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## Toxic for Whom?

### Examining the Targets of Uncivil and Intolerant Discourse in Online Political Talk

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As the internet becomes integrated into citizens' everyday life, many casual opportunities to engage in political talk take place online. With the rise of social media, scholarly attention to online political talk has shifted from formal political discussion forums to informal spaces where political discussion is not the main purpose (Graham 2010, 2012; Himelboim et al. 2012). In these latter situations, political talk emerges from other social activities and interests (e.g., entertainment) and can expose its participants to a variety of perspectives.

The interest surrounding political talk online is well justified. Informal political conversation is a core activity in modern democracies that enables citizens to learn about topics of public concern, engage with their communities, build shared values, as well as to build, understand, and negotiate both personal and collective identities (Moy and Gastil 2006; Wyatt, Katz, and Kim 2000). Although a substantial body of research has examined the potential benefits of political talk, scholars become skeptical when these conversations take place in digital environments given the uncivil discourse they breed (Anderson et al. 2014; Coe, Kenski, and Rains 2014; Rowe 2015). While these concerns are not unjustified, most research on online incivility has focused on the presence of certain behaviors, with little attention to the extent to which this type of discourse targets particular groups and individuals, or is used to express opinions (Coe, Kenski, and Rains 2014; Gervais 2014). As such, these studies appear to assume that incivility online is inherently offensive, without examining whether participants actually engage with and target each other in uncivil interactions. In other words, to understand if and how antinormative discourse may target distinct groups online, we must distinguish interpersonal offense from opinion expression and, more important, from behaviors that threaten democratic values.

Following a stream of research advocating for a nuanced understanding of incivility, which considers that some forms of incivility might be acceptable or perceived as inoffensive in online political talk (Kenski, Coe, and Rains 2017; Papacharissi 2004), this chapter focuses on identifying the conditions in which certain people or groups are *targeted* by uncivil vs. intolerant discourse. Specifically, what contextual and discursive features are associated with targeting

others –either participants in a discussion or external actors –when discussing political affairs online? This study analyzes comments on political stories on Facebook and news websites in Brazil. As communication online is structured by platform affordances, the study also examines the relationship between these two discussion environments and the focus of uncivil and intolerant discourse on different targets.

In examining the contextual and the conversational dynamics around antinormative discourse, this chapter provides a framework that enables future research to distinguish situations in which online discussions are inherently toxic and threatens democratic values from those where participants are expressing their opinions more aggressively when discussing politics. This study finds that much of the vitriol online is targeted at political actors and characterized by elaborated opinion expression, suggesting that those who discuss politics online might adopt a critical tone towards the political sphere. When comments target other participants in a discussion, they are more likely to be uncivil than intolerant, and to signal disagreement – suggesting a heterogeneous conversation environment. Finally, comments targeted at minorities are more likely to be intolerant and to emerge in homogeneous discussion threads, suggesting that the targets of these comments are either absent from the discussion or silenced by the perception of a hostile opinion environment. Taken together, these findings indicate that while incivility is not inherently associated with interpersonal offense nor should be considered a problematic feature of online political talk, intolerant discourse emerges precisely when it may hurt democracy the most by targeting minorities and disenfranchised groups in relatively homogeneous discussions when they are the topic of a news story, contributing to further exclusion of their voices.

### **Incivility and Online Political Talk**

Scholars such as John Dewey ( 1927), Jurgen Habermas (1996) and Benjamin Barber (2003), have emphasized the role of informal political talk as a fundamental practice in democratic societies. Their perspective inspired a substantial body of research examining the democratic value of informal political talk, and scholars have examined both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits associated with everyday political conversation (Conover and Searing 2005; Jacobs, Cook, and Carpini 2009). For instance, citizens who engage in political talk are able to refine their own arguments and better understand others’ perspectives, have higher levels of political knowledge and efficacy (Huckfeldt and Mendez 2008), and are more likely to be

politically engaged (Gil de Zúñiga, Valenzuela, and Weeks 2016; Jacobs, Cook, and Carpini 2009). Ultimately, informal political talk enables citizens to learn, elaborate, and refine opinions, perspectives, interests, and values that contribute to form social and individual identities, and enable them to understand and yield meaning to political facts and matters of public concern (Walsh, 2004).

As social interactions take place increasingly in online environments, scholars have voiced concerns about the value of online political talk. Some have argued that the internet fails to promote democratically relevant political conversation due to the excessive presence of incivility and to the lack of accountability of discussion participants (Hill and Hughes 1997; Santana 2014). However, the presence of uncivil discourse, as well as of trolls – users who purposefully intend to obstruct discussion and upset others – in computer-mediated interpersonal interaction is as old as the use of the internet for communication through email and bulletin-board systems (BBSs), even before commercial use (Mabry 1997; Phillips 2016). Incivility can be found in nearly any venue where people discuss politics online, with some of the most heavily researched sites being online forums and the comments section of news websites (Papacharissi 2004; Rowe 2015; Santana 2014). Regardless of how incivility may be conceptualized, researchers have consistently found these behaviors online – on news sites (Coe, Kenski, and Rains 2014), Usenet discussion groups (Papacharissi 2004), and social media such as Facebook (Rowe 2015).

Moreover, incivility online have notable effects. For instance, uncivil comments may increase risk perception and polarization around nanotechnology (Anderson et al. 2014), though these effects are mediated by prior issue knowledge and religious beliefs. Incivility in blog posts can motivate readers to participate in the comments section when controversial topics are framed in ways that affect personal values, but it may also increase polarization (Borah 2014). As well, exposure to uncivil comments may trigger greater incivility in polarized political issues (Gervais 2014). However, this incivility tends to be perceived as acceptable when it aligns with their views. Uncivil comments are also perceived as less persuasive in the context of disagreement about abortion (Chen and Ng 2016). Overall, incivility online may affect people's willingness to participate in discussions, as well how individuals form opinions, process, and interpret information. However, most studies have focused on discussions around specific – and often controversial – topics, which cannot be generalized to most informal political debates. Moreover, researchers do not have a shared understanding of what incivility is and how it should be

characterized. In this context, this chapter aims to contribute to the challenge of understanding incivility online by focusing on how antinormative behaviors target particular individuals or groups.

## **1 Toward a better understanding of antinormative behavior online**

Despite the generalized concerns around incivility and the vigorous body of research dedicated to the topic, the concept is notoriously hard to define (Jamieson et al. 2015). One reason for this challenge is that incivility “lies in the eye of the beholder” (Herbst 2010, p.3), suggesting that the perceptions of what is uncivil may vary as interaction norms are flexible and contextual. For scholars aligned with deliberative theories, civility is the ability to recognize discussion partners as equals, whose opinions are legitimate and worthy of respect even in the context of disagreement (Habermas 1996; Jamieson et al. 2015). To some extent, most definitions share a notion of incivility as lack of respect towards other people and their views. The fuzziness around the concept of incivility and its operationalization poses a challenge for comparing research results (Stryker, Conway, and Danielson 2016).

Yet incivility is a communicative practice – one that may serve a rhetorical purpose in a discussion (Benson 2010; Herbst 2010). In this perspective, incivility is sensitive to flexible norms of interaction and depends on contextual factors – e.g. a commentary that is acceptable among friends might be inappropriate in the workplace. Considering incivility as a communicative practice, rather than a normative violation, means accepting that different types of incivility exist and that they may serve strategic purposes in discourse (*Rossini forthcoming*). Specifically, while incivility can be a rhetorical asset that people choose to evoke to express their opinions, intolerance comprises inherently harmful behaviors that threaten democratic values such as freedom and equality (Gibson 2007; Honneth 1996). While incivility refers to the use of rude remarks, name-calling, personal attacks, pejorative expressions, profanity and vulgarity, intolerance encompasses attacks on individual liberties and rights, demonstrations of intolerance towards race, sex, gender or religion, xenophobia, the use of stereotypes that are harmful or demeaning towards individuals and groups, or incite violence.

Conceptual concerns aside, little attention has focused on identifying individuals or groups that are systematically targeted by these expressions online. As such, little is known about the extent to which these behaviors may represent a toxic discussion environment. I argue that it is fundamental to understand the differences between uncivil discourse used as a rhetorical asset

to justify and explain positions – albeit with antinormative intensity – and to offend others. Thus this study focuses on understanding how expressions of incivility or intolerance are used to target individuals and groups in online political talk – the conditions in which they are used to attack other participants in a discussion. The goal is to disentangle situations in which incivility might have rhetorical purposes in a discussion from when it is used to attack others, and the conditions in which particular groups and individuals are targeted by intolerant discourse – a more problematic behavior that is potentially damaging for democracy.

While online discussions might often be uncivil, one cannot infer that participants are actively offending one another simply because they use uncivil rhetoric, particularly in the context of online comments on news websites or social media. Online comments are inherently public and are meant to be seen by others, which is not to say that their purpose is to invite discussion nor to engage in back-and-forth conversations (Reagle Jr 2016). Thus, the fact that comments might be uncivil does not necessarily mean that people are being uncivil *towards others*. When faced with challenging perspectives or interpersonal disagreement (Stromer-Galley, Bryant, and Bimber 2015; Mutz 2006), citizens may adopt a more heated tone and express their opinions in uncivil ways – which does not necessarily mean they are offending each other (Rossini *forthcoming*). Incivility can also be used to call attention to an opinion, and has the effect of improving recall of arguments in a political discussion (Mutz 2016).

As well, the perception of a homogeneous opinion climate might incentivize people to express their opinions with a more uncivil tone when they believe others will share their perspectives (Gervais 2014), and to target those who do not share their views– which may foster a sense of community and belonging in polarized contexts (Sobieraj & Berry 2011). However, more homogeneous discussion environments may also invite intolerance – as those who are targeted by this type of discourse are often not a part of the conversation (Wojcieszak 2011; Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009). Moreover, the perception of a homogeneous opinion environment might also silence more diverse voices – a phenomena referred to as the spiral of silence (Gearhart and Zhang 2014; Matthes, Rios Morrison, and Schemer 2010). Social media users are more likely to self-censor and refrain from commenting on Facebook posts when they perceive the environment as hostile. Discussion hostility does not prevent participants from reading the comments, but the perception that their opinions may not be welcome increases the likelihood of self-censorship (Gearhart and Zhang 2014).

Research suggests that target, or focus, of uncivil discourse invites different interpretations. For instance, the public is more likely to classify a message as uncivil when it is focused on personal attacks, and less so when the focus is a political argument or policy (Muddiman, 2017). Name-calling and vulgarity are perceived as highly uncivil behaviors, while other types of incivility – such as pejorative speech or aspersions – are not (Kenski et al. 2017). Similarly, behaviors that call out personal conduct or personal character are significantly more likely to be perceived as uncivil than those related to political disagreement – e.g. attacking or disqualifying others’ arguments. Expressions of intolerance, however, are consistently perceived as extremely uncivil, suggesting that expressions such as racism, xenophobia, or threats of physical harm, are not seen as acceptable behaviors (Stryker, Conway, and Danielson 2016). The target of incivility therefore is an important factor when evaluating different types of antinormative behavior. Nevertheless, few studies on incivility online have examined the extent to which it targets particular people or groups – for example, if it occurs in direct responses when two or more people are in interaction with each other or targeted at others who are not taking part in the conversation. As a result, the perspective that incivility is necessarily bad, or harmful, appears to be based upon the premise that it occurs as a part of the debate with intention to offend, or, at least, disrupt the conversation.

While a few studies have considered targets of incivility, they have mainly focused in the binary between interpersonal and out-group incivility (Maia and Rezende 2016; Rowe 2015). This approach combines different potential targets and is not ideal for understanding the rhetorical functions of incivility in online discourse. Likewise, understanding the targets of intolerant discourse is crucial to diagnose the situations and conditions that may foster democratically harmful remarks. For instance, intolerant discourse targeted at other participants in a forum may have the purpose of silencing or disqualifying them, or their arguments, thus denying others of the right to be heard and treated as equals. Conversely, intolerant discourse targeted at those who are not a part of the conversation might suggest that participants feel that their opinions will be shared by others, and may contribute to further marginalize the targeted groups (Wojcieszak 2011).

Considering that interpersonal incivility online is associated with heated political discussion, in which participants hold diverging views (Stromer-Galley et al. 2015), and intolerant remarks are more likely to be voiced in more homogeneous environments, I hypothesize:

H1) Uncivil comments are more likely to target discussion actors, and intolerant comments are more likely to target nondiscussion actors.

The pervasiveness of incivility online is often associated with inherent features of computer-mediated communication, which lacks the social and nonverbal cues available in face-to-face interactions. In the absence of such cues, users may feel disconnected from their real identities and are prone to express their opinions harshly without worrying about the consequences of their actions— a phenomenon labeled the “online disinhibition effect” (Suler 2004). Online incivility also is associated with platform affordances such as the ability of participating anonymously in a discussion, and the ease to enter and leave discussions (Santana 2014; Papacharissi 2004). Studies comparing anonymous and identified discussions in different online platforms show that identification may reduce the presence of uncivil behavior, as users tend to "save face" when using real names (Maia and Rezende 2016; Rowe 2015; Stromer-Galley and Wichowski 2011). Conversely, studies focused on online deliberation have found that discussions in which participants have profiles or use real names tend to foster sincerity, rationality and quality of justification (Friess and Eilders 2015). Consistent with online disinhibition (Suler, 2004), the use of personal profiles, the maintenance of preexisting relationship ties, and the visibility of users’ actions on social networking sites such as Facebook should act as a social constraint that could prevent participants to be uncivil toward others in the network. Thus:

*H2) Users will be less likely to target other participants to the discussion on Facebook when compared to news websites.*

Intolerance can be manifested in different ways, such as inciting violence, using offensive stereotyping, and denying others of their freedoms or liberties; the latter can be practically translated into intolerance towards religion, individual preferences or opinions, race, gender, sexual orientation, or social status. Thus, the nature of intolerant discourse as a rhetorical act that denies equal status to people or groups due to personal characteristics and beliefs suggests that

minorities (political, social, racial etc) are particularly likely to be targeted by this type of discourse.

*H3) Comments targeted at minorities are more likely to be intolerant than uncivil.*

## **2 Internet Use and Political Context in Brazil**

With over 207 million inhabitants, Brazil is the fifth most populous country in the world, with 68% having internet access at home — a figure that stands at 83% in urban regions (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics [IBGE] 2016). Mobile internet use is nearly universal, reaching 93% of the population. Brazilians are particularly active internet users and accounted for over 102 million Facebook accounts in 2016 (Facebook 2016). The internet is increasingly becoming a major source of news in Brazil, with roughly 49% of the population using the internet main sources of information (IBGE 2016).

Brazil is a presidential democracy with a multiparty system. The data for this study were collected in 2015, following the popular uprisings of 2013 and 2014 and the close election of Dilma Rousseff in the 2014 presidential elections. The narrow margin in the election revealed a divided country, and 2015 was marked by several public protests against the president, who was ultimately impeached in 2016. These protests, along with corruption scandals and the “Car Wash” Operation, an investigation that shed light into several illegal schemes between politicians from both sides of the spectrum and powerful businessmen, further shone the spotlight on the political sphere. Following the 2014 elections, much of the public debate around politics was polarized, but not just along partisan lines: The public generally perceived politicians as corrupt and untrustworthy. Considering the heated political context in Brazil, it is worth examining the extent to which politicians were targeted by online comments characterized by antinormative intensity. In other words, how much of the popular mistrust and dissatisfaction toward the political sphere translated into uncivil and intolerant expressions online? And in which conditions are politicians likely to be targeted by commenters? To explore these issues, I ask:

*RQ.1) In which conditions are comments more likely to target politicians with antinormative discourse?*

Although intolerant discourse is more readily recognized when targeted at minorities or when taking the form of hate speech, the concept also encompasses threats to democratic norms and values – for instance, inciting violence, or government overthrown by force (Papacharissi, 2004). Thus, while incivility towards politicians might be seen as acceptable online, and can be compatible with democratically relevant political talk insofar as it suggests that citizens are monitoring and criticizing their elected representatives (Zaller 2003), intolerance toward the political sphere is inherently harmful as it dismisses the basic values and norms that are the foundation of democratic societies (Gibson 2007). Thus:

*RQ.2) When citizens target politicians in their comments, are they more likely to be uncivil or intolerant?*

Finally, if citizens are indeed monitoring the political sphere when they target politicians in antinormative comments, these messages would likely display some level of explanation or elaboration of ideas and perspectives. As well, it is relevant to investigate the extent to which comments targeted at the political sphere signal disagreement, which would indicate a more heterogeneous discussion environment. Thus:

*RQ.3) What is the relationship between targeting politicians and justified opinion expression?*

*RQ.4) What is the relationship between targeting politicians and disagreement?*

### **3 Methods**

This study focuses on public comments on news stories published by the Facebook page of Portal UOL, Brazil's largest online news portal, and compares comments in news stories posted on the portal's Facebook page to those in their original sources. In addition to its own newsroom, UOL hosts several prominent media outlets, such as Folha de São Paulo (the main national newspaper), regional newspapers, entertainment websites and opinion blogs written by journalists and analysts, which grants a variety of topics, stories, and perspectives in the sample. To compare stories shared on Facebook with news sources source, I followed links to each news outlet shared by Portal UOL – including *hard* news, entertainment news outlets, and political

blogs<sup>1</sup> – and scraped all public comments in these outlets using a custom-made Python script<sup>2</sup>. Facebook comments were collected using Facepager, an open-source software designed for academic use (Junger and Keyling [2012] 2018). While it is not possible to make inferences about the demographics of users in either of these sites<sup>3</sup>, this approach aimed at keeping the topics of discussion constant among platforms.

DiscoverText was used to collect stories posted by Portal UOL's Facebook page over the course of six months. Then the pool of collected stories was sampled using the constructed week sampling technique, which ensures the variability of news on weekdays is properly represented in the sample (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005). I sampled two constructed weeks to represent six months of the online news cycle (Connolly-Ahern, Ahern, and Bortree 2009). The initial sample contained 1,669 news stories posted by Portal UOL on Facebook over the course of two constructed weeks. Then, all posts from Portal UOL on Facebook were coded as either political or non-political news<sup>4</sup>, leading to a smaller sample of 229 stories. Lastly, stories without comments or with only one comment, as well as duplicated posts, were removed, leading to a total of 157 news stories. These stories were categorized in the following subtopics: formal politics, public policy (education, security, violence), celebrities (e.g., stories about celebrities engaged in political activities, or victims of discrimination), civil society, minorities, international affairs.

The final sample of 157 stories led to a universe of 55,053 comments on Facebook and on news sites, with Facebook comments accounting for around 70% of this total ( $n = 38,594$ ). Given the large number of comments, a random stratified sample of comments<sup>5</sup> was created to account for the proportion between Facebook (70%) and comments on source (30%), and number of comments on each thread (e.g. threads with 1000, 100 or 10 comments were proportionally represented). Instead of pulling random messages, consecutive messages were

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<sup>1</sup> These blogs are "opinion blogs" written by journalists and have similar moderation practices as the news websites. As such, those were aggregated with other news sources.

<sup>2</sup> The Python script to collect comments from Folha de São Paulo and UOL was written by Evandro L.T.P. Cunha, a doctoral student in the department of Computer Sciences at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. The script was further adapted by the author to collect comments from other news websites in the sample.

<sup>3</sup> The author contacted UOL and Folha de São Paulo to obtain demographics, but the data were not made available.

<sup>4</sup> The initial sample of posts was identified as political or nonpolitical, adopting a broad conception of political news that encompasses not only formal political affairs, but also topics such as education, security, violence, social programs, minorities, activism etc.

<sup>5</sup> Confidence interval: 99%; Margin of error: 1%.

sampled to enable the observation of threads, using a random number as a starting point. The final sample for analysis had a total of 12,337 comments.

### *Content Analysis*

This study employs systematic content analysis (Neuendorf 2002) to classify public comments, with the codebook (available upon request) operating on two units of analysis: users and messages. Users were coded as identified or anonymous based on their names or aliases – that is, users were coded as identified if their *screen name* conveyed an identifiable name. Messages were coded to identify several discourse features, such as disagreement, opinion expression, incivility, and intolerance.

Messages were coded as disagreement when they: (1) diverged from the general tone of the discussion (considering the previous message in a thread as the baseline)<sup>6</sup>; or (2) explicitly diverged from another commenter in form of either name tagging or reply. Opinion expression was coded in two subcategories: opinions, which included any comment or remark that revealed a commenter's take on a topic; and justified opinion expression, coded when the commenter elaborated on an explanation to substantiate an opinion. This category aimed at identifying whether people made an effort of justifying or explaining their positions, without taking into account the quality of the argumentation.

Messages coded as uncivil were further classified in subcategories, which includes different types of incivility (mockery, disdain, pejorative language, profanity, personal attacks focused on demeaning characteristics, personality, ideas, or arguments). Intolerant messages are those that convey a harmful intent towards people or groups. Messages identified as intolerant 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 were also coded with respect to their targets – other users, political actors, people or groups featured on the news, the media (including journalists), political minorities, and others – a category used for less frequent targets. Uncivil or intolerant messages could also be unfocused, when coders were unable to identify a clear target. Targets were mutually exclusive.

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<sup>6</sup> Because sequences of messages were analyzed instead of random comments in each news story, coders considered as disagreement when a comment explicitly disagreed with the previous messages. For example, if two comments are criticizing a given political party and another commenter follows up defending the political party, this message is coded as disagreement.

Content analysis was conducted by two independent coders, who performed an inter-coder agreement test using approximately 5% (n = 636) of the sample after several rounds of codebook discussion, refinement, and testing. Intercoder reliability was measured using Krippendorff's *alpha*, and all categories were considered reliable (above .7). In spite of the challenges in identifying uncivil and intolerant discourse, these variables were highly reliable. For incivility, coders 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. *Alphas* for disagreement were of 0.89 and 0.82 for news sources and Facebook, respectively.

#### 4 Results

The descriptive results of the content analysis show that uncivil discourse occurs frequently in online political talk: 37.8% of all 12,337 messages were coded as uncivil. Intolerance, however, was identified in only 7.8% of the sample. According to Table 1, politicians are the main target of uncivil discourse in online comments, but there are meaningful differences between the two platforms ( $X^2(7) = 270.34, p < 0.001$ ). However, while the second main target of incivility on Facebook is the topic (or actors) mentioned in the news, the second main target of uncivil comments on news websites are other users.

Table 1. Distribution of Targets per Platform (%)

	Incivility		Intolerance	
	Facebook page	News	Facebook page	News
Unfocused	0.6	0.4	0.6	3.7
Other users	12.0	16.4	0.5	11.1
News topic and actors	25.6	7.5	39.6	31.5
Political Sphere	48.5	62.4	10.5	23.5
Minorities	4.2	1.3	40.7	16.0
Journalist/news media	5.4	7.0	0.2	0.6
Others	3.7	5.0	0.7	8.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Where targets of intolerance were concerned, a relationship between platform and target emerged ( $X^2(7) = 106.19, p < 0.01$ ). Intolerant comments on the Facebook page were mostly targeted at minorities – such as LGBTQ, women, and the poor–, followed by the topic and actors

mentioned in the news (e.g., incarcerated people, teenagers involved in criminal activities<sup>7</sup>). and politicians, parties and institutions. In the news sources, the main targets were the same, but ranked differently. The topics and actors mentioned in the news pieces were the main focus of intolerant discourse, while the political sphere came in second place and minorities in third. While intolerant discourse is seldom directed at other participants to the discussion on Facebook (0.5%), this target is substantially more frequent on news websites.

The frequencies of targets of incivility and intolerance suggest that these behaviors tend to focus on different targets and are also sensitive to the platforms where discussions take place. To further understand how these behaviors are manifested online, I ran three logistic regression models using the targets of interest as the dependent variables: other people in the forum, politicians, and minorities (Table 2). Because the category for targets was only coded when a message was classified as either uncivil or intolerant, the models are based on the subset of the data that was coded as either uncivil or intolerant (N = 5,135). In other words, because targets are not coded when a message is civil and/or tolerant, these were discarded for the analysis<sup>8</sup>. The models tested a set of discursive predictors, such as justified opinion expression, disagreement, and direct replies, as well as the platform where the comment was published (Facebook = 1). The topics of the news story were included in the models as control variables. As the subset of comments only contains messages that were either uncivil or intolerant, the variable uncivil in the model was dummy-coded (intolerant = 0, uncivil = 1).

Table 2. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Targets of Incivility and Intolerance

	Targets of Uncivil and Intolerant Discourse								
	Participants to discussion			Politicians			Minorities		
	B	Wald	Exp (B)	B	Wald	Exp (B)	B	Wald	Exp (B)
(Intercept)	-6.071***	-8.91	0.002	-3.607***	-13.89	0.027	-4.397***	-4.29	0.012
Justified Opinion	-0.459***	-3.44	0.631	0.181*	2.20	1.198	0.026	0.17	1.026
Uncivil (Intolerant = 0)	3.134***	5.0	22.959	2.186***	11.63	8.899	-3.356***	-16.08	0.034
Facebook	-0.155	-1.12	0.856	0.167*	1.89	1.181	0.122	0.55	1.129
Reply	1.917***	12.60	6.800	-0.536***	-4.27	0.585	0.029	0.11	1.029

<sup>7</sup> In 2015, the Congress was discussing a bill of law that would reduce the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Brazil from 18 to 16 years old. As a result, several news stories in the period referred to the bill of law, especially when teenagers were involved in criminal activities. To confirm the robustness of the findings, models were also tested with the full dataset containing messages that were neither uncivil nor intolerant. The results remained unchanged.

Disagreement	2.786***	18.27	16.21	-1.886***	-13.06	0.151	-0.150	-0.54	0.861
<b>Story Topic</b>									
Political News	-0.522	-1.86	0.593	2.830***	15.38	16.951	2.459**	2.37	11.692
Minorities	-0.358	-1.21	0.699	0.002	0.00	1.001	6.182***	6.04	484.005
Public Policy	-1.098***	-2.84	0.333	0.603**	2.84	1.827	0.818	0.74	2.267
Celebrities	0.617	1.29	1.853	0.194	0.51	1.214	5.781***	5.34	324.127
Nagelkerke PR <sup>2</sup>	0.574			0.485			0.488		

Note : \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The first hypothesis focused on the extent to which uncivil and intolerant comments are targeted at other participants in a discussion, predicting that this would likely be associated with incivility rather than intolerance. The results support H1, with messages targeting others in a discussion being significantly more likely to be uncivil than intolerant. As well, when messages target others, they are less likely to be justified, and comments are more likely to address others in uncivil or intolerant remarks in the context of disagreement and when replying to others.

Focusing on platform affordances, H2 predicted that the public nature of Facebook, where participants use their real identities and are visible in their networks, would constrain expressions of incivility. The hypothesis was not confirmed: Platform was not a significant predictor of uncivil and intolerant comments addressed toward other participants to the discussion on news website.

H3 predicted that intolerant comments would be more likely to target minorities than uncivil ones, given that intolerant discourse is characterized by denying others of egalitarian status and respect. The hypothesis is supported: When comments target minorities, they are significantly more likely to be intolerant than uncivil, as indicated by the negative betas. Not surprisingly, minorities are more likely to be targeted by intolerant comments when they are also the topic of the news story and in politically relevant stories about celebrities who have protected status (e.g., being victims of racism or homophobia). However, the positive association between comments targeting minorities and stories covering formal politics is not trivial and suggests that part of the discussions around *hard* news might be focused on the relationship between politicians and minorities.

The final set of research questions inquired about the extent to which politicians were targeted by uncivil or intolerant discourse. With regard to the topics of the news story, politicians were more frequently targeted by antinormative discourse in comments to stories about the

political sphere and policy-related topics (e.g. education, security, urban violence) (RQ1). Second, regarding the nature of antinormative discourse, comments targeted at politicians were significantly more likely to be uncivil than to display intolerance (RQ2). Third, consistent with the expectation that discussing politics is a proxy for monitoring the political sphere, uncivil and intolerant comments targeted at politicians were significantly more likely to contain justified opinions than those directed at other targets (RQ3). Finally, comments targeted at politicians were significantly less likely to display disagreement (RQ4) and to be a direct reply to other participants to the discussion, suggesting that these might be more associated to reactions to the news story than to genuine political debates in which participants address one another.

## 5 Discussion

This study sought to better understand how antinormative discourse is expressed online by examining the targets of uncivil and intolerant discourse, starting from a conceptual distinction between incivility (e.g. name-calling, pejorative speech, vulgarity, and aspersions), which may be acceptable in some online contexts, and intolerance (e.g. racism, sexism, and xenophobia), which threatens basic democratic values such as equality, plurality and freedom of expression and therefore undermine the benefits of political talk (Rossini *forthcoming*). Identifying the extent to which certain people and groups are targeted by these behaviors is crucial to better understanding the conditions in which online discussions threaten democratic norms, offend individuals, or are simply characterized by heated opinion expression.

Prior research has identified *ad hominem* attacks as a frequent type of incivility online, suggesting that political discussions on news websites or social media might be toxic to its participants (Coe et al. 2014, Maia and Rezende 2016). Looking at specific targets of uncivil and intolerant discourse, this study finds that groups that are not participants to the discussions (such as politicians and minorities) are more likely to be targeted by both uncivil or intolerant discourse online. Nevertheless, it is important to unveil the dynamics at play when antinormative messages target participants within the discussion, as these might reflect discussions that are toxic to its participants. As hypothesized, interpersonal comments are significantly more likely to be uncivil than intolerant, which can be explained by research suggesting that extreme discourse (which may be intolerant) is more likely to circulate in echo chambers – that is, contexts in which participants feel that others will share their perspectives – and as such are more likely to target people or groups on the “other side” (Wojcieszak 2011; Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009).

As comments targeted at others are less likely to be justified and more likely to happen in the context of disagreement, it can be inferred that interpersonal incivility might be aimed at simply offending others, and not as a rhetorical device used to explain one's positions in the face of disagreement (Herbst 2010). Thus, those who adopt uncivil rhetoric targeted at other discussants might not be interested in engaging in debates with the other side and instead are attempting to dismiss opposing voices by attacking them. Note, however, that this does not mean that these conversations are inherently offensive or toxic. As research on perceptions of incivility suggests, people generally perceive as acceptable when participants in a discussion are attacking others on the grounds of their positions and arguments (Kenski, Coe, and Rains 2017; Muddiman 2017). Even when other discussants are targeted by antinormative discourse, it is possible that they do not perceive these behaviors as personally offensive if the messages signal political disagreement. As well, if those who are more frequently engaged in political discussions online tend to be more uncivil (Hmielowski et al. 2014), continued participation in these debates might influence participants' perception of this behavior as being acceptable.

Still in the realm of interpersonal incivility, the results challenged the hypothesis that the public nature of Facebook, where users are identified by their real names and pictures, would act as a constraint to antinormative behaviors (Suler 2004). Contrary to the hypothesis that social constraints would prevent participants from being uncivil toward others in a platform where these behaviors are visible to others in the network, as compared to the more anonymous environment of news websites, platform was not a significant predictor of interpersonal targets. This result challenges prior findings that show anonymity as one of the main predictors of online incivility; therefore, identification alone may be insufficient to prevent participants from being uncivil toward others in a discussion (Papacharissi 2004; Rowe 2015). A possible explanation is that Facebook users may be interacting with others outside of their own networks when commenting news stories, and therefore might not feel as constrained by their social ties to adopt uncivil rhetoric towards other discussants. In other words, while prior research on face-to-face political talk suggests that people refrain from engaging in disagreeable debates with those in their social circles (Mutz 2006), social media users might feel less constrained to engage in heated disagreement if they do not feel the pressure of social sanctions when commenting on news pages. Even though news commenters might imagine their friends and families to be the audiences of their comments (Kim, Lewis, & Watson 2018), they can also engage in

disagreeable debates with unknown others when commenting on news stories, which would explain the likelihood of experiencing and expressing interpersonal incivility in these situations.

When looking at targets outside of the discussion, this study finds that intolerant comments are significantly more likely to be targeted at minorities, which might also contribute to silence their voices in these discussions (Matthes, Rios Morrison, and Schemer 2010). Notably, when minorities are targeted by antinormative discourse, these expressions are not associated with replies nor with disagreement, suggesting that these comments might be more reactive to the news stories than genuine discussions (Reagle Jr. 2016). Nonetheless, if minorities are more often targeted by intolerant discourse than by incivility, these messages can profoundly threaten democratic pluralism and equality, particularly when these comments are not challenged by disagreement. Taken together, these findings show that intolerant comments more likely to emerge in relatively homogeneous discussion threads, and that participants are more focused in attacking their targets than in engaging in conversations, as signaled by the reduced likelihood of replies.

Finally, this study points to the political sphere as the main target of uncivil comments online. This result is not surprising given how the political sphere in Brazil has been facing increasingly polarized criticism and a loss of credibility under repeated charges of corruption. Consistent with research examining engagement with politicians on Twitter in the U.K., Greece, Germany, and Spain (Theocharis et al. 2016), the public might perceive that incivility is acceptable when talking about politics on social media. Contrary to interpersonal uncivil messages, comments targeted at the political sphere are likely to contain justified opinions, indicating that, despite of their heated rhetoric, those making uncivil comments towards politicians are likely to back their own claims instead of merely attacking. As such, those who target politicians with antinormative intensity online might be exercising their roles as monitorial citizens (Zaller 2003), publicly criticizing the political sphere. In this situation, incivility might be used as a rhetorical asset to call attention to one's opinions and to signal dissatisfaction and outrage (Mutz 2016; Sobieraj & Berry 2011).

While this study contributes to our understanding of online incivility by expanding current research beyond the U.S. context, its findings cannot be extrapolated to other countries. Future research needs to focus on comparing online incivility and intolerance across different countries. As well, some of the dynamics observed in how particular groups and individuals are targeted by antinormative discourse might be related to the political climate in the country.

Finally, the coding scheme used in this study focused only on textual elements, not considering images, *gifs*, or emoticons, which are frequently used on social media. More research is needed to understand the role of visual forms of communication in online political talk, more broadly, and in uncivil or intolerant discourse.

This chapter makes an important contribution to the understanding of how antinormative discourse is expressed online by focusing on the targets of uncivil or intolerant discourse and provides a better understanding of situations in which it should raise concerns with regards to its democratic values – namely, those in which intolerant discourse may emerge. When intolerant discourse targets minorities, for instance, it contributes to marginalize and exclude these groups from public discussion. If intolerant discourse is targeted at individuals in a discussion, it may signal a toxic environment for democratically relevant political talk, while intolerance targeted at political actors may suggest a threat to democratic institutions and procedures. These are problematic behaviors that need to be distinguished from uncivil opinion expression, or mild interpersonal attacks, in online political talk.

Future research needs to further examine the conditions in which intolerant discourse emerges online, and how it may affect its targets – both directly and indirect. As well, future research needs to more actively consider the affordances of digital platforms – e.g. mentions, replies – to examine the extent to which uncivil discourse online signals a toxic conversational environment to its participants, or if the heated rhetoric around political issues that circulates online is an indicator that participants to these discussions perceive these behaviors as acceptable, particularly when they are not directly engaging with other peers.

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