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### From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News

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## From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News

SARAH SOBIERAJ and JEFFREY M. BERRY

*Most research on incivility in American politics focuses on its effects on citizens' political attitudes and behaviors, in spite of remarkably little data on the extent to which political discourse is actually uncivil. Those studies that do examine content focus on negative campaign advertisements, overlooking more egregious forms of political incivility that penetrate the broader media landscape. In this study, we attempt to conceptualize and measure more dramatic types of political incivility, which we term "outrage." Outrage discourse involves efforts to provoke a visceral response from the audience, usually in the form of anger, fear, or moral righteousness through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and partial truths about opponents. Scrutinizing 10 weeks of data from political blogs, talk radio, and cable news analysis programs, we demonstrate that outrage discourse is extensive, takes many different forms (we examine 13 different types), and spans media formats. We also show that while outrage tactics are largely the same for liberal and conservative media, conservative media use significantly more outrage speech than liberal media. It is our hope that introducing more concrete information about the actual content of political media will render existing research on potential effects more meaningful.*

**Keywords** talk radio, blogs, political commentary, infotainment, polarization, political culture, incivility

Maybe you aren't aware of the link between the churches in your community and Nazism. Syndicated radio host and Fox Cable News commentator Glenn Beck may be helpful in this regard:

I beg you, look for the words "social justice" or "economic justice" on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words. Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes! (March 2, 2010)

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For those who missed these remarks on his radio show, Beck made the same argument on his TV show, underscoring his point by holding up cards, one with a Swastika and another with a hammer and sickle, and cautioning that social justice had also been the battle cry of Nazis and communists.

Research on “negativity” and “incivility” in American politics has drawn almost exclusively on campaign advertisements and candidate statements in the news in an attempt to measure the impact of this negativity on voter turnout (usually) and faith in government (sometimes). These inquiries are important, but they fail to fully capture the acrimony of our contemporary political culture. In order to reach a point where we can begin to understand the political consequences of incivility—the question at the forefront of virtually all research on this topic—we first need a more comprehensive understanding of the extent and texture of political incivility itself.

Existing research looks at the statements and advertisements made by candidates and political parties, but virtually no research has examined the ways in which political incivility penetrates the broader landscape of a political media shaped powerfully by entertainment imperatives.<sup>1</sup> Laboratory exposure to advertisements or mock candidates is limited in what it tells us about the real political waters in which we swim, which include campaign advertisements (during certain periods of time, in some states more than others) but also talk radio, political blogs, and conflict-based cable news analysis programs, all of which have audiences swelling at breathtaking rates. Questions about negativity in politics must include these spaces in which incivility is transformed into something grander: outrage.

The term *outrage* is used frequently in this article, in reference to a particular form of political discourse involving efforts to provoke visceral responses (e.g., anger, righteousness, fear, moral indignation) from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and partial truths about opponents, who may be individuals, organizations, or entire communities of interest (e.g., progressives or conservatives) or circumstance (e.g., immigrants). Outrage sidesteps the messy nuances of complex political issues in favor of melodrama, misrepresentative exaggeration, mockery, and improbable forecasts of impending doom. Outrage talk is not so much discussion as it is verbal competition, political theater with a scorecard. What distinguishes this type of discourse is not that it seeks to evoke emotion in the political arena. On the contrary, emotional speech has an important place in political life, and many emotional appeals are not outrageous.<sup>2</sup> What makes outrage distinctive are the tactics used in an effort to provoke the emotion.

Outrage differs conceptually from its sibling, incivility. Civility has been defined many ways, but is understood by us in this context as political argumentation characterized by speakers who present themselves as reasonable and courteous, treating even those with whom they disagree as though they and their ideas are worthy of respect. Incivility, then, involves “gratuitous asides that show a lack of respect and/or frustration with the opposition” (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). In a sense, outrage is incivility writ large. It is by definition uncivil, but not all incivility is outrage. Eyeroiling, sighing, and the like are not in our view outrageous, because they do not incorporate the elements of malfeasant inaccuracy and intent to diminish that characterize outrage.

How do we recognize outrage, and can it be measured? Who uses it? What does it sound like? In the absence of meaningful information about *content*, questions of *effects*, which dominate the existing research, are premature. In this article, we explore the constituent parts of outrage in an effort to lay out a path for its measurement, in hopes that other researchers will join us in exploring this phenomenon. We then use these tools to

offer a baseline map of the landscape and texture of political outrage speech and behavior, showing that outrage is both abundant and intense. Finally, we explore some of the potential implications of these findings and suggest directions for future research.

### **What We Know About Political Incivility**

Empirical research in political communication and political psychology attempting to identify effects of exposure to political incivility—as distinguished from mere negativity, which can exist with or without an uncivil mode of delivery<sup>3</sup>—offers complex and at times contradictory answers, as is the case with media effects research across most content. The reigning presumption is that incivility in politics undermines faith in government and discourages political participation. Findings suggest that exposure to uncivil political discourse in the media erodes political trust, engenders more negative assessments of political institutions and actors, decreases the perceived legitimacy of political figures, and triggers increased emotional response (e.g., Forgette & Morris, 2006; Fridkin & Kenney, 2008; Mutz, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

Yet some research suggests that there may be positive effects of negative political speech, such as Geer and Lau (2006), who found that negative (not specifically uncivil) campaign advertisements actually stimulated voter turnout in Britain between 1980 and 2000. Similarly, Brader (2005, 2006) demonstrated that emotional appeals in campaign advertising engage audiences, prompting viewers to seek out further information. Some research suggests effects too complex to be viewed as positive or negative. For example, Kahn and Kenney (1999, 2004) found that negative campaign advertisements and negative news coverage increased voter turnout, but “mudslinging” reduced it, and that the impact varied based on the status of the candidate delivering the message as well as the style of the criticism. Similarly, Brooks and Geer (2007) found that incivility disturbed the public’s sense of the value of political discussion but that those people viewing uncivil messages were also more likely to vote.

The complexity and contradiction embedded in these results are unsurprising. The literature includes researchers who vary in the way they define negativity and/or incivility as well as the way they operationalize these concepts. The scholars also attempt to measure impact in different contexts (laboratory, survey, etc.) after audience members encounter different media and different genres within individual media. It should be of little surprise to find that measurable effects of a mock political talk show viewed in a lab might differ from survey data assessing the measurable effects of exposure to negative campaign advertisements. Even without these significant methodological differences, it is a daunting task to isolate the impact of one type of political speech given the broad and complex political and media environments in which we operate.

Despite these challenges, the effects of uncivil political discourse are worth examining. The problem is that this effects research exists alongside minimal data on the content of real political discourse. In other words, even if exposure to uncivil political discourse is proven to yield measurable outcomes (e.g., apathy, political engagement, diminished trust), this information is of little use without an empirical account of the degree to which political discourse is actually uncivil. This is an unexpected imbalance in light of the many corners of media studies in which academic research offers exactly the opposite: numerous analyses of media texts accompanied by conjecture about their likely effects yet precious little empirical data on audiences or users.

There is some content analytic work on incivility in political speech, but it is too narrow to provide a meaningful assessment of the state of outrageous political discourse

in the media. Beyond the flood of research on negative campaign advertisements (e.g., Buell & Sigelman, 2009; Geer, 2006; Krebs & Holian, 2007; West, 2005) and campaign communications via the news (e.g., Lau & Pomper, 2004), which suggests that a downward spiral into negativity cannot necessarily be established, we have little sense of the texture of political discourse more broadly. Jamieson and Cappella (2008) offer some valuable qualitative insights into the ways in which outrageous personalities present political life to their audiences, but they look exclusively at the conservative opinion media.

Moy and Pfau (2000) offer perhaps the most comprehensive content analysis of what we might call the broader political curriculum. The content analysis portion of their study examined depictions of political institutions in 1995 and 1996 across a wide range of media, including news, television news magazines, entertainment talk shows, and political talk radio, and revealed that the political tone varies tremendously. They demonstrated, for example, that talk radio is most negative on the presidency, while entertainment talk shows depicted Congress in the least favorable manner. Their research also reveals patterned differences in media use, with different preferences among men and women (e.g., men preferring talk radio, women preferring television news magazines) as well as different use patterns among people from different age groups and from different political parties. This reminds us that political discourse is diffuse in society (rather than concentrated in campaign advertisements) and demonstrates that diverse media formats do not create a simple echo chamber in which the same information is articulated and rearticulated by different talking heads. Further, the intermedia variation in political content and the patterned differences among audience members suggest that while laboratory experiments allow us to isolate a particular variable, they tell us little about incivility as it is actually encountered.

### **Why Study Outrage?**

We argue that it is critical to step back from effects research temporarily to develop a deeper understanding of the depth and nature of political incivility. At no time has this taking stock been more critical, as changes in the nature of contemporary political, technological, and economic relations have created a media environment that is uniquely supportive of outrage-based political discourse. Many changes in the media landscape since the 1980s have supported the expansion of the outrage industry, but perhaps none has been more influential than the fragmentation of the audience as users have dispersed across the rapidly expanding array of media choices on- and offline. Outrage thrives in a narrowcasting environment. By way of example, consider the case of television. During the era of big-three network dominance, when programming choices were based on garnering the largest possible number of viewers from the mass audience, the goal was to offend the fewest, to program with the least objectionable content (Gitlin, 1987). Networks in a narrowcasting environment reach out to smaller and more homogeneous audiences and can afford to offend. Indeed, many television programs, radio shows, and blogs deliver niche audiences to advertisers specifically through the use of objectionable programming. If Rush Limbaugh had to concern himself with attracting a broad audience (presumably including Latinos), he would have been unlikely to denounce Sonia Sotomayor as a racist after she was nominated for the Supreme Court or to compare her to KKK firebrand David Duke or to a housekeeper. Agent provocateurs, a nearly unthinkable risk 35 years ago, now have a bevy of available platforms from the multitude of cable networks to the thriving blogosphere, and even talk radio where the number of stations has grown dramatically.

While outrageous political speech is certainly not new—even our Founding Fathers engaged in mudslinging—its widespread proliferation and visibility is new. This

ascendance, combined with evidence revealing that audiences for conventional political media such as network news programs and newspapers are in decline, suggests that outrage is increasingly part of the political information landscape. It is therefore pressing that we begin to more fully capture the content and character of political programming today.

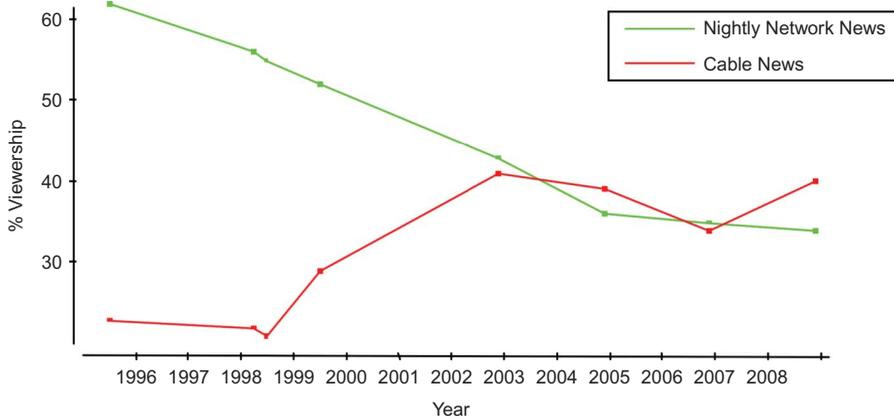
The depth, breadth, and substantive content of the 13-month outrage assault on the Obama health care proposal should caution us against dismissing this style of media and advocacy as a colorful if distasteful part of American politics. From the Tea Party explosions to claims that the proposal would establish “death panels,” outrage dominated the debate over this costly and far-reaching proposal. The important point is not that fervent criticism arose—in a healthy democracy we expect such public scrutiny—but that the approach by media hosts and activists generated a bevy of misinformation and simultaneously shifted much attention away from thoughtful analysis of the proposal and toward the outrage purveyors themselves.

We also need to think about outrage more systematically because of its emotional dimension. There is reason to suggest that emotional appeals—if successful—may have important social and political implications. These implications could be reason for concern; perhaps they fan the flames of intolerance, promote and entrench polarization, or create a generalized mistrust of government. But there is also the possibility that emotion can be politically productive, by heightening our attention to particular issues, candidates, and policies as well as promoting political participation (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Nadeau, Niemi, & Amato, 1996). We ask questions of content to render questions of effects—which we see as vitally important—more meaningful.

### **Audiences: A New Political Diet**

The newly diffuse delivery of political information coupled with trends in audience data suggests that our political diet is increasingly composed of unvetted news and unedited opinion. Prior (2007) demonstrates that the greater selection afforded by the introduction of cable TV generated a strong movement by viewers away from news programming and toward entertainment. For the first time since Gallup began asking the question in 1995, significantly more respondents say they use cable news networks daily for information than say they turn to nightly network news programs (see Figure 1). Cable news has surpassed broadcast news in terms of audience share, and the most watched cable news programs are news analysis shows. Fox’s *The O’Reilly Factor* often draws 4 to 5 times the audience of the competition on CNN, the only one of the three leading cable news networks that strives toward neutrality in the evening hours. Since MSNBC shifted to a more distinctly liberal persona in its evening shows, the network’s ratings have improved, and it now draws as many or more viewers than its CNN competitors (Calderone, 2009). One may be tempted to dismiss the purveyors of outrage language as fringe characters who resort to this approach because they appear in obscure venues. But audience data suggest otherwise. The audience for Fox TV alone is impressive. Its three top shows are *The O’Reilly Factor* (4.8 million for two showings a night), *Hannity* (2.3 million), and *Glenn Beck* (2.1 million). Fox is one of the highest rated of all cable networks with its steady stream of conservative commentary.<sup>4</sup>

The Project for Excellence in Journalism’s annual reports highlight the skyrocketing popularity of talk radio. As of 2009, there were over 2,500 all news or talk radio stations in the U.S., in comparison to just 400 in 1990, and an estimated audience of 53 million listen each week.<sup>5</sup> Rush Limbaugh attracts over 15 million listeners a week. Not too far behind him is Sean Hannity (14 million). Michael Savage, perhaps the most controversial



**Figure 1.** Respondents getting daily news from cable news versus nightly network news (source: Gallup poll, December 15, 2009).

conservative commentator, has a weekly audience of 9 million, as does Glenn Beck. Unlike the other sources of outrage content investigated here, political talk radio is almost exclusively conservative in orientation. All of the top 10 syndicated talk radio programs are conservative talk shows, even the two advice shows (Dr. Laura Schlessinger and Dave Ramsey).<sup>6</sup> We do not know how many people believe they are getting objective news from these programs, but the precipitous decline in readership of newspapers suggests that an increasing number of people turn to these sources for political information. For us to understand political incivility in any meaningful way, it is critical that these venues be taken into account. Although there are abundant sources of traditional news and thoughtful political commentary, there is reason to examine the consequences of a political environment in which Rush Limbaugh is thriving with a contract extension worth \$400 million and the *New York Times* is in dire financial straits. As Rheingold (1993) says, “[P]ay attention to where you pay attention.”

### Measuring Outrage

We hope to map the terrain of outrage in an effort to provide (a) a broader foundation for research on the effects of coarseness in political discourse, (b) some sense of what incivility sounds like and how it varies, (c) insights into how political outrage differs on the right and left, and, perhaps most critically, (d) a baseline to allow us to track changes in political culture over time. At the end of this article, we discuss the increase of outrage over time, but here we offer a finely grained cross-sectional analysis.

During a 10-week period in the spring of 2009, four researchers coded evening cable TV, national talk radio shows, ideological political blogs, and (for comparison) mainstream newspaper columns. The specifics on each of these four data sources are as follows.

#### *Cable TV*

Eight news commentary shows on the three most prominent cable news networks were each watched for 1hr per week. The shows were those hosted by Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, and Bill O’Reilly on the conservative Fox News network; Rachel Maddow, Chris Matthews,

and Keith Olbermann on the liberal MSNBC; and Lou Dobbs and Campbell Brown on CNN. In addition, as points of comparison, an hour of afternoon traditional news programming, *The Situation Room* with Wolf Blitzer on CNN, and the weekly episode of *Meet the Press* on NBC were included. With the exception of *Meet the Press*, which airs only once each week, we sampled shows on a predetermined schedule that rotated the days of the week for each program.

### ***Talk Radio***

With so few liberal talk radio shows, we were only able to include those hosted by Alan Colmes of Fox Radio and Thom Hartmann, formerly of Air America. Our choice of the conservative radio hosts was dictated in part by the availability of audio archives, but we were able to follow six of the most popular conservatives: Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, Hugh Hewitt, Laura Ingraham, Mike Gallagher, and Mark Levin. For comparison we also included NPR's *Morning Edition* along with *The Diane Rehm Show*, which can be heard on many public radio stations. The first hour of each program was sampled and coded. As with the cable TV programs, days of the week were rotated for each show.

### ***Political Blogs***

Ten leading conservative and 10 leading liberal political blogs were followed each week. Selecting the blogs was not a simple process. We compiled the entries on three different "Top 10" lists for both conservative and liberal blogs (Technorati's authority rankings, the top conservative and liberal blogs identified on [www.blogs.com](http://www.blogs.com), and opinion-based listings provided by Scott Martin and Heather Pidcock) to create master lists including blogs mentioned on any of the lists at least once. After creating these master lists (one for liberal blogs and one for conservative blogs) and removing blogs that were not predominantly political, we utilized Alexa rankings to determine the 10 most heavily trafficked blogs on each list. The conservative blogs in the sample are Townhall, Michelle Malkin, Hot Air, Right Pundits, Gateway Pundit, Powerline, Hit and Run, Little Green Footballs, Ace of Spades, and Moonbattery. The liberal blogs are Huffington Post, Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo, Crooks and Liars, Think Progress, Wonkette, Firedoglake, MyDD, Orcinus, and Hullabaloo. Each week we sampled the first post appearing on a rotating day of the week at or after a specified time (as most of these blogs update frequently).<sup>7</sup>

### ***Newspaper Columns***

To compare political speech in newspaper columns to that in traditional political commentary, the country's top syndicated newspaper columnists were coded as well. We examined the work of the five most widely syndicated columnists who lean conservative (David Brooks, Charles Krauthammer, Kathleen Parker, Cal Thomas, and George Will) and the five most widely syndicated who lean liberal (E. J. Dionne, Maureen Dowd, Ellen Goodman, Leonard Pitts, and Eugene Robinson). We sampled one column per week per columnist on a rotating schedule.

Outrage and even incivility are slippery concepts: hard to define, but easy to identify (you know it when you see it). As a result, the variables we ultimately used in our analysis were created through an early wave of inductive research. We each brought 20 examples we believed to be outrage and several that were borderline and worked through

each of them, asking what was going on in each instance. What are the abstract tactics that the speaker/writer is using? What is it that makes something feel clearly outrageous versus something that feels closer to conventional political discourse? In the end, we were able to identify 13 types of recurring speech and behavior that constituted outrage, and we developed a codebook to define each, provide examples, and address subtleties that might otherwise lead to inconsistent coding. Coders reviewed each case for the following 13 variables: insulting language, name calling, emotional display, emotional language, verbal fighting/sparring, character assassination, misrepresentative exaggeration, mockery, conflagration, ideologically extremizing language, slippery slope, belittling, and obscene language. Summary judgments for overall tone (of the case as a whole) and overall amount of outrage language (in terms of a percentage of the overall speech used in a given case) were also included.

The operational definitions of the 13 content variables required many rounds of pretesting to construct and are not self-explanatory. Capsule summaries of each are contained in the Appendix, and as we move through the analysis detailed descriptions of several will be offered. The full operational definitions and illustrative examples are contained in a lengthy codebook available from the authors.

Although the four formats differ considerably, we created a research instrument that could be used to analyze all four forms. Each television episode, radio program, blog post, and newspaper column was analyzed using the same content analysis instrument. Coders recorded the use of each of these particular types of speech and behavior. Up to six uses of each variable were counted, with the appropriate unit of analysis for most being the “turn” or “chunk.” Following Perrin (2005), a “turn” is defined as a contiguous block of speech by a single participant. When there is a back and forth conversation, each speaker’s turn is the appropriate unit. If a monologue was prolonged, judgment was made as to appropriate boundaries of a single turn, such as changes in topic, pauses in thought, and disruptions for station information, teasers, or advertisements. For written content, “chunks” are also a contiguous but clearly demarcated block of print, typically a paragraph or section. For more concrete variables (e.g., obscene language), each discrete use was counted rather than the number of uses per turn or chunk.

Despite the challenges of coding complex variables characterized by a variety of nuanced usages embedded in rich texts, the level of specificity of the operational definitions in the codebook yielded quite impressive intercoder reliability ratings. Over the course of 10 weeks, 15 cases were randomly selected for intercoder reliability tests in which two of the four coders evaluated the same case independently. The results ranged from a low of 80.43% to a high of 98.6%, with a mean of 91.4%.

## Mapping Outrage: The Findings

### *How Much Outrage Is There?*

The data reveal that there is a great deal of incivility in politics beyond campaign communications and that this incivility takes many diverse forms. Outrage punctuates speech and writing across formats. Whether it is MSNBC’s Keith Olbermann spitting out his coffee because of some conservative transgression or radio host Michael Savage venomously impugning the character of immigrants, cable television, talk radio, and blogs overflow with outrage rhetoric, and even mainstream newspaper columns are not above the fray.

Excluding the comparison cases, we find that 89.6% of the cases included in the sample contained at least one outrage incident. If we break this down further and look by medium, 100% of TV episodes and 98.8% of talk radio programs contained outrage,

while “only” 82.8% of blog posts incorporated outrage writing. Table 1 offers some broad measures of the frequency with which outrage is used per case in each of the four media formats. Direct comparisons across the four formats are not possible, as the 1-hr segments of TV and radio are far lengthier than newspaper columns or blog posts (we will return to cross-format comparisons below), but the unadjusted figures in Table 1 are revealing. The number of incidents on TV (23 per episode) and radio (24 per episode) should be viewed within the context of the actual length of programs, which, after subtracting commercial time, leaves approximately 44 min of actual content for TV and 36 min for radio.

As striking as the frequency of these incidents is, the data understate incidents for the most egregious cases, as each outrage measure was capped at “6 or more” instances per case, with particularly virulent programs reaching this threshold quite quickly and exceeding that cap by a large margin (see Table 2 for the most outrageous commentators). Furthermore, there is considerable time devoted to segment set-ups, teases about what’s to come, news cut-ins, and nonpolitical talk (e.g., sidebars about taking the dog to the vet) that are devoid of relevant content. Thus, we estimate that outrage rhetoric or behavior is used on average once during every 90 to 100 seconds of political discussion on TV and even more frequently on radio. In particular, two radio hosts, Mark Levin and Michael Savage,

**Table 1**  
Incidents of outrage rhetoric and behavior per case (rounded)

	TV	Radio	Columns	Blogs
Mean	23	24	6	6
Median	25	23	5	4
<i>SD</i>	10.265	13.739	5.871	6.027

Rates were not adjusted for differences in length of shows, columns, and blog posts.

**Table 2**  
Most outrageous TV and radio programs, blogs, and newspaper columns

Format	Name	Perspective
TV	1. <i>The Glenn Beck Show</i>	Conservative
	2. <i>Countdown with Keith Olbermann</i>	Liberal
	3. <i>Hannity</i>	Conservative
Radio	1. Mark Levin	Conservative
	2. Michael Savage	Conservative
	3. Rush Limbaugh	Conservative
Blog	1. Moonbattery	Conservative
	2. Orcinus	Liberal
	3. Wonkette	Liberal
Column	1. Cal Thomas	Conservative
	2. Charles Krauthammer	Conservative
	3. Leonard Pitts	Liberal

*Note.* Rankings are based on average weighted overall outrage scores.

utilize outrage speech or behavior at a rate of more than one instance per minute. The top 10 syndicated columnists were included in the research for the purposes of comparison to more evident provocateurs. Yet even in columns we find an average of six instances of outrage rhetoric, even though the tone is often less extreme. This is captured by our summary measure “overall tone.”<sup>8</sup> The mean overall tone of columns is 1.05, significantly lower than the mean overall tone for blogs (1.51), radio (1.83), and television (1.92).<sup>9</sup>

These data demonstrate how common outrage is in mediated political discourse, yet they are conservative assessments, and some outrage is missed. During the course of the data collection, the research team found some audacious comments that were not captured by any of the measures. Most glaringly, there is no variable for insults if they do not draw upon some other form of outrage (e.g., insulting language, name calling, obscenity). Similarly, if we were to replicate this study, it would be useful to include a measure for conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories often flirt closely with related variables such as misrepresentative exaggeration, character assassination, and slippery slope argumentation, but some instances did not conform to the strict definitions established for these related variables and were lost. Finally, our variable emotional display was reserved for quite dramatic behaviors (e.g., crying, yelling, slamming down the phone in anger) and does not capture less egregious but more prevalent behaviors such as eye-rolling, exasperated sighing, and so forth. If these had been counted, the numbers would have been even higher for radio and television.

### *What Does Outrage Sound Like?*

Table 1 aggregated all forms of outrage. As pointed out above, however, the coding specified 13 different manifestations of outrage language and behavior. After disaggregating

**Table 3**  
Outrage incidents per case: Overall, left, and right

Modes of outrage	Overall mean	Left mean	Right mean	Difference	<i>t</i> <sup>a</sup>
Insulting language	1.53	1.18	1.81	-0.621***	-2.99
Name calling	1.54	1.11	1.89	-0.781***	-3.36
Emotional display	0.99	0.64	1.26	-0.621***	-3.22
Emotional language	0.58	0.46	0.68	-0.219*	-1.78
Verbal fighting/Sparring	0.74	1.10	0.53	0.567**	2.42
Character assassination	0.56	0.44	0.66	-0.212*	-1.71
Misrepresentative exaggeration	1.64	0.87	2.26	-1.396***	-6.34
Mockery/Sarcasm	2.56	2.45	2.65	-0.200	-0.81
Conflagration	0.26	0.15	0.36	-0.215***	-2.64
Ideologically extremizing language	1.37	0.91	1.74	-0.835***	-3.79
Slippery slope	0.28	0.17	0.37	0.200***	-2.61
Belittling	0.92	1.06	0.80	0.259*	1.73
Use of obscene language	0.64	0.52	0.73	-0.208	-1.45
Total outrage incidents	13.16	10.32	15.47	-5.143***	-3.76

*Note.* Comparison cases are excluded.

<sup>a</sup>Equality of means tests

\**p* < .10; \*\**p* < .05; \*\*\**p* < .01.

these data, we find enormous variation in the frequency of each of these 13 forms (Table 3). In terms of overall use, four types of outrage—mockery, misrepresentative exaggeration, insulting language, and name calling—each constitute more than 10% of all recorded instances of any of the variables. Ideologically extremizing language falls just at 10%. Clearly, some modes are used as a matter of course while others are utilized infrequently.

Mockery was the most prevalent mode of outrage (1,003 instances overall), with hundreds more overall instances than the second most common mode of outrage, misrepresentative exaggeration. Mockery is defined as making fun of the behaviors, planned behaviors, policies, or views of a person, group of people, branch of government, political party, or other organization in such a way as to make the subject look bad or to rally others in criticism of the subject. Coders were instructed to weed out “affectionate, light-hearted teasing” and to look for humor “designed to make the subject look foolish/inept, hypocritical, deceitful, or dangerous.” Radio host Alan Colmes uses mockery to demean the impact of the “Tax Day Tea Parties”: “They [onlookers] will go, ‘Oh my God, look at all these tea bags . . . I just have to act, these people . . . must be listened to!’” (April 13, 2009). Mocking the Republicans for ignoring their responsibility for the country’s financial crisis, columnist Eugene Robinson noted that “[t]hey had a decade long toga party, safeguarding our money with the diligence and sobriety of the fraternity brothers in ‘Animal House’” (February 24, 2009).

Misrepresentative exaggeration ( $N = 615$ ) captures instances of “very dramatic negative exaggeration . . . such that it significantly misrepresents or obscures the truth.” The conservative blog Moonbattery concluded that “RINO Senator Arlen Specter plans to stab both his party and future generations of Americans in the back by voting for the outrageous porkzilla package which appears purposely designed to break capitalism by crushing our economy” (February 9, 2009). Exaggeration was coded conservatively, reserved for cases such as this where the writer states that the stimulus plan is intended to bring down capitalism. Less dramatic exaggerations are quite common in political banter and posturing but are not included in these numbers.

Insulting language ( $N = 595$ ) is almost as prevalent as misrepresentative exaggeration. For this research, the operational definition of insulting language involved the use of “insulting words in reference to a person, group of people, branch of the government, political party, or other organization or their behaviors, planned behaviors, policies, or views.” This variable was created specifically to capture only insulting words (“idiotic” or “pompous” for example), not all insults more generally speaking. For example, describing someone as “a child” is insulting but does not use insulting words, so it would not be counted as insulting language (it would, however, be captured under belittling). A blogger at Firedoglake used insulting language in posting “Jindal, you sucked!” after the Louisiana governor’s response to President Obama’s first nationally televised speech to Congress (February 25, 2009).

Often insulting language was used to name-call, in which case it was coded only under name calling, which emerged as the fourth most common type of outrage (573 instances overall). For example, “asinine” in reference to a person or group’s behavior was counted as insulting language, but if the person or group is called “asinine,” this was recorded as name calling. Not stopping with generic names like “moron” or “idiot,” or even with political insults like “partisan hack” or the fresher “hack-in-the-box” (Dennis Miller to Bill O’Reilly in reference to Nancy Pelosi, February 25, 2009), speakers and writers offered quite inventive concoctions. Consider the riffs on politicians’ names: radio host Mark Levin repeatedly referring to Rod Blagojevich as “Boyabitch” (February 9, 2009), Moonbattery referring to Arlen Specter as “Sphincter” (February 9, 2009), or radio host

Michael Savage calling Charles Schumer “Up-Chuck Schumer.” Obama supporters were called names such as “Obamabots” (Michelle Malkin, March 24, 2009) and “Obamatards” (Wonkette, February 9, 2009). Sometimes insulting language and name calling are strung together for maximum effect, as was the case when TV host Keith Olbermann referred to the Tea Party protesters as “a bunch of greedy, water-carrying corporate-slave hypocrites” (April 15, 2009) or when blogger Digby described the defenders of torture practices as “illogical, sadistic scumbags” (April 17, 2009).

In reading and listening to the cases, there were some surprises. First, direct confrontation, which we term “sparring,” is rare. Despite the antagonistic tenor of shows like *The O’Reilly Factor* and *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, sparring scored nearly last among the 13 variables, with just a 2.3% frequency. We anticipated more hostile interruption and conflict between guests or between guests and hosts. This relative lack of jousting is explained by the noteworthy absence of opposing voices within individual programs. Hosts share airtime with ideologically compatible voices, and periodically with moderate or “neutral” visitors, but very rarely with true believers from the other side.<sup>10</sup> We were also surprised how often obscenities are used. We believed naively that foul language would be quite rare—perhaps relegated to a random blog post. Instead, it appears closer to the middle of the rankings.

### ***Who Is Most Outrageous: Liberals or Conservatives?***

When it comes to inflammatory media shenanigans, the right insists the left is worse, and the left insists the right is worse. Claiming persecution by the other side, and detailing how inaccurate and vindictive they are, is standard fare. Table 2 demonstrated that extensive outrage language and behavior come from both the left and the right; is one side really worse than the other? In a word, yes. Our data indicate that the right uses decidedly more outrage speech than the left. Taken as a whole, liberal content is quite nasty in character, following the outrage model with emotional, dramatic, and judgment-laden speech. Conservatives, however, are even nastier.

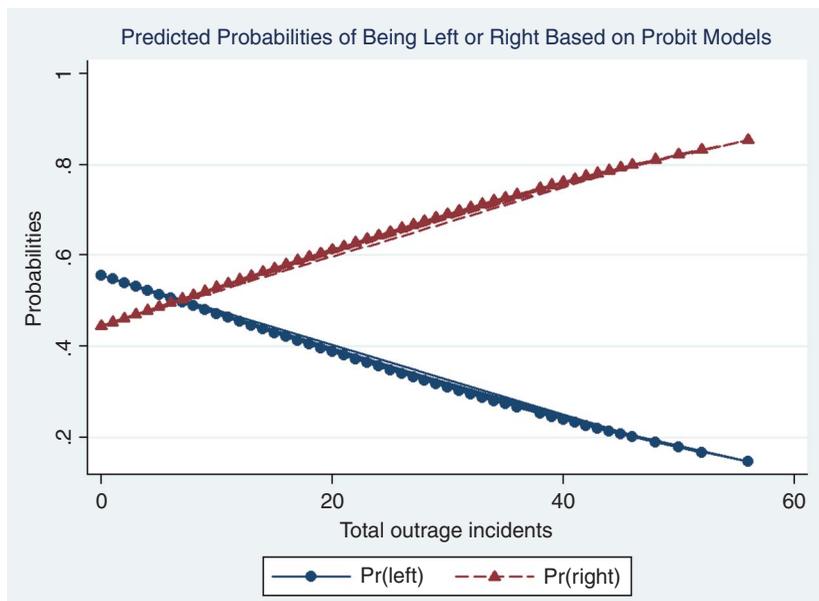
Returning to Table 3, we see an overview of the number of outrage incidents for the left, right, and as a whole across the 13 modes. The right engages in significantly more of 10 of the 13 types of outrage, while the left engages in significantly more of only two of the 13 types of outrage (verbal sparring/fighting and belittling), and there is no statistically significant difference in the volume of mockery/sarcasm, the 13th type of outrage. Perhaps most important is the significant difference ( $p < .01$ ) in the overall number of outrage incidents per case, with the right engaging in an average of 15.57 acts per case, while the left engages in 10.32 acts per case.

In light of the four formats (TV, radio, blog, and column) with differing case lengths and the unequal distribution of cases on the left and right (e.g., more conservative talk radio), we cannot simply compare averages. Table 4 shows the chances of a personality/author being on the left politically as predicted by both weighted least squares and probit regression analyses. The total outrage incidents and the overall outrage scores are used as predictors, controlling for the length in words (to account for differences in length between television episodes, blog posts, and radio programs) and the number of speakers present (as cases with only one speaker will not contain sparring). Both techniques show that as the outrage incidents/outrage score increases, the personality/author is less likely to be left of center, and hence more likely to be right of center politically as the comparison cases have been excluded from the analyses. The data demonstrate that the higher the level of outrage, the greater the likelihood that the personality/author is a conservative.

**Table 4**  
Weighted least squares and probit models using amount of outrage to predict political ideology

	Dependent variable: Left							
	WLS				Probit			
Independent variables	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(v)	(vi)	(vii)	(viii)
Total outrage incidents	-0.007** (0.002)	-0.009** (0.003)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.008** (0.002)	-0.009** (0.003)	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)
Total outrage scores								
Other controls	No .0000	Yes .0040	No .1425	Yes .0400	No .0002	Yes .0022	No .1376	Yes .0460
<i>p</i>								

*Note.* Coefficients reported are the marginal effects of an infinitesimal increase in independent variables. In even-numbered columns, we have also controlled for the length of the episode or post as measured in words, as well as the number of speakers present. Results shown are for regressions with dependent variable left. For right, since right = 1 - left after excluding comparison and neutral cases, the coefficients are the reverse of those for left.



**Figure 2.** Graph of predicted probabilities (fitted values; excluding comparison cases). This graph is based on the probit regressions in Table 4. It shows the predicted probabilities of being left and right given the total outrage incidents. Since we exclude neutral and comparison observations, for each level of incidents the probabilities of left and right must add to 1.

Another way we can examine the left–right variation is by examining the predicted probabilities of being left and right in graph form. Figure 2 shows the predicted probabilities (fitted values) based on the probit model used in the previous regressions. If the number of outrage incidents in a case is relatively small (five incidents or fewer), the case is more likely to be liberal. But as outrage incidents increase in number, the probability that the case is conservative increases dramatically. Those shows with the highest levels of outrage are far more likely to be conservative than liberal.

Although the left and right do not use outrage equally, they use it in ways that are remarkably similar. Among the most often-used outrage categories, modest differences appear only among two. Liberals are slightly more likely to use mockery, while conservatives are a bit more prone to misrepresentative exaggeration. Nevertheless, those on both sides of the political spectrum use the same rhetorical strategies.

### *What Differences Emerge Across Media?*

As stated earlier, there are some differences in the presence of outrage across media formats, with all television episodes (100%) and virtually all talk radio programs (98.8%) containing at least one outrage incident (excluding comparison cases), in contrast to the somewhat smaller percentage of blog posts (82.8%). This is explained in part by the relative civility of political blogs, but the difference is exaggerated by the ways in which blog posts are entered as discreet themed posts. Many talk radio and television hosts include nonpolitical segments (e.g., creative pet tricks or a story about lousy service at a restaurant), but these are integrated with political content in each episode. Bloggers, on the other hand, often parcel sidebar commentary/stories into discreet posts. For example, Little Green

**Table 5**  
Modes of outrage rhetoric and behavior (by format)

Outrage type	Total	TV	Radio	Blog	Column
Mockery	0.20	0.18	0.13	0.32	0.26
Misrepresentative exaggeration	0.12	0.14	0.14	0.08	0.12
Insulting language	0.12	0.12	0.12	0.11	0.15
Name calling	0.11	0.12	0.12	0.09	0.10
Ideologically extremizing language	0.10	0.10	0.12	0.08	0.05
Belittling	0.07	0.06	0.04	0.13	0.14
Emotional display	0.07	0.08	0.11	0.01	0.00
Emotional language	0.05	0.06	0.04	0.05	0.04
Obscene language	0.04	0.03	0.06	0.05	0.00
Character assassination	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.04
Slippery slope argumentation	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.07
Sparring	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.00	0.00
Conflagration	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.02
Total	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00

*Note.* Data are expressed as proportions for each medium.

Football had a brief post touting the new iPhone. A few fully nonpolitical posts were selected when their date/timestamps aligned with those outlined in the sampling protocol, diluting the presence of outrage. In other words, we believe blogs do contain outrage less often than cable news analysis and talk radio, but probably not radically less. Taking stock of this information, it is interesting to note that it is television, the most widely used medium, that is the most likely to contain outrage talk and behavior.

Although we cannot compare outrage *frequency* within cases across media, we can examine variation in outrage *form*. The left and right are quite similar in their outrage styles, and the same can be said about variation across format (see Table 5). With the exception of mockery and belittling, which have higher rates of usage in blogs and columns than television and radio, most forms of outrage are fairly evenly dispersed across the four formats. Emotional displays show up much less frequently in columns and blogs than in television and radio, but this is to be expected. While print formats have the ability to engage in emotional display through font manipulation, the use of capital letters, dramatic punctuation, emoticons, and so on, they do so infrequently, particularly in newspaper columns.

### Change or More of the Same?

No matter what era, no matter what issue or events, political pundits are predisposed not only to find change but to provide a cogent rationale for why we should be worried about such developments. Yet when social scientists measure ostensible trends that concern the broader public, it is often the case that it is not so much change that we find but “more of the same” (Schlozman & Tierney, 1986).

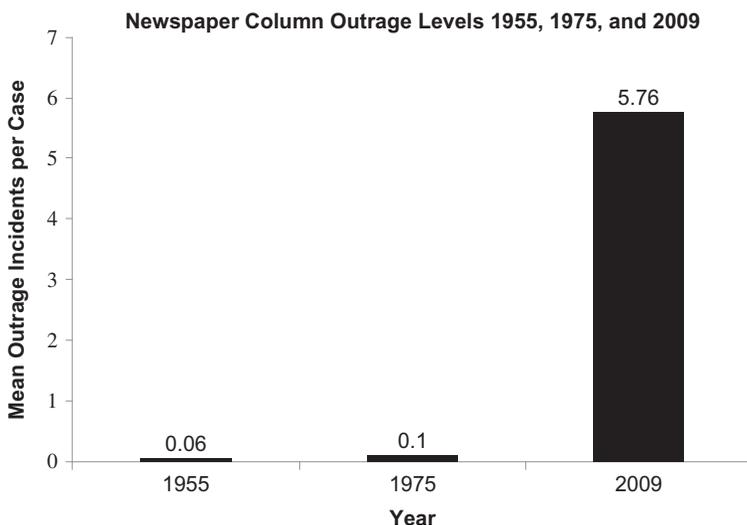
Since the data offered here are cross-sectional, do we really know that outrage is more prevalent and that coverage of public policy and politics is truly changing? Of course, we cannot go back in time to take comparative measurements of cable, talk radio, or blogs. There are no historical archives of talk radio shows that we are aware of, and cable TV

opinion shows and political blogs are relatively recent in origin. Again, we know of no repository of such shows or posts that go back many years in time. We do know something about changes in audience size, and we will return to that below.

What can be analyzed over time are newspaper columns. The most widely syndicated conservative and liberal columnists were included in our analysis as a point of comparison to the three other media sources. The research objective was to see to what degree the presumed sources of outrage commentary in TV, radio, and in blogs compared with this more conventional form of journalism. It was hardly surprising that the newspaper columnists used less outrage than those they were compared with. Unexpectedly, what we also found was that outrage language is now common among the nation's leading newspaper columnists. As steely an intellectual as Charles Krauthammer is, he can be quite nasty. And if Maureen Dowd did not actually invent political mockery, she has certainly turned it into an art form.

To determine whether this outrage is indeed new (or simply more of the same), 10 widely syndicated columnists were studied during 10-week periods for both 1955 and 1975.<sup>11</sup> We chose these dates to see if the tumultuous period of the 1960s and early 1970s, with the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War protests, and the Watergate scandal, all of which raised the country's political temperature to a high fever, led to greater outrage in newspapers. As illustrated in Figure 3, the answer is no. Outrage is virtually absent from both the 1955 *and* the 1975 columns, in contrast to the columns of 2009, which contain, on average, nearly six instances of outrage per column. The titans of American journalism in 1955 and 1975 remained restrained in their language despite the impassioned politics of protest.

In addition to these time-series data, other relevant research supports our presumption that outrage is on the rise. The tone of talk radio also seems to have changed over a relatively short period of time. The Times Mirror Center for People and the Press conducted a massive and meticulous study of talk radio during the early 1990s. To be sure, talk radio then leaned right, but Andrew Kohut and his research team described talk radio as a mix of conservative and moderate views and through interviews determined that despite the



**Figure 3.** Newspaper columnists' use of outrage over time (mean outrage incidents per case).

presence of Rush Limbaugh as a high-profile counterexample, hosts were on average more moderate than their audiences. Politically, the radio hosts themselves were a mix of ideological and partisan backgrounds, and more were actually Democrats than Republicans (Kohut, Zukin, & Bowman, 1993, p. 14). What they describe is like nothing we listened to in 2009. There are a handful of liberal and moderate talk shows at the local level, but all of the leading nationally syndicated shows today are extremely conservative and vituperative in tone. While talk radio is becoming more conservative and the audiences are increasing, a significant market has yet to emerge for liberal talk radio (Mayer, 2004).

More evident to those following the media business is the dramatically changing landscape of media spaces and audiences. The most powerful hint that outrage is on the rise is that cable news analysis shows and political blogs were not even in existence a decade ago, and political talk radio did not grow in number or popularity until the 1990s. Father Coughlin may have spawned controversy decades ago, but programming of that ilk was rare. Now outrage venues abound and their audience continues to grow. Tens of millions of people a day consume talk radio alone. The combined cable audiences are smaller but still impressive. The blog world is splintered into a staggering number of sites, though the top sites (which include the ones we studied) attract a lion's share of the traffic (Hindman, 2009). Today the number of outrage media outlets and the size of outrage audiences are both impressive and unprecedented.

## Conclusion

By looking at "outrage," this research casts a much broader net than previous work on incivility. As we have noted, the most oft-cited pieces in the field, Mutz and Reeves (2005), Mutz (2007), and Brooks and Geer (2007), concern themselves with effects rather than content. Even so, the incivilities introduced in their experimental designs address only three of our 13 variables: emotional display, verbal fighting/sparring, and insulting language. This is not a shortcoming of their valuable work per se, but it highlights the degree to which those seeking to understand the effects of negativity or incivility on the public must consider the many ways that hostility and disrespect permeate the political landscape. Future research on effects would be well served to investigate whether audiences respond similarly to more dramatic forms of outrage as they do to the milder forms that research has probed thus far.

Our research also indicates that while previous work has looked extensively at candidate (or mock candidate) statements, debates, and advertisements, this is not the only place political acrimony resides. Campaign-related rhetoric is a modest part of the overall volume of antagonistic speech. The texture of our broader political culture must be considered. How does the general tenor of political discourse shape attitudes about politics, political figures, interest in participating, and our beliefs about others with whom we disagree? Even those whose primary concern *is* campaign communications ought to factor the broader discursive landscape into account, as involvement in this culture most certainly informs how audiences will respond to incivility when it emerges in the campaign context. Perhaps, for example, those who engage with a greater amount of high outrage political information—an Olbermann viewer and regular reader of *Wonkette*, for example—demonstrate less of an aversion to rough and tumble political skirmishes between candidates. Or one might hypothesize that they are more averse to outrageous campaign communications, feeling strongly that such attacks have a place, but in the world of political entertainment.

Although we have emphasized measurements of outrage commentary, what is ultimately important are the larger implications of these behaviors and trends. The media

industry writ large is undergoing revolutionary change, and how we as individual citizens will be consuming news even just 5 years from now is not entirely clear. As newspapers continue their freefall, new platforms such as Internet radio and television, podcasts, and Pandora-like content platforms move forward.

The business model of outrage-oriented political commentary succeeds because we have an increasingly polarized populace and content providers in an incredibly competitive media environment who are desperate to attract audience members whose attention can be sold to advertisers. These trends coalesce such that content providers work to deliver niche audiences to advertisers by capturing their attention with edgy content that shocks the audience while simultaneously flattering them for their moral and intellectual superiority, as demonstrated by their ability to see through the manipulative smoke, mirrors, and buffoonery offered by the other side.

How the prevalence of outrage may affect the behavior of government has yet to be rigorously documented. It may be that the rise of this polarized infotainment simply complements existing ideological sentiments in our political culture. Still, partisanship, as measured by the voting behavior of legislators, is up quite sharply in the past few decades. The country appears to be moving toward a parliamentary-type legislature with the party in power ruling and the party out of power biding its time and doing its best to bring down its opponents. It strains credulity to believe that the new and expanded ideological media has had nothing to do with this trend. For those media commentators outside of mainstream news organizations, the red meat is good versus evil and heroes working at great odds against powerful villains. This favors the most ideological within parties, helping them raise money and gain votes in primaries when they oppose more moderate candidates.

If the existing research on the effects of incivility at the micro level is an indication, the implications of outrage for individuals are even murkier and more fascinating. While it is tempting to hand-wring over presumed increases in political intolerance and decreased trust in political leaders and institutions, it is vital that we not overlook the possibility that members of the outrage audience may also pay greater attention to public affairs, increase their levels of political participation, or develop an increased sense of belonging by virtue of feeling part of the imagined communities these personalities and their producers work so carefully to cultivate. Whether outrage is corrosive or constructive (or both for different groups in different ways) to the health of democracy is an unanswered question, but we assert that this outrage genre with its growing audience demands our attention and offers many avenues for fruitful research. And yet, this research is not at all straightforward. The expanded array of political information choices, coupled with increased consumer control afforded by podcasts, DVRs, Hulu, and the like, makes it challenging to measure media effects; as consumers exercise greater control over their political information sources, it becomes harder and harder to tease out the reciprocal effects of consumption of outrage politics and political beliefs and behaviors (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

Of course, this greater option for self-selectivity has implications far more significant than those faced by researchers, as selective exposure troubles many of our assumptions about the public sphere in democratic societies. At the same time that outrage has proliferated, broadcast news and newspapers have lost their hold on the population, and many have opted to forgo news altogether, throwing into question the degree to which we share a common stock of political knowledge and to what extent we are required to think carefully about the concerns and ideas of those with whom we presume we disagree (or even those in the middle). To some degree people have always chosen their news vendors, but never before has the mainstream news media declined alongside a growing industry of profitable and ideological competitors. As a result, our citizenry may include an increasing number of

opinionated citizens immersing themselves in a media world filled with voices who share and bolster their existing perspectives without challenging them.<sup>12</sup>

We recognize that this research raises as many questions as it answers and hope that this preliminary roadmap proves useful as a baseline for future comparisons, as we can begin to gather data about changes in political speech over time. It is our hope that other researchers will join us in exploring these issues further.

## Notes

1. Jamieson and Cappella (2008) offer a noteworthy exception.

2. Indeed, many of the greatest political changes in the United States have been preceded by emotional appeals highlighting the plight of various constituencies (e.g., the civil rights movement).

3. There is a long history of research on the impact of negativity in politics, particularly negative campaign advertising, in which negative information is relatively undifferentiated and messages are coded as broadly positive or negative (the benchmark research is Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), but critics have suggested that without more information about *types* of negativity, the findings of negativity effects research are difficult to interpret. Much recent research, therefore, examines negativity with more nuance, differentiating between such characteristics as negative information about issues versus negative information about people and civil versus uncivil modes of delivery. See the citations on incivility above as well as Brooks (2006) and Sigelman and Park (2007) for critiques of the negativity research.

4. These numbers are from Nielsen, as reported by Fox News Channel in an advertisement in the *Wall Street Journal* (July 16, 2009).

5. Project for Excellence in Journalism *State of the News Media 2010*, citing Inside Arbitron and other sources.

6. *Talkers Magazine*, "Top Talk Personalities," Spring 2009 (cited in *State of the News Media 2010*, "Talk Radio" 2010).

7. Sampling posts from some blogs, such as the Huffington Post, which have more complex structures and many nested blogs, required additional instructions that are available from the authors but too detailed to enumerate here.

8. Coders assessed overall tone subjectively, in conjunction with extended definitions of both outrage speech and conventional political speech (available in the codebook upon request). The coding instructions read: This variable asks your assessment of the overall tone of the program, column, blog, etc. This particular variable is about the *intensity* of the outrage. The variable OAMOUNT should be used to assess the *amount* of outrage. The coders were asked to consider the following: Taken as a whole, describe the case you have just analyzed: (00) overall tone is more aptly described as conventional political speech (content and form OVERALL are more aptly described as "conventional" political speech, even if there are moments that technically count as outrage), (01) light intensity outrage (close to the border of "conventional" political speech), (02) moderate intensity outrage (outrage is present, but not overly emotional in form and/or content), (03) intense outrage (there are windows of reason, but the content and/or form is generally quite emotional), and (04) very intense outrage (content and/or form may match but infrequently exceed this level of emotionality).

9. Using an unpaired, unequal variance *t* test, we can reject at the .001 significance level that the overall tone mean of columns is the same as the other formats and accept that radio, TV, and blogs have a higher mean overall tone than columns.

10. Indeed, playing this edge is not without its challenges. Interpersonal conflict, when real, makes many uncomfortable and must be domesticated in order to retain viewers (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2008).

11. The five leading syndicated liberal columnists for 1975 were Joseph Kraft, Mary McGrory, William Raspberry, Anthony Lewis, and Tom Wicker. The conservatives were Vermont Royster, William F. Buckley, George Will, William Safire, and Rowland Evans/Robert Novak. For 1955, we found the leading columnists to be mostly moderate in tone. Based on their home papers and reputations, we chose the following columnists: Stewart Alsop, Joseph Alsop, Walter Lippman, Arthur

Krock, C. L. Sulzberger, William Henry Chamberlin, Roscoe Drummond, Philip Geylin, and John Chamberlin.

12. For a useful debate about the selective exposure literature (as well as other salient issues), see Bennett and Iyengar (2008); the critique offered by Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason (2010); and Bennett and Iyengar (2010) for their response.

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## Appendix: Summaries of Content Variables

Below are thumbnail descriptions that focus on the underlying concept that we attempted to measure. The codebook has fuller definitions along with a range of examples of speech that fall within the boundaries of each of these.

### *Insulting Language*

This variable is intended to measure whether the author or speaker uses insulting language in reference to a person, group of people, branch of the government, political party, or other organization, or their behaviors, planned behaviors, policies, or views. For example, “asinine” in reference to a person or group’s behavior is insulting language, but if the person or group is called “asinine,” this is reserved for the “name-calling” variable.

### *Name Calling*

This is a measurement of whether the author or speaker engages in name calling in reference to a person, group of people, branch of the government, political party, or other organization. Affectionate, light-hearted teasing is not included. Rather, name-calling language is characterized by words and contexts that make the subject look foolish, inept, hypocritical, deceitful, or dangerous.

### *Emotional Display*

This variable captures audio and/or visual emotional displays in reference to a person, group of people, branch of the government, political party, or other organization (or their behaviors, planned behaviors, policies, or views). In printed text, such as that in blog posts or on Web pages, it is unlikely to appear often but would most likely be communicated

through “shouting” via the deliberate use of uppercase letters, multiple exclamation points, enlarged text, and so on. Emotional display is about the *form* of expression. See “emotional language” for emotional *content*, although the two will often present concurrently.

### ***Emotional Language***

This variable is intended to measure instances where the author or speaker engages in verbal or written expressions of emotion in reference to a person, group of people, branch of the government, political party, or other organization. Emotion words related to anger, fear, and sadness are key indicators. Emotional language is about the literal content of what is said or written, rather than how it is communicated.

### ***Verbal Fighting/Sparring***

This is aggressive jousting between speakers. In radio and television, it may take the form of dismissive interruptions or rude exchanges between guests and callers or between hosts and guests/callers characterized by a lack of civility.

### ***Character Assassination***

Does the author or speaker *attempt to damage the reputation* of a person, group of people, branch of the government, political party, or other organization by slander or misrepresentation of their views, motives, or behaviors? In politics, questioning the veracity of a statement is common and should not be confused with character assassination, which is more extreme. Saying someone was not honest in a reply to a journalist is not character assassination, but saying that someone is a liar who cannot be trusted does constitute character assassination. These are *ad hominem* attacks.

### ***Misrepresentative Exaggeration***

This documents whether the author or speaker engages in very dramatic negative exaggeration in reference to the behaviors, planned behaviors, policies, or views of a person, group of people, branch of the government, political party, or other organization, such that it significantly misrepresents or obscures the truth.

### ***Mockery***

This variable was designed to measure whether the author or speaker makes fun of the behaviors, planned behaviors, policies, or views of a person, group of people, branch of the government, political party, or other organization to make the subject look bad or to rally others in criticism of the subject. Affectionate, light-hearted teasing is not included. Instead, the focus centers on humor that is used to make the subject look foolish, inept, hypocritical, deceitful, or dangerous. It might also come in the form of a physical impersonation intended to make others laugh at the expense of the subject (think Tina Fey).

### ***Conflagration***

Coding for this variable records attempts to escalate nonscandals into scandals. The key trait is speech that overstates or dramatizes the importance or implications of minor gaffes, oversights, or improprieties. By nonscandal we refer to an episode, event, or trend that a learned, dispassionate observer would not consider significant or scandalous.

### ***Ideologically Extremizing Language***

The reference here is to extremist language used to critically describe a person, group of people, branch of the government, political party, or other organization or their behaviors, planned behaviors, policies, or views. Usually the descriptive language will be used as an implicit slur rather than as simple description.

### ***Slippery Slope***

This is intended to capture fatalistic arguments suggesting that some behavior, policy, or decision is a small step that will inevitably pave the way for much more extreme behaviors, policies, or decisions.

### ***Belittling***

When an author or speaker belittles or demeans a person, group of people, branch of the government, political party, or other organization (or their behaviors, planned behaviors, policies, or views), this is labeled “belittling.” This may be done in the context of mockery or exaggeration.

### ***Obscene Language***

This gauges use of obscene language in reference to a person, group of people, branch of the government, political party, or other organization (or their behaviors, planned behaviors, policies, or views). Here we mean *words that are not used on network television* (as a general rule), not simply insulting words. If the obscene language is used concretely to name-call, this falls under the “name-calling” category.