Fighting Words:
The Effects of Conflict Orientation and Civility on Individuals’ Willingness to Engage in Political Discussion

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Introduction

What leads some people to respond to online comments and not others? How does the tone of the comment affect the quality of the response?

“I agree that mental institutions are necessary. Mental patients that aren't given the proper care can cause a great deal of harm out in the world. Still, I hardly think it's fair to just pass all the blame onto liberals.”

What do people say when they do respond?

Emphasizing substance
“Although I respect and understand your thoughts on this issue I suggest that there may be other ways to ensure that mental illness gets the recognition and funding it needs for such an important issue. We don't need to reopen or build mental institutions and simply warehouse people but we do need to identify early signs of mental illness and make sure parents and families have the resources and education they need to get help before tragedies like this happen.”

Agreement with comment
“I totally agree with you. There are so many untreated mentally ill people in the world right now that desperately need help.”

Direct attack, no substance
“It's ironic you are giving so much flak to the government, and individuals with mental health problems, because you are clearly insane yourself.”

Why not respond?

It's pointless
“This person has already made up their mind and any attempt to reason with them would be futile and a waste of energy.”

I don’t like to argue
“I just don’t like getting into arguments. It's not even that I'm completely opposed to what he's saying, it's just I don't like the tone, and I think he may be misinformed.”

I don’t engage online
“I don't generally post comments on forums on the internet. Especially about subjects that I'm not 100 percent familiar with.”

Results and Discussion

Conflict orientation is a key influence in the decision to engage in online discussion, and is correlated with other key demographics that affect political participation. Incivility doesn’t influence the likelihood of response, but does influence the tone, breeding name-calling and personal attacks. This type of response has repercussions for ideals of deliberative democracy and encouragement of mutual respect.

Research Design

- 668 respondents
- recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk
- conducted December 28-29, 2012
- survey experiment run through the UVA Political Cognition Laboratory’s Limesurvey platform
  - Conflict Communication Scale (CCS, Goldstein 1999)
  - political engagement, media consumption
  - story on budget cuts and mental illness
  - experimental treatment- civility x ideology

Implications