

J 358 N (08750)
Online Incivility and Public Debate (Spring 2021)
The University of Texas at Austin

Course

12:30 to 2 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays
Fully online course with synchronous Zoom lessons
All lessons recorded for later viewing

Professor

Dr. Masullo (Chen)

Quickest way to reach me

Text me at 228-229-2783
Be sure to tell me in the text who you are.
Don't expect an immediate answer after 8 p.m. or before 6 a.m.

Office Hours

Conducted via Zoom
2 to 3 p.m. Tuesdays
10 to 11 a.m. Wednesdays
Sign up here: <https://calendly.com/gina-chen/spring-2021-office-hours>

Tentative Syllabus – Subject to Change

Course Overview

This course explores online incivility – defined as nasty remarks that often contain profanity, all capital letters to indicate yelling, put-downs or name-calling, or promote homophobia, racism, sexism, xenophobia, or bigotry. The aim of this course is to lead students in critically assessing the impact of incivility on public discussions online. By the end of the course, students will understand the roots of incivility and the particular attributes of online communication that help incivility flourish. They also will learn what tools and practices help prevent incivility or calm it once it occurs.

By the end of the semester, students will understand:

- The extent and types of incivility across social media and news story comments.
- The roots of uncivil speech in American culture and politics.
- What attributes of the online environment make it so hospitable to incivility.
- Why specific groups (minorities, women, etc.) are more frequent targets of incivility online.
- How people's beliefs (such as political beliefs) influence how they view and respond to incivility.
- How incivility and disagreement differ in their effects on people and online discussions.
- Best practices for preventing incivility online and diffusing it once it occurs.

Required Readings

Chen, G.M. (2017). *Online Incivility and Public Debate: Nasty Talk*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. **(The book is available in the campus bookstore, as well in the UT library for a free download.)**

Additional required readings will be posted on Canvas.

Warning

Because of the topic of this course, we will be discussing news comments or social media posts that include profanity, vulgarity, insults, abusive language, hate speech, or other forms of aversive communication. Please see me with any concerns or if there is a particularly sensitive issue for you.

Grading Policy

A	94-100
A-	90 to 93
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D	< 70
F	< 60

- **Late work:** 5 points deducted for each day of lateness. No work accepted more than three days late without documented extenuating circumstances approved by me in advance.
- **Failure to turn in work** = Zero.
- **Rounding:** I do not round grades up or down. The numeric score is the score you get. (So if your final grade is a 93.9, that will be an A-, not an A.)
- **Changing grades:** I do not change grades unless I have made a mathematical error or failed to include an assignment.

Attendance Policy in the COVID19 era

You must attend class in some form. You can attend however you want: in person, virtually via the livestream of class, or asynchronously by watching the video from class. You do NOT need to tell me how you will attend, and you can switch modalities from class to class (for example, attend one class in person and then livestream the next).

If you miss a class, you are still responsible for the work and should contact a classmate to find out what you missed. Repeated absences will impede your ability to be successful in this class. Please see me for emergency situations or long-term absences.

Missed Classes/Deadlines and Late Assignments

If an emergency prevents a student from taking a scheduled exam or meeting the deadline of a presentation, the student must notify the instructor prior to the exam or presentation. Otherwise, the student will not be eligible for a make-up. Make-up exams will be granted only for a limited time and only for valid, documented reasons, such as serious illness, family emergency, jury duty or military reserve obligation. Absence excuses are subject to verification. Presenting a false excuse will be considered a violation of the academic integrity rules.

Class Recordings

Class recordings are reserved only for students in this class for educational purposes and are protected under FERPA. The recordings should not be shared outside the class in any form. Violation of this restriction by a student could lead to Student Misconduct proceedings.

University policy on Scholastic Dishonesty: Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. Since such dishonesty harms the individual, all students, and the integrity of the University, policies on scholastic dishonesty will be strictly enforced. For further information, visit the Student Judicial Services website: <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/>

Academic Dishonesty includes the following. This list is not exhaustive. If you are unsure whether something constitutes academic dishonestly, see me:

- Turning in another's work as your own.
- Turning in work from another class for this class.
- Downloading information from the Internet or any other source without providing proper attribution. Proper attribution includes quotation marks and a reference for the actual words of another person or source and a reference for paraphrases from another source.
- Copying in whole or in part from any class readings without proper attribution.
- Cheating on tests by brings prohibited resources to the exam or copying answers from another student's paper.

Overview of Course Assignments and Grading

- Percentage indicates value toward final grade.
- Upload assignments to Canvas by class time (unless noted)

15% Discussion Questions from the Readings

3 questions per person due for each week that we have readings.

10% Participation

Incivility Example (2/4)
Deliberation Example (2/16)
Virtual class module (2/18)

25% Response Papers

#1 3/4
#2 3/25
#3 4/22

50% Examinations

Midterm 4/1 (Open book, open note on Canvas – opens 3/31 and closes 4/5)
Final Exam (Open book, open note on Canvas – opens 5/6 and closes 5/13)

Detailed instructions for each assignment are provided on Canvas. Here is an overview.

Discussion Questions: For every week that readings are due, you are expected to come up with 3 questions about the readings. Questions should be substantive and demonstrate that you read the materials, but they can include genuine questions about information you did not understand from the readings. They cannot be vague queries, such as “I didn’t understand the whole chapter.” If multiple readings are due in a week, you only need to come up with 3 questions. But at least one of your questions should relate to each reading.

Response Papers: 1 page typed, double-spaced. You will be expected to respond concisely and thoughtfully to a question regarding the reading materials and lectures.

Participation: Our goal of having lively class discussions requires that students have read the assigned material BEFORE class time. Participation will include both your thoughtful and prepared contributions to the class discussions, the level of effort shown in your assigned work, and in your willingness to seek additional guidance as needed via email or office hours. Participation also includes the assignments for your incivility example, your deliberation example, and the virtual class.

Tentative Class Schedule – Subject to Change

	Topic for Class	Due by Class Time Unless Noted
Week 1: Overview of Class/Introduction to Online Incivility		
1/19 & 1/21	Welcome, intro, syllabus. What is incivility? History of commenting; how it developed into what it is today.	
Week 2: Who are Online Commenters		
1/26 & 1/28	Who are commenters What do they want?	Due by 1/26 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Upload 3 comments on the reading. ▪ Read “Comment: The Bottom Half of the Web” ▪ Read “News Commenters and News Comment Readers” ▪ Read “Comment Section Survey Across 20 News Sites”
Week 3: Is Incivility Always Bad?		
2/2 & 2/4	What is incivility, really? Is it normatively bad? Discuss your example	Due by 2/2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Upload 3 comments on the readings. ▪ Read “We Should Not Get Rid of Incivility Online” ▪ Read “International Perspectives on What’s Considered Profane or Hateful Online” Due 2/4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Upload example of incivility with explanation of why its uncivil
Week 4: History of Incivility & Introduction to Public Deliberation		
2/9 & 2/11	Brief history of incivility and why people are uncivil What is public deliberation?	Due by 2/9 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Upload 3 comments on the reading. ▪ Read Chapter 1, “Introduction: Incivility in Today’s World,” in the textbook. ▪ Read Chapter 2, “Online Incivility and Public Discourse,” in the textbook. ▪ Read “The Discursive Turn: Citizens Talking Together”
Week 5: Public Deliberation Continued		

2/16 & 2/18	Discuss your deliberation examples in class	<p>Due 2/16</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upload example of deliberation with brief explanation of why its deliberation. <p>Due 2/18</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete virtual class assignment by 11:59 p.m. NO CLASS
Week 6: Incivility in Politics		
2/23 & 2/25	Historical examples	<p>Due 2/23</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upload 3 comments on reading. Read “The Problem of Incivility & Partisanship” Read “What is ‘In-Your-Face-Politics”
Week 7: Incivility in Politics Continued		
3/2 & 3/4	This current moment	<p>Due 3/2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read “The President is In: Public Opinion and the Presidential Use of Twitter” <p>Due 3/4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Response Paper #1.
Week 8: Managing Political Incivility		
3/9 & 3/11	To block or not to block, that is the question	<p>Due 3/9</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upload 3 comments on the reading. Read “#Blocked: When Engagement Fails” Read “Politicians, Social Media, and Digital Publics”
Spring Break – No classes 3/16 & 3/18		
Week 9: Incivility Over Time		
3/23 & 3/25	<p>Is our society more uncivil today than in the past?</p> <p>Overview of how we communicate online and why it is so hospitable to incivility?</p>	<p>Due 3/23</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upload 3 comments on the readings. Read “Explaining CMC: Group Dynamics” Read Chapter 3, “Nasty Talk Online,” in the textbook. <p>Due 3/25</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Response Paper #2
Week 10: Midterm Review and Midterm		
3/30 & 4/1	3/30 Interactive Midterm Review 4/1	

	Midterm Exam	
Week 11: Can Incivility and Deliberation Co-Exist?		
4/6 & 4/8	Overview of analysis of online comments about Confederate Flag, 2016 presidential campaign, same-sex marriage decision	Due 4/6 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Upload 3 comments on the reading. ▪ Read Chapter 4, "Can Incivility and Deliberation Co-Exist?" in the textbook. ▪ Read Chapter 5, "Analyzing Comments in the News," in the textbook.
Week 12: Incivility and the Marginalized		
4/13 & 4/15	Why certain groups face more incivility online than others	Due 4/13 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Upload 3 comments on the reading. ▪ Read "Attacks and Harassment" ▪ Read "Women Journalists and Online Harassment."
Week 13: Incivility and Political Participation		
4/20 & 4/22	Disagreement, Incivility, and Emotions; differences between civil and uncivil; impact on political participation.	Due 4/20 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Upload 3 comments on the reading. ▪ Read Chapter 6, "Incivility and Speaking Out," in textbook. ▪ Read Chapter 7, "Testing the 'Defensive Effect,'" in the textbook. Due 4/22 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Response Paper #3
Week 14: Talking Across Differences		
4/27 & 4/29	Solutions for online incivility? Moral reframing Ted talk and exercise; course evaluation. What type of messages work best?	Due 4/27 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Upload 3 comments on the reading. ▪ Read Chapter 8, "Conclusion: Where Do We Go From Here?" ▪ Read "Engagement Moderation"
Week 15: Talking Across Differences Continued		
5/4 & 5/6	Solutions – how to effectively talk across differences so conversations remain more deliberative.	Due 5/4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Upload 3 comment on the reading. ▪ Read "Finding Common Ground." ▪ Read "How to Talk to People Who Disagree With You Politically"
Final Exam is Open-Book, Open Note Opens on Canvas at 11:59 p.m. Thursday, 5/6 Due by 11: 59 p.m. Monday, 5/13		

Additional Course Policies and Resources

Dropping this Course

Undergraduate students can drop this course through February 3, 2021, and there will be no documentation of a drop on your UT transcript. You may use a Q drop to drop this course at any time between February 4, 2021 and May 11, 2021 (5:00 pm CDT) by meeting with your academic advisor. This Q drop will be recorded as non-academic and will not count against your six-drop limit.

Changing The Grading Status of This Course

If you wish to change this course to, or from, pass/fail, there are two different options:

- **Standard Pass/Fail:** You may change up to two Letter-Graded courses to Pass/Fail or any Pass/Fail Course to Letter-Graded one time between February 4, 2021 and April 5, 2021 (5:00 pm CDT). Unless only offered on a Pass/Fail basis, a course taken under the Standard Pass/Fail option will generally only count toward elective hours and not toward Core, Flag, Minor, Certificate, or Major requirements. Students who are Moody majors must take ALL Moody courses for a Letter Grade in order for the course to count for a Moody degree (unless it's only offered on the Pass/Fail basis, or unless you use the COVID-19 Pass/Fail Exception, see below). You should check with your academic advisor before choosing to use this option.
- **COVID-19 Pass/Fail Exception (CPFE):** This also allows you to change a course to, or from, the pass/fail status. You may change the grading status of up to three courses TOTAL using a CPFE for Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 *combined* (e.g., one course for Fall 2020 and two for Spring 2021). You can change the grading status of a Fall 2020 or Spring 2021 course using the CPFE one time between January 6, 2021 and May 28, 2021 (5:00 pm CDT). Once you have changed the grading status of a course using the CPFE, you cannot change it again. A course taken on a Pass/fail basis using the CPFE option will still be allowed to count toward Core, Flag, Minor, Certificate, or Major requirements, if you pass the course. [Please see the Texas One Stop website for more information about the CPFE.](#) You should check with your academic advisor before choosing to use this option.

Use of Canvas: I will use Canvas, a web-based course management system with password-protected access to distribute course materials, to make course announcements, to post grades, and for you to submit your assignments. You can get help learning to use Canvas at the ITS Help Desk at <http://www.utexas.edu/its/helpdesk/>.

Email: I will be using email to communicate with you about this class, and I will use your official UT email address. All students should become familiar with the University's official email notification policy. It is the student's responsibility to keep the University informed of changes to his or her email address. Students should check email regularly

(daily). The email policy can be found here:

<http://www.utexas.edu/cio/policies/university-electronic-mail-student-notification-policy>

Students with disabilities: The University of Texas at Austin provides, upon request, appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. For more information, contact Service for Students with Disabilities at 512-471-6259 (voice) or 512-232-2937 (video phone.)

University of Texas Honor Code: The core values of The University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility. Each member of the university is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, and respect toward peers and community.

University policy on holy days: A student who misses classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day should inform the instructor as far in advance of the absence as possible, so that arrangements can be made to complete assigned work.

Q drop policy: The state of Texas has enacted a law that limits the number of course drops for academic reasons to six. The University may not permit an undergraduate student a total of more than six dropped courses, including any course a transfer student has dropped at another institution of higher education, unless the student shows good cause for dropping more than that number.

Behavior Concerns Advice Line (BCAL): If you are worried about someone who is acting differently, you may use the Behavior Concerns Advice line to discuss by phone your concerns about another person's behavior. This service is provided through a partnership among the Office of the Dean of Students, the Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC), the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and The University of Texas Police Department (UTPD): Call 512-232-5050 to visit <http://www.utexas.edu/safety/bcal/>

Resources for Learning & Life at UT Austin: The University of Texas has numerous resources for students to provide assistance and support for your learning. You are particularly encouraged to use the Learning Skills Center on campus for help on writing assignments. Also, the PCL reference librarians can assist you with online news retrieval and other information finding tasks.

The UT Learning Center: <http://www.utexas.edu/student/utlc/>

Undergraduate Writing Center: <http://uwc.utexas.edu/>

Counseling & Mental Health Center: <http://cmhc.utexas.edu/>

Career Exploration Center: <http://www.utexas.edu/student/careercenter/>

Student Emergency Services: <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/>

Safety issues: <http://www.utexas.edu/safety/terms/>