

A LOOK AT REGIONAL DIFFERENCES
IN THE USE OF ONLINE INCIVILITY

By

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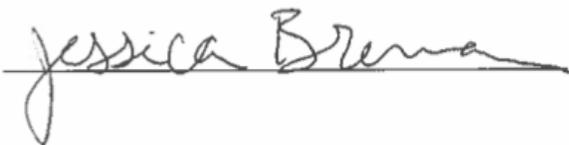
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Coe', written over a horizontal line.

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By: Jessica Morgan Brennan

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Abstract

The Internet has become a popular outlet for citizens to exercise their freedom of speech and engage in political discussion. However, the use of uncivil language online has become an increasingly common practice, in part due to specific characteristics of the Internet, such as increased anonymity. This study seeks to address if regional differences influence the incidence of online incivility in newspaper comment forums. Using a content analysis of a combined 2,604 newspaper comments, this study compares the incidence of incivility between the Arizona Daily Star and the Boston Globe to see if the commenters of one newspaper proved to be more “uncivil.” The study results revealed that incivility occurred significantly more often in the Boston Globe than the Arizona Daily Star. By analyzing the specific regional factors characteristic of each newspaper, it may be possible to gain a better understanding of why such a difference occurred and ultimately why people use such language.

Keywords: incivility • Internet • online news forums • uncivil language • public discourse

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research is to begin to understand some of the patterns that exist in the use of online incivility. By comparing online civility from two different regions of the country, the Southwest and the Northeast, some of these patterns may begin to appear. Using the research method of content analysis, I will be analyzing the use of incivility in the comments on articles from two different online newspapers, the Arizona Daily Star and the Boston Globe. Once the data is gathered, I hope to be able to determine some of the differences in online incivility used by the commenters in either newspaper. This will, in turn, begin to illustrate certain national trends that may emerge regarding the use of uncivil language.

Statement of Relevance

When we think about democracy, freedom of speech is often one of the first things that come to mind. The ability to express our beliefs and attitudes is considered healthy for any democracy and has helped our society advance to where it is today. Throughout history, different media have allowed us to exercise our First Amendment rights, ranging from books, to newspapers, to the radio, and finally the television. All these different technologies have influenced the way we communicate our opinions. Now, as we further advance as a society, an even newer technology has drastically changed the communication landscape, and this is the Internet.

Like any new medium, the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet have been subject to debate. Some researchers have argued that the Internet will “pave the road for a democratic utopia” (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 259) ultimately reviving the public sphere. The Internet does indeed offer many new platforms for political discussion, but this might not always work in favor of a healthy democracy. The Internet also provides outlets for people to engage in angry, hostile, or sarcastic conversation often attacking the beliefs and opinions of others. By recognizing and

analyzing such incivility in online discussions, important inferences can be made about the state of online discourse, and civility in our society as a whole. The reason that analyzing online incivility is so important is not that a few harsh words exchanged may be offensive to someone. Instead, the importance lies in the possible escalation of online incivility. For example, could fraud, stalking, abuse leading to suicide, or acts of political violence be extreme versions of incivility? (Herbst, 2010, p.132).

The distinct regional differences that exist between the Southwest and the Northeast should also be kept in mind for this research. Certain characteristics of these regions and the two newspapers may help us to better understand any patterns that emerge in regards to the use of online incivility. For example, the Boston Globe circulates to a much larger audience whose political perspectives can be categorized as more liberal. To access the newspaper online, it requires a 99-cent monthly subscription. On the contrary, the Arizona Daily Star has a smaller circulation, a more conservative audience, and allows it's online users free access to content. By analyzing the papers from both regions and comparing the results, I can begin to generalize if one region seems more "civil" than the other, or if regional differences do not affect civility at all. Then, by comparing my findings on civility to general regional differences I can discover if there are any correlations between certain characteristics of each region and how they measured on civility. Regional difference and civility in general have played a major role in politics, so my results may be pertinent to the upcoming 2012 presidential election as candidates campaign to different parts of the country.

Literature Review

I. Introduction

The freedom to express one's opinion is a right that has been enjoyed by Americans throughout the decades, and enmeshed within this democratic right is the concept of civility. Throughout history, freedom of speech has remained one of the key liberties necessary for a democracy to thrive. However, there is no doubt that this right is not enough to drive a democracy without the use of civil discourse when exercising this right. Historically, the concept of civility dates as far back as Ancient Greece and Aristotle's "civil society" (Papacharissi 2004, p. 263). This concept emerged as a response to an increase in diverse groups of interest within Ancient Greece and refers to a way of balancing conflict and consensus while respecting a variety of different viewpoints (Hauser, 1998). Although the philosophical foundation of this concept remained constant, Aristotle's "civil society" evolved as history progressed. During the Enlightenment, it incorporated the "common concerns [that] were expressed in new discursive spaces—newspapers, personal exchanges in coffee houses and salons, political clubs, and the like" (Hauser, 1998, p. 27). Throughout history, the importance of civility in the construction of a functioning democratic society has not been overlooked, which is why for decades, civility has been the subject of the research of many communication scholars. However, these "discursive spaces" have drastically changed since the time of the Enlightenment to include technology such as the radio, the television, and most recently, the Internet. As the newest "discursive space," it is not yet clear how the Internet has influenced the use of civil and uncivil language, which is what my research will begin to address.

As technology advances, the platforms that provide an outlet for public discourse also change. The most recent advance in technology has been the Internet, which has become a primary mechanism for citizens to exercise their right to free speech and engage in political discussion. Certain characteristics of the Internet differentiate it from other types of

communication, such as increased anonymity, interactivity, as well as its ability to unite people across the globe (Papacharissi, 2004). As the Internet has become an increasingly popular medium, more and more researchers have begun to analyze the types of effects the Internet has on communication patterns. Since many aspects of the Internet have yet to be fully analyzed, my research will cover incivility within this medium, specifically within the comments posted on online news forums.

As I previously mentioned, civility has remained a subject tackled by scholars throughout history, while the Internet has increasingly become the subject of current research. Much of the recent research concerning civility, however, has focused on civil and uncivil discourse among political elites (Coe, Kenski, Rains, 2011), and has yet to specifically address civility among everyday citizens. Although a few studies have specifically analyzed the content and implications of comments posted on online news forums (Hlavich & Freivogel, 2011), Papacharissi (2004, p. 269) states, “The question of lack of civility in cyberspace and its effects on egalitarian discourse is rarely tackled by scholars”. Taking this idea one step further, I will specifically analyze online incivility within comments found on online news forums. However, even further differentiating my research from anything done in the past, I will compare the comments from two regionally distinct newspapers, and begin to evaluate the differences between the two. The comments will be from both The Arizona Daily Star as well as The Boston Globe, two newspapers that differ in region, circulation, and generally speaking, political ideology among the newspapers’ readers.

II. Characterizing “Civility”

The exact definition of civility is somewhat elusive. It can be argued that civility exists “in the eye of the beholder”, and that depending on one’s perspective, what is considered to be

civil for some people may not be considered civil to others (Herbst, 2010, p. 3). For some, civility may be as simple as acting polite or well mannered. It could be thought of as saying “please” and “thank you,” holding the door for someone, or simply shaking one’s hand upon first meeting. On the contrary, incivility is often associated with rudeness, vulgarity, and name-calling. However, these common conceptualizations only skim the surface of the definitions of these constructs. Although politeness is indeed a component of civility, the two terms are not synonymous because equating civil discourse with polite discourse would ignore the democratic value of “robust and heated discussion” (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 260). Furthermore, Papacharissi argues, “Adherence to civility merely ensures that the conversation is guided by democratic principles, not just proper manners.” Therefore, as politeness is only etiquette related, civility broadly encompasses a “respect for the collective traditions of democracy” (p. 260).

Civility can also be thought of as a “strategic tool”, especially within the context of political communication. Herbst argues that civility is a tool that is used by politicians intentionally. Political advertising campaigns serves as a perfect example, where some candidates verbally attack their opponents, while others demonstrate the upmost respect for their opponents in an attempt to prove something about their own character. The use of civility and incivility as a strategic tool is without doubt a valid argument, but since my research is not focused on the discourse of political elites, this characterization does not entirely define the construct in the context of my research. It is worth mentioning, however, because for some of the commenters who engage in prolonged arguments with others within the online forum, it is possible that they strategically design their posts to be either civil or uncivil, whatever they decide will benefit their side of the argument the most.

The above conceptualizations of civility are either too broad or too narrow, and do not accurately characterize civility within the context my research. Since my research is focused on the comments posted on online news forums, commenters are both interacting with the content of the news story as well as other commenters in the forum, so the definition of civility must characterize the interactive nature of the term. The definition that best describes the concept of civility in terms of my research describes civility as “constructive engagement” driven by “argument, deliberation, and discourse” (Herbst, p. 19). Since not all commenters respond to one another, but often comment only on the news story itself, “engagement” in this case will refer to interpersonal communication as well as interactive engagement with the news content itself.

Now that civility has been defined, it is important to explain what incivility means in this context as well. Incivility spans beyond simple disagreement. In fact, disagreeing with another person’s perspective and possessing the ability to rationally argue a point and support it with evidence is a key component of functioning democratic discourse (Papacharissi, 2004). Incivility comes in when people take their arguments a step too far, or in some cases, not far enough. Such incivility, often equated with the word “flaming”, can be characterized as attacks that go beyond facts, or in some cases neglect to provide any facts at all, driven by “name-calling, contempt, and derision of the opposition” (Brooks and Geer, 2007, p. 1). Flaming is “one of the most widely recognized phenomena of online interaction” (Lee, 2005, p. 385). Although incivility is often harmless, there does come a point where people begin to question just how harmless uncivil discourse really is. For example, when arguing a point changes to verbally attacking another’s character, the intent may be to cause some sort of psychological harm.

According to Lee (2004, p. 401), when flaming takes the form of a personal attack, these “attacks usually become painful and hurting”. In fact, researcher H. Lee analyzed the incidence of flaming in a Usenet newsgroup, and came across the following comment as a response to a personal attack: “You can’t imagine the ‘real’ pain those words inflict on me. I couldn’t even begin to tell you how angry I can get over this. Rusty razorblades are now the images filling my mind” (p. 401). Obviously, people react to online incivility in many different ways, but clearly people may experience real psychological harm as a result of what is said online. Certain characteristics of the Internet, especially anonymity, are fuel to the fire of such uncivil discourse.

III. The Internet and Online Incivility

The influence of the Internet on democratic discussion and civic engagement is an issue debated among scholars. Some scholars have argued that the Internet “will increase political participation and pave the way for a democratic utopia” (Papacharissi, p. 260). They see it as a way to revive the public sphere and increase public engagement in politics. Others argue that some characteristics of the Internet may undermine its deliberative potential and lead to a “general lack of civility” (Barber, Mattson and Peterson, 1997; Witschge, 2002).

Certain characteristics of the Internet have changed some of the ways in which we communicate, for better or for worse. The features of the Internet that truly differentiate the medium are the “Internet’s unbounded space for interaction and the anonymity of this interaction” (Witschge, 2008, p. 76). In the political context, the interactive nature of the Internet has “opened up new ways of incorporating user generated content within news contexts” (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009, p. 3). Since users can post content anonymously, often times they tend to act less inhibited (Moor, 2007). This allows people to share their opinions online who might not otherwise do so (Witschge, 2002). Anonymity “obliterates real-life identity

boundaries” as well as “enhances free and open communication” (Papacharissi, p. 267).

However, the ability to anonymously post content is also thought to promote hostility online and increase the use of offensive language (Moor, 2007).

To date, the effects of uncivil online discourse on the public’s attitude are not entirely clear. Empirical data supporting whether or not uncivil online discourse has a detrimental effect on the public is limited (Brooks & Geer, 2007). Some scholars have argued that incivility is actually beneficial to democratic conversation. Scholar Connery (1997) posits that the value of discussion is characterized by its unruly nature. However, in everyday life, Phillip and Smith (2004) assert that when confronted with uncivil communication, people tend to react with anger. Similarly, in a study conducted by King (2001), Internet users, including heavy and long-term users, experienced negative affective responses associated with online incivility, particularly flaming. In the context of online news forum comments, some people actually experienced psychological harm from speculative and uncivil reader comments (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011). A further analysis of instances of online incivility is necessary as its affects are still a topic of debate. For those exposed to incivility online, negative consequences are indeed a possibility.

IV. Comments on Online News Forums

For many online news sources, a section following the news articles allows for readers to “submit their voice, opinion, perspective, or expertise to content written by professional journalists” (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009, p. 5). This section encourages readers to offer their feedback on the article, and allows for the reader to interact with the content of the article as well as with other commenters. Some sites automatically post the comments without having staff members monitor the content of the comments (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011) while other sites have staff who prescreen comments to make sure they follow some sort of ethical guidelines.

Yet, most reader comments do make it through the prescreening process and usually, only comments that are overtly vulgar or offensive are censored. For some papers, the comments are completely anonymous but for most, commenters go by a pseudonym or nickname, allowing for some sense of anonymity.

The comment section on online news articles may indeed provide a “unique and constructive space for public discourse” (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009, p. 2). The interactive nature and anonymity of the commenters allow for people to express their opinions and engage in discussion who may not otherwise do so. At the same time, being able to express one’s opinion anonymously has its negative consequences. Many of the comments are “insensitive—even downright rude—using speculation and language that news organizations would reject if written by a staff member or in a letter to the editor” (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011). Similarly, commenters may exhibit “inappropriate use of language thereby impeding substantive and constructive discussion” (Manosevitch & Walker, p. 7). Hermida & Thurman (2009) recognize that commenters may be so uninformed and inaccurate that in some extreme cases, their comments could actually hurt the reputation of the newspaper itself.

The incivility exhibited in these discussion forums can sometimes reach such an extreme that they cause some sort of psychological harm to other readers. For example, Hlavach & Freivogel (2011) examined a comment thread from an article titled “3 bodies found in car on Southwest Side” posted on May 18, 2010. The article discussed a recent triple homicide in which the bodies of two young males were found in the back seat of an abandoned car and a third body found in the trunk. Although few details of the story were released in the article, 78 comments were posted within 39 hours of the story appearing online. Commenters “joked about the size and condition of the car shown in the accompanying photo...debated whether the

killings were the work of ‘gang bangers’ or ‘drug cartels...[and] several seemed entirely unsympathetic of the victims, and even blamed the parenting skills of the victims’ families” (p. 22). The comments became so out of hand that by comment number 64, posts appeared from commenters that identified themselves as the victims’ family members pleading for civility and respect during a time of family tragedy. Unfortunately, this situation is not an isolated incident and cases like this occur in many discussion boards within different online newspapers (Hlavach, 2011).

The above situation is only one of the many in which uncivil discourse has reached a new extreme to the point where no reasonable person could classify it as constructive democratic discussion. It’s cases like these that draw attention to the issue of incivility in the environment of online discussion forums. Unfortunately, we live in a society in which it is not uncommon for incivility to escalate past the realm of discourse and morph into violence, which is indeed cause for alarm. A recent example of incivility reaching this level was the Tucson shootings in January of 2011 that left 6 people dead and 14 wounded. This is only one of the many examples in our society in which incivility has reached a dangerous level. By analyzing incivility within the microcosm of online comments in discussion forums, I plan to begin to identify if regional differences influence the use of online incivility.

V. Regional Differences and Online Incivility

To broaden the scope of my research, I pose a research question that looks at the use of incivility in two different regions. Although specific factors pertaining to the newspaper articles themselves (i.e. section and article content) may influence the use of online incivility, this study seeks to analyze incivility from a regional perspective. Certain characteristics inherent to a specific region and that region’s newspaper are important to keep in mind when studying the use

of incivility. The first newspaper I will analyze is the Arizona Daily Star, which is a Southwest newspaper published 7 days a week in Tucson, Arizona. When the Tucson Citizen stopped circulating in May 2009, the Arizona Daily Star became the only daily newspaper in Tucson (mondotimes.com, 2011). It circulates 89,874 copies (mondotimes.com). The Boston Globe is a Northeast newspaper also published 7 days a week. It is the largest newspaper in Boston and the New England area and it circulates 205,939 copies (mondotimes.com). Since the Boston Globe covers a more densely populated area than the Arizona Daily Star, one could predict that the difference in online readership between the newspapers somewhat reflects that difference in each papers' number of copies. So the first major difference between the two papers is their circulation. A second difference has to do with the ideologies within the states in which the newspapers circulate. According to the Gallup Poll (2011), 39.3% of the citizens of Arizona identify themselves as conservative (about average among all 50 states), while 29.9% of the citizens of Massachusetts identify themselves as conservative (below average among all 50 states). In fact, the city of Boston is considered the 24th most liberal city in the U.S. (Govpro, 2005). Since Tucson was not on the list for most liberal cities in the United States, and the state of Arizona is more conservative than the state of Massachusetts, one can conclude that Tucson and its surrounding area is more conservative than Boston and its surrounding area. Therefore, a second major difference in the newspapers is that the readers of the Arizona Daily Star are more conservative than the readers of the Boston Globe. With the above two differences between the paper in mind, a second research question can be posited in regards to incivility. This study focuses on the question: Are there differences in the use of incivility in online news discussion forums between two regionally different newspapers, the Boston Globe and the Arizona Daily Star?

Methodology

Using content analysis, comments were analyzed from two newspapers, the Arizona Daily Star and the Boston Globe. For both newspapers, comments were taken from a one-week period.

I. Arizona Daily Star

For the Arizona Daily Star, the one-week period spanned from 10/19/11 to 10/25/11. Within this period, 2008 comments were collected and coded. These comments were collected by going to the newspaper's website, www.azstarnet.com and saving all the articles on the main page for each section as PDFs. This means that not every single newspaper article from each section was analyzed, but instead a sample was taken from each section. However, for both newspapers, the sample could be characterized as a near-census of articles for a one-week period. The sections coded included: Local News, Sports, Opinion, State News, Business, Sports, Lifestyles, Nation and World, and Entertainment. The coding of this newspaper was part of a separate research project on incivility, and involved 5 coders analyzing comments for incivility over a 2-month period. After the coding was done, one weeks worth of data was picked at random and later compared to a week's worth of data compiled from the Boston Globe.

II. Boston Globe

The comments collected from the Boston Globe came from the Globe's website www.bostonglobe.com, however this paper required a 99 cent per month subscription to leave comments and view the comments of other subscribers. After paying for the subscription, comments were collected during the one-week period between 03/01/12 and 03/07/12. These dates were selected based on convenience because for the Boston Globe coding, I was the only coder. Although a total of five coders participated in the coding of the Arizona Daily Star comments and I was the only coder coding the comments from the Globe, since all five of us

reached statistical reliability, one could expect similar results had any of the other five researchers been involved in the Boston Globe coding. Also, due to dissimilarities between the two newspapers' websites, the comments were collected differently for the Boston Globe. In this case, the comments from *every* article in every section were coded, allowing for a total of 596 comments. Besides being the most systematic way to collect the data due to the way the Boston Globe website was set up, it also allowed for a more representative sample of comments. The sections coded were similar to those of the ADS and included: Arts, Business, Metro, Nation, Opinion, Politics, Sports, and World. It is also important to note that the data was saved as a PDF file after 6pm EST the day the article published to allow enough time for east coast commenters to publish a comment.

III. Incivility Categories

Seven separate categories were considered when coding for incivility. For both the Arizona Daily Star and the Boston Globe, the same exact incivility categories were looked at. These included:

- **Name Calling:** Insulting language directed at a person or group of people, including derogatory nicknames. Examples: fool, puppet, crook, NObama, moron.
- **Aspersions:** Disparaging or offensive language directed at a policy, plan, idea, or behavior but not specifically at a person or group of people (this is name-calling). Examples: pathetic, repulsive, idiotic.
- **Lying:** Implying that someone or a specific behavior, idea, plan or policy is dishonest. Examples: never speaks the truth, liar, deceitful, doublespeak, dishonest.
- **Vulgarity:** The use of crude and inappropriate language, including curse words in other languages and abbreviated swearwords. Examples: ass, bullshit, faggot, OMFG, pendejo.

- **Pejorative for Speech:** Mean-spirited language referring to how someone speaks or expresses ideas. Examples: whining, complaining, drivel, bitching, ranting.
- **Sarcasm:** Use of sarcastic tone and/or punctuation to emphasize sarcastic tone. Examples: Yeah Okay!, That'll work—NOT, Can you believe this?, In your dreams!
- **Other Incivility:** A “catch-all” category for disrespectful comments that do not have a “yes” code in any of the other 6 categories. Examples: This article is just regular African-American culture on display.

It is worth noting that the five coders were not reliable on two categories, sarcasm and other incivility. However, despite this, these categories can still give us an idea of general trends occurring within the newspapers, especially if the results are statistically significant. When interpreting the results, one must keep in mind that these categories weren't perfect, but we can still take into account whatever results these categories yield. So with this coding scheme, comments were analyzed to generate a comparison of the use of uncivil language between the two newspapers.

IV. Additional Coding Categories

Throughout the coding, other categories were coded outside of these incivility categories. Of these categories, the two that must be mentioned for this research study are duplicate comments and comment removed. If the comment was a duplicate (meaning it was exactly the same as a previous comment and from the same user), it was coded as “yes” for duplicate and the rest of the categories were left blank. If the exact same comments were coded more than once, this could potentially skew the results, so this category was important. For both papers, there are guidelines as to what is appropriate and what is deemed inappropriate to comment. For the Arizona Daily Star, if a comment was taken off the comment board by ADS employees, it would

say, “comment removed”. For the Boston Globe, if the comment was taken down it would say, “user has been blocked”, however both are essentially the same. This category may influence the incidence of vulgarity because if the site has stricter guidelines, overtly vulgar language is more likely to be removed from the site.

Results

After analyzing the comments from the two newspapers, the most evident difference was the number of comments in 7 days worth of comments. For the week of 10/19/11 to 10/25/11 there were 2,008 comments in the Arizona Daily Star. For the Boston Globe, there were 596 comments between the dates of 03/01/11 though 03/07/2011. Table 1 displays the number of comments coded per day in for each of the newspapers:

Table 1: Number of Comments Coded by Date

Arizona Daily Star		Boston Globe	
DATE	NUMBER OF COMMENTS	DATE	NUMBER OF COMMENTS
10/19/11	824	03/01/12	90
10/20/11	287	03/02/12	90
10/21/11	251	03/03/12	89
10/22/11	148	03/04/12	84
10/23/11	110	03/05/12	71
10/24/11	247	03/06/12	85
10/25/11	142	03/07/12	86

This study sought to answer the following question: Are there differences in the use of incivility in online news discussion forums between two regionally distinct newspapers, the Boston Globe and the Arizona Daily Star? Looking at the total incidence of incivility, meaning a “yes” code in any of the seven incivility categories, there is indeed a difference in the use of incivility. In the Boston Globe incivility occurred in the comments 47.5% of the time and only 36.5% of the time in the Arizona Daily Star, $\chi^2(1)=23.28$, $p < .001$. Also, it is important to note, a grand total of 39% of the comments between the two papers contained some form of the seven incivility categories. To further breakdown these results, a list of each incivility category and the corresponding percentage of times there was a “yes” code within each category is provided below:

- **Name-calling:** Boston Globe: 27.2%, Arizona Daily Star: 12.3%, $\chi^2(1)=76.03$, $p < .001$.

This means that Boston Globe commenters used name-calling more than twice as often as those who commented in the Arizona Daily Star. Between the two papers, name-calling occurred 15.8%, the second most frequent form of incivility.

- **Aspersion:** Boston Globe: 5.0%, Arizona Daily Star: 2.0%, $\chi^2(1)=15.69$, $p < .001$.

Although aspersion occurred far less frequently than name-calling with an overall total of 2.7%, the results show that aspersion occurs significantly more in the Boston Globe than in the ADS.

- **Lying:** Boston Globe: 1.5%, Arizona Daily Star: 1%, $\chi^2(1)=.92$, n.s. Lying only occurred a total of 1.1% of the time, and since the incidence is so low the results aren’t significant.

However, this category still follows the trend of the Boston Globe having a higher incidence of “yes” codes than the ADS.

- **Vulgarity:** Boston Globe: 2.0%, Arizona Daily Star: 3.3%, $\chi^2(1)= 2.44$, n.s. Vulgarity also

yielded insignificant results, but it is important to note that it is the first category in which the trend has reversed and the ADS has a higher incidence of this variable. The total incidence of vulgarity across the two papers was 3%.

- **Pejorative:** Boston Globe: 4.2%, Arizona Daily Star: 1.4%, $\chi^2(1) = 17.76$, $p < .001$. Here the results are back to the original trend, with Boston using pejorative for speech three times as often as the Star, a statistically significant result. The overall incidence for this variable between papers was 2.1%.
- **Sarcasm:** Boston Globe: 18.8%, Arizona Daily Star: 15.2%, $\chi^2(1) = 4.27$, $p < .05$. Sarcasm was the category that occurred the most between papers, occurring 16.1% of the time. Again, the Globe has the higher incidence, but not as big of a percentage difference as with name-calling.
- **Other Incivility:** Boston Globe: 1.0%, Arizona Daily Star: 4.9%, $\chi^2(1) = 18.1$, $p < .001$. This is the only other category in which the Arizona Daily Star had more “yes” codes than the Boston Globe, and the results yielded were significant. Overall, other incivility occurred a total of 4% of the time.

Besides the seven incivility categories, one more category deserves attention. This was whether or not the comment was removed by the newspaper website. The Boston Globe had a total of .7% of all comments removed, while the ADS had a total 1.7% of comments removed. These findings will be important when discussing the research findings for the vulgarity category, because comments containing vulgarity often times are removed by the website.

Discussion

Commenters from the Boston Globe used significantly more uncivil language than commenters from the Arizona Daily Star, demonstrating that there are differences in the use of

incivility between the two papers. There was an 11% difference in the use of incivility between the Boston Globe and the ADS, clearly a meaningful difference. In attempting to better understand this major difference, we must revisit the characteristics of each newspaper. The Boston Globe's circulation was far greater than that of the Arizona Daily Star. The Globe's readers can also be characterized as slightly more liberal. Also, the Globe required a paid subscription, while the ADS did not. Lastly, although the Globe's circulation was far greater, there were far less comments in a 1 week period than in the ADS, most likely due to the paid subscription required by the Globe. One reason for the incivility difference could be that due to the Globe's larger circulation, there could have been more diverse viewpoints expressed within the comment forum. With a range of different views, commenters may be more likely to clash with either the article or other commenters. Another possible explanation has to do with the subscription fee and smaller number of comments. It is possible that for the Boston Globe, the same commenters that often utilize uncivil language posted uncivil posts over and over again, which would skew the results in favor of incivility. For the ADS, since there were significantly more comments overall, if a commenter that frequently used uncivil language posted frequently, it wouldn't have made as much of a difference since there were so many other comments. These explanations are based on specific characteristics of the newspapers, but looking at the bigger picture may also be necessary.

The fact that the Northeast and the Southwest are two geographically distinct regions could also shed light on my incivility findings. Globe commenters may have revealed more uncivil speech simply because those commenters may just be more uncivil. It is important that this obvious explanation is not overlooked. The Northeast is often stereotyped as being ruder than other areas of the country (after all, people from Massachusetts are sometimes referred to as

“Mass holes”). One could argue that these results simply support that stereotype. In this sense, regional differences are a contributing factor in that people from the Boston area may be more comfortable using uncivil speech because this kind of language is deemed appropriate in everyday conversation. This may also have to do with the slightly more liberal ideology expressed earlier. On the other hand, if those from Tucson were exposed to slightly more polite speech, they would be likely to use more civil language in their comments. Simply put, where people are raised may influence their choice of language, and this could definitely be a contributing factor to why the Boston commenters were more uncivil.

Lastly, the comment guidelines provided by the newspapers’ website may also help to explain the significant difference in the use of incivility. Pasted below are the rules for posting comments on the Arizona Daily Star’s discussion forums, taken directly from the website:

“Our guidelines prohibit the solicitation of products or services, the impersonation of another site user, threatening or harassing postings and the use of vulgar, abusive, obscene or sexually oriented language, defamatory or illegal material. You may not post content that degrades others on the basis of gender, race, class, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability or other classification. It's fine to criticize ideas, but ad hominem attacks on other site users are prohibited. Users who violate those standards may lose their privileges on azstarnet.com.”

Clearly, these guidelines attempt to cut down on the use of incivility within these comment forums. On the Globe website, the following are the guidelines set by the newspaper:

“Please feel free to add a comment to our forums and articles. The rules are simple:

Keep it clean. No swears or porn.

Be nice. No threats, abuse, or spam.

Be respectful. No hate speech.

Be truthful. Don't pretend to be somebody else.

Debate, but don't attack. Stay away from personal attacks.

No ads. No pushing a product or service, and no asking for money.

Don't steal. Don't post somebody else's stuff, and don't libel anybody.

We can edit. Or delete. Or ban you.”

When comparing the guidelines from the two websites, those imposed by the Arizona Daily Star seem slightly stricter and more concrete than those from the Boston Globe, which seem like broader restrictions. Although it is impossible to know for sure if the ADS actually enforces these regulations more strictly than the Globe, based solely on the wording of the guidelines those from the ADS seem stricter. The ADS scored slightly higher than the Globe on comment removal, (1.7% vs. .7%) which could be attributed the stricter guidelines, meaning that more uncivil comments were removed in the ADS. Another possibility could be that commenters actually read and took into account the guidelines before posting comments, and since those set by the Globe were more open to interpretation, commenters were able to get away with using more uncivil language

Zeroing in on some of the incivility sub-categories, name-calling and sarcasm deserve attention because they were the most frequent types of incivility that occurred. One possible explanation of why these categories occurred so frequently is that these comment forums may be a good representation of everyday conversation. For example, most commenters use some form of slang, most comments are not grammatically correct, and the majority of comments lack formality. These characteristics are also inherent in the speech we use in everyday conversation. By making the assumption that these forums mirror the language we use in everyday speech, it is

also logical to assume that name-calling and sarcasm are some of the most frequent forms of incivility used. So the fact that we use these forms of incivility in everyday conversation frequently may explain the prevalence of these categories within the comment forum. A second possible factor could be that the coders more easily recognized these categories. Since name-calling requires a direct object that is more concrete than aspersion, and sarcasm is often signified with the use of certain punctuation marks these categories are easier to recognize than aspersion, pejorative for speech, and other incivility. A combination of these forms of incivility being used more in everyday talk as well as the fact that they are easier to recognize most likely contributed to their higher frequency within the comment forums.

Other important civility categories to discuss are those in which the trend was reversed and ADS scored higher than the Boston Globe, which in this case were vulgarity and other incivility. Although the results of the vulgarity comparison were not significant, the fact that the overall trend was reversed for this category is still worth noting. Since I've already established that the ADS guidelines may be stricter than those imposed by the Globe, it wouldn't make sense for the Arizona Daily Star's higher vulgarity frequency to be attributed to newspaper guidelines. It is important to keep in mind that uncivil language isn't necessarily vulgar language. This reversed trend could be attributed to Boston Globe commenters using other forms of incivility that are thought of as less severe than vulgar language, while those from the ADS occasionally chose swearwords as a way to make a more powerful statement. The other category in which the trend was reversed was other incivility. Since the initial five coders were unable to reach reliability for this category, a contributing factor for this trend reversal could be that some of the other four coders interpreted this category differently than me, which could potentially skew the results in the opposite direction. Since vulgarity wasn't statistically significant and those coding

other incivility never reached reliability, these categories that show the ADS as being more uncivil may not be as significant as those that follow the trend of greater incivility in the Boston Globe.

An important implication of these findings is that the use of incivility may vary by region, and in regions where incivility is high, there is a possibility that uncivil talk may have begun to mesh with everyday discourse. The fact that people use uncivil language in both everyday conversation and on these online news forums may not necessarily be alarming. However, if people become so familiar with this type of insulting language, they may grow desensitized to it, which is probably already happening. In a society that has become desensitized to insulting discourse, the problem is what will happen next. If people get too comfortable using uncivil talk, the risk of verbal incivility escalating into physical violence becomes a real possibility. My research suggests that if uncivil discourse had any positive correlation with actual acts of violence, some regions may be more at risk than others. However, more research needs to be done to understand if such a correlation exists and exactly when hateful speech is no longer enough, and offensive language turns into violent action.

Although this research provides us with a general idea about which of the newspaper's commenters are more uncivil, there are some limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, since five researchers coded the comments from the Arizona Daily Star, the methodology was not replicated perfectly for the Boston Globe, since I was the only coder. Although we did reach reliability on many of the important categories in the Star, if I coded any of these categories differently from the other coders the results from the Boston Globe would have been slightly different than if more coders had participated. If this research were to be replicated in the future, it will be important to have multiple coders for each newspaper to allow

for the results to achieve a greater degree of objectivity. A second limitation was that all coders did not reach reliability on two categories, sarcasm and other incivility. This means that all five coders did not see these categories completely objectively. For the future, the coding scheme would need to be changed to allow each coder to see the categories the same way. I would recommend combining other incivility and sarcasm into one category, where any comments that use a sarcastic or mocking tone, or any other form of incivility (i.e. racial insult without name-calling) could be categorized. Lastly, since only one week worth of comments were analyzed, and the number of comments were significantly smaller in the Boston Globe, results may have been different had more comments been analyzed from a longer period of time. To get an even more accurate sense of the incivility trends between the two newspapers, future research would need to analyze articles over a few months as opposed to just one week. While keeping in mind the above limitations, my research nevertheless serves as a good starting point for better understanding the incivility differences between two regionally distinct newspapers.

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