Political Trash Talk's Toll

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Review of In-Your-Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media by Diana C. Mutz. 263 pp. $29.95

"If a producer can find someone who eggs on conservative listeners to spout off and prods liberals into shouting back, he's got a show," Bill O'Reilly, host of The O'Reilly Factor, declared a few years ago. "The best host is the guy or gal who can get the most listeners extremely annoyed over and over and over again."

Examples of incivility in political discourse, which has spread to television in the last few decades, abound. At the Republican Convention in 2004, for example, after a heated exchange with Chris Mathews, the host of MSNBC's Hardball, Democratic Senator Zell Miller yelled "I wish I could challenge you to a duel." Although incivility is almost universally condemned, not much is known about its impact. In In-Your-Face Politics, Diana Mutz, a professor of political science and communication at the University of Pennsylvania, draws on her own laboratory experiments and survey data from the National Annenberg Election Panel Study to provide a rigorous analysis of the consequences of televised trash talk on American political culture. Her lively and lucid book sheds light on the relationship between political programming and public engagement.

Mutz demonstrates that viewers get aroused as they watch politicians go at each other, especially when close-up camera shots accompany the exchange, because it violates their norms of politeness for face-to-face encounters. The arousal has some positive implications. Many Americans prefer American Idol to dull but civil political programs. They are more likely to watch the political theater of incivility. And when they are aroused, their attention to (and ability to remember) the content of contested issues is enhanced.
That said, Mutz makes a compelling case for the downside of trash talking on television. The response of viewers to incivility, she indicates, is asymmetric. They react negatively to in-your-face behavior by politicians they oppose, but seem to see it as justified indignation in those they favor. As visual images intensify feelings of intimacy (i.e. spatial proximity), Mutz suggests, shout shows undermine notions of a "worthy opposition" and encourage political polarization. The effect is greatest among strong political partisans (and Mutz cites multiple studies that conclude that conservatives exhibit more neural sensitivity to threats, whether or not they are related to politics and are presented on television or "real life," than liberals).

Equally important, televised trash talk erodes trust in politics, politicians, and in government. In 1964, Mutz reminds us, 76 percent of Americans indicated that they trusted government officials to do the right thing, at least most of the time. By 2008, only 30 percent held that view. The decline in trust, she points out, helps Republicans who run against waste and fraud in Washington, D.C. and hurts Democrats who seek support for antipoverty and racially-targeted programs aimed at minority groups from voters who will derive no personal benefit from them.

Television, Mutz concludes, is a difference maker in American politics. Reading about acts of incivility in a newspaper -- and even hearing rants on the radio -- do not cause nearly as much physiological arousal as do the close-up facial expressions and tone of voice cues on shout shows. And as the dissemination of remarks disparaging African-Americans by Donald Sterling, former owner of the NBA's Los Angeles Clippers, to Vivian Stiviano indicates, the Internet has vastly increased the likelihood that incidents of incivility will go viral.

If they do, partisan polarization and mistrust in government may well become permanent features of American politics. Mutz' recommendations to counter these tendencies -- which include a television workshop composed of scholars and producers to create informative, civil programs that hold viewers' interest; placing news programs after popular entertainment shows; attracting viewers by focusing on "the horse race"; treating candidates like celebrities and offering them free airtime on a show called Our Next American President (modeled on Canada's reality-show, The Next Great Prime Minister), in which audience members are invited to choose the winner; and a political version of fantasy football -- illustrate how intractable the problem may be.

Politicians may not be less civil than they were in the past. But we now see them, up close and personal. It's not a pretty sight, and as Mutz points out, we seem to need the "arousal that incivility provides to make politics exciting."