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Online political hostility

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Introduction

As an increasing number of people start using the Internet to engage in politics, a paradox becomes apparent: the more numerous the active users discussing politics online (considered propitious for democracy), the higher the incidence of them engaging in misinformation or aggressive behavior. For example, an American study shows that most users find it ‘stressful and frustrating’ to disagree about politics on social media (Anderson & Auxier, 2020). For many, online hostility is no longer the exception but the norm (Antoci et al., 2019), defining the expectations of digital interactions.

This entry provides an overview of the definitions, causes and effects of online hostility. Prototypes of this concept have circulated since the early days of research on the Internet, and as such, online hostility has been addressed by scholars from a wide range of disciplines. Despite, or perhaps because of, its past usages, a challenge remains in delineating the limits of the concept. In this entry, we focus on informal political talk. We exclude from our discussion attack ads, negative campaigning, discriminatory political agendas and the like. Instead, we consider horizontal interactions among ordinary people as they exchange thoughts and opinions about politics on the Web. The realm of our exploration covers social media platforms, as well as online forums, comment fields of online publications, blogs and vlogs.

Origins

Researchers have tried to make sense of the relationship between hostile behavior and expression online and the new digital environment since the late 1990s. One of the debates that still marks the subfield is whether the Internet (or social media specifically) causes an increase in the number and intensity of hostile behavior and expression or whether the digital tools simply make this behavior more observable or traceable. Some arguments invoked in support of the causality thesis are that online forums, chat rooms and social media groups allow for anonymous interactions that remove the pressure of conforming to sociability rules and permit rude, unfriendly or bullying conversations at low social costs (such as reputation loss). For example, most comments posted anonymously on online newspaper comment boards are uncivil compared with comments posted non-anonymously (Coe et al., 2014; Santana, 2014). Later studies, however, question the importance ascribed to anonymity (Rossini, 2020). Another commonly assumed reason is that one perceives online conversations to be more hostile and harmful than in-person conversations: the so-called ‘hostility gap’, which has also been questioned lately (Bor & Petersen, 2019).

Arguments in favor of social structural explanations for the increase in perceived hostility in online content refer to elite discourses and behavior taking a more radical form (Mutz, 2015), thereby acting as cues for the wider public (Gervais, 2017). The use of uncivil language by

political leaders has been shown to lower political trust and increase affective polarization (Skytte, 2021), which are both detrimental to democracy. Another structural argument is related to the growth of partisan (alternative) media. Media that cater to partisan audiences engage in ‘outrage discourses’ (Berry & Sobieraj, 2016), a form of hostile expression, and are rewarded with more visibility and engagement based on social media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2015; Sandberg & Ihlebæk, 2019). Finally, another argument is that social media recommender algorithms expose people to more hostile attacks directed against strangers than would otherwise be noticeable. Social media increase the visibility of hostility – leading to political disengagement for people with non-hostile psychological profiles, who tend to opt out of online debates (Bor & Petersen, 2019).

Studies that compare platforms are lacking (Rossini, 2020; Siegel, 2020), so it is unclear whether some social media channels are more prone to hostility than others. Different media formats (text, audio, video) affect perceptions of incivility differently – which, in turn, may signal differences across social media platforms specialized in certain types of content (Sydnor, 2018). In a rare comparative study, Oz et al. (2018) find that Twitter is, overall, less deliberative and more prone to impolite and uncivil expressions compared to Facebook, in part because of its specific architectures and in part because of its different demographics. In addition, some platforms may be more vulnerable than others to bot attacks and computational propaganda, which might drive online hostility on purpose.

Definitions

Online hostility is a stretched concept that covers any form of aggressive behavior or expression directed at others. In this entry, we focus on communicative hostility, referring to antagonistic expressions, while acknowledging that the Internet is host to several other hostile behaviors, such as hacking and phishing.

Even when considering only its communicative aspects, online hostility remains an umbrella concept that comprises many subcategories, from less severe forms to illegal ones. Concepts associated with online hostility are incivility, intolerance, cyberbullying, hate speech, trolling and flaming. One difficulty when trying to disentangle these various conceptual strains has to do with the lack of precision of their definitions. Online hostility can be detected at the level of the *content* of the expression or in the *intention* of its author or in the *perception* of its target (or of third parties). While there are many valid reasons to consider intentionality and perception, both introduce a high level of subjective evaluation that makes them impractical in empirical studies. Thus, we privilege here a content-focused definition of hostility, with the consequence that we will not discuss *cyberbullying* at any length. Cyberbullying requires an intentional dimension, having been defined as “any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others” (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 278). The same applies to *trolling*, which refers to posting a hostile expression with the intention of poking fun at others and observing their reaction just to irritate and provoke (Phillips, 2015). Eliminating intentionality allows us to proceed by separately discussing several concepts tightly associated with textually defined online hostility.

Historically, *flaming* was the first concept to receive academic attention. Popularized in the 1990s, it described expressions carrying negative affect, curse words and ‘typographic energy’ (that is, exclamation signs and all-caps writing; Lea et al., 1992), or containing outrageous

claims and enraged discussion (Papacharissi, 2004). Flaming is rarely used as a concept in research on online communication today (Jane, 2015).

Incivility is most often conceptualized as a practice that violates social norms. Its features include the use of profane or vulgar language, sarcasm, name-calling, lying or slander (Coe et al., 2014; Mutz, 2015). Incivility has also been conceptualized as an outrage discourse that provokes emotional responses (Berry & Sobieraj, 2016). Furthermore, uncivil political talk is different from negative political talk because it includes disrespect, hyperbole and histrionic presentations (Gervais, 2015). Others have classified incivility as a continuum in which civil language lies at one end and highly uncivil language at the other (Sydnor, 2018). Following such understanding, previous studies have thought of sarcasm as a milder form of incivility that reflects the tone of a message and, for example, considered racial slurs as highly uncivil language (Sydnor, 2018, p. 99). Similarly, Kosmidis and Theocharis (2020) view homophobic, racist and sexist language as more severe expressions of incivility.

Instead of thinking about incivility in normative terms or as a spectrum of ‘more or less’, it can be useful to consider it as serving a strategic purpose in discourse (Herbst, 2010). While incivility may be a rhetorical asset used to evoke or express opinions, civility, by contrast, leads to emotional affirmation – that is, feeling good while interacting with others (Herbst, 2010, p. 10). On social media, it is possible that uncomfortable political interactions produce anxiety, which raises the question of whether humans can be truly open to heated debate. Online political discussions might therefore be perceived as uncivil because they break with people’s habitual notions of being able to express themselves without being contradicted.

Others use *form* and *content* as two factors to further refine the concept. Papacharissi (2004, p. 267) operationalizes incivility “as the set of behaviors that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups”. Incivility is contrasted with impoliteness. A comment is considered impolite if it includes name-calling, pejorative speech and vulgarities (Papacharissi, 2004). Using the same form–content dichotomy, Rossini (2020) inverts the association described in Papacharissi’s (2004) work (adding thus to theoretical confusion) by seeing incivility as connected to how a message is expressed and intolerance as its substance. For Rossini (2019), incivility stands for the use of rude remarks, name-calling, personal attacks, pejorative expressions, profanity and vulgarity. Conversely, intolerance is defined as negative stereotypes that are harmful to or demean individuals and groups based on race, sex, gender or religion. Intolerance can also be expressed as attacks on individual liberties and rights or an incitement to violence that threatens freedom and equality (Rossini, 2019). Whereas incivility in communicative practices is sensitive to flexible norms of interaction and depends on contextual factors (Rossini, 2020), intolerance is more static and easier to capture and measure. The latter often targets minority groups, while incivility expressed as tone or style is found in more general Internet behaviors.

Intolerance can be described as discriminatory or exclusionary speech in the form of racism, sexism and xenophobia, threatening basic democratic values and therefore undermining the positive outcomes of political talk (Rossini, 2019, 2020). As opposed to incivility, intolerance comes with greater risks of silencing or derogating alternative views (Jamieson et al., 2017). Indirect or direct targets of hostility are often a result of strategic targeting, which has direct implications for the democratic process in terms of disengagement or self-exclusion. Hostile expressions that target individuals as members of a group are often referred to as hate speech (Siegel, 2020). Online hate speech is, in this understanding, a manifestation and subtype of intolerance.

Implications

Overall, intolerance, hate speech and hostility are key concerns facing today's online environments as these expressions can have harmful implications for politics and democracy. One fear is that the more uncivil the political environment gets, the fewer citizens trust democratic institutions. Dyzek et al. (2019, p. 1145) therefore argue that the contemporary crisis of democracy is foremost a crisis of communication. In contrast, it can be argued that low-level hostility, such as heated disagreement, is actually positive for the quality of democratic interaction. As Mouffe (2020, p. 104) writes, "A well-functioning democracy calls for a vibrant clash of democratic political positions [...] the refusal of confrontation lead[s] to apathy and disaffection with political participation". Disagreement in Facebook comments made to news outlets' public Facebook pages increases the attention given to the comments (Dutceac Segesten et al., 2020), which may increase the incentive to participate in discussions. Furthermore, it seems uncivil messages online more often target public figures, such as politicians, and are used to justify opinions rather than interpersonal attacks (Rossini, 2021).

Even uncivil discussions can have positive democratic effects, which is why there can be an analytical advantage of distinguishing between an uncivil tone or a style of interaction and intolerant communication (Rossini, 2020). Intolerant expressions often occur in homogeneous discussions about minorities and civil society, or target individuals based on group belonging, which makes these manifestations specifically threatening to liberal democracy (Rossini, 2020). Hate speech and intolerance therefore require extra attention, as the targets are often marginalized or vulnerable groups in society and online expressions might lead to offline discrimination or hate crimes.

Online hostility may indeed have a range of negative effects on levels of trust and polarization (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020), inclusion and participation (Siegel, 2020), or information processing (Gervais, 2015). At the same time, it may have positive effects on political engagement and mobilization (Borah, 2014; Brooks & Geer, 2007; Kosmidis & Theocharis, 2020). As such, online hostility is not, by definition, a problematic feature of online discussions, but distinguishing between more precise forms and degrees of hostility, as well as between hostility directed at marginalized or minority groups and its more justifiable expressions as it relates to political opinions, may be more useful here.

Conclusion and outlook

Probably the communicative online hostility discussed in this entry is here to stay. For one, online hostility is a deliberate strategy pursued by predisposed people (Bor & Petersen, 2019). Moreover, uncivil discussions are seen as more entertaining on social media compared to other media (Sydnor, 2018). In fact, social media has become a place to perform hostility or at least disagree, even on mundane topics (e.g. pineapple on pizza). In this way, hostility has become a part of a 'rhetorical culture' where a hostile yet playful tone of irony and detached laughter is not only tolerated but expected (Andersen, 2021). Thus, future research should aim to provide more accurate conceptual definitions that are adapted specifically to online communication and include more systematic comparisons across platforms.

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