

## Civil Keystrokes: Examining Anonymity, Politeness, and Civility in Online Ohio Newspaper Forums

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*Online news discussion forums have become popular virtual spaces for public discourse. Computer-mediated communication theories suggest the anonymity afforded by online platforms may deindividuate individuals, leading to less civility and politeness. The current study examines the role of anonymity within the setting of online news comment forums and whether anonymous comments contain more incivility and impoliteness than Facebook-identified users. Comments from two Associated Press articles were collected from four major newspapers' websites. Results suggest anonymous comments are less civil and less polite than those commenting through Facebook profiles. Future research is necessary to determine the implications of online discussion forums.*

*Keywords:* civility, computer-mediated communication, newspaper, comments, politeness, SIDE model

Americans' online news consumption has surpassed radio and print media, becoming the second most popular news media outlet only to television, leading to about four in ten Americans getting their news online (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016). As the online presence of newspapers has grown, the avenues for the expression of public opinion have become more diverse. The present study aims to understand how the different affordances of these forums affect civility and politeness in comments. Historically, letters to the editor served as the primary feedback forums in the news industry. With more newspapers taking their publications to the internet, readers can now express their opinions in online news forums, characterized by fewer gatekeepers and more opportunity for participation across time and space.

These forums are digital spaces where readers can offer their voices, opinions and feedback on news content and issues, allowing them to interact with both the content and other readers (Hlavach & Freivogal, 2011). Many large U.S. newspapers including *The Los Angeles Times* enable readers to register anonymously to post comments. Users have the autonomy to be identified by usernames and handles that can be as vague or as descriptive as they choose. Other newspapers, like *USA Today*, or scholarly websites such as *Popular Science*, recently have taken steps to restrict anonymity by linking comments to Facebook profiles or disabling comments entirely. Some research has suggested online civility not only leads to polarization between commenters (Chen & Ng, 2017), but also influences readers' perceptions of the subject matter (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2013). Online comments may also affect journalists' approach to newswriting (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011) and experiments have suggested incivility and impoliteness can affect readers' judgment of journalistic quality (Prochazka, Weber, & Schweiger, 2018). Editors have expressed concerns about cyberbullying and the spread of misinformation within comment sections, especially when many news outlets do not have the time or staffing to monitor the content of forums (Brost, 2013).

Some scholars have suggested that anonymity enables users to express unconventional opinions without the fear of being judged by gender, race or disability (Papacharissi, 2004). Conversely, others have contended that higher levels of anonymity exacerbate hostile discourse (Rösner, Winter, & Krämer, 2016). In an initial content analysis of comments made in the *Washington Post*'s website followed by a comparison of comments made on the website to those made on the newspaper's Facebook page, Rowe (2013) found a clear difference in civility. Using a theory driven approach, we aim to examine whether social media profiles on source sites or the use of anonymity leads to uncivil and impolite behavior in online news forums.

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### **Anonymity in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)**

Anonymity is a construct defined by the absence of identifiers (Marx, 1999); however, many scientists agree that anonymity is a social phenomenon. Marx (1999) argued that anonymity requires an audience of at least one other person. Rationales for anonymity include the facilitation of information, the protection and privacy of one's self, the avoidance of persecution and the encouragement of experimentation and risk-taking (Marx, 1999).

The different type of online platforms allows for varying degrees of concealment of physical appearance, location, name and other identifying characteristics. For instance, some types of news sites allow people to create a user account with the news site and post comments using pseudonyms and fake names. However, online platforms such as Facebook do not necessarily have 'visual anonymity,' as others can easily glean clues about a person's real identity from information displayed on his or her Facebook profile—people typically put their real names and display photos of themselves on their Facebook profiles (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011).

The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) model provides a salient theoretical framework to explain why online platforms facilitate impolite and uncivil discourse (Walther, 2011). Though originally constructed with organizational groups in mind, the SIDE model has been applied to a wide variety of CMC situations and environments (Tidwell & Walther, 2006). This model purports deindividuation in online group settings leads to a transfer of salience from self to the collective, causing group identification and adherence to group norms. The SIDE model identifies two factors that drive CMC behavior: visual anonymity that leads users into a state of deindividuation and the lack of verbal and nonverbal cues, known as the cues-filtered-out approach (Walther, 1992). When in a state of deindividuation, CMC users will "orient themselves to a salient social category or group" (Walther, 2011, p. 450) and relate with other users on the basis of group membership (Lea, Spears, & de Groot, 2001). This anonymity frees people from ordinary relationships and social conventions such as politeness, and transports the user into an environment where the self is less important than the collective (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). Users will act according to in-group norms and adopt a group identity.

Going by the tenets of SIDE, it is a logical inference that newspapers allowing anonymous users to comment will have statistically more comments after articles compared to those newspapers requiring a known profile login, such as through Facebook. Furthermore, based on the reduction of social presence afforded by CMC, we seek to examine the conditions under which commenters will be more likely to disclose their own personal political identities.

H1a: Newspapers allowing anonymous comments will have more initial comments than newspapers requiring a social media profile.

H1b: Newspapers allowing anonymous comments will have more responsive comments than newspapers requiring a social media profile.

RQ: Under what conditions, topical and anonymity, would individuals disclose their own personal political identities?

### **Politeness**

Extensive research has examined the effects of politeness in conversational exchanges; however, there is no fixed scholarly consensus as to what constitutes 'politeness.' According to Fraser (1990), there are four broad perspectives of 'politeness.' The 'social-norm' perspective views 'politeness' in terms of speech styles and contends that politeness is associated with higher levels of formality and adherence to social etiquette rules. Grice's (1989) "conversational maxim" describes how communication efficiency can be enhanced using principles such as conflict, minimizing strategies to maximize cooperation between parties. Goffman's (1971) 'face saving' view delineates between two types of 'faces': positive and negative face. 'Positive' face describes how people behave politely in order to maintain relationships with others, whereas 'negative' face describes how people assert their autonomy by expressing frank opinions that could potentially offend other parties. Lastly, the 'conversational-contract' view posits that conversation participants have certain preliminary normative expectations of one another that are applied to all discussion parties (Fraser & Nolen, 1981). Ultimately, politeness is defined as the extent to which a participant follows these conversational norms.

Although some commenters may make attempts at politeness, it is difficult to ascertain whether politeness is a driving force or motivator of behavior or communication choice in these forums. In sum, politeness can be described as the extent to which people adhere to conversation etiquette and norms, negotiate between sacrificing one's face and saving face, and attempt to minimize conflict by cooperating with other parties (Chen, 2015; Fraser, 1990). According to "cues filtered out" approaches, online communication platforms lack the visual markers of face-to-face communication (Culnan & Markus, 1987). Applying conversational norms, which have been established using face-to-face communication, in the mediated environment is a challenge. Such visual anonymity makes it harder to trace peoples' real identities and reduces the social cost of being impolite. Consequently, scholars have contended that the anonymity afforded by online platforms emboldens people to be impolite when having political discussions with others (Ng & Detenber, 2005; Papacharissi, 2004). Given previous studies (for example Halpern & Gibbs, 2012) have shown that people tend to have more impolite political discussions on anonymous platforms than on known platforms, we hypothesize people who post comments with their news site user accounts will be more impolite than people who post comments using their Facebook accounts. Impoliteness, then, may be the norm in the mediated, deindividuated environment, rather than a violation of norms. When a user is individuated, or uses a social media account with a (presumed) authentic photograph, real name, and networked ties, like that of Facebook, an active attempt to adhere to conversational norms like politeness should be observed. Thus, we hypothesize

H2: People who post comments with their news site user accounts will be more impolite than people who post comments using their Facebook accounts.

### Civility

Civility is regarded as a key hallmark of deliberative political discourse. The term 'civility' was derived from the term 'civil discourse.' Civil discourse is essential for the functioning of a democracy (for example, Dutton, 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 2000). Some scholars have lamented the decline of civil discourse in the public sphere (Bowman & Knox, 2008). Nevertheless, other scholars have cited the potential of online platforms to foster civil discourse (Pavlik, 1994). As such, it is imperative to examine the extent to which online platforms promote or stymie civil discourse.

The present study also aims to differentiate between civility and politeness in CMC research. Previous research tends to conflate incivility with impoliteness. For instance, in Ng and Detenber's (2005) study, their 'uncivil' experimental conditions consisted of people being impolite by flouting conversation norms, e.g., hurling personal attacks at one another. Some scholars have suggested that it is unrealistic to expect political discourse to always be carried out in a polite fashion (Garnham, 1992). Furthermore, political discourse that is carried out in a polite manner tends to be more restrained because people practice self-censorship and espouse the status quo so as to avoid offending people (Holtgraves, 1997). It would seem that such measured polite discourse impedes spirited debate that reflects democratic ideals, as Lyotard (1984) and Schudson (1997) have found. Rather, whimsical, heated, political debate that flouts conversation norms and etiquette might actually enhance democratic goals as such discussions tend to be more diverse than polite political discourse (Dillard, Wilson, Tusing, & Kinney, 1997).

Thus, it is important to delineate between impoliteness and incivility. According to Papacharissi (2004), uncivil discourse goes beyond what is typically regarded as 'impoliteness,' i.e., flouting etiquette or social norms, and being uncooperative. Rather, civil discourse is discourse that espouses democratic ideals and the common societal good (Shils, 1992). Papacharissi (2004) further argues that civility is a form of 'collective politeness.' As such, when people denigrate *social categories* of people, they are deemed to be behaving in an uncivil manner. However, if people hurl aspersions at each other (for example, "You're an incompetent governor!"), they are simply being impolite, not uncivil.

Given civility is a hallmark of a democratic society in which each individual ideally has an equal opportunity to voice their frank opinions for the collective good, Papacharissi (2004) defined uncivil discourse as discourse that undermines democratic ideals, challenges the common good by depriving people of their personal freedoms and discriminating against social categories of people. Thus far, few studies have explicitly delineated between known (not anonymous) and anonymous online platforms when examining the extent to which people engage in uncivil political discourse online. Although other content analyses have shown people are generally civil

when expressing their views online, these have only focused on examining civility within the context of online message boards (Papacharissi, 2004). Such displays of incivility are more likely to occur in anonymous contexts because users are acting under a cloak of anonymity. (Papacharissi, 2002; Spears & Lea, 1994). Furthermore, according to the SIDE model (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Spears & Lea, 1992), the lack of nonverbal cues on the Internet causes people to interact with one another using cues (for example, textual cues) that give indications about group-level attributes of other discussants. Consequently, people are more likely to form stereotypes of other online discussants and make derogatory remarks based on perceptions of *social categories* that these discussants belong to (Spears & Lea, 1992). As such, we hypothesize:

H3: There will be more uncivil comments from anonymous news site user accounts than comments using Facebook accounts.

The struggle to civilly discuss politics in the news and interpersonal conversations is as historic as the American democracy (Capella & Jamieson, 1997; Herbst, 2010). Furthermore, online political news stories generally tend to receive more comments than non-political online news stories (Tsagkias, Weerkamp, & de Rijke, 2009). Scholars contend the online political sphere is highly polarized, with opposing parties having factious debates on political issues that are characterized by emotionally charged vitriol (Hargittai, Gallo, & Kane, 2008; Sunstein, 2001). Topics discussed online that have clear sides in opposition of each other, especially partisan leaning, have been found to have fewer civil comments (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). As such, we predict online political news stories will receive more impolite and uncivil comments than non-political online news stories.

H4: Comments to political stories will be less civil than non-political stories.

H5: Comments to political stories will be less polite than non-political stories.

## Methods

### Sample

Four Ohio newspapers that allow online comments to AP articles were chosen for the current study. The state of Ohio was specifically chosen because of its importance in presidential elections as a swing state, the frequency of candidate and surrogate visits during the 2012 campaign, and for the comparisons of the cities and newspapers chosen. The newspapers used in this study were the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Cuyahoga County), *Toledo Blade* (Lucas County), *Dayton Daily News* (Montgomery County), and the *Cincinnati Enquirer* (Hamilton County). The newspapers range in daily circulation from 95,000 to 300,000, and are each well established in their respective communities. Two of the newspapers require commenters to use their known Facebook profile in order to leave a comment. Two newspapers require commenters to create an account, creating any handle they would like. We recognize anonymity could be perceived as a spectrum than as a binary. The Facebook profiles necessary for leaving comments in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and *Toledo Blade* could contain false or fake profiles, deidentified profile pictures, or creative names, obscuring the commenter's real identity. Additionally, the handles created by commentators in the *Plain Dealer* and *Dayton Daily News* could contain identifying information, depending on how much the commentator wants to reveal. Table 1 contains circulation and total comments drawn from each paper.

Table 1  
*Condition, Daily Circulation, and Total Number of Comments from Sample Newspapers*

Newspaper	Condition	Circulation	N of Comments
Cleveland Plain Dealer	Anonymous	246,571	431
Cincinnati Enquirer	Facebook	144,154	88
Toledo Blade	Facebook	94,215	31
Dayton Daily News	Anonymous	94,425	32

## Content

In order to determine if it is truly the platform affordances that lead to differences in comment content, it was important to use the same articles during the same time frames, keeping the content as standardized as possible. This also minimized possible effects of external events unrelated to the chosen topic (for example, global events on election related news). We also wanted to determine if type of content, political or non-political, would yield different types of comments in the different conditions. Thus, newspaper articles surrounding a non-political and political event approximately one week apart were used for the current study.

AP articles on a political topic and a non-political topic were chosen as the stimuli for collecting comments. The AP is a news agency that operates nearly 250 news bureaus throughout the world, and the agency's news content is published and circulated in more than 1,500 newspapers. The AP's articles are written in plain, non-inflammatory language and circulated widely across communities. The choice of AP articles helped in the standardization of article content, regardless of the partisan leanings of the editorial boards of the newspaper. The same AP article was available in all four newspapers in both topics and was examined for edits or updates during the 24-hour comment capture timeframe.

The political topic chosen for this study is the recap of the Presidential debate covering domestic policy held in Denver, CO on October 3, 2012. This was the first of three Presidential Candidate debates and covered domestic policy exclusively (where the remaining debates will either be a blend of foreign and domestic policy or a town hall meeting). The non-political topic chosen was a controversial ruling by replacement referees during the Seattle Seahawks-Pittsburgh Steelers NFL game on September 24, 2012. The referees' ruling, outcome of the game, and subsequent national outrage was a hot topic and the final straw in a media narrative about the ongoing NFL referee strike. This event was also chosen given neither of the NFL teams in Ohio (Cincinnati Bengals or the Cleveland Browns) were involved in the story. Prior to the choice of the NFL topic, two other non-political stories were considered: one reporting the Emmy awards and another regarding the response to super storm Sandy. The Emmy story yielded no comments in the first day. The discussion following the story covering responses to Sandy evolved into a political topic, making comparisons moot. Because we wanted to make sure the non-political story was within a week of the political topic, we settled on the NFL story, which was controversial at the time, and engaged readers to comment.

## Procedures

Comments and articles were printed digitally every few hours for 24-hours after the articles' posting to the newspapers' websites. Articles were compared for substantial editing and none was found. Streams of comments were compared to determine if newspaper webmasters removed or flagged comments deemed offensive or in violation of the newspapers' policies and none were found. Comments were recorded in chronological order and coded for newspaper, topic, condition, and if they were initial or responsorial. Each commenter from each newspaper was given a unique subject identification code and all comments from the commenter were coded with this code. A total of 210 unique commenters were found across the four newspapers and two topics. One commenter appeared to comment on each newspaper's political article, using the same handle and nearly the same comment.

**Civility and Impoliteness Coding.** A total of 582 comments were organized according to paper, condition, topic, timing, and commenters' subject identification codes by the lead author. All subsequent data analysis was conducted using only subject identification codes in order to ensure handles, which can contain political or uncivil speech in and of themselves, would not affect analysis of comments. Each post was coded as either an initial post, where the author addressed the content of the news article in a new "thread," or as a reply, where the author addressed a comment from another author or another author directly. If available, the number of likes/dislikes a comment received and whether the newspaper designated the author as a "Top Commenter" was also recorded.

The remaining two authors adapted previous civility and politeness coding schemas to use to train on 25 comments, illustrated in Table 2 (Papacharissi, 2004). Civility codes focused on verbalization of threats to democracy, political identification, or stereotypes directed towards self, other commenters, or a non-present generalized 'other.' Comments containing threats to another commenter's rights (for example, "Keep talking like that and you'll see what I mean") or a non-present other (for example, "Seniors listen up...those death panels are for real.") were coded as uncivil. According to the tenets of SIDE theory, it would be uncivil for a commenter to deindividuate another discussant or non-present other, and ascribe assumed group characteristics (Postmes &

Spears, 1998). Included in these codes are comments containing political identification of self (for example, “As a democrat and as an Obama voter”), other commenter (for example, “Jim, if you were an actual conservative”), or general non-present other (for example, “As a liberal, Obama goes left”). Comments containing stereotypes such as “women are so desperate” or political stereotypes towards specific parties such as “You lefties just cant let Bush go!” or “what do we expect who was trained by Marxist professors?” were also coded for incivility.

Table 2  
*Civility, Politeness Codes and Actual Sample Examples*

Category	Code (to OD or NPO)	Actual User Comments
Civility	Politically identify (self)	“As a democrat, and as a Obama voter,
	Political stereotype	“You lefties just cant let Bush go!”
	Non-political stereotype	“This is why people call you desperate!!”
	Threat to freedoms	“His efforts to increase socialism in the US won't work as it never has and never will...freedom remains the answer.”
Politeness	Sarcasm	“Pete Carroll has been on the right end of both the Bush Push and now the Fail Mary.”
	All caps	“YOU CAN raise revenue and lower taxes when you GROW the economy.”
	Name calling	“Romney has been a clown since day one”
	Aspersions (excluding lying)	“You lose the argument about ACA everytime & yet you continue are you stupid as well as ignorant?”
	Accusations of lying	“love watching you liars get their butts handed to them. Face it doink, Obama was exposed last night for the liar he is!”
	Hyperbole	“certainly you are referring to The Amateur King.”
	Non-cooperation	“Obama has no intention of ever working with Republicans.”
	Vulgarity	“hell, he didn't even read his own bill!”

*Note: OD = other discussant, NPO = non-present other*

The coding schema for impoliteness contained more specific interpersonal communication codes (Jamison & Falk, 1999; Papacharissi, 2004). Each type of interpersonal communication was coded for either towards other discussant or non-present other. Use of sarcasm was coded as a measure of impoliteness, such as “Romney is ducking the issues regarding his refusals to release his income tax return;” “It's filed away safe and sound with the President's birth certificate :)” or a non-present other such as “Pete Carroll has been on the right end of both the Bush Push and now the Fail Mary.” Comments in all-caps were labeled as impolite as over-capitalization of text online is a known heuristic for yelling (Brusco, 2011). Aggressive communication such as name calling (for example, “Romney has been a clown since day one.”) and aspersions (for example, “You lose the argument about ACA everytime and yet you continue are you stupid as well as ignorant?”), excluding lying, were considered impolite comments. Accusing of others of lying (for example, “love watching you liars get their butts handed to them”), non-cooperation (for example, “Obama has no intention of ever working with the Republicans”), and hyperbole (for example, “certainly you are referring to The Amateur King”) could be considered threats to democratic conversation and therefore impolite (Ng & Detenber, 2005; Papacharissi, 2004). Finally, any comments including vulgarities or swear words were coded as impolite per societal norms of public speech.

The codebook was developed over a series of meetings with the other authors on these 25 comments. Conversations determined if a single word, or the entire comment, would suffice for any given code. It was decided the entire comment would be the unit of analysis, and the codebook reflected this agreement. After training, each coder coded the same random 10% sample, and Cohen  $\kappa$  was calculated for each variable (Hayes & Krippendorf, 2007). Intercoder reliability was found to be 0.91, indicating acceptable agreement on most of the training content. The categories with disagreements, specifically aspersions towards another commenter and aspersions towards a non-present other, were discussed and clarified in the codebook. Next, the two coders each coded half of the remaining sample to test hypotheses, and Cohen  $\kappa$  was calculated for each variable. The final coding analysis found all

categories met a threshold of Cohen  $\kappa > 0.80$ , which has been found to be a satisfactory discipline standard (Lacy & Riffe, 1996; Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2016).

## Results

A comparison of total number of comments in each condition was conducted to test H1a and H1b. In the Facebook condition, readers left a total of 34 unique comments (18%), and in the anonymous condition, readers left a total of 152 unique comments (92%). A binomial test found this distribution is not due to chance,  $p < .001$ . H1a is therefore supported. Similarly, in the Facebook condition, readers left a total of 85 (21%) comments in response to others' comments, and readers in the anonymous condition left a total of 311 (79%) comments in response to others' comments. A binomial test found this distribution is not due to chance,  $p < .001$ , and thus H1b is supported.

In order to test H2, seven categories were summed creating a civility index of comments ( $M = 0.12$ ,  $SD = 0.32$ , range = 0 - 1). A higher score on this index illustrated a more uncivil comment. A one-tailed independent groups  $t$ -test found anonymous comments ( $M = 0.13$ ,  $SD = 0.33$ ) were less civil than Facebook comments ( $M = 0.08$ ,  $SD = 0.27$ ),  $t(579) = -1.732$ ,  $p = .043$ , supporting H2. Sub-scales of civility were calculated, summing the codes of comments made towards other discussants ( $M = 0.02$ ,  $SD = 0.12$ , range = 0 - 1) and NPO;  $M = 0.10$ ,  $SD = 0.3$ , range = 0 - 1). One-tailed independent groups  $t$ -tests suggest no difference in civility by condition in comments made towards non-present others or those comments made towards other discussants. Comparison of total number of comments across profile conditions revealed only one variable, assigning political stereotypes to generalized others not involved in the online discussion, was found in nearly 10% of all comments. The remaining six variables were equal to or less than 1% of comments coded in the affirmative for the incivility code (see Table 3).

Table 3  
*Comparison of Civility Indexes by Condition*

	Facebook		Anonymous		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Civility Index*	0.08	0.27	0.13	0.33	-1.73
Civility – NPO <sup>ns</sup>	0.06	0.24	0.10	0.30	-1.97
Civility – OD <sup>ns</sup>	0.02	0.13	0.02	0.12	0.13

Note: ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .001$

Across conditions, negative stereotypes were rarely assigned to other discussants or non-present generalized others, and the differences in frequency were found to be statistically insignificant. Of the 50 comments coded as assigning political stereotypes to a non-present other, 43, or 86%, were in the anonymous profile condition and only seven, or 14%, were in the Facebook profile condition. A binomial test found this distribution to be due to condition, and not chance. Therefore, political stereotypes will be more likely to be assigned to non-present others in an anonymous profile.

To test H3, 16 coding categories were summed to create an impoliteness index based on comments towards other discussants or non-present others (see Table 4). A higher score on this index meant the comment was more impolite ( $M = 1.1$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ , range = 0-8). A one-tailed independent groups  $t$ -test found anonymous comments ( $M = 0.13$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) were marginally less polite than Facebook comments ( $M = 0.95$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), and trending towards significance,  $t(575) = -1.44$ ,  $p = .08$ . Sub-scales of politeness were calculated, summing the codes of comments made towards other discussants ( $M = 0.18$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ , range = 0-4) and non-present others ( $M = 0.89$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ , range = 0-5). One-tailed independent groups  $t$ -tests suggest anonymous comments ( $M = 0.93$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) were less polite in when made towards non-present others compared to Facebook comments ( $M = 0.73$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ),  $t(579) = -1.94$ ,  $p = .05$ . There was no difference found between anonymous ( $M = 0.17$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ) or Facebook ( $M = 0.23$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ) conditions in comments made towards other discussants,  $t(579) = 1.03$ ,  $p = .30$ .

Table 4  
*Comparison of Politeness Indexes by Condition*

	Facebook		Anonymous		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Politeness Index <sup>ns</sup>	0.95	0.96	1.10	1.23	-1.44
Politeness – NPO <sup>ns</sup>	0.72	0.93	0.92	1.06	-1.94
Politeness - OD <sup>ns</sup>	0.23	0.17	0.46	0.52	1.03

Note: ns = not significant; OD = other discussant; NPO = non-present other

Table 5  
*Pearson Chi-Square and Binomial Tests of Politeness Variables by Condition*

	$\chi^2$	Analysis of comments coded ‘yes’	
		Facebook (n, %)	Anonymous (n, %)
All-Caps NPO	2.42**	7, 12.5%	49, 87.5%
Name Call of NPO	9.24**	9, 9.2%	89, 90.8%
Aspersions OD	3.06*	16, 29.6%	38, 70.4%
Aspersions NPO	4.89**	36, 15.9%	191, 84.1%
Accuse Lying NPO	5.49**	23, 30.7%	52, 69.3%

Note: \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .001$ ; OD = other discussant; NPO = non-present other

Table 6  
*Comparison of Civility Means of Comments on Non-Political & Political News Articles*

	Non-Political Topic		Political Topic		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Civility Index**	0	0	0.13	0.33	-8.74
Civility – NPO**	0	0	0.11	0.31	-8.06
Civility – OD <sup>ns</sup>	0	0	0.02	0.13	-0.88

Note: ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .001$ ; OD = other discussant; NPO = non-present other

Binomial tests were calculated for five of the individual politeness items that were coded as ‘present’ (1) in at least 9% of the comments across conditions. Nearly 90% of the comments did not contain the remaining eleven variables. The impoliteness variables examined were typing in all caps, calling names, accusing of lies, and using aspersions towards other discussants or generalized others (see Table 5).

Using the same civility index used for testing H2, a one-tailed independent groups t-test comparing means in each topic condition were calculated and found comments left on political articles were less civil than comments left on non-political articles,  $t(579) = -8.74$ ,  $p < .001$ . Sub-scales of civility were created to comparing comments directed towards other discussants and comments made about non-present others across topics (see Table 6). Comments made about non-present others in political topics were less civil than those made in reaction to the non-political news story. There was no statistical difference between topics on comments made towards other discussants,  $t(579) = -0.88$ ,  $p = .19$ . Just as in the condition tests, only assignment of political stereotypes to non-present others was present in at least 10% of the total comments. The remaining six variables were coded in no more than 2% of the comments, and not analyzed.

A Pearson chi-square and follow-up binomial test found a significant difference between article topic and rate of political stereotypes being assigned to non-present others,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.59$ ,  $p = .03$ . Of the 50 comments coded as assigning political stereotypes to non-present others, all were written in comments to the political article. Therefore, political stereotypes will be more likely to be assigned to non-present others in a political article.



Assignment of political stereotypes to other discussants and non-present others was not expected in comments made to non-political stories. Pearson chi-square and binomial tests examining frequencies of comments assigned to other discussants were not significant, but comments made to non-present others were. The only comments assigning political stereotypes to non-present others were found in response to a political article.

Additional chi-square tests compared the frequency of negative stereotypes (non-political) towards other discussants and non-present others in comments by topic. Once more, there were no statistical differences between the cells. Nearly 99% of comments did not contain a negative stereotype towards anyone and does not warrant further comparison of frequencies. Therefore, topic does not affect the probability of assignment of negative stereotypes being made by commenters to other discussants or non-present others.

The same politeness index was used to calculate one-tailed independent groups t-tests comparing means in each topic condition (see Table 7). Comments left on political articles were not found to be less polite than comments left on non-political articles. Political news stories had less polite comments directed at non-present others than non-political stories. Four of the same specific politeness variables were present in at least 10% of comments, leading to binomial tests to determine if distribution of codes was due to chance or the article's topic (Table 8). Individuals commenting on political stories are less civil directing their comments towards non-present others indexed by typing in all caps (95% of comments were from political stories,  $p < .001$ ), name-calling (95% of comments were from political stories,  $p < .001$ ), use of aspersions (93% of comments were from political stories,  $p < .001$ ), and accusing non-present others of lying (100% of comments were from political stories,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, H5 is partially supported.

Table 7

*Comparison of Politeness of Comments on Non-Political and Political News Articles*

	Non-Political Topic		Political Topic		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Polite Index <sup>ns</sup>	0.82	0.83	1.09	1.21	-1.46
Politeness – NPO <sup>ns</sup>	0.78	0.85	0.90	1.05	-0.73
Politeness – OD**	0.04	0.21	0.20	0.58	-3.92

Note: ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .001$ ; OD = other discussant; NPO = non-present other

Table 8

*Pearson Chi-Square and Binomial Tests of Politeness Variables by Condition*

	$\chi^2$	Analysis of comments coded 'yes'	
		Sports n, %	Politics n, %
All-Caps Non-Present Other	0.50**	3, 5%	53, 95%
Name Call of Non-Present Other	0.06**	7, 7%	93, 93%
Aspersion Non-Present Other	1.18**	7, 7%	91, 93%
Accuse Lying Non-Present Other	7.23*	0, 0%	75, 100%

Note: ns = not significant; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .001$

In order to answer the proposed research question, each comment was coded for self-identification of party or fandom and ideology. Self-identification was coded as whether the commenter identifies with a specific political identity (0 = no, 1 = yes) such as "Amen brother, I'm a democrat;" "I'm a conservative...". Ideology was coded as pro-Obama/anti-Romney (for example, "I'm going to vote today, and I won't vote for Mitt;" "Obama has the better policies"), pro-Romney/anti-Obama ("Romney is for all of us;" "best policies! Romney/Ryan"), or unknown. Ninety-nine percent of all commenters did not self-identify specifically in any way, and four of the six commenters who had were found in the anonymous condition. Pearson chi-square tests were found to be not significant. A Pearson chi-square test did not show any statistical significance difference between topics and self-identification. Therefore, neither condition nor article topic affect rate of self-identification.

A series of binomial and crosstabs tests were conducted to determine under what conditions ideology would be disclosed. A binomial test first confirms there is a significant difference beyond chance between the number of

pro-Romney/anti-Obama comments ( $N=259$ ) and pro-Obama/anti-Romney ( $N=70$ ) comments,  $p < .001$ . A chi-square test suggests there is no difference in proportions of disclosure of ideology between anonymous or social media profile conditions,  $\chi^2(1) = .001, p = .98$ . A comparison of the number of ideological disclosures by paper, however, was significant,  $\chi^2(3) = 11.88, p = .01$  (see Table 9). The clearest difference appeared between the proportion of pro-Romney/anti-Obama comments to pro-Obama/anti-Romney comments left in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and the proportion of comments in each ideological category in the *Dayton Daily News*. It is interesting to note these two papers were both in the anonymous condition. In particular, the number of pro-Romney/anti-Obama comments left on the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*'s article accounted for 62.3% of the 329 comments that disclosed some sort of ideology.

Table 9

*Pearson Chi-Square of Ideological Disclosures by Paper*

	<i>Cleveland Plain Dealer</i>	<i>Toledo Blade</i>	<i>Cincinnati Enquirer</i>	<i>Dayton Daily News</i>
Pro-Obama/Anti-Romney	48 <sup>a</sup>	6 <sup>a,b</sup>	5 <sup>a,b</sup>	11 <sup>b</sup>
Pro-Romney/Anti-Obama	205 <sup>a</sup>	12 <sup>a,b</sup>	29 <sup>a,b</sup>	13 <sup>b</sup>

$\chi^2(3) = 11.88, p = .01$ . Each subscript letter denotes a subset of paper categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

### Discussion

Our current study found civility and politeness, and possibly rationality, are hard to come by when users are anonymous to others. In total, most of our hypotheses were either completely or partially supported. The anonymous nature of certain newspaper comment forums yielded more comments, and these comments were less civil and polite compared to comments left in forums requiring a Facebook login. Additionally, political news articles in general tend to lead to less civil and less polite comments than non-political news stories. Comments towards non-present others were especially less civil and less polite across condition and topic. These findings are consistent with the tenets of the SIDE theory (Spears & Lea, 1992) and previous findings indicating that people tend to be more impolite on anonymous online platforms than on online platforms requiring a known profile (for example, Halpern & Gibbs, 2012; Santana, 2014). We believe this is the first study to collect comments from the same newspaper article during the same period of time, standardizing the environments and content to which users were commenting. Furthermore, this study filled the gap in the literature using the SIDE theory to examine whether people were more uncivil in anonymous online conditions than in online conditions where a user's identity is known.

The finding of proportions of self-disclosure of political ideology are particularly interesting. In the *Dayton Daily News*, there were no differences between the number of pro-Obama/anti-Romney and pro-Romney/anti-Obama comments (see Table 9). In the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, however, there were four times as many pro-Romney/anti-Obama comments compared to the pro-Obama/anti-Romney self-disclosures. While these papers were both in the anonymous condition, their communities' political histories may offer insight (Richardson, 2017). Democrats have held the offices of city commissioners in Dayton since the early 1990s, but prior to then the offices were served by Republicans. In the same time period, the mayor of Dayton has been Democrat, Republican, and Independent, and all U.S. representatives have been Republican as well. Conversely, Cleveland's mayor, city council, and U.S. Representatives have all been Democrats since the mid-1980s. In fact, Cuyahoga County is a majority Democratic county (Exner, 2016), has carried Democratic candidates in Presidential elections since the 1990s, and is considered one of the most progressive, liberal cities in the state. From our data, it appears the anonymous environment provided those in the minority (Republicans) in the largest Democratic county (Cuyahoga). Research examining the spiral of silence in CMC contexts has shown people who perceive their opinions to be in the minority feel more emboldened expressing their honest views on anonymous CMC platforms (McDevitt, Kioussis, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2003). It is plausible that the Republicans living in that region knew that they were in the minority and thus felt more comfortable criticizing Obama online under the guise of anonymity.

More research is needed to examine the extent to which anonymity creates partisan echo chambers online among political groups whose opinions are in the minority.

Concerns of individuals becoming somehow “submerged in the machine” leading to social isolation and deindividuation effects lead more psychological, sociological, and communication research to focus on the interpersonal aspects and ramifications of CMC (Kielser, Siegel, & McGuire, 1986). This study aimed to explore the role of anonymity on incivility in CMC settings, but current research only scratches the surface of how anonymity affects the dynamics of online discussion. Future research can take a number of directions, including the experimental route to establish a more causal relationship between anonymity and incivility. An experimental design involving the creation of anonymous and identified conditions within the context of comment forums would have great explanatory power. Anonymity may give those who feel marginalized protection to speak out, but our findings suggest those doing the speaking are doing so in less civil and polite ways, which can lead to constant face saving in light of identity threats, culminating in a spiral of toxicity.

Further research is also needed to gauge the effects of incivility on readers’ perception of bias in the news and their perception of the journalist and newspaper’s credibility. Prochazka, Weber, and Schweiger (2018) found while “uncivil comments decreased the perceived formal quality of an article” civil comments themselves did nothing to improve such perceptions (p. 72). With online news consumption on the rise, comment forums are becoming increasingly common, and thus more visible to readers. Even if an online newsreader is not actively participating in the discussion, the comments from other readers are easily seen following most news articles. According to Jones, Ravid, & Rafaeli (2004), nearly half of online news readers may be comprised of individuals who do not participate in commenting behavior, but who still read posts from other users. Thus, the effects of incivility within online commentary may reach beyond just those who actively engage in online conversation. A more qualitative approach could explore the effect of negative and impolite comments on journalists themselves, especially those comments directed at the author or publisher of a story by examining whether uncivil comments affect a journalist’s mental health, their ability to perform their job well, or their job satisfaction.

The results of this study also beg the question: What can, or should, be done about incivility in online news environments? Some media outlets, such as *NPR* and *Chicago Sun-Times*, have disabled their comment sections entirely. Scott Montgomery, managing editor of *NPR* digital news in 2016, stated the comment sections were not “providing a useful experience for the vast majority of users” (Montgomery, 2016, p. 1). Banning comment sections altogether may be the most practical solutions for news outlets that have neither the time nor the resources to monitor and take down offensive posts. Other scholars suggest that journalists might engage with commenters within the forum to steer the conversation back to quality discussion, such as answering legitimate questions posed by users, providing more information on a story, or encouraging and being supportive of quality, civil comments (Straud, Curry, Scacco, & Muddiman, 2014).

### Limitations

We have used a very narrow definition of anonymity in the present study, and thus our results may be limited in external validity. Anonymity in other CMC studies has been defined as simply visual anonymity, where “individuals communicate with each other without their physical appearances attached to their messages” (Morio & Buchholz, 2009, p. 298). A hierarchy of anonymity has been proposed (Azechi, 2005), and tested in a variety of contexts, including civility in online newspaper comments (Reader, 2012). Two of the source sites used in this study could be considered more pseudo-anonymous than truly anonymous, given the users had opportunities to choose their own handles, which could include identifying factors. There is also no true way to ensure those who commented on the articles in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* or *Toledo Blade* had accurate and honest Facebook profiles. These varying levels of anonymity – when the outlet permits it, pseudo-anonymous when the outlet requires an account and/or name be created, and identifiable when the outlet requires an existing social media profile be linked – should be tested experimentally in the future, or, conversations with the platform administrators to determine to what extent anonymity is accurate.

The entanglement of civility and politeness should not be understated. Civility can offer a means to enable deliberative, constructive conversations on topics, that elicit passion and mobilization. Deliberate debate is necessary for a “well-functioning democracy,” without which can “lead to apathy and disaffection with political participation” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 104). Civility is often studied as a discursive activity (Santana, 2014) whereas

politeness is a communication strategy to save face of either speaker or receiver (Chen, 2015). Political issues have been found to be tied to some individuals' sense of self (Walsh, 2004), and thus face threat impoliteness can strike at the very core of a person. The content analyzed in the present study was discursive in nature, insofar as individuals were leaving commentary either to an article or in response to another's comments. From the content alone, however, it is difficult to determine if saving face from perceived threats were motivations behind comments made. Impoliteness in a comment that is responding to a negative face threat would be expected according to politeness theory (Brett et al., 2007). In fact, others have found resolution of impolite or uncivil communication online is unlikely if a user's sense of face is challenged (Brett et al., 2007).

We were faced with certain challenges when choosing our non-political AP story. Our original story regarding the Emmys, did not yield any comments. Our third choice of non-political story, Hurricane Sandy, yielded highly politicized conversations due to the involvement of key campaign surrogates and government entities. The choice of political topic may have had some influence in which civility and politeness indexes were significant: other discussant vs. non-present others. Had we chosen a political story less centered around the performance of a non-present others the comments may have been coded differently. Future research should attempt to validate the findings obtained in this study by examining the nature of comments posted in reference to online news stories on controversial political issues that do not necessarily have *specific* political scapegoats such as climate change, gun control laws, or equal rights for gay men and lesbians.

Although we drew upon coding categories that were used in previous studies on impoliteness and incivility in online comments (Papacharissi, 2004), we were unable to find the *specific* adjectives and nouns comprising each of these coding categories. Consequently, we had to use our discretion to decide on the most appropriate coding categories for words that appeared in the comments that we encountered. Also, we coded for the absence or presence of specific words, and did not code for the tone of the entire comment. For instance, one commenter wrote, "Well the FAILED ONE proved what he is all about and how is looking out for a special segment of the population. Now you should understand. Thank me for educating you." Using our coding schema, we coded that the commenter was simply calling others names (for example, "failed one"). However, we did not deem the commenter to be hurling aspersions because none of the *individual* words in those two sentences were derogatory. Future research should examine the comment holistically.

## Conclusions

News writers and editors, whether in the 'traditional' or 'convergence' camp, have perceived online comments as a means of engaging and establishing a community (Meyer & Carey, 2014; Robinson, 2010). Scholars have expressed hope that the anonymity of online platforms would bridge divides between various social classes of people and enhance deliberative democracy (Barlow, 1996; Pavlik, 1994). The negative effects of allowing incivility and impoliteness to take over newspaper forums has been a concern of journalists, editors, and readers alike (Anderson et al., 2013; Coe et al., 2014). Some have found deliberative moderation and involvement by either the reporter or the content provider can lead to a decreased likelihood of incivility and impoliteness (Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2014), and offered plausible tips to decrease toxic communication without losing online commentary's deliberative properties (Stroud et al., 2014). However, the findings from this study seem to suggest otherwise. Although anonymous online platforms generate higher levels of discourse than social media identified platforms, such discourse also tends to be more impolite and uncivil than discourse on online platforms requiring a social media profile. Thus, there seems to be a tradeoff between anonymity and discourse that is both civil and polite. As such, newspaper websites that prize civil and polite discourse over the volume of discourse might want to consider making users post comments using social media profile accounts.

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