

# Political participation and discussions on social media

Karolína Bieliková  
Martina Novotná

CMA17: Current Issues in Research of Media and Audiences





# Today's lesson

## 01

### What is political participation?

- Traditional vs. news forms of political participation
- New opportunities?
- Ideal model

## 02

### Types of participation

- Expressive vs. passive
- Online political discussions

## 03

### Dark participation

- Mis/disinformation
- Conspiracy theories
- Incivility and intolerance

01

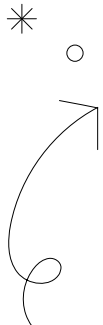
# What is political participation?





# Political participation

- *‘those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take’* (Verba & Nie, 1972)
- Reflects activities not attitudes
- Spectrum of what activities are political participation is getting wider with the use of internet and growing number of social media (Waeterloos, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2021; Lee & Kim, 2021)





# Traditional political participation

(Verba & Nie, 1972)

- Verba and Nie's seminal definition cited above, political participation has four minimal definitional features:
  - (i) participation is an activity,
  - (ii) it is voluntary and not ordered by a ruling class or obliged under some law,
  - (iii) it refers to people in their role as non-professionals or amateurs,
  - (iv) it concerns government, politics, or the state



**Voting**



**Cooperative activity**



**Campaign activity**



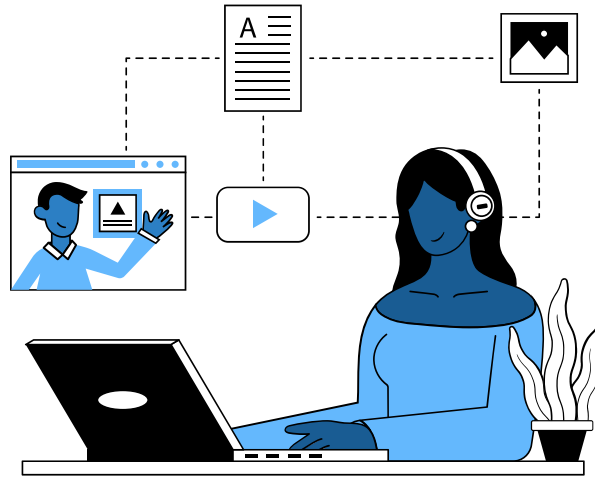
**Citizen- initiated contact**



# New forms of participation

- Opening up the definition of participation:  
*'any dimensions of social activity that are either designed directly to influence government agencies and the policy process, or indirectly to impact civil society, or which attempt to alter systematic patterns of social behavior'* (Norris, 2002: 16)
- Blurring the boundaries between political and civic participation
- Additional forms of participation such as joining boycotting or attending demonstrations





# What can change with internet?

Do you see any new possibilities?  
What are new types of participation people can use now?



# TIKTOK ACTIVISM?

SOCIAL MEDIA





# What does the internet change?

## More voices/perspective



- Blog, vlogs or social media account as a space for voicing own opinions
- More opportunities for marginalized voices than through traditional communication channels

## Direct communication



- Citizens can more directly communicate with political actors
- Political actors have more actors monitoring their behaviour

## Open place for discussion



- Opportunities to discuss current topics with more people
- Supporting democracy and further participation

## Bottom-up engagement

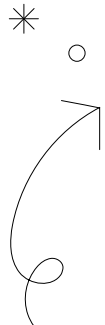


- Citizen engagement can more easily be noticed and lead to change
- Raising issues overlooked by traditional media/political actors

# Ideal model of political participation



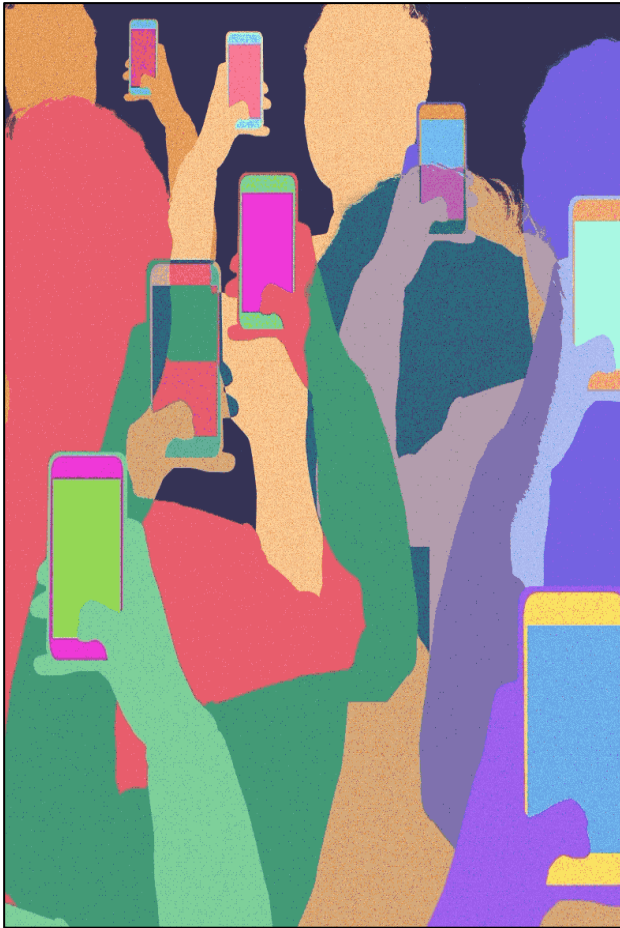
- Habermas: Public sphere (1989)
  - *“a domain for of our social life in which such as a thing as public opinion can be formed“*
- A place where people openly discuss current topics/events and matters of concern
- Mediated between state and society
- In theory it is open to everyone and free from coercion or intimidation by state
- A space where common good can be discussed and decided upon



02

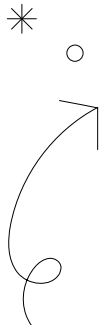
# Types of participation





# How can online participation look like?

- Expressing one's opinion online
- **BUT** growing number of social media leads to growing numbers of activities that can be considered political participation
- What can we still consider as political participation?



# SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES



## Expressive participation

- Main attribute is that is more visible
- Sharing, writing posts, posting images, creating events etc.
- By some users considered more effective than passive participation
- Takes more effort



## Passive participation

- Not as visible
- Reading posts, comments, events, etc.
- Often seen as less effective

Is like expressive or passive?



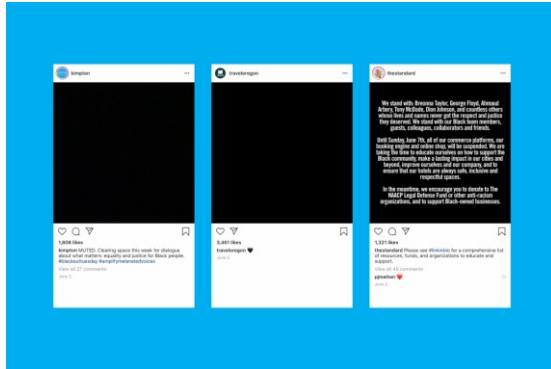
# Passive participation - does it do anything?

- Users often do not consider activities of passive participation as an act of political participation (f.e. reading posts, comment section)
- This type of participation can be perceived as less important because it is not visible to the public
- **BUT** passive participation can lead to expressive participation
- Influence on attitudes and opinions



# Expressive participation

## Creating

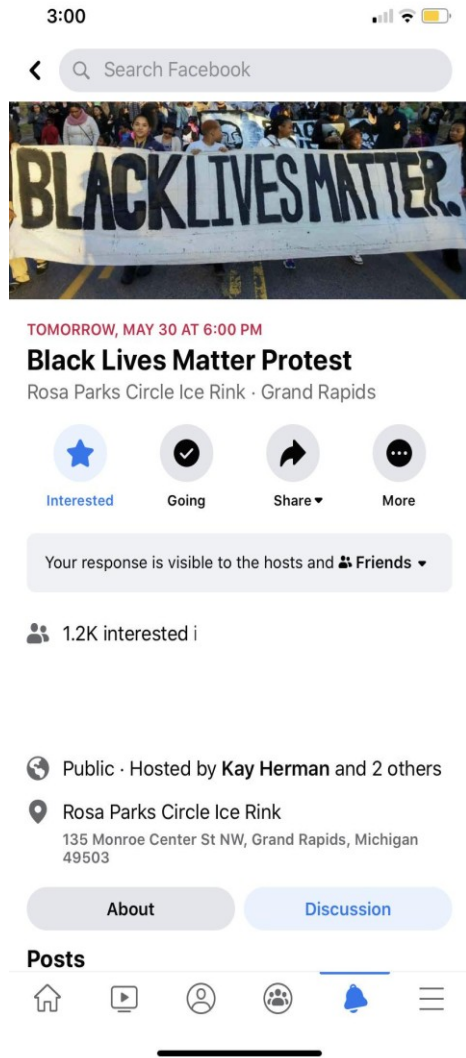


- Participation that take the most effort
- often perceived as the “most valuable”
- Voicing opinions, providing information or preferences etc.

## Sharing



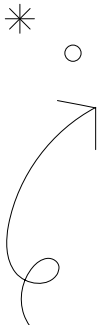
- Expressing opinions or narrative without creating the content



# Question of slacktivism/clicktivism

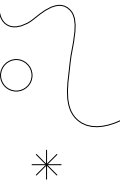
(...) which refers to the trend of fulfilling only the desire for instant self-satisfaction and having little impact on actual political processes (Halupka, 2014; Lim, 2013; Morozov, 2011).

- Criticism that there is a disconnect between online activities and the real impact in everyday life (Štětka & Mazák, 2015)
- Fear that opportunities in the online space may lead to less political activity offline (real participation in the demonstration)

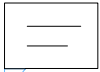




# Political Conversation & Democracy



- Political discussion as a requirement for a “strong democracy”
- Online political discussions are perceived as a valuable form of political participation (Ohme, 2019)
- Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars such as Gabriel Tarde and John Dewey emphasized the role of political discussion in democratic life.
- Jurgen Habermas’ influential work emphasized the role of public spheres to enable citizens to influence the political sphere.



○

\*

# Online Political Talk: Expectations vs Reality

- The 'online public sphere' would create the conditions for democratic deliberation.
- E-participation and e-deliberation initiatives could allow the public to engage in formal decision-making processes actively.
- **Political discussion is often judged based on its deliberative potential**
- Scholars have raised concerns about access and new barriers to the online public sphere (Habermas, 2022; Kennedy et al., 2021; Vochocová et al., 2016).



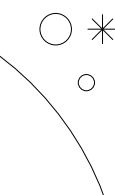
03

# Dark participation

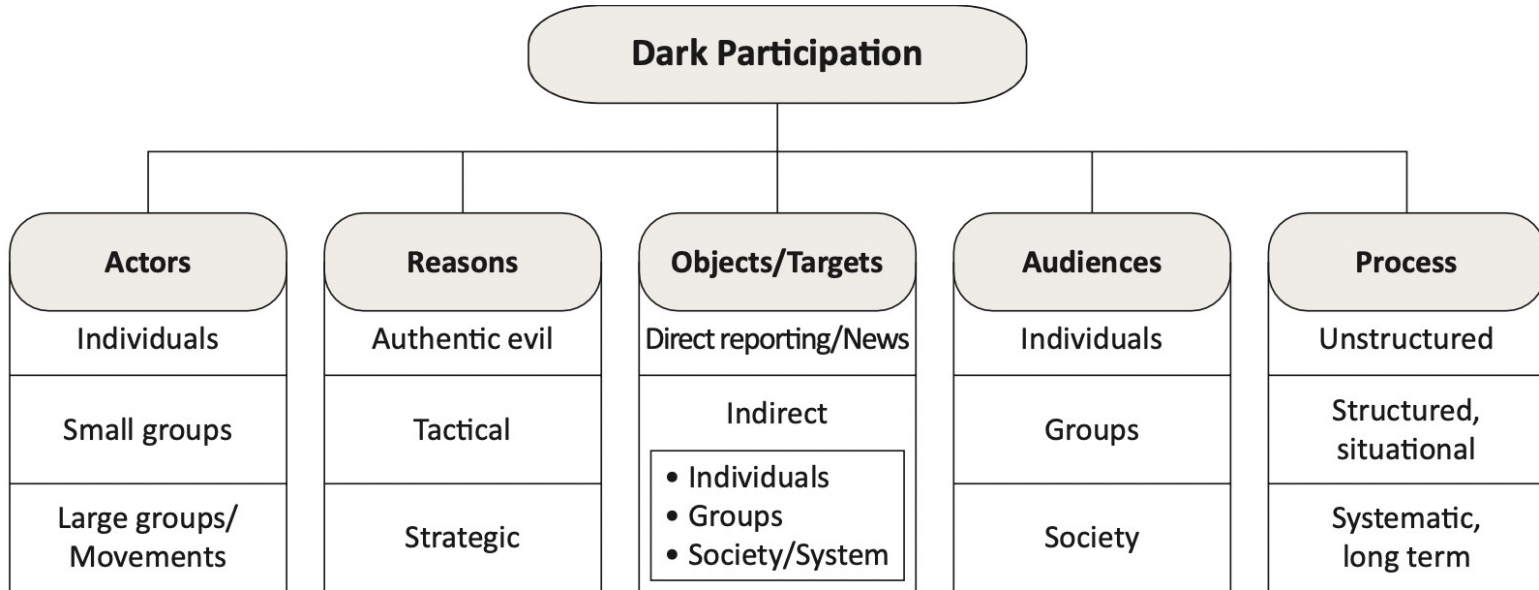




# What is dark participation?

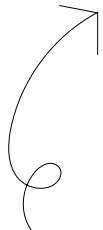
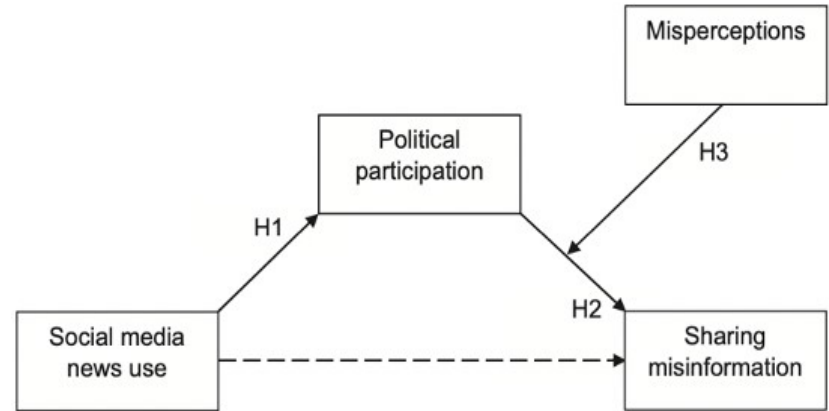
- Quandt, 2018 : “(..) characterized by negative, selfish or even deeply sinister contributions (..)”
  - Participation that does not help but threatens democracy
  - Includes: trolling, cyberbullying, dissemination of mis/disinformation, uncontrolled news environment, incivility, hateful comments, etc.
  - this type of participation seems to be growing parallel to the recent wave of populism in Western democracies
- 

# Variants of dark participation



# Misinformation

- The difference between sharing misinformation led by deception (i.e., disinformation campaigns) or cognitive bias
- The problem of sharing without controlling information/sources
- Relationship with the amount of news on SNS and motivation to use (Valenzuela et al, 2019)



# Disinformation

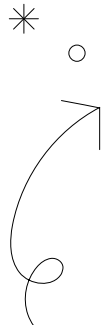
- Sharing disinformation as an act of political participation
- Motivated by speaking the truth to public
- The goal is to put the correct information out there
- Situation Czech republic (STEM, 2020)
  - 72% of citizens believe that the major media in the Czech Republic deliberately distort or withhold important information
  - 41% then find this allegedly withheld information on their own from other sources
  - 6% said that at least once a week they received information that was not reported or withheld by the major media



# Conspiracy theories



- Conspiracy thinking can lead to higher participation online
- Distrust towards systematic traditional forms of participation (voting)
- Finding alternative ways to participate (counter)
- Connected to antisystematic thinking
- Motivation is to be heard if they think their voices are silenced in traditional channels







# Fact-checking as participation

- Some users may be motivated to provide correct information and stop the dissemination of disinformation
- Motivated by
  - Need to help other
  - Normative idea to do what is right
- **BUT** problem is with lasting motivation and growing frustration
  - Can lead to less expressive types of participation (blocking, reporting)
  - Ignoring all together
  - Or trolling and using sarcasm and humour
- Sarcastic fact-checking can still be as effective the one using serious language
- Influence of who is providing the correct information (person vs. social media)



# Influence on relationships (Duffy, Tandoc & Ling, 2020)

- Sharing news and information to build relationships (gaining social recognition; trying to entertain, inform others)
- **BUT** pressure to share can lead to sharing fake news
- Subsequent negative reactions to shared information may cause fear of further sharing → social exclusion
- Differences across age
  - Older people - sharing threats as warnings or advice (especially to family, friends)
  - Young people - more caution before sharing information



○

\*

# Incivility Online

Studies have shown that online discussions frequently involve hostility, vulgar language, and verbal fighting (Coe et al., 2014, Rossini, 2022).

Many scholars argue that incivility **undermines** the democratic potential of discussions.

Online incivility often seen as “toxic”, a signal of “low quality”, and incompatible with democratically relevant political talk.



\*



# Incivility vs intolerance

- „**uncivil discourse** can be understood as expressions that feature a rude, disrespectful or dismissive tone towards other participants in a discussion, the story, or the discussion topic, as well as opinions expressed with antinormative intensity.“



- „**Intolerance** is operationalized in this study as set of behaviors that are threatening to democracy and pluralism - such as prejudice, segregation, hateful or violent speech, and the use of stereotyping in order to disqualify others and groups.“

(Rossini, 2022)

# SUBCATEGORIES

## Incivility & intolerance

Vulgar words

Personal attacks

Threats toward  
individual rights

Intolerance toward  
political positions  
and personal  
opinions

Racism

Aspersions  
towards policy,  
institutions

Attacks towards  
arguments or  
perspectives

Social or economic  
intolerance

Attacks toward  
gender and sexual  
freedom

Religious freedom

Offensive  
stereotypes

Violent threats

# Examples of Incivility and intolerance



1

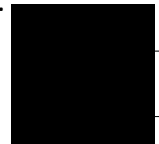
Okamura, the person is lying, also Which virus??

As a punishment, you will go to do cleaning to Fukushima..or just stop lying, bastard



You do not even know grammar. Awful mistakes

4

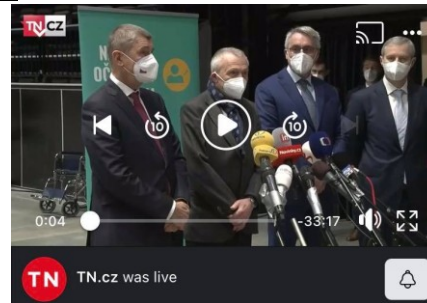


3

You are lying again... based on the news from the previous week there are no free beds left in the hospitals by now, and yet you are saying that 12 % of the beds are still free.

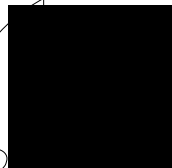


Dr. Mengele and his team! 5



2

You should excuse murders! No one wants your vaccine, and you have already killed so many people



\*

o

o



# How do incivility and intolerance influence active engagement in online discussions?

*„Discussions of people from the other side, when I say it politely, so I just provoke, and then I don't look at those discussions anymore. Because it is just bunch of vulgar words and shits, so I do not follow discussions anymore.“ –*

**Vendelín**

*„Things about Hitler and so on, so this is 100% beyond the border, and I directly report it.“ – **Samuel***

*„(...) so, for instance, they comment post, and I am writing with him a bit, but in most of the cases it ended up with aggression, and I do not want to be part of this (...).“ – **Martin***



○

\*

# Perceptions of Incivility: What Matters

Personal attacks  
seen as more uncivil  
than attacks  
towards political  
arguments  
(Muddiman, 2017)

**Types  
of  
attacks**

**Age  
matters**

Middle-aged adults  
perceive name-calling as  
highly uncivil, while  
college students rate  
vulgarity as more uncivil  
(Kenski et al., 2017)

Women are more likely  
to perceive incivility  
(Kenski et al., 2017;  
Vochocová, 2020)

**Gender  
matters**

**Space**

Data shows that in the  
case of news media  
outlets, some trigger  
more hostility than others  
(Humprecht et al., 2020)

\*





# Other Factors When it Comes to Incivility

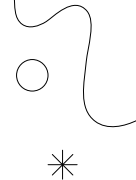
**Partisanship matters:** people perceive those aligned with them politically as less uncivil (Muddiman, 2017) as well as incivility may increase cross-cutting attention (see Lee et al., 2021)

**Conflict-orientation matters:** people who like debates are entertained and energized by incivility (Sydnor, 2017)

**“Extreme” behaviors** (e.g. racial slurs, violence) consistently seen as highly “uncivil” (Stryker et al., 2016)



# Negative & Positive Effects of Incivility



Risk of reinforcement of uncivil behaviour or its acceptance (Hmielowski et al., 2014)

... may influence polarization (Anderson et al., 2014; Borah, 2014)

... trigger incivility by those on the same side (Gervais, 2015)

---

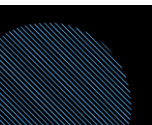
... Incivility can raise attention, awareness, and recall of arguments (Mutz, 2016)

---

... boost engagement and participation in online comments (Borah, 2014; Coe et al., 2014)

---

On social media, uncivil discussions can be seen as entertaining (Sydnor, 2019)



# GROUP ACTIVITY

**Split into groups**

**10 minutes of brainstorming**

**10 minutes of discussion**

**(1) Fighting for the opinion that incivility is a regular pattern of online discussions and is okay.**

**(2) Find arguments for a statement that incivility is harmful – why and for which reasons we should worry about it.**

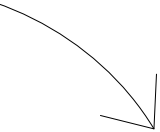
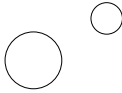


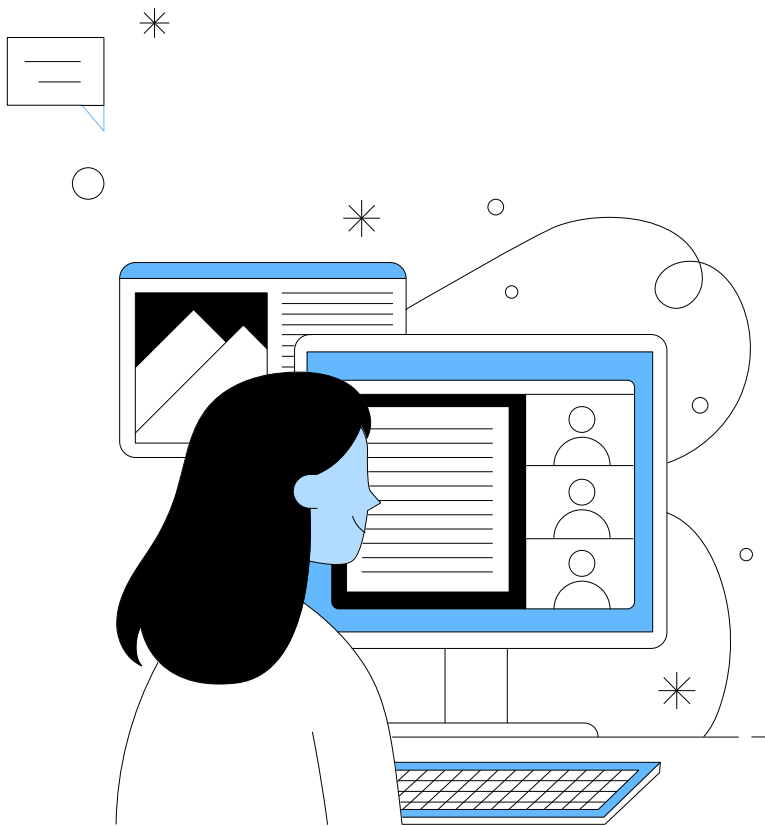
○  
\*  
○



# TAKE AWAYS

- Internet provides new options for political participation (more accessible, less effort)
- Dissemination of false information in online environment disrupts the idea of new ideal public sphere
- Online political discussions are important, but some voices may be excluded due to new online barriers.
- Incivility is evaluated as a problematic pattern, but some participants in online discussions are resilient.
- Optimistic scenario: there are not many people who frequently spread intolerance in comparison to incivility.





# THANK YOU!

DOES ANYONE HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?

[k.bielikova@mail.muni.cz](mailto:k.bielikova@mail.muni.cz)  
[mnovotna@fss.muni.cz](mailto:mnovotna@fss.muni.cz)

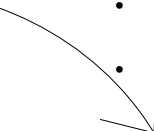
CREDITS: This presentation template was created by [Slidesgo](#), including icons by [Flaticon](#), and infographics & images by [Freepik](#)

Please keep this slide for attribution

# SOURCES

- , Anderson, A. A., Brossard, D., Scheufele, D. A., Xenos, M. A., & Ladwig, P. (2014). The “nasty effect”: Online incivility and risk perceptions of emerging technologies. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19(3), 373–387. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12009>
- Borah, P. (2014). Does it matter where you read the news story? Interaction of incivility and news frames in the political blogosphere. *Communication Research*, 41(6), 809–827. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650212449353>
- Coe, K., Kenski, K., & Rains, S. A. (2014). Online and uncivil? Patterns and determinants of incivility in newspaper website comments. *Journal of Communication*, 64(4), 658–679.
- Gervais, B. T. (2015). Incivility online: Affective and behavioral reactions to uncivil political posts in a web-based experiment. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 12, 167–185. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2014.997416>
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. The MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (2022). Reflections and hypotheses on a further structural transformation of the political public sphere. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 39(4), 145–171.
- Hmielowski, J. D., Hutchens, M. J., & Cicchirillo, V. J. (2014). Living in an age of online incivility: examining the conditional indirect effects of online discussion on political flaming. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(10), 1196–1211.
- Humprecht, E., Hellmueller, L., & Lischka, J. A. (2020). Hostile Emotions in News Comments: A Cross-National Analysis of Facebook Discussions. *Social Media + society*, 6(1), 205630512091248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120912481>.
- Kennedy, R. D., Sokhey, A. E., Abernathy, C., Esterling, K. M., Lazer, D., Lee, A. S., Minozzi, W., & Neblo, M. A. (2021). Demographics and (equal?) voice: Assessing participation in online deliberative sessions. *Political Studies*, 69(1), 66–88.

- Kenski, K., Coe, K., & Rains, S. A. (2017). Perceptions of Uncivil Discourse Online: An Examination of Types and Predictors. *Communication Research*, 47(6), 795–814. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650217699933>
- Lee, J., Choi, J., & Kim, J. (2021). Effects of online incivility and emotions toward in-groups on cross-cutting attention and political participation. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929x.2021.1969429>
- Muddiman, A. (2017). Personal and Public Levels of Political Incivility. *International Journal of Communication* 11, 3182–3202.
- Mutz, D. C. (2016). *In-your-face politics: The consequences of uncivil media*. Princeton University Press
- Norris, P. (2002), *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Quandt, T. (2018). Dark Participation. *Media and Communication*, 6(4), 36-48.. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1519>
- Rossini, P. (2022). Beyond Incivility: Understanding Patterns of Uncivil and Intolerant Discourse in Online Political Talk. *Communication Research*, 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650220921314>.
- Stoll, A., Ziegele, M., & Quiring, O. (2020). Detecting Impoliteness and Incivility in Online Discussions. *Computational Communication Research*, 2(1), 109–134. <https://doi.org/10.5117/ccr2020.1.005.kath>
- Stryker, R., & Conway, B. A. & Danielson, J. T. (2016): What is political incivility? *Communication Monographs*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2016.1201207>
- Sydnor, E. (2018). Platforms for Incivility: Examining Perceptions Across Different Media Formats. *Political Communication*, 35(1), 97–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1355857>
- Sydnor, E. (2019). *Disrespectful democracy: The psychology of political incivility*. Columbia University Press.
- Theocharis, Y., & Van Deth, J. (2018). The continuous expansion of citizen participation: A new taxonomy. *European Political Science Review*, 10(1), 139-163. doi:10.1017/S1755773916000230



- Verba, S. and N.H. Nie (1972), *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Vochocová, L. (2020). 'Frustrated women invite the immigrants to Europe': Intersection of (xeno-) racism and sexism in online discussions on gender aspects of immigration. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(1), 333–349.
- Valenzuela, S., Halpern, D., Katz, J. E., & Miranda, J. P. (2019). The Paradox of Participation Versus Misinformation: Social Media, Political Engagement, and the Spread of Misinformation. *Digital Journalism*, 7(6), 802-823.
- Waeterloos, C., Walrave, M., & Pennet, K. (2021). Designing and validating the Social Media Political Participation Scale: An instrument to measure political participation on social media. *Technology in Society*, 64.. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2020.101493>

