



# CIVIL DISCOURSE ONLINE

NICD RESEARCH BRIEF  
NO. 1

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# National Institute for Civil Discourse Research Brief No. 1: Civil Discourse Online<sup>1</sup>

## Key issues

*Does online communication expand meaningful discourse across geographic and social boundaries or does it further fragment political discourse and the public sphere?*

*Does anonymity in online discourse exacerbate incivility?*

## Overview

Some observers expected the proliferation of digital media to expand meaningful, democratic discourse by increasing the accessibility that users of media have to diverse interlocutors. Other observers anticipated that digital media would further fragment the public sphere and that the anonymity afforded by online communication would exacerbate already present levels of incivility. Research to date is hampered by ambiguity about the meaning of civil discourse, absence of systematic comparison of online with offline political discourse, and treatment of “new media” or the “Internet” as a single entity, without attending to the diversity of technologies, practices and forms.

Empirical research yields inconsistent findings. Both offline and online, Americans tend to discuss politics with those with whom they agree. When they encounter those with differing political views online, it is usually inadvertent, but they do not necessarily seek to avoid those with differing views. People actively seek out opinion-confirming information, but do not go out of their way to avoid opinion-disconfirming information. In the 2004 Presidential election, Internet users were aware of a greater range of political arguments than were non-users, when age, education, use of other media sources, and level of interest in the election were held constant. Under some conditions, engaging in online political discussion may lead to a small increase in diversity of users’ political discussion networks. Fragmented discussion taking place within ideologically homogenous subgroups may or may not increase extremist views depending on a particular group’s position on the ideological spectrum. Anonymity and incivility in online discussion may be far less prevalent than is commonly assumed. Finally, some studies suggest that when some posters in online political discussion are selected at random to moderate and rank other posters with respect to reasoned, civil discourse, the incidence of incivility is very low.

## Arguments and Findings

Both proponents and critics of new digital media draw on models of a deliberative democracy that is “egalitarian, rational-critical and inclusive,” in which people with diverse perspectives come together to address hard issues, and in which political leaders take seriously the public will expressed through such informed, reasoned discourse.<sup>2</sup> But while Ross Perot touted his vision of an Electronic Town Hall as “the old town hall meeting, expanded using modern technology...democracy in its purest form,”<sup>3</sup> and legal scholar Michael Fromkin thought wikis and blogs would enhance participatory, deliberative democracy,<sup>4</sup> critics warned that the Internet would exacerbate people’s tendency to cluster with likeminded others and seek out opinion-confirming information. This would lead to more fragmentation and polarization of the public sphere.<sup>5</sup> Critics also feared that the anonymity of much online discourse would foster incivility.<sup>6</sup>

The American public is as ambivalent as scholars. A 2010 Public Religion Research Institute study found that about 80% of US adults think that, overall, a “lack of civil or respectful discourse in our political system” is a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem.<sup>7</sup> A 2011 study by the Pew Research Center found that 61% of Americans believe that the Internet exposes them to greater diversity in political views than they would be exposed to otherwise. But 54% believe that the Internet makes it easier for them to connect with others with similar political views and 55% believe that the Internet encourages political extremism.<sup>8</sup>

Research to date has produced inconsistent findings in part because researchers have failed to systematically compare offline and online political discourse, to disaggregate new media into various technologies and procedures for online participation, or to provide a standard for what counts as civility or incivility for purposes of empirical research on online discourse. Similarly, research that examines exactly what *participants* think civility or incivility in online discussion means remains to be done.

Zizi Papachrissi is one of the few scholars to try to define online incivility for research purposes and she cautions that incivility should be distinguished from heated conversation. Discourse can be civil while also being highly critical and passionate. Any respectful, democracy-promoting discourse, including that in which participants challenge each other's opinions or assert their own opinions in harsh or critical ways would be civil discourse. Thus, according to Papachrissi, exchanges or comments that "threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms and stereotype social groups," are uncivil, but using sarcasm or writing in all capital letters or using strong language are impolite but not uncivil.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Fragmentation***

People often find conversation with those of opposing views threatening or uncomfortable, so both offline and online they tend to discuss politics with likeminded others. While it provides more opportunities to converse with those who hold different views, the Internet also allows people to selectively expose themselves only to information and others who confirm rather than challenge their opinions. This could create a "cyber-Balkans," akin to the Balkanization produced by cable news, in which people are segregated, isolated into enclaves with likeminded others, and prone to experience an "echo chamber" effect in which prior predispositions are reinforced and solidified.<sup>10</sup>

### **Some empirical studies support concerns about fragmentation and polarization.**

- A 2007 study of Howard Dean's candidate blog from the 2004 Presidential election primary found that the blog was primarily used to support Dean and not to air different views or even to discuss specific issues. Posts rarely included reasons or facts.<sup>11</sup>
- A 2009 survey of a representative sample of American adults visiting some type of online discussion forum in the last year found that respondents only infrequently and incidentally encountered views with which they disagreed. People were more likely to encounter those with whom they disagreed in nonpolitical forums (e.g., those related to hobbies or professions) than in political forums.<sup>12</sup>
- A 2010 study randomly assigned participants to an ideologically homogenous, very liberal group; an ideologically homogenous, very conservative group; a moderate group; or a group combining elements of the other three positions. Participation in the ideologically homogenous conservative group – but not in the ideologically homogenous liberal group – produced greater extremism than participation in the moderate or mixed group.<sup>13</sup>
- A 2010 study of a random sample of participants in neo-Nazi online discussion groups at one point in time showed that those who reported visiting the site more frequently also reported a more favorable impression of Hitler and more support for racial violence, holding constant age, gender, education, income, news media exposure, and more general online participation.<sup>14</sup>

### **However, many other studies suggest that concerns about fragmentation, polarization and echo chambers are overdrawn.**

- A 2004 mail survey of a random sample of adults in Pittsburgh found that those who reported Internet use were no more likely to exhibit extreme views than those who did not report such use.<sup>15</sup>

- A 2007 study found significant disagreement among posters on the news discussion site Slashdot.org, especially in election-day discussions about the 2004 US election.<sup>16</sup>
- A 2009 study of a large Facebook group (on the social networking site Facebook.com) created to oppose the use of torture by the United States found that members expressed diverse opinions and that a sizeable number of members disagreed with the stated opinion of the group.<sup>17</sup>
- A 2010 study of conversations in a random sample of 20 politically-oriented Facebook groups found significant heterogeneity of opinion within each of the groups.<sup>18</sup>
- A 2004 study of respondent awareness of diverse arguments about candidates and issues in the 2004 US Presidential election found that Internet users were aware of a greater number of arguments than were non-users, holding constant age, education, use of other media sources and interest in the election.<sup>19</sup>
- A 2010 study of a representative national sample of Internet users estimated the impact of online political discussion and online news consumption against a baseline estimate of the likely political heterogeneity of participants' discussion networks based only on heterogeneity of the community where they lived. Both online political discussion and online news consumption produced small increases in heterogeneity beyond the baseline estimate, but the more partisan the participant, the less the impact of online political discussion and news consumption.<sup>20</sup>

The last two studies provide especially compelling challenges to the echo chamber argument. These studies and others suggest that to know *if* and *how* digital media Balkanize and produce echo chambers requires specifying *which modes of Internet use in which types of virtual spaces* are being operated under *which rules of engagement* and for *which people*.

Even in digital spaces where echo chambers are seemingly facilitated by Internet use, the same people who frequent these spaces may still engage in online discourse with those whose opinions differ.

- A 2009 study recruited participants from partisan online discussion groups, assessed their views on various controversial political topics, and then gave them a set of diverse political news story headlines. Tracking software monitored which stories they read and how long they had story windows open during timed periods that required participants to prioritize their reading. People tended to choose articles that reinforced their views, but still chose some articles that challenged their views and if they started to read something and then found it challenged their views, they rarely stopped reading for this reason.<sup>21</sup>
- A 2009 study analyzing data from the 2004 Pew Internet and American Life Project found that Internet use to acquire political information was associated with increased awareness of arguments consistent with candidate preference. Internet use was not associated with any diminution in awareness of inconsistent political arguments, holding constant interest in the election and various demographic factors.<sup>22</sup>

**In short, in online activity, people exhibit their general tendency to seek out opinion-confirming information. But using the Internet also may increase chances that people will be exposed to and become aware of a greater variety of reasoning and information than they would have been exposed to otherwise.**

### *Anonymity*

Critics of digital media also worry that the anonymity of online discourse breeds a lack of accountability that may exacerbate incivility beyond the world of offline discourse, including especially face-to-face conversation. The blogosphere and other online spaces have given us a new vocabulary for describing incivility. Online, “trolls” are those individuals who try to provoke conflicts (or “flame wars”)

with others, make off-topic comments or post spam in order to detract from conversation; trolls are sometimes also “anons,” or those who do not provide any identifying information or even a screen name.<sup>23</sup>

Common refrains about greater incivility in Internet discourse compared to face-to-face conversation have not been subjected to empirical testing. What little evidence we have suggests that **concerns about online incivility may be overblown, anonymity may not be as prevalent in online discourse as assumed, and anonymity need not detract from civility.**

- A 2005 study analyzing the content of four political Usenet groups (on the online discussion group forum Usenet.org) purposely selected to represent the far left, mainstream left, mainstream right and far right found that discussions often were characterized by “flaming,” including verbal attacks on another poster’s ideas or on the poster personally.<sup>24</sup>

But

- Anonymity was not to blame for incivility in this 2005 study. Those appearing to use their real names were as likely to flame as were those using aliases or no names at all.<sup>25</sup>
- A 2007 study of a random sample of blogs at three different time points failed to substantiate the claim that bloggers tend to be anonymous. Most posters provided some identifying information.<sup>26</sup>
- A 2007 study found that only 4% of posts in political conversations on Slashdot exhibited incivility.<sup>27</sup>
- A 2009 study of Facebook political groups found that the overwhelming majority of posters were civil.<sup>28</sup>

Many blogs are retreating from allowing anonymous posting, now requiring registration before commenting. This change may be motivated more by desire to attract advertisers wary of having ads posted alongside vitriolic dialogue than by desire to promote civil discourse as a good in itself.<sup>29</sup>

Some news and blog websites are moving to systems in which posters are ranked according to ratings by other posters. The underlying assumption is that those who gain a reputation for contributing reasoned opinions and reliable information will be ranked higher than those who fellow posters consider to be “trolls.” Indeed, the author of the 2007 study finding an extremely low level of incivility on Slashdot credited this to Slashdot’s system of site moderation in which some posters are selected at random to moderate and rank other posters to make sure that none detract from reasoned, civil discourse.<sup>30</sup>

The site Wikipedia (Wikipedia.org) has been using a similar system for some time; editing rights are gained by earning trust from other editors.<sup>31</sup> The Huffington Post news website (Huffingtonpost.com) has a system in which posters can become “fans” of one another, and in which staff moderators award badges to posters who contribute positively. Similarly, staff moderators review all comments before publishing and can ban someone for making particularly offensive remarks. More generally, the automated moderating software that now exists can use algorithms designed to find comments that are off-topic or contain angry language.<sup>32</sup>

## **In Sum**

In sum, **moderating systems that harness widely held human concerns about reputation, status and community acceptance within an informal social control system seem a promising way to maintain online civility but also allow room for passionate critique and counter-critique of ideas and arguments.**

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<sup>2</sup> Sharon Meraz, "Analyzing Political Conversation on the Howard Dean Candidate Blog," In  *Blogging, Citizenship and the Future of Media*, ed. Mark Tremayne, Routledge, 2007, pp 59-91, 60. See also J. MacGregor Wise, "Community, Affect and the Virtual: Politics of Cyberspace," In *Virtual Publics: Policy and Community in an Electronic Age*," ed. B. Kolko, Columbia University Press, 2003, pp. 112-133; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, MIT Press, 1989; Michael Keren, "Blogging and Mass Publics," *Biography* 33(1), 2010, pp. 110-126.

<sup>3</sup> *Los Angeles Times* 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Michael A. Froomkin, "Technologies for Democracy," In *Democracy Online: Prospects for Renewal through the Internet*, ed. P. Shane, Routledge, 2004, pp. 3-21.

<sup>5</sup> Marshall Van Alstyne and Erik Brynjolfsson, "Global Village or Cyber-Balkans? Modeling and Measuring the Integration of Electronic Communities," *Management Science* 51(6), 2005, pp. 851-868; Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com*, Princeton University Press, 2001; Benjamin Barber, "Which Technology and Which Democracy?" In *Democracy and New Media*, ed. H. Jenkins, D. Thornburn and B. Seawell, MIT Press, 2003, pp. 33-48; Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society," *Communication Theory* 16(4), 2006, pp. 411-426.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g., Norman Johnson and Randolph B. Cooper, "The Effect of Flaming on Computer-Mediated Negotiations," *European Journal of Information Systems* 17(4), 2008, pp. 417-434; Charles Q. Choi, "Anger Management for Online Trolls," *Wired Science*, 2010, Retrieved April 12, 2011 (<http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2010/10/troll-anger-management>); Vincent Price, Lilach Nir and Joseph N. Capella, "Normative and Information Influences in Online Political Discussions," 2006, Retrieved April 12, 2011 (<http://respository.unpenn.edu/asc--papers/99>).

<sup>7</sup> Public Religion Research Institute, PPR/RNS religion news survey, retrieved from <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/November-PRRI-RNS-Survey-Elections-and-Civility.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Aaron Smith, *The Internet and Campaign 2010*, Report from the Pew Research Center, 2011, Retrieved April 12, 2011 (<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/The-Internet-and-Campaign-2010.aspx>).

<sup>9</sup> Zizi Papachrissi, "Democracy Online: Civility, Politeness and the Democratic Potential of Online Discussion Groups," *New Media & Society* 6(2), 2004, pp. 259-293, 267.

<sup>10</sup> Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson, *supra*, n. 5; Sunstein *supra* n. 5; Barber *supra*, n. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Meraz 2007, *supra* n. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Magdalena Wojcieszak and Diana Mutz, "Online Groups and Political Discourse: Do Online Discussion Groups and Spaces Facilitate Exposure to Political Disagreement," *Journal of Communication* 69(1), 2009, pp. 30-46.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Warner, "Segmenting the Electorate: The Effects of Exposure to Political Extremism Online," *Communication Studies* 61(4), 2010, pp. 430-444.

<sup>14</sup> Magdalena Wojcieszak, "'Don't Talk to Me': Effects of Ideologically Homogeneous Groups and Politically Dissimilar Offline Ties on Extremism," *New Media & Society* 12(4), 2010, pp 637-655.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Muhlberger, "Polarization of Political Attitudes and Values on the Internet," Paper Presented at Annual Meeting of the International Communications Association, New Orleans, LA, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Jesse Kline, "Political Discussion and Debate on Slashdot," November 28, 2007, Retrieved April 12, 2011 (<http://jesse.kline.ca/papers/57-political-discussion-and-debate-on-slashdot>).

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Kushin and Kelin Kitchener, "Getting Political On Social Networking Sites: Exploring Online Political Discourse on Facebook," *First Monday* 14(11), 2009.

<sup>18</sup> David Ingenito, *Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Social Media and Politics: Global Village or Cyber-Balkans?* Los Angeles, University of Southern California, USC Digital Library, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> John Horrigan, Kelly Garrett and Paul Resnick, *The Internet and Democratic Debate*, Report from the Pew Research Center, October 27, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Brundige, "Encountering Difference in the Contemporary Public Sphere: The Contribution of the Internet to the Heterogeneity of Political Discussion Networks," *Journal of Communication* 60(4), 2010, pp. 680-700.

<sup>21</sup> Kelly Garrett, "Echo Chambers Online? Politically Motivated Selective Exposure among Internet News Users," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14, 2009, pp. 265-285.

<sup>22</sup> Tetsuro Kobayashi and Ken'ichi Ikeda, "Selective Exposure in Political Web Browsing," *Information, Communication, Society* 12(6), 2009, pp. 929-953.

<sup>23</sup> See Choi 2010, *supra*, n. 6

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- <sup>24</sup> Richard Davis, *Politics Online: Blogs, Chatrooms and Discussion Groups in American Democracy*, Routledge, 2005.
- <sup>25</sup> Davis, 2005, *supra* n. 24.
- <sup>26</sup> Susan C. Herring, Lois Ann Scheidt, Anna Kouper and Elijah Wright, "Longitudinal Content Analysis of Blogs, 2003-2004," In *Blogging, Citizenship and the Future of Media*, ed. M. Tremayne, Routledge, 2007, pp. 3-20.
- <sup>27</sup> Kline 2007, *supra* n. 16
- <sup>28</sup> Kushin and Kitchener 2009, *supra*, n. 17.
- <sup>29</sup> Richard Perez-Pena, "News Sites Rethink Anonymous Online Comments." *New York Times*, April 12, 2010, Retrieved April 12, 2011 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/12/technology/12comments.html>).
- <sup>30</sup> Kline 2007, *supra* n. 16.
- <sup>31</sup> Perez- Pena 2010, *supra* n. 29.
- <sup>32</sup> Choi 2010, *supra*, n. 6.

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