

Abstract

Scholars, politicians, journalists, and the general public are worried about an increase of so-called *incivility* in public online discussions, such as insults, lies, and threats against vulnerable groups. In recent years, a growing body of online incivility research has emerged. However, three main shortcomings can be identified: First, scholars usually conceptualize incivility as a violation of norms, while approaching different norms. Thus, research lacks a unified systematization of incivility, which makes it difficult to measure its prevalence, causes, and effects in a reliable and valid manner. Second, scholars largely agree that incivility is a perceptual construct but most studies conceptualize incivility based on approaches that prescribe norms, and studies on incivility perceptions of participants involved in public online discussions are scarce. Finally, it is largely unclear how different participants in public online discussions react to distinct types of incivility. Therefore, the dissertation aimed at (1) providing a theoretically well-founded systematization of incivility in public online discussions, (2) empirically examining incivility perceptions of participants involved in public online discussions, thereby refining and validating the systematization of incivility, and (3) investigating participants' reactions to incivility. Drawing on analytical theories on cooperation, communication, and norms, a new theoretical framework of incivility in public online discussions was developed that is based on five communication norms and the disapproval of the participants involved in online discussions. Afterwards, five heterogeneous focus groups with three types of participants in public online discussions were conducted, namely lay participants (i.e., ordinary users), semi-professional participants (i.e., online activists collectively combating incivility), and professional participants (i.e., community managers), and they discussed what they perceive as (mildly and severely) uncivil. The results suggest that incivility encompasses violations of all five communication norms, that different types of norm violations are not assessed as equally severe, and that several criteria shape the processing of norm violations. To empirically test and validate the systematization of incivility, an online experiment was conducted. Lay participants were confronted with norm violations in a mock-up online discussion forum. The results validate the concept of incivility though revealing varying severity levels among different types of incivility, and indicate that distinct types of incivility elicit different responses. Lastly, within a quantitative content analysis of the comments on the Facebook sites of 15 German news outlets, professional participants' reactions

to incivility were examined. The results showed that professional participants react more often to one specific type of incivility, but that their response styles do not differ between different types of incivility.