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CIVIL KEYSTROKES: EXAMINING ANONYMITY, POLITENESS, AND CIVILITY IN ONLINE NEWSPAPER FORUMS

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Abstract

Online news discussion forums have become popular virtual spaces for public discourse, especially as more newspapers bring their publications online. Computer-mediated communication theories, such as the social identity model of deindividuating effects (Spears & Lea, 1994), suggest the anonymity afforded by online platforms leads to a deindividuation of the individuals involved, leading to less civility and politeness. The current study examines the role of anonymity within the CMC setting of online news comment forums and whether commentary posted by anonymous users contains more incivility and impoliteness than Facebook identified users. Comments left to two Associated Press articles, political and non-political, were collected from four major Midwest newspapers' websites. Results suggest individuals commenting from anonymous handles are less civil and less polite in their comments than those individuals commenting through Facebook profiles. Political news stories garnered more comments that were less civil and less polite than non-political stories. Future research is necessary to determine the implications of incivility in online discussion and its effects on democracy and productive public discourse.

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Introduction

Americans' online news consumption has surpassed radio and print media, becoming the second most popular news media outlet only to television (The Pew Research Center For the People and the Press, 2012). As the online presence of newspapers has grown, the avenues for the expression of public opinion have become more diverse. Historically, letters to the editor served as the primary feedback forums in the news industry. With more newspapers taking their publications to the Internet, readers can now express their opinions in online news forums, characterized by fewer gatekeepers and more opportunity for participation across time and space.

These forums are virtual spaces where readers can offer their voices, opinions and feedback on news content and issues, allowing them to interact with both the content and other readers (Hlavach & Freivogal, 2011). Furthermore, such forums may or may not be monitored or censored by news staff. Many large U.S. newspapers including *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post* enable readers to register anonymously to post comments. Users have the autonomy to be identified by usernames and handles that can be as vague or as descriptive as they choose. Other newspapers, like *USA Today*, or scholarly websites such as *Popular Science*, recently have taken steps to restrict anonymity by linking comments to Facebook profiles or disable comments entirely. Some research has suggested online civility can not only lead to polarization between commenters, but readers' perception of the subject matter (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2013) and can possibly affect journalist approach or credibility (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011).

Some scholars have suggested that anonymity enables users to express unconventional opinions without the fear of being judged by gender, race or disability (Papacharissi, 2004). Conversely, others have contended that higher levels of anonymity exacerbate hostile discourse (Halpern & Gibs, in press). In an initial content analysis of comments made in the *Washington Post's* website and in a comparison of comments made in the *Washington Post's* website and those made on the newspaper's Facebook page, Rowe (2013) found a clear difference in civility. However, rather than examining content found through the source's (newspaper) social networks, drawing upon the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE), we aim to examine whether nonymous SNS profiles on source sites or anonymity leads to uncivil and impolite behavior in online news forums.

Anonymity in CMC

Anonymity is a construct defined by the absence of identifiers (Marx, 1999); however, many scientists agree that anonymity is a social phenomenon. Marx (1999) argued that anonymity requires an audience of at least one other person. Rationales for anonymity include the facilitation of information, the protection and privacy of one's self, the avoidance of persecution and the encouragement of experimentation and risk-taking (Marx, 1999).

The different type of online platforms allow for varying degrees of concealment of physical appearance, location, name and other identifying characteristics. For instance,

some types of news sites allow people to create a user account with the news site and post comments using pseudonyms and fake names. However, online platforms such as Facebook do not necessarily have 'visual anonymity' as others can easily glean clues about a person's real identity from information displayed on his or her Facebook profile—people typically put their real names and display photos of themselves on their Facebook profiles (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011).

The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) model provides a salient theoretical framework to explain why online platforms facilitate impolite and uncivil discourse (Walther, 2011). Though originally constructed with organizational groups in mind, the SIDE model has been applied to a wide variety of CMC situations and environments (Tidwell & Walther, 2006). The SIDE theory was derived from the concept of deindividuation, which sprung from early research on crowd behavior (Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952). The term deindividuation refers to the stripping of self-awareness in-group settings, which may lead someone to engage in behavior they would typically not engage in otherwise. The group becomes its own entity, loosening restraints on individual members further, becoming more attractive to others, and perpetuating its own effects.

Reduced self-awareness has been found to cause people to act irrational and uninhibited, acting with aggression, malice, and violence (Zimbardo, 1969). However, in a meta-analysis of deindividuation research, no consistent results were found to completely support the overwhelmingly negative effects of deindividuation, but instead found that reduction of self-awareness enhanced group norms (Postmes & Spears, 1998; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). Deindividuation leads to a reduction of self-awareness and self-monitoring, marked by lowered observations of social norms and a lack of planning (Diener, 1980.)

According to SIDE theory, deindividuation in online group settings leads to a transfer of salience from self to the collective, causing group identification and adherence to group norms. The SIDE model identifies two factors that drive CMC behavior: visual anonymity that leads users into a state of deindividuation and the lack of verbal and nonverbal cues, known as the cues-filtered-out approach (Walther, 1992). When in a state of deindividuation, CMC users will "orient themselves to a salient social category or group" and relate with other users on the basis of group membership (Lea, Spears, & de Groot, 2001; Walther, 2011). This anonymity frees people from ordinary relationships and social conventions such as politeness, and transports the user into an environment where the self is less important than the collective (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). Users will act according to in-group norms and adopt a group identity. Going by the tenets of SIDE, it is a logical inference that newspapers allowing anonymous users to comment will have statistically more comments after articles compared to those newspapers requiring a known profile login, such as through Facebook. Furthermore, based on the reduction of social presence afforded by CMC we seek to examine the conditions under which commenters will be more likely to disclose their own personal political identities.

H1: Newspapers allowing anonymous comments will have more initial and responsorial comments than newspapers that do not allow readers to post anonymous comments.

RQ: Under what conditions, topical and anonymity, would commenters self-disclose their own personal political identities?

Politeness

Although extensive research has examined the effects of politeness in conversational exchanges, there is no fixed scholarly consensus as to what constitutes 'politeness.' According to Fraser (1990), there are four broad perspectives of 'politeness.' The 'social-norm' perspective views 'politeness' in terms of speech styles and contends that politeness is associated with higher levels of formality and adherence to social etiquette rules. Grice's (1989) "conversational maxim" describes how communication efficiency can be enhanced using principles such as conflict, minimizing strategies to maximize cooperation between parties. Goffman's (1971) 'face saving' view delineates between two types of 'faces': positive and negative face. 'Positive' face describes how people behave politely in order to maintain relationships with others whereas 'negative' face describes how people assert their autonomy by expressing frank opinions that could potentially offend other parties. Lastly, the 'conversational-contract' view posits that conversation participants have certain preliminary normative expectations of one another that are applied to all discussion parties (Fraser & Nolen, 1981). Ultimately, politeness is defined as the extent to which a participant follows these conversational norms.

In sum, politeness can be described as the extent to which people adhere to conversation etiquette and norms, negotiate between sacrificing one's face and saving face, and attempt to minimize conflict by cooperating with other parties (Fraser, 1990). According to "cues filtered out" approaches, online communication platforms lack the visual markers of face-to face communication (Culnan & Markus, 1987). Such visual anonymity makes it harder to trace peoples' real identities and reduces the social cost of being impolite. Consequently, scholars have contended that the anonymity afforded by online platforms emboldens people to be impolite when having political discussions with others (Ng & Detenber, 2005; Papacharissi, 2004). Given that previous studies have shown that people tend to have more impolite political discussions on anonymous platforms than on known platforms (e.g., Halpern & Gibs, in press), we hypothesize that people who post comments with their news site user accounts will be more impolite than people who post comments using their Facebook accounts.

H2: People who post comments with their news site user accounts will be more impolite than people who post comments using their Facebook accounts.

Civility

Civility is regarded as a key hallmark of deliberative political discourse. The term 'civility' was derived from the term 'civil discourse'. Civil discourse is essential for the functioning of a democracy (e.g., Dutton, 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 2000). Some scholars have lamented the decline of civil discourse in the public sphere (Bowman & Knox, 2008). Nevertheless, other scholars have cited the potential of online platforms to foster civil discourse (Pavlik, 1994). As such, it is imperative to examine the extent to which online platforms promote or stymie civil discourse.

Previous research tends to conflate incivility with impoliteness. For instance, in Ng and Detenber's (2005) study, their 'uncivil' experimental conditions consisted of people being impolite by flouting conversation norms, e.g., hurling personal attacks at one another. Some scholars have suggested that it is unrealistic to expect political discourse to always be carried out in a polite fashion (Garnham, 1992). Furthermore, political discourse that is carried out in a polite manner tends to be more restrained because people practice self-censorship and espouse the status quo so as to avoid offending people (Holtgraves, 1997). It would seem that such measured polite discourse impedes spirited debate that reflects democratic ideals (e.g., Lyotard, 1984; Schudson, 1997). Rather, whimsical, heated political debate that flouts conversation norms and etiquette might actually enhance democratic goals as such discussions tend to be more diverse than polite political discourse (Dillard, Wilson, Tusing, & Kinney, 1997).

Thus, it is important to delineate between impoliteness and incivility. According to Papacharissi (2004), uncivil discourse goes beyond what is typically regarded as 'impoliteness', i.e., flouting etiquette or social norms, and being uncooperative. Rather, civil discourse is discourse that espouses democratic ideals and the common societal good (Shils, 1992). Papacharissi (2004) goes further to argue that civility is a form of '*collective politeness*'. As such, when people denigrate *social categories* of people, they are deemed to be behaving in an uncivil manner. However, if people hurl aspersions at each other (e.g., "You're an incompetent governor!"), they are simply being impolite, not uncivil.

Given that civility is a hallmark of a democratic society in which each individual ideally has an equal opportunity to voice their frank opinions for the collective good, Papacharissi (2004) defined uncivil discourse as discourse that undermines democratic ideals, challenges the common good by depriving people of their personal freedoms and discriminating against social categories of people. Thus far, few studies have explicitly delineated between nymous and anonymous online platforms when examining the extent to which people engage in uncivil political discourse online. Although Papacharissi's (2004) content analysis showed that people were generally civil when expressing their views online, he only focused on examining civility within the context of online message boards. Such displays of uncivil behavior are probably more likely to occur in anonymous contexts than in nymous contexts because people become less inhibited about saying things that would otherwise be considered heterodox in a democracy, such as condemning democratic ideals or threatening to take away peoples' rights to express themselves (Papacharissi, 2002; Spears & Lea, 1994). Furthermore, according to the SIDE model (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Spears & Lea, 1992), the lack of non-verbal cues on the Internet causes people to interact with one another using cues (e.g., textual cues) that give indications about group-level attributes of other discussants. Consequently, people are more likely to form stereotypes of other online discussants and make derogatory remarks based on perceptions of *social categories* that these discussants belong to (Spears & Lea, 1992). As such, we hypothesize that:

H3: There will be more uncivil comments from news site user accounts than comments using Facebook accounts.

Furthermore, online political news stories generally tend to receive more comments than non-political online news stories (Tsagkias, Weerkamp, & de Rijke, 2009). Scholars contend that the online political sphere is highly polarized, with opposing parties having factious debates on political issues that are characterized by emotionally charged vitriol (Hargittai, Gallo, & Kane, 2008; Sunstein, 2001). As such, we predict that online political news stories will receive more impolite and uncivil comments than non-political online news stories.

H4: Comments to political stories will be less civil than non-political stories..

H5: Comments to political stories will be less polite than non-political stories.

Methods

Sample

Four Midwest newspapers that allow online comments to Associated Press articles were chosen for the current study. The newspapers range in daily circulation from 95,000 to 300,000 and are each well established in their respective communities. Two of the newspapers require commenters to use their known Facebook profile in order to leave a comment. Two newspapers require commenters to create an account, creating any handle they would like. Real names, photos, and locations are not necessary to comment in these anonymous conditions. Table 2 contains circulation and total comments drawn from each paper.

Content

Newspaper articles surrounding a non-political and political event approximately one week apart were used for the current study. Associated Press (AP) articles on a political topic and a non-political topic were chosen as the stimuli for collecting comments. The AP is a news agency that operates nearly 250 news bureaus throughout the world, and the agency's news content is published and circulated in more than 1,500 newspapers. The AP's articles are written in plain, non-inflammatory language and circulated widely across communities. The choice of AP articles helped in the standardization of article content, regardless of the partisan leanings of the editorial boards of the newspaper. The same AP article was available in all four newspapers in both topics and was examined for edits or updates during the 24-hour comment capture timeframe. The non-political topic chosen was a controversial ruling by replacement referees during the Seattle Seahawks-Pittsburgh Steelers NFL game on September 24, 2012. The referees' ruling, outcome of the game, and subsequent national outrage was a hot topic and the final straw in a media narrative about the ongoing NFL referee strike. The political topic chosen for this study is the recap of the Presidential debate covering domestic policy held in Denver, CO on October 3, 2012. This was the first of three Presidential Candidate debates and will cover domestic policy exclusively (where the remaining debates will either be a blend of foreign and domestic policy or a town hall meeting).

Procedures

Comments and articles were printed every few hours for 24-hours after the articles' posting to the newspapers' websites. Articles were compared for substantial editing and none was found. Streams of comments were compared to determine if newspaper webmasters removed or flagged comments deemed offensive or in violation of the newspapers' policies and none were found. Comments were recorded in chronological order and coded for newspaper, topic, condition, and if they were initial or responsorial. Each commenter from each newspaper was given a unique subject identification code and all comments from the commenter were coded with this code. A total of 210 unique commenters were found across the four newspapers and two topics. One commenter appeared to comment on each newspaper's political article, using the same handle and nearly the same comment.

Civility and Impoliteness Coding

A total of 582 comments were organized according to paper, condition, topic, timing, and commenters' subject identification codes by the lead author. All subsequent data analysis was conducted using only subject identification codes in order to ensure handles, which can contain political or uncivil speech in and of themselves, would not affect analysis of comments. Each post was coded as either an initial post, where the author addressed the content of the news article in a new "thread," or as a reply, where the author addressed a comment from another author or another author directly. If available, the number of likes/dislikes a comment received and whether the newspaper designated the author as a "Top Commenter" was also recorded.

The remaining two authors adapted previous civility and politeness coding schemas to use to train on 25 comments, illustrated in Table 1 (Papacharissi, 2004). Civility codes focused on verbalization of threats to democracy, political identification or stereotypes directed towards self, other commenters, or a non-present generalized 'other.' Comments containing threats to another commenter's rights (e.g., "Keep talking like that and you'll see what I mean") or a non-present other (e.g., "Seniors listen up...those death panels are for real.") were coded as uncivil. According to the tenets of SIDE theory, it would be uncivil for a commenter to deindividuate another commenter (or non-present other) and ascribe assumed group characteristics. Included in these codes are comments containing political identification of self (e.g., "As a democrat and as an Obama voter"), other commenter (e.g., "Jim, if you were an actual conservative"), or general non-present other (e.g., "As a liberal, Obama goes left"). Comments containing stereotypes (either towards another commenter or non-present other) such as "women are so desperate" or political stereotypes towards specific parties such as "You lefties just cant let Bush go!" or "what do we expect who was trained by Marxist professors?" were also coded for incivility.

The coding schema for impoliteness contained more specific interpersonal communication codes (Papacharissi, 2004; Jamison & Falk, 1999). Each type of interpersonal communication was coded for either towards another commenter (IP) or a non-present other (NPO). Use of sarcasm was coded as a measure of impoliteness, such as "Romney is ducking the issues regarding his refusals to release his income tax return." - It's filed away safe and sound with the President's birth certificate :)" or a non-

present other such as “Pete Carroll has been on the right end of both the Bush Push and now the Fail Mary.” Comments in all-caps were labeled as impolite as over-capitalization of text online is a known heuristic for yelling (Brusco, 2011). Aggressive communication such as name calling (e.g., “Romney has been a clown since day one.”) and aspersions (e.g., “You lose the argument about ACA everytime and yet you continue are you stupid as well as ignorant?”) excluding lying were considered impolite comments. Accusing of others of lying (e.g., “love watching you liars get their butts handed to them”), non-cooperation (e.g., “Obama has no intention of ever working with the Republicans”) and hyperbole (e.g., “certainly you are referring to The Amateur King”) could be considered threats to democratic conversation and therefore impolite (Ng & Detenber, 2005; Papacharissi, 2004). Finally, any comments including vulgarities or swear words were coded as impolite per societal norms of public speech. After training, each coder coded the same random 10% sample. Cohen κ was calculated for each variable (Hayes & Krippendorf, 2007). All categories met a threshold of Cohen $\kappa > 0.80$. Each coder then coded the remaining sample available for hypothesis testing.

Results

Hypothesis Tests

A comparison of total number of comments in each condition was conducted to test H1. In the Facebook condition, readers left a total of 119 comments (20.45%). In the Anonymous condition, readers left a total of 463 (79.55%) comments. A binomial test found this distribution is not due to chance, $p < .001$. H1 is therefore supported. In order to test H2, seven categories were summed creating a civility index of comments (see Table 3). A higher score on this index illustrated a more uncivil comment. A one-tailed independent groups t-test found anonymous comments were less civil than Facebook comments, $t(579)=-1.732$, $p=.043$, supporting H2. Sub-scales of civility were calculated, summing the codes of comments made towards other discussants (OD) and non-present others (NPO). One-tailed independent groups t-tests suggest a difference in civility by condition in comments made towards non-present others, but no difference in those comments made towards other discussants (see Table 3). Comparison of total number of comments across profile conditions revealed only one variable, assigning political stereotypes to generalized others not involved in the online discussion, was found in nearly 10% of all comments. The remaining six variables were equal to or less than 1% of comments coded in the affirmative for the incivility code.

Across conditions, negative stereotypes were rarely assigned to other discussants or non-present generalized others, and the differences in frequency were found to be statistically insignificant. Of the 50 comments coded as assigning political stereotypes to a generalized other, 43, or 86%, were in the anonymous profile condition and only seven, or 14%, were in the Facebook profile condition. A binomial test found this distribution to be due to condition, and not chance. Therefore, political stereotypes will be more likely to be assigned to non-present generalized others in an anonymous profile.

To test H3, 16 coding categories were summed to create an impoliteness index based on comments towards other discussants or generalized others (see Table 4). A higher score on this index meant the comment was more impolite. A one-tailed independent groups t-test found anonymous comments were marginally less polite than Facebook comments, and trending towards significance, $t(575)=-1.439, p=.076$. Sub-scales of politeness were calculated, summing the codes of comments made towards other discussants (OD) and non-present others (NPO). One-tailed independent groups t-tests suggest a difference in politeness by condition in comments made towards non-present others, but no difference in those comments made towards other discussants. Binomial tests were calculated for five of the individual politeness items that were coded as 'present' (1) in at least 9% of the comments across conditions. Nearly 90% of the comments did not contain the remaining eleven variables. The impoliteness variables examined were typing in all caps about a generalized other, calling a generalized other names, accusing a generalized other of lies, and using aspersions towards other discussants or generalized others (see Table 5).

Using the same civility index used for testing H2, a one-tailed independent groups t-test comparing means in each topic condition were calculated and found comments left on political articles were less civil than comments left on non-political articles, $t(579)= -8.742, p < .001$. Sub-scales of civility were created to comparing comments directed towards other discussants and comments made about non-present generalized others across topics (see Table 6). Comments made about non-present others in political topics were less civil than those made in reaction to the non-political news story. There was no statistical difference between topics on comments made towards other discussants, $t(579)=-0.875, p=.191$. Just as in the condition tests, only assignment of political stereotypes to non-present others was present in at least 10% of the total comments. The remaining six variables were coded in no more than 2% of the comments, and not analyzed.

A Pearson chi-square and follow-up binomial test found a significant difference between article topic and rate of political stereotypes being assigned to non-present generalized others. Of the 50 comments coded as assigning political stereotypes to a generalized other, all were written in comments to the political article. Therefore, political stereotypes will be more likely to be assigned to non-present generalized others in a political article.

Assignment of political stereotypes to other discussants and non-present generalized others was not expected in comments made to non-political stories. Pearson chi-square and binomial tests examining frequencies of comments assigned to other discussants were not significant, but comments made to non-present others were. The only comments assigning political stereotypes to non-present others were found in response to a political article.

Additional chi-square tests compared the frequency of negative stereotypes (non-political) towards other discussants and non-present others in comments by topic. Once more, there were no statistical differences between the cells. Nearly 99% of comments did not contain a negative stereotype towards anyone and does not warrant further comparison of frequencies. Therefore, topic does not affect the probability of

assignment of negative stereotypes being made by commenters to other discussants or non-present generalized others.

The same politeness index was used to calculate one-tailed independent groups t-tests comparing means in each topic condition (see Table 7). Comments left on political articles were not found to be less polite than comments left on non-political articles. Political news stories had less polite comments directed at non-present others than non-political stories. Four of the same specific politeness variables were present in at least 10% of comments, leading to binomial tests to determine if distribution of codes was due to chance or the article's topic (Table 8). Individuals commenting on political stories are less civil directing their comments towards non-present others indexed by typing in all caps, name-calling, use of aspersions, and accusing non-present others of lying. Therefore, H5 is partially supported.

Ninety-nine percent of all commenters did not self-identify in any way, and four of the six who had were found in the anonymous condition. Pearson chi-square tests were found to be non significant. Self-disclosure of political identity in comments to non-political stories was not expected. A Pearson chi-square test did not show any statistical significance difference between topics and self-disclosure. Therefore, neither condition nor article topic affect rate of self-disclosure.

Discussion

According to Dubrovsky (1985) the utilization of computer conferencing “promotes rationality by providing essential discipline (task orientation, coordination, equality of participation) by filtering out affective components of communication and emphasizing the content, minimizing social influences” (p. 381). Our current study found civility and politeness, and possibly rationality, are hard to come by when users are anonymous to others. In total, most of our hypotheses were either completely or partially supported. The anonymity of certain newspaper comment forums yielded more comments, and these comments were less civil and polite compared to comments left in forums requiring a Facebook login. Additionally, political news articles in general tend to lead to less civil and less polite comments than non-political news stories. Comments towards non-present others are especially less civil and less polite across condition and topic. These findings are consistent with the tenets of the SIDE theory (Postmes & Lea, 1992) and previous findings indicating that people tend to be more impolite on anonymous online platforms than on nononymous online platforms (e.g., Halpern & Gibs, in press). Furthermore, this study filled the gap in the literature by using the SIDE theory to examine whether people were more uncivil in anonymous online conditions than in nononymous online conditions.

Concerns of individuals becoming somehow “submerged in the machine” leading to social isolation and deindividuation effects lead more psychological, sociological, and communication research to focus on the interpersonal aspects and ramifications of CMC (Kielser, Siegel, & McGuire, 1986). This study aimed to explore the role of anonymity on incivility in CMC settings, but current research only scratches the surface of how anonymity affects the dynamics of online discussion. Future research can take a number of directions, including the experimental route to establish a more causal

relationship between anonymity and incivility. An experimental design involving the creation of anonymous and identified conditions within the context of comment forums would have great explanatory power.

Further research is also needed to gauge the effects of incivility on readers' perception of bias in the news and their perception of the journalist and newspaper's credibility. With online news consumption on the rise, comment forums are becoming increasingly common, and thus more visible to readers. Even if an online newsreader is not actively participating in the discussion, the comments from other readers are easily seen following most news articles.

A more qualitative approach could explore the effect of negative and impolite comments on journalists themselves, especially those comments directed at the author or publisher of a story by examining whether uncivil comments affect a journalist's mental health, their ability to perform their job well, or their job satisfaction.

Limitations

We were faced with certain challenges when choosing our non-political AP story. Our original story regarding the Emmys, did not yield any comments. Our third choice of non-political story, Hurricane Sandy, yielded highly politicized conversations due to the involvement of key campaign surrogates and government entities. The choice of political topic may have had some influence in which civility and politeness indexes were significant: other discussants vs. non-present others. Had we chosen a political story less centered around the performance of a non-present other, the comments may have been coded differently. Future research should attempt to validate the findings obtained in this study by examining the nature of comments posted in reference to online news stories on controversial political issues that do not necessarily have *specific* political scapegoats such as climate change, gun control laws, or equal rights for gay men and lesbians.

Although we drew upon coding categories that were used in previous studies on impoliteness and incivility in online comments (Papacharissi, 2004), we were unable to find the *specific* adjectives and nouns comprising each of these coding categories. Consequently, we had to use our discretion to decide on the most appropriate coding categories for words that appeared in the comments that we encountered. Also, we coded for the absence or presence of specific words and did not code for the tone of the entire comment. For instance, one commenter wrote, "Well the FAILED ONE proved what he is all about and how is looking out for a special segment of the population. Now you should understand. Thank me for educating you." Using our coding schema, we coded that the commenter was simply calling others names (e.g., "failed one"). However, we did not deem the commenter to be hurling aspersions because none of the *individual* words in those two sentences were derogatory. Future research should examine the comment holistically.

Finally, the four newspapers chosen were based on circulation figures and whether they allowed readers to comment on AP news stories. We did not take socio-demographic factors such as the political climate of geographical regions into consideration when

choosing the four newspapers. Regression analyses showed that geographical region was a significant predictor of frequency of comments. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* accounted for the most number of comments overall and was in the anonymous commenters condition. It is situated in an overwhelmingly Democratic county, which may have lead to differences in the coding. Interestingly enough, the comments that appeared on the political news story that was carried by the online version of the newspaper were largely hostile and anti-Obama. It is plausible that the Republicans living in that region knew that they were in the minority and thus felt more comfortable criticizing Obama online under the guise of anonymity. More research is needed to examine the extent to which anonymity creates partisan echo chambers online among political groups whose opinions are in the minority.

Conclusion

Scholars have expressed hope that the anonymity of online platforms would bridge divides between various social classes of people and enhance deliberative democracy (Barlow, 1996; Pavlik, 1994). However, the findings from this study seem to suggest otherwise. Although anonymous online platforms generate higher levels of discourse than nonymous online platforms, such discourse also tends to be more impolite and uncivil than discourse on nonymous online platforms. Thus, there seems to be a tradeoff between anonymity and discourse that is both civil and polite. As such, newspaper websites that prize civil and polite discourse over the volume of discourse might want to consider making users post comments using their Facebook accounts.

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Table 1
Civility, Politeness Codes and Actual Sample Examples

Category	Code (to OD or NPO)	Actual User Comments
Civility	Politically identify (self)	"As a democrat, and as a Obama voter,
	Political stereotype	"You lefties just cant let Bush go!"
	Non-political stereotype	"This is why people call you desperate!!"
	Threat to freedoms	"His efforts to increase socialism in the US won't work as it never has and never will...freedom remains the answer."
Politeness	Sarcasm	"Pete Carroll has been on the right end of both the Bush Push and now the Fail Mary."
	All caps	"YOU CAN raise revenue and lower taxes when you GROW the economy."
	Name calling	"Romney has been a clown since day one"
	Aspersions (excluding lying)	"You lose the argument about ACA everytime and yet you continue are you stupid as well as ignorant?"
	Accusations of lying	"love watching you liars get their butts handed to them. Face it doink, Obama was exposed last night for the liar he is!"
	Hyperbole	"certainly you are referring to The Amateur King."
	Non-cooperation	"Obama has no intention of ever working with Republicans."
	Vulgurities	"hell, he didn't even read his own bill!"

Table 2
Condition, Daily Circulation, and Total Number of Comments from Sample Newspapers

Newspaper	Condition	Circulation	N of Comments
Cleveland Plain Dealer	Anonymous	246,571	431
Cincinnati Enquirer	Facebook	144,154	88
Toledo Blade	Facebook	94,215	31
Dayton Daily News	Anonymous	94,425	32

Table 3
Comparison of Civility Indexes by Condition

	Facebook		Anonymous		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Civility Index	0.076	0.266	0.126	0.332	-1.732	.043
Civility – NPO	0.059	0.236	0.11	0.314	-1.974	0.25
Civility - OD	0.017	0.129	0.015	0.122	0.130	.448

Table 4
Comparison of Politeness Indexes by Condition

	Facebook		Anonymous		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Politeness Index	0.949	0.955	1.100	1.234	-1.439	.076
Politeness – NPO	0.723	0.929	0.919	1.061	-1.938	.027
Politeness - OD	0.227	0.173	0.459	0.524	1.034	.151

Table 5
Pearson Chi-Square and Binomial Tests of Politeness Variables by Condition

	Analysis of comments coded 'yes'			
	χ^2	Facebook	Anonymous	Binomial <i>p</i>
All-Caps Non-Present Other	2.424	N=7 (12.5%)	N=49 (87.5%)	<i>p</i> < .001
Name Call of Non-Present Other	9.239*	N=9 (9.2%)	N=89 (90.8%)	<i>p</i> < .001
Aspersions Other Discussants	3.059	N=16 (29.6%)	N=38 (70.4%)	<i>p</i> = .004
Aspersions Non-Present Other	4.889*	N=36 (15.9%)	N=191 (84.1%)	<i>p</i> < .001
Accuse Lying Non-Present Other	5.485*	N=23 (30.7%)	52 (69.3%)	<i>p</i> = .001

ns=*p*>.05, *=*p*<.05, **=*p*<.001

Table 6
Comparison of Civility Means of Comments on Non-Political and Political News Articles

	Non-Political Topic		Political Topic		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Civility Index	0	0	0.125	0.331	-8.742	< .001
Civility – NPO	0	0	0.108	0.311	-8.057	< .001
Civility - OD	0	0	0.017	0.129	-0.875	.191

Table 7
Comparison of Politeness Means of Comments on Non-Political and Political News Articles

	Non-Political Topic		Political Topic		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Polite Index	0.822	0.834	1.09	1.206	-1.461	.072
Politeness – NPO	0.778	0.849	0.896	1.05	-0.732	.232
Politeness – OD	0.044	0.208	0.196	0.577	-3.916	< .001

Table 8

Pearson Chi-Square and Binomial Tests of Politeness Variables by Condition

	χ^2	Analysis of comments coded 'yes'		
		Sports	Politics	Binomial <i>p</i>
All-Caps Non-Present Other	0.495	N=3 (5%)	N=53 (95%)	<i>p</i> < .001
Name Call of Non-Present Other	0.060	N=7 (7%)	N=93 (93%)	<i>p</i> < .001
Aspersions Non-Present Other	1.182	N=7 (7%)	N=91 (93%)	<i>p</i> < .001
Accuse Lying Non-Present Other	7.230	N=0	N=75 (100%)	<i>p</i> = .001
* = <i>p</i> < .05, ** = <i>p</i> < .001				