



CIVILITY *and the Road Less Traveled*
SEVENTH IN A SERIES

Although we complain about the state of mass media, the truth is, incivility sells.

Rude Reality

QUENTIN J. SCHULTZE

I was invited to appear on CNN to talk about TV evangelism. Since I had just written a book on the topic and had plenty of media-interviewing experience, I wasn't anxious.

At the studio in Chicago, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the other guest was a Christian TV personality I had met and liked when I had appeared on his talk show.

Fifteen minutes later, the two of us were live on the network, being interviewed by the host at CNN headquarters in Atlanta. The host began trying to get the televangelist and myself to disagree, but with little success. We conversed amicably about the good and bad in TV evangelism.

Then the host opened the phone

lines. The two of us easily answered the first few calls: yes, some TV evangelists do seem more interested in raising money than in preaching the gospel; no, not all televangelists are unsavory characters like Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker, who were forced to resign for moral and legal transgressions in the late 1980s.

The next call was a doozy. Caller "Jim" accused the televangelist of firing Jim's male friend, who had been employed by the televangelist's ministry. Worse yet, Jim claimed that his friend was fired for refusing to have sex with the televangelist.

My mind raced and my heart started pounding. How should I respond? Should I criticize the producer for putting that kind of call on

the air? Should I confront the caller on behalf of the televangelist? Did the audience actually hear the caller's accusations, or were they censored by a producer presumably monitoring the audio on a time delay?

All I heard in my earplug was silence, which seemed to last for minutes as I tried to keep my cool with the camera's bright red "on-air" light shining in front of me and the similarly stunned televangelist sitting next to me. I said nothing. He said nothing. I tried not to smile or frown—just to stare unemotionally at the camera. More silence. Then the host in Atlanta introduced the next caller without saying a word about what just happened. As I discovered later, there was no time delay. The whole fiasco was



Netflix, print, and especially now online media, the competition for ears and eyes is fierce. The worst possible media content—at least from a business perspective—is anything unexciting. Only the most interesting, engaging, and stimulating media have a chance to succeed.

Creating Conflict

The easiest way to pique an audience's interest is to create conflict—or at least the promise of conflict. The result is gimmicky programs, headlines, advertisements, and stories designed to lure audiences away from competitors. On television “news” shows, reasonable reporting and civil conversations have increasingly given way to insult-riddled arguments, blustery shouting matches, and “gotcha” interviews designed either to elicit angry responses from guests or make them look like idiots.

Network talk radio is infected with ideological rants and cutesy putdowns of public persons. Meanwhile, some radio network hosts have become leaders of personality cults seemingly worshiped by avid listeners who hang on their every word. If a listener agrees with the host's salvos, he or she probably enjoys hearing the “bad” people get their due.

Similarly objectionable but less political are the morning and evening hosts of local radio programs who use adolescent sexual innuendo and clever one-liners aimed at common people whose misfortunes are reported in the news: “Did you see the story about the dummy in Texas who....” Aren't we all smarter than that idiot! The idea is to belittle seemingly clueless lowlifes for the enjoyment of listeners. The result is a community of listeners who know that they are more

intelligent than the poor grunts who naively listen to other, less witty hosts on competing stations.

Reality TV

So-called “reality television” similarly creates conflicts that play to audiences' self-righteous sensibilities. This kind of fare began on daytime programs such as *The Jerry Springer Show*, hosted by the namesake former politician turned entertainer who

The worst possible media content—at least from a business perspective—is anything unexciting. Only the most interesting, engaging, and stimulating media have a chance to succeed.

began inviting troubled people to bare their personal travails on national TV. By the early 2000s, Springer and various knockoff daytime hosts had learned how to garner audiences by concocting ever-more-outrageous confrontations between program hosts and guests, and especially among guests who knew and disliked each other in real life.

Staging confrontations between estranged couples eventually led to a series called *Cheaters* in which TV cameras secretly caught unfaithful partners and then brought the couple together for a confrontational showdown that rarely resulted in reconciliation. Worried partners used to have to hire private eyes to track significant others; now they could simply call up the producer and make a pitch.

The secret to success in reality shows seemed to be finding guests who could be portrayed as more igno-

captured live for hundreds of thousands of viewers. Maybe the audience loved it. Surely they weren't bored. I felt used.

Most mass media are in the business of selling audiences to advertisers. Television sells viewers. Radio sells listeners. Print advertisers sell readers. In one sense, this is a marvelous economic model that rewards media companies for pleasing audiences. In another sense, it's a crazy system that pressures producers to spice up their fare in order to maximize audience share.

With the rise of so many cable and satellite channels, music downloading services, on-demand programming channels and services, movie and TV distribution companies like

Quentin J. Schultze is the Arthur H. DeKruyter Chair in Faith and Communication at Calvin College and co-author of the recent book, *How to Write Powerful College Student Résumés and Cover Letters*, as well as several books on media.

rant or careless than the audience. Viewers voyeuristically flocked to these programs. So what if the resulting confrontations got out of hand and guests started throwing chairs and hurling bleeped-out insults at one another? It's fun to watch!

Programs like *Survivor*, *The Apprentice*, and *Wife Swap* took the

The benefit of having access to so many media channels also makes it more difficult for any of the channels to stand out from the others. The result is conflict-oriented fare that tramples on civility.

next logical step by placing people into competitive, intensely relational situations designed to produce entertaining conflict. Nastiness and gossip were encouraged. Viewers could join in the fun by rooting for their favorite characters as well as wishing ill upon their perceived villains.

Political Games

The evolution of the three major cable TV news networks—MSNBC, Fox, and CNN—reflects the state of political discourse. The networks began as news operations with a few mild-mannered talk shows. But in the last five years, competing with each other as well as all of the other non-news networks, they have turned to partisan political harangues guided by ideologically spirited hosts whose own careers depend on their outspokenness. Sometimes the hosts will blast competing hosts on rival networks—such as Bill O'Reilly (Fox) and Keith Olbermann (MSNBC), whose on-air feud itself became fodder for supposedly insightful news pundits. In 2006, one pundit called that feud “over the top and nasty,” a “rumble” that “evokes some of the nastiest p**** matches in journalistic history.” So much for news!

Prime-time cable news nowadays ignores public calls for civility. Both right-leaning and left-leaning hosts

assume that the stakes are too high for anything less than victory over their demonized foes—either the radical left or the radical right. (They both love using that dismissive word “radical.”) On-air arguments (there are few real discussions) are cast as political battles between right and left, good and bad. Each side pro-

pagandizes its own audiences by telling them what they want to hear regardless of whether or not the messages are fully true. Partial truths are good enough

to rile up guests, entertain viewers, and please advertisers.

Certainly most of the higher-rated cable TV talk shows are hosted by political conservatives. But this probably says little about whether conservatives or liberals are less civil. Producers of conservative shows like *Glenn Beck* and *Hannity* have done a better job of appealing to middle America's sense of outrage over the cultural as well as political state of the nation. Many on the left were politically outraged during the later years of George W. Bush's presidency, but they were not able express their outrage effectively in terms of culture (the underlying values, beliefs, and worldviews). Even in radio, the left-leaning *Air America* network was a financial disaster. It suffered from being boring, excessively political programming that even most liberals turned off.

Biblical Conflict

The biblical roots of modern media's penchant for conflict-nurtured incivility extend back to the fall from grace. Adam blamed Eve and then Eve blamed the serpent, hoping to boost their own egos by pointing out the faults of others. Biblical history thereafter unfolds as one story after another in which fallen people jockey to make a name for themselves by

embracing their superiority in the face of their competitors' alleged weaknesses. The game is self-righteousness. The rule is personal ridicule of others. The means is distortion of a basic truth: we *all* fall short.

The kind of person we want to be like is necessarily shaped by the people we admire. That's why the Apostle Paul repeatedly encourages new Christians to be like him by putting on and practicing the fruit of the Spirit. He admits he's a terrible sinner, but he also calls for believers to imitate each other *as they together imitate Christ*.

Clearly we all have to be on guard so that we don't become like the media stars whose careers depend on rudeness, disrespect, and arrogance. As we imitate the media personalities who champion uncivil discourse, our witness to biblical truth is compromised. *How* we communicate in public is always part of our message. And how we communicate is shaped significantly by the kinds of people that we desire to be.

The Future

I'm not hopeful about mass-mediated public discourse in North America. The benefit of having access to so many media channels also makes it more difficult for any of the channels to stand out from the others. The result is conflict-oriented fare that tramples on civility. Moreover, the resulting cultural and ideological polarizations seem to be growing.

Perhaps we should find some hope in the fact that more and more citizens seem to be tiring of the squabbling. Maybe some worthy leaders will emerge in the media and even in politics. One sign that we're on the right track might be leaders who simply remain silent in the face of outrageous phone calls on talk shows. The ancient monks captured biblical wisdom when they encouraged each other to live by this dictum: “Speak only if you can improve upon the silence.” ■