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Chapter 8: Disentangling Uncivil and Intolerant Discourse in Online Political Talk

Patrícia Rossini

Uncivil discourse has been a topic of scholarly concern in the past decades due to the perceived rise of political polarization and partisan media (Herbst, 2010; Mutz, 2016), and the pervasiveness of incivility in computer-mediated communication (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, and Ladwig, 2014; Coe, Kenski, and Rains, 2014; Papacharissi, 2004). The potential benefits of online political discussion are often questioned, or dismissed, due to the elevated presence of uncivil discourse (Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014). However, as discussed in other chapters in this book (see Muddiman; Sydnor), incivility is a challenging concept to define. As a result, what scholars consider to be uncivil varies in definition and operationalization (Jamieson et al., 2015; Muddiman, 2017).

Most of these studies, however, have focused in the U.S. context or the U.K., and little is known about civility in online discussions in non-English speaking democracies. This chapter fills that gap by analyzing uncivil discourse in Brazil, the fifth largest population in the world (Un.org, 2017). By looking at a developing country with a high rate of internet use¹, this chapter contributes to a broader understanding of how citizens in non-U.S. contexts engage in uncivil and intolerant behavior when discussing political news online.

In this chapter, I advocate for a nuanced understanding of incivility in online political talk, and argue that uncivil discourse, in itself, does not necessarily prevent online discussions from producing beneficial outcomes. I argue that uncivil discourse, in which people express their perspectives with foul language and antinormative intensity, should be understood as a rhetorical act. Second, I argue that the true threat to democracy is *intolerant* discourse in which groups of people or individuals are attacked in ways that threaten democratic pluralism.

Distinguishing incivility and intolerance provides scholars with a better theoretical framework to evaluate not only the presence of uncivil discourse in online environments, but the extent to which online discussions represent an actual threat to democratic pluralism and equality. Moreover, understanding incivility as a rhetorical act that is both sensitive to context and shaped by individuals' understanding of prevailing norms allows us to avoid the trap in which uncivil discourse is all deemed bad and offensive (Herbst, 2010). To discuss the merits of such a nuanced approach to uncivil discourse, this paper opens with an overview of how incivility is conceptualized and operationalized in both online and offline contexts. I then present a conceptual approach that disentangles uncivil and intolerant discourse, and explain how it can be used to better understand incivility in online political discussion with a study testing the validity of this theoretical model. This chapter makes an important theoretical contribution by advancing an understanding of incivility as a rhetorical act, hence differentiating between behaviors that are inherently harmful and offensive from those that are not.

Uncivil Discourse and Online Political Talk

The internet offers citizens many opportunities to engage in informal political talk, a practice that is central to democratic citizenship (Barber, 2003; Mansbridge, 1999; Stromer-Galley and Wichowski, 2011). It is through political talk that citizens learn about matters of public concern, form and clarify their opinions, and learn about others' views. Everyday political talk may increase political knowledge, foster shared values and enable participants to learn and understand matters of public concern. Some scholars argue that politically meaningful talk should be characterized by deliberative criteria, such as a rational and respectful exchange of arguments that are driven by the common good instead of personal gains (Mansbridge, 1999). Other researchers have shown that several of these benefits have been measured using self-report, suggesting that informal discussions have positive outcomes for participants even when they are not measured as a function of deliberative criteria (Eveland and Hively, 2009; Valenzuela, Kim, and Gil de Zúñiga, 2012).

The discussion around the democratic potential of the internet is as old as the commercial internet itself. Structural affordances of the internet – such as the ability to communicate with others beyond geographic boundaries, find people with similar interests and be exposed to a variety of perspectives – were all predicted to facilitate political participation (Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Stromer-Galley and Wichowski, 2011). However, the hope that the internet would revolutionize citizenship and renew political engagement by fostering political discussion was rapidly replaced by cynicism. Scholars quickly found that the characteristics of political discussion online did not live up to the standards of a public sphere governed by Habermasian principles, such as rational and respectful argumentation in which participants engage with a broad range of ideas (Coleman and Moss, 2012). Although some have questioned whether online

political talk can live up to the high standards of deliberation (Chadwick, 2009; Freelon, 2010), most agree that the potential benefits of political discussion online are undermined by the presence of uncivil discourse (Hmielowski, Hutchens, and Cicchirillo, 2014; O’Sullivan and Flanagan, 2003). Several studies have flagged the elevated presence of profanity, rude language and disrespect, as well as trolling and flaming as indicators that these environments were toxic for democracy (Reagle Jr, 2015; Santana, 2014). In the context of computer-mediated communication, behaviors such as name-calling, ad hominem attacks, profanity, stereotyping and interpersonal disrespect are consistently flagged as uncivil (Coe et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Sobieraj and Berry, 2011). The list may also include graphic representations of shouting (e.g. writing in all caps) (Chen and Lu, 2017). Even though there is overlap in how researchers have flagged expressions of incivility, it is relevant to note that differences in how scholars operationalize this wide range of expressions pose a challenge for comparing research results (Stryker, Conway, and Danielson, 2016).

Incivility is a challenging concept to define (Jamieson et al., 2015). Authors have operationalized the concept in many ways (see Muddiman, Sydnor, this volume). To some extent, it can be argued that the perception of incivility lies “in the eye of the beholder” and is sensitive to contextual factors and the flexible nature of social interactions – an expression perceived as uncivil in the workplace, for example, may be perfectly acceptable among friends (Herbst, 2010). In short, there are two main approaches to incivility. One perspective is deeply rooted in deliberative theory, and approaches incivility as the lack of respect or unwillingness to acknowledge and engage with opposing views (Mutz and Reeves, 2005). Another tradition is rooted in politeness

theory, and considers rude or vulgar remarks, personal attacks, and disrespectful language as uncivil (Jamieson et al, 2015). Muddiman (2017) differentiates these two traditions under the concepts of personal-level and public-level civility. Personal-level civility is violated by behaviors such as rudeness, emotional speech and name-calling. Public-level incivility includes behaviors such as refusing to engage with others or to recognize the legitimacy of opposing views, spreading misinformation or prioritizing personal gains over the common good. Distinguishing different types of incivility is relevant to understand its effects. For instance, citizens appear to rank personal-level incivility as more uncivil than public-level incivility, suggesting that heated arguments around political issues are seen as less problematic than attacks on someone's character (Muddiman, 2017). Striker et al.'s (2016) study also suggests that citizens are sensitive to personal attacks, but consider some level of incivility acceptable in political discussions. The authors have also found that more "extreme" forms of incivility, such as racial, sexist, ethnic or religious slurs, as well as threats— which, in my view, are expressions of intolerance — are consistently deemed as extremely uncivil, thus providing further evidence that these types of harmful expressions need to be disentangled from more acceptable and less dangerous forms of incivility.

Considerations of "Intolerance" rather than "Incivility"

These models emphasize a need to understand different forms of uncivil expression and their potential consequences. They demonstrate that context affects how citizens interpret political incivility and shed light to the fact that incivility may be expressed in many different ways – not all of which are necessarily offensive or problematic.

In fact, some level of rudeness may be deemed acceptable in heated political discussions when participants hold diverging views. The idea that incivility is, in itself, a threat to democratic norms ignores the nuances of uncivil discourse. For instance, some behaviors that are considered uncivil are not necessarily used to offend others or to disrupt the conversation. One might use profanity to express an opinion in a heated discussion and emphasize a point, or to get attention (Herbst, 2010, Mutz, 2016).

I align with the perspective that civility is a communicative practice and can be understood as a rhetorical act (Benson, 2011; Herbst, 2010), or “a tool in the strategic and behavioral arsenals of politics” (Herbst, 2010, p.6). In that sense, Papacharissi’s (2004) perspective that incivility is a threat to democratic norms might be too strong. Civility is best understood as a set of shared norms of interaction which are flexible and contextual (Herbst, 2010). The concept of incivility should not conflate rude or impolite discourse with that which threatens democratic pluralism – such as attacks on groups of people or on core values of a democratic society.

I argue that the concept of *political intolerance* is better suited than the concept of *incivility* to identify practices and behaviors that are inherently threatening to democracy (Gibson, 1992; Hurwitz and Mondak, 2002). Intolerant behaviors are less dependent on context than incivility, as they necessarily offend or undermine particular groups based on personal, social, sexual, ethnical, religious or cultural characteristics. Political intolerance signals a lack of moral respect – a basic condition for individuals to be recognized as free and equal in a plural democracy (Habermas, 1998; Honneth, 1996). Although it can be argued that the level of perceived “intolerance” of a given behavior depends on a country’s political system, culture, and rules, intolerant behaviors are more

clearly distinguishable than the wide array of behaviors considered to be uncivil because they are rooted in democratic values and norms that are shared in the country. In fact, prior studies have identified behaviors such as racial slurs, threats to harm others and encouraging harm as “extreme” expressions of incivility and found that individuals are more likely to classify them as “very uncivil” (Stryker et al., 2016) – indicating that behaviors that convey intolerance are consistently perceived as violations of interactive norms.

Incivility as a Rhetorical Tool

Incivility, then, should be interpreted as a rhetorical asset that people may use to express opinions and justify positions (Herbst, 2010). As such, incivility is not necessarily incompatible with democratically relevant political talk. Thinking of incivility as a rhetorical act and not as a set of pre-defined rules means accepting the complex and flexible nature of interaction norms that might occur across contexts. Hence, “uncivil” online political discussion might still be capable of contributing to opinion formation and learning about other's positions. Moreover, relying on predetermined standards of political civility may silence particular forms of expression or limit the types of discourse that are accepted in the public sphere. This critique is often directed at theoretical models that rely too much on procedural discourse and expectations of argumentative rationality, such as deliberation (Benson, 2011; Fraser, 1990). Incivility may also be associated with positive outcomes, such as improving attention, learning and recall of opposing arguments in political discussions (Mutz, 2016).

In examining incivility and intolerance online, it is important to go beyond the simple presence of certain words or expressions that might characterize them. To fully understand how expressions of incivility or intolerance are used in the context of online political talk – and the

extent to which they are used to attack other participants in a discussion – it is crucial to identify the target of these expressions (Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015). While online discussions might be uncivil, one cannot infer that participants are actively offending one another simply because they use uncivil rhetoric.

This approach helps advance our understanding of political discussions online by acknowledging that incivility may be used as a rhetorical asset to mark positions and explain arguments in heated conversations, as well as to bring attention to one's perspective, particularly in heterogeneous conversations. Although the nature of online discourse may facilitate the use of uncivil rhetoric – due to reduced social and contextual cues, as well as weak or non-existent social ties (Hmielowski et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014) – I argue that these expressions are not necessarily incompatible with democratically relevant political talk online, nor they should prevent these discussions from having similar positive outcomes often attributed to face to face political conversation – such as increasing political knowledge, providing context and meaning to public affairs, and fostering social ties. Conversely, intolerant discourse signals moral disrespect and profound disregard towards individuals or groups, and as such – by definition - cannot be compatible with normative values of democratic pluralism, freedom of expression and equality (Gibson, 1992; Hurwitz and Mondak, 2002). Expressions of political intolerance are therefore potentially damaging to democracy and should raise concerns as to the factors that may facilitate it in digital environments.

Moreover, discussion partners in online environments are often unknown, therefore provoking "the disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2004) and facilitating antinormative

behavior (Hmielowski et al., 2014; Rowe, 2015). In this context, the argument that incivility is a rhetorical asset that individuals use to ensure their political claims stand out, the diversity of viewpoints in online political discussions might encourage participants to rely on uncivil discourse. In fact, online discussions tend to be more uncivil precisely when participants disagree (Stromer-Galley, Bryant, and Bimber, 2015), and those who discuss politics online more frequently are more likely to adopt uncivil rhetoric (Hmielowski et al., 2014). The same pattern should not be true for political intolerance, as intolerant behaviors tend to become salient in homogeneous environments (Crawford, 2014; Wojcieszak, 2011).

To demonstrate the validity of this theoretical model, I analyze political discussions around a variety of political topics in two distinct online environments – social networking sites and news websites. By doing so, I provide further evidence of how platform affordances may shape political discussion online. By disentangling incivility and intolerance in online political talk, I hypothesize that intolerant discourse is less frequent than incivility in public and informal venues of interpersonal interaction online.

Prior research suggests, for instance, that Facebook users are less likely to be uncivil than commenters on news websites (Rowe, 2015). Because platforms shape the ways participants engage in political talk, this study also investigates if there are significant differences in types and volume of intolerant and uncivil discourse in news websites and Facebook news pages.

Finally, both uncivil and intolerant discourse may be directed towards other people or groups, which may or may not be a part of the conversation. Thus, it is relevant to consider the targets of uncivil and intolerant expressions to understand the extent to which online spaces facilitate or constrain interpersonal offense.

Understanding “Uncivil” and “Intolerant” Comments in Context

To understand the prevalence of uncivil and intolerant political discussion, I analyzed online comments from news sources based in a Brazilian context. The study examined online comments in response to political stories posted on Facebook, as well as online comments posted in response to those same stories at their original online news site. This data was collected from Portal UOL's Facebook page - the most accessed online news outlet in Brazil, with over 6.7 million followers on Facebook. Portal UOL was selected as the source for Facebook comments because it is the country's largest online portal and hosts several media outlets. I used the constructed week sampling technique to ensure that the variability of news on weekdays is properly represented in the sample (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico, 2005). Two constructed weeks were built to represent six months of online news coverage (Luke, Caburnay, & Cohen, 2011).

To conduct my comparative analysis, I first identified all posts from Portal UOL on Facebook as either political or non-political news, adopting a broad conception of politics that also topics of public concern such as education, security and violence, social programs, minorities, activism and social movements. I then followed the links in all political posts in order to collect comments located at the source, which was an official news outlet - mostly UOL and Folha de São Paulo, Brazil's most important newspaper, or political blogs². This approach ensures that discussants in both platforms are engaging with the same stories. I analyzed comments on a total of 157 news topics and created a random stratified sample³ from a universe of 55,053 comments on Facebook and on news sites, respecting the proportion between comments on Facebook (70%) and sources (30%), and number of comments per thread. The content analysis was therefore

conducted on 12,337 comments. To analyze threaded discussions, I randomly sampled consecutive messages in each platform.

Separating “Uncivil” from “Intolerant” Comments

This study employs systematic content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002) as its main methodology⁴. The coding scheme developed is broadly inspired by, and expands upon, prior research (Coe et al., 2014; Stromer-Galley, 2007). The unit of analysis is a comment. The main coding categories are disagreement, opinion expression, incivility, and intolerance. The subcategories under "uncivil messages" include a) dismissive or pejorative language towards public policies or political institutions; b) profanity or vulgarity; c) personal attacks focused on demeaning characteristics or personality; d) Attacks focused on arguments, e) pejorative language towards the way a person communicates. Intolerant messages have a harmful intent towards people or groups, attack personal liberties, and deny others of equal rights and participation in the "free market" of ideas (Gibson, 1992, 2007; Sullivan and Transue, 1999). In practical terms, intolerant behaviors were coded in the following subcategories: xenophobia, racism, hate speech, violence, homophobia, religious intolerance, and attacks towards gender, sexual preferences or economic status. Intolerant and uncivil messages are also coded by target – such as other users, political actors, people or groups featured on news stories, the media, political minorities etc. This category identifies whether uncivil and intolerant discourse is targeted at other discussants - which in turn would undermine interpersonal respect and potentially affect the discussion - or at third-parties who are not a part of the conversation - such as politicians, political parties, minorities etc. Uncivil and intolerant messages can also be unfocused, when there is no clear target.

The results of this analysis support the hypothesis that expressions of political intolerance (which I argue are the real threat to democracy) are occurring less frequently online than are uncivil expressions (which I argue are less of a threat to democracy). As demonstrated in Table 8.1, the presence of incivility is substantial in both platforms: 40.9% of the comments in News websites and 36,5% of the comments on a news page on Facebook are flagged as uncivil. As predicted, intolerant discourse is observed substantially less often than incivility.

[Table 8.1 about here]

The main type of incivility observed in both platforms is attacking other people or groups, which includes *ad hominem* attacks, pejorative language, lying and defamation. The second most frequent type of incivility is pejorative language towards political institutions, government and policy. Both the volume of intolerant discourse and the types of intolerance are sensitive to different platforms (Table 8.2). Specifically, intolerance is more likely to be expressed in Facebook comments as compared to News websites, a result that could be partially explained due to the active presence of moderators in news websites and the lack of dedicated tools to moderate comments on Facebook pages⁵. Notably, the types of intolerance were also different across platforms. On Facebook, most comments coded as intolerant featured incitation to violence/harm, followed by sexual discrimination, intolerance towards political ideas and offensive stereotyping. Conversely, the main expression of intolerance in news comments is towards political views and values, followed by social discrimination, offensive stereotyping and incitation to violence or harm.

[Table 8.2 about here]

I additionally analyzed the targets of uncivil and intolerant discourse to understand whether people are intentionally offending other discussants or targeting particular groups. The main targets of uncivil discourse are politicians, political parties and institutions in both platforms. However, while the second main target of incivility on Facebook are people or groups mentioned in the stories, the second main target of uncivil comments on news websites are other users.

Intolerant comments on the Facebook page were mostly targeted at minorities - such as LGBTQ and women, as well as socially disadvantaged individuals - and the second main target was the topic and actors mentioned in the news (Table 8.3). Politicians, parties and institutions are the third main target of intolerant discourse on Facebook. The topics and actors mentioned in the news stories are the main focus of intolerant discourse, while the political sphere comes in second place and minorities are the third preferred target. It is also relevant to note that while intolerant discourse is seldom targeted at other users on Facebook, that is not the case for news websites, where 11.5% of all intolerant comments were interpersonal. These results suggest that those in less identified digital platforms might feel less constrained to adopt an offensive discourse towards other participants to the discussion than those who engage in political talk in social networking sites, where social ties could arguably exert some pressure for participants to refrain from interpersonal offense.

[Table 8.3 about here]

Does it matter if it's Uncivil?

Digital platforms – such as social networking sites, discussion groups, communities and news websites – provide citizens with a wide array of opportunities to engage in political

discussion. Nonetheless, online political talk is often questioned as a democratically healthy activity due to elevated levels of incivility. In this chapter, I advance the argument that these venues for political discussion should not be dismissed just because participants often resort to uncivil discourse to express opinions and views. Considering political talk as a vital activity for democratic citizenship, I question the perspective that the volume of uncivil discourse in online interactions is inherently problematic or that it impedes the ability of such conversations to produce democratically desirable outcomes, a view that has been broadly endorsed (Hmielowski et al., 2014; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014) and is heavily informed by theories of deliberation and expectations that online political talk should live up to standards of deliberative discourse (Freelon, 2010; Mendonça, 2015; Stroud et al., 2014). I argue that this approach disregards some key features of interpersonal communication in the digital age, in particular the fact that interaction norms are flexible and highly affected not only by context but also by the nature of relationships.

Prior studies have adopted various approaches to incivility that do not rigorously disentangle behaviors that denote lack of interpersonal respect or adherence to interaction norms, from those that are inherently harmful or threatening to core democratic values – which are necessarily undermining the intrinsic value of political talk. Although some authors have suggested the need to accept impolite and rude behaviors as inherent to online political talk (Papacharissi, 2004), conceptualizing incivility as democratically threatening behaviors seems disconnected with most approaches of civil discourse that are grounded in interpersonal norms and politeness theories (Jamieson et al., 2015). In this chapter, I have advocated for a conceptual distinction between intolerant behaviors

and uncivil ones, which assumes the latter constitutes a rhetorical act that people may use strategically to advance their political opinions, which might be acceptable in online environments. This perspective builds upon the idea that online conversation may be compatible with uncivil expressions insofar as participants are less constrained by social sanctions that are present in face-to-face interactions and may interpret some types of incivility as tolerated or acceptable.

The results presented in this chapter suggest that different online platforms may shape how participants engage in uncivil and intolerant discourse. For instance, uncivil discourse is more frequently observed in news websites, whereas intolerance is more likely to be expressed on Facebook. These results might be interpreted in different ways. First, Facebook pages are less controlled than news websites, as page administrators have limited capabilities to moderate comments in large-scale. Thus, intolerant comments are not systematically moderated. Secondly, if people perceive that their opinions will be broadly shared by others, they might be more willing to make intolerant public comments. That is, Facebook users could potentially be more likely to express intolerance if they believe that their imagined audience will share their views – which is consistent with studies that indicate that intolerance is associated with the perception of an homogeneous public opinion environment (Askay, 2014; Crawford, 2014; Wojcieszak, 2010). Prior research has demonstrated that internet users are affected by their perception of a favorable opinion environment and are less inclined to express their views if they believe others will not share them (Askay, 2014; Gearhart and Zhang, 2014; Liu and Fahmy, 2011).

This study also demonstrated that incivility is not necessarily used to offend other participants in online discussions. Rather, uncivil discourse is more frequently targeted at politicians and political actors – which suggests that those who engage in political talk online

might be “critical” or monitorial citizens who like to express their opinions about public affairs (Norris, 2000; Zaller, 2003). Considering that Brazilian citizens have been witnessing repeated corruption scandals and took the streets in large demonstrations against the political sphere in 2013, 2014 and 2015, it is not surprising that those who discuss politics online are vocal about their dissatisfaction and mistrust by targeting uncivil attacks at political actors.

Notably, platform affordances have a significant impact in the extent to which citizens engage in interpersonal incivility – that is, when they purposefully offend others with uncivil discourse – which happens more frequently in the comments section of news websites. However, interpersonal incivility constitutes a fraction of the uncivil expressions in online environments, a finding which should serve to calm those who believe that the uncivil nature of online political talk is necessarily harmful for democracy. The fact that citizens are likely to target politicians, political actors and other third consistent with findings on perceptions of incivility suggesting that personal attacks are seen as more uncivil and inappropriate than incivility targeted at politicians or political positions (Kenski et al., 2017; Muddiman, 2017; Stryker et al., 2016), which supports the argument that perceived interaction norms are flexible and contextual.

The finding that incivility occurs more frequently in comments on news websites, despite the fact that these spaces are often moderated (Huang, 2016), suggests that some expressions of incivility are not generally perceived as undesirable or incompatible – as they are not flagged by participants nor excluded by moderators. By contrast, intolerant discourse was less likely to take place on news websites, suggesting that expressions of racism, hate speech, violence, and the like may be consistently deemed as inappropriate

by moderators. Users, being aware of that active moderation, may be more likely to refrain from these types of comments on news sites. These findings are corroborated by studies investigating perceptions of incivility (Stryker et al., 2016) which show that racial slurs, threatening or harmful discourse are considered extremely uncivil by most people.

This study demonstrates that the types of uncivil discourse to which people are exposed online do not represent threats to democratic values or indicate a hostile environment for political debates. Although incivility might come with the territory when people engage with political news online, most discussions do not cross the boundaries of intolerant discourse and therefore should not be treated as inherently problematic for democracy. The potential benefits of informal political talk online should not be readily dismissed just because their users often behave in uncivil ways. As most research on the benefits of political talk is based on self-reported measures (Huckfeldt and Mendez, 2008, Moy and Gastil, 2006; Xenos and Moy, 2007), it stands to reason that the quality of political discussions is less relevant than its frequency to produce positive outcomes.

This chapter has made three contributions. First, I offered a theoretical model that helps understand the rhetoric uses of uncivil discourse in online political talk. By showing that incivility and intolerance can be meaningfully distinguished and analyzed, this study advances theory and helps identify the extent to which citizens engage in anti-democratic behaviors when discussing politics online. Second, the results suggest that incivility might be accepted - and even normalized - in political discussions online, being more frequently used to talk about political affairs than to offend other participants. These results are consistent with prior research suggesting that those who discuss politics online more frequently are also more likely to be uncivil, suggesting that these behaviors might be perceived as acceptable or appropriate

(Hmielowski et al., 2014). The main focus of uncivil discourse across both platforms were politicians, parties, and institutions, thus revealing dissatisfaction towards the political sphere. This finding supports the argument that incivility is a rhetorical act commonly used to expose individual opinions about the world. Finally, the platform through which political discussion takes place significantly shapes the ways individuals express themselves. Participants are more likely to attack others when they participate in more anonymous environments, such as news websites, than when they are discussing politics on Facebook. In contrast, uncivil and intolerant comments on Facebook are more frequently directed at those who are not a part of the conversation - politicians, people and groups who are subjects of news stories - and seldom directed at other participants. This finding suggests that platform affordances that are specific to social networking sites – such as the “public displays of connections” and the use of personal profiles (Boyd, 2012; Ellison and boyd, 2013) – may influence users to refrain from confrontation.

This chapter provides a theoretical model that differentiates behaviors that are inherently threatening to democracy from those that are not. This is not to say that incivility is a positive aspect of online conversations. Rather, as this chapter has shown, one needs to scrutinize the different types of incivility and examine the targets of these expressions to determine the extent to which online platforms may contribute to offensive communicative styles. Future research needs to shift away from the perception that incivility is problematic in itself. Rather, researchers should further examine how different online platforms may constrain or facilitate expressions of intolerance, in order to understand how platforms might mitigate these behaviors to prevent democratically harmful online discussions.

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Table 8.1: Incivility x Platform

	Facebook Comments	News Comments
Civil	5407 (63.5%)	2261 (59.1%)
Vulgarity or profanity	119 (1.4%)	6 (0.2%)
Attacks towards people or groups	2491 (29.3%)	981 (25.6%)
Pejorative/dismissive language towards institutions or policy	345 (4.1%)	421 (11%)
Attacks towards arguments	130 (1.5%)	152 (4%)
Pejorative for communication	19 (0.2%)	5 (0.1%)
Total	8511	3826

$X^2(5) = 336.3893, p < 0.001$

Table 8.1: Intolerance x Platform

	Facebook Comments	News Comments
Absent	7702 (90.5%)	3664 (95.8%)
Intolerance towards political views/values	55 (0.6%)	50 (1.3%)
Racism	17 (0.2%)	7 (0.2%)
Social discrimination	9 (0.1%)	31 (0.8%)
Gender discrimination	24 (0.3%)	8 (0.2%)
Sexual discrimination	251 (2.9%)	6 (0.2%)
Religious intolerance	15 (0.2%)	7 (0.2%)
Offensive stereotyping	45 (0.5%)	26 (0.7%)
Incitation to violence/harm	393 (4.6%)	27 (0.7%)
Total	8511	3826

$X^2(8) = 280.9623, p < 0.001$

Table 8.3: Targets of incivility and intolerance per platform (%)

	Incivility		Intolerance	
	Facebook Comments	News Comments	Facebook Comments	News Comments
Unfocused	0.6%	0.4%	0.6%	3.7%
Other users	12%	16.4%	0.5%	11.1%
News topic and actors	25.6%	7.5%	39.6%	31.5%
Politicians, parties, institutions	48.5%	62.4%	10.5%	23.5%
Minorities	4.2%	1.3%	40.7%	16%
Journalist/news media	5.4%	7%	0.2%	0.6%
"Brazilians"	2%	1.9%	0.4%	7.4%
Others	1.7%	3.1%	0.3%	1.3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Incivility: $X^2(7) = 270.3431$, $p < 0.001$

Intolerance: $X^2(7) = 106.1873$, $p < 0.001$

Endnotes

¹ According to official data (IBGE, 2016), over 83% of the urban households had internet access and over 92% of the population had mobile internet access in 2015.

² Because these blogs are formal "opinion blogs" written by journalists and have similar moderation practices as the news websites, those were aggregated with other news sources.

³ Confidence interval: 99%; Margin of error: 1%.

⁴ Content analysis was conducted by two independent coders, who performed an inter-coder agreement test using approximately 5% (n = 636) of the sample using Krippendorff's *alpha*. All categories were considered reliable (.7 or higher). In spite of the challenges in identifying uncivil and intolerant discourse, these variables were highly reliable. For incivility, we obtained a Krippendorff's *alpha* of 0.87 on news sources and 0.79 on Facebook, whereas the values for intolerance were of 0.84 on news sources and 0.89 on Facebook.

⁵ Interviews with editors and moderators from the main sources of news (Portal UOL and Folha de São Paulo) analyzed in this project indicated that they adopt different moderation approaches in the news websites and on Facebook – the former is systematically moderated, while the latter is not. The main reason not to moderate Facebook is that the platform does not provide enough control to moderate in large scale other than the use of a dictionary approach that filters lists of words and automatically hides comments on a Facebook page.