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Marisa Torres da Silva, Maria José Brites & Miguel Vicente

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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

INCIVILITY AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

MARISA TORRES DA SILVA

Universidade Nova de Lisboa, ICNOVA (Portugal)

MARIA JOSÉ BRITES

Universidade Lusófona, CICANT (Portugal)

MIGUEL VICENTE

Universidad de Valladolid (Spain)

Freedom of expression is one of the individual rights that must be present in any democratic social system. Citizens exercise this freedom by circulating messages and content through a variety of channels, from face-to-face oral communication to a growing repertoire of communicative exchanges mediated by digital technologies. Although it is difficult to have an objective measurement of these symbolic processes, the amount of content that is broadcasted and received daily has steadily grown during the last decades. Technological innovations, together with their successful social and commercial diffusion, mean that citizens face a volume of information that threatens to overwhelm their information processing capacity. This feeling of being overwhelmed by a flow of communication that surpasses our attention generates individual and social problems that confront us with one of the paradoxes of our time: the volume of information has increased considerably, but the feeling of a lack of intellectual handles and practical skills to manage this avalanche of content generates unease and unrest.

Under this growing flood of messages circulating in our closest environment and materialising daily on the screens of our electronic devices, new threats also emerge in terms of the form and substance of this content. The possibility of expressing ourselves freely, both individually and collectively, should function as the cement that makes dialogue and cooperation within civil society possible, but we often find that these communicative exchanges are aimed at eroding coexistence among equals. Consequently, freedom of expression is of little use when it is not based on respect for those who do not share our views. Diversity of ideas emerges, in this context, as a value to be promoted and defended to build an open, plural, and democratic society.

This Special Issue addresses how online incivility and toxic talk are changing the context and forms of mediated public participation. Although incivility is very difficult to define, with notable variations among scholars, it can be considered as a set

of behaviours that threaten democracy and deny people their personal freedoms (Papacharissi, 2004), frequently including elements such as intimidation, disrespectful speech, hostility and hate speech. Incivilities traditionally associated with risk behaviours in the cities (Park, 1984; Roché, 1996) are now transposed to online environments with a huge impact in peoples' lives.

Incivility has effects on those who encounter it, whether as participants or observers often in negative ways (Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2017), such as the “nasty effect” of encouraging negative perceptions of issues (Anderson et al., 2014, 2018) and political arguments (Mutz, 2007). Incivility also has a polarizing effect pushing people to extreme positions. However, although the phenomenon of incivility and its potential effects is rather extensively present in the scholarly literature, the ways by which publics and audiences interpret and act on incivility and online toxic environment is a less visible topic.

Online incivilities call for social imaginaries of the media related to its engagement of people through conflict and contestation, through its potentially harmful or fatal consequences to individuals, society and democratic politics as well as being a source of moral panic anxieties (Cricher, 2008). Audiences use strategies of self-regulation against invasiveness (Syvertsen, 2017), also because they are seen as responsible for their online choices (Syvertsen, 2020), developing coping strategies to deal with unpleasant online experiences.

The appeal to civic mindedness takes on greater meaning in a digital scenario in which some of the basic rules for constructing a balanced and rational communicative action are experiencing fissures. The idealistic gaze of the early stages of the spread of Internet has had to confront a much harsher reality, in which anonymity and emotional distance mean that some of the filters and brakes we use in our face-to-face interactions are diluted, opening the door to much more blunt and aggressive behaviours.

This Special Issue of *Mediální studia / Media Studies* is composed by four articles that address different aspects of the proposed topic, offering complementary approaches to a multifaceted phenomenon in which social and communicative practices with different interests converge.

The first contribution, co-authored by Magdalena Saldaña (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile) and Valentina Proust (University of Pennsylvania, USA), opens this monograph with a title, “Comments that hurt: Incivility in user-generated comments about marginalised groups”, which points to a factor of great importance for correctly contextualising discourses based on incivility: these messages hurt the people they are talking about, or at least they have the potential to create this effect. The relational dimension thus takes on a centrality that should not be forgotten when we analyse the conversations on social networking sites. In this work, relations between marginalised groups and hegemonic groups can lead to aggressive and derogatory content towards minorities, as evidenced by the content analysis carried out of the

comments posted by users in reaction to a Chilean digital newspaper's coverage of the LGBTQ+ movement.

In her article titled “Facebook as a public arena for women: infringing on democratic ideals and a cause of worry”, Hilde Sakariassen, from University of Bergen (Norway), approaches a research dimension on social networking sites that has traditionally received less attention than the study of the published online content. Women's perception of the characteristics and quality of the public space that is constructed on Facebook confronts us with the concerns and tactics deployed by Norwegian women to adapt to a predominantly hostile space. Concerns emerging from these aspects become a highly relevant explanatory factor when one tries to understand their behaviour on the main social network site within the global corporation Meta.

The third article, co-authored by Anda Rožukalne and Dite Liepa (Rīga Stradiņš University, Latvia), is set in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that shook the planet and confronted a wide portion of our humanity, in a widespread manner during the lockdowns, with the goodness and rawness of digital conversation. The article “From ‘Covid idiots’ to ‘Covidshow’ and ‘Covidhysteria’. Analysis of digital news commenters' verbal aggressiveness and means of linguistics creativity during COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia (2020-2021)” uses a research tool that records and measures aggressiveness on the Internet to explore patterns of generating new linguistic terms. By exploring the content of three Latvian digital media, they provide interesting insights into the dynamics of popularisation and extinction of terms that sprout in everyday language, aspiring to become useful words to describe realities marked by their own fugacity.

The fourth contribution, “Mapping emotional responses across the individual moral system in Social Network ethical public communication: a quasi-experimental study”, closes this Special Issue with a study that analyses, by means of quasi-experimental methods, the process of generating emotional responses based on different informative frames on a conflictive topic, such as the reception of migrants in Italy. The contribution of Ernestina Lamponi, Marinella Paciello (both affiliated at the International Telematic University Uninettuno, Italy) and Francesca d'Errico (Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro, Italy) is useful to identify clues about the way in which a given media coverage can affect, positively or negatively, the dynamics of ideological polarisation perceived in the digital scenario when dealing with ethical dilemmas.

Although the content of this Special Issue may echo and amplify pessimism regarding the online dialogue we are producing, the message we wish to convey is that a culture based on mutual respect must emerge and prevail in online dialogue. Identifying risks and bad practices is necessary to define new courses of action that can readdress social priorities. An open confrontation of arguments is necessary to build a public sphere that reaches consensus and stimulates active participation and relevant social engagement. However, in many of the mediated practices identified in the four selected articles we can also perceive the other side of the coin, locating

opportunities for widening the space for democratic space in online environments, and strengthening its foundations. Following Masullo Chen et al. (2019), incivility is a complex concept that keeps calling for scholarly inquiry anchored in diverse analytic perspectives.

Marisa Torres da Silva is an Assistant Professor at the School of Social Sciences and Humanities of Universidade Nova de Lisboa (NOVA FCSH) and integrated researcher of Instituto de Comunicação da NOVA (ICNOVA), Portugal. She is Vice Chair of the Publics and Audiences Section at the Portuguese Association of Communication Sciences (SOPCOM) and editor-in-chief of *Media & Jornalismo* journal. Her research interests include the relationship between journalism, democracy and audiences, online hate speech, news consumption and audience research, gender and journalism, investigative journalism, cultural journalism, and media pluralism. Contact: mts@fcs.unl.pt

Maria José Brites is an Associate Professor at Lusófona University and a member of the Board of the Centre for Research in Applied Communication, Culture, and New Technologies (CICANT). She is the coordinator of the project Youth, News and Digital Citizenship - YouNDigital (PTDC/COM-OUT/0243/2021). She is chair of the Publics and Audiences Section at the Portuguese Association of Communication Sciences (SOPCOM) and vice-chair of the Audience and Reception Studies section at ECREA. Her research interests include participatory methodologies, youth, journalism and participation, audience studies, and news and civic literacy.

Contact: maria.jose.brites@ulusofona.pt

Miguel Vicente is an Associate Professor at Universidad de Valladolid (Spain) and head of Department of Sociology and Social Work. He is currently co-chair of the Audience Section at the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and the coordinator of the Working Group on Communication Meta-Research at the Spanish National Association of Communication Researchers (AE-IC). His main research fields are environmental communication, audience studies, public opinion and political communication, and qualitative research methods and software.

Contact: mvicentem@yahoo.es

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