

Left is mean but right is meaner, says new study of political discourse

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While the tragic shooting in Arizona has spotlighted the vitriol that seems to pervade political commentary, objective research examining the scope of this disturbing phenomenon has been lacking. In the first published study of its kind, social scientists at Tufts University's School of Arts and Sciences have found that outrage talk is endemic among commentators of all political stripes, but measurably worse on the political right, and is more prevalent than it was even during the turmoil of the war in Viet Nam and the Watergate scandal.

In their study, Tufts Assistant Professor of Sociology Sarah Sobieraj and Professor of Political Science Jeffrey Berry systematically scrutinized what they call "outrage talk" in leading talk radio, cable news analysis, political blogs and newspaper columns. Their findings, "From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News," appear in the February 2011 issue of the journal *Political Communication*, available online February 8.

The term "outrage talk" refers to a form of political discourse involving efforts to provoke visceral responses, such as anger, righteousness, fear or moral indignation, through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks and partial truths about opponents.

The Tufts scientists' analysis of both ideologically conservative and liberal content revealed that outrage talk, often infused with hateful terminology and imagery, is pervasive, not just an occasional emotional

eruption.

During a 10-week period in the spring of 2009, four researchers reviewed evening cable TV, national radio talk shows, ideological [political blogs](#) and mainstream newspaper columns for 13 variables, such as insulting language, name calling and misrepresentative exaggeration. Researchers also judged overall tone of each sample and proportion of outrage language.

Almost 9 out of 10 cases sampled, or 89.6 percent, contained at least one outrage incident. One hundred percent of TV episodes and 98.8 percent of talk radio programs contained outrage incidents, while 82.8 percent of blog posts incorporated outrage writing. In some cases, outrage speech or behavior occurred at a rate of more than one instance per minute.

More Outrageous: Liberals or Conservatives?

When it comes to inflammatory language, is one side really worse than the other? Yes, found the Tufts researchers: "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 of emotional, dramatic and judgment-laden speech. Conservatives, however, are even nastier."

The data showed the political right engaging in an average of 15.57 outrage acts per case, while the left engaged in 10.32 acts per case.

However, as Sobieraj and Berry noted, although the left and right do not use outrage equally, they use it in ways that are remarkably similar.

"Whether it's 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," they said.

New: Outrage in Newspapers

Unexpectedly the Tufts researchers found that outrage language is now common among the nation's leading newspaper columnists. To determine whether this outrage is new, or simply more of the same, Sobieraj and Berry studied 10 widely syndicated columnists during 10-week periods in both 1955 and 1975. They chose these dates to see if the tumultuous period of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War protests and the Watergate scandal led to greater outrage in newspapers at that time. They found the answer was 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," said the Tufts scholars. "The titans of American journalism in 1955 and 1975 remained restrained in their language despite the impassioned politics of protest."

In contrast, according to the researchers, today's model of outrage-oriented political commentary succeeds because of an increasingly polarized populace and content providers facing an incredibly competitive environment who are desperate to attract audience members and in turn advertisers.

Whether outrage is ultimately corrosive, constructive or both to the health of democracy is still an unanswered question, said the authors.

Provided by Tufts University

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