In their conclusion, McLeod and Shah write that the “evidence of such polarizing effects of individual framing raises larger questions about the implications of this common journalist practice” (163). But even after tweaking the results of their content analysis, they found that individual frames (52.6 percent) were not outsoring collective frames (47.4 percent) by much. Perhaps an examination of TV-network news would have produced a different picture in this respect. Individual and collective frames, on the one hand, and episodic and thematic frames, on the other, are not identical but are quite similar in their respectively narrow and contextual characteristics and their different effects on news consumers’ attitudes and policy choices.

When Shanto Iyengar (1991, 27) found that over a period of six years 81 percent of TV networks’ crime reports and 74 percent of terrorism coverage were episodically framed and had similar problematic effects on news consumers as individual frames, it was not difficult to blame the media for this consequential discrepancy.

All told, again, this is an excellent book that I will certainly use in my Media in American Politics seminar.

Reference


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Diana Mutz’s latest book, *In-Your-Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media*, is in many ways an extension of her acclaimed work on the paradoxical relationship between deliberative and participatory democracy. In this book, Mutz argues that highly arousing uncivil television succeeds in drawing viewers’ attention and improving political knowledge, but at the cost of generating low affect toward the “other side” and decreasing political trust. It is easy to bemoan uncivil cable news, and critics can rightfully peg these programs as purveyors of affective polarization and mistrust of government. Yet, as Mutz contends, it is not clear that we would be better off without it, when the alternative is staid political programming that is largely ignored.

Mutz argues that political television can be in-your-face in two senses: spatial norms are violated through close-up camera angles, as are discursive norms by way of insulting language, eye-rolling, raised voices, and other
behavior conveying disrespect. The combination of both aspects makes for particularly arousing programming because, subconsciously, our brains do not make a distinction between televised political theater and conflicts occurring in our actual environments. Close-up camera shots of individuals are experienced as invasions of personal space. Likewise, watching others act uncivilly on television induces discomfort in the same way it would if we were in the same room with two people yelling at each other.

To test the impact of in-your-face television, Mutz conducts a series of experiments in which hired actors portray invented congressional candidates debating on a fake television program. Several versions of the debate were created in which both the presence of incivility and camera perspective were manipulated, along with the candidates’ partisanship. Subjects, believing the candidates and program to be real, were randomly assigned to view one of the versions. In addition, results from the experiments were replicated using an online survey sample and video from actual cable news programs.

Part 1 of the book (chapters 2–4) focuses on the impact of exposure to in-your-face-politics. Mutz first highlights some positives of in-your-face television. Using skin conductance tests, she shows that incivility and close-up camera angles are physiologically arousing, which led to superior recall of the candidates’ positions. Viewers of incivility also reported finding the program to be more entertaining—which may help with attracting audiences during initial transmissions and, subsequently, going viral online.

However, in-your-face politics also reduced affect toward the opposition candidate and the perceived legitimacy of his views (close-up civility, on the other hand, increased perceived legitimacy of the outgroup candidate). While viewers were most stimulated when the opposition candidate was uncivil and shot close-up, subjects did not react negatively to in-your-face versions of the preferred candidate.

Incivility (but not camera distance) also reduced political trust, particularly among those who try to avoid interpersonal conflict—but these effects were fleeting. Notably, incivility did not reduce tolerance for political conflict, suggesting that disagreement per se does not generate low regard for politics.

Part 2 of the book (chapters 5 and 6) focuses on the real-world viewership and frequency of in-your-face political television. In what may prove to be an important finding in the debate over selective exposure effects, trust levels among strong partisans—the people most likely to watch in-your-face politics—are influenced more than weak partisans. Similarly, conservatives are particularly likely to view and react to in-your-face political programming.

While programs high in political content are more likely to combine incivility and close-up perspectives than those with low to moderate levels, in reality, close-ups and incivility are negatively correlated on political television. Moreover, partisan political programs are more likely to feature incivility than neutral programs, but less likely to feature close-up camera angles. I thought more could be said about this finding and what it means if the combination that
is most arousing is somewhat infrequent on political television—but this is a quibble, and the section is overall thorough and compelling.

In part 3 (chapters 7–9), Mutz considers incivility across media and time. In contrast with the televised versions, radio broadcasts of the candidate debates did not have much impact. Nor did transcripts of the uncivil debates (printed in fake newspapers) arouse readers, unless extremely uncivil (and civil) versions were used. This leads Mutz to argue that text-based incivility does not arouse to the extent that audio-visual incivility does. I thought this was a bold and well-argued point, but I remain skeptical. There are ways in which text communication can be visually and tonally strident—for example, the strategic use of capitalized words, quotation marks, and punctuation—and while the extremely uncivil text featured references to nonverbal types of incivility (via moderator commentary), this is not the same thing.

Nonetheless, the stimulating power of political television is clear, and so the burden is on others to disprove this claim. Moreover, political television may be intensifying. Mutz shows that images of humans, close-ups, and shots closing in on humans have increased in frequency over time on network news. The pacing and intensity of stories have increased as well. If political television seems more arousing today than it was 30 years ago, it is not just because of vitriolic commentary.

For those concerned about widespread political apathy, Mutz concludes, more civility on television is not a solution. Political programming need not be shout fests, but it does need to be entertaining. Campaigns may never be the carnival-like events they were in the 19th century, but by taking cues from shows like American Idol, political television (particularly around election season) can better compete in an entertainment-dominated media environment.

This book is likely to join Mutz’s previous work as an indispensable contribution to the political communication and psychology literatures. The theory and evidence are overwhelmingly persuasive. If there was one aspect that was under-theorized, it was in regard to civil debate, a problem common to work on political incivility. Does civility mean neutrality in tone or does it mean diplomatic outreach? Is it both, with the latter being a more extreme form of civility? Might diplomacy, instead of arousing, assuage audiences? In Mutz’s lab experiments, the actors portraying candidates were directed to go to “extremes to be polite” (33). This makes it difficult to parse out whether it is civility, incivility, or both that is responsible for the differences in the two-group comparisons. However, this is a minor concern, and Mutz demonstrates civility’s lack of impact at several points (e.g., 84).

The experimental methodology employed is deserving of much praise. While the use of skin conductance tests to measure physiological arousal means ignorance of the valence of reactions, the theory is therefore parsimonious and the interpretation of results is straightforward. Most importantly, the measure is objective. Should it be possible to incorporate this technique into dimensional and discrete approaches to the study of emotion, it would be a
great step forward for political psychology. At this point, Mutz’s work is well ahead of the vast majority of studies in the discipline relying on self-reported measures.

It is probably a rare thing to call an academic text entertaining, but Mutz has been among my favorite scholars to read, and this book was no exception. Balancing thoroughness with accessibility, the writing will satisfy serious academics while appealing to a more general audience. The book should serve as a model for anyone who wants to do good political science and write about it in a clear and personable manner.

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