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Democracy in Flux

Order, Dynamics and Voices in Digital Public Spheres

“Can we please stop yelling at each other just because it’s the Internet?”

Comparing incivility perceptions of community managers, users, and activists in online comment sections

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1 INTRODUCTION

The roles of journalists and recipients have changed, especially since the emergence of social networking sites (SNS). The publication of content on SNS and the supervision of the subsequent online discussions have become an integral part of everyday editorial work, and the new journalistic role of community managers has emerged. Online discussions offer promising benefits as they promote deliberation between users and foster participatory journalism (Quandt, 2018; Ruiz et al., 2011). However, there are major concerns about the low quality of these discussions and an increase of uncivil behavior such as insults, vulgarity, discriminatory language and lies (e.g., Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014; Diakopoulos & Naamann, 2011). Consequently, community managers, single users and different activist groups have started to engage in comment sections and counter behavior they perceive as uncivil, sanction users and improve the discussion atmosphere (e.g., Friess, Ziegele & Heinbach, 2020; Kalch & Naab, 2017; Ziegele et al., 2018).

However, the scientific debate over what exactly constitutes incivility is still ongoing: While scholars agree that incivility is a violation of norms, they disagree which norms constitute incivility (e.g., Muddiman, 2017; Stryker, Conway & Silver, 2016). Recent research further suggests that incivility is highly subjective and lies in the eye of the beholder (e.g., Herbst, 2010; Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2017). Such considerations imply a perceptual construct of incivility. Approaching such a construct requires asking the actors involved in online discussions about what they perceive as uncivil. However, only few studies have addressed incivility perceptions of different online actors, namely community managers, users and activists. Studies in this field typically focused on one type of incivility (Chen et al., 2018), or on one group of actors such as activists (Ziegele et al., 2019). Moreover, most of the studies defined a priori types of incivility (e.g., Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2017; Muddiman, 2017) rather than exploratively inquiring what the participants perceive as uncivil. Therefore, we brought together community managers, users, and activists to address the following research question:

What do different actors of public online discussions perceive as uncivil and where do they agree and differ in their perceptions of incivility?

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In recent years, incivility in public online discussions has increasingly gained scholarly attention. However, definitions and operationalizations of incivility vary widely: While scholars largely agree that incivility is a violation of norms, they disagree regarding which norms constitute incivility. The majority of studies conceptualized incivility either as a violation of politeness norms (e.g., Chen & Lu, 2017; Mutz, 2007), deliberative respect norms (e.g., Anderson et al., 2014; Coe et al., 2014), or democratic norms (e.g., Papacharissi, 2004). Additionally, recent studies have approached incivility as a violation of multiple norms and empirical findings suggest that incivility is highly subjectively shaped (e.g., Muddiman, 2017; Stryker et al., 2016). We follow these extended approaches and conceptualize incivility as a perceptual construct that includes violations of multiple norms. More specifically, we build on a new approach of Bormann and colleagues (under review) who developed an integrative framework that incorporates previous incivility concepts. They suggest a multidimensional concept consisting of five injunctive communication norms that participants of online discussions can disapprove of violating. The *information norm* is about the substance (i.e., quality, quantity, relevance) of the information provided in a discussion. The *modality norm* refers to the formal aspect

of communication and asks participants to communicate clearly. The *process norm* refers to the reciprocity of contributions. The *relation norm* asks participants to be respectful and polite with each other. Finally, the *political context norm* refers to liberal democratic norms. According to the authors, violations of one or several of these five norms potentially constitute incivility.

3 METHOD

To answer the research question, we employed a qualitative semi-structured focus group methodology and composed five heterogeneous focus groups with representatives of the three types of actors: (1) Community managers of public, private, regional, and national news media, including broadcasting and print, (2) ordinary users, and (3) members of the largest German activist groups *#Iamhere* and *No Hate Speech Movement*. The sample comprised a total of 25 participants. The focus groups were conducted face-to-face in November 2019 in five different German cities. Two researchers moderated the focus groups and the approximate duration was two hours. The interview guide included open questions and stimuli on perceptions and evaluations of norm violations in public online discussions. The focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed with a thematic qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014).

4 RESULTS

In general, all actors perceived a lack of empathy and humanity in public online discussions and expressed concerns about this development. They reported various violations of all five communication norms, and there appears to be a large common ground which communication acts are perceived and condemned as uncivil: All three types of actors most frequently mentioned violations of the political context norm, followed by violations of the relation norm, the information norm, and the process norm. Overall, violations of the modality norm are mentioned less often. Nevertheless, violations of all five norms are more or less perceived as uncivil. In terms of severity, differences between the norms can be identified: Violations of the context and relation norm tend to be perceived as more severe than other norm violations.

Violations of the political context norm that were frequently reported and perceived as uncivil were hate speech, incitement and discrimination of marginalized groups, attacks against individual and collective liberty rights, and attacks against democratic and constitutional principles. Perceived violations of the relation norm were, among others, insults, swearing, vulgarity, threats, and slurs. Uncivil violations of the information norm were, for example, spreading dis- and misinformation such as lies or conspiracy theories, as well as referring to unreliable sources and dubious or unsubstantiated claims. In addition, users reported specific violations of the information norm caused by community managers: A lack of transparency regarding sanctions, and the deletion of comments containing media-related criticism, which the users perceived as censorship and deception. Regarding the process norm, the most frequently reported violations were topic deviation and ignorance of other participants' contributions. Violations of the modality norm were reported less often and some of them were contentious between different actors, for example, sarcasm or ambiguous communication. Whereas some participants perceived irony and sarcasm as uncivil, others found ironic and sarcastic comments in public online discussions to be entertaining.

The results and its implications will be discussed in more detail in the presentation.

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