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Media Culture and the Politics of Fear

By David Altheide
March 21, 2016

The politics of fear is rampant in the United States. A NYT/CBS (Dec 10, 2015) poll showed that Americans are more fearful of a terrorist attack than any time since the 9/11 attacks. The cartoon character Pogo's statement "We have met the enemy, and he is us," captures popular culture's complicity in Donald Trump's antics, particularly when the Republican front-runner cranked up fear and gave terrorism a symbolic victory on December 7 by calling for a ban on Muslims entering the United States. But the blame goes beyond campaign harangues: The real culprit is our entertaining media culture that thrives on fear, confrontation, and conflict. And social media have extended the opportunity to be profane. Many of Mr. Trump's followers state that he says what they are feeling. And that is the problem: Civility and maintaining a public order requires restricting dark, petty, and bigoted feelings to private spaces. This is why regulations about media content and appropriateness are as important as they are contentious. It was no accident that a debate between Democratic presidential hopefuls Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders was billed as "fight night." Jabs and knockouts appeal to our lesser selves, but public discourse and civility have taken a hit, a big hit.

The role of the media goes a long way in explaining major divisions in the United States today. Fear prompts people to take action and to speak their mind. My research shows that the politics of fear fits well with communication formats that are personal, instantaneous, and visual. We are

barraged with dramatic and evocative messages that danger and threat are imminent even though numerous studies show that Americans face little danger from terrorist attacks. Politicos like Donald Trump have skillfully combined the politics of fear with personal attacks blaming opponents for permitting the danger, such as restricting gun sales and not restricting immigrants. This gets a lot of media attention as shown by a NYT's report (March 15, 2016) about the extensive amount of "earned"—or free—coverage Mr. Trump receives. The bombastic reality TV star clearly understands that the reaction and meaning of an event, such as the San Bernardino shootings or of disruptive protesters, is often as significant as the event itself. This presidential wannabe's hysterical bombshell about banning Muslims went global and validated the murderers' claims about the hatred of the U. S. against all Muslims. Many Americans agreed with Mr. Trump. The governors of some 16 states say they will refuse to permit Syrian refugees from entering their states. And Americans did what they often do when fear increases: They buy guns, lots of guns. Several national gun retailers tripled their sales within two weeks of the San Bernardino killings. It is the rise and escalation of the politics of fear that draws our attention now.

Social media and entertaining formats account for much the widespread fear and vitriol. Decades of sensationalized crime reporting set the baseline for the last two decades emphasis on imminent dangers from immigrants and terrorism. These reports, along with countless popular culture images about dread and suffering, fuel the politics of fear that pervades both mass and social media today. This fear is being promoted by the same media dynamic that nurtures Donald Trump's harsh and derogatory comments about his Republican and Democratic opponents—impugning their integrity, intelligence, gender, and physical appearance—as well as minority groups, women, and even a disabled political reporter. Mr. Trump's diatribes played especially well with audiences that have long avoided conventional news sources such as the major American TV networks and established newspapers in favor of internet blogs, social media, and alternative news sources with political and ideological agendas. Many of these are rife with reports about fear and impending danger, even governmental threats to personal and family security. Many Americans, who rely on such sources, believe that the 9/11 attacks were an "inside job," meaning that the U. S. government was actually behind the catastrophe. Other sites make similar allegations about the murder of children at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Thus, when mass shootings occur, whether at Sandy Hook or in San Bernardino, a substantial baseline of mistrust, fear and anti-government sentiment is activated for many Americans.

Social media formats provoke an increasingly harsh and conflictual media culture. Civility suffers as crude and personal attacks become commonplace. The entertainment format of news, as well as reality TV shows such as Mr. Trump's "The Apprentice," promotes conflict, shock, and harsh language and treatment to attract audiences. As New York Times (Jan 9, 2016) columnist Frank Brunini stated, "obnoxiousness is the new charisma." Nasty discourse was promoted and used for entertainment and effect throughout American history, but has reached a new low in modern times with the attacks on President Obama. Congressional representatives have routinely attacked President Obama with nasty, personal, and often false (e.g., "birther," not a Christian) statements in order to get elected and assure these constituents that they were representing their interests and would keep them safe. Recall that Republican Joe Wilson called President Obama a liar ("you lie") during an address to Congress on Sept. 9, 2009. Indeed, several of the current Republican candidates for president used uncivil rhetoric to their benefit in

local and congressional campaigns. Voters were wooed with inflammatory statements and crude language in some state and regional campaigns over the last several years, and became accustomed to the crude appeals that were made by Donald Trump in his presidential bid. Incivility went viral as the load of Republican presidential candidates repeatedly called opponents liars and even impugned and boasted about sexual prowess and physical characteristics. Ironically, establishment Republican candidates were undone by these polarizing tactics.

Fear, anger, and support for Mr. Trump are intensified with social media, especially brief tweets that affirm emotional positions and relationships. Voters are attracted who are angry with politicians because Mr. Trump's attacks resonate what many people feel—angry and neglected—and enable the bulk of his supporters to bask in the outrage against conventional politicians. Bigotry, racism, and economic backsliding fuel the search for blame. Many of Mr. Trump's supporters are on the underdog's side in a moral crusade to affirm their identity and pain. Thus, voting for Mr. Trump enables them to fight back and win the day, regardless of the outcome of the general election. An article in *The Washington Post* (Dec. 10, 2015) pointed out that Republican media consultant Frank Luntz was blown away by the results of a focus group of people who had voted for Mitt Romney in the last election. He found that Trump's exaggerations, insults, and false statements actually made him a more attractive candidate. Luntz told reporters, "Normally, if I did this for a campaign, I'd have destroyed the candidate by this point." That hateful and distorted rhetoric would work on some audiences should not have surprised Luntz, who was the architect behind the evocative language and "talking points" for Republican opposition to many issues over the last several years, including substituting "death tax," for "estate tax." Perhaps even Pogo would be aghast at the benefits of such negative statements, but it all makes sense given our current media culture.