Chapter 24

Interaction of Incivility and News Frames in the Political Blogosphere: Consequences and Psychological Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

The political blogosphere is replete with uncivil discussions and is apt to examine the influence of incivility on news frames. This chapter brings in literature from incivility and framing effects to examine the influence of incivility on news frames for several outcomes such as willingness to participate, online participation, attitude certainty, news credibility, and political trust. The chapter is an extension of the first two studies, which indicate the detrimental effects of incivility causing more attitude certainty and less political trust and open mindedness. At the same time, incivility caused more willingness to participate, online participation, and higher news credibility. However, the initial studies were unable to explain why the detrimental effects of incivility were observed. A third experiment examined the psychological mechanisms involved in these incivility effects.

INTRODUCTION

On a typical day, one could read the newspaper on one’s breakfast table, watch the news on television or get information online. Perhaps, on an average, individuals indulge in all three of the above. While news content in print and television are very specific regarding their presentation style (the newspaper is all text with a few still images, while television consists of visual stories and audio with minimal text), the world of contemporary media is unique from how traditional media offers information. For example, visitors to a website such as the New York Times encounter a mixture of hard news, opinion columns and blogs in text, still images, video and audio together on the same page. On the other hand, in the social media landscape, bloggers regularly repurpose news from the online
news websites, other blogs and different online sources mixed with their own editorial content and commentary. The most common types of links bloggers use are those that link to mainstream news websites (Corfiled, Carson, Kalis & Simon, 2005; Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun & Jeong, 2007). It is common knowledge now that bloggers are “news readers—often very active readers” (Tremayne, 2007, p. 261). And the links that bloggers create often lead directly to the mainstream news sites. Thus, in general bloggers voraciously consume the mainstream news and repurpose them with added information and opinionated commentary.

The blurring of the lines between traditional media and social media seems to be an established fact. Increasingly researchers are being faced with questions about new theoretical perspectives to investigate the contemporary media landscape. News content is no longer read by the audience as selected by the editors of a news organization. Individuals could get their information from online news portals such as Google news. Information can be provided via selected sources dependent on the individual’s personal customization choice (Sundar & Nass, 2001). Now, it is also possible to access a combination of video, audio and text-based news all at once, on one page. Additionally, the online environment facilitates the blurring of distinctions among news genres (Thorson, Vraga & Ekdale, 2010). An objective story from traditional news media could very well be juxtaposed with an opinionated commentary.

The Internet has become one of the common tools for political discourse and scholarly attention has increasingly turned to the role of this new medium in reinvigorating democracy. The anonymity and flexibility of the online world allows the free expression of views and exposure to crosscutting information leading to increased knowledge about public issues and active participation in politics. For example, Stromer-Galley (2002) claims that the absence of non-verbal cues in online discussions leads to a “lowered sense of social presence and heightened sense of anonymity” (p. 35). She further observes that these same characteristics facilitate political conversations online by mitigating perceived social risks, which, in some cases, can discourage face-to-face political talk. However, this same anonymity and unconstrained expression can initiate vicious and acerbic debate thus invalidating the ideals of democracy (Barber, Mattson, & Peterson 1997; Dahlberg, 2001). The political blogosphere is replete with uncivil discussions so much so that some scholars have called for the development of rudimentary guidelines for the type of discussion that can be considered appropriate (O’Reilly, 2007). The political blogosphere then becomes an apt context to examine the influence of incivility on news content.

The author conducted two experimental studies to examine the influence of incivility on news frames for several outcomes such as willingness to participate, online participation, attitude certainty, news credibility and political trust. The present study is an extension of the first two studies, which indicate the detrimental effects of incivility causing more attitude certainty and less political trust. At the same time, incivility caused more willingness to participate, online participation and higher news credibility. However, the initial studies were unable to explain why the detrimental effects of incivility were observed. The third experiment examined the psychological mechanisms involved in these incivility effects.

The Contemporary Media Landscape

Nearly 15 years ago Morris and Ogan (1996) argued for the importance of taking the Internet seriously, “the Internet has become impossible to ignore” (Morris & Ogan, 1996, p. 39). They aptly pointed out that the introduction of any new medium should make us rethink the basic theoretical assumptions in our field. How does the new media environment influence traditional theories in the communication field such as agenda setting, framing, uses and gratifications and gatekeeping, to name a few? McCombs and colleagues