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Beyond toxicity in the online public sphere: understanding incivility in online political talk

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Introduction

With the promise of a digital public sphere capable of reinvigorating public debate and political participation far from being fulfilled, research on online political talk has been increasingly concerned with the challenges that digital platforms impose on democratically constructive conversations, such as the presence of uncivil discourse and trolling. While these issues have been discussed for over three decades, the rise of uncivil mainstream politics led by the upsurge of populism around the world, along with polarization and the prevalence of partisan media in high-choice environments, has sparked new interest around the potential effects of uncivil discourse, online and offline.

Several scholars have suggested that incivility in online discussions can undermine their value, leading to a dismissal of these forms of political engagement. Rather than dismissing online political talk due to the presence of incivility, researchers have been calling for a more nuanced approach to allow for a better understanding of the set of behaviours that are routinely classified as uncivil.

Uncivil by design? Disputing the democratic value of online political talk

The 'democratic potential' of the Internet to reinvigorate the public sphere has been a topic of scholarly concern for over three decades. The expectation that digital technologies would help to advance democratic goals was largely based on its technical features – or affordances – such as enabling people to talk to one another beyond geographic boundaries, to participate in discussions without fear of social sanctions or constraints, and the possibility of horizontal communication between citizens and their elected representatives (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). The hopes for a renewed public sphere were rapidly frustrated by empirical studies focused on online political discussions, e-government and e-participatory initiatives and political campaigns. Research suggested that the quality, tone and heterogeneity of online discussions was far from the standards of deliberative communication (Davis, 2005), that government-led digital initiatives were more focused on improving the efficiency of services than in fostering active citizen participation (Chadwick, 2003), and that political campaigns were not interested in opening channels for voters to interact with politicians (Stromer-Galley, 2000).

Despite being unable to fulfil the idealized goals of a 'virtual public sphere', online political talk remains one of the core areas of inquiry in the field of political communication, largely motivated by the variety of opportunities to participate in formal and informal discussion environments, such as forums, bulletin boards, news websites and, more recently, social media

(Rossini and Stromer-Galley, 2019). The interest around online political discussions is not unjustified: talking about politics is a central practice to democratic citizenship, one that enables the public to learn about issues of public concern, build and recognize collective identities, learn about others' views and form, rehearse and clarify political opinions (Moy & Gastil, 2006; Rossini & Stromer-Galley, 2019).

Much of this scholarship has been framed within deliberative theory, focusing on the extent to which online political talk exhibits a set of normative discursive traits, such as rational exchange of arguments, justified positions, interpersonal respect, diversity of perspectives, reciprocity and civility (Coleman and Moss, 2012; Santana, 2014; Stromer-Galley and Wichowski, 2011). Others have called for a more inclusive approach, arguing that informal conversations should not be expected to live up to demanding deliberative norms (Chadwick, 2009; Freelon, 2010). While scholars may disagree about what constitutes democratically desirable conversation, most have consistently flagged incivility as a toxic feature of online political talk (Coe et al., 2014; Hmielowski et al., 2014; O'Sullivan and Flanagin, 2003; Santana, 2014). As a result, online discussions are routinely dismissed as democratically relevant due to a pervasive presence of incivility.

Many have argued that the Internet is uncivil by design: the affordances that were championed as being democratizing, such as anonymity, which would allow for participants to debate as equals, also might facilitate personal attacks, vulgar language or rudeness (e.g., Santana, 2014). The possibility of talking to others beyond geographic borders also means that people engage with unknown others, reducing the risk of social constraints that would force participants to 'save face' (Papacharissi, 2004). And while content moderation practices are largely seen as a solution to mitigate toxicity online and can have positive effects on the quality of discourse (Stroud et al., 2014), research has found that uncivil expressions prevail even in moderated environments (Rossini, 2019).

In short, research on online incivility has been focusing on a set of affordances of certain online channels to explain the phenomenon, but this line of inquiry becomes more complex as political talk takes place in multiple platforms; which calls for more comparative research. For instance, the idea that anonymity facilitates toxicity is challenged by the prevalence of incivility on social media, where people have personal profiles and use real names. Likewise, in the age of social media, moderation practices become less transparent as social media companies, notably known for not taking 'ownership' over the content in their platforms, are in charge of deciding the boundaries of what is permissible online (Gillespie, 2018). As a result, assumptions about the role of platform affordances in facilitating uncivil expressions need more scrutiny, as the changes in the media landscape make it more challenging to isolate which affordances are at play in facilitating or constraining these forms of expression.

Beyond understanding the role of platform affordances, research on online incivility has mainly adopted a view that these behaviours are detrimental to the quality of political talk. In what follows, I argue that scholars should move beyond this simplistic approach to incivility, which is a consequence of the lack of consensus around how incivility is conceptualized and measured. Then, I outline a research agenda for the future that focuses on better understanding the role of antinormative behaviours in online political talk.

Uncivil for whom?

Incivility is a challenging concept, and most scholars would agree that there is no consensus around its definition (Jamieson et al., 2015). A common reference to this lack of clarity is that ‘incivility lies in the eye of the beholder’ (Herbst, 2010; Jamieson et al., 2015). Most approaches to incivility fall in two theoretical traditions: politeness and deliberative democracy. In the former, behaviours such as rudeness and vulgar rhetoric, interpersonal disrespect, profanities, personal and ad hominem attacks, are considered violations of politeness and, as such, uncivil (Laden, 2019). In the context of deliberation, incivility is seen as a lack of respect for democratic norms and cooperation, unwillingness to acknowledge and engage with diverse positions, and to negotiate and compromise to benefit the public good (Mutz and Reeves, 2005).

Studies of online incivility have mainly adopted the politeness approach, focusing on behaviours such as name-calling, vulgarity, profane language, stereotyping, interpersonal disrespect, and graphic representations of shouting (writing with all caps or using many exclamation points) as signals of uncivil discourse (Chen, 2017; Coe et al., 2014; Hutchens et al., 2014; O’Sullivan and Flanagan, 2003; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014). Despite the overlap in the types of behaviours classified as uncivil, given differences in how scholars have conceptualized incivility, the results of current research cannot be compared. However, most studies looking at the presence of incivility in a variety of online platforms, from forums and news websites to social media, find comparable instances of incivility – ranging from 20 to 40 per cent – suggesting that, regardless of how one defines and measures it, the behaviour can be consistently observed in online political talk (Chen, 2017; Coe et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Rossini, 2019; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014).

The focus on incivility as impoliteness, instead of in the context of democratic norms, can be explained by an emphasis on a methodological focus on content analyses of online conversations. The features that indicate impoliteness are, to some extent, easier to operationalize as contextual cues: most people can spot and consistently classify these behaviours in written text; while underlying normative values such as cooperation, respect and consideration for diverse opinions, and focus on the public good, are not necessarily signalled as textual cues in online discourse. To some extent, these behaviours can be better identified in formal instances of political discussion, such as parliamentary or congressional debates, when cooperation, willingness to compromise, respect towards diverging ideas and focus on the public good are necessary to solve disagreements in order for political processes to unfold.

Given the challenges around how incivility online is defined and measured, a concerning result is that scholars have been conflating behaviours that signal face-to-face impoliteness with those that are more problematic and consequential, such as hate speech, violent threats, offensive stereotyping, and so on. When these are equated to name-calling, vulgar language, and so on, scholars cannot accurately judge the extent to which the presence of incivility means that online political talk is toxic or harmful.

It becomes equally challenging to understand the potential effects of incivility, a stream of research that has also prioritized the politeness approach. Studies suggest that the presence of incivility in online comments can undermine trust, and the perception of quality and credibility

of news media outlets (Meltzer, 2015; Prochazka et al., 2018). Incivility in comments can increase the perception of risk and polarize the audience, among those who already held negative views on the topic (Anderson et al., 2014), or affect citizens' perceptions of the persuasiveness of others' arguments (Chen and Ng, 2016).

Less is known about the extent to which online incivility affects individual behaviour. A study found that blog posts can motivate readers to participate in the comments section, but they may also increase polarization about the topic (Borah, 2014). Others have found that incivility around partisan topics in the news can increase the perceptions that out-group politicians are behaving uncivilly, and in turn can discourage readers from engaging with the news (Muddiman et al., 2017). In the context of political discussions, there is some evidence that those who more routinely participate in online political talk are more likely to perceive incivility as acceptable, as well as more likely to engage in those behaviours, suggesting that the most active participants of online discussions are also the ones who perceive incivility to come with the territory when discussing politics (Hmielowski et al., 2014). On social media, incivility may even be perceived as entertaining (Sydnor, 2018). Interestingly, experimental research suggests that participants assume that uncivil comments can make others angry or upset, but do not report being angry or upset themselves, suggesting a 'third-person effect' (Chen and Ng, 2017) that could also be interpreted as an indication that the actual effects of being exposed to incivility are overstated, as people tend to think others will be offended even if they are not.

In the same vein as the stream of research investigating incivility in the content of online political talk, studies on effects also suffer from the conceptual fuzziness highlighted earlier in the chapter, which in turn suggests that the reference to the results of the studies summarized above must consider the different ways in which the concept was operationalized and measured. As a result, despite a large body of research analysing online incivility, the inferences that can be made from these studies are inconclusive at best in helping to determine whether these behaviours are harmful – or harmless – to online political talk.

Beyond 'just incivility'

To address the challenges around the concept of incivility, and accepting that the term may have different meanings depending on cultural and contextual situations, scholars have started to push for a nuanced approach. Papacharissi (2004) has argued that reducing incivility to face-to-face impoliteness ignores 'the democratic merit of robust and heated discussion'. Her work proposed a distinction between impoliteness and incivility, with the latter being restricted to behaviours that can be seen as a threat to democratic values, such as inciting violence towards democratic institutions, using offensive stereotyping towards people and groups, and other types of behaviours that deny other people their freedoms (Papacharissi, 2004). This perspective makes an important contribution, arguing that the dismissal of impolite conversation may also mean denying that heated debate can be an important democratic activity; particularly when the affordances of mediated conversation can facilitate rudeness by removing some of the social constraints that are present in face-to-face interactions.

Thinking about incivility beyond digital environments, Muddiman (2017) differentiates between personal-level incivility, grounded on politeness norms and, as such, violated by personal attacks and interpersonal rudeness, and public-level incivility, 'violations of reciprocity norms and

disrespect for opposing political ideas' (Muddiman, 2017: 3199). In my own work on online political talk, I offer a distinction between incivility and intolerance, with the former referring to impolite, rude, vulgar or profane expressions, including name-calling and personal attacks, and the latter defined as expressions that violate moral respect and undermine individual and collective identities based on personal, social, sexual, ethnical, religious or cultural characteristics, violent threats, and so forth (Rossini, 2019).

There are several reasons to justify a nuanced approach to incivility to better understand its role on digital media. First, studies based on the distinction between impoliteness and incivility (Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015), or incivility and intolerance (Rossini, 2019), have found that the types of antinormative expressions that are more frequently found online tend to fall under rudeness and vulgarity, while expressions that signal threats to democratic norms or values are rarely found in mainstream online spaces such as social media, news websites or popular online forums. Thus, it may be that the generalized concern around the toxicity of political talk online is exaggerated: while conversations may be heated and rude, there is not enough evidence to suggest that they are harmful or detrimental to advancing important democratic goals, such as being exposed to, and engaging with, the other side (Rossini, 2019).

Moreover, research examining citizens' perceptions suggests that some forms of incivility are accepted: for instance, name-calling and vulgarity are seen as more uncivil than messages containing aspersions or employing a pejorative tone (Kenski et al., 2017), and attacks on another person's conduct or character are seen as more uncivil than attacks on political arguments or positions (Muddiman, 2017; Stryker et al., 2016). In short, there is enough evidence that citizens' perceptions of incivility are not always aligned with what researchers deem as uncivil. Thus, scholars need to move beyond a single idea of incivility, and towards measuring presence, effects and perceptions of different types of behaviour.

Looking ahead: a research agenda for online incivility

This chapter has provided an overview of the research in online incivility and identifies the lack of clarity in what has counted as uncivil in current research, as well as the broad range of behaviours under the umbrella of 'incivility' as the main shortcomings in this agenda. To conclude, I turn to an agenda for future research to explore three areas: content, perceptions and effects.

First, if we accept that the nature of online discourse facilitates rudeness and profanities, because of affordances that reduce contextual cues and risk of sanctions, we must also consider that some expressions flagged as incivility might be considered normal in online discussions. Thus, scholars need to disentangle behaviours that denote heated arguments, interpersonal disrespect or lack of politeness from those that are democratically harmful – such as harassment, hate speech, violent threats and discrimination – in order to be able to distinguish democratically relevant conversation from toxic discourse. Still in the realm of content, scholars must consider that incivility might serve different rhetorical purposes, and distinguish expressions used to attack others from rhetoric that aims at advancing or reinforcing arguments.

Second, research has started to uncover the extent to which behaviours deemed by scholars as uncivil are indeed perceived as such by people, and the findings suggest that the public does not

always align with scholarly definitions (Kenski et al., 2017; Stryker et al., 2016). So far, this work has not focused specifically on expressions of incivility online, for which participants may have different levels of tolerance that can be affected by experiences and other contextual variables, such as the platform where a comment is made, or whether or not participants are anonymous. Future research should further investigate how different types of antinormative expressions are received and perceived, adopting a cross-platform approach to unveil how contextual variables may affect the reception of antinormative behaviour.

Third, little has been uncovered about the types of discourse that are systematically moderated by platforms, news websites and online forums. As a consequence, what we know about online incivility based on public content is affected by moderation practices that may have introduced biases which scholars cannot fully understand or explain. While the concern about how platforms devise policy and practice moderation is not new (Dutton, 1996; Gillespie, 2018), the use of algorithms to perform moderation at scale has made these practices increasingly less transparent to the public. More research is needed to unveil how these moderation practices shape the tone of the content that is publicly visible.

Finally, the research investigating the effects of incivility online has suggested that this type of discourse can affect people's perception of the credibility, trustworthiness and quality of news outlets and articles, and can increase polarization. However, these studies have mainly focused on a few – often contentious – topics. More research is needed to understand how being exposed to incivility can affect future behaviour, such as the willingness to participate in a discussion, as well as individual-level effects, for example being offended, or feeling ostracized or silenced. Importantly, the inclusion of a broad range of behaviours under the same concept also means that the work around the effects of incivility has failed to address the effects of toxic forms of expression, such as harassment, violent threats, discrimination or hate speech. While these behaviours are less pervasive in most online places, their consequences are potentially more harmful both to participants in a discussion and to bystanders. They are also more challenging to study quantitatively, as these types of expressions could be moderated. Moving forward, a focus on qualitative research is particularly relevant to uncover the detrimental effects of online abuse.

To summarize, while incivility has benefited from a growing body of scholarly attention, there are several areas for this research agenda to develop. We must be careful with normative arguments for civility, as these often come from opinion leaders, elites and those in the centre of the public sphere, and can be used to ostracize marginalized voices, rather than foster a more democratic dialogue. Future research needs to step away from using 'incivility' as an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of behaviours, in order to better understand how antinormative discourse takes place online and, in particular, to be able to critically distinguish vulgar, profane or heated online banter from democratically alarming behaviours that silence and discriminate against others' voices.

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