NAÇÃO “TRASH TALK”1
O fenômeno da incivilidade na mídia contemporânea dos EUA

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Resumo: “Trash talk” (literalmente “fala lixo”) é linguagem tóxica que polui o panorama midiático atual nos EUA. Trash talk inclui vários tipos de discurso grosseiro e mal-educado; aqueles que usam trash talk comunicam em estilos que parecem agressivos, argumentativos, insultantes, ofensivos, ou abusivos. Neste trabalho, examino exemplos do aumento de trash talk na mídia contemporânea dos EUA, especificamente televisão. Em seguida, considero o impacto negativo de tal discurso incivil no bem-estar mental e físico das pessoas. Finalmente, sugiro como resistir a trash talk na mídia e na vida cotidiana também. Fazendo um esforço consciente para reduzir a incivilidade, os americanos podem cultivar um ambiente comunicacional mais equilibrado e uma cultura civil mais saudável.

Palavras-Chave: Civilidade. Linguagem. Mídia.

TRASH TALK NATION
The phenomenon of incivility in contemporary media in the USA

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Abstract: Trash talk is toxic language that pollutes the current media landscape in the USA. Trash talk includes various types of impolite and rude discourse; trash talkers communicate in styles that seem aggressive, argumentative, insulting, offensive, or abusive. In this paper, I review examples of the rise of trash talk in contemporary media in the USA, specifically television. Next, I consider the negative impact of such uncivil discourse on people’s mental and physical well-being. Finally, I suggest how to resist trash talk in media and in everyday life as well. By making a conscious effort to reduce incivility, Americans can cultivate a more balanced communication environment and a healthier civil culture.

Key Words: Civility. Language. Media.


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0. Introduction

Over a quarter century ago, American\(^3\) media scholar Neil Postman (1985) argued that television has a negative effect on the quality of public discourse in the USA. He claimed that television turns almost all areas of culture into entertainment, including education, politics, religion, business, news, and sports, and that television has therefore led Americans to amuse themselves to death. A decade earlier, Postman (1976) warned of two dangerous kinds of toxic language in the communication environment of the USA: crazy talk and stupid talk.

According to Postman, crazy talk is effective language with unreasonable purposes, while stupid talk is ineffective language with little purpose, and both types of discourse tend to produce misunderstanding and to complicate human affairs.

If Postman were alive today, he might well call attention to another threat to the integrity of public discourse, a third type of toxic language that pollutes the current American communication environment: trash talk. The phrase “trash talk” refers to a wide range of uncivil discourse, involving language considered inappropriate, impolite, coarse, vulgar, profane, obscene, or taboo. Trash talkers communicate in styles that seem aggressive, argumentative, insulting, offensive, or abusive, using language peppered with invective, expletives, and curses.

Nowadays, trash talk is more commonplace than ever, occurring routinely across the contemporary American media landscape. Here is a description found on the Internet that sums up the situation rather well: “Our politicians, athletes and talk radio jerk-offs have raised the art of trashespeak to the point where ‘trash thy neighbor’ is now the eleventh commandment” (HISTORY BUFF, 2007). In such a toxic climate filled with trash talk, it is increasingly difficult for Americans to maintain cultural traditions of people treating each other with courtesy, decency, and respect. With incivility apparently held in high esteem, the USA has become a nation of trash talkers. And trash talk nation does not favor civil discourse or civil society, in the USA or anywhere else.

In this paper, I propose that if Americans wish to disavow trash talk nation and foster and maintain a civil culture, they must make a conscious effort to resist the onslaught of trash

\(^3\) In this paper, I use the term “American” to refer to the United States of America, as distinguished from North, Central, and South America. Also, this paper concerns contemporary media in the USA, but similar phenomena may occur in other Anglophone areas of the world that exchange media products with the USA, as well as in other media from diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.
talk in contemporary media in the USA. This paper has three parts. First, I will discuss the rise of trash talk, including examples from contemporary American media, specifically television. Second, I will consider the negative impact of trash talk on people’s mental and physical well-being, and argue that trash talk is bad for the mind and body alike. Third, I will suggest how Americans might begin to resist trash talk in media and in everyday life as well, in order to challenge the acceptability of toxic language and incivility overall.

1. The rise of trash talk in the USA

The first point I would like to make is that trash talk is on the rise in the USA. Extreme language use and uncivil discourse have increased all around contemporary American media, while civil discourse has declined and deteriorated. There seems to be more trash talk than ever before, and Americans have become desensitized to the abundance of trash talk in their current communication environment. Trash talk and incivility have become commonplace and mundane, and indeed, in some contexts, even expected.

As evidence that Americans expect trash talk in certain situations, there is a recent television commercial for bottled water with baseball manager Lou Piniella, a man famous in the USA for outbursts of temper. The commercial parodies an incident in which Piniella was ejected from a game for arguing with an umpire. In the commercial, Piniella explains that people expect him to get upset, and he wants to live up to their trash talk expectations, although he and the umpire really exchange completely civil remarks while acting as if they were yelling at each other, like aggressive trash talkers. The commercial plays on expectations of trash talk in contexts like sports, and in relationships of antagonism like manager versus umpire. The idea that Piniella and the umpire might be civil friends does not occur to viewers. This example illustrates clearly how Americans accept trash talk and even expect it in their communication environment.

But the Piniella commercial is just the tip of the trash talk iceberg. In fact, Americans seem to be in the middle of a trash talk epidemic. Not only are there higher levels of trash talk than ever before, accompanied by greater tolerance of uncivil discourse, but also there is an apparent cult of incivility, which is sensationalized and glorified in contemporary media. On broadcast television as well as on cable, many of the seven deadly English words that American comedian George Carlin claimed cannot be said on the air (see, for example, DAY, 2006, p. 318) are now being said routinely. In spite of token gestures made to tone down
extreme language, like bleeping out profanity and blurring images of people’s mouths to avoid lip-reading, viewers still know what is being said. Perhaps such attempts to disguise trash talk actually call more attention to the loaded words. And now, trash talk pops up practically anywhere, even in situations where people might not expect uncivil discourse. As evidence that trash talk is getting worse and invading previously civil domains, here are some examples of trash talk on the rise in an unlikely realm of American media: television cooking shows.

Yes, unlikely as it seems, the evolution of television cooking shows demonstrates a progression of trash talk from none, to mild, to extreme. Of course, people who actually work in real professional kitchens may find incivility somewhat familiar, due to ordinary business pressures. But television shows are entertainment, and do not necessarily have to reflect regular business environments. Televised incivility is optional in the sense that producers have some control over how much trash talk to include. And over the past decades, by including more and more incivility, cooking shows have gradually become environments for trash talk.

The earliest incarnations of television cooking shows in the USA are completely civil. From the pioneering French Chef Julia Child to the comical Galloping Gourmet Graham Kerr, on through Jacques Pépin today, these are polite, neutral hosts who never utter a syllable of trash talk. The style is documentary and educational, the focus is on food and light humor, and the ambiance invokes a fine restaurant or cozy kitchen. This genteel tradition continues with folksy down-home chefs, like Emeril Lagasse, Paula Deen, and Rachael Ray, who also emphasize food and pleasantries. Hosts like these commit occasional verbal faux-pas, risqué puns, and double-entendres, but they still maintain a civil level of discourse. In these shows, communication flows from host to audience and guest stars, so there is no reason to be impolite, no excuse in the framing of the show for the host to use trash talk.

The next stage in the evolution of television cooking show trash talk involves cooking presented as competitive sport, using metaphors of combat and battle, introduced by the Iron Chef series in Japan. In the Iron Chef model, competitive cooking resembles televised sports matches (particularly martial arts and wrestling), with a hyped-up pitch of battle discourse. Participants in the show have a tongue-in-cheek awareness of the mixed metaphors (cooking plus sport plus battle), and discourse remains civil throughout, despite the competitive theme. In the Iron Chef America series, there is no trash talk, but the show paves the way for uncivil
discourse by introducing the notion of aggressive competition into the cooking genre. The idea of teams competing against each other in the kitchen leads to the possibility of antagonism, providing a potential pretext for trash talk among competitors.

Building on the theme of kitchen combat, in the reality television genre, there are some competitive cooking shows that include mild trash talk. There is occasional cursing in the competitive cable show, *The Next Food Network Star*. There is also mild trash talking on another cable series, *Top Chef*. In these shows, like other competitive reality shows, there is trash talk backstage among the participants as they make rude remarks about each other, but mostly they engage in trash talk when commenting to the audience about the situation. There are also occasional bloopers when flustered contestants make mistakes during the competition. This type of casual profanity reflects what ordinary people might say in everyday life. That is, participants are not censoring their language because they are on television. In these programs, cooking is still the main focus, and trash talk merely adds a spicy reality flavor to the show.

Full trash talking comes to life in a pair of television series starring British Chef Gordon Ramsay, famous as much for his sharp tongue and quick temper as for his many successful restaurants. Imported to the USA from the United Kingdom, one series is called *Kitchen Nightmares* and the other, *Hell’s Kitchen*. In the USA, both programs carry ratings of TV-14 (recommended minimum age), with viewer discretion advised, even though aired during prime-time on Fox Network’s regular broadcast channel, not on cable. What is noteworthy about both programs, whose titles themselves include negative concepts - nightmares, hell - is that the programs function as excuses for engaging in trash talk, with trash talk no longer just an accessory. Instead, trash talk plays a starring role.

In the *Kitchen Nightmares* series, Chef Ramsay devotes each episode to making over a troubled restaurant. During his activities, Ramsay curses a lot, about the food, the restaurant owners, the staff, the customers, and the situation overall. Sometimes, Ramsay and restaurant owners even confront each other, using plenty of profanity to describe their common situation, and others around the restaurant curse as well. The *Kitchen Nightmares* series introduces the idea of host and participants using trash talk when they address one another, although they stop short of outright name-calling.

In the *Hell’s Kitchen* series, Ramsay and others engage in trash talk with striking exuberance. Following the cooking-as-battle premise, the *Hell’s Kitchen* series takes insults
and obscenities to new heights, providing the most extreme instances of trash talk in mainstream cooking shows. In *Hell’s Kitchen*, profanity of every sort abounds, used by contestants to talk to the camera in describing events, by contestants to each other during cooking challenges, and by Chef Ramsay throughout to contestants as well as restaurant patrons. Although contestants always refer to Ramsey with great respect - “Yes, Chef; no Sir; right away Chef” – in other types of interaction, no holds are barred in terms of what cast members say to the camera and to each other, resulting in a veritable festival of trash talk.

Why might trash talk be on the rise, even in unlikely media such as cooking shows? Apparently, trash talk, extreme language use, and uncivil discourse attract attention in today’s crowded, saturated media landscape. As Postman explained in considering the overabundance of information in our communication environment:

> From millions of sources all over the globe, through every possible channel and medium – light waves, airwaves, ticker tapes, computer banks, telephone wires, television cables, satellites, printing presses – information pours in. Behind it, in every imaginable form of storage - on paper, on video and audio tape, on discs, film, and silicon chips - is an ever greater volume of information waiting to be retrieved (POSTMAN, 1992, p. 69).

With so much information, and especially so much entertainment in the media landscape, contemporary media products and personalities must compete to be distinctive among the crowd. Trash talk emerges as a strategy for grabbing attention in the overloaded communication environment. Strident and aggressive trash talkers stand out from the pack. Also, aggression is more vivid and therefore better suited for image-based action-oriented media like television. Even in realms where we would not expect trash talk, producers encourage incivility in hopes of improving ratings. After all, mainstream American media systems depend primarily on commercial profits generated by advertising, and advertising, in turn, depends on ratings. Trash talk sells, but politeness and civility do not.

As a result, some cooking shows now include entirely gratuitous trash talk. For example, there is Anthony Bourdain’s cable series, *No Reservations*, which returns to the documentary format of old. Although there is no element of competition, host Bourdain seems to relish using profanity constantly, while addressing the camera as well as those around him in the environment being filmed.

Moreover, the sensational, attention-grabbing nature of extreme verbal discourse is paralleled by more extreme visual images as well. Like verbal incivility, visual incivility is also on the rise, even in cooking shows. There are plunging necklines of chefs Giada De
Laurentiis and Rachael Ray (see, for example, LOUIE, 2007), as well as the sexualization of food itself by chef Nigella Lawson, sometimes referred to as “food porn” (see, for example, MAGEE, 2007). But I will leave the topic of visual incivility for another time, and confine myself here to verbal incivility.

2. The negative impact of trash talk

Having reviewed these examples of trash talk on the rise in the USA, the second point I would like to make is that trash talk is bad for people’s minds and bodies alike. This is why Americans need to resist trash talk: because it has a negative impact on their lives. Trash talk is toxic, and like other toxic substances or activities, should be avoided. By toxic, I mean poisonous: harmful to mental and physical well-being, capable of impairing health. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and make explicit the negative impact of trash talk.

In this second part of this paper, I will consider the damaging nature of uncivil discourse and examine some of the psychological and physical consequences of trash talk on the mind and on the body. There is plenty of precedent for taking into account the power of negative thinking and the presence of toxic elements in the communication environment.

Various scholars suggest that language shapes both thought and culture. For instance, American anthropologists Edward Sapir (1921) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) claim that our language habits affect how we perceive reality (see also NYSTROM, 1973, pp. 216-226; STRATE, 2006, pp. 84-86; WEST & TURNER, 2003, p. 334). And German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests that “Language is not merely a vehicle of thought; it is also the driver” (cited in POSTMAN, 1992, p. 14; POSTMAN, 1976, p. 55) and that the limits of our language are the limits of our world (see also STRATE, 2006, p. 82). Scholars such as these usually connect their arguments to issues of grammar and vocabulary, but these arguments certainly do support the notion that how we talk about things makes a significant difference.

The idea that “you are what you say” is familiar to communication scholars in the tradition known as general semantics, from Alfred Korzybski (1993), to Wendell Johnson (1946) and S. I. Hayakawa (1990), as well as Neil Postman (1976). According to general semantics, our language environment creates pictures inside our heads, and although these internal pictures are not the same thing as the reality outside our heads, these internal pictures do color our perceptions of the reality outside us. General semanticists agree that language influences our perceptions, thinking, and behavior. For instance, general semanticists warn of
projection, where our language use reflects as much about us as it does about our topics of 
conversation. Our forms of expression project our own perceptions, and the way others 
express themselves affects us too. Another language danger involves self-fulfilling 
prophecies, that is, predictions that come true because we made the prediction. Our 
predictions become so powerful that we act and react according to the predictions instead of 
the situations at hand. Thus, the more we describe the world in uncivil terms, the more the 
world seems uncivil. People get used to trash talk and incivility as the norm, and a vicious 
cycle ensues in which the more we use uncivil discourse, the less civil we are at all. In 
addition, the constant use of a small set of profane expressions, over and over, is a form of 
reductionism: reducing our descriptions of the world to a limited range of nasty language, as 
if there were no other descriptions available. The few characteristics we mention in trash talk 
become the only characteristics we notice. So in general semantics, various ideas do suggest 
that trash talk is bad for you.

The notion that trash talk is toxic also surfaces in discussing the effects of excessive 
violence and sex in media, whether on television or radio, in music lyrics or hate speech, in 
dance styles or video games, in films or in comics (see, for example, DAY, 2006, p. 278-
371). Critics of violence and sex in media often suggest that nasty media help breed nasty 
people. Even though we cannot prove a definite causal connection between violent media and 
vioent people, we find clues in studies of media effects such as those done by George 
Gerbner in the 1970s about television (see, for example, GERBNER & GROSS, 1972; see 
also WEST & TURNER, 2003, pp. 377-390). According to Gerbner, television presents 
pictures of what the world is like, and these pictures influence our perceptions. Gerbner 
discovered that people who watched higher levels of violence on television seemed to 
perceive the world around them as more violent. In other words, although viewers did not 
themselves become violent, they developed expectations that others around them were 
violent. In the USA, television and other media abound in portrayals of dysfunctional 
discourse and behavior, whether violent or sexualized, often aired during the day and easily 
available to children. For instance, on regular mainstream American broadcast television, 
sensitive topics like rape, incest, and other forms of sexual molestation are discussed on 
daytime talk shows such as Oprah Winfrey’s program, as well as on nighttime drama series 
like Law and Order: Special Victims Unit, which frequently get rebroadcast during daytime 
hours. Beyond just television, critics complain about excessive violence and sex in other
media such as music, movies, games, and fashion, and about similar negatively-oriented phenomena like tasteless gross-out humor, shouting-heads journalism, and insulting political commentary (see, for example, CUNNINGHAM, 2001; DENBY, 2009; MORRISON, 2005). Such critical movements also encourage people to reduce incivility, and they too support the notion that civility matters, and that the types of communication in which we engage make a difference in the sort of culture we come to inhabit.

Furthermore, in recent years, evidence has started to accumulate in scientific realms such as medicine that the type of discourse in which we engage can have physical as well as mental effects. For instance, according to Dr. Christiane Northrup (2006a, 2006b), who specializes in women’s health, what we pay attention to is part of our health, and our environment includes thoughts and emotions. Northrup emphasizes that positive attitudes such as joy have powerful beneficial effects, while negative feelings can unbalance our health. She argues that changing our emotions can change physical aspects of our health, especially the heart. Northrup also describes how the energy we cultivate through the quality of our thoughts and emotions helps determine what we attract into our lives. So it stands to reason that surrounding ourselves with negative feelings and hostile attitudes such as displayed in trash talk has detrimental effects on our health as individuals and ultimately, as a culture.

Another source of mounting scientific evidence that trash talk has negative physical consequences comes from psychiatrist Daniel Amen (1998, 2009), who uses brain scanning technology to examine patterns of blood flow to the brain. Dr. Amen considers the brain to be “the hardware of the soul” and he focuses on how to develop a healthy brain, offering practical suggestions for optimizing brain function. One technique Amen suggests to promote brain health is, as he puts it, to “kill the ANTs”, that is, A-N-T-S, the “Automatic Negative Thoughts” that invade everybody’s minds. According to Amen, ANTs significantly impair brain function. Amen argues that upsetting thoughts and feelings seem to stimulate areas of the brain involved in anxiety and depression, while positive thoughts and feelings are beneficial to brain function. So Amen’s research also supports the idea that the nastiness of trash talk has negative effects on the brain, with damaging consequences for our health overall.
3. How to resist trash talk

Having made my second point about the need to resist trash talk, let me move to the third and final part of this paper: how to resist trash talk. What can Americans (and anybody else) do to combat trash talk in our communication environments? Although we may accept that media themselves do not directly cause civility or incivility, we must acknowledge that communication environments can and do promote or jeopardize our physical and mental health and well-being. Primarily as media consumers, but also as media producers, Americans must make a conscious effort to raise awareness of the dangers of trash talk and to take action against it. How might Americans stem the noxious tide of trash talk? I recommend one step anybody can take, a strategy for spreading the message that language matters, that civility counts. Although there are no sure-fire cures, here is a basic remedy.

I suggest a modest beginning to the ambitious goal of creating a civil culture in the USA: to launch a voluntary civility movement. The challenge is for Americans to take a civility pledge. The voluntary civility pledge has two parts: one, do not tolerate trash talk in others; and two, do not indulge in trash talk oneself. Those who take this pledge promise to disdain and discourage incivility and to cultivate and encourage civility, wherever and whenever possible. This commitment to avoid consuming or producing trash talk, as if trash talk were a physically toxic substance, requires people to boycott incivility in contemporary media. That is, people must refuse to consume trash talk, and they must not patronize services or products that depend on incivility. If audiences stop consuming incivility in media, they have the potential to affect ratings, and ratings drive the profits that shape the American media industries. If American consumers demonstrate that trash talk is bad business, they can encourage a more civil communication environment, leading to a more humane culture. And as producers also, whether professionals in media industries or ordinary folks in everyday life, Americans must rid themselves of foul expressions and curse words, and learn to substitute milder phrases less likely to offend. Americans must clean up their own language use and refrain from trash talk.

But why should Americans (and anybody else) bother taking such a voluntary civility pledge? As spiritual and philosophical traditions have noted, over time and across cultures, civility is one of humanity’s primary moral principles, by which we demonstrate respect for others and for ourselves. Actively choosing to be civil is not a new idea. In recent years, a professor at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland who leads that university’s “Civility
“Initiative”, Dr. P. M. Forni, has written several books (2002, 2008) (and even appeared on Oprah Winfrey’s television show) about the importance of choosing civility and how to fight against incivility. Trash talk is only one kind of incivility, but trash talk is emblematic of the decline of civility in American culture overall.

The rise of incivility in American life is exemplified by numerous accounts of conflicts over which kinds of face-to-face behavior are appropriate where and when, such conflicts often being associated with the word “rage”. In a paper on “Understanding road rage”, one scholar contemplates the antics of automobile drivers who are uncivil on highways (SCHUCHARDT, 2001). A flight attendant complains bitterly about uncivil airplane passenger in a magazine piece entitled “Flying in the age of air rage” (HESTER, 1999). And journalists write about incivility in the workplace: “Overworked, overwrought: ‘desk rage’ at work” (NISSEN, 2000); and “Etiquette crisis at work: employees say they’ve had enough of incivility, bad manners” (JACOBY, 1999). Another newspaper article explains how sports events provide occasions for incivility too, resulting in “sideline rage”: “New rules for soccer parents: 1) no yelling. 2) no hitting ref” (WONG, 2001). And even a humble, ordinary object wielded without consideration for others can stimulate incivility in water-logged public environments: “Umbrellas in their midst, New Yorkers ponder ‘rain rage’” (SAULNY, 2001). These sorts of “rages”, to name just a few, indicate the extent to which incivility has become part of American life. Trash talk nation is home not only to uncontrolled rage, but also to intolerance, viciousness, and undisguised hostilities, promoting an overall cynicism and lack of respect for social norms of civility.

Well, if charity starts at home, as the old saying goes, so does civility. Americans do not have to wait for government intervention or law enforcement to take control, and they do not need institutional censorship, either. What Americans need is self-censorship. A voluntary civility pledge does not require any special equipment or skill beyond a sincere desire to improve and determination to change. Voluntary civility is simple: people can do it themselves, and they can do it right now. An American myself, I encourage my fellow American citizens to adjust the settings on their own personal tolerance meters, and to “just say no” to trash talk.

As the USA moves out of the caricature era of the Bush years, when the country seemed to respect nothing but money, Americans are fortunate to have elected President Barack Obama, who began his administration by urging Americans to act like “citizens”
instead of “consumers” and by condemning Wall Street corruption as “shameful”. Perhaps now Americans will be ready to turn away from incivility and towards civility, to abandon trash talk and to restore the dignity of serious public discourse. In conclusion, by resisting the onslaught of trash talk in contemporary media, by making a conscious effort to reduce incivility and distance themselves from trash talk nation, Americans can cultivate a more balanced communication environment and improve their chances of fostering a healthier, civil culture, in the USA and around the world.

References


At the start, I thought you were gonna tap some trash-talking HvHers, but I just saw that you're actually one of them. Really surprising, gash420.

Member. Dec 29, 2019. #13. You were awping, but cool. 2bad. Trash talk. In the course of a competitive situation putting down your opponent verbally or saying how good you think you are. Oftenly involving talk of moms or sisters. Examples of Trash Talk: "You couldn't tackle me in a phone booth". "You better stay out of the paint or I'll block you so hard I'll make your momma hurt more than I made your sister hurt last night". "I'm so fast you couldn't see me with a telescope".

23 synonyms of trash-talk from the Merriam-Webster Thesaurus, plus 21 related words, definitions, and antonyms. Find another word for trash-talk. Synonyms & Antonyms of trash-talk. to express scornfully one's low opinion of. began to trash-talk the opposing players the minute they got on the field. Synonyms for trash-talk.