

CIVILITY IN A TIME OF TERROR

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I tried a little experiment this year. With less need to constrain my public persona than I've had in a while, I've tried launching a "public intellectual" stream of work, engaging on various topics of interest through social media, specifically, blogging (<http://blogs.bu.edu/vsapiro/politics-education-gardening-stuff-pegs/>) and tweeting (@VSapiro).

Gaining bravery about those forms, I decided to try participating in a different public forum -- the comments streams that follow articles in some of the mainstream press I read such as the *Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. That is a very different form of communication, running largely through anonymous posts. So I made up some screen names for myself and dove in, mostly about the primaries, but sometimes other topics as well. As with almost all of my public communication, I figured I cared about what was happening, but what was most important was that as a political scientist I have useful professional expertise I can bring to bear that would make my contributions a contribution to deliberation and discussion.

I followed my usual rules of public communication about politics: I try to stick to what I know as a political scientist -- no pure opinion; just observation based on the insights of good research, written in a manner that is appropriate for a non-scholarly, more public, and more casual setting.

The conclusion I want to share from this experience is that I am working to end this experiment because it became too frightening an experience to continue.

If you dip into these comments sections on any regular basis, you are aware that they tend to degenerate into sarcasm, name-calling, personality attacks, paranoid conspiracy theories, and repetition of supposed facts that have long since been proven false. If you read these comments sections often and carefully you will notice a lot of regulars -- people who participate daily, even multiple times a day. Contributors recognize each other, using their screen names to address each other, often carrying on arguments and skirmishes they might have been having for a long time. I thought I could bring a useful and corrective note of rationality to that world. What a good example of arrogant elitism!

What you may not know through your reading experience is how it feels to participate. I can't generalize, because my subject pool is only a random sample of the one person I happen to be. But I can tell you it was difficult not to get drawn in, to get more engaged, and to enter the culture of response that exists in that world. I would offer a comment and then feel compelled to check to see whether anyone had responded to my comment. This led me to read more, then think of more things I wanted to say as I read the other comments. I found myself focusing on which of the many comments I read needed a reply. I became mentally and emotionally involved as though there was a real conversation going on.

As time went on it became more difficult not to respond and participate in kind. This world caught me emotionally. I would start to get angry and resentful. The emotions these comments provoke revolve around anger and resentment. Comments with which I agreed just felt normal, and had no emotional valence to speak of. Instead of correcting facts, I wanted to teach them some lessons. I didn't. Extricate myself before I wasted any more time or said anything really stupid required marshaling real self-control. It was difficult. In fact, it requires choosing not to read the comments sections so as not to get provoked to join in.

The comments in most of these venues are apparently anonymous, masked by screen names that hide the “true identity” of the participants. But within that world, people are not anonymous, because in that world the screen names, the avatars, are the real participants and they are known to each other. Those avatars are more a part of our civil society than many of the people whose fingers type life into them, because the people behind the avatars may rarely if ever participate in political discussion and deliberation at their face-to-face communities – their workplaces or neighborhoods or places of worship, the grocery store, or the back-yard barbecue. But their avatars are not really make-believe. They are an expression of the people behind them. And there is good reason to believe that this avatar world gives them a way to engage in politics in a manner and to a degree they find meaningful, but cannot manage in the “real” world using their real faces and day-to-day social networks.

Do not mistake these comment sections for deliberative democracy in action. They have nothing to do with enlightenment or informed citizenry. They are cage-fight political communities, confined to the margins of the websites on which the comments sections appear. But these are not electronic dark alleys or abandoned warehouses. They are performed out in the open, in public spaces provided by the press. (Although worse is probably happening in the Dark Web.) Many of the keywords and phrases are familiar if you follow what Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj (*The Outrage Industry: Public Opinion Media Industry and the New Incivility*, 2014) call the “outrage industry.” These keywords and phrases are familiar if you follow the Twitter feeds of the more populist political candidates on both sides of the political spectrum. The tropes and memes that make these comments sections live are well-connected into that broader outrage industry and culture.

Some 16 years ago, at an ISPP meeting in Amsterdam I delivered a paper entitled, “Considering Political Civility Historically.” I never published the paper – I thought I was writing a larger book, then I got involved in university administration, and one thing didn’t lead to another and the paper is still a paper. At the time, people were deeply concerned about civility in politics, and it seemed to me that many of those discussions made some untenable assumptions: that civility is an unmitigated good, that it rises above history and culture, that there are some basic guidelines that allow us to know it when we see it, that it is a characteristic of individuals rather than interactions and social structures. I explored two very different literatures – American history, and pragmatics or social linguistics, to understand the phenomenon of civility, its sources and impacts.

Here are some things I learned from that investigation:

- Civility is a critical support for democratic process, facilitating productive, constructive but
- It is also a mechanism that regulates state and society in favor of dominant elites whose standards and practices and perspectives determine what constitutes civility, when it is being performed, and when it is being violated.
- Standards and practices of civility are variable and they are historically, situationally, and contextually determined.

My conclusion was as follows:

‘Civility’ is not easy to achieve, not because people get hot-tempered in politics (which they do) or because they haven’t learned all the rules ‘properly’ (which they haven’t). Civility is, in fact, difficult to achieve in any setting in which people have differences of status, history,

culture, or interests. In other words, civility is difficult to achieve when we most need political deliberation. Civility is *itself* something that needs to be sought, deliberated, and negotiated. The call for ‘civility is often reminiscent of calls for ‘management’ rather than ‘politics’: a method of decision-making that can transcend clashes of interests and those other aspects of decision-making that give politics a dirty name, even among those who prize it as the means for a people to achieve a sustainable and just collective existence. Achieving civility, for better or worse, requires engaging in political processes of deliberation. Unfortunately, in real life, there is no meta-language for politics. Civility is *of* politics, not *above* it.

I still believe that. Perhaps even more than I did then. Having now returned to this subject of civility for many reasons, I was very pleased to find some excellent recent work by some of our colleagues that helped me think about the puzzles of civility, why it seems so fragile, and what we might do to strengthen it.

Laments about the decline of civility too often focus on a broad cultural deficiency. I have already mentioned Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj’s 2014 work, *The Outrage Industry*, which takes a careful look at the structure and business of the mass media that support radio and television shows starring personalities that promote outrage politics. They define outrage talk as “verbal competition, political theater with a scorecard” (p.7) “As a form of discourse,” they say, “outrage is distinctly emotional, antagonistic, and opinion-based. It is very much a community-based language, that provides keywords and phrases and reactions” (p.19). It promotes caricature and conspiracy theories, and works to stoke anger, resentment, and moral indignation. It provides important signaling to the public about candidates, parties, and people. And perhaps most importantly, it creates and supports communities of people who are attracted to these famous people who give voice to their perceptions and feelings and provide them with an authoritative language and a set of facts to bring to bear on their own interactions. By “facts” I don’t mean the term as most of us in this scholarly social science gathering understand them, as vetted by certain testing procedures, but facts meaning ideas and thoughts that make sense, feel right, and accord with how people understand their own experiences of all kinds. I’ll have more to say about facts and evidence in a minute.

The stars of the outrage media are people who relate to their audience rather than to facts. They like normal people, include their viewers and listeners in the conversation, cuddle up in close camera shots, and talk with their audience in inclusive terms. People feel engaged in a conversation.

The opportunities for political engagement provided by these shows and the avatar-based social media are very important in the context of the politics of resentment. In her recent book, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (2016), Kathy Cramer offers an important window into the perspectives of rural Midwestern white Americans – people who know the following facts: the political and policy world is run by mostly city people, by those who do not do work that makes them sweat, are privileged not have to pay attention to anyone’s interests but their own, and therefore do not devote much attention or energy on the real people in small towns and rural areas who do not run the show. You know, people like those of us in this room at an international scholarly conference who are comfortable thinking of people like them as uneducated, not very bright, a bit irrational, lacking in good restaurants, and not worth listening to or trying to understand except occasionally as subjects of our studies, for example, when we control for education or size of residential community.

Those people are not our teachers or doctors or accountants or newspaper columnists or even, for the most part, our neighbors, or anyone else we listen to. They pay attention to the mainstream media, and they hear themselves called names, including rednecks and racists. They don't like being called racists, and generally don't believe that is what they are, and they resent the denigration. No wonder they are happy to find media outlets that don't seem to treat them that way.

Cramer's observations about the communication aspects of this politics of resentment reminded me of some of the many very interesting and important observations in Diana Mutz' work, both her 2006 book, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*, and her 2015 book, *In Your Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media*. Her works examine the details of interactions – in the first book, on communication across difference, and in the second, the dynamics of uncivil discourse on television.

Mutz finds in her investigation of cross-cutting conversation – conversation across difference – that those with less education and less wealth and members of minority groups are involved in more cross-cutting conversations than white people and those with high incomes and more education. As she says, “The same characteristics that give people more control over their lives in general also give the, more control over with whom they associate.” Let's put it this way – those of us with more resources, leverage, and social power have more power to hear what we want to hear, and don't have to be much exposed to thinking that is oppositional to our own, despite what we say about our commitment to democracy, deliberation, and enlightenment.

This creates an interesting situation. As Mutz says, “those most knowledgeable about and interested in politics are not the people most exposed to oppositional political viewpoints.” I can just imagine, given the politics of resentment, that the support of the outrage industry and the possibility of speaking out and engaging in conflict politics in the avatar electronic world feels empowering on many levels.

Mutz finds that the in-your-face world of uncivil, outrage television – television that defies the mores of everyday civility -- is arousing, attention-grabbing, and ultimately, therefore, more informative for those who are drawn to it than the calm, peaceful, boring world of what we academics are likely to regard as interesting high-quality journalism. Mutz finds that the performance of incivility or outrage helps people remember was said. But she also finds that it has no impact on attitudes toward speakers one was inclined to like in the first place, it makes them more negative toward those they are inclined *not* to like in the first place. As she said, “Uncivil behavior on the part of one's own side is dismissed as mere righteous indignation in the face of an uncivil opponent; but when the other side engages in similar behavior, it is a sign of their own depravity.” This would explain why, in my comment-section experiment, I was not very affected by the outrage in the voices of people with whom I agreed (and, of course, the people with whom I agreed were not very outrageous anyway), but angered by the outrages of those with whom I disagreed.

Here's an application: The more outrageous Donald Trump becomes, the more shocked the opposing public is at the number of people who seem not only unfazed by his outrageousness, but even attracted to it. Attacking Trump or his supporters for being uncivil, or his supporters for being uneducated or racists is not a winning strategy. It's a *loser*. His supporters, who resemble the profile of people who were already drawn to outrage television or radio, are fully aware of what the educated elite think of them, and I imagine they are thrilled to have someone speak on their behalf and are energized by the in-your-face social media that is obviously scaring those elites half to death.

The decline of trust in expertise feeds into the phenomenon of outrage politics. Trust in most kinds of social institutions has been declining for decades, and in some cases can't go much lower. But if you listen to the debates about climate change, or public opinion polling, or Brexit, or just about anything else you will hear in certain segments of the population a deep suspicion of any kind of expertise, including those based in science, or any statement that claims a basis in expertise, including science. Expertise is usually expressed by educated elites, and to many people it's just another point of view -- and one that often seems obscure and difficult to understand, anyway. This "expertise" often just feels wrong on the face of it, as when "scientists" say that people can change the climate of the earth or make glaciers on the other side of the Earth melt. Or the children of same-sex couples are on average just as healthy and well-adjusted as the children of different-sex couples. Or the biggest spenders do not always get their way in elections. Primed by infamously misleading claims by experts -- so-called scientific reports offered by the cigarette, soda, or pharmaceutical industry or public opinion polls that obviously don't predict actual results (even though, isn't that their purpose?), the facts presented in the outrage industry look as good as any other.

The existence of electronic and social mediated communities is compelling. Once upon a time, such citizens might have found themselves isolated, besieged by ideas and facts that just didn't sound right, but having no one to turn to, especially because normal face-to-face interactions over politics would be threatening. But now, with social media and online and televised communities, and especially the ability to engage directly and individually through a screen-named avatar, empowerment probably feels closer. You can always find the rest of your community. And if you pay attention mostly to the people in your own community, it can feel large and strong and empowering.

Politics has become very personal, and outrage politics has seeped into our private lives. Studies are showing rising political animosity in the US that seriously affects people's view of other people and the possibility of friendships across political difference.

As political psychologists, we have work to do and a role to play. At first, when I thought about this talk, I wondered what point there is in talking about civility in an organization that has people who focus on terror and terrorism. How can civility be that important in the face of terror? But if the societies that are most marked by democratic practices experience further increases in outrage politics, the decline of civility, the inability to discuss politics across difference in face-to-face settings, we are in trouble. And that terrorism, creates a climate of fear that must have an impact on trust and civility.

Political psychologists must find ways to contribute through our research and teaching. I think we need to use the fruits of this research to think about educational and training programs and experiences that might help. The irony, of course, is that offering such programs as experts is not likely to make inroads. They have to be empowering and respectful. And they have to feel real and engaging. Which is to say, I'm not really sure what we can do. Nevertheless, we must give this serious thought, reflecting on the best research we can muster. For if we do not, we will find that even in a democracy like the United States, some portion of the public may become comfortable calling for the leader of the opposing party to be imprisoned, or even mortally threatened, (Alan Rappoport, "From links to Lucifer to calls for execution, Republicans seethe at Hillary Clinton," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/politics/hillary-clinton-rnc-attacks.html>)