

9-22-2014

Review: The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility. By Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj.

Isabel Pinedo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communication>

Recommended Citation

Pinedo, Isabel (2014) "Review: The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility. By Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj.," *Democratic Communiqué*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communication/vol26/iss1/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Democratic Communiqué by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Review

The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility. By Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, x + 255p. (paperback) ISBN 978 0 19 992897 2. US List \$29.95.

Rush Limbaugh's scathing attack against Sandra Fluke, who spoke in support of contraceptive health insurance coverage on behalf of Georgetown law students to House Democratic Steering Committee members in 2012, is an instance of what Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj call "outrage." It is unusual only because it met with such a widespread public outcry that, under pressure from advertiser withdrawal, led eventually to a half-hearted apology from Limbaugh. Otherwise the offensiveness of his remarks are characteristic of the outrage-centered genre of political opinion media that has come to dominate programming on cable news networks, talk radio, and political blogs over the past two decades. Instances of the genre include shows hosted by Glenn Beck and Bill O'Reilly on FOX News, Rachel Maddox and Keith Olbermann on MSNBC, Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage on talk radio (where all the leading nationally syndicated outrage programs are conservative), and political blogs *Townhall* and *Huffington Post*.

In *The Outrage Industry*, Berry and Sobieraj refute the conventional wisdom that the rise of outrage media is the result of increased political polarization and argue instead for a much more multifaceted set of contributing factors. They specify the rhetorical characteristics of outrage, which they define as a genre, situate it in the context of structural changes to the media landscape that have fostered its exponential growth, and sketch out its synergistic relationship to politicians and activists. Berry and Sobieraj support their arguments with a set of six original datasets, both qualitative and quantitative.

Chapter two lays out thirteen discursive characteristics of outrage, of which the most common are "mockery, misrepresentative exaggeration, insulting language, and name-calling" (39). Berry and Sobieraj base their typology on a large-scale quantitative content analysis of the leading outrage media and controls drawn from more moderate forms of television, radio, blogs, and newspaper columns. They find that, though "the right uses decidedly more outrage speech than the left" (42), left and right use modes of speech that "mirror" (9) each other in order to vilify opponents and alarm the audience. Outrage media's hyperbolic and intense rhetoric drives ratings and views.

Chapter three turns to the historical confluence of regulatory, technological, and cultural changes that have allowed outrage to emerge as a genre. The trajectory of deregulation that began under the Reagan administration has resulted in the ownership and control of the majority of media properties by five corporations. This has subjected news media to the priorities of the market model and the abdication of the public service model. Quality of information is subordinated to profitability. Essential to this transition, and to the dominance of conservative outrage programming, was the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987. Political opinion media draw a narrow demographic that share these outlets' ideological po-

sitions; however, these niche audiences appeal to advertisers despite being older (typical of the TV news audience). Its audience's attentiveness to outrage media is believed to keep them tuned in even during the commercials, and thus more exposed to the ad message. Add to this the low operating costs of the format, the content needs of large numbers of television and radio channels, the negligible startup costs of the internet, and you have a model of economic success that has led to the proliferation of the genre. In television's tradition of copying successful formulas, the outrage model has proliferated.

Drawing on qualitative interviews with outrage industry experts, chapter four discusses the importance of branding for networks and personalities. To build the perception of trustworthiness, the overwhelmingly white male hosts of outrage media self-deprecatingly present themselves as ordinary people who understand and speak on behalf of their audience. They deploy harsh, uncompromising rhetoric and superficial analysis to reframe news items drawn from other media, in order to call attention to themselves and to create compelling content, possibly even ratings-stoking controversy.

Chapter five examines the appeal of outrage media for fans, who describe their chosen outlet as a validating experience. Berry and Sobieraj draw here on qualitative, in-depth interviews of self-identified fans of outrage media, and qualitative content analysis of select television and radio shows. They find that, together, the hosts and audience build an imagined community. As much as dangerous and misguided outsiders are excoriated, insiders are drawn into a warm social circle of the morally righteous. Here, fans learn the "real" story of what's going on, and they arm themselves with information. The audience, "who may feel devalued or disrespected in other settings," is interpellated as noble "hardworking Americans" (142), who get it. The programs provide fans with a safe haven in a culture that legitimates discourses of tolerance and leaves them feeling beleaguered in larger circles. Conservative fans feel censored in larger social circles by "*the fear of being perceived as racist*" (149, emphasis in text). This fear, coupled with conservatives' higher rates of racial resentment, and liberals' relatively greater trust in mainstream news, partially accounts for the more extensive range of conservative outrage venues, their more intense use of outrage rhetoric, and the appeal to fans of reverse racism as a resonant theme.

Looking beyond outrage media's use-value to fans, chapters six and seven explore the synergistic relationship between conservative outrage media, the Tea Party, and the GOP. Chapter six examines conservative outrage media's role in energizing the "Tea Party insurgency" (156) and amplifying their message. This discussion is based on in-depth interviews with leaders of the Tea Party movement, and coverage (including political blogs) of contested races in the 2010 Congressional Primary, including the disruptive town hall meetings. The Tea Party draws its constituent activists from a demographic segment that conservative outrage media also draws—conservative white Republicans, who are "more likely to classify themselves as 'angry'". Most of them rely on FOX for news and regard it as objective. Partly as a result of this, a large majority (84%) believe they hold majority views. The authors conclude that conservative outrage personalities have created "a comfortable cocoon of 'news' that affirms the values and direction of the movement" (162). As they see it, the Tea Party's decentralized structure and the ability of activists to use digital tools (e.g. web

conferences) to organize, have allowed chapters to keep costs low. More significantly, the Tea Party's informal structure has meant that no one is empowered to broker compromise on its behalf, and this has served as a stopgap to Congressional compromise. Outrage media, particularly talk radio, has operated as the Tea Party's national communications and mobilizing tool. Their coverage of conservative activists' hostile disruptions of town hall meetings provided a template for local chapters across the country. The political theater of the protests made for compelling coverage, and eventually, mainstream media picked up coverage. Still later, liberal protesters picked up the tactic, though media focus remained on the right. This mobilization made Republican congressional members wary of antagonizing the Tea Party and led them to assume hard right positions.

In chapter seven, Berry and Sobieraj argue that outrage media has contributed to increased polarization, and its vilification of compromise has stymied the ability of Congress to redress the problems of the country. Outrage media exert pressure on members of Congress by holding them accountable to their ideological priorities, and by reframing the terms of the debate, as we've seen with talk of "death panels" linked to the Obama health care law for instance. Though Tea Party and conservative outrage media's vilification of Democrats may serve the Republican Party, Tea Party antagonism towards immigration and its deep vein of racial resentment have made it difficult for the GOP to adapt to the changing demographics of the country.

The same changing media landscape that brought us outrage media has brought us the political commentary of the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*, which unmask the distortions of outrage media and the failures of the mainstream news media. But as useful as this satirical corrective is, the authors argue, it doesn't strike at the foundations of the outrage industry. Berry and Sobieraj's recommendations for more effective change are, as they acknowledge, unlikely prospects. They include reinstating some form of the Fairness Doctrine and a reevaluation by Congress of the regulatory environment to keep the public interest free of infringement by market forces. They also recommend that media watchdog groups create reliability scores for the most popular programs and blogs, though their study suggests that ideological selectivity will limit exposure to data that contradicts cherished beliefs. They endorse public support for politicians of both political stripes who are open-minded and willing to compromise, and propose that corporations issue instructions to their media buyers stipulating their code of ethics for ad placement.

The Outrage Industry is a cogent, lucid account of complex social phenomena, making it a pleasure to read. Berry and Sobieraj's arguments are backed by extensive original research (they provide a methods appendix), and also take into account a consideration of a large body of pertinent empirical literature. Their illustrative examples and charts are well chosen. Though the arguments are complicated, the clarity of the book makes it appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate students in critical media analysis and political science. Its ethnographic content would appeal to those interested in cultural studies. Political activists and the lay public would also find it of interest given the ongoing impact of its subject on political life.

Isabel Pinedo
Department of Film and Media
Hunter College, City University of New York