

Civility 2.0: A comparative analysis of incivility in online political discussion.

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ABSTRACT: Online political discussion amongst citizens has often been labelled uncivil. Indeed, as online discussion allows participants to remain relatively anonymous, and by extension, unaccountable for their behaviour, citizens often engage in angry, hostile, and derogatory discussion, taking the opportunity to attack the beliefs and values of others without fear of retribution. Some commentators believe that this type of incivility, however, could soon be a thing of the past as citizens increasingly turn to online social network sites such as Facebook.com to discuss politics. Facebook requires users, when registering for an account, to do so using their real name, and encourages them to attach a photograph and other personal details to their profile. As a result, users are both identified with and accountable for the comments they make, presumably making them less likely to engage in uncivil discussion. This paper aims to test this assumption by analysing the occurrence of incivility in reader comments left in response to political news articles by the Washington Post. Specifically, it will quantitatively content analyse the comments, comparing the occurrence of incivility evident in comments left on the Washington Post website with comments left on the Washington Post's Facebook page. Analysis suggests that, in line with the hypothesis, these online platforms differ significantly when it comes to incivility.

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INTRODUCTION: According to Dryzek (2000), democratic theory has taken a decidedly deliberative turn in recent decades. In fact, it is often suggested that the deliberative variant has become *the* dominant approach in democratic theory. Although deliberative democrats are yet to agree on precisely what constitutes deliberation (Graham & Witschge, 2003), all agree that political conversation is a vital component of democratic society. Indeed, ‘it is through political conversation that members of society come to clarify their own views, learn about the opinions of others, and discover what major problems face the collective’ (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2013). Moreover, Scheufele (2001: 19) argues, ‘talking about certain issues with other citizens is a necessary condition for fully understanding those issues, for tying them to other, pre-existing knowledge, and consequently, for meaningfully participating in political life.’

Thanks in large part to recent developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICTs), namely the Internet, citizens now have more opportunity than ever before to engage in political discussion with others. Thus, the Internet has generated optimistic expectations of a more engaged and informed public. Indeed, a growing body of literature attests to the democratizing potential of this technology and its ability to enhance political discussion (see, for example, Brundidge, 2010; Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Stromer-Galley, 2002).

Many sceptics believe, however, that the relatively high-level of anonymity that this medium affords users exacerbates disinhibited communicative behaviour, leading to an increase in rude, angry, and uncivil political discussion. In fact, this type of emotional communicative behaviour – often termed “flaming” – ‘has been one of the most widely recognized phenomena of online interaction’ (Lee, 2005: 385). Consequently, the nature of virtual interactivity has received considerable attention in recent decades (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Lea,

O'Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Davis 1999; Papacharissi, 2004, Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2011).

The present paper contributes to this growing body of literature by comparing occurrences of uncivil communicative behaviour across different online platforms. While much of the literature in the field of anonymity and computer-mediated communication (CMC) is based on comparisons between this medium and other, more traditional forms of communication, the present paper goes one step further by comparing different forms of CMC. Although recent developments in Web 2.0 technology have transformed the way we communicate online, to date little is known about how these changes will affect communicative behaviour. The present paper addresses this important gap in the literature as it compares online discussion forums which afford users a high-level of anonymity, with those which offer their users considerably less, making them more accountable for their behaviour. Specifically, it will content analyse comments left by readers of the Washington Post's politics sections, comparing occurrences of uncivil behaviour between those left on the Washington Post website with those left on the Washington Post Facebook page. Given that Facebook now has 1.15 billion active monthly users (Facebook.com), many of whom use the site for political purposes, this study is both timely and of normative importance.

Anonymity and disinhibited behaviour: Understanding how anonymity influences behaviour has a long tradition in social psychology, dating back to Gustave Le Bon's classic work on crowd behaviour in 1895. In his influential book *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895/2002), Le Bon observed how individuals, when forming part of a crowd, take on 'a sort of collective mind which makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation' (2002: 4). In short, he argued, there are 'certain ideas and feelings which do not

come into being, or do not transform themselves into acts except in the case of individuals forming a crowd' (2002: 4). Many of these acts, which include impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, and the absence of judgement, Le Bon continued, lack morality and 'are almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution' (2002: 10).

One of the key causes determining the appearance of these characteristics, according to Le Bon, is a sense of anonymity that is afforded individuals forming part of a crowd. Indeed, when forming a crowd, individuals acquire a sense of anonymity, and subsequent loss of accountability, which is often responsible for controlling individual behaviour. When individuals are no longer responsible for their own behaviour, that is, they become part of a crowd in which they can be neither identified nor accountable for their own behaviour, they are more liable to succumb to instincts which, when acting alone, would normally be kept under restraint.

Le Bon's theory of submergence was not formally tested until Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcomb reintroduced it into mainstream social psychology in 1952. In their laboratory experiment on male undergraduate students, the authors set out to determine whether or not participants who could be identified would be more or less likely to express negative sentiments about their parents and their relationships with them. In line with Le Bon's theory, Festinger et al. (1952) found a positive significant correlation between the ability to identify who said what during discussions, and the number of positive sentiments about parents that were expressed. In short, as identifiability increased, negativity decreased. The authors interpreted their findings as evidence of a psychological state in which individuals act as if they were submerged in the group. Such a state of affairs, according to Festinger et al. (1952: 382), 'may be described as one of de-individuation; that is, individuals are not seen or paid attention to as individuals.' Under conditions where the member is not individuated in the group, they continue, 'there is likely to occur for the member a reduction of inner restraints

against doing various things' that they may normally consider anti-normative, such as expressing negative sentiments about their parents.

Deindividuation theory was subsequently developed and extended by Zimbardo (1969) through a series of experiments which would come to form the blueprint for future deindividuation research (Postmes & Spears, 1998). Although Zimbardo (1969) identified a number of "input" variables which cause deindividuated behaviour, broadly defined as 'behavior in violation of established norms of appropriateness' (1969: 251), much of his research clearly emphasized the importance of anonymity and lowered responsibility in reducing inhibited behaviour. In one of his most notorious studies, for example, Zimbardo (1969) conducted a laboratory experiment in which female undergraduate students were asked to deliver an "electric shock" to a confederate as an "aid to learning". The participants in the experimental group were given oversized lab coats, hoods, and were seated in separate cubicles in an effort to shield their identity. Participants in the control group, on the other hand, wore their own clothes and prominently displayed name tags and were introduced to one another before the experiment began. Zimbardo (1969) found that anonymous participants were significantly more likely to deliver longer shocks than their identifiable counterparts, presumably because they were anonymous and, by extension, unaccountable for their behaviour.

Although the other experiments in this series produced conflicting findings (when soldiers were identifiable, for example, they actually shocked for longer than their identifiable counterparts), Zimbardo's contribution to this literature was more than empirical. Importantly, for the present research, Zimbardo recognised that deindividuated behaviour was not necessarily a group phenomenon, but may be applied to any instance where individual self-observation, self-evaluation, and concern for social evaluation are reduced. While this

commonly occurs in group settings, Zimbardo also applied the concept to suicide, murder, and interpersonal hostility.

Concerned with the lack of realistic and naturalistic settings in which deindividuation research had been conducted, Diener and associates (1973; 1976) embarked upon a series of experiments designed to increase the external validity of this research. Perhaps the most notable of these was conducted on Halloween to assess the effects of deindividuation variables on stealing by trick-or-treaters. In particular, Diener et al. (1976) tested three independent variables, one of which was anonymity. In the anonymous condition, no attempt was made to identify any of the costumed children, and the experimenter was not a member of the household, thereby removing any familiarity with the local neighbourhood children. In the non-anonymous condition, on the other hand, when the children knocked on a door, they were each asked for their name and where they lived, which was subsequently repeated back to them to make it clear this information had been retained by the experimenter. The experimenter then excused themselves from the front-door, leaving behind a bowl of candy/money, providing the trick-or-treaters with the opportunity to help themselves. In line with previous research, anonymity was found to be a significant predictor of stealing.

Anonymity in computer-mediated communication: It has often been argued that the conditions of computer-mediated communication (CMC), namely the relatively high-level of anonymity that this medium affords users, are similar to the conditions that cause the psychological state of deindividuation (Lea, O'Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986). Thus, it is hardly surprising that the theory has been used extensively to account for the occurrence of anti-normative social behaviour in CMC (Postmes & Spears, 1998).

Deindividuation theory was first tied to CMC by a number of influential scholars from the Committee on Social Science Research in Computing at Carnegie Mellon University

(Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1985; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Comparing CMC with other, more traditional forms of communication, their extensive body of research, collectively known as the ‘reduced social cues’(RSC) approach, suggests that this medium is liable to produce relatively self-centered and un-regulated behaviour, leading to more extreme, impulsive, and less socially acceptable communicative behaviour (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), similar to that identified in previous research on deindividuation.

Applied first to group behaviour using experimental methods, the RSC approach found that groups communicating electronically, when compared to groups communicating face-to-face, exhibited more anti-social behaviour and made more extreme decisions (Siegel et al., 1985). Similarly, electronic survey responses were found to be more extreme, more revealing, and less socially acceptable compared to those responses completed by hand (Kiesler & Sproull, 1986). Such a trend also applied to professional communication, where employees in a large organisation reported encountering significantly more uninhibited behaviour, namely swear words, insults, and rudeness, in their electronic communications compared to face-to-face conversations. In fact, employees reported seeing ‘flaming’¹ in their electronic communication on average 33 times a month, compared to just 4 times a month in their face-to-face encounters (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986).

According to the RSC approach, this type of behaviour is common in CMC because the medium lacks the vital social context cues necessary to regulate communicative behaviour. According to Sproull and Kiesler (1986), communicators perceive the social context of a communication through a combination of both static and dynamic cues. Static cues include the aspects of the physical environment in which communication takes place, such as the communicators’ appearance and clues as to their relative status, whereas dynamic

¹ The authors borrowed the term ‘flaming’ from Steele et al. (1983) who defined its meaning ‘to speak rabidly or incessantly on an uninteresting topic or with a patently ridiculous attitude.’

cues emanate from communicators' non-verbal behaviours, such as nodding in approval or frowning with displeasure. When communicators are able to perceive social context cues, they are able to adjust the target, tone, and verbal content of their communications in response to their interpretation of the situation. Typically, therefore, when social context cues are strong, behaviour tends to be well regulated and controlled (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), adhering to socially accepted norms of communication. However, when social context cues are weak or absent, as is often the case in CMC, communicators are afforded a semblance of anonymity that does not exist in other forms of communication. Consequently, communicators become relatively unconcerned with making a good appearance and become free from fears of retribution and rejection, as well as feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment (Siegel et al., 1986; Lee, 2005). This, it is argued, ultimately leads to less inhibited communication (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; 1991; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991).

Given the phenomenal growth of CMC, thanks in large part to advancements in the Internet and its associated technologies, there has been a considerable amount of scholarly interest in the occurrence of such anti-normative social behaviour online. Much of the early research in this field focused on the Usenet application, a type of forum designed to allow Internet users to join discussions on topics of their choice (Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Papacharissi, 2004). Due to the relatively high-level of anonymity that Usenet affords its users, it is often hypothesized that the exchanges which take place on these forums will be largely dominated by uncivil and impolite language. Davis (1999) found that Usenet discussion, when centered on political topics, was typically dominated by vigorous attacks and humiliation. Political discussion via Usenet, Davis (1999: 163) argued, 'tends to favor the loudest and most aggressive individuals... Those who are less aggressive risk vigorous attack and humiliation.'

Anecdotal evidence suggests that incivility in other online forums is also closely related to the level of anonymity that users are afforded. When studying the development of online newspapers, for example, Boczkowski (1999: 105) blamed the ‘frequent occurrence of utterly aggressive content posted by some participants’ on the high-level of anonymity that CMC in this context traditionally affords users. Indeed, Kevin McKenna, Editorial Director of The New York Times Electronic Media Company, in his personal correspondence with Boczkowski (1999: 105), highlighted explicitly the effect of anonymity in this CMC context: ‘We did find early in our experience with forums that we were getting a lot of people, as they could hide behind anonymity, saying things that were either sophomoric or hateful, almost as graffiti.’ Similarly, Christopher Wolf, leader of the Internet Task Force of the Anti-Defamation League, argues in a letter to the Editor on the NY Times website that people who are able to post anonymously, or pseudonymously, are far more likely to say awful things, sometimes with awful consequences. Such behaviour may often result in the spread of anti-Semitic, racist, and homophobic content across the Web.

Much empirical research in this area, however, finds that, overall, incivility in Usenet political discussion is not as rife as first thought. Papacharissi (2004: 275), for example, suggests that contrary to popular belief and consistent with previous research by Hill and Hughes (1998), ‘most messages posted on political newsgroups are neither predominantly impolite nor uncivil.’ In fact, just over 14 percent of the messages analysed by Papacharissi were found to be uncivil, the majority of which assigned stereotypes designed to offend or undermine their opponents’ arguments. These findings offer support to those scholars who argue that most people online are far more likely to be nice than resort to rude, hostile, and uncivil communicative behaviour (Baym, 2010; Rice & Love, 1987; Lea, O’Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992).

Facebook.com: A Potential Remedy: One area of online political discussion which is often associated with both anonymity and uncivil communicative behaviour is the reader comment sections hosted by many online news outlets. This interactive feature, which encourages readers to offer their own views, arguments, and insights into the content produced by professional journalists, as well as enter into debate with other readers, has become increasingly common in recent years, thanks largely to developments in Web 2.0 technologies. In fact, among the top 100 U.S. newspapers, 33% accepted article comments in some form in 2007; the following year, it had risen to 75%. By 2010, however, 92% of the top 150 newspapers in the U.S. had begun accepting reader comments in response to their published news articles (Santana, 2011).

Although these comment sections do not necessarily meet all of the criteria implicit in the ordinary use of the term deliberation, they do provide an ideal opportunity for large numbers of citizens to participate in “everyday” discussion about political issues, as well as other topics which interest them. Such “everyday” discussion, if not deliberative in the strictest sense, is still nevertheless a crucial part of the full deliberative process that is necessary for an effective democratic society (Mansbridge, 1999).

As implemented by most online news outlets, this feature is relatively straightforward and shares many of the same characteristics across most organisations. Generally speaking, comments are submitted via a form available at the end of an article, where readers may or may not be required to register in order to post their comments (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). For those requiring registration, most do not call for readers to use their real-name when doing so (Hermida & Thurman, 2007), affording them a relatively high level of anonymity when commenting.

In light of the previous research reviewed above, many commentators believe that anonymity in this context has led to ‘the frequent occurrence of utterly aggressive content

posted by some participants' (Boczkowski, 1999: 105). Indeed, according to prominent journalist Leonard Pitts Jr., a Miami Herald columnist writing for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, online comment sections have become 'havens for a level of crudity, bigotry, meanness and plain nastiness that shocks the tattered remnants of our propriety' (Pitts Jr., 2010). The reason for such behaviour, he continues, is anonymity; unlike in an old-fashioned letter to the editor – no one is required to identify themselves, no one is required to say who they are and to own what they have said, allowing them to 'vent their most reptilian thoughts' (Pitts Jr., 2010).

Similar concerns were raised by Kevin McKenna, Editorial Director of The New York Times Electronic Media Company, following the newspapers' early experience hosting this type of online forum. As McKenna reflects, '[w]e did find early in our experience with forums that we were getting a lot of people, as they could hide behind anonymity, saying things that were either sophomoric or hateful... Once we established that you have to register to take part in the forums – that your postings were linked back to something that was traceable, that you were accountable for what you posted and couldn't do it in total anonymity – the quality of the conversation greatly improved' (c.f. Boczkowski, 1999: 105). Likewise, The San Jose *Mercury News* found that article commentary is more civil when the commenter is easily identifiable with their name and face attached to their comment.²

Given this anecdotal evidence, many news outlets have moved to reduce the level of anonymity that readers are afforded when expressing their views on the content they encounter. One way this has been attempted is with the introduction of a Facebook plug-in which allows news sites to require users to comment on these forums via the social network site. According to Jimmy Orr, the Managing Editor of the LA Times online, by requiring Facebook registration, the occurrence of mean-spirited, profane and sometimes useless

² http://www.mercurynews.com/news/cj_16495483 - accessed 22.04.2013.

responses will be minimised for two reasons. Firstly, Facebook requires users to construct a public or semi-public (restricted) personality profile through which they can traverse the site, engage in its many social functions, and connect with other users to form social networks (Boyd, 2007). Users are encouraged to maintain relatively open and identifiable profiles that include photos, educational affiliations, religious and political preferences, birthdays, and hobbies. Profiles also contains a public space where other users have the chance to leave messages, post links, and connect with one another. Facebook users are therefore both identifiable with, and accountable for, the content they produce. According to Wolf (2011), now is the time to consider Facebook's real-name policy as an Internet norm because online identification demonstrably leads to accountability and promotes civility.

A second reason Facebook users are theoretically less likely to participate in uncivil communicative behaviour is because other users in their social network are automatically notified of their activity via the "newsfeed" function. Thus, when a user comments on a news article via Facebook, the content is made public not only to those participating in the same forum, but also to other members of their Facebook network (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). This form of "pervasive awareness" (Hampton, Lee, & Her, 2011) amongst friends greatly increases accountability, and, by extension, should aid in reducing uncivil communicative behaviour.

Research question and hypothesis: Although the exponential growth in online social network sites such as Facebook has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years, little is known about how the use of such services may influence the political behaviour of their users, particularly when it comes to political discussion. The present study aims to begin the process of filling this important gap in the existing literature. In light of the literature reviewed thus far, as well as the anecdotal evidence presented above, the present study aims

to test the assumption that reader comments left on Facebook, a platform on which users are identified with, and accountable for, their content, will exhibit considerably fewer instances of uncivil communicative behaviour than those left on anonymous discussion forums.

By addressing this normatively important question, the study aims to make a meaningful contribution to the literature on anonymity and incivility in CMC, as well as the growing body of literature on the effects of SNS use. In particular, the study will add an empirical and comparative element to a largely anecdotal and descriptive literature on the influence of Facebook use on political discussion.

Methodology: In order to test our hypothesis, a quantitative content analysis of online reader comments left in response to articles on the politics sections of the Washington Post was conducted. Reader comments from the Washington Post online were selected for analysis given the high-level of anonymity that this newspaper affords commenters on its website. Although the Washington Post requires readers to register in order to comment, it does not require them to do so using their real name. Although asking readers to register is a tactic designed to increase the sense of accountability that commenters feel, and commenters are asked to refrain from posting “inappropriate” remarks, the Washington Post comment section provides readers a high level of anonymity, and a low level of accountability.

In contrast, the Washington Post also maintains a Facebook page alongside its own website on which it posts identical content, simultaneously. Users commenting on articles taken from the Washington Post website are therefore responding to the same content, in the same format, and at the same time as those commenting on the Washington Post Facebook page. This allows the researcher control over framing effects and the moderating influence of issue divisiveness that may occur when comparing the civility of responses to different content or news reports. Given that the Washington Post website and the Washington Post

Facebook page differ only in the degree of anonymity and accountability that they offer users, such sections provide a naturally occurring quasi-experimental setting, ideal for determining whether or not social network sites such as Facebook influence the way politics is discussed online.

Sample:

In order to test our hypotheses, a two-stage sampling strategy was employed. The first stage involved generating a stratified sample of political news articles over 2-constructed weeks in the first half of 2013. Constructed week sampling was used as it remains arguably the most efficient way to compensate for the cyclical nature of daily news reporting (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Only two eligibility criteria were established for generating a selection of articles during the first stage of sampling. Firstly, only comments left in response to articles on the Washington Post “Politics” section, the “Post Politics” blog, “The Fix” blog, or the political science perspective section of the Post’s “Wonkblog” were eligible. Secondly, for the article to be eligible, it had to appear on both the Washington Post website and the Washington Post Facebook page simultaneously, allowing us to compare comments from the same articles, therefore removing the possibility that a particularly divisive issue or negatively framed article could skew the results. In total, 26 articles were included for the second stage of the sampling process.

The second stage involved generating a random sample of reader comments from the articles generated in the first stage of sampling. In total, from the 26 articles gathered over two randomly constructed weeks, 4502 comments were collected on the Washington Post’s website, and 2304 comments on the Washington Post’s Facebook page. For articles that received over 250 comments on either the Website or the Facebook page, a random selection of 250 comments from the article was entered into the sample pool. All website comments

were entered into a database, as were the Facebook comments, where they were numbered chronologically and had all identifying information removed. Each comment was also given a number to signify from which article it was taken to aid in the analysis. A random sample of 1000 comments was then drawn, with 500 website comments and 500 Facebook comments selected independently. After spam messages and those not written in English were removed, a total of 498 Website comments, and 490 Facebook comments, remained for analysis.

Measurement:

A pre-existing coding scheme developed by Papacharissi (2004) was used to guide coding all comments for instances of democratic incivility and impoliteness. Although the coding scheme features many of the same categories used by other studies of incivility (see, for example, Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2012; Jamieson & Falk, 1999), Papacharissi makes an important distinction between incivility and impoliteness. In line with previous research on the topic of incivility, Papacharissi recognises that an exchange which involves poor manners is not necessarily uncivil and ‘does not set a democratic society back’ (Papacharissi, 2004: 267). Indeed, politics inevitably mobilizes strong opinions and passionate feelings, thus impoliteness can often surface (Massaro & Stryker, 2012). This is particularly true online where anonymity makes it easier for individuals to be rude, although not necessarily uncivil. However, heated discussion and disagreement only becomes problematic when, according to Papacharissi, it disrespects the collective traditions of democracy. Incivility, according to this perspective, is defined as ‘a set of behaviours that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups’ (Papacharissi, 2004: 267).

A three-item index was developed to determine whether or not online comments violated standards of democratic discourse as defined above. If a comment 1) verbalized a threat to democracy (e.g. proposed to overthrow a democratic government by force), 2)

assigned stereotypes (e.g. associate person with a group using labels), or 3) threatened other individuals' rights (e.g. personal freedom, freedom to speak), it was coded as uncivil and the type of incivility was noted.

A second index was developed in an effort to identify impoliteness. A comment was coded as impolite if it 1) contained name-calling, 2) cast aspersions, 3) accused others of lying, 4) used hyperbole, 5) used pejoratives for speech, 6) signalled non-cooperation and/or 7) sarcasm. An eighth, catch-all category of 'other' was also used in instances where the comment was deemed to be impolite by the coder but did not fall into the categories above. One such example of 'other' impoliteness would be comments written in capital letters, or partly in capitals, to symbolise shouting.

All uncivil and impolite messages were also coded for their direction. If an uncivil or impolite comment was directed at another commenter in the discussion it was labelled 'interpersonal', or 'other-directed' if it was directed at someone who was not present, for example a politician or other figure. The present coding scheme also coded direction as 'neutral', meaning it was not directed at any group or individual in particular, but was used simply to articulate an argument. This third category was added after the data gathering process had begun as it soon became clear that incivility and impoliteness was often not aimed at others. Papacharissi also coded the direction of stereotypes as 'antagonistic' or 'neutral' depending on the type of language used and whether or not the stereotype was used to offend. However, the present coders were unable to agree upon instances of antagonism or neutrality in stereotypical language, thus they too were coded as 'interpersonal', 'other-directed', or 'neutral' in line with all other categories.

Inter-coder reliability:

Although all comments included in the analysis were coded by a single coder, a second coder was recruited in an effort to ensure reliability. The second coder undertook around 13 hours of training in order to become familiar with the method of content analysis, the units of analysis, and most importantly, the coding scheme and some of the literature from which the coding scheme was developed. After an initial pilot test, a subsample of 198 (20%) comments was selected at random from the final sample to determine reliability. After spam comments and those not written in English were removed, a total of 193 remained for analysis. Table 1 presents the reliability scores for the two coders.

-----Insert Table 1 here-----

Results: In line with previous research, the majority of comments in our sample were neither uncivil nor impolite. This was true of both Website and Facebook comments. In fact, of the 498 Website comments which were analysed, only 30 (6%) were coded as containing at least one form of democratic incivility, while just 13 (2.7%) Facebook comments were coded the same way. The use of stereotypes was by far the most common form of democratic incivility in Website comments, with 22 of the 30 including stereotypes. An example of stereotyping in Website comments include the following contribution to a discussion which took place between readers in response to an article about the length of waiting times at the previous Presidential election:

“Flori-duh is about the dumbest state I have ever lived in. People do not know how to vote because they do not read newspapers or pay attention to the news. They stand in line for voting just to take time off of work.”

This is just one of 22 instances in which users of the Website version of the Washington Post assigned a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular person or groups of people.

Only eight Website comments included instances of threats to individual rights. The following comment is part of a discussion on the problem of voting waiting times and provides a typical example of a comment which advocates restricting the rights or freedoms of certain members of society:

“an easy fix
anyone receiving welfare should not be allowed to vote anyway -- they are effectively
children
that simple change would shave about 40million off the voting rolls where they have no right
to be anyway.”

Threats to Democracy was the least common type of uncivil communicative behaviour on the Website version of the Washington Post, with only five comments coded as containing this type of language. A typical example of this type of incivility can be seen in the following comment:

“Many revolutions start with one small spark, President Obama has set this one off with his presser with the children and his use of the executive orders. The question is, is this the revolution that he had in mind? Time will tell.”

Although the nature of democratic incivility on the Washington Post Facebook page was similar to that on the Website, there were considerably less instances of it and it was shared evenly between stereotypes (5), threats to individual rights (5), and threats to democracy (4).

In order to test our hypothesis, and determine whether or not the difference between Website comments and Facebook comments was significant, a chi-square test was conducted. Table 2 presents the result of this test. With a chi-square value of 6.742, we can be 99% confident that the difference in our sample between Website comments and Facebook comments has not occurred by chance, but is reflective of our wider population.

-----Insert Table 2 here-----

As expected, impoliteness was considerably more common amongst commenters than incivility. However, unlike incivility, both Website and Facebook comments contained a similar amount of impoliteness. 172 of the 498 (34.5%) Website comments contained some form of impoliteness while 159 of the 490 (32.4%) Facebook comments contained similar content. The most common form of impoliteness among Website commenters was Sarcasm (10.2%), followed by name-calling (8.8%) and aspersions (8.4%), while Facebook impoliteness mostly involved name-calling (11.2%) and “Other” impoliteness (7.3%).

Table 3 presents the zero-order relationship between platform type and our various indicators of impoliteness. It shows that, in line with the hypothesis, Website comments and Facebook comments differ significantly when coded for sarcasm ($\chi^2 = 4.419$ $p < .05$) and aspersions ($\chi^2 = 4.337$ $p < .05$). However, when all forms of impoliteness are combined to create a simple dichotomous variable, the difference between platform type is not significant ($\chi^2 = .484$ $p > .05$).

-----Insert Table 3 here-----

Given the increase in indentifiability and accountability that comes with commenting via Facebook, the relationship between platform type and the direction of incivility and impoliteness was also tested. It is hypothesized that Facebook comments will exhibit significantly less interpersonal incivility and impoliteness than Website comments which are more likely to be directed towards other individuals participating in the discussion. Table 4 presents the results of this analysis. As expected, it shows that almost half of all uncivil and impolite comments left on the Website were directed at other commenters participating in the discussion (46.6%). In contrast, less than a quarter of uncivil and impolite comments left on Facebook were classed as interpersonal. A chi-square value of 20.059 ($p < .001$) confirms this difference is a significant one, meaning that Website commenters were far more likely to be impolite to one another than were Facebook commenters.

-----Insert Table 4 here-----

Limitations:

In line with our hypothesis, Kavada (2012) argues that the design characteristics of certain online platforms enable and constrain their use by different actors. In short, as has been argued throughout this paper, the way online platforms are designed may have implications on the way their users behave. However, the skills, goals, and culture of their users may also affect the way they are used. Consequently, the differences between online platforms that have been identified here may not be a direct result of differences in the design of the chosen platforms, but rather a difference in the skills, goals, and culture of those news commenters using Facebook to access the Washington Post.

Discussion: Much has been written in recent years about the potential of SNSs to increase political participation and improve the quality of political discussion. This study is intended to move forward the debate about the democratising potential of Facebook.com, the world's most popular SNS. In doing so, it compares the occurrences of incivility in reader comments left on the politics sections of the Washington Post website, with reader comments left in response to the same articles on the Washington Post Facebook page. Given that the reader comments being analysed are left in response to the same articles, from the same newspaper, at the same time, our findings provide an insight into the influence that the platform type has on communicative behaviour. With anonymity being the primary distinguishing feature of the Washington Post website compared to the Washington Post Facebook page, the findings

contribute both to a growing literature on the effects of the Internet on political behaviour, but also on the role anonymity plays in uninhibited behaviour.

In line with previous research, the study makes two important findings. Firstly, the occurrence of uncivil communicative behaviour in reader comments is significantly more common on the website version of the Washington Post where users are able to maintain their anonymity, compared to the Facebook version of the Washington Post where commenters are identified with, and accountable for, the content they produce. Secondly, the uncivil and impolite behaviour that was identified on the Washington Post website was significantly more likely to be directed towards others participating in the discussion, compared to the Washington Post Facebook page where instances of incivility and impoliteness were less likely to be interpersonal, and more likely to be aimed at individuals not involved in the discussion, or used as a way to articulate an argument, rather than offend others.

The findings offer empirical support to those who claim that the exponential growth of SNS use, in particular that of Facebook, may have a positive effect on political behaviour. Indeed, if uncivil behaviour has a deleterious effect on deliberation, and democracy more generally, as the literature suggests, the increase in Facebook use for political purposes ought to be embraced. Moreover, it supports the claims of those calling for an end to online anonymity who fear a rise in ad hominem attacks and the consequences that such behaviour brings. However, although the findings indicate a clear and significant difference between the two online platforms, in line with previous research, the overall level of incivility across all comments was low.

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Table 1. Inter-coder agreement

	% agreement	Kappa
Threat to democracy		.664
Threat to individual rights		.855
Stereotype		.795
Name-calling		.815
Aspersions		.722
Lying		N/A
Vulgar		1
Pejorative		1
Hyperbole		.749
Non-cooperation		.662
Sarcasm		.714
Other impoliteness		.722
Uncivil		.767
Impolite		.776
Direction		.678

N.B. All Kappa coefficients were generated using SPSS. Cohen's Kappa could not be calculated for the variable 'Lying' as one coder found no instances of it in the subsample.

Table 2. Civility and platform type.

	Website	Facebook	
Threat to Democracy	5	4	
Threat to rights	8	5	
Stereotype	22	5	
Uncivil (total number of comments containing incivility)	30	13	χ^2 6.742 ($p < .01$)

N.B. Some comments contain more than one form of incivility. Due to the relatively small numbers of observation in each cell, χ^2 was only calculated for total numbers of uncivil comments.

Table 3. Impoliteness and platform type.

	Website	Facebook	χ^2
Name-calling	44	55	1.564
Aspersions	42	25	4.337 (p.<.05)
Lying	5	5	.001
Vulgar	3	9	N/A
Pejorative	2	1	N/A
Hyperbole	15	12	.295
Non-cooperation	5	1	N/A
Sarcasm	51	32	4.419 (p.<.05)
Other	29	36	.933
Impoliteness (total number of comments containing impoliteness)	172	159	.484

N.B. Some comments contain more than one form of incivility. Due to the relatively small numbers of observations in some cells, χ^2 was only calculated where both cells had 5 or more observations.

Table 4. Interpersonal incivility/impoliteness and platform type.

	Website	Facebook	
Interpersonal	89	41	χ^2 20.059 (p.<.001)

Coding scheme: adapted from Papacharissi, 2004;

All highlighted comments are to be analysed and coded according to the following instructions.

Each article should be read in its entirety and all highlighted comments subsequently coded before moving on to the next article. If a comment appears not to relate directly to the article it responds to, please read the thread of comments preceding it before coding.

All comments should be read in their entirety.

Comments may contain more than one form of incivility and/or impoliteness.

Code ‘1’ all comments containing a ‘threat to democracy’: A comment ought to be coded as containing a threat to democracy if it advocates the overthrow of the government (i.e. if it proposes a revolution) or if it advocates an armed struggle in opposition to the government (i.e. if the commenter threatens the use of violence against the government). Examples of such threats include commenters suggesting that government efforts to restrict guns, for example, would lead them to take up arms. For example, one commenter suggested that if the government were to enforce the ban on assault weapons and try and take his gun, ‘they would soon regret it.’ Similarly, commenters threatening to start a revolution in response to the government implementing policy would also be coded as a threat to democracy.

Exceptions: Should you believe that the threat is sarcastic, please code for ‘sarcasm’ (11), not a threat to democracy. ‘Non-cooperation’ (8) should also not be confused with a threat to democracy.

Other examples: Please see Papacharissi, 2004; Smith & Bressler, 2012 for further examples of such threats.

Code ‘2’ all comments containing a ‘threat to individual rights’: A comment ought to be coded as containing a threat to individual rights if it advocates restricting the rights or freedoms of certain members of society or certain individuals. Such examples are common when sensitive or divisive political issues are being discussed because commenters often resort to threatening one another or often advocate restricting the rights of groups or individuals they blame for the event which led the issue to being discussed. For example, following a tragic shooting in which a psychologically disturbed individual is implicated, many people are quick to suggest that the rights of mentally ill citizens be restricted, i.e. ‘They should all be locked up’ would be an example of this. Also, supporters of gun-control often blame those who oppose gun-control, for example, for the widespread use of guns and, by extension, such tragic events. In doing so, they suggest that it is they who are responsible for such tragedies and, therefore, ‘they have no right to participate in this debate.’

Exceptions: Threats to individual rights should not be confused with stereotypes (although they might be closely related if the threat being made assumes that all members of that particular group is the same) or with non-cooperation. Refusing to co-operate is not necessarily the same as refusing others the right to participate in the discussion.

Other examples: Please see Papacharissi, 2004; Smith & Bressler, 2012 for further examples of such threats.

Code ‘3’ all comments containing the use of ‘stereotypes’: A comment ought to be coded as containing a stereotype if it asserts a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing. This includes associating people with a group using labels, whether those are mild – ‘liberal’, or more offensive – ‘faggot’. The use of stereotypes is common when the topic being discussed is highly partisan.

Stereotyping may also involve making generalized assumptions about the thoughts and behaviour of certain groups or individuals based on said stereotypes, for example, suggesting gun-owners/supporters are paranoid, liberals/conservatives are less/more patriotic, or immigrants rely heavily upon social security.

Exceptions: The use of the words liberal or conservative are not always used stereotypically. For example, an administration or an individual may be liberal or conservative in their views, but this type of description is not necessarily stereotypical or derisory.

Other examples: Please see Papacharissi, 2004; Smith & Bressler, 2012 for further examples of such threats.

*Note: Stereotypes should also be coded for their direction: those intended to offend others should be coded as **antagonistic** (i.e., ‘you liberals are all the same. You want to ban anything you don’t like and that doesn’t suit you.’) or **neutral** if it was used in articulating an argument but without the intent to offend others (i.e., ‘the liberal agenda has caused a huge rise in regulations across a number of industries).*

Code ‘4’ all comments containing ‘name-calling’: (e.g., gun-nut, idiot, fool, etc...). To be coded as name-calling the words used must be clearly derogatory towards the person it is intended for.

Exceptions: Be careful not to include words which may be regarded as a stereotype (i.e., liberal). If name-calling is aimed at a group, or the ‘name’ is often applied to a group of individuals, it may potentially be a stereotypical comment (i.e. anyone who owns a gun is an idiot – this groups all gun-owners together, therefore stereotyping them).

Other examples: Please see Jamieson & Falk, 1999; Kenski, Coe, and Rains, 2011; Papacharissi, 2004 for further instances of name-calling.

Code ‘5’ all comments containing ‘aspersions’: All comments containing ‘an attack on the reputation or integrity of someone or something’ ought to be coded for aspersion. A comment may be coded as including an aspersion if it contains disparaging or belittling comments aimed at other commenters or their ideas. These ought to include explicit efforts to express dismay at others. For example, a comment which reads: ‘Teachers don’t need to be carrying guns! It’s stupid!’ may be considered an aspersion. A comment which reads: ‘sheer idiocy’ may also be considered an aspersion. Similarly, a comment which reads: ‘this is a free country that prohibits slavery. Do you have a problem with that?’ may also be coded as an aspersion as its tone implies it is not a genuine question, but an attack on a previous comment/idea. An aspersion may be both explicit or implicit.

Other examples: Please see Jamieson & Falk, 1999; Kenski, Coe, and Rains, 2011; Papacharissi, 2004 for further instances of aspersion.

Code ‘6’ all comments containing ‘lying’: All comments implying disingenuousness (e.g., liar, dishonest, fraud etc...) of other commenters or public figures ought to be coded as lying

Exceptions: If a comment casts doubt on the truthfulness of a previous comment or a public figure this does not constitute the use of synonyms for liar. For example, if a commenter says ‘that is not true’, they are not implying that the other person is intentionally lying, but rather that they are misinformed.

Other examples: Please see Jamieson & Falk, 1999; Kenski, Coe, and Rains, 2011; Papacharissi, 2004 for further instances of lying.

Code ‘7’ all comments containing vulgarity: All comments containing vulgar language (e.g., crap, shit, any swear-words/cursing, sexual innuendo etc...) ought to be coded as vulgar. Comments containing vulgar abbreviations such as WTF (what the fuck) should also be coded as vulgar.

Other examples: Please see Jamieson & Falk, 1999; Kenski, Coe, and Rains, 2011; Papacharissi, 2004 for further instances of vulgarity.

Code ‘8’ all comments containing ‘pejorative speak’: All comments containing language which disparages the manner in which someone communicates (e.g., blather, crying, moaning, etc...) ought to be coded as pejorative for speech.

Other examples: Please see Jamieson & Falk, 1999; Kenski, Coe, and Rains, 2011; Papacharissi, 2004 for further instances of pejorative speak.

Code ‘9’ all comments containing ‘hyperbole’: Comments which contain a massive overstatement (e.g., makes pulling teeth with pliers look easy) ought to be coded as hyperbole. Be careful not to include words which accurately describe events, particularly given that many of the topics under discussion may be described using words associated with hyperbole (i.e., the Newtown shooting may be described both as a ‘massacre’ and a ‘heinous’ act), although these words are not necessarily used to overemphasize it. Hyperbole might be characterised either as a phrase (i.e., barely a week goes by without a shooting), or the overuse of descriptive words designed to emphasize a point (i.e., ‘It’s not the guns that kill but a ticking time bomb of anger seething in society, giving clues & everyone ignoring him until he kills little babies with an illegal automatic weapon. I don’t think it was an accident he killed mommy, the Phd & Principal. He was suicidal & homicidal; very common & wanted notoriety. What better way than to kill babies).

Note: many social issues are discussed using language which may be considered hyperbole, i.e., abortion = murder, gay marriage = abomination, etc. It is up to you as to whether you believe the commenter is making an overstatement or just describes it as such.

Other examples: Please see Jamieson & Falk, 1999; Kenski, Coe, and Rains, 2011; Papacharissi, 2004 for further instances of hyperbole.

Code ‘10’ all comments containing ‘noncooperation’: The discussion of a situation in terms of a stalemate ought to be coded as noncooperation. Outright rejection of an idea/policy by a commenter should only count as non-cooperation if it involves excessive use of exclamation marks or capital letters for example. For example, a comment which reads: ‘I’m

48 years old. I retired after 20 years in the military. I went back to college to be a special education teacher. I WILL NEVER CARRY A FIREARM INTO MY CLASSROOM. Find another solution' may be considered non-cooperation. Similarly, a comment which reads: 'I hate guns!! I refuse to send my kids to a school where the teachers are armed!!!!!!' may be coded as non-cooperation.

Exceptions: A simple rejection of an idea/policy should not be considered non-cooperation. Likewise, suggesting that another commenter has no right to take part in the discussion for whatever reason should be coded as 'threat to individual rights' insofar as it threatens their right to free speech, not as non-cooperation. Only a refusal to listen or comply should be coded as non-cooperation.

Other examples: Please see Jamieson & Falk, 1999; Kenski, Coe, and Rains, 2011; Papacharissi, 2004 for further instances of noncooperation.

Code '11' all comments containing 'sarcasm': You'll know it when you see it!!

Code '12' all comments which may be deemed impolite, but which do not fall into any of the previous categories of impoliteness: This category ought to catch any other type of impoliteness that you think is evident and which does not fit into any other category above. This most commonly includes using capital letters to symbolise shouting and the use of blasphemous language. Even comments you believe are impolite in their tone may be coded as 'other' (12).

Exceptions: CAPITAL LETTERS, if used for single words, should be assumed to be signalling emphasis. If a phrase or sentence is written in CAPS, this may be considered shouting.

Other examples: Please see Papacharissi, 2004; Smith & Bressler, 2012 for other examples of impoliteness.

Direction of incivility:

All uncivil and impolite comments should be coded for their direction, with the exception of stereotypes which should be coded as antagonistic or neutral.

Once the type of incivility has been categorised, the direction then needs to be coded. Comments containing incivility and which are aimed at another commenter in the discussion should be coded as **Interpersonal (i)**. Interpersonal comments include those which are explicitly directed at other commenters (i.e. where the comment includes the name of other commenters) or those which address the comments of others, even without naming them. An example of interpersonal incivility may include: ‘I can’t wait to see you on the battlefield someday Leo [another commenter] because that is what it’s gonna boil down to....you believe what you want and you should BUT DO NOT FORCE YOUR BELIEFS ON ME.’

If the comment contains incivility and is aimed at a specific person or group of people not present, the comment is coded as **Other-directed (od)**. In this case, the “other” often refers to a politician (i.e. Obama), a pressure group (i.e. the NRA), a political party (i.e. Republicans), the media (i.e. the Washington Post), or state institutions (i.e. SCOTUS).

If the comment contains incivility but does not refer, or imply reference, to another commenter or “other”, the comment is coded as **Neutral (n)**. Neutral incivility occurs

primarily when the commenter disagrees with the content of the article being commented on.

An example of neutral incivility may include: ‘A Bushmaster in a classroom? WTF!!’

The direction of a comment is very much dependent on the coders understanding of whether or not it refers to other comments in the thread or whether it is a stand alone comment which is not intended as a response. Thus it is important to be familiar with the content and language of the article to which the comment refers.