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- 1 Why do progressive voices dominate late-night comedy programming? Why is a liberal Sean Hannity nowhere to be found in the media landscape? Why have attempts at producing progressive talk radio programming failed? These are questions that scholars of partisan media have grappled with—most of the time, unsuccessfully so—since the advent of conservative talk radio in the late 1980s. In her latest book *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2020), Dannagal Goldthwaite Young takes the reader on a journey through the psychology of the audiences of political entertainment programs to account for conservatives' preference for the genre of "outrage" and liberals' predilection for irony.
- 2 A type of personalized programming dedicated to the opinion of a charismatic personality who delivers an explicit political message, often in vitriolic, fire-and-brimstone fashion, outrage is designed to arouse anger and indignation. Among prominent outrage hosts are conservative talk radio figures like Rush Limbaugh and the hosts of Fox News prime-time political talk shows such as Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly. Exploring the psychological underpinnings of political affiliations, artistic

tastes, and political programming consumption, and meta-analyzing a wide array of studies in the psychology of communication—including her own work on the effects of late-night comedy shows—Young argues that an individual's affinity for a particular genre does not result so much from their political beliefs and worldviews as they are the logical extensions of a set of psychological traits that tend to be dominant among the ideological cohort that they identify with.

- 3 Among the many important contributions of the book is the examination of the historical, cultural, and institutional contexts in which the two genres emerged and evolved, which is the focus of the first three chapters. Entitled “The Counterculture Comics versus the Hate Club of the Air,” chapter 1 traces back the origins of contemporary outrage programs and late-night comedy shows respectively to the burgeoning conservative media ecology of the 1950s and the counterculture satire circuit that appeared in the early 1960s. Drawing on Nicole Hemmer’s *Messengers of the Right*¹, Young makes the case that today’s outrage programming finds its roots in the anti-New Deal diatribes and predictions of impending doom of conservative radio hosts like Clarence Manion, Dan Smoot, and H. L. Hunt, whose shows were launched in response to the perceived domination of mainstream news media by liberal forces. On the other hand, the forebears of John Stewart and Samantha Bee are to be found among the prominent satirists of San Francisco counterculture like Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, and in The Committee, a collective of improvisational and stand-up comedians.
- 4 While both genres emerged concomitantly and were overly political, Young argues, they differed in the way they related to politics. As an improvisational genre, satire was not designed to promote a particular political agenda or wield any influence on the political process. On the contrary, Manion and his colleagues did aim to mobilize conservative listeners and bring about political change. Nonetheless, each in their own way inaugurated and rehearsed “affective politics,” approaching politics in an impassioned, instinctive manner.
- 5 In the second chapter, “Political and Technological Changes that Created Jon Stewart and Bill O’Reilly,” Young fast forwards to the 1990s to examine the advent of the second generation of outrage and satire, focusing on the launch of *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central and *The O’Reilly Factor* on Fox in 1996. The programs’ almost instant success played out against the backdrop of exacerbated polarization of the electorate, hyper segmented media offer, and decreasing trust in the news media as the sector became increasingly deregulated and consolidated, and the ideal of public service was disappearing. It also occurred as traditional news and journalism were displaced by the “talk” format, which materialized in “a shift in favor of cheaper content, including the rise of television ‘pundits,’ people talking about news in lieu of journalists investigating and reporting news [...]” (39).
- 6 Both satire and outrage programming, Young argues in chapter 3 (“Outrage and Satire as Responses and Antidotes”), emerged as responses to such flaws, feeding off of political polarization and decreasing trust in the news media. The success of conservative talk radio programs such as *The Rush Limbaugh Show* in particular was fueled by the notion that mainstream news media were playing straight into the hands of liberals and Democrats. Later, the charismatic hosts of Fox prime-time political talk shows (O’Reilly, Hannity, Ingraham) harnessed the affordances of media criticism to establish themselves as alternatives to the mainstream news media, spearheading the genre of outrage in the process.

- 7 As genres that take the criticism of the emerging cable news punditry as its overarching subject and use it to legitimize their own discursive positioning, irony and outrage represent a form of “new political television” and operate as substitutes for the decline in high modern journalism and the failures of elite journalists. On each side, criticism of mainstream news media intensified in the wake of the 9/11 attacks: Fox outrage hosts clamored against the alleged liberal slant in the treatment of the Bush administration’s response to the attacks while Stewart’s *Daily Show* denounced the symbiotic relationships between political elites and the press, journalism’s failure to analyze the attacks in the context of US financial interests in the military industrial complex, and the spectacle of patriotism.
- 8 Moving away from historical considerations, Young develops her central argument in the following chapters, through a meticulous, step-by-step analysis of the psychological dynamics at play in the aesthetics and processing of irony and outrage. In chapter 4 Young explores “the Psychology of Satire” to deconstruct the cognitive mechanism at work when the brain processes humor and irony. Just like humor, Young explains, satire and irony require considerable cognitive involvement on the part of the audience as satirical texts activate two consecutive but seemingly unrelated frames of reference, which forces the brain to manage both working and long-term memories. The audience’s intervention is needed to resolve the incongruity between the two frames which is inherent in satirical texts, whose meaning only emerges through the process of reconciliation.
- 9 A cognitively taxing endeavor, understanding irony and satire implies that some individuals more than others are likely to enjoy political humor, which is the focus of chapter 5, entitled “Who gets the joke?” Perception of humor complexity, Young argues, is a function of the audience’s processing abilities, “as understanding irony requires that listeners process the literal meaning first [...] before using context cues to signal the need for an ironic inversion [...]” (88). This implies that individuals who tend to understand and enjoy jokes are those who score higher in “need for cognition,” namely, those who experience higher levels of enjoyment from “solving problems and working through information” (88). As understanding irony requires the audience’s ability to retrieve certain constructs in long-term memory, an individual’s capacity to understand irony is also a function of which scripts are available to them for activation: without such scripts, he or she is not able to make the “appropriate cognitive contributions” to reconcile the incongruity (97).
- 10 Along with need for cognition, Young demonstrates in a chapter dedicated to “the Psychology of the Left and the Right” (chapter 6), many of the psychological traits associated with humor comprehension and enjoyment directly relate to artistic tastes and political ideology. For instance, people high in need for cognition usually also score high in “tolerance for ambiguity”—the level of comfort that an individual experiences with novelty and uncertainty—and low in “need for closure.” Such underlying psychological traits not only determine artistic tastes and preferences significantly—people high in tolerance for ambiguity and low in need for closure tending to enjoy abstract painting and open-ended films more for instance—but also relate to their ideological leaning. Subjects that score high on the need for cognition, Young shows, tend to be more numerous among political liberals than among political conservatives. As individuals displaying lower levels of need for cognition, conservatives tend to rely on judgments made based on heuristics, that is, cues that do not require as much

cognitive energy as emotional responses. A consistent relationship between high need for closure and low tolerance for ambiguity and political conservatism also exists, Young demonstrates, which leads her to the conclusion that ideologies should in fact be understood in terms of the way they satisfy an individual's various psychological needs, although such connections and linkages are significantly moderated by an individual's interaction with their social and environmental contexts.

- 11 Not only do psychological traits relate to one's artistic tastes and political preferences, they also determine one's predisposition to humor, Young argues in chapter 7, "the Psychological Roots of Humor's Liberal Bias." All in all, need for cognition is correlated with a general sense of humor as "enjoyment of thinking is central to appreciation of humor and [...] this may be putting liberals at a "laugh advantage" when it comes to finding jokes funny" (132). The extent to which people value the production and reception of humor in their lives, Young shows, is in fact much smaller among conservatives, who are significantly less appreciative of irony than liberals, but are also less appreciative of jokes involving exaggeration. She concludes chapter 7 by noting that, given their greater predispositions to understand and enjoy humor, "one should expect liberals to gravitate toward—and produce—political information and political genres that invite multiple layers of processing by audiences [...]" (140).
- 12 Young's analysis of the way psychological traits shape a person's predisposition to certain forms of political information provides a natural segue into a discussion of "the Aesthetics of Outrage" (chapter 8). In this chapter, she meticulously demonstrates that preference for outrage programming strongly correlates with personality traits that tend to be prevalent among individual self-identifying as conservative, namely low need for cognition, low tolerance for ambiguity, high need for closure, and high threat salience. In fact, Young argues, outrage programs activate exactly these psychological traits: they identify problems and attribute responsibility in an unambiguous manner, presenting US identity, culture, and society under threat from subversive forces, hell-bent on destroying them. As such, enmity and the constant efforts to expose foes represent a considerable driving force of outrage programs. As individuals "drawn to information that monitors for threats" (142), it is unsurprising that conservatives display strong affinities for this kind of programming.
- 13 On the contrary, the relation between the aforementioned psychological traits and liberalism is reversed, with individuals self-identifying as liberal or progressive displaying higher tolerance for ambiguity, lower need for closure, higher need for cognition, and lower threat salience. As irony works through ambiguity and hybridity and requires considerable cognitive involvement, it is unsurprising that liberals, who score higher in tolerance for ambiguity, dominate the audiences of satirical political programming. Tolerance for ambiguity is in fact a strong predictor of exposure to programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, while sense of humor correlates negatively with viewing outrage programming like the *Rush Limbaugh Show* or *The O'Reilly Factor*. "Among conservatives," Young adds, "as tolerance for ambiguity increases, exposure to belief-confirming Hannity and Limbaugh decreases. Limbaugh and Hannity are consumed most by conservatives with the lowest tolerance for ambiguity" (151). The difference between satire and outrage also lies in the hosts' discourse about their own importance: whereas the status of late-night comedy hosts is conferred by the "halo effect" that results from the gratification audience derives from

understanding irony, for hosts like Hannity or Limbaugh, “it is th[e] assumed status in moral certainty inherent in outrage” (154).

- 14 These findings do not come without important caveats, Young cautions. As a clear warning against the temptation to essentialize individuals identifying with a particular ideological cohort, she insists that the significant variance across individuals makes it imperative to approach the findings she presents as trends. Young also states in clear and unambiguous terms that the literature she examines assesses individuals’ *need* for cognition—i.e., the enjoyment and gratification a person derives from engaging in cognitive activities—and not *capacity* for cognition. She forcefully argues that in no way should the findings she presents be construed as suggesting differences in levels of intelligence across individuals with different political preferences.
- 15 Turning to the functions and effects of satire and outrage, Young demonstrates in chapter 9 (“Satire and Outrage, Parallel Functions and Impacts”) that the need for entertainment is a strong predictor of exposure to entertainment-oriented late-night comedy shows (*The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live* and *Late Night with Conan O’Brien*), but less so of exposure to *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* and the three leading outrage programs (Limbaugh, Hannity, and O’Reilly). Conversely, individuals who report watching *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* for “interesting views and opinions” are significantly more liberal than those who report attending these shows for other reasons; similarly, the audience of outrage programs who report being motivated by the need for information are overwhelmingly conservative.
- 16 The audiences of late-night comedy, Young reveals, display higher levels of information than those who do not watch this type of programs and “[...] viewing satire programming contributes to political knowledge above and beyond the baseline political interest and education of their audience members” (174). Viewers of *The Daily Show* in particular display higher levels of information than regular newspaper readers or the audiences of network news. On the contrary, the audiences of Fox outrage programming appear the least knowledgeable about current events: the kind of knowledge they accrue is “justified true beliefs,” namely beliefs that are held as true despite being justified by false premises (177). Audiences of satire programming and outrage programming are also the most politically engaged across the board. Outrage fuels participation in the political process by activating threat salience and through its capacity to attribute responsibility for the threat—what Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj² refer to as the “signaling effect” of outrage programming (186)—while satire increases political engagement through interpersonal discussion and by raising political efficacy among young audiences, a phenomenon particularly visible among viewers of *The Daily Show*.
- 17 Significant differences exist in the way satire and outrage audiences consider the news media. Although both tend to view mainstream news media with various degrees of hostility and to distrust them, by mocking mainstream journalism’s tendency towards sensationalism and profit driven routines, satire reinforces the “epistemic authority” of the press and “reaffirms the notion that strong journalistic institutions are central to the health of a democracy” (190).
- 18 In “Playing Against Types” (Chapter 10), Young analyzes failed attempts at conservative satire and liberal outrage by examining the demise of the radio network Air America and Fox’s short-lived *The Half Hour News Hour*. Air America’s failure to

successfully produce liberal outrage programming, she contends, stemmed mostly from being hosted by a team of journalists and comics instead of a solo charismatic figure, when “outrage as a genre is defined by the personality, passions, and perspective of the show’s host [...]” (194). The same failure to fully grasp the dynamics of the genre accounts for the cancellation of *The Half Hour News Hour* after 13 episodes, as producers misunderstood the importance of incongruity in satire and writers crafted jokes that punched down at marginalized groups instead of punching up at people in positions of power. A similar violation of the genre’s fundamental rules was visible when late night comedians adopted “some tropes of outrage” in the early days of the Trump administration (201), a moment when liberals suddenly perceived themselves to be under threat. This created momentary disorder because while threat is highly compatible with anger and moral seriousness, Young argues, it is ill-suited for the playfulness inherent in satire.

- 19 In the eleventh chapter (“Irony and Outrage – A Wild Raccoon Versus a Well-trained Attack Dog”), Young concludes on the efficacy of irony and outrage as instruments of political mobilization. While outrage programming’s moral certainty in its defense of absolute truths and its capacity to explicitly identify out-groups, threats, and specific remedies make it a very efficient mobilizing tool, irony is not employable for “goal-driven propaganda” because “argumentation through play and insinuation through irony are hard to use for political gain” (209-210). As exemplified by Stewart and Colbert’s *Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear* in October 2010, when satirists attempt to get into the political arena and organize efforts to mobilize the electorate, they are seldom successful. This leads Young to the final conclusion that “outrage is the tool of Conservative elites. But ironic satire is the tool of the liberal satirist alone” (214).
- 20 Young’s central argument that irony and outrage are the logical extensions of the respective psychological traits of conservatives and liberals provides a fertile ground for the analysis of various subcategories of the genres. More specifically, her argument on outrage addresses what had long remained a blind spot of the research on conservative media in spite of media scholars’ renewed interest in the influence of Fox News on US political culture (Reece Peck, *Fox Populism*, 2019³), the long history of conservative talk radio (Hemmer Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 2016; Brian Rosenwald, *Talk Radio America*, 2020⁴; Paul Matzko, *The Radio Right*, 2020⁵), and right-wing journalism (A.J. Bauer and Anthony Nadler, *News on the Right*, 2019⁶). Young’s book helps illuminating in a novel and refreshing fashion our understanding of how and why the conservative public countersphere catalyzed around the subgenre of talk radio at the turn of the 1990s and not around other conservative media—*National Review*, *Human Events*—or conservative programs—PBS’s *Firing Line*. More broadly, it provides a timely theoretical framework to analyze the emergence of affective publics and the dynamics of affectivity in politics, and as such, resonates meaningfully with the inquiries conducted by Zizi Papacharissi⁷ and Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis⁸. *Irony and Outrage* also opens up new avenues of investigation on more current political debates, which are likely to both enrich and complicate Young’s argument on conservatives’ need for cognition. For instance, if individuals self-identifying as right-wing display lower levels of need for cognition and tend to rely on heuristics to navigate their environment, how can we account for the success of the QAnon conspiracy theory, whose alleged leader precisely does not provide his or her followers with information that comes “fully

cooked” but instead exploits their appetite for deciphering and decoding enigmatic cues distilled on platforms?

- 21 Similarly, as should be expected from any thought-provoking exploration of audiences’ psychological motivations, *Irony and Outrage* leaves parts of the territory uncharted. Among those are the forms of outrage programming, such as talk radio, that do include some element of hybridity. Considering that it relies on hosts’ unscripted, free-flowing monologues, interspersed with readings of newspaper clippings, gimmicks, songs, how did talk radio manage to establish itself as—and to a certain extent, remain—conservatives’ preferred medium considering conservatives’ aversion for hybridity? In addition, although Young recognizes that conservatives and liberals are to be found along a political continuum, the way the results are presented tends to suggest that she treats political ideology as a binary. While this is consistent with the heightened polarization of the electorate, it nonetheless invisibilizes individuals who do not necessarily gravitate towards the extremes of the continuum. In the same way, the political media diet and motivations of individuals displaying average scores on the different psychological traits are less fully explored. Do people who score in the middle on tolerance for ambiguity, need for closure, need for cognition, and threat salience have a more varied political media diet? Lastly, Young briefly mentions instances of liberal outrage programming but does not really engage with the genre, excepted for *Air America*. While *The Rachel Maddow Show* and *All In with Chris Hayes* can hardly qualify as outrage, *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, a program that aired on MSNBC for eight consecutive years, represents a successful experiment in liberal outrage and as such, a fertile line of inquiry.
- 22 A book likely to appeal both to media historians and communication scholars, *Irony & Outrage* undoubtedly makes a radical contribution to the fields of political communication and psychology of communication by advancing our understanding of a topic that is both a long-standing academic concern and a central issue in the current national conversation in the United States and beyond. The fact that the book’s argument generates more discussion and questions is testament to just how significant and stimulating it is. As such, it is a must-read for anyone interested in the motivations of partisan media audiences and in partisan media more generally.

NOTES

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