"Split Screens" and "Spin Rooms": Debate Modality, Post-Debate Coverage, and the New Videomalaise

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This experimental research examines how different presentation modalities in presidential debates and post-debate spin influence the ability to form evaluations about candidates' character, shape perceptions of their incivility, and alter judgments of political trust and news credibility. Results indicate that these experimental factors work together to encourage character judgments, diminish perceptions of candidate civility, and reduce levels of trust in government. In addition, political talk conditioned experimental effects on perceptions of news credibility, with the adverse effects of split screen presentations concentrated among those who talked about the debate. Thus, the negative effects of "in your face" politics conveyed by the "split-screen" modality appear to be most pronounced among those primed to think about performance and those attuned to politics through interpersonal talk.

The sizable body of research on presidential debates has confirmed that debate viewing "largely reinforces existing predispositions rather than substantially changing previously held images of candidates, issue orientations, or voting intentions" (Sigelman & Sigelman, 1984, p. 624; see also Katz & Feldman, 1962; Lanoue, 1992; Sears & Chaffee, 1979; Yawn, Ellsworth, Beatty, & Kahn, 1998; Zhu, Milavsky, & Biswas, 1994). Since conventional wisdom suggests that general election debates

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have little impact on political attitudes and judgments, scholars have shifted their attention to a broader set of debate effects. This second wave of scholarship has found that debates boost political knowledge and heighten issue salience (Carlin, 1992; Druckman, 2003; Kraus, 1988). Still, the focus has remained on campaign learning and issue alignment (Abramowitz, 1978; Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003; Lemert, 1993).

One early effort to broaden this focus can be found in the work of Wald and Lupfer (1978) who studied whether the first televised presidential debate in the 1976 general election campaign affected general attitudes and basic orientations toward the legitimacy and trust of the political system. They predicted that exposure to debates would function as a "civics lesson," but instead found that watching the debate increased cynicism and reduced trust. This is not surprising given the structure and content of debates, for as they write, "after a debate devoted primarily to a criticism of present and proposed government policy, [it is] little wonder that viewers did not show an increased sympathy for government" (Wald & Lupfer, 1978, p. 351).

Mutz and Reeves (2005) found similar effects outside the context of presidential debates. These scholars asked whether incivility in political discourse can reduce evaluations of the legitimacy of political institutions. Holding the substantive policy conflict constant, they found that in response to the contentiousness, or incivility, of televised disputes in political talk shows, voters have reduced trust in government. Referring to these effects of viewing as the "new videomalaise," Mutz and Reeves (2005, p. 13) asserted that "not only were attitudes toward politicians and Congress affected, but levels of support for institutions of government themselves were also influenced." Equally important, some effects were amplified when a close-up camera shot was used in place of a medium range shot, suggesting that production choices in presenting televised political exchanges can impact viewers' evaluations (Mutz & Holbrook, 2003).

Although studied in the context of political talk shows, the current research has at least two important implications for the study of presidential debates. First, consistent with earlier work by Wald and Lupfer (1978), Mutz and colleagues (2003, 2005) hinted at the possibility that debate watching may influence not only viewer learning and evaluation of candidates, but also judgments of the legitimacy of the political system. The "new videomalaise" observed by Mutz and Reeves may also have implications for judgments of the credibility of news media, because spirals of cynicism stemming from conflict in the news spur negative evaluations of government and the press (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Indeed, judgments of news media may be especially influenced by these efforts to highlight the "game" or "contest" of politics because they are the source of "manufactured contentiousness." Second, the results of Mutz et al. (2003, 2005) suggested that the presentation modes of presidential debates may produce unique effects on viewers, above and beyond the content of the debates (e.g., what candidates say, and how they perform in the debates). Yet potential effects of subtleties in broadcast productions have received little attention in the scholarly research on televised campaign debates.

Recognizing this, the current experiment attempts to expand the work by Mutz et al. to the study of presidential debates by examining the effects of journalistic practices in covering presidential debates—the presentation format of televised debates and spin in post-debate commentary—on viewer evaluations. Specifically, this experiment investigates the direct and interactive effects of debate presentation format (single-screen or split-screen) and post-debate spin (policy focused or performance focused) on judgments of candidate character, government trust, and news credibility. Further, drawing on previous research that indicated the role political discussion plays in shaping individual perceptions of news bias (Eveland & Shah, 2003), the possibility that such effects of media format and content are conditioned by how much people talk about presidential debates is also explored.

The Crisis of Confidence

Although the conceptualization and operationalization of government trust and news credibility have been characterized by a lack of coherence, it is largely agreed upon that public evaluations of both have declined sharply over the last four decades (Burgoon, 1976; McCroskey & Young, 1981; Moy & Pfau, 2000; Singletary, 1976; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Given this decline, there is a tendency to focus on erosion and loss when labeling the general phenomena under study. Research on political trust used terms such as ''political cynicism,'' ''political disaffection,'' and ''political alienation'' to characterize the general decline in confidence in government and politicians (see Moy & Pfau, 2000; Pinkleton & Austin, 2001). Likewise, work on news credibility—usually defined in terms of judgments of trustworthiness and accuracy—can also be found under the rubric of ''media mistrust'' and ''news bias'' (Jones, 2004; Kenney & Simpson, 1993; Kiousis, 2001). Understanding the causes of this crisis of confidence in government and the press is the one concern this work shares.

Cappella and Jamieson (1997) placed the blame for this ''spiral of cynicism'' squarely on the news media, pointing to the journalistic tendency to highlight conflict between political actors. The general critique of media and their adverse effects on attitudes about politics and public affairs has a much longer history, however. Robinson (1975) used the term ''videomalaise'' to describe how viewing negative news coverage fostered pessimistic evaluations of political actors and institutions. Patterson (1993) specified and extended this critique, arguing that both broadcast and print news coverage that presented politics as a competition or contest eroded confidence in the political system and its participants (see also Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995).

Empirical tests largely confirm that the norms of television production and the desire to construct news in ways that highlight contentiousness bear some responsibility for fostering feelings of cynicism toward politics and politicians. The ''game-centered political coverage and the denigration of politicians' motives'' is blamed for the deleterious effects of news viewing on judgments of democratic legitimacy

(Mutz & Reeves, 2005, p. 2). Broadcast journalists engage in a number of routine practices that amplify the conflict-orientation of politics (Bennett, 2005; Patterson, 1993). Television may be most guilty of this style of news presentation, probably because incivility spurs greater viewer interest and higher ratings (Mutz & Holbrook, 2003). Ironically, as Cappella and Jamieson state, ''the media's own sowing of the seeds of public distrust . . . of political institutions and processes may have attached itself to the bearers of the information about these institutions—the news media themselves'' (1997, p. 209). That is, the broadcasters' focus on the competitive features of politics is thought to start a spiral of cynicism that also infects the press. From this perspective, news that highlights the conflict among politicians adversely influences evaluations of both the subjects of these reports and their sources, a case of the public killing the proverbial messenger.

The Construction of Contentiousness

Most research that examines the effects of game-centered reporting on judgments of political legitimacy and news credibility focuses on the *content* of televised political conflict. The current research, however, is more interested in the *form* of this contentiousness reflected in the production practices of TV news, which often provides opportunities to heighten the sense of conflict, and to activate cynical responses (see also Bucy & Newhagen, 1999; Davis, 1999; Tiemens, Sillars, Alexander, & Werling, 1988; Zettl, 1990). Focusing on the production technique of the close-up shot, Mutz and Holbrook (2003) contend:

> As political conflicts intensify on television, cameras tend to go in for still tighter and tighter close-ups. This creates a highly unnatural experience for the viewer, in which they are forced to view the televised person from a very intimate perspective, one that would be highly unlikely to occur with a public figure they dislike in any real world scenario (p. 7).

Another presentation technique featured in the 2004 presidential debates was the use of the split-screen format that allowed viewers to constantly monitor the words, gestures, and reactions of each candidate. This style of staging may heighten the perception of conflict in much the same manner as close-up camera shots (Messaris, Eckman, & Gumpert, 1979; Zettl, 1990). The split screen technique explicitly presents the debate as a contest between opponents who display their contempt and disagreement for one another with every nonverbal, off-handed gesture, inaudible sigh, and shift in body language. Incivility is highlighted, as each sneer can be read as disrespectful, every grimace a sign of frustration, and even simple sips of water or looking over notes as inattentiveness.

In support of the view that the mode rather than the content of televised political exchanges can spur cynicism, Mutz and Holbrook (2003) found in their experimental work that the effects of manipulating the level of incivility—i.e., altering

how respectful, composed, and attentive speakers were to one another in these exchanges—was amplified when close-up camera shots were presented to respondents. That is, encountering civil or uncivil exchanges "only mattered if subjects viewed the debate in one of the close-up conditions" (p. 17).

Mutz and Reeves (2005) argued that these types of effects are unique to television. A print version of a contentious exchange, either as a transcript or a news account, cannot convey the same sense of incivility as the televised presentation. Those who encounter television contention witness nonverbal and paralinguistic cues such as sneering and mocking glances, nods of disagreement, or efforts to interrupt the other speaker. Any one of theses cues, or their combination, is likely to spur judgments about the character of each candidate, foster perceptions of candidate incivility, and encourage cynical reactions to government and news media.

Of course, newspaper accounts can also choose to focus on performance over policy, attending to stylistic elements of the exchange as opposed to more substantive issues. A focus on performance instead of policy, especially in post-debate analysis, may also spur cynical reactions and encourage character attributions. Indeed, such coverage may amplify the effects of the split screen mode of presentation by further emphasizing the *game* over the *substance* of politics (Patterson, 1993). Classic debate studies by Lang and Lang (1978) reflect on the possibility that published accounts of debate performance alter viewers' immediate reactions to debates. The effects of post-debate news spin remain understudied, however, even though these scholars emphasize the need to examine other media coverage of debates when considering their effects, and caution against tracing reactions to televised debates "without taking into account the total communication environment" (Lang & Lang, 1978, p. 322).

Interpersonal Discussion and Media Mistrust

Interpersonal discussion has been considered another critical element of campaign communication environments. Political discussion is not only a source of political information independent of the media channel (Beck, 1991), but also a sphere of interpersonal exchange of and reflection on what individuals experience from the media (McLeod et al., 1999; Shah et al., 2007). Because of these informational and reasoning processes, interpersonal discussion has been viewed as a factor conditioning media effects on public opinion (Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Lasorsa & Wanta, 1990; Mendelsohn, 1996; Price & Cappella, 2002).

Despite this importance, interpersonal discussion was largely absent from past research on televised debates. Given that televised debates and post-debate press commentaries often fuel everyday political conversation (Carlin, 2000), it is reasonable to consider political discussion as a relevant intervening factor that may amplify the effects of debates. Further, recent research by Eveland and Shah (2003) examining the role of interpersonal discussion in news bias perceptions suggested that political conversation plays an important role, especially in understanding the

impact of debate presentation modes and post-debate spin on judgments of political trust and news credibility.

Building on insights from theories of pluralistic ignorance and the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Prentice & Miller, 1993), Eveland and Shah (2003) found that interpersonal discussion about politics reduced perceptions of media credibility. Given the homogeneity of most discussion networks, there is a high degree of agreement between most individuals' political views and those of their most frequent discussion partners. Thus, the information to which people are exposed in their social interactions is likely biased, especially when discussing politics (Beck, 1991; Walsh, 2004). Frequent discussion with like-minded others has also been linked to perception of a hostile media. Yet, whether political talk works with split-screen presentation formats and performance-focused commentary to influence evaluations of candidate character and diminish evaluations of political trust remains to be seen.

Taken together, individuals' perceptions of candidate character, political trust, and news credibility are likely shaped by a range of factors. Certainly cues within the media environment that foster videomalaise—i.e., the split-screen modality or performance-focused commentary—may spur a sense of cynicism about politicians, politics, and the press. The modality of the debate and the post-debate commentary may function independently and in combination to shape bias perceptions. For example, the potentially adverse effects of the split-screen modality may be exacerbated when this mode of presentation is coupled with a focus on performance. In addition, the frequency of political discussion has the potential to augment these effects given that media cues have greater influence on those who frequently engage in political talk. Accordingly, the following hypotheses and research question are posited:

H_1: A split-screen mode of debate presentation will (a) encourage perceptions of candidate incivility, (b) increase the ability to form character judgments, (c) diminish appraisals of political trust, and (d) reduce news credibility compared to a single-screen mode.

H_2: A performance-focused debate story will (a) encourage perceptions of candidate incivility, (b) increase the ability to form character judgments, (c) diminish appraisals of political trust, and (d) reduce news credibility compared to a policy-focused debate story.

H_3: The combination of a split-screen mode of debate presentation and a performance-focused debate news story will interact to (a) encourage perceptions of candidate incivility, (b) increase the ability to form character judgments, (c) diminish appraisals of political trust, and (d) reduce news credibility.

RQ_1: How does the respondents' level of debate discussion condition the effects of a split-screen mode of debate presentation and a performance-focused debate news story on perceptions of candidate incivility, the ability to form character judgments, appraisals of political trust, and news credibility?

Method

The data in this study came from a Web-based experiment with students enrolled in communication courses at a large Midwestern university. The instructors of these courses offered extra credit for participating in the research. A total of 301 students participated in the aspects of the online experiment presented here.[1] Participants initially were contacted with an email that contained the web link of this online experiment. By clicking the attached web link, participants were directed to the experiment web site and asked to complete a pre-manipulation questionnaire. Then, participants were randomly assigned to an experimental condition by an algorithm written into the HTML code. This automatic randomization technique was adopted to minimize inter-subject contamination and increase the validity of the study. Further, to ease the concern that voting behavior and election outcome might have an effect on processing and reaction to the experimental manipulations, data were collected from October 18 until November 1, the two weeks prior to the 2004 presidential election.

Experimental Design and Stimulus

This study employed a 2 × 2 factorial design, where the factors were debate modality (single-screen or split-screen) and story spin (policy or performance). A 5-minute debate segment was selected from the first presidential debate, which took place September 30, 2004, in Coral Gables, Florida, with Jim Lehrer serving as moderator. In this selected segment of the debate, the two candidates discussed how to address nuclear weapons proliferation and diplomacy with North Korea and Iran, with George Bush supporting multilateral talks, and John Kerry favoring bilateral talks. This part of the debate was selected for manipulation because, (1) it concerned a topic about which most undergraduate students would not be well-versed and over which the candidates openly disagreed, and (2) it presented a vivid but balanced exchange between the candidates in terms of nonverbal and paralinguistic cues.

The debate clip manipulation took one of two modes: single-screen or split-screen. For this experimental manipulation of the on-screen technique, two separate live feeds of the debate, one single-shot and one split-screen, were obtained from two different networks carrying the debate. Thus, the same content for both treatment groups could be used with only the mode of presentation altered. To remove any potential effects of the source cues, network identifiers were removed from the versions that were used in the experiment.

In the single-screen mode, respondents saw the debate as it traditionally would be produced for television, with shots alternating between candidates as they spoke. In this format, respondents saw each candidate only when they were speaking. No reaction shots of the other candidate were presented. In the split-screen mode, respondents saw the identical debate segment produced with a dual shot production

technique. That is, both candidates were on screen at all times, with reactions and movements of one candidate visible while the other spoke. In other words, this split-screen debate segment is identical to the single-screen debate segment except that it includes reaction shots.

In the second experimental manipulation, respondents were presented with one of two post-debate news analyses. The stories focused on one of two themes: policy or performance. They were written by former journalists and presented as Associated Press (AP) stories. In keeping with AP conventions, the stories adhered to norms of balance and objectivity, and included quotes from representatives of both campaigns, senior presidential advisor Karen Hughes for Bush, and senior advisor Joe Lockhart for Kerry. In the policy-centered story, the analysis concentrated on the candidates' different positions on how to respond to North Korea's nuclear weapons program. In the performance-oriented story, candidate self-presentation issues were emphasized.

The stories were structured similarly, but the focus was different. For example, in the policy-oriented story, respondents read, "The two candidates clearly displayed contrasting policy positions as they disputed how their administrations would handle the potential threat." In the performance-oriented story, respondents read, "The two candidates clearly displayed contrasting debating styles as they disputed how their administrations would handle the potential threat." Quotes were also used to emphasize the manipulation. For example, in the policy analysis, Hughes was quoted as saying, "Kerry's approach to North Korea simply will not work. Informed voters don't want a commander in chief who returns to the failed policies of the past." In the performance analysis, the quote was changed to read, "Throughout that exchange, Kerry came off as smug and aloof. Informed voters are not looking for these qualities in their commander in chief." The same technique was used to alter quotes from Lockhart so that in the policy story the advisor was quoted as saying, "Bush doesn't have a viable strategy for North Korea. I have to wonder if Americans really want a president who turns his back on threats to our country." In the performance analysis story, the quote read, "Bush looked irritated and impatient during that exchange. I have to wonder if Americans really want a president who is so easily flustered."

Although not part of the experimental manipulation, potential ordering effects were controlled by alternating the arrangement of the stories; half of them started with Bush and the other half with Kerry. All other facts and features of the news story remained constant across the conditions.

Measures

After being exposed to the manipulations, respondents answered a post-test questionnaire. The questionnaire tapped the specific traits displayed by the candidates during the debate clip, particularly their civility, whether respondents believed the debate clip provided information relevant to judgments about the candidates'

character, and gauged levels of political trust and news credibility. These measures served as dependent variables in the study.

Debate Incivility. Debate incivility was conceptualized as a lack of politeness and mutual respect expressed by candidates participating in the debate. In other words, being uncivil means violating social norms about communication, which are widely acknowledged by ordinary Americans in real life (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Specifically, disrespectful or emotionally less controlled demeanor, including verbal and non-verbal expressions, constitutes overall debate incivility. To measure the degree of debate incivility perception, two pairs of items asked how the respondents characterized the debate performance of each candidate with regards to being, 1) "respectful" or "disrespectful," and 2) "composed" or "frustrated." These items were measured on an 11-point scale, anchored by the opposing word pairs.[2] Civility index for Bush ($r = .65$; $\alpha = .79$; $M = 5.21$; $SD = 2.36$) and for Kerry ($r = .51$; $\alpha = .67$; $M = 2.71$; $SD = 1.77$) were then averaged to generate a debate incivility index ($M = 3.97$; $SD = 1.38$). This nicely complimented the video utility for character evaluations measure, which was non-directional.

The Ability to Form Character Judgments. Items measuring the evaluation of the video contained two items concerning whether the clip provided "insight" into candidate character. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following non-directional statements: 1) "This debate clip provides insight into Bush's character," and 2) "This debate clip provides insight into Kerry's character." Two points should be noted about these items: (1) the word "insight" in this context connotes the ability to form character judgments, regardless of whether they are accurate or inaccurate, and (2) the non-directional approach allows respondents favoring Bush and respondents favoring Kerry to respond to the same scale, most broadly tapping whether respondents perceived in the debate clip any relevant judgmental criteria regarding the candidates' character across the different conditions. Items were measured on an 11-point scale, from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. A character insight index was made by taking the mean score of these items ($r = .69$; $\alpha = .82$; $M = 5.99$; $SD = 1.99$).

Political Trust. As discussed earlier, the literature has suggested some similar but slightly different concepts to discuss the overall public sentiment of how the political system operates, and, accordingly, somewhat different operational definitions and measurement schemes. Among others, these include political trust, political cynicism, political disaffection, and political alienation (see De Vreese, 2004). Nonetheless, it is believed that trust (or distrust) is at the core of all of these concepts and, thus, is relevant as a criterion of experimental effects in this study. Following this reasoning, two items were used to tap how trustworthy participants find the government and politicians. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: 1) "I trust our government to do the right thing," and 2) "I have confidence in most elected officials." Items were measured

on the same 11-point scale used for the character insight index. A political trust index was constructed by taking the mean score of those two items ($r = .59$; $\alpha = .74$; $M = 5.00$; $SD = 1.92$).

News Credibility. This study relied on assessments of news accuracy and trust-worthiness as operational criteria of news credibility. To measure news credibility, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: 1) ''Most of the information provided by the news media is accurate,'' and 2) ''I distrust most of the information from the news media'' which was reverse coded. Again, items were measured on the same 11-point scale as was used for the character insight index. A news credibility index was constructed by taking the mean score of those two items ($r = .50$; $\alpha = .66$; $M = 5.40$; $SD = 1.78$).

Covariates. In order to ensure that other factors did not confound observed experi-mental differences, a range of potentially confounding variables such as surveillance media use, extent of partisanship, debate watching, and debate talk, were controlled. The last of these was also used to construct the interaction terms to explore the research question stated above.

First, news exposure was considered to be a potential confounding variable. As previous research has suggested, news consumption may influence confidence in government and the press (e.g., Cappella & Jameson, 1997). The measure of news media exposure consisted of a total of 15 items that included exposure to newspapers, television, news magazines, political talk shows, and talk radio ($\alpha = .75$, $M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.27$). News media exposure was measured on an 11-point scale ranging from *never* to *frequently*.

Second, given prior research on hostile media effects, this study controlled for partisanship, which was measured by asking respondents to provide their party affiliation on a standard 7-point scale that ranged from *strong Republican* to *strong Democrat*. Responses were then dichotomized, with partisans coded as 1, and non-partisans, including Republican-leaning and Democratic-leaning independents, as 0. All third-party affiliated respondents were treated in the same manner as independents. Applying this system to the data, 57% of respondents were coded as partisan, whereas 43% coded as non-partisan.

Finally, since the experimental manipulation was based on the first presidential debate of 2004, prior exposure to this presidential debate as a blocking variable was included. A total of 78% of respondents answered that they had watched the first televised presidential debate. This measure of prior exposure as a covariate in the analyses beyond the experimental randomization was employed. Since, for purposes of ecological validity, a real presidential debate was used for source materials, it was inevitable that some participants would have seen the debate prior to their participation in the experiment. Because participants were randomly assigned into experimental conditions, this did not affect the difference observed across condi-tions. However, it is possible that the overall pattern would have differed if the study had been restricted to those who had not previously watched the debate.

As a further safeguard, interpersonal conversation about the debate was also accounted for. Debate talk was measured via a single item that asked respondents how much they had discussed the debates with other people. This item used an 11-point scale, on which 0 meant *very little* and 10 meant *a great deal* ($M = 6.63$; $SD = 2.38$). For the purposes of creating the interaction terms to explore the research question, this measure of debate talk was dichotomized into two categories, high and low, using the median value as a cutting point.

Results

To test the hypotheses and explore the research question, a series of ANCOVA tests were performed. First, an ANCOVA model that included main effects for the experimental factors (i.e., debate modality and news story spin) and two-way interaction terms involving these experimental factors and debate discussion was specified. Specifically, the specified interaction effects included an interaction between the two experimental factors, and two subsequent interactions between each of the experimental factors and debate discussion. News exposure, partisanship, prior exposure to the presidential debate, and debate discussion were employed as covariates. The same ANCOVA model was run against all dependent variables.

Debate Incivility

ANCOVA test revealed main effects for debate modality ($F = 4.647$; $p < .05$) and news story spin ($F = 7.908$; $p < .01$) on judgments of candidate debate incivility, but did not yield a statistically significant interaction between debate modality and news story spin (see Table 1). As hypothesized, incivility perception was heightened in the split-screen condition as compared to the single-screen condition. Similarly, performance-focused post-debate commentary led participants to perceive more debate incivility than did issue-focused spin. Similarly, no statistically significant interactions were observed between either one of the experimental factors (i.e., debate modality and post-debate spin) and debate talk.

Ability to Form Character Judgments

ANCOVA tests on the respondents' ability to form character judgments revealed no statistically significant main effect for debate modality (see Table 2), but did reveal a significant main effect for news story spin ($F = 6.114$; $p < .01$) and for the interaction between debate modality and news story spin ($F = 5.413$; $p < .05$). These effects were decomposed by plotting the estimated marginal means for debate modality and news story spin on character insights. As expected, the combination of the split-screen modality and the performance-focused story fostered greater character insight. Notably, no statistically significant interactions were observed between

Table 1
ANCOVA for Candidate Character Insights by Manipulations and Debate Talk

Variance Source	DF	MS	F	Sig.
Debate modality	1	.180	.047	.83
News story spin	1	23.404	6.114	.01
Debate discussion	1	8.754	2.287	.13
Debate exposure	1	.012	.003	.96
News media exposure	1	6.613	1.728	.19
Partisanship	1	.398	.104	.75
Debate modality × news story spin	1	20.721	5.413	.02
Debate modality × debate discussion	1	.675	.176	.68
News story spin × debate discussion	1	.819	.214	.64
Within-cell errors	289	3.828		

the experimental factors (i.e., debate modality and post-debate spin manipulations) and the measure of debate talk.

Political Trust

The next ANCOVA test revealed no statistically significant main effects for debate modality or news story spin on judgments of political trust (see Table 3), but did produce a statistically significant interaction between debate modality and news story spin ($F = 4.179$; $p < .05$). The estimated marginal means for debate modality and news story spin were plotted to decompose the interaction and observe the

Table 2
ANCOVA for Debate Incivility by Manipulations and Debate Talk

Variance Source	DF	MS	F	Sig.
Debate modality	1	8.696	4.647	.03
News story spin	1	14.799	7.908	.01
Debate discussion	1	.098	.052	.82
Debate exposure	1	.081	.043	.84
News media exposure	1	.130	.070	.79
Partisanship	1	.001	.000	.99
Debate modality × news story spin	1	.756	.404	.53
Debate modality × debate discussion	1	.081	.043	.84
News story spin × debate discussion	1	.074	.040	.84
Within-cell errors	290	1.871		

Table 3
ANCOVA for Political Trust by Manipulations and Debate Talk

Variance Source	DF	MS	F	Sig.
Debate modality	1	4.362	1.177	.28
News story spin	1	1.679	.453	.50
Debate discussion	1	.107	.029	.87
Debate exposure	1	.404	.109	.74
News media exposure	1	1.398	.377	.54
Partisanship	1	1.817	.491	.48
Debate modality × news story spin	1	15.481	4.179	.04
Debate modality × debate discussion	1	1.546	.417	.52
News story spin × debate discussion	1	.007	.002	.97
Within-cell errors	291	3.705		

nature of this effect. Adverse effects were concentrated at the intersection of the split-screen modality and the performance-oriented story. This combination reduced trust in politics below the level of either of these factors in isolation. However, no statistically significant interactions were found between the experimental factors (i.e., debate modality and post-debate spin) and debate talk.

News Credibility

The final ANCOVA test again found no statistically significant main effects for debate modality or news story spin on news credibility assessments, and no statistically significant interaction between these experimental factors (see Table 4). However, a statistically significant interaction between the modality of the debate clip and the amount of political talk ($F = 8.044$; $p < .01$) was observed. The estimated marginal means for debate modality and debate talk were plotted to decompose the interaction. The adverse effects of the split-screen debate modality were amplified among respondents who engaged in high levels of debate talk. This combination reduced news credibility to the lowest level observed across the experimental conditions.

Summary

Taken as a whole, these findings provide very limited support for H_1, which predicted that the split-screen modality, as opposed to the single-screen modality, would adversely affect character judgments, political trust, and news credibility. The only statistically significant direct influence observed was on perceptions of candidate incivility during the debate. Somewhat more support was observed for

Table 4
ANCOVA for News Credibility by Manipulations and Debate Talk

Variance Source	DF	MS	F	Sig.
Debate modality	1	3.862	1.256	.26
News story spin	1	1.771	.576	.45
Debate discussion	1	4.910	1.597	.21
Debate exposure	1	.043	.014	.91
News media exposure	1	7.144	2.324	.13
Partisanship	1	.080	.026	.87
Debate modality × news story spin	1	7.454	2.424	.12
Debate modality × debate discussion	1	24.733	8.044	.01
News story spin × debate discussion	1	.951	.309	.59
Within-cell errors	291	3.075		

H_2, which predicted performance-focused spin would influence evaluations of candidate character and induce a spiral of cynicism. Post-debate spin was found to influence respondents' ability to draw insights into character and to make judgments about the incivility of debate participants. However, like debate modality, there were no statistically significant direct effects on political trust and news credibility.

This does not mean that debate modality and post-debate spin did not influence political trust and news credibility in other ways. In fact, the results of ANCOVA analyses indicate that the adverse effects of the split-screen mode were often conditioned by performance-focused spin, providing some support for H_3. As predicted, the interaction of these two experimental factors significantly increased respondents' ability to form candidate character judgments and reduced their political trust. Although statistically significant interactive effects were not observed for evaluations of debate incivility, the significant main effects of debate modality and story spin ensured that the intersection of these two factors produced the highest estimates of debate incivility among respondents.

The ANCOVA results also provided insight into the research question about the role of political talk. Interpersonal discussion, in this case talk about the presidential debate, significantly interacted with debate modality to influence judgment of news credibility. However, consistent with past research, only debate modality, not news story spin, had this interaction with debate talk, and such interactive effects were not observed for outcomes other than biased perceptions of media.

Discussion

Television has been implicated as a potential agent in fostering cynicism about politics and eroding confidence in democratic institutions. This study's findings

add support for certain aspects of this broad notion of videomalaise, and extend this idea in four unique directions. First, it found few direct effects of ''in your face'' politics, but observe that modes of television production that heighten perceptions of incivility—specifically, the split-screen modality—work in combination with performance-focused debate commentary and debate talk to influence evaluations of candidate character, diminish political trust, and reduce news credibility. Second, in contrast with past research, which typically has focused on media content as the feature of news that spurs cynical reaction, the current study examined the impact that presentation mode has on these judgments. Third, it is notable that this study looked beyond political actors and institutions—the typical focus of research on videomalaise—to consider whether production choices that highlight incivility adversely affect news credibility. Finally, consistent with prior research on perceptions of media bias, it was found that political talk amplifies the adverse effects of split-screen presentations, at least on news credibility.

In general, this study found considerable support for the central contention that cues of incivility, whether in the form of split-screen modality (as opposed to single-screen modality) or post-debate focus on performance (as opposed to focus on policy), work individually and in combination to encourage the formation of candidate character judgments and reduce political trust. Although the main effects of the experimental manipulations—the modality of the debate presentation and the spin of the post-debate analysis—were restricted to judgment of debate incivility on the part of the candidates, the interaction of these two factors provided additional insight into diminished political trust. The fact that political talk also moderated the effects of split-screen modality, amplifying the negative effect on news credibility, provides additional evidence of the conditional nature of the influence of debate modality.

As Meyrowitz (1994) notes, media modality effects are by their very nature subtle and difficult to isolate and observe. Therefore, it is particularly notable that the modality of debate presentation in this study had significant effects, direct or interactive, on evaluations of candidates, political trust, and news credibility. That these modality effects were not restricted to candidate character judgments, but were extended to attitudes toward politicians, government, and media, suggests how extensive these influences may be and builds on the findings of Mutz and colleagues (Mutz & Holbrook, 2003; Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

So how can one interpret the finding that the combination of the split-screen condition—the manipulation that presented the debate as a contest between opponents—and the performance-focused debate story—the manipulation that focused on personalities over policy—reduced levels of political trust? It seems that the convergence of cues focusing on the contest and on winning resulted in an erosion of confidence in politics and politicians. It seems that the various nonverbal and paralinguistic cues available in the split-screen format, which are not as apparent in the single-screen version, did not erode trust in government. However, when coupled with the post-debate critiques of performance, these cues took on more power by reinforcing a common theme: Politics is a contest not about policy but about personality and performance.

Indeed, past research on media coverage of presidential debates has shown that debate coverage tilted heavily toward personal character, debate style, and gaffs made by candidates during debates, thus crowding out the coverage of policy debate (Benoit & Currie, 2001; Sears & Chaffee, 1979). In addition to the tendency of media to highlight performance over policy (Owen, 2002), media increasingly present political events by using production techniques through which politics are personified and conflict is heightened (Mutz, 2007). When viewed from this perspective, this ''media logic'' is driven by both the strong journalistic desire for dramatic news and increasing market competition (Altheide & Snow, 1991; Bennett, 2005). Within this context, the experimental evidence on the interaction between the format and content of debate coverage sheds light on how news norms influence political legitimacy.

The interactive effects of modality and political talk on news credibility also deserve further attention. The findings of this study indicate that political talkers tend to be more sensitive to the cues provided by the split-screen format, but direct their antipathy toward the media. This, of course, raises another question: What is it about frequent political talk that triggers negative judgments about news credibility when these cues are present? It may be that individuals who talk politics frequently with like-minded others, are predisposed to see the press as biased. The split-screen modality then plays upon this predisposition to further trigger perceptions of media bias. Or it might be that there are limits to the spiral of cynicism as it relates to split-screen presentations, such that media bear the brunt of the blame for the cynical responses they spur among political talkers (see De Vreese, 2005).

Taken together, some might even interpret these findings as good news for democracy, with modality and spin producing fairly restricted effects. Rather than directly feeding a spiral of cynicism, the effects of modality were largely conditional, with different triggers leading to the erosion of confidence in politics and the press. Of course, they could also be read as yet another example of how journalistic and production choices of news workers are eroding public confidence in democratic institutions. It may well be that the observed effects reflect a new array of previously undiscovered modality effects that interact with content features to further erode democratic confidence.

The authors conclude by acknowledging some caveats, and by making suggestions for future research. First, the authors acknowledge some limitations of the methods. Since the study relied on a convenience sample of college students who likely differ from the general population with respect to their political preferences and other attitudinal variables, the external validity of the findings might be a concern. Specifically, because college students may be more desensitized to ''in your face'' television programming than the general population, it is possible stronger effects would have been observed with a non-college student sample. Alternatively, given that college students are in the early stages of adult political socialization, their political naiveté might make them more susceptible to the impacts of modes and the content of debate coverage. Because of this limitation, caution is required when making inferences about a general population. However, these concerns

were outweighed by two advantages of the design this study employed. First, the experimental nature of the study allowed strong causal claims to be made, which would have been impossible if cross-sectional survey designs with random samples of the general population had been used. Second, the randomization used to assign subjects to experimental conditions limited to some extent the threats to external validity posed by the convenience sample.

Second, as in most experimental research, the effects observed in this study might be short-term. That is, one time exposure to a 5-minute video manipulation combined with a short news story is not likely to change participants' general attitude and orientation toward politics and the media system. Rather, it is more plausible that feelings of distrust were temporarily evoked by the experimental treatments. However, given the prevalence of performance-focused coverage and production techniques highlighting political conflict, experimental evidence in this study might be indicative of recurrent effects of videomalaise.

Further, this study is based on the theoretical assumption that political contentiousness is heightened by split-screen debate coverage and this perceived contentiousness engenders distrust. To empirically test this assumption, future studies should attempt to measure the degree of perceived contentiousness and model it to predict political distrust as a mediator. It also would be helpful to further identify conditions in which perceptions of political conflict are linked to distrust. For example, in European political culture, political contentiousness is much more tolerated than in American culture. In such contexts, debate incivility amplified by split-screen coverage and performance-focused commentary might not result in increased distrust toward political and media institutions. Thus, research should consider cultural tolerance for political conflict as a contingency of the videomalaise thesis.

As such, the findings of this study provide some important new directions for research on videomalaise, media modality, and the effects of candidate debates and pundit disputes. This research certainly suggests that future research should expand its focus beyond variables of candidate evaluation to consider the influence of debate modality on a broader set of democratic confidence outcomes, including evaluations of political trust and news credibility. Future inquiries on videomalaise should look past the documented effects of media content on political evaluations and pay greater attention to modes of television production and presentation. Further, if the results presented here are any indication, such explorations need to look beyond direct effects and carefully consider how modality and content interact to influence citizens.

Notes

[1]A total of 698 respondents participated in the larger experimental design of this study. The omitted cells featured an audio only condition and a no post-debate story condition in a fully crossed design. Neither of these factors is central to the hypotheses tested here and did not intersect with the design as presented in this paper.

[2]A third item was initially included in the scale development—*attentive* to *inattentive*—in an effort to cover the conceptual definition of civil discourse as being respectful, well-composed, and attentive to other speakers. Unfortunately, the attentiveness-inattentiveness items did not perform well from a reliability standpoint and were removed prior to final scale construction.

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