

# Research Synopsis

## Civil Discourse Online<sup>1</sup>



A 2011 Pew Research Center study found that 61 percent of Americans believe that the Internet exposes them to greater diversity in political views than they would be exposed to otherwise, but 54 percent believe that the Internet makes it easier for them to connect with others with similar political views.<sup>2</sup> **Research shows that both offline and online, Americans tend to discuss politics with people with whom they already agree.**<sup>3</sup>

*QUESTIONS* What difference, then, do the Internet and other new media make? Is online communication generally more or less open to the civil exchange of diverse opinions on politics? Does online communication expand or fragment political discourse? And, given that online discourse is here to stay, how can we foster exchanges that are more open, and more civil?

*SEEKING ANSWERS* The answers so far center around two concerns about the way online communication seems to function: the tendency (or not) toward **fragmentation** and the role of **anonymity** in relation to civility.

### What is “uncivil” online?

According to Zizi Papachrissi, online exchanges or comments that “threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms and stereotype social groups,” are uncivil, but using sarcasm or writing in all capital letters or using strong language – while impolite – is not uncivil.<sup>8</sup>

The jury is still out about whether fragmentation really poses a threat to open and civil political exchange online. A review of the research suggests that if we really want to know if and how digital media further fragment people and produce “echo chambers” of thought, or conversely, under what conditions digital media may diversity networks and discussion partners, we will have to engage in finer-grained study of particular types of Internet use, rules governing participation, and who ultimately participates. Overall, people do exhibit a general tendency to seek out **opinion-confirming information** when online. But using the Internet also may increase chances that people will be exposed to and become aware of a **greater variety of reasoning and information** than they would have been otherwise.

- A 2009 survey of a representative sample of American adults visiting some type of online discussion forum in the last year found that respondents only infrequently and incidentally encountered views with which they disagreed. People were more likely to encounter those with whom they disagreed in nonpolitical forums (e.g., those related to hobbies or professions) than in political forums.<sup>4</sup>
- A 2004 Pew Internet and American Life study of respondent awareness of diverse arguments about candidates and issues in the 2004 U.S. election found that Internet Users were aware of a greater number of arguments that were non-users, holding constant age, education, use of other media sources and interest in the election.<sup>5</sup>

The implications of anonymity are clearer. Overall, it seems that concerns about online incivility may be overblown, **anonymity may not be as prevalent in online discourse as assumed, and anonymity need not detract from civility.**<sup>6</sup> Further, promising options are being developed for encouraging civility in anonymous online environments (see box, “Encouraging civility,” following page).<sup>7</sup>

*IMPLICATIONS* Systems of moderating online discussion that harness widely shared concerns about reputation, status and community acceptance seem promising as a way to **maintain online civility while at the same time allowing room for passionate critique of ideas and arguments.**

#### **Encouraging civility**

Some research suggests that when some posters in online political discussion are selected at random to moderate and rank other posters with respect to reasoned, civil discourse, the incidence of incivility is very low.

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<sup>1</sup> This synopsis is based on National Institute for Civil Discourse Issue Brief No. 1: Civil Discourse Online, prepared by Robin Stryker, Department of Sociology, The University of Arizona, and Heidi Reynolds-Stenson, Department of Sociology, The University of Arizona, dated July 28, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Smith, *The Internet and Campaign 2010*. Report from the Pew Research Center, 2011, Retrieved April 12, 2011 (<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/The-Internet-and-Campaign-2010.aspx>).

<sup>3</sup> Tamara Witschge "Online Deliberation: Possibilities of the Internet for Deliberative Democracy," in *Democracy Online: the Prospects for Political Renewal through the Internet*, ed. Peter Shane, 2004, pp. 109-122.

<sup>4</sup> Magdalena Wojcieszak and Diana Mutz, "Online Groups and Political Discourse: Do Online Discussion Groups and Spaces Facilitate Exposure to Political Disagreement," *Journal of Communication* 69, 2009, pp. 30-46.

<sup>5</sup> John Horrigan, Kelly Garrett and Paul Resnick, *The Internet and Democratic Debate*, Report from the Pew Research Center, October 27, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Davis, *Politics Online: Blogs, Chatrooms and Discussion Groups in American Democracy*, Routledge, 2005. Susan C. Herring, Lois Ann Scheidt, Anna Kouper and Elijah Wright, "Longitudinal Content Analysis of Blogs, 2003-2004," in *Blogging, Citizenship and the Future of Media*, ed. M. Tremayne, Routledge, 2007, pp. 3-20; Matthew Kushin and Kelin Kitchener, "Getting Political On Social Networking Sites: Exploring Online Political Discourse on Facebook," *First Monday* 14(11), 2009; Jesse Kline, "Political Discussion and Debate on Slashdot," November 28, 2007, Retrieved April 12, 2011 (<http://jesse.kline.ca/papers/57-political-discussion-and-debate-on-slashdot>).

<sup>7</sup> Kline 2007; Richard Perez-Pena, "News Sites Rethink Anonymous Online Comments." *New York Times*, April 12, 2010, Retrieved April 12, 2011 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/12/technology/12comments.html>) ; Charles Q. Choi, "Anger Management for Online Trolls" *Wired Science*, 2010, Retrieved April 12, 2011 (<http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2010/10/troll-anger-management> )

<sup>8</sup> Zizi Papachrissi, "Democracy Online: Civility, Politeness and the Democratic Potential of Online Discussion Groups," *New Media & Society* 6, 2004, pp. 259-293, at p. 267.