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Civility, Engagement, and Online Discourse: A Review of Literature

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Online venues present an opportunity for people to engage in civic discourse

Central to the health of democracy is people talking with one another and sharing their thoughts about politics and public affairs (Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1939). Engaging in political discussion helps people gain knowledge (Eveland & Thomson, 2006), allows them to teach or spread information to others (Brosius & Weimann, 1996; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), leads people to more considered opinions (Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000), and can be just as important for their understanding of the news as news exposure itself (Robinson & Levy, 1986). Political discussion also informs people about ways to participate (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999) and influences their vote choices (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Discussing politics and current affairs and the inherent disagreements that accompany this exchange are essential parts of American democracy (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996).

The Internet presents a unique opportunity for people to engage in political discourse. Online forums, blogs, news organizations' comment sections, and social networking sites are just a few of the places that the American public can participate in discussions about public affairs. Like face-to-face communication, research has found that online deliberation can increase knowledge about important issues, efficacy, and willingness to participate in politics (Min, 2007). Yet much online conversation falls short of the deliberative ideals of civil, well-reasoned conversations among respected discussants.

Of particular concern, the nature of online spaces and the discourse they afford open the door for incivility. Incivility is often perceived when people are impolite or behave rudely, but it can involve actions other than disobeying the rules and practices of proper etiquette. Papacharissi (2004) argues that civility involves enriching democracy and its opposite, incivility, occurs when people engage in "behaviors that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups" (p. 267). These two notions of civility – politeness and democratic enrichment – sometimes conflict. Since the type of discourse that strengthens democracy requires position-taking on issues about which people may be emotionally invested, some messages that enhance democracy (especially via a lively debate), could violate ideals of politeness. In this paper, we consider incivility in both forms, as well as efforts to reduce both types of uncivil behavior.

Our objective in this white paper is to provide a concise review of what we know about online discussion and how we can promote more civil discourse and engagement. We begin by reviewing why people engage in online discussion. We next turn to research findings on the deliberative nature, or lack thereof, of online discourse and explanations for its existence. Ideas and scholarship on how to improve online discourse are then described. We conclude with a brief discussion on Millennials, as they are the most

active participants in online discussions. This topline report aims to give major takeaways from the literature to-date. For those who wish to improve the quality and civility of the political discourse in this country and elsewhere, it is crucial to more fully understand the unique strengths and weaknesses of online spaces as venues for civic discourse.

People engage in online discussion to connect, express their views, and hear from others

A prerequisite to creating an online space that promotes civil discourse is understanding why people currently seek these spaces. Perceptions and motivations for online engagement differ across users. Whereas online comment writers are more motivated by a desire to express opinions and spread information than a desire to engage in discussion, comment readers are motivated by the social interaction of hearing from others and understanding multiple perspectives (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Mitchelstein, 2011). People perceive their online political activity as primarily discursive and different from offline activities that influence government (Hoffman, Jones, & Young, 2013). Witschge (2008) surveyed Dutch users of online forums about immigration. Users cited the exchange of ideas and exposure to differing views as primary reasons for using the forums. The forum participants valued diversity and the opportunity to express their own views. They also perceived the forums as more accepting of diverse views than traditional media; the authors suggest that this perception influences the type of discourse that takes place in the online forums.

Social media and social networking site users tend to have social reasons for visiting these sites. Believing that more of one's friends are on Facebook and that there are many social tools available on Facebook (e.g. photo-sharing) positively predicts use of the site (Lin & Lu, 2011). Research finds that personality variables also predict social media use. Emotional instability, a variable related to loneliness, is related to greater social media use (Correa, Hinsley, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010). Social networking may help people integrate socially; participation in social networking sites affects offline relationships, making people feel more connected to a broader community (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). The effects of Facebook use on this type of bridging social capital are particularly strong among those with low self-esteem. Social media, it seems, lives up to its name.

In sum, the findings signal inherently social reasons for engaging in dialogue online. At least some people desire online spaces where they can express their views and hear from others. Others seek community and connectedness.

Online political discussion often can be uncivil and veer from deliberative ideals

Online spaces are unique social environments that can make civil discourse challenging. Central to civil discussion is the consideration of multiple opinions, which can be even more difficult to find in online contexts than in face-to-face situations. Research has found that opposing arguments in online text-based interactions resulted in less attitude change about target political and social issues than face-to-face interactions (Lipinski-Harten & Tafarodi, 2013), suggesting that it is easier to be dismissive of alternative viewpoints in online contexts. Also, people tend to be less satisfied with text-based online communication than with face-to-face and videoconference-style communication (Simon, 2006). By influencing the way

online discussants perceive each other and the discussion experience, online contexts thus have the potential to make civil discourse harder to achieve.

Comment sections, which are fairly well-studied online discussion spaces, vary in terms of comment quality and deliberativeness. Discourse can be conceived of as either adhering to the standards of deliberation or presenting limited arguments and perspectives (Ruiz, Domingo, Micó, Díaz-Noci, Masip, & Meso, 2011). In their analysis of posts on a Chinese news site, Zhou, Chan, and Peng (2006) found that most participants did not incorporate opposing views in their searches and discussions, nor did they directly respond to others. Exposure to disagreement was limited; people were more likely to express agreement rather than an opposing idea, but they did offer support for their opinions. Ruiz et al. (2011) report similar findings in their analysis of newspaper comments across five countries. Further, in online discussions, people tend to mimic the opinion climate of their group, and these comments have been found to lead to post-discussion opinion change (Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2006).

One common criticism of online interactions is that they are often uncivil and impolite. In examining the civility of discussion threads in an online political news group, Papacharissi (2004) found that although mediated communication encouraged heated discussion, most messages were in fact civil. But when incivility does take place, research indicates that it does not just come from a few *trolls* or *flamers* (Konnikova, 2013) but rather, incivility is distributed widely across commenters (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). Higher rates of incivility in comments exist around stories that center on divisive topics and/or cite partisan sources (Coe et al., 2014). Incivility is a concern because of its effects. Uncivil comments encourage issue polarization and influence others' perceptions of the stories they surround (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufefe, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014). Interestingly, however, people perceive news stories with uncivil commentary as more credible (Thorson, Vraga & Ekdale, 2010).

As these studies illustrate, online discussion remains far from deliberative and can contain high levels of incivility. Identifying ways to improve the deliberative and civil nature of online spaces thus becomes a high priority.

Anonymity can give rise to incivility and anti-deliberative behaviors

When two or more individuals meet face-to-face in conversation, much more information is being passed between them than just the words they are saying. A multitude of social cues are available to guide each person's thoughts and behavior: status cues (e.g. style of dress and spoken language use), interaction context cues (e.g. workplace vs. home), group identity cues (e.g. racial/ethnic/national identity and gender), and many others (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006). The fact that online discourse typically lacks these kinds of cues is one of its defining differences, and one that has serious implications for the outcomes of such discourse.

The anonymity and freedom from consequences that online discourse allows may inspire greater incivility. Indeed, online platforms present a low-cost type of engagement—people can express their opinions and learn the views of others at their convenience. Citizens can express themselves anonymously, tempering the possibility of negative recourse for the positions they express. This shroud of anonymity can encourage people to behave in ways that they might not offline. Termed *the online disinhibition effect* (Suler, 2004), some people feel freer in an online (rather than offline) environment to express themselves. This expression can come in the form of increased disclosure of personal information,

or as acting in normatively less desirable ways, such as using insults and threatening language. Halperin and Gibbs (2013) analyzed comments on the White House YouTube and Facebook channels – YouTube being more anonymous than Facebook. Although YouTube comments were less polite than those on Facebook, there were no differences in the use of derogatory stereotypes, the second form of civility reviewed in our introductory section. This finding suggests that anonymity may relate to some forms of incivility more than others. Comparing comment systems that allow anonymity to those that do not, Santana (2014) found that comments left on anonymous sites were less civil.

Although anonymity is related to at least some forms of online incivility, there is some debate over how problematic online anonymity really is (Stryker & Reynolds-Stenson, 2011). Some point to its benefits, like reducing visible status cues and creating a more equal group identity (e.g. Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006). Others note its drawbacks, like deindividuation (i.e. a loss of self-awareness when one's identity becomes interchangeable with the identities of others in a social group) and a lack of concern for the consequences of online behavior (e.g. Suler, 2004). Although the anonymity of online spaces at times can be credited with increased participation and willingness to voice views that are counter to group norms, anonymous arguments are less effective at changing opinions than non-anonymous ones (Haines, Hough, Cao, & Haines, 2012). On news organizations' sites, anonymity predicts more comment participation (Meyer & Carey, 2014). Yet anonymous comments tend to be perceived by readers as less credible (Rains, 2007).

Online environments and the anonymity they can provide present a unique challenge to creating civil online spaces. In order to get the most out of online spaces for political discourse, careful attention must be paid to balancing the effects of anonymity with the quality of discussion.

There are reasons to be optimistic about improving online discourse

Avoiding the problems of incivility and anti-deliberative practices by creating more productive online conversation spaces is the goal of researchers and practitioners alike. In the following paragraphs, we review psychological research, practices from online sites, and research on news comment sections to uncover strategies for creating better online discussion.

Psychological research on interpersonal communication provides some potentially fruitful avenues for fostering civil discourse online. For example, one of social psychology's well-known approaches to intergroup relations, the contact hypothesis, may be applied to online interaction between individuals and groups who disagree on political issues. The approach, originally described by Allport (1954), outlines the conditions under which intergroup contact is most likely to have positive outcomes: equal status of participants, common goals, intergroup cooperation, institutional support for the interaction, and direct, personal interaction between group members. Modern researchers (e.g. Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006; Harwood, 2010) have suggested that online spaces may be well suited to meeting these conditions and facilitating productive discussion. Research also suggests that the quality of online interactions can be improved by creating interaction spaces that are personally relevant, that allow for personal participation, and that provide a rich, or multi-faceted, interaction experience (e.g. Dalley-Hewer, Clouder, Jackson, Goodman, Bluteau, & Davies, 2012; Harwood, 2010). It follows that the conditions under which online interaction occurs can be devised to maximize positive outcomes (in the case of the current research, civility) and minimize negative outcomes (incivility).

Other strategies that have been employed in online discussion spaces include moderating users' discussion and providing guidelines to users. Although online platforms—particularly those that depend on user-generated content—cite the importance of free speech and expression, many websites have implemented tactics to encourage civility in the discourse that takes place. Community guidelines on large platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, and Twitter identify hate speech, violence and threats, harassment, bullying, and personal attacks as content that may be reported and removed. However, the guidelines are mostly unspecific as to how often this content is monitored and removed. Twitter specifically states that they do not actively monitor content and will intervene only in very limited circumstances. On YouTube, staff will review videos that are flagged as inappropriate (a review of comment sections under videos reflects that comment moderation is minimal). Reddit only issues informal guidelines (termed “reddiquette”) asking users not to be rude, conduct personal attacks, or insult others. Finally, Facebook states that they may remove reported content that contains violence and threats, self-harm, bullying and harassment, or hate speech. How effective these guidelines and strategies are requires more research.

The comment sections of news sites are a fruitful place to investigate strategies for creating more deliberative conversation. Some organizations believe that comment sections increase reader engagement and loyalty, but see cleaning up the uncivil comments as a predecessor to thoughtful deliberative reader engagement (Goodman, 2013). The Huffington Post announced in August 2013 that they would no longer allow anonymous commenters, and implemented the policy that commenters must log in using their Facebook accounts (Soni, 2013). Popular Science also announced that they were shutting off their comments sections, as research indicated that, “even a fractious minority wields enough power to skew a reader's perception of a story.” (LaBarre, 2013) The New York Times takes a staff-intensive approach to comment moderation: Comments are either approved or rejected by staff; they are not edited. The New York Times implements several incentive-based strategies. First, they created NYT Picks, which are a selection of comments that represent a range of views and are judged the most thoughtful and interesting. Second, to become a Verified Commenter, one must use one's real name. Across the Internet, websites, particularly those that allow users to interact with one another, are taking actions to increase the civility of the engagement.

Evidence suggests that tactics such as moderating comments can improve the quality of online discussion on news sites. Wright and Street (2007) argue that format and operation influence deliberation, which is dependent on design rather than the technology itself. Comment moderation leads to more intentions to participate (Wise, Hamman, & Thorson, 2006) and is related to actual comment participation (Meyer & Carey, 2014). Having a journalist interact with commenters in the comment section also can improve the deliberative nature of the comments left (Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2014). Because peoples' comments tend to mirror the thoughtfulness they see in the comments of others (Sukumaran, Vezich, McHugh & Nass, 2011), newsrooms can look for ways to populate their comment sections with thoughtful remarks. There are many new ideas for increasing the quality, amount, and diversity of comment sections. In an examination of 126 proposed methods for improving online discussion spaces, Zamith and Lewis (2014) identify four reoccurring themes that describe improved spaces: (a) better organized online content, (b) effectively moderated content, (c) comments connected across sites to enrich the range of views, (d) and the promotion of both participation and diversity. They suggest some technical applications such as filters that organize comments by content, interactive visuals, and crowd-sourced moderation.

By drawing from psychological research, current guidelines and moderation policies, and scholarship on ways to improve comment sections, there is clear optimism about the potential for more engaging and civil online discourse.

Millennials have been paving the way in online discourse

An important precursor to fostering online spaces for civil discourse is an understanding of who will likely inhabit the space. Individuals' cultural backgrounds, education levels, and ages can influence the way they interact with and experience online environments (e.g. Gallagher & Savage, 2013; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). It is probably no surprise that online spaces are dominated by the younger generations of Americans. People born between the early 1980s and early 2000s, or Millennials, represent a powerful political voice and lead much of the nation's community action, especially in online spaces. A vast majority (71%) of young people today cite the Internet as a main news source (Pew Research Center, 2013), and 67 percent of 18-24 year olds have engaged in political activity on social networking sites (Smith, 2013). The trend of engaging in political activity online has been increasing in recent years (Smith, 2013). Millennials are, and will continue to be, a driving force behind political change as they continue to use online spaces as a medium for political engagement.

When researchers investigate what engagement means to young people, they often find something more personalized and discursive than institutional participation like voting or other forms of candidate or party support (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2014). New media provide young people (who are generally the earliest adopters of technology) with an opportunity to engage in socially interactive participatory politics (Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen, 2014). Online platforms afford users access to vast and diverse information, opinions, and audiences; the ability to collaborate with and mobilize others; and the freedom to do these things apart from formal political structures and organizations (Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen, 2014).

Several research projects have analyzed how to get Millennials involved in the political sphere via new media. Young people are most likely to be online, but least likely to be engaged politically (Lupia & Philpot, 2005). Lupia and Philpot (2005) suggest that the solution to getting young people involved lies in strategic website design. Young people (who differ from their older counterparts over preferred website attributes) desire platforms that effectively and efficiently provide information relevant to the target demographic. Iyengar and Jackman (2004) found that tailoring political information to youth by incorporating more interactive elements is more successful at increasing their political interest and participation than information presented without engaging and interactive features. This research establishes a track record of identifying promising design features to engage Millennials with politics online, an endeavor we hope to continue in future steps of this research.

Conclusion

Spaces for citizens to engage with one another and discuss politics and public affairs are central to a healthy democracy. Online platforms have an opportunity to supply this space. The unique nature of the Internet coupled with the psychological and communication phenomena that affect online users greatly influence the quality of mediated interactions. Anonymity, disinhibition, and the adoption of anti-social online mores can leave online discourse lacking civility. Current research, however, indicates that strategic platform design may pave the road to more civil and civic dialogue.

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