogs related to environmental issues in Colorado, Crow and Berggren (2014) reported mean narrativity scores of 3.29 and 2.67 for winning and losing coalitions, respectively (based on a 7-point narrativity scale). Comparisons to NPF studies of other media are, however, problematic in that most, if not all, of these studies only analyzed policy-related documents that were presumed to contain policy narratives (see, for example, Gupta et al., 2014; Heikkila, Weible, & Pierce, 2014; Shanahan et al., 2013), while the present study examines both policy-related and nonpolicy-related tweets. The higher levels of narrativity in previous studies likely reflect this difference in research design.

Furthermore, these statistics treat tweets in isolation, a fact that may not reflect the average user's experience. In particular, those who follow the Brady Campaign or the NRA on Twitter most likely read the organization's *stream* of tweets, and narratives may emerge through a cumulative effect of exposure to multiple tweets over time. This expectation is reasonable given the fact that, as of 2014, a majority of Twitter users visit the site at least a few days a week, if not more frequently (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, and Madden, 2015). When the unit of analysis is shifted from a single tweet to a day's worth of tweets, a different story emerges. For the Brady Campaign, the mean narrativity for a day's worth of tweets is 2.03, while for the NRA, the mean is 1.43.[8] Further, when the unit of analysis is shifted to a week's worth of tweets, mean narrativity increases to 5.78 for the Brady Campaign and to 4.51 for the NRA.[9]

To illustrate how each organization constructs narratives through its Twitter-stream, it is instructive to look at 1 week of heightened narrativity in the time frame: the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting. The increased activity on Twitter was largely driven by the Brady Campaign, which issued 157 tweets in the week following the shooting, compared to just 29 from the NRA. Further, the organizations differed significantly in their narrative construction during this week; the Brady Campaign's tweets placed the most emphasis on victims and heroes and had an average daily narrativity score of 5.75, compared to 1.75 for the NRA, which focused primarily on solutions. Despite the NRA's apparent reticence, the organization's tweets reveal a narrative interpretation of the event. Table 3 contains a sample of tweets and retweets from each organization between December 14, 2012 (the day of the shooting) and December 21, 2012.

While each tweet contains only one or two narrative elements, collectively the tweets cover a range of topics and clearly exceed the minimum threshold for the definition of policy narratives. The Brady Campaign's tweets contain an event, a victim, a perpetrator, a villain, a hero, and a solution. The NRA's tweets alluded to, but did not specifically mention, the shooting, nor did the organization mention victims or a perpetrator. However, the organization's tweets did contain allies, an opponent, a hero, a villain, and solutions. At the aggregate level, both organizations' tweets connected the shooting to a set of policy alternatives. For the Brady Campaign, the shooting created a moral mandate to take action; moving from the horror of the event itself and grief over the deaths of young children, the organization called for swift action and emphasized the groundswell of public support for "sensible" reforms. The gun lobby and politicians were portrayed as villains seeking to obstruct

**Table 3.** Tweets Issued in the Week Following the Newtown, CT School Shooting

|  | Date | Narrative Elements | Tweet |
|---|---|---|---|
| Brady Campaign | December 14, 2012 | Victim, Event | RT@BradyPrez Truly heartbreaking to hear a 3rd-grader describe mass shooting @ her school. We Are Better Than This t.co/WyCqFq2o |
|  | December 14, 2012 | Perpetrator, Solution | RT@EvaLongoria How can a 20yr old with a history of mental problems have access to guns! #GunControl |
|  | December 15, 2012 | Villain, Event | RT@JoyAnnReid There is a very clear bad actor here. The NRA, which represents gun manufacturers, and owns pols on both sides. #CTshooting |
|  | December 16, 2012 | Hero, Solution | RT @Bradytwitt: POTUS to support Dianne Feinstein's legislation on Assault Weapon Ban - great news - badge of courage |
| National Rifle Association | December 19, 2012 | Opponent, Solution | President Obama supports gun control measures, including reinstating an assault weapons ban www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/18/Ä |
|  | December 21, 2012 | Villain | When it comes to our most beloved and vulnerable members of the American family, our children, we as a society leave them utterly defenseless. |
|  | December 21, 2012 | Villain, Hero | Wayne LaPierre: "While some have tried to exploit tragedy for political gain, we have remained respectfully silent." #NRA |
|  | December 21, 2012 | Ally, Solution | Poll: 53% agree with #NRA plan to increase police presence at schools www.breitbart.com/Big-Journalism/20Ä |

change, while the public and gun control advocates were cast as heroes, demonstrating bold leadership. In a parallel manner, the NRA decried the senseless loss of life and called for decisive action to prevent such a tragedy from recurring. However, the organization framed the problem as a lack of security in schools, remedied by increasing police presence. The heroes in this narrative are "good guys with guns" who can immediately stop the "bad guys." It is thus clear from the stream of tweets that each organization utilized narrative elements to strategically frame gun policy issues in the aftermath of the mass shooting.

### *Use of Specific Narrative Elements*

Given the contentious politics and importance of framing in gun policy, it is important to examine how the Brady Campaign and NRA differ in their emphases
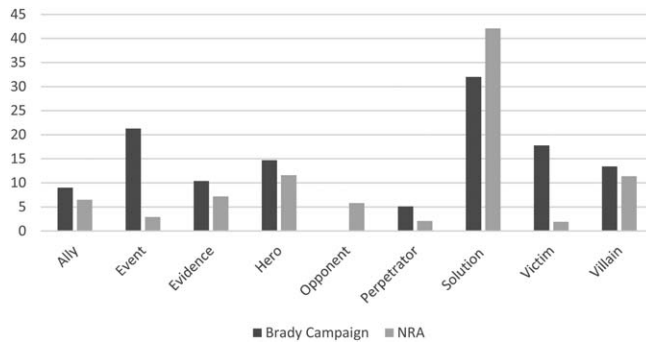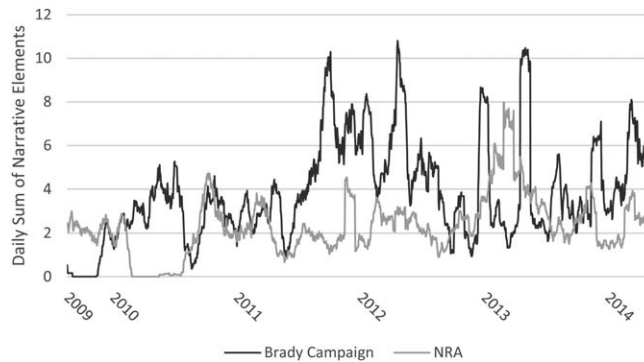
Figure 1. Narrative Elements in Gun Policy Organizations' Tweets.

on particular narrative elements and to what extent these elements vary over time. Figure 1 illustrates the percentages of each organization's tweets containing nine narrative elements.

As one might expect, the Brady Campaign emphasized victims of gun violence and events, including mass shootings and homicides, to a greater extent than the NRA; this can be considered as part of a strategy of conflict expansion by way of drawing in more sympathetic observers and participants (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 245; Pralle, 2006; Schattschneider, 1960). The Brady Campaign also employed evidence to a greater extent than the NRA,[10] a finding that is consistent with work by Smith-Walter et al. (2013) examining the newsletters of the Brady Campaign and NRA; the authors of this study posited that evidence serves to buttress other narrative elements, especially victims, allowing the Brady Campaign to "appeal to both the head and the heart" (p. 24).

Figure 1 illustrates some surprising findings as well. First, both organizations focused little attention on the perpetrators of gun violence, a finding that departs from previous gun policy research highlighting the prominence of the "crime control" frame (Goss, 2006).[11] Both groups also used heroes slightly more than villains, suggesting an absence of the devil shift. To further investigate this, I calculated the "devil-angel shift" score for each organization (see Heikkila et al., 2014). This score ranges from −1 (indicating an emphasis on villains) to 1 (indicating an emphasis on heroes).[12] Based on their individual tweets, both organizations engaged in a slight angel shift, with mean scores of .1 for the Brady Campaign and .01 for the NRA. Shifting the unit of analysis to a day's worth of tweets, the Brady Campaign displayed an angel shift (with a mean score of .15), while the NRA had a slight devil shift (with a mean score of −.04).[13] Overall, these findings run contrary to the expectation within the NPF that intractable policies are likely to reflect "the devil shift." Finally, the fact that the Brady Campaign used villains to a greater extent than the NRA is inconsistent with work by Smith-Waters et al. (2013), who found the opposite in their analysis of newsletters by the two organizations.[14] As will be discussed below, I attribute this finding in part to the NRA's use of opponents (in lieu of villains).

**Figure 2.** Temporal Distributions of Total Narrative Elements in Gun Policy Organizations' Tweets, Using a 30-Day Moving Average.

*Variation Over Time in Narrative Elements*

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of daily sums of narrative elements (across tweets) for each organization, using a 30-day moving average.

Variation over time in the groups' use of narrative elements is attributable, in part, to groups' responses to events—i.e., shootings and heightened periods of legislative activity. The high point in the Brady Campaign's use of narrative elements occurred in April of 2012 as the group lobbied against two Senate bills—introduced shortly after the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida—that would have required states to recognize concealed weapons permits issued in other states; the Brady Campaign referred to these bills as the "George Zimmerman Armed Vigilante Acts" (Gross, 2012). The next significant increase reflected the group's response to the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT on December 14, 2012. The group's use of narrative elements increased again in the lead-up to and aftermath of congressional voting on a bill—which failed—that would have expanded background checks on gun sales, among other provisions, in April of 2013; the day that the Senate voted on the bill, the Brady Campaign issued 72 tweets containing a total of 180 narrative elements. The NRA was less responsive to events, but did increase the use of narrative elements following the Newtown, CT shooting—particularly as the group lobbied heavily against gun reform proposals. The high point in the NRA's Twitter activity occurred on February 27, 2013, the day of a Senate hearing on a bill that would have reinstated the federal assault weapons ban; in opposition to this bill, the NRA issued 55 tweets containing a total of 96 narrative elements. These findings are consistent with other research examining trends over time narrative construction. In a study of four environmental policy debates in Colorado, for instance, Crow and Berggren (2014) found that the use of narrative elements increased toward the end of policy debates, perhaps as a reflection of intensified efforts by political actors to sway public opinion and influence policymakers.

Beyond the influence of events, narrative construction also seems to be driven by circumstances and decisions internal to the organizations. For example, narrative

elements in the Brady Campaign's tweets increased from July to November of 2011 (peaking in late September), due mainly the organization's retweeting of posts from other users mentioning the phrase "gun violence"; many tweets were from individuals who had lost friends or family, such as the following tweet from July 29, 2011: "RT @JERKIN_BARBIE: Got sum bad news today…I lost my 26yearold cousin @ 4 dis morning to gun violence IMISS yu so muchh Maurice R.I.P SMH." By retweeting these posts, it seems that the Brady Campaign was consciously seeking to expand the issue by magnifying the scope of the gun violence problem. Both organizations also increased their use of narrative elements from January to May of 2014, but not in response to any one event. For instance, both organizations commented on state-level gun policies, called for federal legislation, and highlighted various events—including accidental shootings (mentioned by the Brady Campaign) and self-defense shootings (mentioned by the NRA). This trend suggests that both organizations have generally made narrative construction more integral to their communication on social media.

In addition to overall narrativity, it is instructive to look at temporal variation in specific narrative elements, as indicated in Figure 3 (illustrating trends for the Brady Campaign) and Figure 4 (for the NRA).

In the case of the Brady Campaign, variations in narrative elements mainly reflect the influence of two events: (1) the shooting death of Travyon Martin in February of 2012, and (2) the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in December of the same year. The group's response to the former is reflected in peaks in emphasis on victims, perpetrators (i.e., George Zimmerman), villains, and events in February and March of 2012. In the immediate aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting, the Brady campaign highlighted victims, heroes, and events. Later, in response to the failed legislative response to the shooting, the group emphasized allies, villains, and solutions. A third event led to an increase in emphasis on victims and heroes in January of 2012: a candlelight vigil for gun violence victims on January 8 (the 1-year anniversary of the mass shooting in Tucson, Arizona, in which Representative Gabrielle Giffords was severely injured). In contrast to other narrative elements, opponents and evidence show little variation in response to events.

As for the NRA, narrative elements increased primarily in response to legislation proposed following the Newtown, CT shooting; in early 2013, the group emphasized allies, villains, opponents, and solutions as it lobbied against expanded background checks on gun sales. The NRA's use of opponents may reflect the organization's effort to maintain a low profile in the immediate aftermath of the mass shooting; during this time, the NRA was especially vulnerable to criticism and, thus, to avoid a backlash, the organization might have chosen to name their opponents without portraying them as villains.[15] Additionally, an increase in the use of perpetrators, heroes, and events (mainly, self-defense shootings) is attributable to the introduction of the #ArmedCitizen hashtag in July of 2012; tweets containing this hashtag describe a citizen using a firearm to defend him or herself against someone with malicious intent, as in the following tweet from June 6, 2013: "#ArmedCitizen: 84-yr-old MO grandmother caught burglar in her home and held suspect at gunpoint until police arrived www.ksdk.com/rss/article/373543/3/GÄ." This hashtag represents the
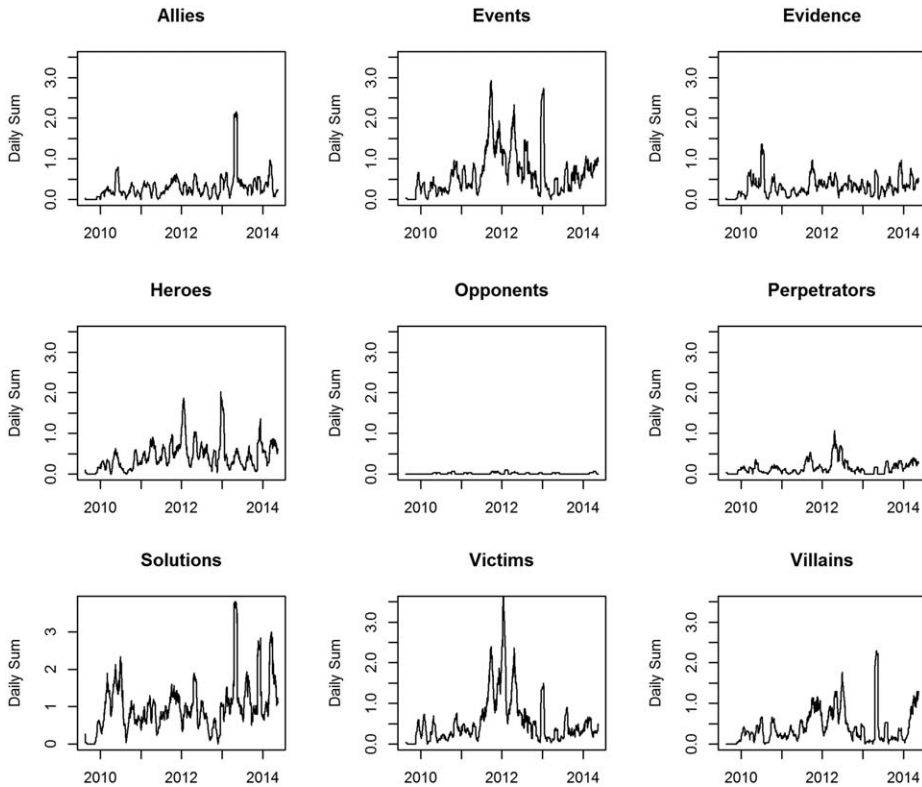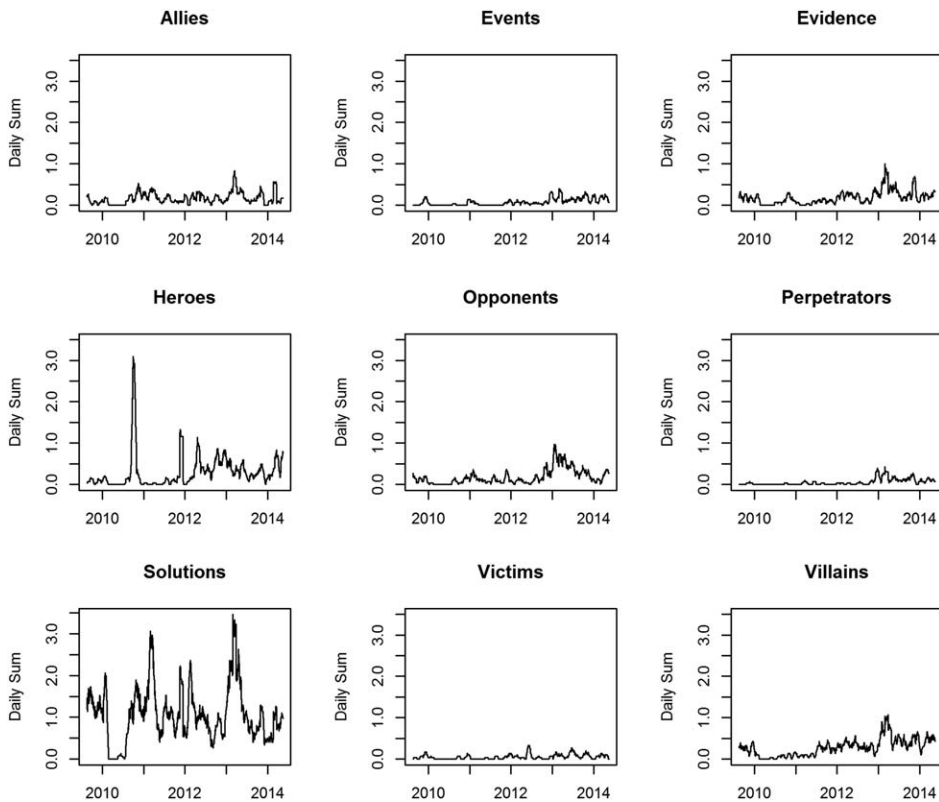
**Figure 3.** Temporal Distributions of Narrative Elements in the Brady Campaign's Tweets, Using a 30-Day Moving Average.

adaptation of the long-standing "Armed Citizen" column in the NRA's flagship magazine *The American Rifleman* (see O'Neill, 2007) and thus demonstrates how the organization utilizes Twitter to reinforce organizational strategies previously established in other media.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Below, I discuss the implications of this research in three main areas: (1) interest groups' use of social media, (2) the politics of gun policy, and (3) methodological and theoretical aspects of the NPF. First, the content analysis of tweets by the Brady Campaign and the NRA shows that both groups constructed policy narratives through social media; some narratives were contained in single tweets, while others emerged through the cumulative effect of the near-constant stream of messages. The 140-character constraint likely required the groups to simplify their messages, paring down their narratives to their basic components and including fewer narrative elements than they might in other media. The fact that just 18.5 percent of the total tweets met the minimum threshold for the definition of a narrative may be a

**Figure 4.** Temporal Distributions of Narrative Elements in the NRA's Tweets, Using a 30-Day Moving Average.

function of that space limitation. Interestingly, however, narrative construction actually exceeded other common purposes of outreach via social media. For instance, the Brady Campaign made requests for political action or donations in 14.7 percent of its tweets, while the NRA made such appeals in 6.7 percent of its tweets. Additionally, 6.7 percent of the NRA's tweets were geared toward gun enthusiasts, showcasing specific firearms and shooting gear. The relative prominence of narratives in the groups' tweets suggests that Twitter may be an important medium within interest groups' larger framing strategies. It may also reflect one major advantage of Twitter: the ability of political actors to convey their preferred framing of policy issues to a greater extent than they are able in other media.[16] In particular, both organizations did not simply tweet in reaction to events, but rather created their own reasons for posting to the site. The Brady Campaign's wave of tweets highlighting the victims of gun violence and the NRA's emphasis on "armed citizens" evidence deliberate efforts to shape gun policy in ways consistent with the organizations' goals. Groups' framing choices are also apparent in the types of events to which they responded, with the Brady Campaign focusing on mass shootings and homicides and NRA focusing on self-defense shootings while virtually ignoring mass shootings (something the organization would be unable to do in press interviews). Incidentally, both

characterizations represent highly selective interpretations of the harms that are associated with guns, neglecting the fact that suicide is the leading cause of death related to guns (Spitzer, 2008, p. 53).

Second, these findings offer insight into the nature of the gun policy debate. Previous research suggests that this debate has emphasized the "crime control" frame, in which gun control groups raise the specter of the "armed stranger" and gun rights organizations explain the futility of gun laws to deter criminals (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Goss, 2006). Scholars have also noted the emergence, in the 1990s, of alternative frames, including those focusing on public health (Godwin & Schroedel, 2000) and on protecting children (Goss, 2006). This study indicates that the crime control frame is still prominent in the rhetoric of gun policy groups; notably, the Brady Campaign frequently calls for keeping weapons out of the "wrong hands," and the NRA asserts that the best way to stop a "bad guy with a gun" is a "good guy with a gun." However, the findings suggest that gun policy organizations have shifted their rhetorical emphasis within this frame, as evidenced by the fact that both organizations virtually ignored the perpetrators of gun violence and that the Brady Campaign dedicated significant attention to victims on Twitter. This shift may be reflective of public pressure to move the discussion following mass shootings away from the shooters themselves, based on the belief that the media give shooters the fame they desire and thus encourage copycats. Following several mass shooting in 2012, numerous opinion editorials called on the media to focus more on the victims than the perpetrators of gun violence (see Grenny, 2012; Kohn, 2012). Similarly, in the wake of evidence that "active shooter" incidents have increased significantly since 2007 (see Schmidt, 2014), the FBI launched a "Don't Name Them" campaign to discourage media attention to shooters (Gerber, 2014).

Moving beyond the overarching frames in the gun policy debate, this research sheds light on the way mass shootings figure into the discourse on social media. Previous work suggests that the gun debate follows a cycle "of outrage, action, and reaction," usually initiated by a horrific or sensational event (Spitzer, 2008, p. 13). Based on this, one might expect mass shootings to lead to a flurry of social media activity on the part of gun control organizations. While mass shootings—defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2005) as incidents in which an individual kills four or more people at a single location—were the most common event mentioned by the Brady Campaign, only the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT led to a major increase in narrative construction. These events, sadly, occur with such regularity—in fact, at least 20 mass shootings occurred during the time frame of the study and received some mention in the Brady Campaign's Twitter feed—that they rarely rise to the status of focusing events (see Birkland, 1997). More typically, the organization offered condolences to the victims and families before shifting to other topics.[17]

Third, in terms of methodological implications for the NPF, this research makes clear that the identification of narratives depends on the unit of observation. While individual tweets contain basic narratives, the stream of tweets over a day or week encompasses more detailed narratives and is arguably a better reflection of the way individuals receive and process information from social media. Future NPF studies

might similarly examine the appropriateness of particular units of observation; while most NPF studies examine narrativity by analyzing single documents—such as press releases or editorials—aggregating results across documents within a particular time frame might offer insight into the broader narrative strategies that these communications comprise as well as the cumulative impacts of these communications.

Likewise, the choice of specific narrative elements matters for the identification of narratives. While this study includes many components identified as central to the NPF—i.e., heroes, villains, victims, and solutions—it also examines new and/or less extensively used elements, including perpetrators, events, allies, and opponents. As noted by Pierce, Smith-Walter, and Peterson (2014, p. 39), such variation in use of narrative elements is common in NPF studies and raises questions about the level of consistency needed in NPF research. I argue that these elements are important given both the context of gun politics and the constraints of communication via social media. Future NPF studies are likely to include even more narrative variation as researchers examine a wider range of policy domains—moving beyond the previous focus on energy and environmental policy (see Pierce et al., 2014)—and incorporate new communication forums. Thus, it may be important to accommodate new character types and elements related to setting, allowing for the analysis of more nuanced policy narratives. Insofar as these elements are grounded in the assumptions of the NPF, they can serve to enrich the framework rather than stray from it.

Finally, the research has theoretical implications for NPF hypotheses at the meso level of analysis. In particular, the NPF predicts that interest groups and other actors will engage in particular narrative strategies depending on whether they are (or perceive themselves to be) on the winning or losing side of policy debates (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 245). Losers are expected to use a range of rhetorical techniques to "expand the scope of conflict," such as emphasizing costs of the status quo, engaging in the "devil shift," using symbols and simple images, and tying issues to broader policy debates (McBeth et al., 2014; Nie, 2003; Sabatier et al., 1987; Shanahan et al., 2013). In the case of gun politics, however, it is difficult to classify winners or losers; neither side is satisfied with the status quo, and both the Brady Campaign and the NRA experienced losses and wins at the federal and state levels during the time frame of the study. If we presume that existing policy generally favors the NRA, we might expect the NRA's communications on Twitter to focus on its core supporters, devoting little attention to controversial topics that might draw wider attention. In contrast, we would expect the Brady Campaign to more aggressively seek to expand its audience. However, the narrative strategy of issue expansion is apparent in both organizations' tweets—in the Brady Campaign's spotlight on victims of gun violence, but also in the NRA's focus on heroes, especially unlikely heroes (the elderly, women, and mothers) using guns to defend themselves against home invaders and robbers. These narratives create a perception of threat and suggest that we all have a stake in protecting the Second Amendment. Issue expansion is also evident in both groups' identification of allies, some unlikely. Among its supporters, the Brady Campaign counts victims of families affected by gun violence, police officers, elected officials, most Americans, and even members of the NRA, as in the following tweet from December 28, 2013: "87% of NRA members want to keep #guns from criminals.

74% support background checks. Join us for a safer America bit.ly/TiXilr." Similarly, the NRA counts among its supporters a majority of Americans, sheriffs, elected officials, the U.S. Supreme Court, and even Obama's own policy advisors, as in the following tweet from February 13, 2013: "RT@NRAILA Obama's own experts conclude his gun policies will not work. Watch and RT t.co/DKjYPtYG #2ndAmendment #SOTU #NRA." In short, both sides portray their coalitions as broad and diverse and thus imply that their positions are both sensible and politically feasible. These findings suggest that conflict expansion, as originally conceptualized by Schattschneider (1960), may have become more ubiquitous in the age of social media. This is likely a function of the nature of social media—in particular, its emphasis on information-sharing and on the creation and expansion of networks. Further, the low cost and convenience of outreach via social media creates incentives for *both* supporters and opponents of the status quo to engage in routinized, ongoing issue expansion, whether in attempts to disrupt—or insure against any disruption of—the status quo.

Another key similarity between the two organizations is the notable absence of a devil shift in their tweets, a surprising finding given that gun politics is such a highly polarized policy area. This is not to say that the groups did not demonize their opponents; in fact, the Brady Campaign accused the NRA of seeking to arm terrorists and of "traffick[ing] in paranoia," among other offenses.[18] Likewise, the NRA portrayed gun control supporters as dishonest elitists.[19] However, recent scholarship has operationalized the devil shift in terms of the ratio of "devil" to "angel" references (Crow & Berggren, 2014; Shanahan et al., 2013). In this case, references to heroes were more prevalent, a finding that is consistent with other NPF research (see Crow & Berggren, 2014). It may be the case that the devil shift as originally conceived makes little sense as a rhetorical strategy; that is, while political actors may *perceive* their opponents as more powerful than they actually are, they might choose to downplay this perception to avoid creating a sense of hopelessness.[20] In short, it may be time to revise expectations regarding the role of the devil shift in political discourse, including a reassessment of factors that influence patterns of blame attribution and praise (see also Merry, 2014b).

While this research only focused on two organizations, I expect the results to generalize—with minor differences—to other interest groups in the same policy area. For instance, the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence is known for pursuing a tougher stand on gun regulation than the Brady Campaign (see Spitzer, 2008), which may be reflected in greater use of villains and heroes in its rhetoric. Similarly, the Gun Owners of America is more ideologically extreme than the NRA and often more willing to speak publicly in the immediate aftermath of mass shootings. This organization might be expected to respond directly to these events by fixing blame and offering policy prescriptions on Twitter. Given that this study is one of the first to apply the NPF to social media, future work should seek to confirm whether these findings hold across cases; that said, I also expect narrative construction to figure prominently in the tweets of interest groups dealing with other controversial and salient issues, such as abortion. Future work should extend to other types of political actors, such as elected officials and political candidates, and to other media, particularly Facebook. If it is indeed possible tell stories in 140 characters or less and if social

media continue to grow as important venues for information dissemination and political discussion, then we should also expect narrative construction to figure prominently in the social media strategies of a range of political actors.

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# Notes

1. It should be noted that frame and narrative are not synonymous terms. Framing is a more general concept, encompassing any use of language to selectively describe and shape perceptions of issues, while narrative is one type of framing technique (McBeth, Lybecker, & Garner, 2010). By focusing on narratives, the study seeks to determine whether tweets go beyond simply identifying general themes and, in fact, tell stories.

2. One exception to this is work by Smith-Walter et al. (2013, p. 42), which codes for the use of allies, defined by the authors as actors who "legitimate the action or the purpose" of the story hero.

3. This practice may reflect the fact that tweets are limited to 140 characters.

4. Cohen's Kappa is a measurement of intercoder reliability ranging from −1 to 1, which takes into account agreement occurring by chance. Landis and Koch (1977) characterize values between .41 and .60 as indicating moderate agreement, values between .61 and .80 as indicating substantial agreement, and values between .81 and 1 as near perfect.

5. A two-sample $t$-test indicated that these mean differences are statistically significant ($p < .01$).

6. Given that the content analysis contains narrative elements that are not typically included in other NPF studies, I constructed a smaller index based on five common narrative elements (villains, heroes, victims, solutions, and evidence). While the mean values of this index are lower, they are proportional to the full index. The Brady Campaign has higher mean narrativity scores for individual tweets (.88, compared to .74 for the NRA), for all tweets in a day (1.4, compared to 1.06 for the NRA), and for all tweets in a week (3.78, compared to 2.94 for the NRA). Two-sample $t$-tests indicated that these mean differences are statistically significant ($p < .01$).

7. A Pearson's chi-square test indicated no significant difference between the organizations in terms of the percentages of their tweets that contain narratives ($x^2 = 1.71, p = .19$).

8. A two-sample $t$-test indicated that these mean differences were statistically significant ($p < .01$).

9. A two-sample $t$-test indicated that these mean differences were statistically significant ($p < .01$).

10. A Pearson's chi-square test indicated that the Brady Campaign's tweets were more likely than the NRA's to contain evidence ($x^2 = 30.19, p < .01$).

11. Goss (2006, p. 117) argued that the crime control frame dominated throughout the twentieth century and remained prominent in the 2000s.

12. Consistent with the definition used by Heikkila et al. (2014), the devil-angel shift was calculated as follows: [(# of references to heroes and allies) – (# of references to villains and opponents)] / (total references to heroes, allies, villains, and opponents).

13. The devil-angel shift score based on a week's worth of tweets was similar for the NRA (with a mean of −.07), while the Brady Campaign displayed a more noticeable angel-shift (with a mean of .30). For each of the three units of analysis, two-sample $t$-tests indicated that these mean differences were statistically significant ($p < .01$).

14. A Pearson's chi-square test indicated that the Brady Campaign's tweets were more likely than the NRA's to identify villains ($x^2 = 9.35$, $p < .01$).

15. For example, on January 10, 2013, the NRA tweeted "Biden to make gun-control recommendations by Tuesday www.usatoday.com/story/news/pol..." This tweet sent a clear signal to NRA supporters, identifying their "enemy" while minimizing the risk of counter-accusations.

16. To investigate this further, it would be important to examine the relative prominence of narratives in other media, such as emails and press releases.

17. The Brady Campaign does, occasionally, invoke previous mass shootings, especially on their anniversaries and when making the case that these events are part of a broader pattern of gun violence.

18. On September 12, 2011, the Brady Campaign tweeted, "NRA decides to use 9/11 as a fundraiser for the dangerous agenda of arming everyone, including suspected terrorists. mediamatters.org/blog/201109120." On June 28, 2012, Brady retweeted, "RT@TheWarRoomCTV 'The #NRA traffics very well in paranoia. They know how to generate fear.' - @DennisHenigan #TheWarRoom."

19. On October 10, 2013, the NRA tweeted, "@NRAILA's Chris Cox: A group of elitist supporters of #gun-control formed a new org to pursue their pet agenda dailycaller.com/2013/10/09/nras-chr." On March 30, 2014, the NRA tweeted, "For Gun Controllers Honesty is NOT the Best Policy www.nraila.org/news-issues/articles."

20. In fact, the Brady Campaign has made a concerted effort on Twitter to downplay the power of the NRA. For instance, on November 7, 2012, the group tweeted, "NRA spent millions but lost US presidency & huge Senate races in OH, FL, VA, MO, CT shattering myths about #gun lobby power."

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