

Book Review

Chen, Gina Masullo (2017) *Nasty Talk. Online Incivility and Public Debate*. Springer International Publishing, Cham, Switzerland.

If the last couple years of the realm of online media could be distilled down to one issue in the contemporary popular imagination, it might be a question of the effect of such media on our wider society, and particularly so of a negative one. It is into this space that Gina M Chen inserts her research into incivility online. Specifically, in this book, she asks two questions; one, can incivility and deliberative discussion online occur simultaneously, and two, what might be the consequences of exposure to such online incivility for political participation by citizens? For this review I shall briefly outline the book ‘Nasty Talk’, and then move on to discuss four issues of concern I have with the text.

Chen’s definition of incivility is one based on the categorisation of speech via message characteristics, specifically here at least one of three: “insulting language or name calling, profanity, and a large category that encompasses stereotypes, and homophobic, racist, sexist, and xenophobic terms that may at times dip into hate speech” (p. 6). But also more than this, Chen distinguishes incivility from rudeness in that incivility both violates norms of conversation and has the potential to cause harm.

The findings of the research outlined in the book for the first question are that incivility and deliberative discourse can indeed co-exist, or in other words; that incivility does not prevent discussion from being deliberative. In fact, the author argues that in certain cases it might enhance such due to emotional investment in the position one takes, a ‘defensive effect’, though she does also posit that incivility can inhibit discussion through avoidance of conflict and in-group self-censoring. The author determined such through qualitative analysis of the comments sections of a series of United States news websites; Fox News, the Huffington Post, NBC News Digital, The New York Times, and USA Today.

The second question of the effect exposure to incivility has on an individual’s propensity to engage in political engagement, showed that incivility had a minor positive effect on political participation, but it was mediated through their emotional reaction to the incivility. If the exposure produced a negative emotion, then people were more likely to react in such a way to increase their political participation, but if the incivility produced no emotional reaction, this reaction was not present. For instance, being disagreed with civilly would not result in an emotional reaction and would not engender someone to be more or less likely to participate in political activities. Simply being disagreed with was not sufficient to produce an effect on political participation propensity; incivility was required. This was determined through experiment, with nearly 1,000 participants being exposed to uncivil responses to posts they made on political topics, and their likelihood of political participation measured thereafter.

Chen’s conclusion, with reference to Habermas’ rational public sphere, was that the presence of incivility on constructive political discourse was more complex than a simple rational/emotional divide would suggest. She argues that incivility is not crucial to deliberative discussion, but that it is also not preventative of such. Further, an increasing amount of incivility (such as hate speech) does indeed prevent deliberative discussion, which suggests a ‘sweet spot’ of incivility which can engender a deliberative response through emotional reaction, but not beyond such a point where one may not respond at all, or the emotionality of one’s response does not involve rational argument.

As such, Chen’s work here in this book is an excellent contribution to applied analyses of online discourse, providing a needed nuance. However, there are areas where this text fell short of being something

more impactful. Given a strength of this book is how contemporary it is with the political issues that are covered (though, naturally, that may date the book and how relatable it is to a student audience over time), the fact that the author chose news websites' comments sections as the location for content analysis for her first question, and not social media, seems oddly incongruous. While this is certainly in keeping with Chen's location in a journalism school, it is a question that has to be raised given the research questions that she asks in this text. If incivility around the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency was one issue she garnered news website comments around, then it seems lacking that the likes of Twitter are not present for analysis, for instance. Given the bulk of such online discourse contemporarily is in social media, the fact that it is not present in this research will not only make it less relevant for, say, student classroom discussion, but also raise questions about its findings' generalisability outside of the narrow context of news media. Is the co-presence of incivility and deliberative discussion something that could be said of social media in addition to news websites? It could be, but we cannot say from this research. It could be argued that it is not present because this was not the authors intent for this research, which is certainly valid, but its lack has considerable volume in the reading.

A second concern is located in the analysis itself. How users negotiate online incivility in their participatory and deliberative efforts is presented by the author without consideration to the social location of the users themselves. What is presumed rather is a generic user, one devoid of a social science theoretical power analysis. There is considerable social science literature that shows that gendered, racial, etc. locations do effect how users experience political discourse and activity, and how that then results in differential behaviours (in Habermasian public sphere literature such as that from Dean [4] and Fraser [5], and for gendered analysis Cunha et al. [2], Bode [1], Dashti et al. [3]). But this literature is missing from this text and consequently one is left asking if all users can experience the co-presence of incivility and deliberative discussion? Why this is problematic is that without such an analysis it cannot be assumed that certain groups are not being excluded by incivility's presence, while other groups privileged. Given the author's inclusion of literature on how emotionality can actually enhance online discourse, or at least provide motivation to respond to discursive challenges, the nature of how differing groups interact with emotionality on a social level seems glaring in its omission. The power different groups have discursively provides of a depth of analysis that I do feel is lacking in the approach taken. Admittedly, the author would probably have had a difficult time determining social location from the comment posts of users on the news websites she chose, but again, this returns us to questions about approach. I do consider that a measure of depth of analysis is missing because such a theoretical approach was not taken.

This theoretical weakness extends into my third concern, namely the author's discussion of the causes of online incivility. Her discussion is one that is technologically deterministic. In other words, she describes the properties of the technology and presumes behaviours therefrom. Why this is problematic is that we have had a couple decades of social science research into online technologies and communication, and initial tendencies to predict outcomes based on the nature of the technologies themselves has been shown over time to be less than accurate. Rather, current analysis looks to how individuals enact those technologies through embedding in existing practice and bend those technologies to those practices. The impact of a technology is not determined by the particularities of that technology, but rather in how those particularities are negotiated with by users; which are given salience (and which are not)? Which are used in ways entirely unexpected from their original or intended design? Locating the prevalence of incivility online in such things as the immediacy of response, the speed at which a comment can go public, the effect of a possible higher likelihood of deindividuation online, etc., ignores how we manage such things offline.

Finally, the structure of the book itself seems torn on striking a balance between a student textbook and an academic sustained argument. It is apparent that the text is a conversion of dissertation work, for the chapters very closely follow such a layout. However, the notes and references for each chapter are located at the end of that chapter, disrupting reading of the text as a whole, something more appropriate for an edited volume where each such section is a discrete piece, which can also be said for the 'Classroom Discussion Points'. Further, given its apparent nature as coming from dissertation work, the methods chapters seem oddly detailed for a text for a more popular audience. While the detail is certainly appropriate for academic work (such as with a dissertation or journal) it seems oddly discordant in a book such as this.

The previous more substantive critiques are not to say that the characteristics of the online context do not have impact, for as with the second concern I have listed, the nuance and particularities do matter, but rather that this reflects a lack of theoretical depth I feel is somewhat present throughout the text. There is a social science context around online communication that is missing, making it research with promise and necessity, but research that stops short of achieving its full potential. The strengths of this text lie in its contemporariness, the fact that is an excellence piece of applied research, with a nuance of question around the division we place between incivility and discourse, emotionality and rationality that is to be applauded. This is particularly the case for the research and methodology around the second question; incivility's effect on political participation. However, throughout the text there is a lack both of theoretical depth, and a wider context of social science research on this topic, that a book such as this should have included.

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