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Television and Uncivil Political Discourse

Diana C. Mutz

Words ought to be a little wild, for they are the assaults of thought on the unthinking.

JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES¹

Assessments of the tone of contemporary politics often focus on the words used by politicians, members of the media, and average citizens. From this vantage, things cannot be worse than in the past. Goodness, the things that were said about candidates and elected officials in the nineteenth century! Comparison of this sort can be tricky, however, because the way messages are transmitted has changed. Diana Mutz argues that images on television and the Internet violate face-to-face social norms for disagreement. These acts draw greater attention, which means that uncivil conflicts are more likely to be diffused through the population.

Is politics these days really nastier than it used to be? For many casual observers, the answer to this question is obvious. Just turn on the television and watch a few political talk shows, and you have your answer. The participants in televised political discourse regularly link one another to the Nazi party and accuse one another of being un-American, anti-family, and all around evil, demonic beings. But as Dave Barry posed this question,

Do we truly believe that ALL red-state residents are ignorant racist fascist knuckle-dragging NASCAR-obsessed cousin-marrying

road-kill-eating tobacco-juice-dribbling gun-fondling religious fanatic rednecks; or that ALL blue-state residents are godless unpatriotic pierced-nose Volvo-driving France-loving left-wing Communist latte-sucking tofu-chomping holistic-wacko neurotic vegan weenie perverts?"²

I hope not, but one could understandably get this impression from watching political television in the United States these days.

Is political discourse really any meaner and nastier than it used to be? As discussed in the introduction to this volume, many certainly sense this to be true. As Judith Rodin, now president of the Rockefeller Foundation, suggests,

Across America and increasingly around the world, from campuses to the halls of Congress, to talk radio and network TV, social and political life seem dominated today by incivility, . . . an unwillingness to compromise and an intolerance for opposition. . . . No one seems to question the premise that political debate has become too extreme, too confrontational, too coarse.³

But how can we be sure that politicians conversed any differently 100 years ago? In a direct sense, this is not something we can know. We do, however, know that even the much revered founding fathers called one another adulterers, thieves, and liars, and that they sometimes engaged in violence over political differences of opinion. So mudslinging is hardly a recent invention.

There are written records of political discourse from the past, to be sure, but importantly, there is no record of how they would have spoken to one another on television, because the medium did not yet exist. There is good reason to believe that politicians' discourse would have been different on camera and off, just as people behave differently when they are among a small number of friends as opposed to in front of an audience.⁴

To summarize, the argument I make in this chapter is that television has changed the way we experience political discourse while simultaneously changing the discourse itself. We can't say with certainty whether the verbal behavior of politicians and their minions is any more coarse than it used to be. But we can be fairly certain that the way the American public *experiences* this discourse is far different from even how our grandparents and great-grandparents experienced it. In the remainder of the chapter, I first describe research that explains how we experience the images of politicians on television. Second, I discuss how changes in the media industry have altered the demands of political television in ways that encourage still more incivility.

EXPERIENCING PEOPLE ON TELEVISION

There are many popular videos on YouTube that show people's dogs and cats excitedly watching television. What's funny about these videos is that the dogs bark and attempt to chase images of other dogs on the television screen, and the cats salivate and bat at the birds, squirrels, and other prey

fitting about the screen. Sometimes they even look behind the television to try and catch the other animal, or knock the television over altogether.⁵

Television, as the old (analogy) adage goes, is just a bunch of electrons. As adults, we all know that the people and other animals shown on the screen are not actually in our living rooms. And so we smugly think we're a whole lot smarter than dogs and cats. But research tells us we should not be quite so quick to claim superiority over our furry friends. In fact, in many ways, the human brain responds to representational images of other people on the screen just as it would if real people were physically present in our environment.⁶ Cognitively, we know they aren't really there, but we cannot help our own hardwiring, and thus we respond socially to images of other people, particularly when it looks as if they walk, talk, and move just like the people we encounter in real life.

So what do funny animal videos have to do with the way we experience political discourse in a video age? As it turns out, a great deal. Imagine for the moment that we know for certain that politicians and their henchmen and henchwomen today are no more nasty and uncivil than they ever were. I suggest this because the way we now experience that same discourse on television generates the *impression* of far more incivility. When politicians in the pre-television era yelled and screamed at one another or called each other names, there were no television or cell phone video cameras there to cover it. At best, we might have heard about it on the radio or read about such an incident in the newspaper. But because neither newspapers nor radio simulate the impression of real people in our actual environment to the same extent that television does, these exposures would be unlikely to produce the same kinds of visceral reactions that are experienced by viewers of uncivil discourse on television.

At the root of this situation is the fact that most human beings prefer social harmony to conflict, albeit to varying degrees. So although at one level we may know that politics is supposed to involve disagreement and competition among choices, we would prefer that everyone just agreed on things (particularly if they agree with us!). Conflict can be messy and unpleasant, and compromises can disappoint many. Thus when we see or hear about conflict, we are likely to think something is wrong with the system rather than that things are working as they should.

This issue is particularly problematic when it comes to public impressions of Congress. The role of Congress is, after all, to debate controversial issues of the day. These deliberations are open to the public and often televised, though few people are likely to see them except when things get heated and they move from C-SPAN to more widely viewed channels. As some congressional scholars have noted, "When its members disagree, they do so as visibly as they can, seeking publicity for themselves and to discredit their rivals and opponents. As proposals are shaped in Congress, every disagreement is magnified and broadcast, so that when the bargaining and amending are done, the finished product appears not as a coherent whole but as a patchwork of compromises, each of which was controversial

and to some extent alienating.⁷ Thus, approval of Congress is a function of conflict within Congress as well as the media coverage that the conflict receives. Likewise, when members of the two political parties pull together into a cohesive unit to do battle with one another in Congress, support for Congress as an institution declines.⁸ Apparently we do not like to watch them fight, even though this is their constitutionally charged duty.

Watching quarrelsome members of Congress on television is in many ways no different from witnessing any other public fight. As anyone who has ever been at a contentious dinner party knows, conflict can be uncomfortable, even when you are not personally involved in the fight. When the couple across the table starts arguing, it makes most of us tense and uncomfortable even though we are mere voyeurs with nothing to lose and no direct involvement. Research tells us that when conflict is going on around us, our level of tension and emotional arousal automatically increase, theoretically preparing us for fight or flight. Physiologically, emotional arousal means that our hearts pump faster, our level of attentiveness to our environment is enhanced, and we are generally "on alert." What's bizarre is that even though the need for fight or flight is highly unlikely to come to pass there at the dinner table, we prepare for the possibility nonetheless. Evolutionary psychologists suggest that this arousal reaction is a remnant from times when these reactions were highly adaptive: we needed them either to get away from a predator or to be pumped up enough to prepare to duke it out.

This reaction starts to seem even slier when it comes to televised politics. Politics is, after all, supposed to involve conflicts of ideas about the policies that would best serve the country. Our system of gaining office is purposely set up as a competitive one, so all of the analogies between politics and sports contests are well deserved. Campaigning for office is a contest with winners and losers, and pushing legislation through Congress likewise involves confrontation and conflict. Some extent of conflict is central to democracy.

And even though politics is, for most citizens, a spectator sport, we can nonetheless get revved up, as if ready to do battle, or run for our lives, when we see politicians arguing with one another on television. In a series of my own experiments, I have hooked people up to electrodes that tap their level of emotional arousal while they watch politicians on television, and what I find is that even if they watch the same politicians delivering identical speeches, arousal levels are much higher when the politicians engage one another in a contentious, *uncivil* fashion.⁹ So even though we are just watching and it is pretty obvious that no one will come to blows, more intense conflict still causes greater arousal on the part of the passive viewer, just as it does in the real world. There can be conflict without incivility, but conflict that is heated and emotional is even more likely to produce high levels of arousal.

When we witness conflicts in the environment around us, our reaction is naturally conditioned by how close to us the threatening object is. It matters whether the conflict is in the same room, next door, across town, or in another country. A conflict going down across town doesn't necessitate

that same level of immediate attention and arousal as one in the same room. People on television can elicit strong reactions from viewers, but some forms of televised faces are particularly likely to do so. In the experiments, not only did the televised uncivil version of the conflict significantly increase viewers' levels of arousal over the televised civil one but also the camera perspective from which viewers witnessed the conflict mattered.¹⁰ Likewise, distance matters on television, even if it is only the *perception* of distance that we have as viewers. Interestingly, when a human being on the TV screen appears to move toward the viewer, the viewer's brain reacts the same way it does when a real human comes closer—arousal goes up, and we pay attention to what appears to be "in our face." But if the person walking (or appearing to walk) toward us is acting in an uncivil or hostile manner, we are particularly likely to react! The impression of close physical proximity logically intensifies our reactions to incivility. Our brains consider incivility to be at its most threatening when it is coming at us, so this kind of television perspective tends to send our arousal levels through the roof. As shown in Figure 6.1, incivility is more arousing than civility, but camera perspective also has an obvious effect. Close-ups elicit systematically more arousal than the identical event shot from a medium camera perspective.

More importantly for purposes of my argument about television, *the appearance of close physical proximity*—which is simulated in our field of vision by larger TV screens or by the close-up camera perspective—intensifies

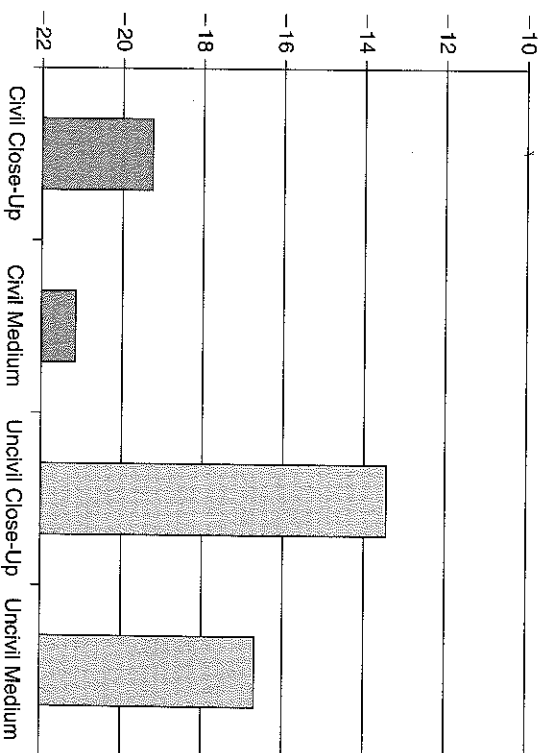


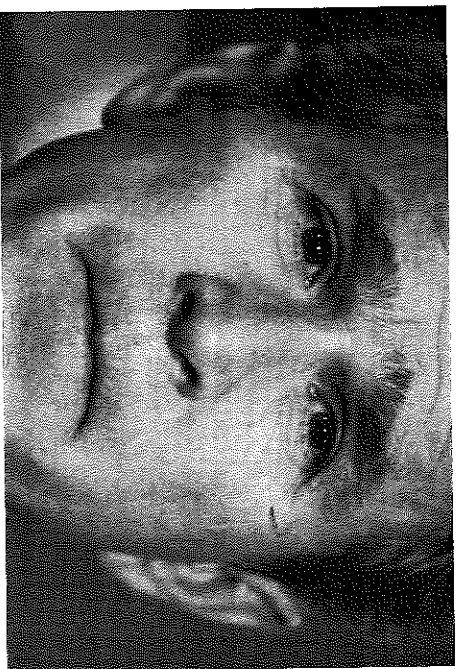
FIGURE 6.1 Emotional Arousal by Civility and Camera Perspective

Reprinted from D. C. Murtz, "Effects of 'In-Your-Face' Television Discourse on Perceptions of a Legitimate Opposition," *American Political Science Review* 101(4): 621–635, 2007.

viewers' reactions to incivility. In the experiment described above, even though people were viewing the same event, those who watched it from a close-up camera perspective experienced far more of the tension and discomfort than those who witnessed it through a more distant camera perspective.

This fact is important because not only has the use of close-ups increased over the years but also our televisions have become bigger. Larger screens have the same kind of effect as close-ups, creating the impression that people on the screen are physically closer to us. In the early days of television, cameras were large and heavy and had to stay in one place as a result. The perspective on the politician was highly static to the audience, screens were smaller on average, and the politician took up a much smaller portion of the TV screen than is common today. Because portable, handheld video cameras did not yet exist, camera footage from outside the studio was also much less common, and the evening news relied primarily on graphics or still photos. When living, breathing humans were shown speaking, it tended to be from a more distant camera perspective that incorporated the whole body of the speaker. Today the norm is a much tighter shot, often close up in the face of the person who is speaking, as illustrated in Image 6.1. On some political talk shows, insistence on the use of close-ups is so persistent that one never even sees where the speakers are in relation to one another. So the same politicians who may have been uncivil before now appear to be "in our faces" with their incivility on a regular basis. In-your-face incivility is especially tension producing, so it is not surprising that so many viewers say they do not like it.

At one point, I took my television-viewing cat on a visit to a friend's home after they had just purchased a huge big-screen TV. I had the idea that it would be very interesting to see how the cat reacted to a five-foot tall



Kevin Lamarque/Reuters/Landov

IMAGE 6.1 George Bush from an Extreme Close-up Camera

Angle.

big-screen version of the squirrel from its favorite video. Needless to say, the mega-squirrel was this feline's worst nightmare, rather than chase the squirrel across the screen as usual, he immediately tore out of the room. Large size and close physical proximity are threatening when one's opponent is directly in one's face. Likewise, when people encounter a politician whom they dislike arguing from this kind of close-up camera perspective, arousal levels go up, and they tend to dislike him or her even more than they initially did.

Fortunately, it is highly unusual for humans in everyday life to experience as much incivility "in our faces" as we do when we watch political television. In everyday life, most people are polite to one another most of the time. If they disagree about politics, they do so politely, or they say nothing at all in order to preserve social harmony. But it is also culturally ingrained in us to put greater physical distance between ourselves and those with whom we disagree. "Backing off" is more than just a metaphorical expression. When conflict arises in most settings, without even thinking about it, we put more distance between ourselves and the person with whom we disagree. To move closer to someone with whom we are disagreeing would come across as very threatening. But television routinely violates the social norms that we are accustomed to from face-to-face discourse.

Imagine, for example, a left-wing Democrat experiencing George Bush from the now common close-up perspective shown in Image 6.1. To get this same visual perspective on George Bush in day-to-day life, one in which his visage fills your entire visual frame, you would practically need to be intimate with him. For a left-wing Democrat, this is not likely. And yet via television, that Democrat gets simulated intimacy with someone he undoubtedly hates. This is not "natural," in the sense that it would be unlikely to happen outside of a situation involving representational media. In the real world, people do not generally cuddle up with those with whom they have strong disagreements.

It is for this same reason that it was notable during the 2011 State of the Union speech that Republicans and Democrats were seated next to each other rather than on opposite sides of the aisle. Space conveys meaning, and by sitting next to one another, members of Congress were trying to signal to the American public a lack of animosity and a desire to set aside partisan bickering—at least for the moment.

In short, viewers react to television as an inherently social medium: It puts "people" in our social environments whom we react to in social ways, even though they are not really physically present, and it makes no real sense for us to do this. In many respects, this should not surprise us; we've all seen people in movie theatres pull back in their seats when watching a car appear to come at them, or a fist swing. These reactions make no sense because they are remnants of old brains in the context of high-fidelity representational media. Likewise, when politicians are shown in a manner that makes it seem as if they are up close and in our faces, we respond especially negatively if we do not like them.

Thus far, I have suggested that television brings politicians to our attention in a manner that violates two key social norms that are widely adhered to in face-to-face social contexts: civility and social distance. First, we see more violations of the norms of civility on political television than in real life. Speakers regularly interrupt and talk over one another, raise their voices, and fail to listen respectfully to each other. Second, when conflict and arguments heat up, rather than provide the appearance that the combatants are “backing off,” today’s TV cameras will tend to dolly in for a close-up of flaring nostrils, sweaty brows, and so forth. Rather than allow us to back away, the camera gives us the impression of being brought still closer to the combatants. Political television provides a very odd and unusual perspective indeed.

Does any of this matter to how we feel about politics and politicians? Some research suggests that it does. In experimental settings, people who view uncivil political programming come away with less trusting attitudes toward politics and politicians in general than they would have if they viewed nothing at all.¹¹ And in contrast, those who watch civil exchanges among politicians develop more trusting attitudes toward politicians. Apparently, when politicians on television do not violate social norms and act more like the rest of us, people find them more trustworthy. They also come away with generally more positive attitudes toward our system of government.

Television is a highly visual medium, which makes it unique among the various means we have of communicating political information. Print and radio have been around much longer, and they have also been accused of sensationalism in what they choose to emphasize, but I suspect that the effects described above are uniquely powerful in an era of audiovisual media. The effects that I have described do not occur as noticeably through other, non-audiovisual media that less closely approximate “being there.” In the experiment described above, I had two actors film a talk show posing as congressional candidates, and they were each restricted so that they had to espouse exactly the same issue positions, make exactly the same political arguments against their opponent and so forth in two different versions of the program. In one version of the program, they stated their positions in a civil and polite manner, without interrupting or raising their voices. In the other, they rolled their eyes as they listened to their opponent, raised their voices while disagreeing, and interrupted one another in ways that violate face-to-face conversational norms in American culture.

Interestingly, when I took the audio portion of this broadcast and had people listen to it in the form of a radio broadcast, they demonstrated only very minor increases in arousal in the uncivil condition relative to the civil one. Those who read a verbatim account of the exchange in the newspaper found it downright soporific and demonstrated no differences in arousal whatsoever. The take-home lesson of these experiments is that regardless of whether politicians are any worse now than they ever were with respect to the civility of their discourse, it matters how the public experiences that discourse. By approximating the physical presence of others in conflict, the audiovisual nature of television makes us respond as if we were actually

there. One hundred years ago, a similarly rude and uncivil exchange would be witnessed by very few people, and those reading about it in a newspaper or hearing it on the radio would not have the same reaction.

These readers and listeners rated the civil and uncivil versions as roughly the same in terms of civility because without the nuanced facial expressions, raised voices, and other audiovisual cues, they could not distinguish one version as more or less civil than the other. Unlike print, television is extremely good at conveying the emotional intensity of a conflict, and faces—a staple of political programs that involve talking heads—are particularly good at conveying emotion on television. This is not to say that print cannot be emotionally charged—anyone who has read a good book knows otherwise. But all else being equal, a written account of the same conflict will generally not elicit the same degree of arousal as a televised one.

If everyone hates incivility and it promotes more negative attitudes toward the political system, one has to wonder why political television looks the way it does. I turn next to explaining why television norms have evolved in this direction. If television’s perspective on politicians routinely violates what our unenlightened brains are accustomed to and makes us react in illogical ways to representational images, why do television producers insist on doing that?

THE DEMANDS OF POLITICAL TELEVISION

As many of you have undoubtedly noticed, political television programs do not attract Super Bowl-sized audiences, nor do they even approximate *American Idol*. A small subset of Americans enjoys political television a great deal, but this is a distinct minority. Political programming is generally not a big money maker in the television business. Moreover, competition for television audiences has intensified in recent years as a result of the proliferation of program options on cable as well as pay-per-view services. In today’s media environment, those who are not interested in politics always have somewhere else to go to be entertained. There are exciting dramas, feature-length movies, and sports on TV 24 hours a day. With more options than ever before, how are political programs to compete for the already sparse political audience?

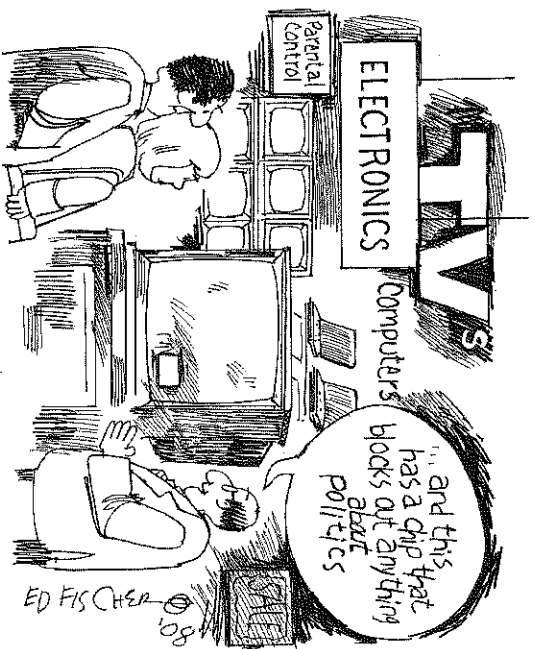
For producers of political television, one obvious way to compete is to liven things up a bit. There is, after all, a reason that sex and violence sell on television. Even if one is uncomfortable viewing such content, it is difficult to look away. High-arousal content draws viewers. In the experiments discussed above, both incivility and close-up camera perspectives increased viewers’ levels of arousal in response to what was otherwise identical content.

For many readers, increased competition may seem like a poor explanation for the existence of so much uncivil discourse on television. After all, people routinely say that they hate this senseless bickering, that it is painful to watch and, in the words of Jon Stewart, that it is “hurting America.”

I believe that most of these statements are accurate reflections of how people actually feel. Nonetheless, people watch. The best analogy to this phenomenon is the “rubbernecking” that takes place in highway traffic after automobile accidents. It isn’t that humans are inherently sick creatures, enjoying the sight of dead bodies by the side of the road; they know that accidents are unfortunate and sometimes tragic events. But they still look. Evolutionary psychology tells us that we look because it is important information for purposes of our own survival. So *to look* does not necessarily mean the same thing as *to like* or approve of what you see.

Incivility is to political television as violence is to television drama. Many complain about violence on television, but ratings tell us that they watch it a great deal. And just as we are hardwired to pay attention to violence as a means of protecting ourselves, we are also more likely to pay attention to uncivil, rather than civil, discourse as well. Evolutionary psychologists suggest that in the long run, it has simply been more important for human survival to pay attention to negative threats in our environments (the lion might eat us!) than to positive attractions (the berries on that tree look mighty tasty!). So negative events are appropriately more attention grabbing than positive ones. After all, if we miss the chance to eat those berries, it would be too bad, but not fatal. If we overlook the lion, on the other hand, the consequences are more dire. This means that even if most political discourse were civil, we would still pay more attention to the uncivil discourse.

As illustrated in the cartoon in Image 6.2, if people really hated incivility in political media, we could have a political equivalent of the “V-chip” (the technology used in television sets to automatically block children from viewing violent programs). But if the experience of the V-chip is any



www.CartoonStock.com

IMAGE 6.2 Incivility Is to Politics as Violence Is to Television Drama

indication, few people would use it. We may *say* that violence and incivility are bad things and that we generally disapprove, but that doesn’t mean we won’t watch them on television.

Likewise, in the research described above, after people were exposed to either the civil or uncivil version of the talk show in my experiments, they were asked at the end of the study how likely they would be to watch this program again at home on their own. Interestingly, although people in the uncivil condition clearly noticed that the candidates were more rude, nasty, and impolite, they were also far more likely to say they would watch the program again than were people in the civil condition. So even though uncivil behavior may seem distasteful, we are drawn to it nonetheless.

Incivility is also entertaining to watch. Some might say that it is inappropriate from the start to expect to be “entertained” by political media, but such is the reality of media consumption. Trying to guilt people into watching boring and polite exchanges of political viewpoints is not likely to be successful. In an age of media plenty, if it isn’t entertaining, people will find something better to do with their time. As Bill O’Reilly responded when criticized about the lack of civil political dialogue on his show, “If you want civility, watch PBS . . .”¹²

Of course, even if we didn’t have programs like *Hardball*, a small subset of the public would watch political TV regardless of what it is like. They genuinely enjoy politics and will become well informed about candidates and the issues of the day in any format. But for the much larger majority of Americans, politics grabs their attention only occasionally and intermittently. In the old days, when news was limited largely to three simultaneous network news broadcasts (ABC, CBS, and NBC), more people watched the news even though there was much less of it available on the air. If one watched at a certain time of day, news was all that was on. Similarly, when a presidential debate aired, it was on every channel, not just one. Today’s media environment, with its huge range of choices, makes it much easier for the casually interested to “opt out” of political television altogether. Thus it is increasingly difficult for political programming to compete for our attention without reinventing itself as something more dramatic and exciting.

Unfortunately, incivility is not without its side effects. In everyday life, most people are civil most of the time, and thus polite behavior tends to be the baseline expectation when we interact with others and when we watch others interact. On television, however, the norm for political discourse is obviously different. The jarring interruptions, raised voices, and barbed sarcasm make it attention grabbing, but viewers get the impression that these people (the political elites) are not like you and me. They don’t abide by the same social norms and don’t act like decent people should act in social contexts. As a result, viewers often come away with the impression that politicians are real jerks. For the candidates we agree with, we may write off their behavior as righteous indignation, but for the ones with whom we disagree, there is simply no excuse. We come to dislike those politicians we disagree with even more intensely. And rather than come closer together and thus

be more likely to compromise, partisans come away with the sense that the “other side” (regardless of which side that is) is downright unreasonable and has no legitimate basis for its views.¹³

In the face-to-face world of interpersonal relations, politeness and etiquette are a means of demonstrating mutual respect. Every culture abides by a certain set of norms for interaction, and by following these rules, we convey a degree of respect toward even those we may dislike. On television, however, the “norm” is precisely the opposite; television uses norm violations as a means of getting viewer attention, and it appears to work well toward that end. The problem is that incivility also decreases respect for the opposition and makes political compromises more difficult for the public to accept.

In addition to drawing the attention of viewers, getting people hot and bothered and perhaps even outright angry when they watch political television may serve a secondary purpose as well. As it turns out, people are particularly likely to tell others about things they experience while in a state of heightened arousal.¹⁴ The social transmission of information from person to person extends the impact of whatever content people view on television, and it also encourages others to watch. Experiments have shown that people are more likely to share stories, news, and information if physiological arousal levels are high when they watch. So, for example, if what a politician says on TV leaves you extremely angry, anxious, or excited, then you are more likely to tell your friends about it. Interestingly, this remains true even when the information itself is not what caused the high level of arousal. So, for example, jogging while you’re watching TV would also make you more likely to pass the information on to friends! This social transmission of information—through people’s personal and online networks, for example—is extremely important in an era when so much of what we read, view, and pay attention to is determined by what people in our social network recommend to us.

Now that television is online along with printed news stories, researchers have been studying what it is that makes some content go “viral” while other content does not. An analysis of which *New York Times* stories were most likely to be shared showed that as with television, strong arousal and intense emotional responses to stories predict the extent to which they will be re-transmitted to others. Stories likely to evoke strong feelings, whether positive or negative, compelled people to share articles with others. This finding persists even after taking into account factors such as how practical an article is, how prominently it is placed on the Web page, and for how long it is featured. All of this suggests that understanding emotional reactions is central to explaining why people react the way they do to mass media.

IF WE BUILD IT, WILL THEY COME?

It is easy for us as observers of the political process to sit back and decry both the extent of incivility in political discourse and the overall quality of political television today. But it is worth pondering whether, given the

constraints of the contemporary media environment, we would really want political television to consist of excruciatingly polite, civil discourse—assuming we had the power to make it so. What would be the consequences? Personally, I doubt many of us would watch it. Bill O’Reilly was correct: The ratings received by very civil, high-quality news shows on public broadcasting do not suggest there is a huge unmet demand for this kind of content.

But some obviously argue otherwise. In a now infamous exchange between *The Daily Show* host Jon Stewart and Tucker Carlson, then-host of the political talk show *Crossfire*, Stewart lambasted the *Crossfire* hosts for their “knee-jerk, reactionary talk.” As he admonished, “You have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you fail miserably.” Stewart was widely cheered for his attack on *Crossfire*, and the heated exchange was itself intense and uncomfortable to watch.

But just how fair is this criticism? Stewart differentiates his own show from real news, and thus denies that he has any similar responsibility to public discourse. As the main commentator for a “comedy news” program, he does not need to worry about serious public discourse. Moreover, Stewart has his own gimmick—comedy—to bring viewers to his program. And thus, as he readily acknowledges, he can make fun of politicians with impunity, and is not expected to present a full or accurate account of the day’s events. So-called “serious” journalists are unlikely to get away with the same approach.

But if these programs became calmer, more civil, and less emotional, would their audiences dwindle further? Based on what Americans say in response to how they feel about incivility, audience size should increase because “Americans clearly don’t want a reality show food fight when it comes to politics. They want civil discourse of the issues.”¹⁵ But is their viewing behavior really consistent with this idea? And what might serious journalists do to draw in viewers?

These are important questions to consider that have not been satisfactorily answered. Some have argued that the current state of affairs will be self-correcting because “we’ll reach a tipping point when people will demand more civil discourse.”¹⁶ I’m not so sure. If uncivil political programs were punished with lower viewership, this argument would make perfect sense and the market would drive political television toward more civil programs. But instead, it may be precisely the reverse; that is, uncivil discourse gets a much larger audience than civil discourse. This is what is widely believed by talk show hosts and their producers. Incivility can be entertaining and lively to watch, just like extreme sports. So even though Americans claim to hate it, their level of attentiveness to uncivil conflict suggests that they can’t look away.

Ultimately, this chain of events gives politicians an even greater strategic incentive to act uncivilly. If they want to get their message out, they are more likely to do so if they scream at another politician than if they calmly explain their viewpoint. Perhaps I’m naive, but I think that most politicians in face-to-face situations are no more uncivil and impolite than the average

person discussing politics. They only act like jerks on television because they know it will reap benefits such as more media coverage, more public memory, and more people who talk about their message with others.

In an era of many choices on television, the Internet, and elsewhere, traditional news audiences are already shrinking. For people who are not political junkies, there are many more entertaining options than simply talking heads blathering on about politics. So if the norm on television were civil public discourse, it's not clear how many people would actually be watching. The highly politically involved would probably still tune in, but those looking for entertainment value would change the channel and go elsewhere.

To summarize, conflict is an integral part of the political process. Our political system is supposed to be competitive, but conflict is not something we're all necessarily comfortable with as human beings in social situations. Conflict produces physiological arousal when we observe it, just as it would in a real-world social situation, even though we are not actual participants in the conflict. Much of the conflict on television violates our face-to-face social norms for disagreement by failing to maintain polite discourse and by appearing to come too close to us in the context of these disagreements. These norm violations produce strong emotional reactions, and they are particularly likely to get covered by the media. In addition, once such a conflict is covered by the media, it is highly likely to grab our attention. When we watch it, it is likely to boost levels of physiological arousal that in turn make us more likely to tell others about it, to e-mail the link to our friends, and so forth. The sum total effect of this process means that uncivil conflicts are much more likely to be diffused through the population to still larger numbers of people, creating the impression of still more political incivility.

Endnotes

1. *New Statesman and Nation*, July 15, 1933.
2. Dave Barry, December 18, 2004.
3. See Judith Rodin and Stephen P. Steinberg (Eds.), *Public Discourse in America: Conversation and Community in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).
4. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).
5. Do not try this at home. Particularly if you use your computer screen to play the video, you risk damage to the screen.
6. See Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass, *The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Television, and New Media Like Real People and Places* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
7. See Robert H. Durr, John B. Gilmour, and Christina Wolbrecht, "Explaining Congressional Approval," *American Journal of Political Science* 41(1): 175–207, 1997, p. 182.
8. See Mark D. Ramirez, "The Dynamics of Partisan Conflict on Congressional Approval," *American Journal of Political Science* 53(3): 681–694, 2009.

9. See Diana C. Mutz, "Effects of 'In-Your-Face' Television Discourse on Perceptions of a Legitimate Opposition," *American Political Science Review* 101(4): 621–635, 2007.
10. *Ibid.*
11. See Diana C. Mutz and Byron Reeves, "The New Videomalaise: Effects of Televised Incivility on Political Trust," *American Political Science Review* 99(1): 1–15, 2005.
12. Lecture at Fairfield University, as reported in *The Connecticut Post*, September 18, 2006.
13. *Ibid.*, Mutz, 2007.
14. See Jonah Berger, "Arousal Increases Social Transmission of Information," *Psychological Science* 22(7): 891–893, 2011.
15. Pam Jenkins, President of Powell Tate, in comments on *Civility in America* 2011.
16. Jack Leslie, Chairman of Weber Shandwick, in comments on their 2011 report, *Civility in America* 2011.