



Democracy online: civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups

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Abstract

The proponents of cyberspace promise that online discourse will increase political participation and pave the road for a democratic utopia. This article explores the potential for civil discourse in cyberspace by examining the level of civility in 287 discussion threads in political newsgroups. While scholars often use civility and politeness interchangeably, this study argues that this conflation ignores the democratic merit of robust and heated discussion. Therefore, civility was defined in a broader sense, by identifying as civil behaviors that enhance democratic conversation. In support of this distinction, the study results revealed that most messages posted on political newsgroups were civil, and further suggested that because the absence of face-to-face communication fostered more heated discussion, cyberspace might actually promote Lyotard's vision of democratic emancipation through disagreement and anarchy (Lyotard, 1984). Thus, this study supported the internet's potential to revive the public sphere, provided that greater diversity and volume of discussion is present.

Key words

civility • internet • online • politeness • political

INTRODUCTION

Proponents of cyberspace promise that online discourse will increase political participation and pave the road for a democratic utopia. From this perspective, the alleged decline of the public sphere, or civil society, will be halted by the democratizing effects of the internet and its surrounding technologies. Conversely, skeptics caution that technologies not universally accessible and ones that frequently induce fragmented, nonsensical, and enraged discussion (otherwise known as 'flaming') far from guarantee a revived public sphere. This study traces civility in cyberspace, guided by the assumption that if cyberspace has the potential to truly revive the public sphere, it should promote civility. Are online discussions truly civil? If so, does that make them meaningful and, ultimately, democratic?

Civility has always been considered a requirement for democratic discourse. Defined frequently as general politeness and courtesy, civility is valued as an indicator of a functional democratic society. Conversations on the meaning of citizenship, democracy, and public discourse highlight civility as a virtue, the lack of which carries detrimental implications for a democratic society. Along with the decline of the public sphere, academics and politicians concentrate on the decline in public and political civility (e.g. Carter, 1998; Jamieson, 1997; Jamieson and Falk, 1998). Still, the actual meaning of civility tends to be rather elusive. What does it mean to be civil? What types of behaviors are associated with civility? The literature that links civility to democratic ideals tends to treat it as an end-state, rather than a behavior. Scholars debating the loss of civility often focus on etiquette; however, polite manners are a condition necessary, but not sufficient, for civility. And yet, civility is misunderstood when reduced to interpersonal politeness, because this definition ignores the democratic merit of robust and heated discussion. To this point, in considering the democratic contribution of conversation to the polity, Schudson argues that conversation is often too civility-driven, and frequently needs to be more robust, rude, and self-absorbed, stating that 'democracy may require withdrawal from civility itself' (1997: 12). However, it is not civility that limits the democratic potential of conversation, but rather, a confusion of politeness with civility. It is adherence to etiquette that frequently restricts conversation, by making it reserved, tepid, less spontaneous. Adherence to civility merely ensures that the conversation is guided by democratic principles, not just proper manners. The distinction drawn defines politeness as etiquette-related, and civility as respect for the collective traditions of democracy. Therefore, this study reconsiders the concept of civility, by identifying civil behaviors which enhance democratic conversation. In doing so, the study draws from relevant civility and politeness literature; then considers the internet as a public space in which political discussion is frequently accused of being heated, anarchic, and ultimately uncivil; and

finally measures the democratic potential of online political discourse against broader standards for civility. This project not only evaluates the democratizing potential of cyberspace but also serves to help us define more carefully the concept of civility.

POLITENESS

A discussion of civility requires an understanding of politeness. Civility is frequently associated with courtesy towards others; therefore, it is necessary to examine what politeness means, how it influences interaction, and how it fits within our understanding of civility. A discussion of politeness can also help us to determine more accurate means for evaluating and measuring civility. While politeness scholarship is certainly prolific, one has trouble finding a definition of politeness shared by all, and the same holds true for civility. Both terms refer to attributes that are difficult to define but somehow, 'we know them when we see them'.

Fraser (1990) summarized theoretical approaches to politeness and identified four current perspectives. The first, termed the 'social-norm view', reflects the historical understanding of politeness as embraced by Western cultures. According to these standards, polite behavior adheres to rules of etiquette and rude behavior contradicts these norms. This view associates politeness with speech style, and connects a higher degree of formality to greater politeness. The second, referred to as the 'conversational-maxim view', stems from Grice's conversation theory, and is based on the belief that 'conversationalists are rational individuals who are, all other things being equal, primarily interested in the efficient conveying of messages' (Fraser, 1990: 223). As a result, several cooperative or conversational principles were established by Grice (1989), which involve strategies to minimize conflict and promote accord. While some of these strategies lead to smoother conversation, they also involve suppressing some of the discussants' emotions and opinions. The third (and the most promising one), known as the 'face-saving view', relies on Goffman's notion of 'face', and was fully theorized by Brown and Levinson (1987). Goffman defined face as 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact . . . an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes' (1971: 5). Brown and Levinson distinguished between negative face as 'the want of every "competent adult member" that this action be unimpeded by others', and positive face as 'the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others' (1987: 62). Positive face refers to polite behaviors, while negative face implies the adoption of rude behaviors. The fourth, 'conversational-contract' view, incorporates elements of the above approaches but is quite different, in that each discussant entering a specific conversation brings an understanding of an initial set of rights and obligations that will determine, at least

preliminarily, the expectations of all discussants (Fraser and Nolen, 1981). These terms and conditions may be formal and imposed by social institutions or may have been informally determined in previous encounters, and thus may (or may not) be negotiable. Still, they formulate a conversational contract that we follow during our discussions, and politeness is defined as adherence to this contract.

Although these perspectives highlight the complexity of the politeness construct, they also reveal how adherence to politeness affects conversation. However, strict adherence to politeness could limit our understanding of civility. On the one hand, the relevant literature reveals that politeness depends on our understanding of etiquette and formality, our commitment to cooperate in a conversation, the desire to preserve or sacrifice our 'face', and a set of formal and informal norms that guide conversation. While this insight is valuable, the concept of politeness, as defined by scholars, refers to interaction that flows smoothly. On the other hand, civility also includes interaction that fosters democratic goals, which is why we need to separate the two. Even though scholars have not formally separated the two concepts, several highlight the need to abstain from excessive politeness in the interest of discussion that is more robust, lively, and generative of democratic capital (e.g. Lyotard, 1984; Schudson, 1997).

Still, politeness theory and the conversational-contract view also presume respect for the other and the collective, and therefore may be of assistance in understanding civility. Interpersonal politeness is often overvalued when examining civility, when it frequently restricts and inhibits open civil discussion. For example, Holtgraves (1997) found that adherence to positive politeness standards led to the seeking of agreement, through the pursuit of safe topics, expression of agreement, and repetition. It also led to the avoidance of disagreement, through token agreement, hedge opinion, personalized opinion, expressed distaste with one's own position, displaced agreement, self-deprecation, and the assertion of common ground. In the same vein, Dillard et al. (1997) found a strong and negative relationship between politeness and dominance and weaker positive associations between explicitness and argument. Research indicates that the social or informal norms that individuals adhere to often limit the extent and diversity of discussion, thus also affecting the democratic plurality of conversation.

A sharply-defined conceptual distinction between civility and politeness acknowledges the passion, unpredictability, and robustness of human nature and conversation, with the understanding that democracy can merit from heated disagreement. Goffman acknowledged that 'when people are on formal terms, much energy may be spent in ensuring that events do not occur which might effectively carry an improper expression' (1971: 40). However, he revealed his appreciation for the energy of uninhibited interaction by pointing out that:

when a set of persons are on familiar terms and feel that they need not stand on ceremony with one another, then inattentiveness and interruptions are likely to become rife, and talk may degenerate into a happy babble of disorganized sound. (1971: 40)

Goffman also cautioned against the dangers that are embedded in excessive adherence to social norms:

Too much perceptiveness or too much pride, and the person becomes someone who is thin-skinned, who must be treated with kid gloves, requiring more care on the part of others than he may be worth to them. Too much *savoir-faire* or too much considerateness, and he becomes someone who is too socialized, who leaves the others with the feeling that they do not know how they really stand with him, nor what they should do to make an effective long term adjustment to him. (1967: 40)

Goffman realised the importance of uncalculated and spontaneous interaction. To highlight that does not imply that all standards of treating co-discussants with consideration must be abandoned. The notion of 'face' is extremely important to our civic duties, because face refers to our management of our public identity. In political discussion, we should establish and renegotiate terms of civil behavior that do not simply adhere to polite word choice, but also strengthen our relationships with each other and our ties to democracy. The following section examines how scholars have looked at civility (often focusing too much on politeness), and leads into a definition of civility that is inclusive of positive face, yet stretching beyond politeness boundaries.

CIVILITY

Preoccupation with civil discourse can be traced to the writings of Aristotle, who coined the term 'civil society' to reflect a form of political association referred to as 'state' or 'polis' (Schmidt, 1998). Closely related to citizenship and civilization, civility is also derivative of the Latin *civis* (citizen) and *civitas* (city), which are themselves the Latin equivalents of the Greek family of words stemming from *polis* (city) (Kesler, 1992). In Pericles' Athens, where a person was first and foremost a citizen, those not civilized – that is, those who were not political – were considered barbarians. Civil society rested on the ideal of the public sphere and was sustained through the expression of public opinion, so its ideological meaning has shifted together with these two concepts. The concept transformed with the emergence of capitalism and the modern state during the 17th and 18th centuries, where civil society was redefined as an expression of private autonomy against the state (Calhoun, 1992). In the Middle Ages, the public of a country did not extend beyond the monarchy and the privileged few. However, the emergence of a bourgeois society revived social interest in public opinion, the public sphere, and the transition to a civil society.

These social developments were primed by philosophical contributions that envisioned public opinion at the center of a civil society. Beginning with Hobbes, who freed the notion of opinion from the confines of religious thought, to Locke, who contributed the idea of the social contract and viewed reason and criticism as the key elements of an informed and educated opinion, to Rousseau, who idealized general will and the importance of following consensus, and Kant, who viewed rational communication through the public sphere as the means through which the private wills of individuals could be harmonized and who influenced subsequent conceptualizations of the public sphere.

Conceptualizations of civility were distinctly influenced by Aristotle's teachings up until the 18th century, when civility was revisited as a result of changes in the economic and civic sphere. On the one hand, Hegel's and Tocqueville's conceptions of civil society tended to separate it from the state, family, or religion, and consequently, the conceptualization of civility was altered (Schmidt, 1998). On the other hand, Kant viewed civil society as the locale where contestation between the public and private realm takes place (Schmidt, 1998). In this sense, individuals possessing civility learn to think of themselves as members of a society that transcends the individual. Civility reflects, but also helps to overcome the human need for individuality and solidarity; the desire to live with others but to also live as an individual.

A more bourgeois interpretation of civility that is associated with good manners and morality can be found in the principles of the American democratic model. The American Founding Fathers proposed a model of civility that was integral to American citizenship and democracy. In the writings of George Washington, for example, civility became a matter of moral education, involving the shaping of young people's character, etiquette, and honor (Kesler, 1992). Non-verbal and verbal behaviors combined to produce a kind of gentlemanship residing in the heart of proper citizenship. Even though good manners aim to form individual character, the social conformity implied in the acceptance of universal behavior standards could inhibit free expression. In this sense, civility implied a certain kind of coolness; 'it helps to cool the too hot passions of citizenship' (Kesler, 1992: 57).

This conceptual overview of civility is brief and obviously not exhaustive, but it highlights a few interpretations of civility that influence how we treat the term today. Those who proclaim the demise of the public sphere also argue for the decline of civility. Academics, journalists, and politicians who declare a civility crisis focus on the downfall of good manners, and align with a civility that connotes 'courtesy, respectability, self-control, regard for others – a willingness to conduct oneself according to socially approved rules even when one would like to do otherwise' (Kennedy, 1998: 88). By contrast, incivility is often associated with a sense of cultural decline. A few

recent works have drawn attention to the decline of civility, and have invoked fiery debate between academics, politicians, and several journalists. For example, Carter (1998) argued that the current crisis of civility is part of a larger crisis of morality, the single cause of which is selfishness. Therefore, Carter saw incivility in angry drivers on the highway, rude sales clerks, offensive rap lyrics, the street fashion of 'drooping pants', violence on television, hate speech, mudslinging political campaigns, and flaming in cyberspace.

The research conducted by Jamieson and colleagues revealed an interpretation of civility that was not as closely related to morality, but was still linked to good manners. Their examination of civility in Congress focused on

the norm of reciprocal courtesy and [presupposed] that the differences between members and parties are philosophical not personal, that parties to a debate are entitled to the presumption that their views are legitimate even if not correct, and that those on all sides are persons of goodwill and integrity motivated by conviction. (Jamieson, 1997: 1)

However, their quest for civility focused on demands to take down words, indications that debate had been disrupted, press accounts, and appraisals of reporters and members that had covered or served for several terms. Their research revealed that overall incivility had increased, and their analyses focused on the use of name-calling, aspersion, hyperbole, synonyms for 'lie', non-cooperation, pejorative words for speech, and vulgarity.

While Jamieson's interpretations are valuable in evaluating the manners of Congress and its members, they focus our understanding on the simple use of words. At the same time, while Carter points out certain trends (such as violence on television), several of his reprimands tend to limit freedom of personal expression. If we truly want to assess the current state of civility, we need to move away from a definition that relies on vocabulary, morality, and simple good manners, and define civility in terms that survive the test of time. As our living conditions change, so do our established morals and values. The manner in which we use words also changes, so that words that constituted name-calling in the past are now more acceptable. To this point, Gurstein (1998) remarked that if civility is to be revived today, it is not the rules of etiquette that are needed, but practices in which it is cultivated. We need to reject a civility that leads to moral finger-wagging and an imposed sense of politeness, and strive for a sense of civility that is acceptable across cultural terrains.

One cannot discuss civility without considering the much-debated visions of the public sphere and civil society. Habermas (1989, 1991) and fellow proponents of the public sphere value well-behaved and rational discussion; in their vision, logic and reason promote discourse and should guide a

democratic society. Under this vision, discussion of civic matters is enhanced by courteous turn-taking in speaking and a well-mannered demeanor. Conversely, Lyotard (1984) looked down on the logic of restraint and argued that anarchy, individuality, and disagreement, rather than rational accord, lead to true democratic emancipation. Fraser (1992) expanded Lyotard's critique and added that Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere functioned merely as a realm for privileged men to practice their skills of governance, for it excluded women and non-propertied classes. She contended that co-existing public spheres of counterpublics form in response to their exclusion from the dominant sphere of debate. Therefore, multiple public spheres that are not equally powerful, articulate, or privileged exist, and give voice to collective identities and interests. These publics reflect the social inequalities of late-capitalist societies, and could be linked to this discussion of civility. Imposing politeness standards on these publics may eradicate their individuality and uniqueness. It is challenging to establish politeness standards that all public discussion can measure up to, without sacrificing some of the irascibility of discussion. This highlights the reason why civility should be redefined as a construct that encompasses, but also goes beyond, politeness.

Moreover, a narrowly-defined understanding of civility raises our expectations of public discourse to unattainable levels. Schudson (1997) argued that public discourse is not the soul of democracy, for it is seldom egalitarian, may be too large and amorphous, rarely civil, and ultimately offers no magical solution to problems of democracy. Civil conversation may indeed be the soul of democracy, provided that we do not impose stringent rules on discussion, and expect a discourse that is so polite and restrained that it is barely human. To this end, Garnham (1992) pointed out that Habermas's vision of the public sphere outlined a tragic and stoic pursuit of an almost impossible rationality, recognizing the impossibility of an ideal public sphere and the limits of human civilization, but still stoically striving toward it. Still, this imperfect discourse seems to be the most accurate reflection of individual thoughts and desires. Sanitized and controlled conversation does not fully capture the conditioned illogic of human thought. Civility standards should promote respect for the other, enhance democracy, but also allow human uniqueness and unpredictability.

This contradiction between respect for the collective, but tolerance of individuality, signals a return to a definition of civility that focuses on the tensions that civility creates between public and private lives. In this vein, Shils provided a definition that includes, but does not limit civility to, good manners. He claimed that civility is the attitude and the ethos of a civil society, that is 'a solicitude for the interest of the whole society, a concern for the common good' (1992: 1). In order to fully explicate civility, we need to focus on how it affects the common good, rather than isolated

individuals. This requires moving beyond instances of name-calling to episodes that are truly offensive. For example, if someone cuts us off on the highway, that is rude and inconsiderate but not necessarily uncivil, nor does it have lasting repercussions on the common good. Specifically, an exchange that involves poor manners is not necessarily uncivil and does not set democratic society back, unless it involves an attack upon a social group of which one of the discussants is a member. This is a distinction that needs to be drawn between rudeness and incivility; between heated discussions and truly uncivil ones. Before a behavior is termed uncivil, its implications for democratic society should be considered.

Therefore, this study adopts a definition of civility as collective politeness, with consideration for the democratic consequences of impolite behavior. It is when people demonstrate offensive behavior toward social groups that their behavior becomes undemocratic; anything less has no lasting repercussions on democracy. To borrow a term from the politeness literature, civility is positive collective face; that is, deference to the social and democratic identity of an individual. Incivility can be defined as negative collective face; that is, disrespect for the collective traditions of democracy. Civility can then be operationalized as the set of behaviors that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups.

This definition becomes especially pertinent in cyberspace. The anonymity of cyberspace makes it easier for individuals to be rude, although not necessarily uncivil. Because the absence of face-to-face communication fosters discussion that is more heated, cyberspace actually promotes Lyotard's vision of democratic emancipation through disagreement and anarchy. In the following section, I examine the nature of online discourse and consider some examples of cyber-incivility.

CYBERSPACE

Utopian views of the internet illustrate a world in which computer-mediated political communication facilitates grass roots democracy and brings people across the world closer together. Geographic boundaries are overcome and 'diasporic utopias' can be fostered (Pavlik, 1994). Anonymity online obliterates real-life identity boundaries and enhances free and open communication, thus promoting a more enlightened exchange of ideas. A growing body of literature attests to the potential that the internet and its accompanying technologies have for reviving political discussion. Scholars have discussed several examples of online communities that engage in political discussion, the nature of which enhances democracy.

Early interactive communication systems, such as the Berkeley Community Memory Project established in 1978; the Public Electronic Network (PEN) established in Santa Monica, CA in 1989, the Blacksburg

Electronic Village, Inc (BEV) in Blacksburg, VA, which was put in place in 1993, and the La Plaza Telecommunity in Taos, New Mexico, established in 1995, demonstrated how internet-related technologies could be used to fulfill political needs (Rogers and Malhotra, 2000). For example, Downing (1989) traced the development of PeaceNet, an online forum devoted to the discussion of peace issues, and found that it fostered democratic discourse in 50 states and over 70 countries. He concluded that such computer networks enable the mobilizing of a constituency otherwise separated in time and space, and may function as forums for developing the requisite language and agendas for political action. Sachs (1995) also discussed the functions of PeaceNet, and drew attention to the cooperation among participants, the non-linearity of discussion, the reflection that users invest in their responses, and the gratifications that are gained from participating in PeaceNet. He concluded that the network served as a complement and an alternative to individuals who wanted to express non-mainstream views and who still wanted to influence mainstream politics. Hacker et al. (1996) documented how the creation of the computer-mediated communication (CMC) networks during the 1992 US presidential election campaign enabled voters to engage in active political discussion, exchange of information, and debate. The Indian newsgroup *soc.culture.india* is one of many online groups that foster critical political discourse among Indian citizens worldwide that might not even meet in real space and time. For several years this group has harbored lively political discussion on issues that are pertinent to the political future of India (Mitra, 1997). Internet technologies indeed do offer the opportunity to communicate across geographic borders and propose new avenues of political change, although the democratizing potential of these technologies frequently rests with the political infrastructure that is in place and the individual predisposition to be politically active.

These are just a few examples of instances in which the internet has enhanced political discussion. Some scholars take this argument a step further and argue that cyberspace presents the new public sphere that will revive democratic discussion. Connery (1997) traced the role of the coffeehouse in the formation of public opinion, and likened the unregulated, contradictory, and digressing discussion experienced there to that of online networks of individuals, which he termed 'virtual coffeehouses'. He argued that the true value of this discussion lies in its unruly character, devoid of rational efficiency, and demands for closure and consensus, attributing the demise of the real-life coffeehouse democracy to the establishment of authority and the institution of exclusivity, and cautioning against the same happening in cyberspace. Knapp (1997) also explained how the rigorous rhetoric of electronic 'essayistic messages' transformed internet newsgroups into vivid public spheres. However, he also cautioned that the regulation of discussion content and topics would place

sanctions on the diversity of internet discussion, thus rendering them more homogenous.

The unique nature of internet discussion, and its ability to transform the political environment into something reminiscent of, but radically different from, Habermas's vision of the public sphere is extensively detailed by Poster (1997). Poster contended that rational argument, suggestive of a public sphere, can rarely prevail and that consensus is not possible online, specifically because it is an environment in which identity is defined very differently. Because identities are fluid and mobile online, the conditions which encourage compromise are lacking in virtual discourse. Dissent is encouraged and status markers are absent. Poster concluded that the internet actually decentralizes communication, but ultimately enhances democracy.

Hacker and van Dijk (2000) agreed that the public sphere should be seen as a plural and decentered entity, in which conflict rather than rational accord plays a key part. Net-related technologies certainly bear the potential of enhancing direct democracy models, but possess limited power within the representative models that are in place in most modern democracies. A commercial or public orientation influences how media, including the internet, are employed within democracies, and the extent to which they can promote civic concerns and lively discussion or simply reinforce the status quo. As Sassi (2000) pointed out, governments are not neutral parties, despite the growing degree to which the autonomous and uncontrolled nature of the internet is celebrated. Even though the internet bears the potential of unifying several fragmented public spheres on issues shared by all, Keane (2000) views the internet as most promising for the growth of macro-public spheres, or public spheres that connect citizens on a global or regional level, and aptly notes the presence of users who treat the medium not as surfing travelers, but rather as citizens who generate controversies about matters of power and principle.

These scholars highlight the importance of robust discussion that furthers democratic ideals. While online political discussion must be uninhibited and diverse, in order to adhere to democratic ideals it must also be respectful of collective values. The question of lack of civility in cyberspace and its effects on egalitarian discourse is rarely tackled by scholars. When discussed, researchers tend to focus on online etiquette, the violation of which leads to flaming. Flaming, an often offensive, nonsensical, albeit passionate online response is thought to have detrimental effects on political discussion. Flaming and conflict beyond reasonable boundaries is evident in the newsgroup *soc.culture.india*, and frequently deters or intimidates participants from joining online discussions (Mitra, 1997). Offensive verbal exchanges and verbal manipulation have frequently endangered the cohesiveness of online communities (Stivale, 1997). Hill and Hughes emphasized that the technological potential for global communication does not mean that people

from different cultural backgrounds will also be more understanding of each other, and they cite several examples of miscommunication.

Characteristically, the authors introduce their subject matter by observing that 'the Internet is sacred *and* profane' (1998: 185, emphasis in original), thus capturing both the democratic aspirations and humanistic limitations of the medium. However, they did find that when conversation was focused on political issues, instead of general matter, it tended to be more restrained (Hill and Hughes, 1998). Often, online communication is about venting emotion and expressing what Abramson et al. (1988) refer to as 'hasty opinions', rather than rational and focused discourse.

At the same time, there are those who do not consider flaming to be threatening. Millard (1997) argued that the term 'flaming' deserved to be recuperated and separated from personal opprobrium. Having experienced a therapeutic experience that was induced by being able to flame Freud, Millard concluded that 'incendiary rhetoric can be no cause for panic but a productive hermeneutic tool' (1997: 158). To this point, Benson (1996: 374) also noted a 'demonstrable faith of some sort in the power of argument and passionate advocacy amidst the flaming and the name-calling'. He concluded that while online debates are characterized by aggressiveness, insult, and often the attempt to humiliate opponents, they also display a high degree of formal regularity, are robust exercises in free speech, are closely attentive to opposing arguments, and present the opportunity for free participation in a political forum where one may meet divergent views. Benson did not term heated online debates as uncivil. He acknowledged that the desire for a civility that focuses on well-mannered discussions may lead to censorship and certainly downplays the value of dissent. In order to fully explicate civility in virtual (and real) environments, we need to draw a distinction between good manners and actual civility, and determine when arguments cease to be simply passionate and become truly uncivil. Therefore, utilizing the previously outlined definition of civility, which focuses on respect for the collective traditions of democracy, this task would involve measuring the politeness and civility levels of political discussion, and then comparing instances of civility and politeness online. In further applying this distinction to the online setting, the following research questions emerge:

RQ1: How impolite are online political discussions?

RQ2: How uncivil are online political discussions?

These questions should help to clarify the distinction between civility and politeness, estimating the extent to which electronic political discussion contributes to the public realm and encourages democratic behavior. Even though political discussion does not automatically transform the internet

from public space to a public sphere, a more intimate look at political postings should make our understanding of the internet's democratic potential more specific.

METHOD

Sample

For the purpose of this study, I considered Usenet newsgroups with political content. Newsgroups function in the same way as computer bulletin boards, where users post messages on their topics of interest. They differ from chatrooms, another popular form of online discussion, in that they are asynchronous (messages are not replied to instantaneously on-screen). Because of this feature, newsgroups tend to attract lengthier discussions, whereas chatroom discussions consist of shorter sentences and appear more fragmented. Chatrooms and newsgroups contain about the same amount of heated discussion or flaming, although chatrooms tend to contain more conversation about people events and less about political issues (Hill and Hughes, 1998). Newsgroups were preferred rather than chatrooms for this study, because they reflect discussions that are lengthier, more detailed, and possibly more issue-oriented. Since the purpose was not only to identify instances of incivility and impoliteness but to also investigate strategies associated with these behaviors, newsgroups were selected for this study. It should be reiterated that while civility is defined as politeness (or lack thereof) with collective repercussions for the democratic potential of a discussion. Therefore, civility does involve group behaviors, but rather individual behaviors that threaten a collective founded on democratic norms and mandates. Therefore, it is appropriate to code individual messages, although their contributions to the progress of the general discussion will also be noted and evaluated.

A search for newsgroups with political content, which examined the titles as well as the actual content of messages that were posted on newsgroups, yielded a list of 147 political newsgroups, out of which 10 were selected for close scrutiny, using a random sampling interval. Two threads were randomly selected from each of these 10 newsgroups, and all messages within those threads were saved and coded for the study variables. Threads consist of groups of posted messages that are on the same topic and part of a newsgroup discussion. If a message started a thread, this means that there were replies to the message. Threads were selected over isolated messages because they present discussions between two or more participants. All threads were followed back to their beginning, that is, the original message that started that thread. If a newsgroup did not contain any threads, then it was skipped and the following randomly selected newsgroup was included in its place. Similarly, if a thread contained only a couple of messages, then it

• Table 1 Sample comparison

NEWSGROUP	THREAD TITLE	TOTAL NO. OF MESSAGES	TOTAL % OF MESSAGES
alt.activism.d	1. great gas boycott 2. New Albany Declaration	59	22
alt.politics.clinton	1. gun control in Kosovo 2. Clintonic order	25	9.3
alt.politics.correct	1. understanding American position on Yugoslavia 2. Yugoslavia is a waste of our time	14	5.2
alt.politics.marijuana	1. Dan Quayle: 'My war against weed' 2. border patrol	15	5.6
alt.politics.nationalism.texas	1. CO CHL passed 2. TX constitution	7	2.6
alt.politics.republicans	1. liberal = gay = pedophile 2. joint chiefs doubted Clinton's strategy	51	19
alt.politics.usa.congress	1. Americans approve Serbian air strikes 2. anti-gun cowards	19	7.1
alt.politics.usa.misc	1. third GOP leader funded by Serb extremist party 2. bring the troops home	26	9.7
talk.politics.mideast	1. proof that Jews are superior... 2. USS liberty lies and bigots	9	3.4
talk.politics.theory	1. Serbian war and Russia 2. propaganda 101 in 4 easy steps	43	16

was skipped for the next randomly-selected thread that generated more discussion. Instances of incivility or impoliteness occur in discussion, so the objective was to isolate newsgroup discussions and study them.

This process yielded a total of 268 messages that were read and coded for the study variables. Table 1 contains the newsgroups names, thread titles, and the number of messages contained in each thread. Discussion topics frequently corresponded to current events at the time of study.

Measurement

All messages were read in their entirety, and coded for instances of civility/incivility, politeness/impoliteness, and a few other message characteristics, by two coders who were trained on a subsample. One codesheet was used per

message. Reliability for all content analysis variables was calculated using the Perreault and Leigh (1989) reliability index:

$$I_r = \{[(F_o/N)-(1/k)][k/(k-1)]\}^{0.5}, \text{ for } F_o/n > 1/k$$

where F_o is the observed frequency of agreement between coders, N is the total number of judgments, and k is the number of categories. This index accounts for coder chance agreement, the number of categories used, and is sensitive to coding weaknesses. Reliability scores can range from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating greater intercoder agreement.

Message characteristics

All messages were assigned a unique number, so as to be easily identified. The newsgroup and the thread that the message belonged to were also noted on the codesheet. The message was then classified as:

- (1) a reply to a debate between two or more participants;
- (2) part of a collective rant (several people complaining about a policy, incident, or some other topic); or
- (3) other (call for action, publication of materials).

This information was recorded so as to identify whether instances of incivility or impoliteness were more likely to occur within certain types of conversation. Also, these categories were used to estimate the nature of online discussions. Most (85.8%) messages were replies to a debate, with only a few constituting part of a collective rant (9%) or serving any other purpose (5.2%). These distinctions were clearly identifiable, so the coders reached complete agreement on these items. The average message length was 95 words, with messages ranging from 16 to 1237 words. Complete intercoder agreement was reached for this item also, since it was calculated using the word count function of word processing software.

Civility

A three-item index was used to code for civility or lack thereof. If there was at least one instance of incivility or impoliteness within a message, then that was enough to render the message uncivil or impolite. Future research could focus on a measure that accounts for the frequency of civility or politeness within a message, and try to distinguish between messages that are more uncivil/impolite than others. While this measure could be more precise, the primary purpose of this study was exploratory, and priority was placed on clarifying the distinction between politeness and civility. Moreover, the position taken in this study was that a message is no less impolite or uncivil simply because of the number of such acts that it contains. One count of incivility is as important as 10 or 20, because it still attacks

democratic ideals. One count of incivility may also be more severe than 10 or 20 counts of incivility put together.

The three-item civility index consisted of the following three questions.

- (1) Does the discussant verbalize a threat to democracy (e.g. propose to overthrow a democratic government by force)?
- (2) Does the discussant assign stereotypes (e.g. associate person with a group by using labels, whether those are mild – ‘liberal’, or more offensive – ‘faggot’)?
- (3) Does the discussant threaten other individuals’ rights (e.g. personal freedom, freedom to speak)?

The response options for these were yes (Y) or no (N). If the answer to at least one of the above questions was affirmative, then the message was labeled uncivil. If there were more than one types of incivility (i.e. the answer to more than one of the above questions was affirmative) then that information was recorded for analysis. For the second question, a distinction was made between neutral and antagonistic stereotypes. If the stereotype used negatively-tinted language and was clearly intended to offend the person to whom it was directed, it was labeled antagonistic. If the stereotype was merely used in articulating an argument, but with no specific intent to offend or knowingly belittle the other person, then it was labeled neutral. Finally, the direction of incivility was also coded. If an uncivil attack was directed at another newsgroup discussant it was labeled ‘interpersonal’, whereas if it was directed at someone who was not present (e.g. a politician, or other figure) it was labeled ‘other-directed’.

Politeness

Politeness was measured in a manner similar to civility, in that an index was used and if a message included at least one instance of impoliteness, it was labeled impolite. If name-calling (e.g. weirdo, traitor, crackpot), aspersions (e.g. reckless, irrational, un-American), synonyms for liar (e.g. hoax, farce), hyperbole (e.g. outrageous, heinous), words that indicated non-cooperation, pejorative speak, or vulgarity occurred, then the message was considered impolite. These categories were borrowed from the research of Jamieson (1997) and Jamieson and Falk (1998). Also, if other instances of impoliteness occurred that had to do with sarcasm, using all-caps (frequently used online to reflect shouting), and other types of more covert impolite behavior, those were coded as other. If more than one type of impoliteness (i.e. if the answer to more than one of the above categories was yes) the information was noted and recorded. The direction of impoliteness was also recorded and categorized as interpersonal or other-oriented.

The data were recorded on an SPSS data chart, and simple frequencies and cross tabulations were calculated for data analysis purposes. The messages

were also read through in their entirety, and detailed notes were taken in order to aid the interpretation of the quantitative data with some qualitative analysis.

RESULTS

This study revealed that, contrary to popular belief and consistent with previous research (Hill and Hughes, 1998), most messages posted on political newsgroups are neither predominantly impolite nor uncivil, although frequently disembodied and distracted. A total of 38 messages (14.2%, .91 reliability) were uncivil, and a total of 59 messages were impolite (22%, .89 reliability). Grouped together, both impolite and uncivil messages constituted 30 percent of the total number of messages that were posted, meaning that there were 80 messages that were uncivil, impolite, or both. All impolite messages were replies to a debate. Almost all (with the exception of two that were calls for action) uncivil messages were also replies to a debate.

The assignment of stereotypes to offend or undermine the opponent's arguments was the most common type of incivility. More than two-thirds of all the uncivil messages (27 messages) used stereotypes in an antagonistic manner, and only one message used a 'neutral' stereotype (.86 reliability). Only six out of 38 uncivil messages expressed some type of threat to democracy (15%, .89 reliability) and 11 (29%, .91 reliability) threatened individuals' rights and freedom. Two-thirds of all instances of incivility were other-directed (.91 reliability), meaning that people were more frequently uncivil not to their fellow discussants, but to others who were not present, such as political leaders and social or ethnic groups.

When being impolite, newsgroup discussants preferred using covert forms of impoliteness, such as sarcasm, all-caps (equivalent to shouting in netiquette), and other forms of aggressive replies. For example, respondents would reply to messages in a snappy tone, without using any derogatory words, but still being rather impolite. Two-thirds of all the impolite messages contained such instances of impoliteness. Use of vulgarity was the second most popular strategy of impoliteness, with one-quarter (14) of all impolite messages containing some vulgar expressions, such as 'shit', 'damn', or 'hell' (.89 reliability). Name-calling followed at a close third, with 13 messages that used derogatory terms to refer to others (.91 reliability). Aspersions (words such as irrational, un-American, or reckless) were present in nine (15%) messages (.91 reliability). Only four messages employed any of the other impoliteness strategies, such as use of synonyms for 'liar', hyperbole, and pejoratives. Contrary to the direction of incivility, most impoliteness was interpersonal, which meant that in a little over two-thirds of the impolite messages, individuals insulted their co-discussants directly. The remaining impolite messages contained insults directed at others who were

not present. In this sample, no messages contained both other-directed and interpersonal insults. This implies that individuals tended to focus their insults in one direction, although more research would be necessary to settle this matter.

Finally, a civility and impoliteness density measure for each newsgroup was constructed by dividing the number of impolite or uncivil messages by the total number of messages in a newsgroup. This measure helped to determine whether certain newsgroups, and therefore, certain types of discussion, were more prone to incivility or impoliteness than others. *Alt.politics.correct* contained the highest percentage of impolite messages (57%), with *alt.politics.congress* a distant second (37%), and *alt.politics.marijuana* and *alt.politics.mideast* third (33%). Both of the threads analyzed for *alt.politics.correct* were about American military involvement with the Kosovo crisis. The discussion was heated, but rarely uncivil. The discussants often engaged in verbal attacks but rarely expressed themselves in an uncivil manner, reflected by the fairly low percentage of incivility in this group (14%). This finding supports the initial distinction drawn earlier between civility and politeness, indicating that a conversation may be passionate, heated, and even rude, but it does not necessarily have to be uncivil at the same time. Similarly, *alt.politics.congress* contained some discussion on American involvement in Serbia, and was host to some passionate and heated discussion on the matter. The impoliteness that ensued did not lead to incivility, however, as reflected in the low incivility percentage for this group also (10%).

This was not the case for *alt.politics.marijuana* and *alt.politics.mideast*, the two groups that were the third most impolite. *Alt.politics.marijuana* was the most uncivil group also, with an incivility density of .26 (26% of the messages posted on this group were uncivil). Here, discussants argued about immigration control and policies, and got caught up in a conversation that was not only heated, but also stereotyped ethnic minorities and denied them basic freedoms. Similarly, discussion in *alt.politics.mideast* was both impolite and uncivil (22% of the messages were uncivil, the second highest incivility rating). Both topics revolved around racism and ethnic supremacy, leading not only to passionate discussion and rude exchanges, but also to ethnic stereotyping and threats to democracy. These results support my main contention that civility and politeness are distinct concepts; they often co-exist in conversation, but one does not presuppose the other. This assertion is further supported by several observations made while reading the messages, to be further discussed in the following section.

DISCUSSION

Primarily, this study found that incivility and impoliteness do not dominate online political discussion. Most Usenet discussants managed to express their

political viewpoints in a civil and polite manner in the discussion groups studied. It is true that online anonymity and the lack of face-to-face interaction may make some less mindful of their manners, but this is not the norm on Usenet. Most discussion maintained a calm and mild tone. Frequently, threads began with a call for action, a complaint about a policy, or a reference to a popular public debate. Usually respondents chatted about the issues at hand, until the discussion somehow escalated into a debate. This happened mainly when an opinionated participant expressed his/her take on an issue in an uncivil and/or impolite manner, or when a person put forth a fairly unusual and provocative point of view. The next five or six messages that followed would contain heated discussion, with occurrences of impoliteness or incivility. Eventually they would be toned down by the discussants themselves, who realised that their exchanges were reaching the point of nonsensical rants. At this point, the discussants would frequently apologize to each other for unnecessary use of sarcasm or other impoliteness. On the other hand, those discussants who were uncivil never apologized or took back any of their words. This indicates that the expression of incivility stems from strongly-held attitudes. These attitudes are not only expressed with fervor, but appear to be associated with the primary values of the discussant. Occasional impoliteness that occurred in the heat of the moment was spontaneous, unintentional, and frequently regretted. Incivility, on the other hand, was expressed more firmly, and was not regretted. This is yet another distinction between the two concepts.

The discussants of these Usenet groups seemed to place great importance on democratic ideals. They frequently evoked the principles of American democracy, and valued freedom of speech, diversity in discussion, and calls to make the world better. Discussants acknowledged and respected the others' right to disagree with them. To this point, the majority of the participants appreciated these online debates, because they provided them with the opportunity to hone their argumentation skills. In *alt.politics.clinton* and *alt.politics.republicans*, discussants often expressed their disappointment with a fellow discussant that did not structure an effective argument, or said that they expected more from a certain person, or commented on the argumentative habits of a certain person. For example, one exasperated participant commented on the habit of another to express his opinions in a cryptic and aloof manner, usually to create a certain effect. These people seemed to know each other's arguing strategies fairly well, primarily because they seemed to spend so much time conversing online. It could be that instances of impoliteness or incivility are more likely to develop over time, as online discussants get to know each other better and feel more comfortable expressing their opinions in such a manner. However, frequent instances of flaming between participants who did not seem to know each other virtually as well attest to the influence of anonymity in online

interaction. Nevertheless, further study of the dynamics of online groups as they develop over time would help us to understand the value of political discussion and online community further.

The obsession with argumentation skills often led to debates over minute details or even about the principles of argumentation. This in turn escalated to discussion that was very antagonistic, frequently superficial, and sometimes impolite. For example, participants in *alt.politics.republicans* engaged in a lengthy debate about the Kosovo situation. At one point, they became caught up on an historical Second World War detail about the region, and proceeded to argue over this minute detail for several messages. This discussion was mostly well-mannered and informed, although some subtle sarcasm did manage to creep into a couple of the messages. In another case, *alt.politics.usa.congress*, participants discussing the situation in Serbia argued, not over who was wrong or right, but over who had the best argument ('may the best argument win'). In this particular newsgroup, discussants repeatedly requested that proof accompany arguments, and quickly dismissed arguments that lacked proof, or contained proof from disputable sources. Belief in the power of the best argument prevailed in most newsgroups. Moreover, when discussants focused on structuring a valid argument, they were seldom impolite and rarely uncivil. When impolite, they mostly used some form of sarcasm or snappy retort. Impoliteness (in the form of name-calling, aspersions, and vulgarity) was seen as a drawback to a solid argument.

Carefully structured arguments were also rarely uncivil. The few instances of incivility occurred in a thread titled 'liberal = gay = pedophile' (in *alt.politics.republicans*), where some participants claimed that certain individuals were 'less equal than others' because of their sexual preference. For example, an individual by the pseudonym of 'Old Timer' claimed:

[U]nnatural sex is the norm for homosexuals. So how can they even think they are equal and thus entitled to the same things 'normal' entails?

This argument was not impolite, but it was clearly uncivil, because it isolated a group of individuals and denied them certain rights.

Incivility, as indicated by the quantitative results, also occurred primarily when individuals discussed ethnic or other social groups in derogatory terms and when individuals threatened democracy or others' rights. While impoliteness was more spontaneous and usually required no more than a few words, incivility seemed better planned and required lengthier sentences. When present, incivility was part of the argument structure; impoliteness, in contrast, was simply an argument flaw that was frequently taken back.

Consequently, several messages were simply impolite (15% of all messages). A few messages were both impolite and uncivil (7% of all messages). Those messages were frequently rants or flames. For example, one

individual wrote a lengthy, rude message in response to a number of people complaining about high petrol prices on *alt.activism*. In this message, he used vulgarity and name-calling several times, and complained that people whined too much instead of appreciating the availability of petrol. This message was also uncivil because this person used several 'neutral' stereotypes, claiming that the discussion participants were nothing but 'SUV driving spoiled rotten consumers'. However, before he embarked on this lengthy rant, this person apologized in advance for what he was going to say and the language that he would use. Baym (1997) actually found that this disclaimer strategy constituted fairly popular practice in other newsgroup discussions. Because the stereotypes used were neutral, because of the severe impoliteness of the message, and because of this disclaimer, most people did not take this message seriously and seemed unoffended by it. Although uncivil and impolite, this message was not immensely offensive (although that is a subjective matter) and did not have a detrimental effect on the discussion.

Messages that are polite yet uncivil, especially when they deny others rights, threaten democracy, or use antagonistic stereotypes should concern us more. These made up merely 8 percent of the total number of messages. In a tone that was frequently callous, devoid of emotion, but never rude, they argued that some were more equal than others, associated them with groups in an unflattering manner, and made threats to democratic forms of government. One could argue that impoliteness is not so bad; it implies emotion, and emotion implies compassion, which in turn implies humanity. It is incivility without a trace of politeness, 'impeccable incivility', that should frighten us. This well-mannered civility, which stripped away individual rights, can be seen in the following example. A person by the pseudonym of 'Anglo Celt' posted a lengthy manifesto of white supremacy titled 'New Albany Declaration' on *alt.activism*. In this message, the white supremacy argument was presented extensively, with frequent attacks made on ethnic groups, democratic government, and other individuals' rights, but with not one word or instance that could be classified as rude. In fact, the whole argument was carefully and impeccably crafted. It received a polite response from one participant who argued against a culture of hate, and a more angered (and impolite) response from another participant who also spoke against white supremacy. Yet this message attested to the distinction between civility and politeness.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated how it is possible for conversations to be impolite without being uncivil. Impolite messages can be comforting, because they betray the imperfections and passions of human nature. Impeccably mannered, uncivil messages, on the other hand, are far more alarming, and

are usually reprimanded online. Such messages have graver consequences because they are rarely taken back and because they openly contest individual rights. Such messages pose a threat to democracy and, by their very nature, thwart the development of a public sphere.

Another objective of this study was to determine whether the internet has the potential to revive the public sphere. The majority of conversation online is civil and polite, encouraging of virtual political discussion, and contributing to the well-being of the public sphere. Still, it is important to neither overestimate the public sphere potential of these online discussions, nor assume that public opinion can easily be sampled by visiting a few newsgroups. Individuals may sign up for these discussion groups with the ultimate objective of venting or being rather aggressive in articulating their opinions. For several, this form of excessive outspokenness is a much appreciated benefit of online anonymity. Therefore, these online political discussion groups may not reflect typical political behavior for some. These newsgroups discussions are not representative of everybody else's opinion, and neither is their demographic make-up. For example, although I did not code for gender, I only came upon five messages that were signed by females. This does not imply that women are not online, it simply indicates that women were conspicuously absent in a random sample of political discussion online. Moreover, computers are still not a widely-available technology; therefore, these discussions only reflect the opinions of those with access to the internet. In addition, most newsgroup discussions were dominated by two or three particularly vocal discussants. It is not possible to ascertain the impact of these conversations without a means of estimating how many others are 'lurking' (reading, but not participating). At this point, newsgroup postings resemble the political discussions that take place among friends in pubs or coffeehouses. Several times they take on topics of interest that are very specific, and in this sense, they resemble Fraser's (1992) notion of co-existing public spheres of diverse counterpublics more than Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere. These newsgroups form several mini-public spheres that are not equally powerful, and serve to articulate diverse collective interests and concerns.

In conclusion, this study finds that the distinction between civility and politeness is meaningful to this context, because it allows us to distinguish discussion that is harmful for democratic norms from discussion that does not acknowledge the etiquette basics. The discourse that was analyzed revealed that there were differences between messages that were offensive interpersonally and messages that threatened the democratic tenor of a conversation. To return to points that were made earlier on in assessing the social capital of such online discussions, including adherence to civility, the study finds that while civility is a component essential to transforming online public space into a virtual public sphere, it is not sufficient. Universal

access, a wider range of topics, and conversation specifically aimed at political action, are needed in order to augment the democratic capital that is generated from these online political discussions. In addition, as other research on the democratic potential of these discussion groups has noted (e.g. Hacker and van Dijk, 2000; Jankowski and VanSelm, 2000), even though online political discussion carries the promise of direct democracy, the contribution is limited within a representative model of democracy that does not support direct feedback channels to political institutions. Therefore, without the appropriate communication channels, political talk seldom actually transforms into democratic practice.

Future research should analyze online political discussion further to determine topics of interest, strategies of discourse, and instances of accord or dissent. It would also be helpful to survey newsgroup participants and obtain some sort of socio-demographic profile of these discussants. In addition, determining how many people are eavesdropping on the conversation would help us to estimate the true impact of these discussions on public opinion and political developments. Researchers should also move away from Usenet newsgroups and look into discussion groups that are sponsored by alternate networks, such as the Well (www.well.org), to determine whether the nature of political discussion changes when people reside in different 'web neighborhoods'. Finally, more political research should be devoted to the conceptual distinction between politeness and civility. Political discussion, virtual and real, should abide to civility standards, but cannot be dismissed when it is simply impolite. Conversational impoliteness is frequently a sincere and spontaneous reflection of emotions, and should be conceptualized as such. Incivility, on the other hand, is fundamentally linked to attitudes and beliefs, and as such could have graver repercussions.

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