

Online political discussions tend to be less civil when the participants are anonymous

By Democratic Audit

*Despite the internet's unlimited potential in informing, engaging, and empowering citizens, it is all too often used as a forum for foul-tempered arguments behind a veil of anonymity, with obvious repercussions for our democracy. **Ian Rowe** of the University of Kent, argues that it is anonymity that is often to blame, and that the more accountable model used by Facebook holds hope for a more civil online political discourse.*



It has often been argued that the Internet is a revolutionary technology, capable of reinvigorating many aspects of democratic life. When it comes to political discussion, in particular, the democratizing potential of the Internet has been well documented and is clear for all to see. Indeed, the Internet and its associated technologies facilitate large-scale, many-to-many communication which transcends geographical boundaries, grants users unprecedented control over content, and allows them to easily seek out and share information with a diverse range of other users. Moreover, many online discussion platforms afford users a relatively high level of anonymity, encouraging participants to express dissenting views without fear of retribution, and allowing previously disadvantaged and marginalised citizens to participate in discussions from which they may previously have been excluded.

Such inclusive and diverse political discussion amongst citizens, it has been demonstrated, may provide a variety of positive democratic outcomes. Citizens who engage in political discussion will likely participate more in community affairs, be more tolerant of those who hold and/or express opposing political views, and make more informed and considered political decisions. Furthermore, citizens engaging in political discussion will likely feel more included in the democratic process, be better able to understand and justify their own preferences, and will set aside the adversarial approach to politics which often characterises discussion on many controversial topics.

Despite its obvious potential, it is often argued that when it comes to discussing the types of divisive, emotional, and highly charged issues at the centre of political debate, angry, hostile, and derogatory communicative behaviour, as opposed to deliberation, has been one of the most widely recognised characteristics of online interaction. In fact, given the negative attention the Internet and its associated technologies have received in recent years, it may even be argued that online communication has become synonymous with uncivil communicative behaviour. This is in large part thanks to the relatively high level of anonymity that is afforded Internet users when communicating online. Indeed, according to Abraham Foxman and Christopher Wolf in their new book *Viral Hate*, '[p]eople who are able to post their comments anonymously (or pseudonymously) are far more likely to say awful things, sometimes with awful effects. Speaking from behind a blank wall that shields a person from responsibility encourages recklessness – it's far easier to simply hit the "send" button without a second thought under those circumstances.'

One notable platform which makes its users accountable for the comments they make and the content they produce, presumably making them less likely to behave in an uncivil manner, is Facebook. The biggest online social network site with over 1.15 billion active monthly users, Facebook requires users to construct a public or semi-public (restricted) personality profile – using their real-name – through which they can traverse the site, engage in its many social functions, and connect with other users to form social networks. Users are encouraged to maintain relatively open and identifiable profiles that include photos, educational affiliations, religious and political preferences, birthdays, and hobbies. Profiles also contains a public space where other users have the chance to leave messages, post links, and connect with one another. Moreover, Facebook users are automatically notified via the news-feed function when other members of their network produce content. Thus, Facebook users are both identified with and accountable for their behaviour.

Research currently underway at the University of Kent suggests that the increased sense of accountability that Facebook users experience may go some way towards improving the quality of online discussion by reducing the occurrence of uncivil communicative behaviour. Having analysed the content of comments left by readers of the Washington Post online, the study compared the occurrence of uncivil and impolite remarks in comments left on the Washington Post website, with comments left in response to the same articles posted on the Washington Post Facebook page. Uncivil remarks – that is, those which threatened the traditions of democracy and the rights of others, as well as those which included the use of stereotypical language, were significantly more likely to occur in comments left on the website version of the Washington Post where users were able to remain anonymous and unaccountable for their comments.

Chart 1. Number of comments containing uncivil remarks by platform type.

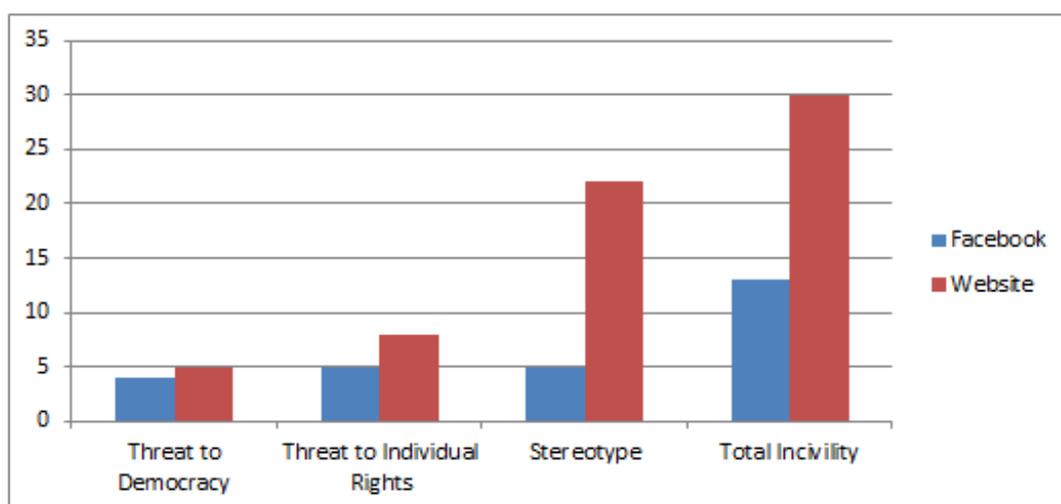
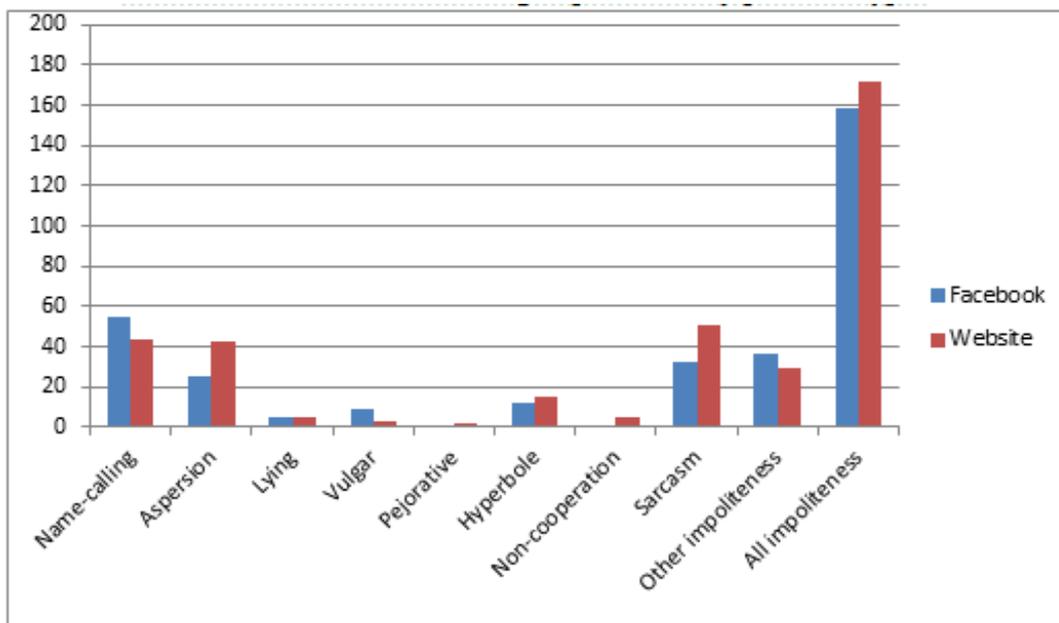
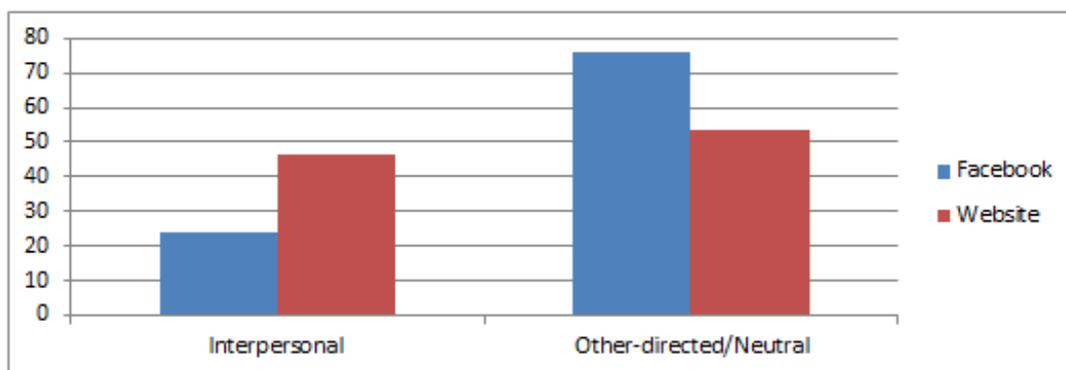


Chart 2. Number of comments containing impoliteness by platform type



Although incivility in comments on both the website and the Facebook versions of the Washington Post occurred rarely, comments exhibited considerably more instances of impoliteness. However, the differences between the two platforms with regard to impoliteness was not quite so clear cut. In fact, the platforms differed significantly only when it comes to casting aspersions and the use of sarcasm. In both cases, the website version of the Washington Post exhibited more instances of impoliteness than the Facebook version, adding further support to claims that Facebook may play an important role in improving the quality of online discussion.

Chart 3. Direction of incivility and impoliteness (%) by platform type.



The study also found that uncivil and impolite comments on the two platforms differed significantly in their direction. Those left on the Washington Post website, where users are unaccountable for their behaviour, were significantly more likely to be directed towards other participants in the discussion compared to those left on Facebook. By contrast, uncivil and impolite Facebook comments were more likely to be aimed at individuals who were not present (such as politicians, for example) or were deemed neutral, meaning that the behaviour was expressed in an effort to make a point or an argument, rather than attack another individual.

Despite an abundance of negative attention in recent years, in which Facebook and other social network sites have been blamed for a variety of social issues, ranging from lower test scores amongst children to a reduction in life satisfaction, current research suggests that Facebook might finally be in line for some positive press. Although more research is needed, it seems that when it comes to discussing politics online, Facebook users, as a result of the way the site is designed, tend to engage in more civil discourse than those using other discussion forums and are significantly less likely to attack the views and opinions of their fellow participants.

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Ian Rowe is a Ph.D. candidate and Assistant Lecturer from the University of Kent at Canterbury. His research is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and focuses on the relationship between social network site (SNS) use and political behaviour. He is currently investigating how SNSs shape the way their users discuss politics online.



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