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On Stupidity and the Ban

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When it comes to hot button topics, there are few more inflammatory than the debate over whether to reenact the lapsed 1994 Assault Weapons Ban into US law. Putting aside the loaded rhetoric, it is challenging to make sense of the statistics being brandished by both sides of the dispute. Representing the argument in opposition of the ban is an article by Sean Davis, co-founder of *The Federalist* magazine, titled “The Assault Weapons Ban Is A Stupid Idea Pushed by Stupid People.” While this article presents a logical argument supported by verifiable facts, the source’s overall reliability is damaged by the obvious bias of both the website and the article.

According to an NMU Olson Library resource on “Evaluating Internet Sources,” key criteria for evaluating the reliability of a source include authority, accuracy, objectivity, coverage and appearance. At first glance, *The Federalist* online magazine has a satisfactory appearance. The credentials of Sean Davis and his co-contributors are considerable, while representing an overwhelmingly politically conservative background. The coverage of topics by *The Federalist*, however, is very one-sided. On the list of “Our Latest” articles, titles included “Nope, The Evidence Still Says Income Inequality Is Not a Problem,” “Why You Can Expect Increased Violence When The Left Is Out Of Power” and “Masterpiece Cakeshop Is Fighting For The First Amendment, Not Against Gay Marriage” (*The Federalist*). These, and the majority of titles, indicated a definite conservative slant. The ratings for *The Federalist* on media bias rating sites *MediaBias/FactCheck* and *Allsides* are “high far right bias” and “lean right,” respectively. This analysis, which is the compilation of ratings for individual articles made without knowledge of their source, confirms the conservative bias apparent in the coverage of *The Federalist* as a news organization.

Beginning with the title, the article’s objectivity is marred by a consistently large quantity of emotionally loaded verbiage. Davis’s treatment of proponents of the ban is both sarcastic and

dismissive. He comments that “The reaction after the terrorist attack in Orlando... was as predictable as it was pathetic,” and that “When silly people like Seth MacFarlane and Susan Sarandon say they want to ban “automatic weapons,” what they mean is that they want to ban guns that look scary.” The use of the words “pathetic” and “silly” to label the opposing side, as well as the sarcasm in these comments, shows that Davis intends to present an emotive argument at the cost of objectivity. To Davis, the Assault Weapons Ban was not only “merely dumb,” but in all likelihood “monumentally stupid and counterproductive” as well. This is hardly the language of an objective discussion. While emotive language alone does not signal an unreliable source, it does, in this case, appeal to a specific group of people who will most likely already agree with the author’s argument. By using strong words and sarcasm, Davis is unlikely to reach those with an opposing view without alienating them, and is thus unable to engage the more varied audience that he would have with a more objective argument.

Davis bases his argument on the assertion that those in favor of a ban have no understanding of guns, and the claim that statistics show that the 1994 ban was ineffective and possibly even “counterproductive”. Davis inserts Twitter posts by Seth MacFarlane and Susan Sarandon calling for a ban on “automatic weapons” in reaction to the Orlando shooting. He points out that no automatic weapons were used in Orlando or in any mass shootings in the US, and that all that is available from most gun dealers, is a “semi-automatic rifle,” which is “absolutely not... more deadly than a typical hunting rifle.” This assertion is both misleading and false. First, Davis chose to quote tweets in which their authors mistakenly used the wrong terminology. Yes, automatic weapons were not used in the Orlando shooting, and they are currently banned with the exception of tightly regulated, grandfathered weapons (308 USCA). The weapon under scrutiny in the gun control debate, however, is the semi-automatic rifle, which

has been available to the public since the Assault Rifle Ban lapsed in 2004. By ridiculing tweets that reference automatic instead of the broader category of assault weapons, Davis does not actually address the issue. Secondly, Davis is incorrect in denying the distinction between semi-automatic and hunting rifles. According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of a semi-automatic weapon is one that is “able to fire repeatedly through an automatic reloading process but requiring release and another pressure of the trigger for each successive shot,” or, in other words, a semi-automatic rifle has a detachable magazine, which a traditional hunting rifle does not. This allows for a far greater number of shots to be fired over a given length of time, and is what makes an assault weapon so deadly.

The only true substance of Davis’s argument is his use of FBI crime statistics to argue that a ban would be ineffective. Even this, however, fails to present a sturdy case. Davis points out that the number of people murdered with rifles decreased from 390 in 2003, the last full year of the Assault Rifle Ban, to 248 in 2014. At first glance this would indicate that the ban failed to reduce the murder rates by assault weapons. But there are a few problems here. First, Davis fails to note that murder rates overall have decreased from 14,408 murders in 2003 to 11,961 in 2014 (FBI Table 2.12, Table 8). Though the percentage decrease in murders with a rifle is higher at 36% than the overall decrease of murders at 17%, this is still a meaningful consideration. Also, this statistic does not differentiate between murders involving semi-automatic or regular handguns, so it is not truly representative of the use of semi-automatic weapons as a whole. Next, while Davis compares statistics of murders using knives and fists to murders using rifles, he chooses not to mention that in 2014, out of 13,164 murders, 8,874 were committed using a firearm, 6,115 of which were hand guns (FBI Table 8). By deciding not to mention that well over half of murders were committed using firearms, the author disregards two important questions.

Earlier in the article he refers to the rigorous background checks required for potential owners of assault weapons. How much higher would the death toll be without these regulations? Also, since the overwhelming majority of murders involve firearms, shouldn't there be concern over the regulation of other categories of guns as well?

Finally, and most pertinently, by focusing on the statistics for all rifle murders, Davis fails to address the issue at the heart of the movement to reinstate the Assault Weapons Ban, which is primarily concerned with the role that semi-automatic weapons have played in mass shootings in the United States. Central to the mission of ban proponents is the need to improve on the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban by providing broader and more relevant criteria of weapons to be regulated. According to research published by Mother Jones on mass shootings between 1982 and 2012, forty-two guns with high-capacity magazines were used across thirty-one mass-shooting cases, twenty assault weapons were used across fourteen mass-shooting cases, and thirty-three cases involved assault weapons or high-capacity magazines, or both. Out of the twelve most deadly shootings including the Orlando nightclub massacre, Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook, eleven involved semiautomatic weapons. Under the improved Assault Weapons Ban proposed by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) in 2013, all of these weapons would be banned (Lee et al). These statistics give a completely different picture from the very general crime statistics that Davis chooses to use, showing the massive role that assault weapons have played in mass shootings. By failing to address the core issue of current gun legislation, Davis fails to meaningfully engage in this debate, and much of his argument is, possibly intentionally, misplaced.

At a first glance, Davis's article in *The Federalist* seemed like a reliable representation of the views of those opposed to reinstating the Assault Weapons Ban. On closer examination,

however, both the website and the article prove to be unreliable most noticeably in the areas of coverage, objectivity and accuracy. A wider scrutiny of its content would be necessary to fairly assess the overall reliability of *The Federalist* magazine. However, based on a close evaluation of Davis's article, "The Assault Weapons Ban Is A Stupid Idea Pushed by Stupid People," it does not appear to be a reliable source.

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