

**Paper submitted to the Political Communication Division of the 68th Annual
Conference of the International Communication Association, May, 2018, Prague, Czech
Republic.**

Does it Matter if it's Uncivil?

Conceptualizing Uncivil and Intolerant Discourse in Online Political Talk

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Abstract. This paper takes up the popular argument that much online discussion is toxic and hence harmful to democracy. I offer a more nuanced theory by arguing that uncivil discourse, where people express their perspectives with foul language and antinormative intensity, should be understood as a rhetorical act. The true threat to democracy is intolerant discourse where groups of people or individuals are attacked in ways that threaten democratic pluralism. The validity of this theoretical model is demonstrated in the context of public comments in a wide range of political news in two different platforms – news websites and social media. Results demonstrate that incivility and intolerance can be meaningfully distinguished. While incivility is associated with desirable discussion features, such as justified opinion expression and engagement with disagreement, intolerance is likely to occur in discussions about minorities and civil society – exactly when it can hurt democracy the most.

Keywords: Political Talk, Incivility, Political Intolerance, Social Media.

Introduction

Informal political discussion is a vital component of everyday life in democratic societies. It is through everyday interactions about politics that citizens learn, understand, and recognize matters of public concern, as well as interact with weak and strong social ties. Informal political conversation about public issues and events help shape participants' views of the world, provide mutual understanding of shared values, and yield meaning to daily facts (Mansbridge, 1999; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000). Prior research has identified numerous benefits of informal political talk, such as increasing political knowledge (Huckfeldt & Mendez, 2008), enabling the refinement of opinions and arguments, and increasing political efficacy (Moy & Gastil, 2006; Xenos & Moy, 2007). Ultimately, the ongoing negotiation of interaction during political discussion enable participants to reason together, articulate arguments, form opinions, build, negotiate, and understand personal and collective identities.

The internet as a "channeler-of-channels" (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011) offers many opportunities for political conversation through synchronous and asynchronous chats, forums, news websites and, more recently, social media. However, scholars interested in political discussion often focus on platforms and forums specifically designed to foster political debates - such as political bulletin boards, discussion forums and e-deliberation or e-participation platforms (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Coleman & Moss, 2012). Recently, this attention is shifting to informal spaces where political discussion is not the main purpose, but may emerge from interpersonal interaction (Graham, 2010, 2012; Himmelboim, Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2012). Consistently, this paper examines the ways people engage in political conversation triggered by exposure to political news in two different informal discussion platforms: Facebook and news websites.

The potential benefits of political discussion online are often questioned or even dismissed due to the presence of uncivil discourse (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, &

Ladwig, 2014; Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014), which led scholars to question the internet's democratic potential to foster political discussion (Highfield, 2016; Papacharissi, 2004). However, scholars disagree in how incivility should be conceptualized, which led differences in how it is measured in online discussions (Anderson et al., 2014; Coe et al., 2014; Hmielowski, Hutchens, & Cicchirillo, 2014; Rowe, 2015; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). In particular, most operationalization of incivility have failed to distinguish behaviors that convey some level of impoliteness or lack of respect from expressions that are inherently offensive and harmful (Muddiman, 2017; Papacharissi, 2004). In this article, I advocate for a nuanced understanding of the concept of incivility in online political talk, and argue that *uncivil discourse*, in itself, does not necessarily prevent online discussions from producing beneficial outcomes often associated with political talk. I argue that uncivil discourse, where people express their perspectives with foul language, harsh or intense remarks, should be understood as a rhetorical act. Secondly, I argue that a much more serious threat to democracy is *intolerant discourse*, where groups of people or individuals are attacked in ways that threaten democratic pluralism.

The validity of this theoretical model is analyzed in the context of public comments in a wide range of political news in two different platforms – news websites and Facebook pages. By considering two platforms that are heavily used for engaging in political discussions online, this research aims at identifying the role played by distinct conversational environments in expressions of incivility and intolerance.

This research makes three main contributions. First, it demonstrates that uncivil and intolerant discourse can be meaningfully distinguished in online political talk, and identifies the main characteristics associated with these types of expression. Second, it finds that intolerant discourse occurs substantially less frequent than incivility in online discussions. Third, results demonstrate that that incivility (as compared with intolerance) might be

accepted - and even normalized - in political discussions online. Results suggest that incivility is not necessarily incompatible with political talk online, and show that most political exchanges - albeit sometimes harsh or heated - do not present expressions of intolerance nor threaten democratic values. This approach advances theory and research on interpersonal communication online because it better theorizes interaction norms in online discussions and their implications for democratic communication.

Political Discussion and Democracy

Philosophers such as Gabriel Tarde (Tarde, 2005) and John Dewey (Dewey, 1954) have deemed political conversation as the organizing principle of social life. Conversation is also at the core of Habermas' (Habermas, 1998) conception of deliberative democracy - perhaps one of the most influential in the field of political communication research in the last decades (Gastil & Black, 2008; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). Following Dewey and Habermas, Benjamin Barber's (Barber, 2003) idea of a "strong democracy" places conversation at the heart of democratic societies, as the capacity of listening, understanding and mediating affection, interests, identities and individualities in order to build communities and negotiate conflict. As Stromer-Galley and Wichowski (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011, p.169) summarize, "it is through political conversations that members of society come to clarify their own views, learn about the opinions of others, and discover what major problems face the collective".

As internet and social media use become intertwined with many people's everyday lives, it is important to understand how internet users engage in political discussion in online environments. This has been a topic of scholarly interest for at least two decades, with most studies focusing on conversational spaces with clear political purposes (Coleman & Moss, 2012; Dahlberg, 2004). However, most analyses on online political discussion have been

framed by Habermas' concept of public deliberation¹, often overlooking less formal but more popular communication environments (Chadwick, 2011; Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011). I align myself with those who claim that it is unrealistic to expect that the deliberative criteria will be met in most of the political discussions online (Chadwick, 2009; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Coleman & Moss, 2012). Moreover, I argue that the lack of deliberative qualities does not prevent political talk from having positive political outcomes – such as increasing political knowledge, fostering shared values and providing meaning to matters of public concern, and so forth. In fact, researchers have shown that several of these benefits stem from everyday political talk using self-reported survey measures, which suggests that relatively unstructured, informal discussions that happen in people's daily lives have intrinsic benefits for their participants even when they are not characterized by deliberative norms and processes (Eveland, 2004; Eveland & Hively, 2009; Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004; Valenzuela, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2012).

However, scholars interested in online political talk have raised concerns over the presence of incivility and other behaviors that may disrupt discussion, such as trolling and flaming (Coles & West, 2016; Gervais, 2014; Santana, 2014). As I will further discuss in the following sections, there are several factors that may facilitate uncivil discourse online. Nevertheless, dismissing the potential benefits of political talk online because of the presence of uncivil discourse seems to ignore the fact that users might negotiate and interpret the norms of interaction in computer-mediated conversation in different ways than in face-to-face discussion, due to the lack of non-verbal cues or of certain social sanctions (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003; Suler, 2004). Instead of looking for elusive deliberative values in online political talk, this paper focuses on the presence of uncivil and intolerant discourse, and

¹ Deliberation is an ideal form of communication oriented towards problem-solving through respectful exchange of arguments between heterogeneous individuals. It is characterized by a set of normative criteria, such as inclusion, reasoned justification, reflexivity, respect, equality and autonomy (Habermas, 1998).

examines the extent to which discussions that take place in digital environments - such as Facebook, and news websites - are characterized by these behaviors.

Uncivil Discourse and Online Political Talk

Scholars have claimed that uncivil discourse is a problematic characteristic of political discussion online, alongside flaming, trolling, and lack of respect among discussants (Hmielowski et al., 2014; O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003; Phillips, 2015). The presence of uncivil discourse, as well as trolls - users who purposefully intend to obstruct discussion and upset others - in computer-mediated interpersonal interaction is as old as the use of the internet for communication through e-mail and BBSs, even before commercial use. Since internet users first started participating in communication environments such as forums, chats and bulletin-boards, studies have been observing profanities, rude language and other behaviors that are frequently deemed as uncivil (Hill & Hughes, 1997; Phillips, 2015; Reagle Jr, 2015; Santana, 2014).

In the context of CMC, behaviors such as name-calling, *ad hominem* attacks, profanity, stereotyping (Coe et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), and lack of respect (Brooks & Geer, 2007), are consistently flagged as uncivil. Graphic representations of shouting (e.g. writing in all caps) has also been considered uncivil (Chen & Lu, 2017). The wide range of expressions and behaviors classified as uncivil by different scholars poses a challenge for comparing research results (Stryker, Conway, & Danielson, 2016). Moreover, the different types of behaviors that are considered uncivil might have different rhetorical purposes and are not necessarily used to offend others – one might use profanity to express an opinion in a heated discussion, and not necessarily to attack or offend another person.

Incivility is conceptually hard to define (Jamieson, Volinsky, Weitz, & Kenski, 2015), and it is understood that, to some extent, the perception of incivility lies “in the eye of the beholder” (Herbst, 2010). To that extent, authors have operationalized incivility in different

ways. For Mutz and Reeves (2005), incivility involves “gratuitous asides that show a lack of respect and/or frustration with the opposition” (Mutz & Reeves, 2005) – a definition strongly connected to contexts of political arguing and disagreement. In the context of deliberative democracy, civility refers to interpersonal respect and to one’s ability to engage in respectful interactions and to recognize others’ views as legitimate even when faced with disagreement (Habermas, 1996; Jamieson et al, 2015). Coe, Kenski and Rains (2014) define incivility as “features of discussion that convey an unnecessary disrespectful tone towards the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics.” Although it may be challenging to define what an unnecessary disrespectful tone might be – since incivility is highly contextual -, the authors identify five different types of incivility: name-calling, aspersion, lying, vulgarity, and remarks that are pejorative for speech (Coe et al., 2014).

Recently, scholars have been advocating for a more nuanced approach to uncivil discourse (Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015), arguing that civility cannot be reduced to interpersonal politeness. Papacharissi (Papacharissi, 2004) explains that this is because the "definition ignores the democratic merit of robust and heated discussion". In her view, online environments facilitate rude behaviors and heated discussion, but those features are not necessarily threatening to democratic values and therefore should not be enough to dismiss online discourse.

In light of the two main scholarly approaches to civility – emphasizing either interpersonal relationships or violations of democratic or deliberative norms -, Muddiman (Muddiman, 2017) proposes a conceptual distinction between personal-level civility and public-level civility. The former is informed by politeness theories – and thus violated by behaviors such as rudeness, emotional speech and name-calling - and the second is grounded on democratic norms – and thus denied when participants refuse to recognize others’ views as legitimate, refuse to engage with others, spread misinformation or prioritize personal gains

over the common good. In short, public-level incivility is defined as “violations of reciprocity norms and disrespect for opposing political ideas” (Muddiman, 2017, p. 3199).

Equating uncivil and impolite behaviors may be problematic when it comes to political arguments. Striker et al. (2016) take up on the distinction drawn by Papacharissi (2004) between incivility and impoliteness, suggesting that one should not consider expressions of interpersonal impoliteness as examples of political incivility. The authors’ consider that interpersonal impoliteness refer to situations in which people avoid challenging others, and argue that policy-based debates do not fall into this category as they are central to the concept of democratic politics (Stryker et al., 2016). Stryker et al. (2016) investigate perceptions of 23 categories of uncivil discourse and finds that people are more likely to judge as uncivil expressions, actions and behaviors related to personal conduct or character than attacks to an opponent’s policy positions – consistent with Muddiman’s (2017) findings, these results suggest that citizens are less offended by uncivil discourse when related to political opinions and affairs than they are by discourse that is offensive or demeaning towards other people.

Departing from the premise that incivility is contextual and that it might be interpreted differently by citizens depending on individual characteristics, Kenski et al. (Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2017) investigate perceptions of the five types of incivility identified by Coe et al. (2014) and find that people have very different interpretations of what is uncivil discourse. Namely, citizens tend to perceive name-calling and vulgarity as highly uncivil behaviors, but do not interpret messages containing aspersions, lying, aspersion and pejorative tone as being significantly uncivil – a result that corroborates the claim that incivility lies in the eye of the beholder and that people have different perceptions of what constitutes uncivil discourse.

In this paper, I align with the perspective that civility is a communicative practice (Benson, 2011; Herbst, 2010), and that “it is most useful to think of civility as a tool in the strategic and behavioral arsenals of politics” (Herbst, 2010, p. 6). Although Papacharissi’s

(2004) argument that *rudeness* might be an inherent part of the experience when people discuss political issues online, conceptualizing incivility as a threat to democratic norms is too strong. (Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015). Conflating rude or impolite discourse with that which threatens democratic pluralism – such as attacks on groups of people or on core values of a democratic society -- means as scholars we fail to fully understand the extent to which the later occurs in online discussion.

To provide a better theoretical model to evaluate the extent to which online political discussions exhibit characteristics that are inherently harmful for democracy, I argue that the concept of political intolerance is better suited to identify practices and behaviors that are threatening to democracy (Gibson, 1992; Hurwitz & Mondak, 2002). Intolerant behaviors should be less dependent on context and interpretation, as they necessarily offend or undermine particular groups due to personal, social, sexual, ethnical, religious or cultural characteristics. Prior studies have identified such behaviors as “extreme” expressions of incivility, and found that individuals are significantly more likely to classify them as “very uncivil” (Stryker et al., 2016), suggesting that behaviors that convey intolerance are more consistently perceived as violations of interactive norms.

To understand the extent to which the internet facilitates discourses that are undemocratic, I start from Herbst's (2010) insight that incivility is a rhetorical asset that people may use to justify their positions in specific situations. Thinking of uncivil discourse as a rhetorical asset instead of a set of rules means accepting that interaction norms are temporary and changeable, and that incivility might be fluidly used across contexts. Hence, while online discussion might be highly uncivil, that does not necessarily prevent it from being democratically relevant and promoting epistemic gains - such as opinion formation and learning about other's positions. Standards of political civility can serve as a mechanism to silence particular forms of expression, or to limit the types of discourse that are accepted in

the public sphere (Benson, 2011; Fraser, 1990). Incivility may also have positive outcomes, such as improving attention, learning and recall of opposing arguments (Mutz, 2016).

To this end, I propose a distinction between *political intolerance* – comprising behaviors that are inherently threatening to democratic pluralism – and *incivility* - the use of disrespectful expressions, personal attacks, bad manners, pejorative speech, vulgarity and rude remarks. Based on prior studies (Herbst, 2010; Mutz, 2016; Shea & Sproveri, 2012), I conceptualize incivility as a context-dependent feature of discourse that may convey a rude, negative or disrespectful tone towards people, groups and discussion topics (Coe et al., 2014). Conversely, political intolerance is defined as attacks on individual liberties and rights, demonstrations of negative attitudes towards certain groups defined in terms of attributes such as race, sex, gender or religion, xenophobia, the use of stereotypes that are harmful or demeaning towards individuals or groups, and incitement to violence or harm. Political intolerance threatens, or at least signals lack of, moral respect - a condition for individuals to be recognized as free and equal in a pluralist democracy (Habermas, 1998; Honneth, 1996).

The novelty of this approach lies in acknowledging that incivility might be used as a rhetorical asset to mark positions in heated discussions, as well as to grant attention to one's perspective, especially when there is disagreement. In this sense, while the nature of online discussions - with reduced social and contextual cues, as well as weak or non-existent social ties (Hmielowski et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014) - may facilitate the use of uncivil discourse, I believe these expressions are not necessarily incompatible with democratically desirable political talk online, nor they should prevent these discussions from having similar benefits as those often attributed to political conversation that is not uncivil. The same is not true for intolerant discourse, as it signals moral disrespect and profound disregard towards other people or groups, and as such is incompatible with, and

has the potential to damage, normative values of democratic pluralism, freedom of expression and equality (Gibson, 1992; Hurwitz & Mondak, 2002).

In addition to the technical features of online discussions that might facilitate uncivil discourse, it is relevant to note that those who engage in discursive environments such as news websites and social media are likely to be exposed to challenging perspectives (Brundidge, 2010b; Stroud & Muddiman, 2012; Vaccari et al., 2016) – in particular, Facebook users tend to be more likely to select political news when it is shared by their peers, suggesting that personal relationships play a crucial role in how social media users access political news (Anspach, 2017). Exposure to and engagement with political disagreement is a desirable outcome for democracy, as it helps citizens understand and learn about different perspectives. Although people may avoid engaging in political talk with politically disagreeable peers in face-to-face settings (Mutz, 2006), online platforms facilitate exposure to political difference (Anspach, 2017; Brundidge, 2010b; Garrett, 2009). Inadvertent exposure to political heterogeneity online is facilitated by weakened social boundaries and blurred lines between discursive spaces, as well as less than perfect selective exposure strategies (Brundidge, 2010a, 2010b; Bruns & Highfield, 2015; Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013; Vaccari et al., 2016). Moreover, discussion partners in online environments are often unknown, therefore provoking "the disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2004) and facilitating antinormative behavior (Hmielowski et al., 2014; Rowe, 2015). In that sense, within the argument that incivility is a rhetorical asset that individuals use to ensure their political claims stand out amidst noisy and crowded environments, the diversity of viewpoints in online political discussions might encourage participants to rely on uncivil discourse as a rhetorical device. The same is not necessarily true for political intolerance, as intolerant behaviors tend to become more salient in more homogeneous environments (Crawford, 2014; Crawford & Pilanski, 2014; Gibson, 1992; Wojcieszak, 2010; Wojcieszak, 2011a, 2011b).

Although Facebook's ever-changing news feed algorithms shape the content to resemble its users' preferences and interactions, challenging political views may still be present as users' personal interactions may not be politically aligned (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). Moreover, research suggests that personal influence is more influential than partisan alignment for social media users to select political news (Anspach, 2017).

Conversely, news websites also attract users with polarized political views and may foster heated discussions. Prior research has identified that Facebook users are, in general, less likely to be uncivil than commenters on news websites (Rowe, 2015). Likewise, online discussions tend to be more uncivil than face-to-face debates when participants disagree (Stromer-Galley, Bryant, & Bimber, 2015).

Based on prior research, I hypothesize that uncivil discourse can be predicted by certain features of online discussions, such as the presence of disagreement, opinion expression, identification, and the topic of the discussion:

H1) Uncivil behavior is predicted by contextual features of a discussion – namely, disagreement, opinion expression, and anonymity.

Although scholars have not adopted the conceptual distinction outlined in this paper, if intolerant and uncivil behaviors are indeed different concepts and if the former is less widely acceptable than the latter, I hypothesize that the features of a discussion that facilitate intolerant behavior are different than the features that predict incivility.

H2) Intolerant behavior is not predicted by the same contextual features that predict uncivil discourse – namely, disagreement, opinion expression, and anonymity.

When citizens justify their opinions, it is plausible to assume that they intend to unpack their arguments so that others can easily understand them. Justification is a key characteristic of persuasion, as arguments that are backed by acceptable reasons are more likely to resonate than arguments that are not justified (Steiner, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2007; Toulmin, 2003). If

we accept that incivility is a rhetorical asset that individuals mobilize when expressing opinions, it follows that incivility should be positively associated with justified opinions.

Thus:

H3) Incivility is positively associated with the presence of justified opinions.

However, to the extent that intolerance is an expression of political opinion that undermines individuals and groups and is a mechanism of social exclusion, it is an open question whether it is associated with justified opinion expression, as individuals may not be eager to provide defensible reasons when they discriminate against groups and imply that they should be denied basic democratic rights. Thus:

RQ1) What is the relationship between justified opinion expression and intolerance?

Methods

Data Collection

Research comparing online conversation in different platforms - ranging from forums, comments on news websites and social media - suggest that platform affordances – such as anonymity - may influence the presence of uncivil behavior (Maia & Rezende, 2016; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014; Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011). To the extent that platform affordances influence how participants interpret social norms and acceptable behaviors (Stromer-Galley et al., 2015), this research compares comments in the same news stories from two different platforms (a news outlet and its Facebook page) to account for the potential relationship between platforms and the use of intolerant or uncivil discourse.

Constructed week sampling is a technique commonly use in media studies that aims at ensuring that the variability of the media cycle is properly represented in the sample (Connolly-Ahern, Ahern, & Bortree, 2009; Hester & Dougall, 2007; Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993). To build a constructed week, each day is randomly selected within the timeframe of analysis, and the process ensures that results are representative of the period of analysis.

Following Hester and Dougall's (2007) recommendation for sampling online news, I sampled two constructed weeks to represent a six-month period (February to July, 2015) of news and focus on Portal UOL's Facebook page - the most accessed online news outlet in Brazil, with over 6.7 million followers on Facebook. Portal UOL was selected as the source for Facebook news stories and comments because it is the largest online content portal in Brazil and hosts several media outlets, such as Folha de São Paulo - the main national newspaper -, regional newspapers, entertainment websites and opinion blogs written by journalists and analysts. UOL also produces its own news content, and shares on Facebook its original stories in addition to stories published by all its partners.

To conduct my comparative analysis, I first identified all posts from Portal UOL on Facebook as either political or non-political news, adopting a broad conception of politics that includes not only formal political affairs, but also topics of public concern such as education, security and violence, policy, minorities, activism and social movements. I then followed the links in all posts categorized as political on Facebook posts to the news' original posting on an official news outlet - mostly UOL and Folha de São Paulo, Brazil's most important newspaper, or blogs specializing in politics². Adopting this approach, I was able to make sure that users in both platforms are discussing the same news stories. While it is not possible to make inferences about the demographics of users who access either of these sites, keeping topic of discussion constant among platforms can at least ensure that differences are not derived from the discussion of different news stories.

I analyzed a total of 157 news topics, with a universe of 55,053 comments on Facebook and on news sites combined. Facebook comments accounted for around 70% of this total (n = 38,594). Given the number of comments, I created a random stratified sample of comments³

² Because these blogs are formal "opinion blogs" written by journalists and have similar moderation practices as the news websites, those were aggregated with other news sources.

³ Confidence interval: 99%; Margin of error: 1%.

that respects both the proportion between Facebook (70%) and comments on source (30%) and number of comments on each thread. For example, threads with 1000, 100 or 10 comments were proportionally represented in the final sample. The content analysis was therefore conducted on 12,330 comments, and all news articles were coded by theme. Because I am interested in threaded discussions, I sampled consecutive messages in each platform using a random number as a starting point.

Content Analysis

Systematic content analysis is used to analyze public comments based on a set of features (Neuendorf, 2002). The coding scheme developed for this project is broadly inspired by prior research (Coe et al., 2014; Stromer-Galley, 2007), with categories inductively and deductively derived. Content analysis was conducted by two independent coders, who performed an inter-coder agreement test using approximately 5% ($n = 636$) of the sample after several rounds of codebook discussion and testing. Krippendorff's *alpha* is used to measure inter-coder agreement and all categories were considered reliable (above .7) for Facebook comments and comments on news sources. In spite of the challenges in identifying uncivil and intolerant discourse, these variables were highly reliable. For incivility, a Krippendorff's *alpha* of 0.87 on news sources and 0.79 on Facebook, whereas the values for intolerance were of 0.84 on news sources and 0.89 on Facebook. *Alphas* for disagreement were of 0.89 and 0.82 for news sources and Facebook, respectively.

Although the codebook cannot be fully detailed here, it operates with three distinct units of analysis: news, users and messages. The news stories were coded by their topics: politics (government, congress, politicians); civil society (NGOs, activism, social movements); celebrities; minorities; public policy; international affairs. Users were coded as either identified or anonymous, based on whether usernames or aliases presented real names that allowed coders to identify gender. Messages were coded in the following main

categories: relevance; topic; target of interaction; disagreement; opinion expression; incivility; and intolerance. The subcategories under *uncivil messages* include mockery, disdain, dismissive or pejorative language, profanity, personal attacks, personality, ideas, or arguments etc. Intolerant messages have a harmful intent towards people or groups, attack personal liberties, and deny others of equal rights and participation in the "free market" of ideas (Gibson, 1992, 2007; Sullivan & Transue, 1999). In practical terms, intolerant behaviors were coded in the following subcategories: xenophobia, racism, hate speech, violence, homophobia, religious intolerance, hate speech, and attacks towards gender, sexual preferences or economic status.

Intolerant and uncivil messages were also coded by focus of those expressions, which can be other users, political actors, people or groups featured on the news, the media, political minorities etc. The focus aims at identifying whether uncivil and intolerant discourse is targeted at other discussants, which in turn would undermine interpersonal respect and potentially affect the discussion, or at third-parties who are not a part of the conversation, such as politicians, political parties, groups etc. Messages can also be unfocused.

Messages were coded as disagreement when they 1) diverged from the general tone of the discussion (considering the previous message in a thread as the baseline),⁴ which indicates heterogeneity in the thread, or 2) explicitly diverged from another commenter in form of either name tagging or reply. The category of opinion expression had two subcategories: a) opinion expression, coded as any or remark that revealed a commenter's take on a topic; and b) justified opinion expression, coded when the commenter elaborated an explanation to

⁴ Because coders analyzed sequences of messages instead of random comments in each news story, they were able to code for disagreement when a comment explicitly disagreed with the previous messages in addition to when participants directly disagreed from others by tagging or replying to them. For example, if two comments criticized a given political party and another commenter follows up defending the political party, this message was coded as disagreement. While it cannot be assumed that all users read the previous comments while participating in a thread, the adopted strategy taps into whether there are heterogeneous opinions in the discussion.

substantiate an opinion. This variable aims at identifying whether people make an effort of justifying or explaining their positions, and does not evaluate the quality of justifications.

Results

The descriptive results of the content analysis demonstrate that uncivil discourse occurs frequently in online political talk: 37.8% of all messages were coded as uncivil. Intolerance, however, occur substantially less. Only 7.8% of all messages in both platforms were deemed intolerant, $t(19273) = 59.994$, $df = 19273$, $p < 0.001$. The descriptive results thus suggest that incivility is substantially more frequent in online political talk than intolerant discourse.

H1 suggests that whether a comment is uncivil is predicted by contextual discussion features such as disagreement, opinion expression, platform, and anonymity. By contrast, H2 posits that intolerant behavior is not predicted by the same features as incivility. To test both hypotheses, I converted all types of incivility and intolerance into a binary variable and used two logistic regression models to examine the relationship between these two dependent variables and user identification, disagreement, and replies (e.g. direct responses). Platform (Facebook vs. news sites) and topic of the news story (formal politics, organized civil society, minorities, policy-related topics, celebrities, international affairs) were added to the model as control variables⁵. To facilitate interpretation of the results, I present odds ratios. Given that samples with more than 10,000 observations are likely to have significant p-values (Lin, Lucas, & Shmueli, 2013), I also report confidence intervals. When odds ratios are within the confidence intervals, one can report 95% confidence that the independent variable has the calculated effect on the dependent variable. Table 1 shows the results of logistic regressions on uncivil and intolerant discourse.

⁵ Several models with fewer independent variables were tested. The full model was selected based on the *Akaike Information Criterion (AIC)* of 15,799, compared to 16,161 for a model without the five news topics. For intolerance, the full model's AIC was 6196,3, which indicates a better fit than a model without the news topics (AIC = 6244.3)

Table 1. Logistic regression predicting uncivil and intolerant discourse

	Uncivil comment			Intolerant comment		
	O.R. (e^{β})	C.I. (2.5%)	C.I. (97.5%)	O.R. (e^{β})	C.I. (2.5%)	C.I. (97.5%)
Identifiable users	0.8964253	0.7963724	1.0090501	0.83445747	0.65055750	1.0737217
Disagreement	2.5356102 ***	2.1951052	2.9317701	1.01362794	0.77253036	1.3235363
Reply	0.5753655 ***	0.5087627	0.6497304	0.81084403	0.63969225	1.0204948
Facebook (vs. news site)	0.8363922 **	0.7504772	0.9323499	1.36024617 *	1.07407116	1.7341066
<i>Message topic</i>						
Politics	0.7849033 *	0.6181604	0.9985803	0.46185557 **	0.29170120	0.7745156
Minorities	1.1690761	0.9133759	1.4991484	2.81955903 ***	1.79602061	4.6981089
Policy	0.3184406 ***	0.2443328	0.4154334	1.73071202 *	1.08577867	2.9172873
Civ. Society	0.5801401	0.4042062	0.8292793	2.06843643 *	1.14076880	3.8371878
Celebrities	0.8582237 **	0.5705880	1.2873786	1.58629161	0.75697520	3.2522462
International	0.3901344 ***	0.2696410	0.5603211	3.91060535 ***	2.30716792	6.9113371

Note: $p =$: 0 '****' 0.001 '***' 0.01 '**' 0.05

The results confirm the first hypothesis, demonstrating that uncivil discourse is predicted by contextual features of the discussion. Specifically, incivility is 2.5 times more likely to occur when there is disagreement, and are 43% less likely to occur when users are directly replying to others. Platform also matters for uncivil discourse, with comments being 17% less likely to be uncivil on Facebook than on news websites. Some specific political topics were significantly associated with uncivil discourse. Namely, discussions about formal politics, organized civil society, matters of public concern (e.g. education, violence) and international affairs are negatively associated with the presence of uncivil discourse. User identification is not a significant predictor of incivility.

The results also support the second hypothesis, as intolerant discourse is not predicted by the same contextual features as uncivil discourse. The main predictors of incivility—disagreement and replies—are not significant in this model. Rather, intolerant behavior is predicted by platform, but while incivility is less likely to occur on Facebook, intolerance is 36% more likely to occur on Facebook. Intolerance is also more closely associated with the topic of the news story being commented on than incivility is. In particular, incivility is 1.8 times more likely to occur in responses to news stories about minorities, and two times more likely in stories about civil society and activism, which are not significantly associated with uncivil behavior instead. Intolerance is also substantially more likely to occur when discussing international affairs and policy-related issues (e.g. violence), which are negatively and significantly associated with uncivil behavior. In sum, for most of the topics coded in the analysis, the associations with intolerance were a mirror image of those with incivility, which confirms that the two concepts are substantively different and can be successfully operationalized and modeled as such. The only topic which was associated similarly with both incivility and intolerance was general politics, and the association was negative but stronger for intolerance than incivility.

The third hypothesis arises from the premise that uncivil discourse is a rhetorical asset and predicts a positive relationship between incivility and whether commenters provide some justifications for their positions. To test this hypothesis, I used justified opinion as the dependent variable in a logistic regression. As with previous models, topic of news and platform were included as control variables⁶. The results are presented in Table 2 and confirm the hypothesis, predicting that people are significantly more likely (61%) to be uncivil when they are trying to justify their own positions. Justified opinion expression is also strongly associated with disagreement, but 37% less likely to occur when people are replying to others directly, and 80% less likely to occur on Facebook than on news sites. People are also less likely to justify their positions when commenting on news stories about the formal political sphere, international affairs or civil society, and significantly more likely to do so when commenting on policy-related issues such as violence or education.

Table 2. Logistic regression predicting justified opinion expression.

	O.R. (e^{β})	C.I. (2.5%)	C.I. (97.5%)
Intolerance	0.7956065 **	0.6755421	0.9342674
Incivility	1.6161598 ***	1.4803808	1.7644319
Reply	0.6437080 ***	0.5622337	0.7357290
Disagreement	3.3247462 ***	2.8481556	3.8849773
Facebook (vs. news site)	0.2048326 ***	0.1850804	0.2265119
<i>Message topic</i>			
Politics	0.5060959 ***	0.3866784	0.6661152
Minorities	1.1157284	0.8453029	1.4813779
Policy	1.5387531 **	1.1566432	2.0586377
Civ. Society	0.6632944 *	0.4401720	0.9958834
Celebrities	0.6777706	0.4259235	1.0726943

⁶ The full model was again selected based on AIC, which indicated a better fit for the full model (AIC = 13,012) when compared to a model with no topics (AIC = 13,349)

International	0.4020909 ***	0.2586043	0.6177966
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*Note: p =: 0 '****' 0.001 '***' 0.01 '**' 0.05*

Finally, Table 2 also answers my research question on the relationship between justified opinion expression and intolerant discourse. The results reveal a negative relationship, as justified opinions are 21% less likely to be provided when comments are intolerant. Once again, the multivariate analysis reveals that uncivil and intolerant behavior tend to occur in substantially different conversational contexts, associated with different types of normatively desirable or undesirable values.

Discussion

The potential for political conversation online to produce beneficial outcomes for its participants and for democracy is often criticized or dismissed because of high levels of incivility and the lack of respect between users of digital platforms. By contrast, this study shows that high levels of incivility in informal political talk online do not necessarily stand in the way of potential practical and epistemic gains often associated with this activity. I have argued for a nuanced approach to the quality of online discussion settings by differentiating uncivil and intolerant discourse. The former might be acceptable in online venues insofar as participants are less constrained by social sanctions and may feel that some expressions of incivility can be tolerated. Moreover, uncivil discourse may help citizens express their views and attract others' attention. In contrast, the latter is inherently problematic as it threatens basic democratic values, thus undermining the benefits of political talk.

The presence of disagreement is a strong predictor of uncivil discourse, but interpersonal exchanges are significantly less likely to present incivility. That is, while people might resort to incivility when they disagree with a political news story or with what other commenters are saying in general, they refrain from doing so when they actively engage in interpersonal interactions by either replying to a comment or tagging another discussant. To the extent that online discussions might have greater levels of disagreement than people

might encounter offline, this finding suggests that heated heterogeneous debates in which participants exchange contrasting views should not be considered democratically dysfunctional just because they are uncivil. Exposure to political disagreement is seen as a valuable aspect of everyday political talk insofar as it broadens citizens' perspectives, increase awareness of others' views and may foster political tolerance (Brundidge, 2010a; Huckfeldt & Mendez, 2008), but is often avoided in face-to-face discussions (Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004; Mutz, 2006; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

The perspective that incivility is a rhetorical asset that people mobilize to express their opinions is supported by the strong and positive association between uncivil discourse and justified opinion expression. Results also show that incivility occurs less frequently on Facebook than on news websites, which suggests that affordances that are unique to social media environments—such as the semi-public nature of users' profiles and connections (Ellison & boyd, 2013)—may constrain uncivil discourse. Conversely, although the finding that incivility is more frequent in news websites is not surprising in light of widespread public concerns about the tone of comments in these outlets (Huang, 2016), the fact that comments are less uncivil when participants are responding to others suggests that incivility is less likely to be used to offend others in such discussions. This finding further challenges the view that incivility is necessarily bad or harmful in informal political talk, as it suggests that while people might express themselves in uncivil ways, they refrain from doing so when they are directly engaging with other discussants and therefore avoid a tone that might offend peers when they perceive others as partners in a conversation.

Intolerant discourse does not share the same predictors of incivility, but it is associated with different topics covering a broader scope of news beyond formal politics. Specifically, intolerant discourse is highly associated with news stories about minority groups, e.g. LGBTQ, women, blacks, and those in social or economic disadvantage, as well as policy-

related topics, international affairs, and stories related to organized civil society. What these findings suggest is that intolerant behavior is more likely to occur precisely when and where it can hurt democracy the most, by disparaging minorities and targeting civil society groups.

Differently than uncivil discourse, intolerance is more likely to be expressed on Facebook and is not affected by disagreement. These results might be interpreted in different ways. First, Facebook is a less controlled environment when compared to news websites, as the platform provides page administrators with limited capabilities to moderate comments in large-scale⁷. Secondly, if people perceive that their opinions will be broadly shared by others, they might be more willing to make intolerant public comments. That is, Facebook users could potentially be more likely to express intolerance if they believe that their imagined audience will share their views – which is consistent with studies that indicate that intolerance is associated with the perception of an homogeneous public opinion environment about a topic (Askay, 2014; Brundidge, 2010a; Crawford, 2014; Wojcieszak, 2010; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; Wojcieszak, 2011b). Although this study was based on public comments and therefore cannot make inferences about Facebook users' perceptions of the public opinion environment, studies informed by the spiral of silence theory have demonstrated that internet users are affected by their perception of a favorable opinion environment and are less likely to express themselves if they believe their opinions will not be shared by others (Askay, 2014; Gearhart & Zhang, 2014; Liu & Fahmy, 2011).

The finding that incivility was higher on news websites, despite the fact that these environments are frequently moderated (Huang, 2016), may suggest that these behaviors are not necessarily perceived as socially undesirable or incompatible with online debates and are

⁷ Interviews with editors and moderators from the main sources of news (Portal UOL and Folha de São Paulo) analyzed in this project indicated that they adopt different moderation approaches in the news websites and on Facebook – the former is systematically moderated, while the latter is not. The main reason not to moderate Facebook is that the platform does not provide enough control to moderate in large scale other than the use of a dictionary approach that filters lists of words and automatically hides comments on a Facebook page.

not always filtered by moderators or flagged by users. By contrast, intolerant discourse was less likely to take place on news websites, suggesting that expressions of racism, hate speech, violence, and the like may be consistently flagged as inappropriate by moderators and that users, being aware of that, may be more likely to refrain from these types of comments on news sites. These findings are corroborated by studies investigating perceptions of incivility (Stryker et al., 2016) which show that racial slurs, threatening or harmful discourse are considered extremely uncivil by most people. This is another reason why it is important to differentiate these types of expression from incivility that is not offensive or harmful.

By disentangling expressions widely perceived as democratically harmful from behaviors that are more acceptable, this study demonstrates that the types of uncivil discourse that individuals are frequently exposed to in online discussions do not represent threats to democratic values or indicate disrespect towards other people or groups. While some level of incivility might come with the territory when people engage with political news online, most discussions do not cross the boundaries of intolerant discourse and therefore should not be treated as inherently harmful for democracy. To the contrary, some degree of incivility in informal online political talk may even be normatively desirable to the extent that incivility is employed as a rhetorical asset that people mobilize to present their perspectives and, in particular, to defend their views when faced with disagreement.

This research, and its findings, are naturally limited. While Portal UOL was chosen because it hosts several of the largest media outlets in Brazil, most political stories come from traditional news media. While these sources are relevant, more research is needed to understand informal talk occurring around news produced by other types of sources - such as online-native news outlets or ideology-based news outlets -, as well as to understand the extent to which these findings are replicable in other countries. Second, while the coding scheme created for this project has accounted for some forms of expression that are inherent

of internet communication - such as the use of emoticons and sharing images, videos, and memes – the analysis is mainly focused on textual elements. Future research needs to tackle the challenge of understanding how visual forms of communication are embedded in political talk.

Conclusion

The internet provides a wide array of opportunities for those who are interested in discussing politics. These venues for political discussion should not be readily dismissed just because their users often behave in uncivil ways. Drawing from a conception of political talk as a vital activity for democratic citizenship, and considering that these conversations are increasingly taking place in various online platforms - such as news websites and social media - I question the perspective that the volume of uncivil discourse in online interactions is inherently problematic or threatening to democracy, a view that has been broadly endorsed by prior research (Coe et al., 2014; Hill & Hughes, 1997; Hmielowski et al., 2014; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014) and is heavily informed by theories of deliberation and expectations that online political talk should live up to certain standards of deliberative discourse (Chadwick, 2009; Freelon, 2010; Mendonça, 2015; Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2014). In my view, this approach disregards some key features of interpersonal communication in the digital age, in particular the fact that interaction norms are flexible and highly affected not only by context but also by the nature of relationships (Benson, 2011; Herbst, 2010; Walsh, 2003).

I have argued that incivility might be seen as an acceptable behavior when people are discussing politics online, especially when facing disagreement. However, this does not mean that discussants exchanging some uncivil remarks are unable to productively interact with diverging views or that they are being uncivil towards one another. One should not dismiss the potential benefits of online discussions just because they are frequently characterized by

uncivil discourse. This argument relies on the conceptual distinction between incivility and intolerance – the latter referring to a set of behaviors that are inherently offensive and threatening to democratic norms. Unlike incivility, which is contextual and subject to interpretation (Kenski et al., 2017; Stryker et al., 2016), intolerant discourse is almost universally identifiable and necessarily harmful insofar as it denies people or groups of their rights of being deemed as equal and respected as such.

The contributions of this paper can be summarized in three main topics. First, I offered a theoretical model that helps understand the rhetoric uses of uncivil discourse in online political talk. By showing that incivility and intolerance can be meaningfully distinguished and analyzed, and that the former is associated with characteristics that are consistently viewed as democratically desirable – e.g. engagement with challenging views and justified opinion expression – this study advances theory and helps identify the extent to which citizens engage in anti-democratic behaviors when discussing politics online. Second, the results suggest that incivility might be accepted - and even normalized - in political discussions online, being associated with other desirable features of political talk. Finally, this study has demonstrated that the topic of a discussion largely influences incivility and intolerance online, the latter being predicted by topic and more likely to be associated with news stories that feature minorities, activists and civic organizations – which is alarming insofar as it demonstrates that this behavior occurs precisely when and where it threatens democratic values the most.

Political incivility has been extensively studied in online political talk, and is frequently deemed as challenging to conceptualize (Jamieson et al., 2015; Mutz, 2016; Stryker et al., 2016). This project makes an important contribution for advancing theory and research in incivility and online political talk by providing a theoretical model that differentiates behaviors that are inherently harmful and threatening to democracy from those that are not

only widely present in online conversations but are also not necessarily problematic. The approach outlined in this paper also advances theory and research on interpersonal communication online because it helps understand the flexible nature of interaction norms in online discussions. Future research needs to shift away from the perception that incivility is problematic in itself and further examine how different online platforms may constrain or facilitate expressions of intolerance, in order to understand the extent to which platform affordances can help mitigate these behaviors to prevent democratically harmful online discussions. More research is also needed to understand how these dimensions of uncivil and intolerant discourse are interpreted by citizens—in particular, the extent to which they perceive these expressions as offensive.

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