How Biased Media Affects the Modern American Political Climate

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MANY PEOPLE HAVE LEARNED one of the most important unwritten rules of public discourse: never bring up politics, ever. As fruitful as a healthy conversation about political opinions and propositions might be, many political discussions quickly turn to poor-spirited debates and, occasionally, outright brawls. However, these specific cases beg a certain question: why do people react in this manner? Part of the answer is how common news sources, such as television and news outlets and mainstream social media, present the information in a violating manner that breaches a certain code of conduct—that of civility. Statements that have been made to stir people up using controversial language often clash with the standards of civility, primarily centered around politeness. Specifically, the biases shown by both talk show hosts and columnists contribute to lighting the fires that lead to political division. The issue with the use of incivility in news content is how it discourages civilians from paying attention to current events and hurts the credibility of news organizations. Because of this, Americans are dissatisfied with the status quo and desire more civil approaches of reporting compared to the current climate littered with all types of uncivil rhetoric.

Incivility among news broadcasting companies generates a counterproductive political divide, hence the need for civil media reform. The concept of civility and incivility is much more dynamic and multidimensional than just the plane of politeness. Incivility, particularly, can present itself on either a more public level or a more personal level. Public-level incivility refers to a lack of reciprocity and is tied closely to democratic governance, such as policy makers viewing opinions other than their own as illegitimate and thus refusing to work with those who hold those thoughts (Muddiman et al. 818). On the other hand, personal-level incivility encompasses the concept of politeness violation and uses threats to attack an opponent's character (817). One study sought to document which specific forms of verbal incivility, coined under outrage, were used across news media along with their frequencies. The five most common forms, which had an average usage of 10% or greater, consisted of mockery, misrepresentative exaggeration, insulting language, name-calling, and ideologically extremizing language (Sobieraj and Berry 33). The same study also displayed that both American partisan political views use this type of language, although some types were more popular with conservatives than liberals and vice versa (28-29).

Identifying and understanding these specific kinds of incivility provide the foundations needed to understand some of the possible issues with opting to use this kind of speech. Each one of the top five forms of personal-level incivility can be expected to drive people away; nobody enjoys being mocked, insulted, offended, or misrepresented. Moreover, this rhetoric encourages silencing opposing partisan

viewpoints. Listening only to a perspective one agrees with results in avoiding receiving insults as well as a collective consensus about who should be insulted (specifically, the opposing political party) with no checks and balances. Embracing this toxic behavior, no matter one's partisan leaning, would further provoke the use of three overarching kinds of bias: partisan bias, affective bias, and informational bias.

Partisan bias is surprisingly regarded as the least problematic bias of the three, despite Americans complaining about it the most. Doris A. Graber and Johanna Dunaway explain that "implications of partisan news are mixed. Partisan slant in news has not always been viewed negatively" (353). These statements imply that some partisan prejudice enhances journalism rather than hindering it. Moreover, news stories with partisan predisposition were shown to be overall more substantive than more objective writing (353). The presence of partisan bias in modern media helps mask the more prevalent effects of the other two.

Affective bias seeks to draw an emotional response from the recipient of the news by casting current events in a more cynical or negative tone. Graber and Dunaway summarize two trends concerning affective bias. The first is that modern media produces "more news content critical of government, politicians, and their policies" rather than "stories focusing on substantive issues" (346), implying that coverage of politics tends to focus more on the people involved instead of the underlying issues that provoked the situation. The second is that the tone of political news content is more frequently negative and skeptical (346). These two trends ultimately attempt to condition an audience to think in a particular manner in order to trigger more visceral responses to future negative news about the opposition.

Informational bias is defined by Graber and Dunaway as "removing important information, context, and perspectives from the news" and can be split up into four separate categories: personalization, dramatization, fragmentation, and authority-disorder bias (350). Personalization occurs when a story is taken and twisted in a manner that emphasizes the elements more appealing to human interest rather than the actual politics being debated. Dramatization often seeks to exaggerate a news story by removing contextual details describing a situation or issue. Fragmentation results when connected stories are selectively isolated from each other, resulting in an undermining of the public's understanding of the overarching problem. Finally, the authority-disorder bias questions a leader's capacity to minimize or control chaos should a political event go awry or something like a natural disaster occur (350-52). All four of these categories intend to shepherd consumers' thoughts in the direction the journalist desires. Collectively, these forms of bias and outrage influence how Americans view issues and select their individual news sources.

Despite the disproportionate amount of negative and uncivil news, studies show that people prefer civil journalism. Ashley Muddiman et al. conducted research that focused on three sets of competing hypotheses addressing this issue. The first was designed to test whether civil or uncivil online news articles prompted more interaction with users. The second was designed to test whether civil news or uncivil news featuring both public- and personal-level incivility prompted more interaction with users. And the third was designed to test how users selected the articles they did—whether it was a violation of expectations or a calculated response to out-group incivility (819-21). They found that civil online news articles generated the

most interaction, measured by the number of clicks. These findings yield "civil" as the first supported hypothesis and "civil more than both public- and personal-level incivility" as the second supported hypothesis (823-24). They also found that calculated responses to out-group bias dictated users' decision making rather than violation of expectations, yielding "calculated response to out-group incivility" as the third supported hypothesis (828-29). These results exhibit that people gravitate towards more civil writing when given the opportunity. If this is the case, why is negativity and incivility so common in modern media?

Negativity and incivility are so prominent for two reasons. The first reason is the difference between print and video content. Muddiman et al. performed their experiment strictly with selected written news articles and not televised news (818). The second reason is that incivility sells. When Diana C. Mutz conducted a study comparing civil versions of a program with uncivil versions of the same program, the result was that "the uncivil versions of the program were consistently perceived as more entertaining by a significant margin" (42). Put simply, incivility catches and holds attention. As a result, news stations use incivility as a critical strategic piece to keep viewers entertained by information that would otherwise bore them (42).

This continuous use of incivility through bias and outrage ultimately comes with a price for news organizations. Despite its uncanny ability to redirect people's attention exceptionally well, incivility also causes viewers and, in some cases, journalists to become dissatisfied and reduce their trust with the media source over time (Graber and Dunaway 358). According to Graber and Dunaway, "Journalists also complain that news is becoming less objective and more ideological, contrary to the ideal that news

should be as objective as possible and commentary should appear only on the editorial pages" (359). This highlights the fact that even journalists are unsatisfied with the current state of news production and desire changes to promote civility within public news broadcasting. In regard to the public, significant portions of the audience believe journalists miscommunicate stories and fail to empathize with the people in stories that they share (359). Essentially, the public sees the entire scheme as a cash grab. On top of poor perception of the journalists themselves, "negative and vitriolic news coverage, partisan coverage, and politicians' attacks on the media contribute to public distrust of the news" (360). Not only are news companies disliked, their audiences also doubt the verity of their content.

If this is the case, why do news corporations neglect to modify their broadcast strategies? Critics of civil news reform might claim that reform is unnecessary. They claim that keeping the news as it is still attracts viewers, arguing that more instances of incivility provide a greater quantity of opportunities to hook those paying attention. Some studies also show that "[t]he effect of political incivility on political participation . . . is practically non-existent" (Riet and Stekelenburg 219). If there exists no correlation between the presence of incivility in the news and candidates' polling numbers, then the current system is not actually broken and should be left alone. However, what these critics fail to consider is that the news is the primary method used to obtain political information for many Americans. Those who ignore the news become ignorant, and those who heed biased news become biased themselves, creating a great political schism. Thus, civil reform is indeed necessary in modern news broadcasting and journalism.

The media can salvage its reputation by diminishing the use of currently used

incivility tactics, replacing them with more civil content; civility in news attracts audiences. Online catalogs and published articles can adapt to this style easily, but the shift requires more effort from television programs—and understandably so, considering some incivility is necessary to stimulate viewers. Despite this, these shows do not need as much incivility as they currently take advantage of, which would enable an intriguing, dynamic flow between entertaining arguments and civil conversations. If producers believe the reduced incivility alone would fail to regain viewers' attention, they should consider using other visual stimulators like the South Korean news networks did when covering their 2012 presidential election. Mutz explains that "the Seoul Broadcasting System . . . ran animations based on popular movies and sporting events to show who was surging ahead or falling behind" (214). Providing a novel approach to displaying information or storytelling while minimizing pointless bickering is what the media needs to help rescue their reputation.

Americans now crave news content presented in civil manners amid the current sea of uncivil reports. Americans should not have to dig for honest, civil news—rather, it should be mainstream. Instead, news rooms dump substantial quantities of uncivil language into their stories since civil alternatives require too much searching to discover. Televised media may attempt to defend itself by claiming that incivility is crucial to increasing viewership, despite the fact that numerous mass media companies lose viewers regularly. Scientific evidence shows that Americans tend to choose civil news stories over uncivil ones, implying that Americans shun news content compliant with the uncivil status quo. News organizations must see that continuing to produce uncivil news will ultimately hurt both their integrity and finances.

Alternatively, seeing creative, civil news media reform would generate a reversal of recent effects—an increase in satisfaction, an increase in trust, and an increase in viewership.

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