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# **(Un)Civil Democracy**

## Political Incivility as a Communication Strategy

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE USE OF INCIVILITY FOR GOOD AND FOR BAD

The awareness that political incivility is increasingly widespread and harmful to our democracies has been a feature of many reflections on recent political events. Scholars, observers, and citizens share the sense that we are witnessing a progressive barbarisation of politics. When asked for their opinion, citizens express no doubt that political incivility is a serious problem that needs addressing. With this premise in mind, the objective of this book is to examine political incivility as it manifests in contemporary democracies.

Let's be clear from the outset: we are not dealing with a new phenomenon. Numerous and diverse expressions of political incivility have been recorded and reported in the past. Our book's central thesis revolves around a fundamental shift: incivility has evolved into a strategic asset that diverse public actors now harness to accomplish distinct objectives. These actors are not limited to political representatives. They also include journalists, citizens, social movements, and protest groups. These individuals collectively contribute to the construction of the "political spectacle". In short, incivility has become a resource to be leveraged, depending on circumstances, to take advantage of opportunities. These opportunities may be political (to prioritise an issue or introduce a new actor into the political landscape), media-related (to gain increased visibility or audience share), or relational (to enhance visibility and centrality

within an integrated communication ecosystem that now encompasses both legacy and social media).

This implies that we deny, or at least downplay, the relevance of incivility, which is often understood merely as an outburst of anger or a momentary loss of control in discursive interaction. Of course, such occurrences can and do happen. However, they are distinct from cases where political actors systematically use incivility to build a persona as candidates opposed to the political establishment. These actors engage in open and perpetual conflict with the media, accusing them of being “fake” because they interpret events in ways they do not like. To simplify, we could say that a nervous outburst is a limited episode that does not define the profile of the actor responsible for it. On the contrary, the second case reflects a deliberate communication strategy that employs crude language, stereotypes, and demonisation of political opponents or other adversaries to reach specific segments of the electorate and position the actor’s political offering.

The current high profile of incivility is due precisely to certain actors adopting specific communication strategies aimed at achieving particular objectives. If the value of incivility has undoubtedly increased in recent years, it is due to the numerous transformations that have affected both the political and media systems. At this point, we should clarify that, in our opinion, the spread of political incivility has undoubtedly benefited from the success of digital media, but this is by no means the whole story. It is common to attribute incivility to the advent of social media, but such an interpretation overlooks the profound transformations that have affected society as a whole. Before exploring these transformations, it is important to define what political incivility is.

The most recent reflections on political incivility all start from the recognition that, like many others relating to contemporary political life, it is a slippery concept. Nevertheless, there is a general *consensus* that incivility is fundamentally characterised by a disregard for the established social and cultural norms dictating personal interactions, as well as those dictating the operation of democratic systems. In essence, it encompasses the transgression of both the norms concerning civil interpersonal conduct and those governing societal affairs, where the exchange and contention of varying viewpoints are expected to occur in recognition of/respect for democratic principles.

Viewed as a strategic resource, political incivility has been significantly encouraged by well-known phenomena such as polarisation and populism.

These are expressed through a media ecosystem in continuous transformation due to the platformisation and hybridisation of communication. In various ways, these phenomena contribute to the production and diffusion of “moments of incivility”, creating conditions for the emergence of in-group versus out-group divisions, distancing from the elites, and identification with the people through the use of raw and direct language. These developments occur in an environment where attempts to gain visibility rely on provocation, evoking emotions in users, the logic of algorithms, and interconnections between media platforms, resulting in a continuous feedback loop.

The idea that we live in an increasingly polarised society is difficult to dispute, as evidenced by the vehemence and bitterness that characterise public discussions of political disagreements. It is almost impossible to remain unaware of the depth of feeling surrounding issues such as Brexit, Europe, pandemic containment measures, vaccines, the conflict in Ukraine, the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, and more, all of which are highly publicised and used by actors to create real divisions among groups. The heterogeneity of the themes around which divisions are created and articulated demonstrates that ideological polarisation has given way to affective polarisation, expressed primarily in terms of out-group animosity or negative feelings towards the other (*out-group animus*). These negative feelings are often expressed through incivility, including insults, exclusion of others, ridicule, and stereotyping of individuals and groups.

In-group versus out-group conflict is evident in all types of political communication, whether it involves political leaders, citizens engaged in social media discussions, or radio and television talk show hosts and their guests. Common to all these scenarios is the presence of mutual distrust, where the possibility of dialogue with the other is excluded. In the dynamics of polarisation, maintenance of a social identity is the overriding concern, strengthening citizens' affiliations with the groups they identify with and their rejection of those who think differently. This binary conflict, characterised by adherence to one's own group and the exclusion of others, takes on tribal characteristics, providing fertile ground for the emergence and proliferation of incivility. It also shapes citizens' information consumption habits, leading them to seek confirmation of their own beliefs while avoiding information that challenges them.

Populism, in turn, amplifies the value of incivility in contemporary societies. Political leaders perpetually seek direct contact with voters, aiming to portray themselves as authentic representatives of popular sentiments,



elevating their profile, and positioning themselves as champions of the people against the elite. In their quest to distance themselves from the elite and interpret citizens' feelings of anger and frustration, political leaders resort to colloquial and easily understandable forms of expression, often using direct and vulgar language. In this context, bad manners become key to effective discourse, accepted by both political actors and media operators, who are traditionally drawn to violations of civility norms. The widespread use of these rhetorical techniques leads to the "normalisation of incivility", spread by both political leaders and citizens. Not only does an aggressive and discriminatory linguistic code become prevalent, but polarising traits that emphasise "us and them" mentalities further complicate the reconciliation of conflicting interests. In short, populism as a communicative style involves the adoption of informal language designed to mirror that of the public, while resorting to aggression and insults designed to delegitimise the role and public image of presumed enemies.

Finally, political incivility has been encouraged by changes affecting the infrastructure of social communication. These changes have led to the creation of a hybrid media ecosystem where disintermediation and reliance on algorithms have impacted all aspects of social life and politics, integrating with the practices of legacy media. Platforms that structure information flows through algorithms have established a framework for a new public sphere where participation and efforts to gain visibility rely on politically incorrect language and aggressive, uncivil rhetoric, which is socially rewarded. Simultaneously, the importance of engagement and virality in social media communication rewards provocative content, leading to wider and faster dissemination and increasing the visibility of those who employ incivility. Consequently, platforms accentuate and amplify these actors' voices, while traditional sources serve as amplifiers, contributing to the spread of incivility. The constant need to occupy space in the attention market by generating engagement and increasing audience shares leads both social media platforms and traditional media to produce, promote, and propagate episodes, expressions, and manifestations of political incivility.

In summary, this context creates ideal conditions for the growth of incivility and enables political actors to exploit it in various novel ways. On careful examination, incivility is seen to be useful in at least three respects. Its "expressive" force allows those who use it to gain immediate recognition and visibility. It facilitates "aggregation", leading actors

to identify with acts of incivility, adopt them, and unite with others. It enables “mobilisation”, potentially leading to significant forms of political commitment. Those who use incivility for communication do so for a range of purposes, combining these three elements in various ways to achieve different ends.

The following chapters present an in-depth analysis of how various actors employ incivility. The *first chapter* offers a comprehensive examination of the objectives that drive political actors to resort to incivility, including the construction of a personal brand, the affirmation of political identity, the mobilisation of supporters, and, of course, the conquest of visibility in media coverage. Politicians’ outrageous statements or other instances of incivility gain algorithmic power (generating followers, reactions, comments, retweets, and likes) that allows them to dominate media coverage and influence the political agenda. At critical moments, especially when the risk of losing an election is high, political actors can exploit incivility to their advantage due to the resulting visibility. Unfortunately, the use of incivility with the aim of gaining visibility, whether for the leader, the party, or a specific issue, no longer seems restricted to election campaigns or specific political actors.

Different is the case of the use of incivility for the building of a personal brand aimed at enabling the immediate recognition of the political actor as one who refuses to conform to the conventions of established political processes. It is not surprising that the recourse to incivility is so widespread in an era when rejection of the so-called technocratic elite, expressions of empathy with voters, manifestations of authenticity, anger, and other emotions have become effective means of generating appeal. Indeed, if populism is viewed as a performative style, the creation of an uncivil brand appears to be a useful way of conveying the rejection of traditional political actors whom voters are tired of and dissatisfied with.

Furthermore, resorting to incivility simultaneously allows political actors to emphasise certain defining characteristics for themselves and, consequently, for the subjects they aim to represent electorally. In this context, incivility is used to establish *identity ownership*, meaning a group identity (related to partisan, ethnic, gender, religious or other affiliations) reflected in the individual identity of the political actor. In short, through incivility, political actors seek to embody, interpret, and sometimes legitimise (as in the case of manifestations of racism) identity traits specific to the groups whose political and electoral support they have or seek to acquire.

Finally, incivility serves as a potent tool for political actors to mobilise their supporters. These actors call upon their followers to take sides in favour of the in-group and against the out-group, thereby contributing to the classic phenomenon of polarisation. Whether supporters are mobilised in support of or against a particular position is a secondary concern. What truly matters is the strategic deployment of incivility to engage supporters, both through social media and street demonstrations.

In the *second chapter*, our focus shifts to how incivility is employed strategically to craft the “spectacle of politics”. This endeavour has become increasingly intricate due to the rapid proliferation of information sources and the subsequent intensification of competition for attention. In this context, incivility functions as a valuable tool for capturing specific audience segments. This includes individuals driven by confirmation bias who engage with partisan media, actively seeking content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs.

The resulting polarised communication mirrors the division seen in contemporary public discourse. It is fuelled by the same dynamics of in-group versus out-group interactions, manifested through insults, delegitimisation, stereotyping, and the exclusion of those with differing viewpoints. These practices are conspicuous in both traditional media and digital platforms, with the common purpose of presenting biased interpretations designed to reinforce a sense of belonging or exclusion.

However, incivility is not limited to constructing biased interpretations. It also serves those, such as talk show hosts striving to boost their audiences or enhance their visibility on social media platforms that reward emotionally engaging content. What these cases share is a recurring narrative structure centred on radicalisation, simplification, and the stark contrast between opposing positions. Staged conflicts, spanning from verbal attacks to physical confrontations in face-to-face encounters, revolve around emotionally charged and deeply divisive themes. The construction of a narrative depicting politics as contentious and uncivil aims to capture and retain larger portions of the audience. As individuals accustomed to the logic of social media platforms engage with these shows by commenting on TV programme clips on their personal social media accounts, they further contribute to the ongoing spectacle.

The *third chapter* explores how citizens use incivility in a context marked by political polarisation and the accelerated proliferation of emotional storytelling facilitated by digital platforms. People often perceive incivility as a “low-cost” communication tool that is easy to use