

# Media and “the Fine Meshes of the Web of Power”: Based on the Statistics of Crime Rate in Virginia in 2022 Compared to Last Year and Before

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**Abstract.** Virginia abolished the death penalty in 2021 and welcomed a new governor in 2022. Meanwhile, widespread media reports that the crime rate goes up in 2022 compared to last year and before. The new Republican governor seriously claimed his Democrat predecessor to have made Virginia dangerous till today. In this article, whether it is a fact or a partisan battle that constructs a narrative will be investigated. Also, the five main topics of the news in the last year and a half will be summarized through the adoption of tools like Python and LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation). The review of the theories that explained the effects of media, especially on political policies, and Foucault's theories on human subjection and involvement in political life, explained the significance of the research. This paper concludes that “Virginia is becoming more dangerous” tends to be a narrative constructed through media by politicians to operate power. People cannot avoid being involved in the media, which has great effects on them in modern times. The narrative surrounding the Virginia crime rate is an example of it. Media runs through the process of “subjectivation” but can only make people be trapped in “the fine meshes of the web of power”.

**Keywords:** Media, Narrative, Crime, Foucault.

## 1. Introduction

The state of Virginia announced the abolition of the death penalty last March. Meanwhile, widespread media reports indicate a significant increase in the crime rate in 2022 compared to 2021, a figure that has hit its highest level over the last 10 years.

However, here the media reported a piece of news that seems to go against the widely acknowledged fact that “most states with the death penalty have greater murder rates than states without it”. Before further research was done and solid evidence was shown, Virginia's governor made a judgment and proposal that “increased funding is needed”. He attributed the increased crimes to a lack of funds, which is not so compelling, while the only variable between the two years is the policy of the death penalty. However, it cannot be denied the influence of his words through the filter of media.

To further analyze this phenomenon, it can be referred to Foucault's theory of subjection, political techniques, and power. Here media is a key factor in constructing discourse and Foucault's phrase “the fine meshes of the web of power”. Some previous research will be reviewed to investigate the effect of media on political affairs like criminal justice policy and political bills. Also, a collection of news about the “Virginia crime rate” from google between March 24, 2021, and July 24, 2022, is scraped by Python in this research. The titles of the news will be analyzed through LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) and will be interpreted and classified into 5 topics. Finally, through a thorough analysis, the argument that Virginia is becoming more dangerous and more policies should be implemented is more like a constructed narrative.

## 2. The Straw Man Fallacy in the Deployment of Statistics

After Virginia abolished the death penalty in 2021, the new governor of Virginia once again stressed the rising crime rate of the state and claimed about the policies in the prior tenure of the

Democrats. Governor Youngkin has been particularly concerned about violent crimes and announced Violent Crime Task Force in May 2022 [1].

As is known, partisan battles can always lead to misleading information. To look into the facts of domestic security and stability in Virginia, it is not enough to know one side of the story. Virginia State Police released the crime statistics in June 2021, which reported that Virginia's murder rate reached its peak in the last twenty years [2]. It seemed to support Governor Youngkin's argument to a great extent. People in Virginia would feel it is urgent for the government to carry out certain policies to stop more crimes from happening. To better describe the phenomena, the news about the "Virginia Crime Rate" from Google between March 24, 2021, and July 24, 2022, was collected. After scraping the titles of the news using Python and processing them with the help of LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation), the computer produced a map to reveal the most concerning topics of the news and their intertopic distance. To begin with, the relevance metric must be adjusted.  $\lambda$  goes to zero when the words are more peculiar in this topic;  $\lambda$  goes to 1 when the words are more frequent. Here  $\lambda$  is set as 0.6 to make the statistics more objective.

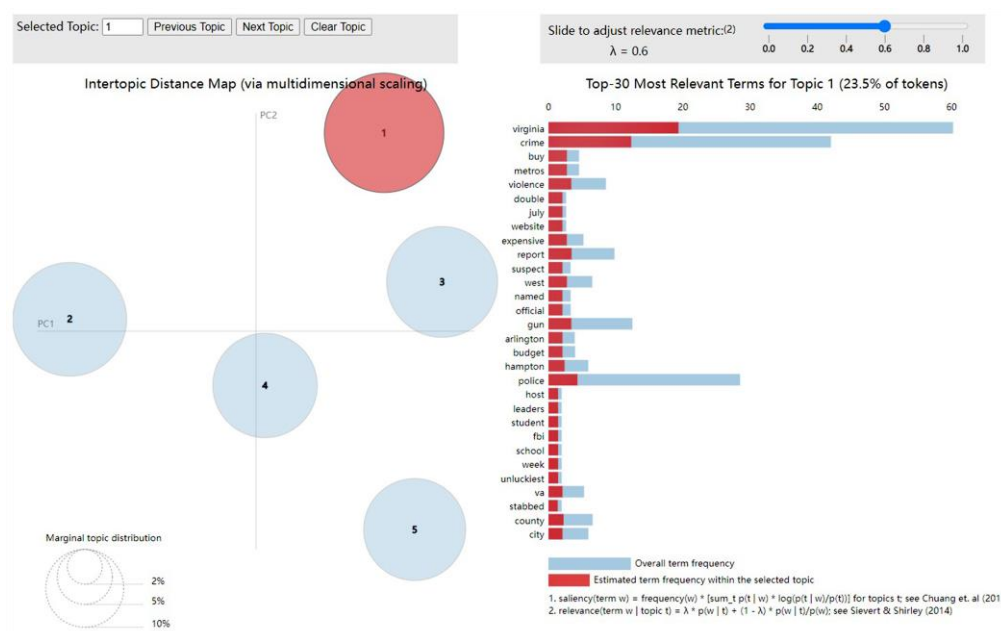


Figure 1. Topic one.

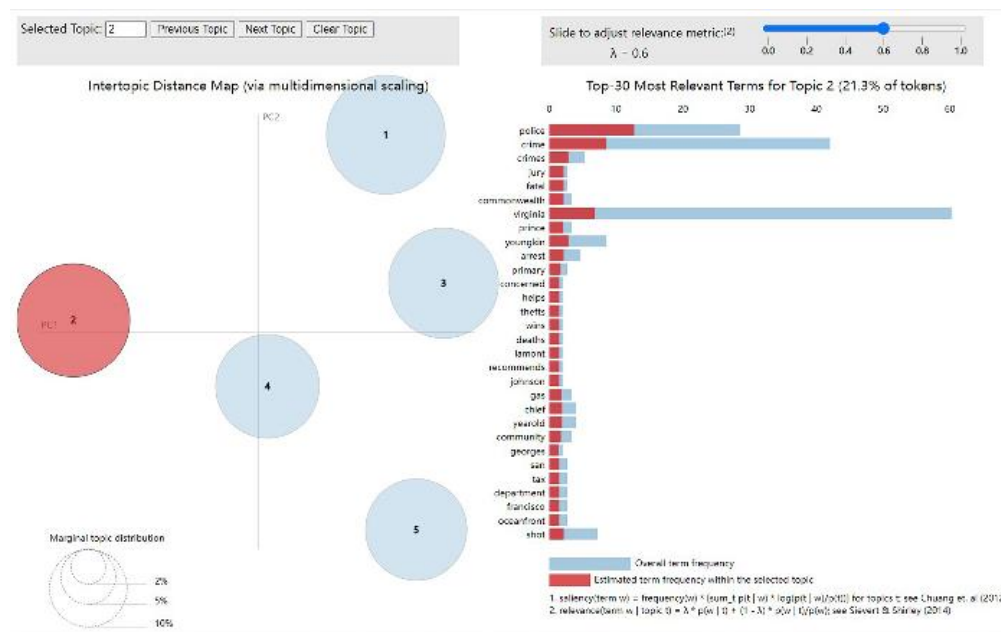


Figure 2. Topic two.

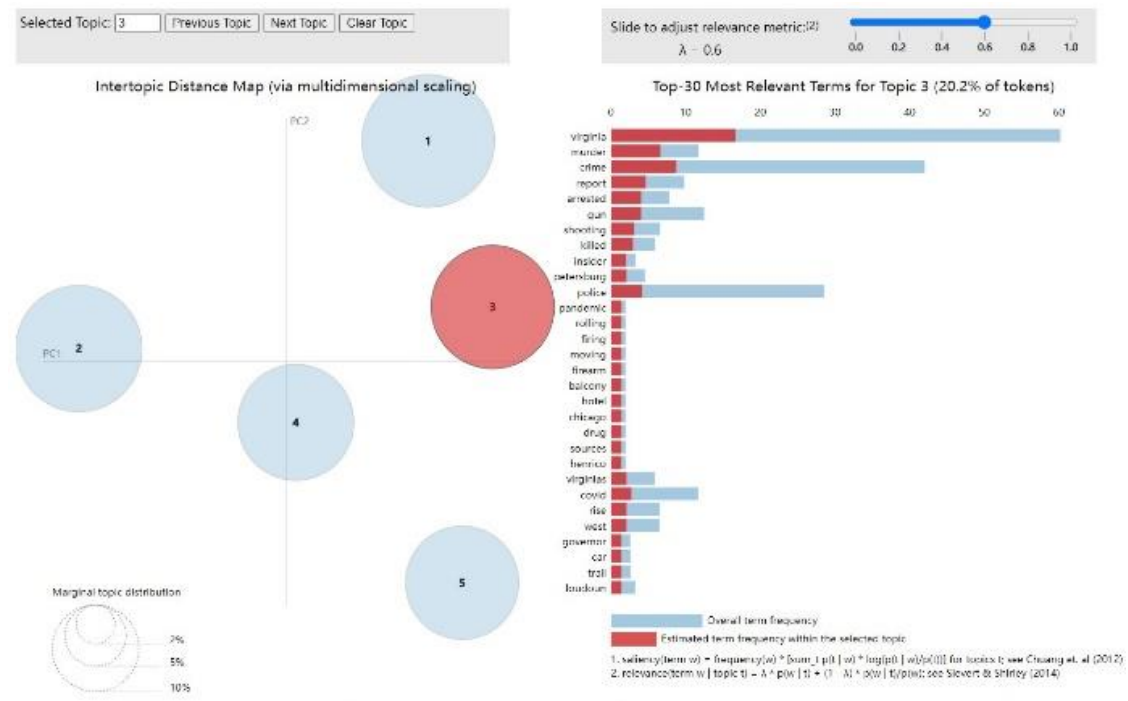


Figure 3. Topic three.

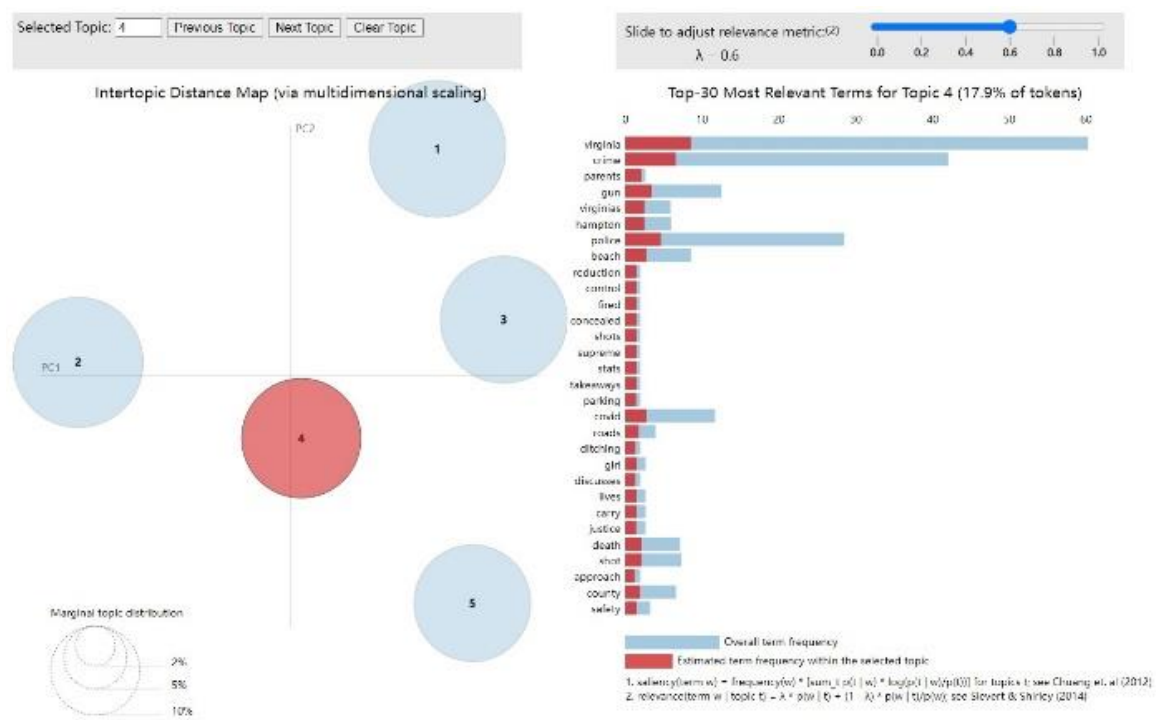


Figure 4. Topic four.

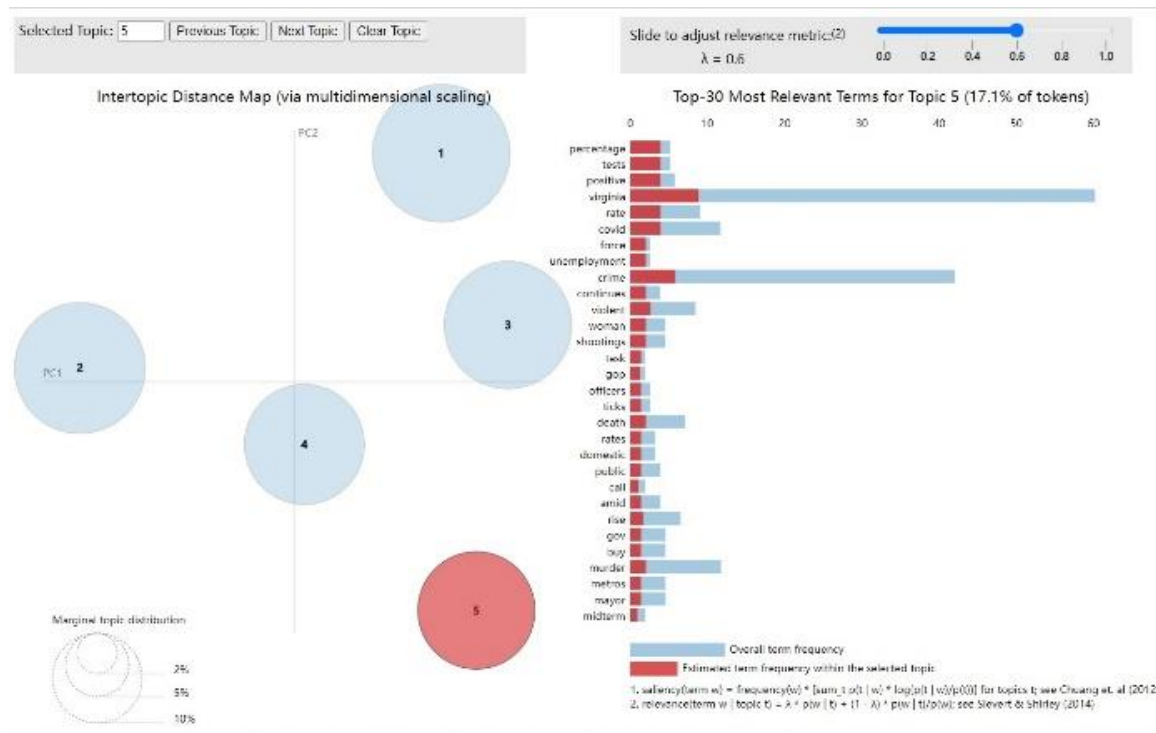


**Figure 5.** Topic five.

As can be seen from Fig 1-5, there are 5 topics concluded. The top 30 most relevant terms for each topic can generalize their concerns. To some extent, it can be illustrated in the table as follows.

**Table 1.** Interpretations for the topics

| Topics | Interpretations                  | Relevant Terms                                                                           |
|--------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1      | Government's fund in policies    | Virginia, crime, violence, report, gun, police, official, FBI, school, budget            |
| 2      | Wide concerns about fatal crimes | police, crime, jury, fatal, commonwealth, Virginia, Youngkin, prince, Johnson, concerned |
| 3      | Homicides                        | Virginia, murder, crime, report, arrested, gun, shooting, killed, police, covid          |
| 4      | Gun violence in counties         | Virginia, crime, gun, police, parents, Hampton, beach, covid, death, shot                |
| 5      | Covid-19's influence on crimes   | Virginia, crime, covid, positive, tests, percentage, unemployment, violent, GOP, force   |

According to Table 1, 10 relevant terms are picked out of 30 and interpreted as different topics. First, topic 1 as the most influential one can be interpreted as concern about the government's fund in policies. Then, topic 2, topic 3, and topic 4 emphasized homicides. The last topic concentrated on the influence of Covid-19 on crimes.

The analysis manifests that for nearly a year and a half, most news could give its readers the impression that gun violence is prevailing and make them focus on the coping policies of the government.

Nevertheless, a closer look into the facts would lead to opposite results. A 2.5% increase in violent crimes over 2020 was recorded in 2021, but the 2021 rate is still 16% lower than a decade ago. However, the murder rate has almost doubled over the last 10 years [3]. In Governor Youngkin's narrative, the state is dangerous because he has clandestinely replaced the term "violent crimes" with "homicides". Here Youngkin committed the "straw man fallacy" to distort, exaggerate, or otherwise misinterpret his opponent's position in order to refute it so that what is being attacked is not the opponent's true position but one that is more easily criticized or rejected.

### **3. The Filter of Media**

Cues from the authority run through the narrative. Here the media reported a piece of news that seems to go against the fact that “most states with the death penalty have greater murder rates than states without it”.

First, the issue is attractive for its relevance to the American people’s daily lives, the very hot gun issues, and even the justice policy regarding the death penalty. However, people can sometimes show opposite attitudes due to the difference in the media’s description, which can sometimes make an unconvincing statement plausible.

#### **3.1. Distorted Reality**

It is indicated from Kleck’s research that the media’s description can, to some extent, distort reality.

Kleck has talked about this phenomenon and coins the term ‘exclusion bias’, which is used to filter the public knowledge of the gun control debate through media [4, 5]. To bolster this argument, he offers lots of examples from both sides of the gun control controversy. Such inaccurate statement ultimately affects not just the audience of the articles but also the social discourse and, finally, criminal justice policy [6].

In 2005, Kleck has already discussed whether there is a link between gun prevalence and murder [7]. He classified three sources of the causal relationship or what he called ‘endogeneity bias’: reverse causality (higher crime rate made people tend to own guns), mismeasured or contaminated data, and omitted variables. The Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) was adopted to do empirical research, which found strong evidence of the existence of the three endogeneity problems that have been priorly put up with. The results went against ample previous research that supported that murder rates and gun ownership have a positive correlation [8-18].

Also, in 2022, Kleck confirmed his results again by finding out the factors that led to the failures in previous research [19]. Besides what he indicated in 2015 that cross-national research should be conducted while the previous ones were almost conducted at sub-national levels such as states, provinces, nations, or cities. In this research, he looks into a more representative selection of the countries worldwide, in which he limits the influences of cultural differences, economic development, and more. He contended that more gun prevalence does not mean a higher homicide rate but added that gun control aimed at specific groups such as convicted criminals might be effective.

#### **3.2. Influence on Attitudes toward Criminal Justice Policy**

Dowler investigates the impact of the media in 2002 on public opinion about criminal justice reform, especially gun control [20].

Dowler’s research shows the significance of the citizens’ previous experiences with media in forming their attitudes toward criminal justice policy. He took the case of gun control, for example. Dowler discovered that people who have watched violent videos, especially the ones with gun battles, are more callous to gun violence and more tolerant of the possession of firearms. They tended to presuppose the scenarios where heroes with guns came out to protect the citizens instead of the weak ones shot by the cold-blooded killers. As a result, they are in support of the possession of guns. Of course, it is not hard to imagine there is a certain group of audience who are more sensitive and totally oppose the arm of guns.

#### **3.3. Differences in Attribution Style**

In a study that looks at the influence of media in elucidating social issues, Sotirovic investigates whether different attribution assignments exist between people who depend on newspapers versus those watching television to learn about crime (death penalty policy) [21].

Sotirovic proposes that various attribution instigators are assigned to interpret how criminal offenses are portrayed in the media. She came up with the result that people who gain information from television are more likely to be in support of the death penalty for the descriptions of the criminal

acts with the images are more concrete. Therefore, a person's preferences for policies are likely to be influenced by attributional judgments [22].

## **4. The Fine Meshes of the Web of Power**

### **4.1. Specters of Subjection**

Foucault argues that prisons are essentially places where criminals are created and that certain people must be selected to become criminals so that it is politically and economically advantageous. For example, in the American series *The Wire*, the police set the time and place of the transaction, and drug trafficking at a specific time and place is tacitly approved. Only blatant transactions in residential areas are likely to result in arrests. In this "win-win" situation, drugs and crime are not eliminated, but the crime rate in the community is reduced. In this sense, the phenomena the series had revealed to a certain degree correspond to Foucault's points that crimes cannot be avoided.

According to Foucault, police, prisons, and criminals support each other, constitute a complicit whole, and form a cycle. In this circular whole, criminals are sent to prison by police surveillance, the prison converts them into targets and helpers of police surveillance, and police monitoring periodically returns some of the criminals to prison. The key to police and prison treatment of crime is to control them: these institutions cannot exist without crime; they cannot exist if the crime is too rampant either. For Foucault, it can be further extended to factories, hospitals, and even schools wherever punishments and disciplines are set [23].

Now this research can go back to the previous articles that stress the rise in crime rates. It should also be noted that the articles mention that Virginia's governor says that as violence has surged throughout the state and in Richmond, Virginia's governor claims more police funding will help reduce crime [24]. Some scholars affirm social media's effects on political participation. According to Bruce Bimber, social media provides an important platform for communication and negotiation between voters and politicians [25]. Social media plays the role of civic education, which helps people to be informed about politics and motivates them to be more active in politics [26]. Similarly, Zeynep Tufekci et al. found that social media can help people understand and grasp key information, enhance communication and interaction among people, and thus lead to collective activities [27]. In this sense, social media takes an irreplaceable place in political interactions where political discourses and information are created instantaneously and contemporarily. The political power system in the former Internet era was a power structure with materialistic features such as "resources, status, and money" as its core. Under such a power system, the communication power pattern is inevitably a vertical system controlled from top to bottom by the state power in all aspects. Based on the democratic, individual, and decentralized nature of social media, every ordinary Internet user becomes a source of information and can post political information around them anytime and anywhere. The rise of social media has provided a wide space for the public to participate in politics and express their opinions in an equal and open manner. However, at the same time, it has also lowered the entry threshold for political participation. In the anonymous, virtual, and commercial online social space, it is easy to alienate into a collective irrational cyber tyranny. In this case, social media is easy to be exploited by politicians and acts as a tool to play political techniques.

As what has been learned before, people living in various discourses are the same as being monitored in the panopticon where a set of epistemes has already been formed. Power relations create the set of epistemes, that is, the fine meshes of the web of power.

Foucault contends that, as a product of the history of the effects of power, human in the modern era or the age of reason acquires a genealogy of the self that is very different from the illusion of Christian theology in the classical age [28]. It forms a soul that is more powerful and invisible under the punishment and discipline of the body. Submission means the process of being subordinated to power, but also what it takes to become a subject. According to Judith Butler, the term "subjectivation" carries the paradox inherent in itself: *assujettissement* denotes both the process of becoming the

subject and the act of subjecting oneself to it; one can only inhabit the figure of autonomy by subjecting oneself to power, which implies a radical dependence [29].

#### 4.2. Media Helps to Build the “Fine Meshes”

A very recent case is the role of media in the pandemic of Covid-19. To fight the Covid-19 pandemic, lockdown procedures have been implemented in numerous places. Social media was still the main source of information regarding the pandemic at the time [30]. Although social media has many advantages for its users, there are also drawbacks that cannot be ignored, including effects on Gen Z users’ psychological health and more [31].

The effects of media can be further investigated through the lens such as the cultivation process of media, media consumption and perceptions of social reality, media violence, political communication impacts, and media’s impact on both individual and social health, effects of the internet, and more.

### 5. Conclusion

From research, it is concluded that the widespread news that indicates that the crime rate in Virginia is going up and that Virginia is more dangerous than before is a kind of narrative constructed by politicians. Social media plays an irreplaceable place in modern times and acts as a tool to play political techniques. People cannot eliminate the specters of subjection in their wishes to fulfill “subjectivation”.

It might be argued that this research lacked empirical evidence from the perspective of the people influenced by the narrative in Virginia, especially those who divert their support to political policies and those who have experienced violent crimes. Also, the selection of the relevant terms for each topic and interpretation of them in the process of LDA is, to some extent, subjective, which may contribute to some inevitable errors.

This study demonstrates the passivity of people in the media and how political tendencies are presented through the media, and how to change this situation deserves more follow-up studies.

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