ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Online and Uncivil? Patterns and Determinants of Incivility in Newspaper Website Comments

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Incivility in public discussions has received increasing attention from academic and popular commentators in recent years. In an effort to better understand the nature and determinants of such incivility, this study examined a 3-week census of articles and comments posted to a local newspaper's website—totaling more than 300 articles and 6,400 comments. The results of the content analysis show that incivility occurs frequently and is associated with key contextual factors, such as the topic of the article and the sources quoted within the article. We also find that, contrary to popular perceptions, frequent commenters are more civil than are infrequent commenters, and uncivil commenters are no less likely than civil commenters to use evidence in support of their claims.

Civility is a crucial principle of public life, one that speaks to "the fundamental tone and practice of democracy" (Herbst, 2010, p. 3). Indeed, a commitment to civil discourse—the free and respectful exchange of ideas—has been viewed as a democratic ideal from the ancient Athenian forums to the mediated political debates of modern times (Papacharissi, 2004; Sapiro, 1999). This is not to say the ideal is always realized. Public discourse has always had its share of incivility, and the current era is no different in this respect. What is different now, however, is that the 21st century's vast, interactive media environment has created broader opportunities for public debate, and that moments of incivility now spread more rapidly and widely than ever before (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). In this milieu, incivility has become a central concern of citizens and scholars. For example, a 2010 survey found that more than 8 in 10 Americans viewed "the lack of civil or respectful discourse in our political system" as a "somewhat serious" or "very serious" problem (Public Religion Research Institute, 2010). Across the United States, various organizations have been created in recent

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years—such as the National Institute for Civil Discourse at the University of Arizona and the Center for Civil Discourse at the University of Massachusetts at Boston—to study and promote civil discourse. The National Communication Association even made civility the focus of a special issue of its magazine, *Spectra*, during 2011.

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to civility in the domains of inter-personal relationships and workplace dynamics (e.g., Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Blau & Andersson, 2005; Forni, 2002). A smaller but growing body of research has examined civility in the context of political discourse. Empirical inquiry into this aspect of civil discourse typically has focused on the question of effects, asking how encountering incivility in the political arena, usually via media, might affect an audience (e.g., Brooks & Geer, 2007; Fridkin & Kenney, 2008; Mutz, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Questions about effects are important, but in some ways put the cart ahead of the horse. As Sobieraj and Berry (2011) point out, "[T]o understand the political consequences of incivility—the question at the forefront of virtually all research on this topic—we first need a more comprehensive understanding of the extent and texture of political incivility itself" (p. 20). The relatively few studies that have made progress in this area (e.g., Herbst, 2010; Jamieson, 1997, 2011; Papacharissi, 2004; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Uslaner, 1993) have focused primarily on incivility among elites—politicians, journalists, pundits, and the like—and/or considered only political discussions. Consequently, little is known about incivility in the public discussions that regular citizens have about a wide range of issues. The present research addresses this gap in the literature by examining the patterns (i.e., recurrent features) and determinants (i.e., explanatory factors) of incivility in discussions among the general public.

Given the noted potential of Internet-based technologies to create opportunities for individual citizens to discuss current events (Benson, 1996; Dahlberg, 2001; Downing, 1989; Papacharissi, 2002), we examine incivility in the context of the comments posted in response to articles published on a newspaper's website. Focusing on a single local newspaper, we track incivility across a 3-week census of article comments—a total of more than 6,400 comments posted to more than 300 articles. This census-based approach has three important strengths. First, analyzing a census is the only means of capturing the full range of topics and sources present in the news articles, features that we argue below might be important determinants of incivility. If, conversely, articles from various newspapers were sampled and some topics/sources occurred infrequently, large sampling error around the estimates would make it difficult to draw conclusions. Second, capturing a census of comments ensures that we are able to observe complete patterns in individual users who make multiple comments—something that can occur with regularity in online discussions (Loveland & Popescu, 2011). Observing such patterns helps us determine whether incivility is the purview of frequent rather than occasional commentators. Finally, relative to sampling, capturing a census allows us to better manage the reality that newspaper websites often post multiple versions of articles as new information

emerges. This fluidity of content has long been known as a central difficulty of sampling Internet content, making a time-bound census a common and useful approach (see Herring, 2010; McMillan, 2000).[1] Thus, although a census-based approach will necessarily limit the breadth of our claims, it will ultimately allow us to better isolate key patterns and determinants of incivility that might provide a foundation for future research.

Incivility, public discussions, and the Internet

Incivility is a notoriously difficult term to define, because what strikes one person as uncivil might strike another person as perfectly appropriate. As Herbst (2010) puts it, civility and incivility are "very much in the eye of the beholder" (p. 3). Some scholars (e.g., Papacharissi, 2004; Sapiro, 1999) draw a distinction between civility and politeness, with the former more focused on norms that promote the collective good and the latter on individual manners that facilitate the exchange of ideas without threatening the face of one's audience. Other scholars have studied civility under the heading of "comity," which is "the adherence to a set of norms that includes courtesy and reciprocity" (Uslaner, 1993, p. 1). Despite these understandable variations, Massaro and Stryker (2012) found in an extensive review of the literature that "sufficient consensus exists about what type of speech counts as extremely uncivil to take seriously the idea that civility norms can profoundly shape attitudes and behaviors" (p. 407). Our focus is on incivility as made manifest in public discussions. Given this, we define incivility as *features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics*.

Several aspects of the definition adopted in this project are noteworthy. In focusing on *disrespect*, we align ourselves with the majority of the scholarship in this area (e.g., Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2013; Borah, 2012; Carter, 1998; Papacharissi, 2004; Sapiro, 1999). As Brooks and Geer (2007) explain in reviewing different conceptualizations, "The concept of civility seems to invariably involve some notion of mutual respect" (p. 4). Our definition also focuses on incivility as something *unnecessary*. Uncivil comments do not add anything of substance to the discussion, a point others have made by including in their conceptualizations such terms as "superfluous" (Brooks & Geer, 2007) and "gratuitous" (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), or by indicating *civil* discourse has "an eye toward … relevance" (Massaro & Stryker, 2012, p. 410). Where our definition is perhaps broader than some past work is in the *target* of incivility, which we specify as including the discussion forum, participants, or topics. This breadth seems appropriate given that we are moving beyond the political context, an environment where "the opposition" is often the primary target of incivility (cf. Brooks & Geer, 2007; Jamieson, 1997, 2011; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). This conceptual definition leads us to operationalize incivility in terms of five key forms of incivility common in the extant literature, drawing particularly on the work of Jamieson (1997, 2011) and Sobieraj and Berry (2011). Table 1 provides definitions and examples of each form.[2]

Table 1 Operational Definitions and Examples of Five Forms of Incivility

Form of Incivility (intercoder reliability)	Operational Definition	Example
Name-calling ($\alpha = .67$)	Mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at a person or group of people.	"Just because something is not popular with the beer swilling Texas drawling nascar crowd here does not mean that the rest of the world agrees that it is worthless." "At least the morons in the state capital no longer have control of this process!"
Aspersion ($\alpha = .61$)	Mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at an idea, plan, policy, or behavior.	"Our justice system is just as corrupt and lousy as any in the world." "Texting while driving is stupid."
Lying ($\alpha = .73$)	Stating or implying that an idea, plan, or policy was disingenuous.	"Americans have been screaming at the top of their lungs that this government is wrong, is corrupt, is lying, is deceiving the people, and is violating our constitution … ."
Vulgarity ($\alpha = .91$)	Using profanity or language that would not be considered proper (e.g., pissed, screw) in professional discourse.	"I hope the voters will … kick him out on his pompous ass next election." "Whitman … said not one damn word in her article … all BS just like Obama and just like Bush and just like Romney … same crap."
Pejorative for speech ($\alpha = .74$)	Disparaging remark about the way in which a person communicates.	"Quit crying over the spilled milk of … ." "I am sick and tired of [them] throwing their tantrums … ."

The presence of incivility in public discussions has important consequences (for a review, see Massaro & Stryker, 2012). Indeed, scholarship in this area has demonstrated that, although its effects are not uniformly negative, incivility does tend to delegitimize political arguments and lower audience evaluations of those making them (e.g., Brooks & Geer, 2007; Fridkin & Kenney, 2008; Mutz, 2007). More normatively concerning is that incivility appears to weaken political trust (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). The effects of incivility have also been considered in computer-mediated contexts. In one recent study focused on the effects of incivility present in blog

comments, Anderson et al. (2013) administered an experiment to a nationally representative sample and found that uncivil comments led to greater perceived risk of nanotechnology (the topic of the blog post) among those already disinclined to support nanotechnology. Another recent study, this one on a student sample, interacted uncivil blog commentary with different news frames and found incivility to decrease open-mindedness while also increasing online participation (Borah, 2012).

Scholars have long heralded the potential of Internet-based technologies as a site for democratic discourse, while also recognizing their potential pitfalls (Benson, 1996; Downing, 1989; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). This promise and peril is reflected in theorizing about the uses and effects of computer-mediated forms of communication such as text-based discussion forums. The cues-filtered-out perspective (Culnan & Markus, 1987) is grounded in the basic idea that the reduction in social cues (e.g., facial expressions) that typifies much computer-mediated interaction can lead to less personal communication. In some instances, this reduction in social cues is argued to be beneficial by mitigating offline status differences and encouraging interactants to focus on the content of the ideas being shared as opposed to the individuals proposing the ideas (for a review, see Rains, 2005). Yet, in other instances, reduced social cues have been argued to encourage disinhibited and antisocial behavior such as flaming (for a review, see O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003). Papacharissi (2002) articulates aspects of these perspectives in discussing the implications of computer-mediated communication and the Internet for democratic discourse. She explains that, although some have argued that "the alleged decline of the public sphere … will be halted by the democratizing effects of the Internet and its surrounding technologies," others caution that these technologies "frequently induce fragmented, nonsensical, and enraged discussions … [and] far from guarantee a revived public sphere" (p. 10).

In this project we examine incivility in the discussions occurring on a newspaper website in response to specific news stories. This is an especially useful context in which to examine incivility, for at least three reasons. First, many newspaper websites now provide an open forum for readers to comment on articles, making these spaces among the most widespread platforms for public discussions. As Manosevitch and Walker (2009) explain, comments to online articles "have the potential to promote public deliberation in a number of ways" (p. 6), particularly by representing a wider range of opinions than are featured in the article itself and by providing the possibility of interaction between readers and journalists (see also Ruiz et al., 2011). Second, most newspapers cover the full spectrum of public issues, from the serious to the silly. This reality allows us to consider whether some topics promote a different amount or kind of incivility than do others—an advantage over past research on incivility online, which has generally considered only political discussions (e.g., Benson, 1996; Papacharissi, 2004). Finally, because many nonverbal cues are reduced or absent online and readers' written contributions are at least partially anonymous, factors such as one's physical appearance or standing in the community are typically less important than is the content of one's ideas. The presence of such an unfettered exchange of ideas—something central to many traditional conceptualizations of democratic

discourse (see Massaro & Stryker, 2012)—offers a naturalistic setting in which to explore incivility among the public. Reader comments in response to online newspaper stories thus provide an excellent opportunity to observe incivility in action.

Incivility in online comments: Four questions

We structure our investigation of incivility around four key questions. The first is how much incivility exists? This is a simple but nonetheless important question, given that many of the normative concerns about incivility are based on the assumption of its substantial presence in public discourse. For example, Kurtz (2012) writes of "the seemingly 'uncivil' turn of our political discourse [that] has become ever more conspicuous over the last ten years" (p. 19), while Borah (2012) observes that the "political blogosphere is replete with uncivil discussions" (p. 2). Reviewing the scholarly literature on incivility, Sapiro (1999) notes that much of the research makes the case that there exists a "crisis of civility," suggesting that "civility has declined in such a way as to have unfortunate effects for the functioning of a democracy by making the members of society less fit for engaging in democratic politics, and less able to deliberate" (p. 3). A "crisis," of course, suggests the presence of a considerable amount of incivility—a possibility we put to the test. We consider the amount of incivility present in discussions of online newspaper stories in two ways: the percentage of comments within the discussion of a given news story that exhibit incivility, and the percentage of all stories discussed on a given newspaper website that contain at least one uncivil comment. The former measure provides an understanding of the sheer amount of incivility that exists in discussions of online newspaper stories; the latter illustrates how common or rare it is for the average discussion to proceed completely free of incivility. We also consider whether incivility is widely distributed among commenters or driven by just a few individuals. Regardless, high levels of incivility would run counter to the normative ideal of civil discourse suggested in much of the scholarship (e.g., Benson, 1996; Massaro & Stryker, 2012; Papacharissi, 2004; Sapiro, 1999).

Our second question extends research on incivility by considering it not as an independent variable—the norm in this body of research (e.g., Anderson et al., 2013; Borah, 2012; Brooks & Geer, 2007)—but instead as a dependent variable that might be linked to the characteristics of an individual participant in an online discussion or the media content to which that individual is exposed. Specifically, we ask if incivility is primarily habitual (always present regardless of external factors) or contextual (associated with specific external factors) in discussions of online newspaper articles. This approach roughly parallels Herbst's (2010) view of civility and incivility as "states" rather than "traits," with a state being more contextual and a trait more habitual. The significance of this question is illustrated by the fact that the two possible answers suggest very different things about incivility in public discussions. If incivility is habitual, scholars will be limited in their ability to understand its causes and, if warranted, to attempt to limit its presence. If, on the other hand, incivility is contextual, then scholars are in a position to consider the factors that tend to produce incivility and potentially seek ways to limit its presence in public discussions. Consistent with this

possibility, we consider three basic contextual factors that might generate incivility in online newspaper comment sections: the topic of the article, the author of the article, and the sources quoted within the article.

We focus on these factors for pragmatic as well as theoretical reasons. Pragmatically, each of the three factors is measurable and consistently present in all types of news content. Theoretically, each factor has the potential to function as an important heuristic device for audiences. News topics vary in seriousness, from the trivial to the weighty, and research shows that people process certain topics (particularly "hot button" political issues) at a more visceral level (Sears, 2001). Thus, different topics might bring different degrees of incivility to the fore in online discussions. Author and sources, meanwhile, provide different ways of tracking *who* is delivering the message—a factor that has long been known to influence how a message is perceived (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Our interest in author is primarily whether incivility is stirred differently by opinion columns versus news columns. Audiences appear to draw a distinction between news sources that are focused more on delivering commentary than straight reporting (Coe et al., 2008), and it seems possible that such distinctions might help explain uncivil reactions. Examining sources quoted in articles gives us the opportunity to consider whether high-profile political figures whose partisan position is well known might garner greater incivility than do other sources, consistent with evidence that partisanship is a primary heuristic among news consumers (Stroud, 2011). If incivility varies in understandable ways based on one or more of these three factors, we can surmise that it is driven more by context than by habit.

Our third question asks whether incivility is popular or unpopular when it occurs in discussions of online newspaper stories. The preponderance of scholarship and popular commentary views incivility as a problem, and surveys confirm that the public feels political discourse in particular is too uncivil. However, it remains to be seen whether people participating in an online discussion disapprove of incivility *as it is occurring*. It may be the case, for instance, that people dislike the idea of incivility and perhaps disapprove of its most memorable displays in public life, but are less sensitive to moments of incivility as they happen during mundane discussions about a range of topics. Citizens routinely draw such distinctions between the abstract and the specific in other domains. For example, surveys regularly reveal that the American public is dissatisfied with the news media in general but pleased with their own news sources, and similarly unhappy with Congress as a whole but content with their own representative (see Gronke & Cook, 2007). The online environment, with its regular opportunities for immediate discussion feedback, provides an excellent context in which to examine the popularity of incivility in real time. We do so via two measures, one that tallies the "thumbs up" and "thumbs down" assigned to each comment (as rated by discussion followers), and a second that tracks the extent to which those making comments remark on the level of incivility present in the discussions in which they are participating.

Finally, we ask if the presence of incivility in a discussion hurts the quality of that discussion. As noted, the primary normative concern about incivility is that it has

deleterious effects for democratic society (Benson, 1996; Massaro & Stryker, 2012; Papacharissi, 2004). One component of these potentially harmful effects is the possibility that incivility debases public discourse, ultimately weakening the marketplace of ideas. In the words of Sapiro (1999), "The degree of civility … affects people's ability to engage in effective political communication and deliberation" (p. 3). We offer a preliminary test of this possibility, focusing on whether high levels of incivility relate to lower levels of discussion quality. Specifically, we track discussion quality via two metrics: the extent to which participants in a discussion (a) directly engage other discussion participants and (b) ground their arguments in empirical evidence. The former measure provides a means of gauging how interactive the discussion is — a common component of scholarly definitions of "deliberation" (see Gastil, 2008). As Stromer-Galley (2007) explains, "[G]enuine engagement in a discussion requires that participants talk *to* each other" (p. 12; emphasis original). The use of evidence is also regularly cited as a component of high-quality deliberation (Gastil, 2008; Stromer-Galley, 2007), and might support in some small way the spread of "enlightened understanding," a familiar democratic ideal (Dahl, 1989). Taken together, engagement and evidence should provide enough insight into discussion quality to allow us to explore the possibility that incivility and poor-quality discussions go hand in hand.

Method

The newspaper we examined was the *Arizona Daily Star*, the only print daily serving the Tucson, Arizona, metropolitan area of approximately 1 million residents. The *Daily Star*, which has a weekday circulation of roughly 238,000 readers that grows to 364,000 on Sundays (Arizona Daily Star, 2013), was chosen for two primary reasons. First, the *Daily Star*'s discussion forum shares key similarities with the forums of 15 other midsized daily papers we evaluated. The *Daily Star* is similar to other papers in that it requires users to log in to submit a comment (e.g., *Seattle Times*, *Kansas City Star*), allows users to rate others' comments (e.g., *Denver Post*, *San Diego Union Tribune*), engages in some form of comment moderation (e.g., *Jacksonville Daily News*, *Louisville Courier-Journal*), and allows users to determine part or all of their screen name (e.g., *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, *Buffalo News*). These similarities should enhance the generalizability of our findings. Second, the *Daily Star* should provide a conservative test of the amount of incivility present in a typical newspaper website discussion, owing to the spotlight put on Tucson after a mass shooting took place there in January of 2011. Six people lost their lives; 13 others were injured, including then-U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords. In the aftermath, the Tucson community openly grappled with the issue of incivility. For example, the University of Arizona launched the National Institute for Civil Discourse, and President Obama, at the Tucson memorial service for the victims, called for a new era of civility, saying "only a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to the challenges of our nation" (Obama, 2011). Consequently, there was likely at least

some incentive for *Daily Star* readers to limit the amount of incivility present in their discussions.

At the end of each article posted to the online edition of the *Daily Star*, readers have an opportunity to "Join [the] Discussion." Discussions can be viewed by any visitor to the newspaper's website, but to post a comment readers must create an account. Each comment is labeled with the first name used to create the account, the first initial of the last name, and an additional identifier that is specified by the commenter (e.g., "John D. 'JD65'"). Commenters may also upload an image.

Data

During the 21-day span between 17 October and 6 November 2011, the computer program TeleportPro was used to create a snapshot of all articles published in the eight sections of the newspaper's online edition: Local News, Entertainment, Nation and World, Sports, State News, Business, Lifestyle, and Opinion. One day after each article was posted, a research assistant manually downloaded an electronic copy of each article and its corresponding reader comments. Articles and comments were collected one day after they were posted to allow sufficient time for comments but minimize the possibility of articles being replaced or no longer accessible. A total of 706 unique articles were downloaded. Over 40% of the articles ($n = 310$) had at least one reader comment. A total of 6,535 comments were identified. Seventy-eight of the comments were duplicates (i.e., the same comment was posted twice), and 13 comments were discarded do to coder error. The analyses were conducted using the remaining 6,444 comments.

Notably, the *Daily Star* has a formal policy outlining the types of behaviors that are inappropriate in reader discussions. In attempting to view any discussion, readers are first presented with an overview of the newspaper's policies. In particular, readers are informed that:

> Our guidelines prohibit … threatening or harassing postings and the use of vulgar, abusive, obscene or sexually oriented language, defamatory or illegal material. You may not post content that degrades others on the basis of gender, race, class, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability or other classification. It's fine to criticize ideas, but ad hominem attacks on other site users are prohibited.

Standard with each comment is a "flag" feature that allows readers to alert the newspaper to comments that they believe violate the newspaper's policies. Although comments are automatically posted to the website, they can be removed later if they are deemed to be in violation. Newspaper employees removed 1.7% ($n = 110$) of the comments during the 3-week census. These removed comments were counted as instances of incivility and included in all analyses.

Content analysis

Three teams consisting of 3–5 research assistants coded the articles and comments. All research assistants received extensive training on the coding procedures over

the span of approximately 6 weeks. Chance-corrected intercoder reliabilities, which were established prior to coding the study data, are reported along with each category of content. All of the variables reached acceptable levels of reliability, with Krippendorff's alpha ranging from 0.61 to 1.00.

Comments

Reader comments were coded for the presence/absence of five types of *Incivility*. Reliabilities for each category are reported in Table 1. *Engagement* with other discussion participants ($\alpha = 1.00$) was operationally defined as use of the text box feature in one's comment. This feature indicates to all discussion participants that a commenter is directly replying to another discussion participant's message and, in most cases, includes a direct quotation from the other participant's message. In all, 42.5% of comments used this feature. *Evidence* in reader comments ($\alpha = .82$) was operationally defined as the presence of statistics such as numbers, percentages, or dollar amounts (e.g., "At the end of 2008, our economy had contracted by -9 percent. Change happened. It reversed and headed upwards by 13 points ending in 2009 with a plus 4. I call that success."). *Metatalk* ($\alpha = .67$) was operationally defined as talk that assesses what has transpired or is transpiring in the discussion, either as a group or between individuals (e.g., " … let's acknowledge that there is an awful lot of implicit racism in many of these posts."). *Reader approval* was evaluated in terms of the number of "thumbs up" ($\alpha = 1.00$) and "thumbs down" ($\alpha = 1.00$) ratings assigned to each comment by other registered users. A running tally of the total number of thumbs up/down ratings was presented to readers at the bottom of each comment. Almost all (>95%) of the comments had one or more thumbs up ($M = 14.26$, $SD = 24.90$, $Mdn = 8$) or down ($M = 7.00$, $SD = 10.18$, $Mdn = 4$) rating.[3]

Articles

Each article that contained at least one comment was coded for author, topic, and sources. The *article author* ($\alpha = .79$) was recorded by copying the name of the journalist who contributed the story. No author was recorded in instances where an unnamed news or wire service was used or where no author was specified. Coders identified the *article topic* ($\alpha = .75$), which was defined as the major focus of the article, based on 17 categories developed by the study authors. All categories are listed in Table 4. Coders also identified the *sources* quoted in the articles ($\alpha = .74$) and assigned them to one of 21 different categories created by the study authors. Source quotations were limited to only those instances where a message was attributed to a source and fell within quotation marks. Our analyses focused on those source categories that appeared in at least 10 articles, all of which are listed in Table 5.[4]

Results

Prevalence of incivility

Our first question asked how much incivility exists in online discussions. It turns out that there is a substantial amount. Overall, more than one in five comments (22.0%)

Table 2 Prevalence of Uncivil Comments Based on Discussion Size

	Total Number of Comments Made in the Article Discussion				
	1	2–5	6–10	11–30	31–443
Mean percentage of uncivil comments	21.13	19.04	20.63	20.49	22.39
Standard deviation	41.11	27.58	20.46	13.29	9.96
Number of discussions	71	113	35	33	56

contained some form of incivility. Most comments utilized only one form of incivility (19.5%); 2.3% of comments contained two forms of incivility, and 0.2% contained three or more forms. The most prevalent form of incivility was name-calling, which took place in 14.0% of all comments. Other forms occurred less frequently: 3.0% of comments included vulgarity, 2.6% contained aspersions, 1.9% contained pejoratives about speech, and 1.7% referred to liars or lying. Further, incivility remains extremely common when considered at the level of the article. Of the articles that included discussion, 55.5% ($n = 171$) included at least one uncivil comment. The percentage of comments within a given article that contained incivility ranged from 0 to 100% ($M = 20.47\%$, $SD = 27.33$, $Mdn = 12.70$). Notably, lengthier discussions did not increase the rate at which incivility occurred. As shown in Table 2, the number of comments per discussion was not related to the percentage of incivility in the discussion, $F(4, 303) = 0.16$, $p = .96$. Several alternative strategies for grouping the number of comments per discussion were evaluated and produced the same null result. For example, discussions with five or fewer comments did not differ from those with more than 30, $t(df = 236.93) = 0.87$, $p = .39$. In short, there is no evidence that incivility begets greater incivility as discussions grow.

Given this substantial presence of incivility, analyses were conducted to determine if particular commenters were responsible for most of the incivility or if it was widely distributed among commenters. Over the course of the 3-week period of analysis, 1,073 different people posted at least one comment ($M = 5.99$, $SD = 13.27$, $Mdn = 2.00$). Approximately half (50.3%) of these commenters posted at least one uncivil comment, and the variance of the percentage of uncivil comments by individual posters was wide ($M = 26.84\%$, $SD = 35.39$, $Mdn = 3.45$). To explore the possibility that more frequent commenters might contribute a disproportionate amount of incivility to the discussions, we split the commenters into two groups: those who made 10 comments or less ($n = 940$) and those who made 11 comments or more ($n = 133$). An independent samples t-test revealed that frequent commenters ($M = 23.00\%$ of comments, $SD = 15.56$) had lower levels of incivility than did less frequent commenters ($M = 27.38\%$, $SD = 37.32$), $t(df = 1072) = 2.41$, $p < .05$. Going further, we compared a small set of very frequent commenters (those who made 41 to 139 comments; $n = 28$) against those who commented only once ($n = 462$). Those who commented just once were much more likely to display incivility ($M = 27.27\%$ of

comments, $SD = 44.58$) than were frequent commenters ($M = 15.18\%$, $SD = 10.20$), $t(df = 116.59) = 4.27$, $p < .001$. Taken together, the results thus far indicate that incivility is common in online discussions, and is driven more by infrequent commenters than frequent ones.

Contextual factors associated with incivility

Our second question dealt with whether comment incivility appeared to be habitual or contextual, which was examined by considering associations between incivility and article authors, topics, and sources. There were 96 different authors among the articles with at least one reader comment. Table 3 presents the percentages of uncivil remarks made in response to articles written by the 20 authors whose articles received the most comments, specifying each author's status along two dimensions: whether they work for a local or national news source, and whether they are news writers or opinion columnists.[5] The results reveal a range of uncivil reactions based on author, from 13.1% to 36.8% of comments exhibiting incivility. Of the 10 authors who generated the most incivility, six were local and four were national. However, local writers were also more prevalent than national ones among the 10 who generated the least incivility, with seven being local and three being national. Given this variation, it is not surprising that the difference in the percentage of uncivil comments posted to local articles ($M = 21.35\%$) versus national articles ($M = 23.14\%$) was nonsignificant, $t(df = 18) = 0.57$, $p = .576$. The results hinted somewhat more strongly at a possible association between comment incivility and news versus opinion. Among the 10 authors who generated the most comment incivility, six were opinion columnists, whereas among the 10 authors who generated the least incivility only four were opinion columnists. However, the difference in the percentage of comment incivility for opinion columnists ($M = 24.18\%$) and news authors ($M = 19.77\%$) fell short of statistical significance, $t(df = 18) = 1.55$, $p = .14$. These results begin to suggest that incivility may be contextual, but also that author status is not a particularly reliable contextual factor to explain its occurrence.

We also examined incivility in relation to article topic, as shown in Table 4. The results indicate that serious, "hard news" topics appear to garner greater incivility. For example, articles about the economy, politics, law and order, taxes, and foreign affairs all received roughly one uncivil comment for every four comments posted. In contrast, articles about health, lifestyle, journalism, and technology were all considerably lower. The notable exception was sports, a lighter topic that nonetheless had the highest percentage of incivility (29.8%). In general, though, it appears that weightier topics generate a higher percentage of uncivil commentary.[6]

Finally, we evaluated the relationship between incivility and the sources quoted within the articles. We explored this at two levels, first exploring all articles in which a source was quoted and then examining those articles in which a given source was the first source quoted. Table 5 reports the results of both analyses and makes clear that certain sources are associated with higher levels of incivility. President Obama, for example, was among the sources garnering the most

Table 3 Prevalence of Uncivil Comments Based on Article Source for Top 20 Sources

Author	Type of Author	Total Number of Comments in Response to Author's Article(s)	Percentage of Uncivil Comments
Rich Pfeiffer	Local opinion	239	36.8
David Fitzsimmons	Local opinion	73	35.6
Associated Press	National news	1138	29.8
Leonard J. Pitts Jr.	National opinion	179	26.3
Carmen Duarte	Local news	238	26.1
Becky Pallack	Local news	172	25.0
Greg Sargent	National opinion	80	22.5
Kathryn Nakagawa, Mark Beeman, and Andrea Romero	Local opinion	85	22.4
Kathleen Parker	National opinion	163	22.1
Tony Davis	Local news	297	21.5
Christine Todd Whitman	National opinion	127	21.3
Ruth Marcus	National opinion	228	20.6
Rhonda Bodfield	Local news	868	19.4
Eugene Robinson	National opinion	237	19.4
Howard Fischer	Local news	177	18.6
Brady McCombs	Local news	145	15.9
Dale Quinn	Local news	153	15.0
Richard Elías	Local opinion	169	14.8
Cathalena E. Burch	Local news	75	13.3
Phil Villarreal	Local news	176	13.1

incivility. Almost one-third (32.7%) of comments in response to articles containing an Obama quotation were deemed uncivil, in comparison to 21.4% of comments to articles that did not contain an Obama quotation, $\chi^2(df = 1) = 25.12$, $p < .001$. In contrast, those with less notoriety were associated with lower levels of incivility. For example, articles that contained a quotation from a private organization, business owner, or employee were less likely to provoke uncivil comments (19.5%) than were those without quotations from those types of sources (24.1%), $\chi^2(df = 1) = 19.48$, $p < .001$. Considering just the first sources quoted, we again found significant variation in incivility, $\chi^2(df = 15) = 101.20$, $p < .001$. As before, Obama (35.1%) stood out on the high end. It appears, then, that incivility in online discussion is indeed contextual, and that both topic and source help to explain its occurrence.

Responses to incivility

Our third question asked how discussion participants respond to incivility. Two measures were used to answer this question. First, the reactions to comments were

Table 4 Prevalence of Uncivil Comments Based on Article Topic

Topic	Percentage of Uncivil Comments	Total Number of Comments in Response to Topic	Total Number of Articles on Topic	Percentage of All Articles on Topic
Sports	29.8	47	13	4.2
Economy/jobs/business/ finance	26.4	1468	61	19.7
Politics	25.4	924	32	10.3
Crime/missing persons/legal action	25.3	1083	47	15.2
Taxes	24.7	243	5	1.6
Foreign affairs/military	24.6	171	19	6.1
Education	21.9	178	10	3.2
Race/ethnicity	17.2	87	2	0.6
Environment	17.0	1042	28	9.0
Immigration/border issues	15.3	437	13	4.2
Health/nutrition/ consumer safety	15.2	257	22	7.1
Social security	14.6	41	1	0.3
Lifestyle, arts, and entertainment	14.1	411	45	14.5
Journalism/media ethics	13.3	30	4	1.3
Technology	7.1	14	5	1.6
News summary	0.0	7	2	0.6
Terrorism inside United States	0.0	1	1	0.3

compared by examining mean thumbs up/down ratings between uncivil and civil comments. The average uncivil comment received a rating of 15.41 thumbs up, whereas the average civil comment received 14.02 thumbs up, a nonsignificant difference, $t(df = 6320) = 1.79$, $p = .07$. Where a difference did emerge, however, was in thumbs down. On average, uncivil comments received a rating of 7.91 thumbs down to only 6.75 for civil comments, $t(df = 2103.01) = 3.74$, $p < .001$. Second, the presence of metatalk was evaluated. Overall, only 1.4% ($n = 92$) of comments included *any* variety of metatalk, meaning the comment made a reference to the quality or direction of the discussion. Of those 1.4% comments, only one comment was made explicitly about civility and only 14 comments were made explicitly about incivility—yet these 15 comments accounted for 16.3% of all comments addressing metatalk. Taken together, these findings indicate that participants do respond more negatively to incivility than to civility. However, that reaction is rarely strong enough to encourage a commenter to speak out against incivility.

Table 5 Prevalence of Uncivil Comments Based on Specific Sources Quoted in Articles

	Percentage of Uncivil Comments in Response to Articles Containing Quotation(s) from Source	Total Number of Articles Containing Quotation(s) from Source	Percentage of Uncivil Comments In Response to Articles Containing the Source as the First Quotation
President Barack Obama	32.7	10	35.1
State government officials/agency representatives (not AZ)	27.6	28	27.6
Judges	24.3	11	25.9
Republican candidates, officials, campaign operatives	23.2	21	22.5
State government officials/agency representatives	22.7	14	23.5
Citizens/persons on street	22.6	47	25.5
Republican congressperson	21.8	10	11.1
Local government officials/representatives from agencies (city or county)	21.2	23	34.8
Federal government officials/agency representatives	20.1	20	21.8
Other non-local university officials/representatives	19.8	12	22.2
Private organization/business manager or employee	19.5	140	17.9

Incivility and discussion quality

Our final question explored the extent to which incivility in comments was associated with discussion quality. We attempted to answer this question using two measures: engagement and evidence. Comments that exhibited greater engagement—those that directly quoted another commenter—were significantly less likely to include incivility than were other comments, $\chi^2(df = 1) = 76.99$, $p < .001$. In particular, just 15.5% of engaged comments included some form of incivility, whereas 24.6% of disengaged comments did so. In other words, when commenters were directly engaging each other in discussion, they were more civil.

Our results for evidence reveal a modest but statistically significant relationship between incivility and use of evidence, $\chi^2(df = 1) = 6.38$, $p < .05$—but not in the

direction we anticipated. Specifically, 16.5% of uncivil comments used evidence, whereas only 13.7% of civil comments used it. Contrary to idea that incivility and poor argumentation go hand in hand, use of evidence and incivility were actually a more common pairing than were a lack of evidence and incivility.

Discussion

Our results illustrate very clearly that incivility is a common feature of public discussions. In the online discussions we analyzed, more than one out of every five comments was uncivil, and 55.5% of the article discussions contained at least some incivility. Of the five varieties of incivility we examined, name-calling was by far the most common. In fact, if participants in online discussions ceased to engage in ad hominem attacks, the discussions would have relatively little incivility. Importantly, the incivility we observed was not limited to just a few individuals but rather was widely distributed across many different commenters. If observers find this substantial amount of incivility normatively disappointing (e.g., Massaro & Stryker, 2012), there are at least a few causes for optimism. One is that the frequency of incivility was not associated with the number of comments made during a given discussion. In other words, we found no evidence to suggest that, as discussions get more involved, tempers flare and incivility increases. At least in the case considered here, it is clear that discussion can proceed at length without devolving into a shouting match — or at least without devolving into a louder shouting match. In fact, when these online discussions were truly discussions — that is, interactive exchanges rather than a series of monologues — incivility was less common. If websites are interested in promoting more civil discourse, it appears that facilitating greater back and forth among participants might be wise. Additionally, we found that, contrary to popular perceptions, those individuals who commented most frequently were not the ones proportionally most inclined to make uncivil remarks. Our data suggest that stereotypes of frequent posters dominating news sites with barrages of incivility are, if not unfounded, at least overstated. Rather, it is the occasional commenter who is more likely to be uncivil, perhaps drawn to comment by a particularly upsetting article that encourages an uncommon — and uncivil — post.

Second, our evidence indicates that contextual features are associated with the presence of incivility, confirming Herbst's (2010) argument that incivility is better thought of as a state than a trait. Incivility varied most notably by the topic of the article and by the types of sources quoted in the articles. In particular, weightier topics and those with clear "sides" (e.g., sports) tended to stir incivility. Further, consistent with the idea that partisan cues matter for news audiences (Coe et al., 2008; Stroud, 2011), a high-profile source with an identifiable partisan leaning (i.e., President Obama) generated the most incivility. The fact that contextual factors contributed to incivility is noteworthy because, although several scholars have examined the effects of incivility in an online setting (e.g., Anderson et al., 2013; Borah, 2012), less is known about those factors associated with the expression of incivility. Our findings clarify that

online posters are not habitually uncivil. Rather, the considerable incivility present in online discussions has clear factors associated with it and, in many cases, well-defined targets.

Third, our findings show that incivility produces stronger reactions from readers than does civility. Although incivility did not affect the likelihood of receiving positive feedback through the thumbs up feature, it did result in more negative feedback than did the civil comments. In part, these findings suggest that incivility is less well-received than civility—a reality consistent with traditional understandings of decorum and politeness (Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Carter, 1998) as well as recent public opinion data (Public Religion Research Institute, 2010). At the same time, if one believes that any reaction is better than no reaction at all, incivility might be considered a way to increase readers' involvement in the discussion (cf. Borah, 2012). Clicking an icon to register support or opposition is clearly a limited means of involving oneself in a discussion, but it is nonetheless a more tangible means of involvement than is doing nothing. Of course, incivility in these forums is common enough that participants are unlikely to comment on it directly. Indeed, we found virtually no metatalk—about incivility or any other aspect of the discussion. In that sense, assigning a "thumbs down" may be as substantial a means of challenging incivility as is likely to occur in such discussions.

Finally, we found that incivility is not linked to limited use of evidence. Instead, uncivil commenters are slightly more likely to bring evidence to bear in support of their claims. Although we did not offer a formal hypothesis about the relationship between evidence and civility, we had anticipated that uncivil comments would be associated with a lack of evidence. Popular commentary seems to sometimes make a similar assumption (see Mehta, 2013), yet we found the opposite. These results thus provide an important caution as we evaluate the quality of public discussions: Although it may be the case that incivility is associated with emotion, it is not the case that uncivil comments are necessarily irrational. Uncivil remarks tend to use statistics as evidence more so than do civil comments. Consequently, it would be unwise to dismiss uncivil comments as mere knee-jerk reactions driven solely by emotion.

In addition to the findings, some limitations and directions for future research should be considered. Although the 3-week census was a valuable means to examine the nuances of incivility, the analyses were nonetheless limited to a single newspaper website. It is not possible to determine the degree to which the results are unique to readers of the *Daily Star*. As noted in describing the *Daily Star*, the local congressperson for the area served by the paper was a shooting victim in the prior year and a presidential speech was given in response addressing the topic of civility. Because the data were collected approximately 8 months after these events, civility may have been particularly salient among commenters in our sample. We have suggested this reality provided a conservative test of incivility, but it is possible it influenced the data in other ways. For example, some Tucsonans may have sought greater involvement with

their community following the shootings, and this may have elevated the total number of comments on discussion sites such as the *Daily Star*. Alternatively, heightened concerns about incivility may have caused some Tucsonans to avoid the comment section altogether. Such possibilities make clear the need for future research.

In focusing on a single paper, it is also possible that the results might have been influenced by factors unique to the *Daily Star* related to the affordances of the discussion forum (e.g., potential for users to determine part of their screen name), policies of the paper (e.g., requirement for users to log in in order to post a comment), and administration of the discussion forum. Although, as discussed above, the *Daily Star*'s discussion forum is similar to other midsize daily newspapers in several important ways, it would be valuable for additional research to explore the prevalence of incivility in other news outlets to better assess the generalizability of our findings. In particular, it would be valuable to analyze papers that vary based on different discussion forum characteristics. For example, it may be that incivility is less pervasive in newspapers that only allow registered users to post comments. Perhaps the simple act of registration fosters a sense of accountability and thus mitigates incivility.

Finally, it is important to note that some of our measures are imperfect. For example, we focused on the use of statistics as an indicator of evidence in support of commenters' arguments. This is reasonable, but a broader measure that taps other forms of evidence (e.g., appeals to authority) would be useful to include in future studies. We also relied on just two measures—engagement and evidence—to assess argument quality. These measures are consistent with the deliberation literature (see Gastil, 2008; Stromer-Galley, 2007), but do not fully encompass argument quality. It is also important to note that discussions are likely to contain other subtle, less common forms of incivility that are difficult to capture reliably via content analysis.

Future research should attempt to address these limitations and consider other possibilities as well. We see three paths as particularly fruitful. First, content analyzing a range of discussion sites would allow for assessment of the degree to which incivility varies by region (e.g., east vs. west) and geographic scope (e.g., local vs. national). It seems likely that levels of incivility might be related to cultural norms, and comparing different sites would provide insight into this possibility. Second, future research should seek to better understand the characteristics and circumstances that might distinguish civil from uncivil commenters. For example, as discussion sites begin to require greater identifying information from commenters, there might be opportunities to examine whether certain individual characteristics (e.g., age) are related to incivility. Experimental research could also play a part in such analyses, exploring what factors lead people to perceive comments as uncivil. Finally, given normative concerns about high levels of incivility (see Massaro & Stryker, 2012), it would be useful to explore ways to reduce uncivil posts. For example, future research might consider whether sites with clearly posted discussion rules and/or strict moderation of content have lower levels of incivility than do other

sites. Such research will help further illuminate the complex role that incivility plays in public life.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 For example, more than half of the web-based content analyses that McMillan (2000) analyzed used some form of a census rather than a traditional sample.
2 To be clear, our definition of incivility is not about *disagreement* with any specific idea present in a discussion, but rather the *manner* in which discussion is engaged.
3 It appears that site users often used this thumbs up/down metric in place of expressing explicit agreement/disagreement within the text of a comment. Indeed, only 2.3% of the total comments expressed explicit agreement with another comment ($n = 145$) and less than 1.0% expressed explicit disagreement ($n = 56$). Further, the thumbs up/down metric allows readers who are viewing the comments but are not authoring comments to play an active role in the discussion. Thus, in this context, we view thumbs up/down as more useful than a text-based measure.
4 The categories coded but not included in Table 5 are: Senator John McCain; Senator Jon Kyle; Governor Jan Brewer; Representative Raul Grijalva; Representative Gabrielle Giffords; Other Democratic U.S. Congressperson; Unspecified party U.S. Congressperson; Democratic candidates, officials, campaign operatives; Tea Party candidates, officials, campaign operatives; Local university officials/representatives.
5 There were no authors for 11% of the articles, so these were excluded from the author analysis.
6 It is noteworthy that immigration—often viewed as a "hot button" political issue—did not generate more incivility. This may have to do with the fact that the two sides of the immigration debate are not as clearly defined as they are for some of the issues that generated the most incivility (e.g., sports, the economy, politics). For example, Arizona Senator John McCain, a Republican, has been a proponent of immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship for those currently living in the United States illegally, a position at odds with many in his party.

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