

We Should Not Get Rid of Incivility Online

Gina Masullo Chen¹, Ashley Muddiman², Tamar Wilner¹,
Eli Pariser³, and Natalie Jomini Stroud¹

Social Media + Society
July–September 2019: 1–5
© The Author(s) 2019
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/2056305119862641
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms

Abstract

Incivility and toxicity have become concepts *du jour* in research about social media. The clear normative implication in much of this research is that incivility is bad and should be eliminated. Extensive research—including some that we’ve authored—has been dedicated to finding ways to reduce or eliminate incivility from online discussion spaces. In our work as part of the Civic Signals Initiative, we’ve been thinking carefully about what metrics should be adopted by social media platforms eager to create better spaces for their users. When we tell people about this project, removing incivility from the platforms frequently comes up as a suggested metric. In thinking about incivility, however, we’ve become less convinced that it is desirable, or even possible, for social media platforms to remove all uncivil content. In this short essay, we discuss research on incivility, our rationale for a more complicated normative stance regarding incivility, and what other orientations may be more useful. We conclude with a post mortem arguing that we should not abandon research on incivility altogether, but we should recognize the limitations of a concept that is difficult to universalize.

Keywords

incivility, social media, toxicity

Incivility and toxicity have become concepts *du jour* in research about social media. The clear normative implication in much of this research is that incivility is bad and should be eliminated. Extensive research—including some that we’ve authored—has been dedicated to finding ways to reduce or eliminate incivility from online discussion spaces. In our work as part of the Civic Signals Initiative, we’ve been thinking carefully about what metrics should be adopted by social media platforms eager to create better spaces for their users. When we tell people about this project, removing incivility from the platforms frequently comes up as a suggested metric. In thinking about incivility, however, we’ve become less convinced that it is desirable, or even possible, for social media platforms to remove all uncivil content. In this short essay, we discuss research on incivility, our rationale for a more complicated normative stance regarding incivility, and what other orientations may be more useful. We conclude with a post mortem arguing that we should not abandon research on incivility altogether, but we should recognize the limitations of a concept that is difficult to universalize.

Research on incivility often makes two unstated assumptions: Incivility can be measured, and incivility is bad. We take exception to both assumptions. One of the main problems is that nobody really agrees on what incivility is. The

public sees it as everything from impolite acts like name-calling and profanity to specific events, such as President Bill Clinton’s dalliance with Monica Lewinsky (Muddiman & Kearney, 2018).

Scholars offer a bit more conceptual clarity. But not much. A main cleavage is whether incivility and impoliteness are synonyms or separate concepts. Papacharissi (2004) argues persuasively that they are separate, asserting that profanity and name-calling are merely impolite, while more virulent speech—such as threats against democracy or stereotyping—are uncivil.

Muddiman (2017) asserts that person-level incivility is speech that could be civil if it didn’t include impoliteness. But public-level incivility is a distinct concept, including failure to compromise and lack of comity among politicians (Muddiman, 2017). Tromble (2018) distinguishes between

¹The University of Texas at Austin, USA

²University of Kansas, USA

³New America Foundation, USA

Corresponding Author:

Natalie Jomini Stroud, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712, USA.
Email: tstroud@austin.utexas.edu



incivility as “profanity or crude language” and intolerance, which “targets categories of people for discrimination, hate, abuse, etc.” Rossini (2019) strikes a related divide, positing that incivility is intense speech marred by foul language while intolerant language morally disrespects individuals or groups. Chen (2017) conceptualized incivility on a continuum that includes impoliteness on the more benign end and hate speech on the unacceptable end (see also Sydnor, 2018).

Operational definitions include profanity (Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014; Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2015) the use of all capital letters (Gervais, 2015; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), aspersions (Coe et al., 2014), accusations of lying (Coe et al., 2014), pejorative speech (Coe et al., 2014; Kenski, Filer, & Conway-Silva, 2018), ideologically extreme language (Muddiman, 2017; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Stroud et al., 2015), exaggerated argument (Stroud et al., 2015), emotional language (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), and misinformation (Muddiman, 2017).

Other approaches, like the one used in the development of Google’s Toxicity algorithm, also presume that detecting incivility is possible using a universal definition. For this algorithm, Google asks a sample of people to rate comments on a scale from “Very toxic” to “Very healthy.” They define toxic as “a rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable comment that is likely to make you leave a discussion.” These conceptual and operational definitions presuppose that incivility can be identified.

Despite well-intentioned efforts, research shows that incivility is in the eye of the beholder. Even work that has found substantial agreement in perceptions of incivility still presents some variance in understanding of the concept. For instance, while Stryker, Conway, and Danielson (2016) found that over 80% of the students in their study perceived slurs and threats of harm as very uncivil, interruptions, and character attacks prompted much more variance with less than 40% of students perceiving these behaviors as very uncivil.

In addition, individual characteristics matter in understanding incivility. People who are older (Ben-Porath, 2008), conflict avoidant (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), and who score high on the Big Five personality trait of agreeableness (Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2017) may react more strongly to incivility than others. Group identity matters as well. Partisans are likely to perceive their out-group political party to be more uncivil than their in-group political party, even when the partisans are engaging in the exact same behaviors (Muddiman, 2017; Mutz, 2015). In addition, when individuals are asked to generate their own examples of politicians behaving uncivilly, they provide answers ranging from “personal attacks” to “empty promises” and “screaming and yelling” to “treason” (Muddiman, 2019). In sum, research indicates that there are a variety of approaches to incivility, and that individual and group differences influence reactions to potentially uncivil speech.

Given variation in what people believe is uncivil, any attempt to categorize incivility relies on a particular cultural understanding of what is *uncivil*. So-called uncivil terms can be entirely inappropriate when used by some people in some contexts. These same words and phrases, however, can be terms of endearment when used by the same people in other contexts, or by different people in the same context. And perceptions of incivility vary across people, making it difficult to know when incivility actually exists.

The second main problem is the assumption that underlies incivility research, which is usually that incivility is bad. Certainly, it can lead to some normatively negative outcomes. Incivility can boost aggressiveness (Gervais, 2015; Rösner, Winter, & Krämer, 2016) or lead people to retaliate (Chen & Lu, 2017), escalating nasty talk. Incivility in news comment sections can increase polarization (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014) and bring about less favorable impressions of news articles and brands (Prochazka, Weber, & Schweiger, 2018; Tenenboim, Chen, & Lu, 2019). There also is a fear that repeated exposure to incivility in digital spaces will degrade what is normatively acceptable—leading to a dystopian society where even the most offensive speech is tolerated.

In other cases, the normative understanding of incivility is conveyed more subtly in research looking at ways to *reduce* incivility. For example, studies have found that using real names in online newspaper comments sections is associated with lower levels of incivility (Ksiazek, 2015; Santana, 2014 although see Chen, 2017; Rösner & Krämer, 2016). Stroud et al. (2015) showed that reporter involvement in the comments of a news organization’s Facebook page decreased the probability of uncivil comments. And work by Ksiazek (2015) suggested a number of policies and practices that could reduce incivility, including requiring on-site or third-party user registration, moderating comments before they appear on site or after they’ve been posted, and using reputation management systems that reward positive contributions via mechanisms such as likes, votes, and badges. All of these studies propose that there is a social benefit to curbing incivility.

Yet incivility can sometimes have a beneficial social purpose. Although profanity is entirely inappropriate in some contexts, it can be appropriate, and even an asset, in others. In some contexts, profanity is a way to bond with co-workers (e.g., Faulkner, 2009); female workers, for instance, have used profanity to establish their authority among male colleagues. Further, there’s an argument to be made that sometimes incivility is required for groups to get their point across. Research also suggests that incivility can draw attention (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), ignite interest in politics (Brooks & Geer, 2007), and prompt intentions to participate politically (Chen, 2017). As Herbst (2010) argues, “The line between passionate engagement and civility seems chronically fuzzy and arbitrary” (p. 3).

Critical work acknowledges the role of power in understanding incivility: Those in power can decide what is socially normative and then label as uncivil anything that pushes against this status quo. For example, women, and especially women of color, have historically been framed as uncivil when they step out of the private sphere to speak as public figures (Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009). Protesters are often covered by news media as deviant actors (Gitlin, 2003). Some scholars have, therefore, pushed against calls for civility, arguing that “civility and decorum . . . operate as border patrols” that make social mobility more difficult for disempowered groups (Young, Battaglia, & Cloud, 2010, p. 430) and even that “civility is the new censorship” (Bennett, 2011, p. 2). A general ban of incivility on platforms may constrain socially beneficial uses of incivility and cede more power to the already powerful.

When platforms and academics take it upon themselves to decide what is uncivil, they are imposing a particular definition of what counts and what doesn't. And inevitably, these definitions may force a particular worldview.

One may reasonably retort that our argument is relativism at its worst, or that we are arguing that everything should be permitted in digital spaces, despite ample research showing that incivility can have detrimental consequences. This, however, is not our position. We do not quibble with the right of news organizations and social media platforms to prohibit uncivil speech or use algorithms to de-prioritize certain words and phrases. What we take issue with is an end goal of a sanitized space. One person's incivility is another's civility. And when an organization settles on a particular definition of incivility, they impose this view on others. Imperfect speech can still have value. We agree with Papacharissi (2004) who asserts, “Sanitized and controlled conversation does not fully capture the conditioned illogic of human thought” (p. 266). We wish for an online discourse that strikes the “sweet spot that is not so polite that it prohibits disagreement or discord but not so nasty that it makes rational speech impossible” (Chen, 2017, p. 177).

Some words and phrases arguably should be prohibited on social media, but not for the reason of preserving civility. It should be because the organization wants to create a particular culture for a specific audience, and the words and phrases chosen are inconsistent with that vision. To treat incivility as anything other than a norm agreed to by some and dismissed by others, however, would be misguided.

So When it Comes to Incivility, What can be Done?

The first possibility could be to allow communities to define for themselves what counts as civil or uncivil, rather than prescribing these standards as an outsider. An interesting initiative that acknowledged the diversity of perspectives about incivility is the now-defunct Civil Comments. The group created a commenting platform where commenters had to

rate the civility of other people's comments before their own comment could be posted. Each group adopting the platform would be responsible for creating its own standards for what counted as civil. In academic contexts, having participants in particular conversations report what is civil or uncivil would be a defensible way to detect incivility *in situ*.

A second approach could be to focus on outcomes beyond civility and incivility. The focus on incivility is not because certain words and phrases are, in and of themselves, universally bad. Rather, incivility is a focus because of the detrimental consequences it can cause, such as dehumanizing others and increasing polarization. Rather than focusing on incivility, platforms and scholars alike could focus on interventions targeting these factors that are ultimately of interest. Platforms could focus on quelling actual harassment—when people release personal and potentially damaging information about others or rally a crowd to attack a person or group indiscriminately. As another example, interventions designed to humanize others may have the desired effect of creating respect for others without the baggage of defining what is civil and uncivil.

Do we have an incivility problem in the digital public sphere? Many would suggest that we do. More than 84% of U.S. adults say they've experienced incivility in online or offline life, and people report an average of 5.4 uncivil online encounters every week (Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate, & KRC Research, 2018). In efforts to improve digital spaces, reducing incivility is an oft-referenced target. But is it the right one? We suggest that it is not. Incivility is relative and, as such, an inconsistent yardstick by which to judge whether a given comment is constructive or appropriate. An emphasis on incivility tends to privilege the groups that have the power to impose their definitions on a conversation, meaning marginalized groups may be more likely to be viewed as uncivil. Sometimes, incivility may actually be required for these groups to be heard. Our purpose in writing this essay is not to argue that incivility research is misplaced. Rather, we argue that research on civility should more bluntly wrestle with the perceptual element of incivility. Overall, we think there are better metrics by which to judge social media conversations and to strive for online debate that is meaningful, reasoned, and productive.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Gina Masullo Chen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4909-2116>

Natalie Jomini Stroud  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3528-9986>

References

- Anderson, A. A., Brossard, D., Scheufele, D. A., Xenos, M. A., & Ladwig, P. (2014). The "nasty effect": Online incivility and risk perceptions of emerging technologies. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19, 373–387. doi:10.1111/jcc4.12009
- Bennett, W. L. (2011). *What's wrong with incivility? Civility as the new censorship in American politics* (Working Paper No. 2011-1). Seattle, WA: Center for Communication and Civic Engagement, University of Washington.
- Ben-Porath, E. N. (2008). *Codes of professionalism; Norms of conversation: How political interviews shape public attitudes toward journalists* (Dissertation). University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Brooks, D. J., & Geer, J. G. (2007). Beyond negativity: The effects of incivility on the electorate. *American Journal of Political Science*, 51, 1–16. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00233.x
- Chen, G. M. (2017). *Online incivility and public debate: Nasty talk*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chen, G. M., & Lu, S. (2017). Online political discourse: Exploring differences in effects of civil and uncivil disagreement in news website comments. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 61, 108–125. doi:10.1080/08838151.2016.1273922
- Coe, K., Kenski, K., & Rains, S. A. (2014). Patterns and determinants of incivility in newspaper website comments. *Journal of Communication*, 64, 658–679. doi:10.1111/jcom.12104
- Faulkner, W. (2009). Doing gender in engineering workplace cultures. *Engineering Studies*, 1, 3–18. doi:10.1080/19378620902721322
- Gervais, B. T. (2015). Incivility online: Affective and behavioral reactions to uncivil political posts in a web-based experiment. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 12, 167–185. doi:10.1080/19331681.2014.997416
- Gitlin, T. (2003). *The whole world is watching: Mass media in the making and unmaking of the new left*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Herbst, S. (2010). *Rude democracy: Civility and incivility in American politics*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Kenski, K., Coe, K., & Rains, S. A. (2017). Perceptions of uncivil discourse online: An examination of types and predictors. *Communication Research*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0093650217699933
- Kenski, K., Filer, C. R., & Conway-Silva, B. A. (2018). Lying, liars, and lies: Incivility in 2016 presidential candidate and campaign tweets during the invisible primary. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62, 286–299. doi:10.1177/0002764217724840
- Ksiazek, T. B. (2015). Civil interactivity: How news organizations' commenting policies explain civility and hostility in user comments. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59, 556–573. doi:10.1080/08838151.2015.1093487
- Lozano-Reich, N. M., & Cloud, D. L. (2009). The uncivil tongue: Invitational rhetoric and the problem of inequality. *Western Journal of Communication*, 73, 220–226. doi:10.1080/10570310902856105
- Muddiman, A. (2017). Personal and public levels of political incivility. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 3182–3202.
- Muddiman, A. (2019). How people perceive political incivility. In R. G. Boatright, T. J. Shaffer, S. Sobieraj, & D. G. Young (Eds.) *A crisis of civility? Political discourse and its discontents* (pp. 31–44). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Muddiman, A., & Kearney, M. (2018, August/September). What counts as incivility in the Trump era? An inductive approach to political incivility. Paper Presented to the Political Communication Division of the American Society of Political Scientists, for its annual meeting, Boston, MA, August 30 to September 2.
- Mutz, D. C. (2015). *In-your-face politics: The consequences of uncivil media*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mutz, D. C., & Reeves, B. (2005). The new videomalaise: Effects of televised incivility on political trust. *American Political Science Review*, 99, 1–15. doi:10.1017/S0003055405051452
- Papacharissi, Z. (2004). Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups. *New Media & Society*, 6, 259–283. doi:10.1177/1461444804041444
- Prochazka, F., Weber, P., & Schweiger, W. (2018). Effects of civility and reasoning in user comments on perceived journalistic quality. *Journalism Studies*, 16, 62–78. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2016.1161497
- Rösner, L., & Krämer, N. C. (2016). Verbal venting in the social web: Effects of anonymity and group norms. *Social Media + Society*, 2, 1–13. doi:10.1177/2056305116664220
- Rösner, L., Winter, S., & Krämer, N. C. (2016). Dangerous minds? Effects of uncivil online comments on aggressive cognitions, emotions, and behavior. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 58, 461–470. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2016.01.022
- Rossini, P. (2019). Disentangling uncivil and intolerant discourse in online political talk. In R. G. Boatright, T. J. Shaffer, S. Sobieraj, & D. G. Young (Eds.), *A crisis of civility: Political discourse and its discontents* (pp. 142–158). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Santana, A. D. (2014). Virtuous or vitriolic: The effect of anonymity on civility in online newspaper reader comment boards. *Journalism Practice*, 8, 18–33. doi:10.1080/17512786.2013.813194
- Sobieraj, S., & Berry, J. M. (2011). From incivility to outrage: Political discourse in blogs, talk radio, and cable news. *Political Communication*, 28, 19–41. doi:10.1080/10584609.2010.542360
- Stroud, N. J., Scacco, J. M., Muddiman, A., & Curry, A. L. (2015). Changing deliberative norms on news organizations' Facebook sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 20, 188–203. doi:10.1111/jcc4.12104
- Stryker, R., Conway, B. A., & Danielson, J. T. (2016). What is political incivility? *Communication Monographs*, 83, 535–556. doi:10.1080/03637751.2016.1201207
- Sydnor, E. (2018). Platforms for incivility: Examining perceptions across different media formats. *Political Communication*, 35, 97–116. doi:10.1080/10584609.2017.1355857
- Tenenboim, O., Chen, G. M., & Lu, S. (2019). Attacks in comment sections: What it means for news sites. *Center for Media Engagement*. Retrieved from <https://mediaengagement.org/research/attacks-in-the-comment-sections/>
- Tromble, R. (2018). Twitter "healthy conversations." Retrieved from <https://www.rebekahtrumble.net/political-communication>
- Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate, & KRC Research. (2018). *Civility in America 2018: Civility at work and in our public squares*.

Retrieved from <https://www.webershandwick.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Civility-in-America-VII-FINAL.pdf>

Young, A. M., Battaglia, A., & Cloud, D. L. (2010). (UN) Disciplining the scholar activist: Policing the boundaries of political engagement. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 96, 427–435. doi:10.1080/00335630.2010.521179

Author Biographies

Gina Masullo Chen (PhD, Syracuse University) is Assistant Director of the Center for Media Engagement and an assistant professor in the School of Journalism, both at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on how the digital space both connects and divides people and how that influences society, individuals, and journalism.

Ashley Muddiman (PhD, The University of Texas at Austin) is an assistant professor of communication studies at the University of Kansas. Her research interests include political incivility, media effects, and digital journalism.

Tamar Wilner (MA, University of Missouri) is a doctoral student in journalism at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research interests include misinformation, media trust and credibility, and news literacy.

Eli Pariser is an omidyar fellow at the New America Foundation. He is focused on how to make technology and media serve democracy.

Natalie Jomini Stroud (PhD, University of Pennsylvania) is Director of the Center for Media Engagement and an associate professor in the Communication Studies Department and School of Journalism at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on understanding how the media environment affects democracy.