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# Does It Matter Where You Read the News Story? Interaction of Incivility and News Frames in the Political Blogosphere

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**Porismita Borah<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

The political blogosphere is replete with uncivil discussions and is apt to examine the influence of incivility on news frames. The present study brings in literature from incivility and framing effects and uses two experiments to examine the influence of incivility on news frames for democratic outcomes such as willingness to participate, online participation, openmindedness, and attitude certainty. Primary findings indicate the detrimental effects of incivility causing less openmindedness and more attitude certainty. At the same time, incivility causes more willingness to participate and online participation. More importantly, the findings demonstrate how incivility interacts with news frames. Implications for news framing effects in the social media landscape are discussed.

## **Keywords**

news frames, incivility, political blogosphere, online participation, openmindedness, attitude certainty

Increasingly researchers are being faced with questions about new theoretical perspectives to investigate the contemporary media landscape. The Internet has become one of the common tools for political discourse and scholarly attention has increasingly turned to the role of this new medium in reinvigorating democracy. The anonymity and flexibility of the online world allows the free expression of views and exposure to crosscutting information. For example, Stromer-Galley (2002) claims that the absence of nonverbal cues in online

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discussions lead to a “lowered sense of social presence and heightened sense of anonymity” (p. 35). She further observes that these same characteristics facilitate political conversations online by mitigating perceived social risks. However, this same anonymity and unconstrained expression can initiate vicious debate thus invalidating the ideals of democracy (Dahlberg, 2001). The political blogosphere is replete with uncivil discussions and some have even called for the development of rudimentary guidelines for appropriate discussions (O’Reilly, 2007).

The political blogosphere then becomes an apt context to examine the influence of incivility on news content. This article attempts to answer questions such as “Does it matter where we read a news story?” For example, does it matter if one reads a news story from the *New York Times* repurposed in a political blog accompanied by blogger commentary? In what ways does the social media environment influence traditional news content? Using two web-based experiments, the article tests the influence of incivility and news frames on democratic outcomes such as willingness to participate, online participation, openmindedness, and attitude certainty.

### *Frames and Framing Effects*

A large and growing body of literature in framing studies has emerged in recent years from a range of disciplines and academic domains (Borah, 2011a, D’Angelo, 2002; Scheufele, 1999; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996). Framing research that grew from sociological foundations refers to the “frames in communication” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 106; Druckman, 2001). The framing effects research, on the other hand, grew from psychological foundations and studied the processes involved in the formation of the audience frame (Druckman, 2004; Iyengar, 1991; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Borah, 2011b).

### *Strategy Vs. Value Frames*

Strategy frames use the language of wars, games, and competition; stories that use performers, critics, and voters; and focuses on the performance, style, and perception of the candidates. As a result, policy positions in strategy frames are interpreted as winning a voter block. Strategic framing tends to incite cynical reactions in news consumers (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), specifically when there is a higher level of strategic news present in the coverage (de Vreese, 2005). Scholars have also linked the exposure of strategic frames to decrease in voter turnout, trust in government, and civic duty (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997); and decreased intention to participate (Valentino, Beckmann & Buhr, 2001). Value frames or “value conflicts” on the other hand, usually depict policy debates as a clash of basic values. Value frames provide an interpretive framework to understand a political issue (Ball-Rokeach & Loges, 1996). Value frames resonate with individuals’ preexisting schema, perhaps reinforcing existing values. Shah et al. (1996) demonstrate that value frames prompt the spread of activation to related issue schemas, influencing individuals’ judgments about other issues, vote choice, or candidate character.

## *Theoretical Explication of Incivility*

Incivility has been studied in many different contexts such as negative political advertising (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Finkel & Geer, 1998), television talk shows (e.g. Mutz & Reeves, 2005, Mutz, 2007), or the online world (e.g., Papacharissi, 2002; 2004; Phillips & Smith, 2004; Hwang, Borah, Kang, & Veenstra, 2008a; Thorson, Vraga, & Ekdale, 2010). For the purpose of the present study, incivility is defined as offensive discussion that “attacks democratic ideals” (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 273). In this sense, incivility in the online world can range from rude critiques and name-calling to offensive stereotyping of groups, which can vary from use of milder words such as “liberal” to more offensive “faggot” (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 274). Whether incivility is understood in terms of television talk shows or in the political blogosphere, the findings from the literature demonstrate serious consequences.

## *Incivility and Its Consequences*

Civility is often considered a social norm of interpersonal communication. Violation of normative expectation by others, such as civility, leads to detrimental consequences regarding attitudes and behaviors (Fraser, 1990). One of the often-cited studies in the mass communication literature, Mutz and Reeves (2005) showed that uncivil exchanges among politicians in a televised debate significantly decreased viewers’ trust in politicians, Congress, and the system of government. Several other studies have showed the detrimental effects of incivility (see Forgette & Morris, 2006; Fridkin & Kenney, 2008). However, an experimental study by Brooks and Geer (2007) suggests that uncivil attacks in political advertisements may not always have detrimental effects on citizens and might even have some positive effects on political engagement.

Scholars have also started examining incivility present in the online world. In a recent study Sobairaj and Berry, (2011) concluded that uncivil discourse is “extensive” and “takes many different forms” in the online world (p. 19). In an experimental study, Hwang et al. (2008a) examined the influence of uncivil messages on deliberative attitudes and emotions. Similarly, Thorson et al. (2010), demonstrate the influence of an uncivil blog post on news credibility.

## *Research Hypotheses*

Research (e.g., Brooks & Geer, 2007) demonstrates that incivility can encourage higher political engagement, a pattern that can be explained by research on defensive mechanism. Prior research indicates that different psychological mechanisms could influence how individuals react to disagreement and incivility (Kunda, 1987, 1990). According to the theory of motivated reasoning, the motives for political reasoning can be understood in two ways: accuracy goals (which motivate individuals to make accurate judgments) and defensive goals (which motivate individuals to defend their prior attitudes).

Defensive motivations could be a potential explanation for the psychological processes involved in incivility effects. Uncivil messages in a discussion could bring forth strong perceptions of hostility, which can lead to defensive motivations (Kinny & Segrin, 1998). Ng and Detenber (2005) demonstrate that incivility produces hostile perceptions and negative evaluations of online discussants. And these hostile perceptions can cause individuals to get politically engaged (Hwang, Pan & Sun, 2008b). Hence, in the present study, the uncivil message from the blogger could bring out perceptions of hostility in the participants, which could lead to higher willingness to participate.

Moreover, in the uncivil condition, when individuals feel contempt and hostility, the exposure to a value-framed story that resonates with their values, could bring about stronger inclination toward engagement, compared to the strategic frame. Strategy frames incite cynicism and decreases intention to participate. In a recent study on value vs. strategy frames, Lee, McLeod, and Shah (2008) found that news frames altered the importance of considerations employed in decision making. More specifically, their study shows that participants shy away from using partisanship as a primary consideration in the strategy framed condition. When exposed to the strategy frame, participants become aware of the associations to partisanship. On the other hand, value frames would provide an interpretive framework to understand the issues as they resonate with individuals' preexisting schema, reinforcing existing values. Thus drawing from the literature on incivility and news frames the first set of hypotheses are proposed:

*Hypothesis 1 (H1):* Participants exposed to an uncivil blog commentary will show an increase in willingness to participate compared to those exposed to a civil blog commentary such that

*Hypothesis 1a (H1a):* Among participants who are in the uncivil condition, those exposed to the value framed newspaper story will show greater increase in willingness to participate than those exposed to the strategy framed newspaper story.

*Hypothesis 1b (H1b):* Among participants who are in the uncivil condition, those exposed to the value framed newspaper story will show greatest increase in willingness to participate.

### *Open-Mindedness and Attitude Certainty*

Research on resistance to persuasion has shown that people tend to show negative responses to counterattitudinal argumentation with an uncivil tone. These include disconfirmation bias and defensive reactions especially when individuals regard the information as a threat to their personal identity (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Hence uncivil counterattitudinal information can elicit defensive or partisan motivation, resulting in less open-minded reasoning (Edwards & Smith, 1996) and competitive or hostile attitudes (De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005).

In a recent study on incivility in the blogosphere, Hwang et al., (2008) demonstrate the erosive effects of incivility on deliberative attitudes. The primary findings show that uncivil commentary by a blogger leads to a decrease in open-mindedness and increase in

attitude certainty. This project extends their study by investigating the influence of uncivil messages on value vs. strategic frames. Exposure to the strategic frame brings about cynical reactions in participants. Hence a combination of feelings of hostility in the uncivil condition and strategic message could lead to less open-mindedness. On the other hand, a combination of hostile feelings toward the uncivil message and value frame that resonates with one's values could increase attitude certainty.

*Hypothesis 2 (H2):* Participants exposed to an uncivil blog commentary will show a decrease in open-mindedness compared to those exposed to a civil blog commentary such that

*Hypothesis 2a (H2a):* Among participants who are in the uncivil condition, those exposed to the strategy framed newspaper story will show greater decrease in open-mindedness than those exposed to the value framed newspaper story.

*Hypothesis 2b (H2b):* Among participants who are in the uncivil condition, those exposed to the strategy framed newspaper story will show greatest decrease in open-mindedness.

*Hypothesis 3 (H3):* Participants exposed to an uncivil blog commentary will show an increase in attitude certainty compared to those exposed to a civil blog commentary such that

*Hypothesis 3a (H3a):* Among participants who are in the uncivil condition, those exposed to the value framed newspaper story will show greater increase in attitude certainty than those exposed to the strategy framed newspaper story.

*Hypothesis 3b (H3b):* Among participants who are in the uncivil condition, those exposed to the value framed newspaper story will show greatest increase in attitude certainty.

## Method

The data for this study were collected using two experiments. Both experiments were embedded in web-based surveys. The experiments used two kinds of consistent frames—strategy and value frames (for a discussion on consistent vs. unique frames see Borah, 2011a). The two frames as well as the issues chosen; gay rights (e.g. Brewer, 2003) and immigration policy (e.g. Lee et al., 2008) have been studied in prior framing effects research. Since the influence of these frames have already been established in the literature, it was considered appropriate to examine their interactions with incivility in the context of the political blogosphere.

## Participants

The participants were undergraduate students enrolled at a Midwestern university. Although student samples are often regarded weak for generalizability, Druckman and Kam (2011) argue that student samples do not always hinder causal inference. Using empirical evidence the authors demonstrate that a convenience sample could create problems

only when the effect of an experimental manipulation depends on a particular characteristic on which the sample has no variance.

The first study (gay rights) was conducted in the fall of 2009 and the second study (immigration policy) was conducted in the fall of 2011. In both studies course instructors offered extra credit for participation in this study. All potential participants were contacted by email and given the web site of the online experiment. A total of 241 participants (74.5% female; 73.9% democrat; mean age = 21 years) completed the first experiment. The second study consisted of 225 participants (76% female; 74% democrat; mean age = 20.44 years).

### *Design and Procedure (Study 1)*

The first experiment dealt with the issue of gay rights and consisted of both pre- and post-manipulation survey items. After answering the pretest questions, the respondents were presented with manipulated stimuli in a news analysis story. The study used a 2 (incivility)  $\times$  2 (framed conditions) between-subjects design. Before reading the news story, the respondents read a blogger commentary, which was manipulated as either civil or uncivil. The two versions of the manipulated story portray the gay rights issue using a strategy frame and a value frame.

After the respondents finished answering the pretest questions, they were told that they would be reading a blog page. Every precaution was taken to make the blog page look real. The blog page was designed after studying other real blogs. The name of the blogger and other identifying information was blocked in all of the experimental conditions. The blog started with a commentary from the blogger, which was manipulated as either civil or uncivil. After the commentary, the blogger asked readers to check out a news story from *The Star Tribune* and the rest of the blog page contained the news story employing a strategic frame or a value frame. All features of the blog except the blogger comments and news story remained constant in the different conditions. The blogosphere is not homogeneous and there are several types of blogs. However, repurposing of news from the mainstream media is a very common format, where the blogger often adds a comment before sharing the news story. The blog page used for the present study followed this format.

### *Manipulations*

In order to manipulate incivility, the blogger commentary differed civil versus uncivil. The blogger commentary was developed with the help of prior studies on incivility in the blogosphere (Author et al. 2008; Thorson et al., 2010). The blogger commentary was also constructed with the help of actual blogger commentaries from real blog posts on the gay marriage issue. Although this was not a systematic content analysis, reading the real blog posts helped in constructing the blogger commentary.

The second manipulation in the study was developed with the help of prior studies (Brewer, 2003; Lee, et al., 2008) and a content analysis of news stories. Two newspapers, one national (*New York Times*) and one local (*Wisconsin State Journal*), were chosen for the content analysis. The main purpose of the content analysis was to investigate the media

content of the issue before conducting the experiment, which increases the external validity of the experimental manipulations. A year before the experiment was considered relevant as sample for the content analysis. Hence, the study period chosen was from October 1st, 2008 to October 1st, 2009. The articles were collected using the online database called Lexis/Nexis. From the total number of 96 articles, value frame dominated the coverage with 46 articles (48%) followed by strategy frame with 32 articles (33.3%).<sup>1</sup>

Further, to maintain consistency, both news stories were structured identically. They appeared to have been taken from *The Star Tribune*, a local Minnesota newspaper. The placement and length of the quotes remained the same in both versions; however, the content of the quotes differed according to the frame. The value framed news story presented arguments about the gay rights issue in terms of moral values. On the other hand the strategy frame presented the debates in the gay rights issue as a political gamesmanship (appendix).

### *Design and Procedure (Study 2)*

The second experiment dealt with the issue of immigration and the study used a 2 (incivility)  $\times$  2 (framed conditions) between-subjects design. The second study duplicated the first study in all respects except the subject of the news story. For the second study the news stories were developed with the help of Lee et al.'s (2008) article. Similar to the first study, the value framed news story consisted of arguments about the immigration issue in terms of moral values. And the strategy frame presented the debates as a political gamesmanship. Also, besides the "willingness to participate" measure from the first study, the second study included an additional item of actual behavior attempting to capture online participation.

### *Dependent Variables*

*Willingness to participate.* Like various other concepts, political participation has been conceptualized in many ways: as having four dimensions; voting, campaign activity, contacting officials and collective activities (Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) or two forms; campaigning and complaining (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999). With the growth of the new media landscape, political participation has taken new dimensions on the web (Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Graber, Bimber, Bennett, Davis, & Norris, 2004). Willingness to participate was constructed by modifying items from prior studies. In the present study, the items are not measures of actual behavior. The variable was captured by averaging participants' scores on 10 items to create an index (Study 1:  $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ; Study 2:  $\alpha = .95$ ,  $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ). The items (see appendix) in the index asked participants to rate their willingness to participate and were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The items asked questions about both traditional and online activities. Both traditional and online participation items were included in this construct because an exploratory factor analysis with promax rotation provided evidence of the items comprising of one factor. Promax rotation derives the name from "procrustean rotation" because it fits a target matrix with a simple structure

(Abdi, 2003). Promax rotation has “the advantage of being fast and conceptually simple” (Abdi, 2003, p. 6). The indicators to measure the factor had substantial factor loadings ranging from .74 to .84 in Study 1, and .74 to .88 in Study 2.

**Online participation.** Besides having the measure for willingness to participate, the second study included an additional measure in an attempt to capture actual behavior. Participants were asked to click on a link if they were willing to join an online petition seeking to influence public policy on the issue ( $M = 1.77$ ,  $SD = .420$ ). The participants had to click “yes” or “no” on the page, and in either case it would lead them to the next page.

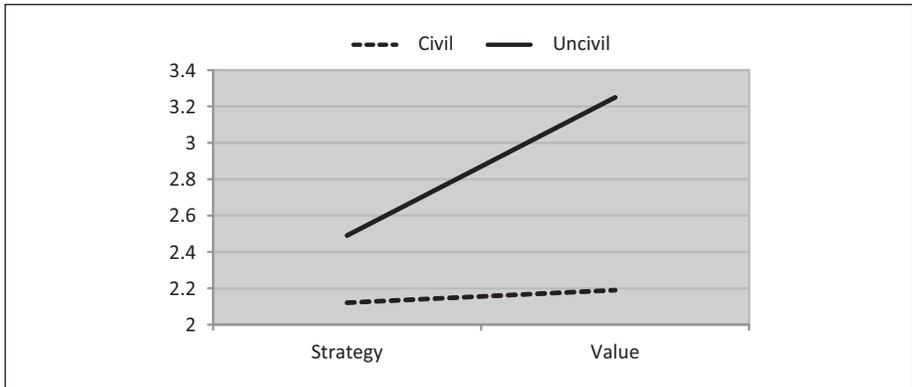
**Open-mindedness and attitude certainty.** Participants were asked to indicate how the news story influenced their attitudes with four items (Hwang et al., 2008a). All items were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). An exploratory factor analysis with promax rotation provided evidence of the items comprising two factors. The indicators to measure the factors had substantial factor loadings ranging from .81 to .93, while the factor loadings on the other factor were substantially low ( $-.063$ ). The factor analysis for the second study revealed similar patterns, with factor loadings ranging from .79 to .93. With the help of these results from factor analysis, two measures were constructed by taking mean scores, open-mindedness (Study 1:  $r = .66$ ,  $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ; Study 2:  $r = .75$ ,  $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ), and attitude certainty (Study 1:  $r = .63$ ,  $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ; Study 2:  $r = .69$ ,  $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ).

**Control variables.** Even though the study used a randomized experimental design, three common control variables were used: issue opinion (Study 1:  $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ; Study 2:  $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ), personal relevance (Study 1:  $M = .702$ ,  $SD = .457$ ; Study 2:  $M = .706$ ,  $SD = .455$ ), and party ID (Study 1: 73.9% democratic; Study 2: 74% democratic).

**Manipulation checks.** Manipulation checks were conducted for both the level of incivility in the blogger’s comment as well as the news frames. All manipulation check measures indicated successful manipulation. After being exposed to the stimulus materials, participants were asked to evaluate the incivility of the blogger’s commentary using a semantic differentials 11-point scale with the following item: uncivil/civil (Study 1:  $t = 9.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 2.41$ ; Study 2:  $t = 9.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 2.48$ ). The news frames manipulation was conducted by using the two items “the news story was about the moral values of the gay rights issue” ( $t = -8.641$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ) and “the news story was about the political struggle over the gay rights issue” ( $t = 3.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ). Similarly, in the second study, the two items were “the news story was about the moral values of the immigration issue” ( $t = -8.022$ ,  $p < .02$ ,  $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ) and “the news story was about the political struggle over the immigration issue” ( $t = 3.262$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ).

Manipulation checks in experimental research could be a tricky issue, since questions asked for manipulation checks could sensitize subjects. In the present study, careful attention was paid to avoid priming the subjects. The manipulation check questions were embedded with items unrelated to the hypotheses and did not identify the hypotheses for the present study.

First, for the manipulation check of the incivility of the blogger’s commentary, the item was part of a six-item question on blogger credibility. Basically, the civil/uncivil question was added to the six-item credibility scale. Moreover, the items were repeated for the news



**Figure 1.** Interaction effects of incivility and value frame on willingness to participate (Study 1)

story credibility as well. Second, the news frame manipulation checks questions were part of several questions asked about other unrelated issues, such as Iraq war or health care reform.

## Results

### Study 1 (Gay Rights)

To test the hypotheses and understand the interaction patterns a series of ANCOVAs were applied. These analyses controlled for pretest issue opinion regarding the gay rights issue, personal relevance of the issue to the participants, and party identification. Findings show that the first hypothesis of the study is supported as uncivil blogger commentary increases willingness to participate,  $F(1, 241) = 12.30, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ .<sup>2</sup> The ANCOVA model does not find significant main effect of frames. However, it is important to note that the significant difference between the civil ( $M = 2.19, SE = .22$ ) vs. uncivil messages ( $M = 3.25, SE = .21$ ) is seen only in the value frame ( $p < .002$ ). This ANCOVA model (Table 2) shows that the interaction between news frames and incivility is marginally significant,  $F(1, 241) = 2.89, p < .09, \eta^2 = .01$ . Specifically, the interaction shows that an uncivil blogger commentary and the value framed news article cause the most willingness to participate (Figure 1). The estimated marginal means for all the models are reported in Table 1.

The next set of hypotheses examined the influence of incivility and news frames on open-mindedness. The ANCOVA model shows significant main effects for both incivility,  $F(1, 241) = 6.99, p < .009, \eta^2 = .03$ , and news frames,  $F(2, 241) = 4.86, p < .03, \eta^2 = .02$  (Table 2). The findings support H2, showing that incivility decreases open-mindedness in participants. Although findings show significant main effects of frames, both H2a and H2b are not supported. However, additional pair-wise comparisons show that in the civil condition, value frame causes the most open-mindedness, ( $M = 3.61, SE = .23, p < .05$ ). In the uncivil condition, however, the differences between frames do not reach significance level.

**Table 1.** Estimated Means From  $2 \times 2$  ANCOVAs (Study 1: Gay rights)

Manipulations		Willingness to Participate	Open-Mindedness	Attitude Certainty
Value frame	Civil	$M = 2.19, SE = .22$	$M = 3.61, SE = .23$	$M = 3.96, SE = .22$
	Uncivil	$M = 3.25, SE = .21$	$M = 2.96, SE = .21$	$M = 5.26, SE = .20$
Strategy frame	Civil	$M = 2.12, SE = .19$	$M = 3.06, SE = .19$	$M = 3.74, SE = .18$
	Uncivil	$M = 2.49, SE = .17$	$M = 2.62, SE = .17$	$M = 4.21, SE = .17$
		Scale: Additive index, where 7 = highest participation and 1 = lowest participation	Scale: Additive index, where 7 = highest open-mindedness and 1 = lowest open-mindedness	Scale: Additive index, where 7 = highest attitude certainty and 1 = lowest attitude certainty

**Table 2.** Analysis of Covariance for All Three Dependent Variables (Study 1: Gay rights)

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	<i>N</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$
Willingness to participate	Incivility	241	1	12.30	.001	.05
	News frames		1	4.17	.04	.02
	Incivility $\times$ Frames		1	2.89	.09	.01
Open-mindedness	Incivility	241	1	6.99	.009	.03
	News frames		1	4.86	.02	.02
	Incivility $\times$ Frames		1	1.24	<i>ns</i>	.00
Attitude certainty	Incivility	241	1	20.35	.001	.08
	News frames		1	10.33	.001	.04
	Incivility $\times$ Frames		1	4.39	.03	.02

Note: Issue opinion, and personal relevance and party ID were controlled.

Next, a similar ANCOVA model was conducted to examine the effects of incivility and news frames on attitude certainty. The findings support H3, H3a, and H3b. Specifically, the results show that the uncivil blogger commentary increases attitude certainty,  $F(1, 241) = 20.35, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$ . The findings also demonstrate a significant main effects of news frames,  $F(1, 241) = 10.33, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$ , on attitude certainty. This ANCOVA model (Table 2) also reveals a significant interaction between news frames and incivility,  $F(1, 241) = 4.39, p < .04, \eta^2 = .02$ . Specifically, the interaction shows that an uncivil blogger commentary and the value framed news article cause the most attitude certainty in participants (Figure 2).

### Study 2 (Immigration policy)

Similarly, for the second study ANCOVA models were conducted. The first ANCOVA show that both incivility,  $F(1, 225) = 17.46, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$ , and frames,  $F(1, 225) = 9.75$ ,

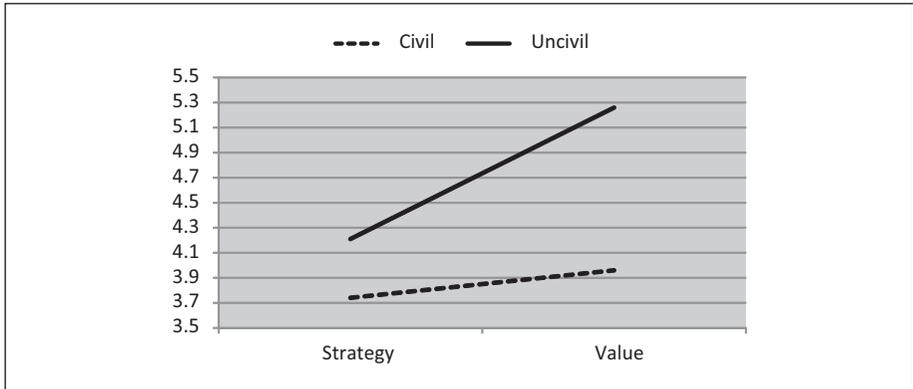


Figure 2. Interaction effects of incivility and value frame on attitude certainty (Study 1)

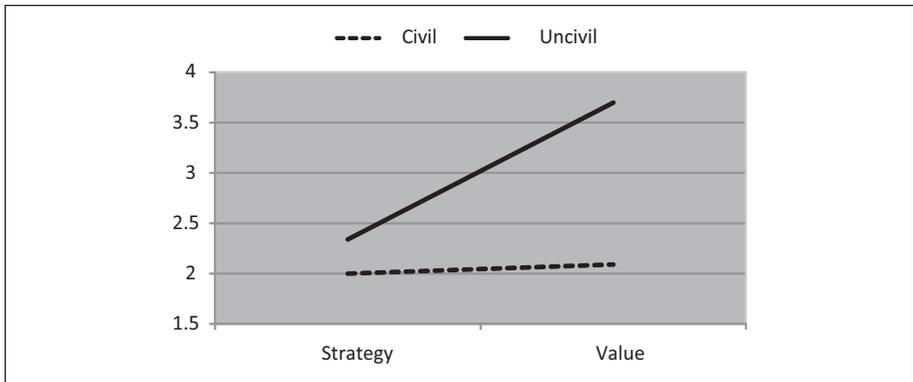
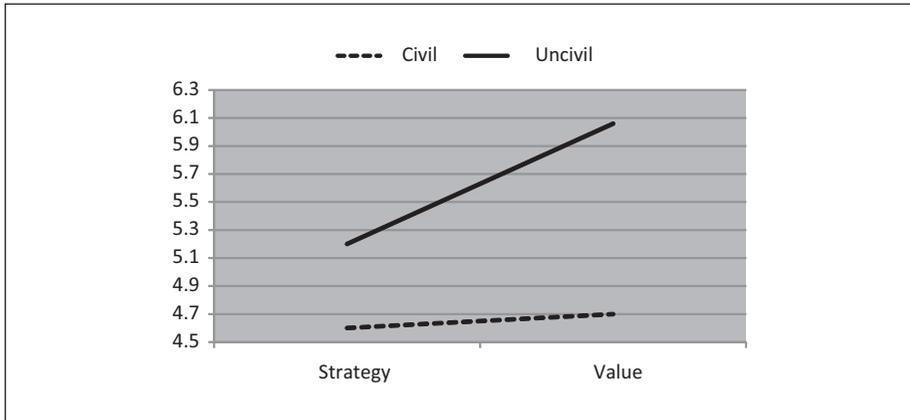


Figure 3. Interaction effects of incivility and value frame on willingness to participate (Study 2)

$p < .002$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ , influence willingness to participate (Table 4). Unlike the first study, the interaction between news frames and incivility is also significant,  $F(1, 225) = 7.80$ ,  $p < .006$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$  (Figure 3). The interaction specifically shows that in the uncivil and value frame conditions, participants are most willing to participate. Additionally, the second study included a measure of online participation. Results show significant effects of incivility,  $F(1, 225) = 11.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ , on online participation (Table 4). The ANCOVA model also demonstrates a significant interaction,  $F(1, 225) = 4.30$ ,  $p < .03$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$  (Figure 4). The estimated marginal means for all the models are shown in Table 3.

Further, ANCOVA models were conducted for the remaining two dependent variables. Results show that incivility,  $F(1, 225) = 6.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ , and frames,  $F(1, 225) = 6.56$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ , have significant effects on open-mindedness. The interaction was not significant; however pair-wise comparisons show that the civil message and value frame caused the most open-mindedness, ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SE = .24$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Similarly, both



**Figure 4.** Interaction effects of incivility and value frame on online participation (Study 2)

**Table 3.** Estimated Means From 2 × 2 ANCOVAs (Study 2: Immigration)

Manipulations		Willingness to Participate	Online participation	Open-mindedness	Attitude certainty
Value Frame	Civil	$M = 2.21, SE = .24$	$M = 1.23, SE = .07$	$M = 3.82, SE = .24$	$M = 4.42, SE = .25$
	Uncivil	$M = 3.32, SE = .21$	$M = 1.88, SE = .06$	$M = 3.04, SE = .20$	$M = 5.58, SE = .26$
Strategy Frame	Civil	$M = 2.12, SE = .19$	$M = 1.20, SE = .05$	$M = 3.01, SE = .20$	$M = 3.63, SE = .20$
	Uncivil	$M = 2.45, SE = .18$	$M = 1.32, SE = .05$	$M = 2.65, SE = .18$	$M = 4.17, SE = .18$
		Scale: Additive index, where 7 = highest participation and 1 = lowest participation	Scale: Dichotomous 1 = no 2 = yes	Scale: Additive index, where 7 = highest open-mindedness and 1 = lowest open-mindedness	Scale: Additive index, where 7 = highest attitude certainty and 1 = lowest attitude certainty

incivility,  $F(1, 225) = 13.04, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ , and frames,  $F(1, 225) = 22.23, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ , influence attitude certainty (Table 4). Again, the interaction did not reach significance but additional pair-wise comparisons demonstrate it was in the uncivil condition and value frame that participants were most certain, ( $M = 5.58, SE = .26; p < .001$ ), about their attitudes on immigration policy.

## Discussion

This project draws literature from two different streams, framing and incivility effects, to examine the interplay between news frames and uncivil messages in the context of the political blogosphere. With the blurring of lines between traditional and social media, understanding communication theories in the social media environment is valuable. The

**Table 4.** Analysis of Covariance for All Four Dependent Variables (Study 2: Immigration)

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	N	df	F	p	$\eta^2$
Willingness to participate	Incivility	225	1	17.46	.001	.07
	News frames		1	9.75	.002	.04
	Incivility $\times$ Frames		1	7.80	.006	.04
Online participation	Incivility	225	1	11.85	.001	.05
	News frames		1	1.48	<i>ns</i>	.00
	Incivility $\times$ Frames		1	4.30	.03	.02
Open-mindedness	Incivility	225	1	6.05	.01	.03
	News frames		1	6.76	.01	.03
	Incivility $\times$ Frames		1	.852	<i>ns</i>	.00
Attitude certainty	Incivility	225	1	13.04	.001	.06
	News frames		1	22.23	.001	.09
	Incivility $\times$ Frames		1	1.76	<i>ns</i>	.00

Note: Issue opinion, and personal relevance and party ID were controlled.

consistent findings across two different issues demonstrate that factors from the social media environment could interact with news content in meaningful ways.

Before discussing the implications of the results, it is important to highlight some of the limitations of the study. The blogosphere is not a homogenous entity. There are many different kinds of blogs; several factors such as reach of the blog, credibility of the blog, and ratings of the blog that could influence how individuals perceive the information received from a blog. The present project did not manipulate any of the factors in the blog except the incivility of the blogger’s comment. Many of these factors could influence audience perception of the blog as well as the news story embedded in it.

Despite some of these limitations, the findings from this project are fundamental to understanding the moderating effects of incivility on news frames in the context of the social media environment. The confidence in the findings from the project is increased as the hypotheses are tested with the help of two experiments using two different issues. The data analysis yielded consistent findings revealing complicated relationships between incivility and news content.

Results from the first set of hypotheses indicate that participants exposed to uncivil messages are more willing to participate. Prior research has shown that individuals could experience feelings of hostility when exposed to uncivil messages, which could lead them to engage more (Hwang, et al., 2008b). Although measuring the psychological mechanisms is beyond the scope of this project, the results demonstrate a similar pattern. And interestingly, this pattern is true only in case of the value frames. We already know that value frames resonate with individuals’ preexisting schema and help them interpret political issues (Ball-Rokeach & Loges, 1996). When individuals are exposed to an uncivil message that criticizes their point of view, and a value frame, individuals become more engaged. As a result subjects show a greater willingness to participate. Individuals exposed

to strategic news frame could often become aware of the connotations related to partisanship (Lee et al., 2008) and they may be less inclined to participate when exposed to strategic frames.

Next, the findings of the effects on attitude certainty show significant main effects of both incivility and news frames. The interaction effect demonstrates that uncivil blogger commentary and the value frame cause the most attitude certainty in participants. These results show that incivility in the blogosphere could lead to less open-mindedness and polarized attitudes. It is possible uncivil messages in political blogs may instigate hostile emotions and attitudes toward the other side of a controversial issue (Hwang et al., 2008b).

Although there were no direct tests for the psychological mechanisms in this project, the results show that it is very possible individuals indulge in a defensive motivated reasoning process. Take for example the results for attitude certainty. The participants' attitudes become more certain in the uncivil condition. When they encounter uncivil comments against their position, they become defensive about their own beliefs and their attitudes become certain, which could also make them more willing to participate.

The patterns demonstrated in the first study on gay rights are again tested in a second experiment using the immigration issue. The second study establishes these relationships further. Moreover, an additional measure is included in the second study to capture actual online participation behavior, which demonstrates similar relationships. Participants in the uncivil and value frame conditions clicked on the page to join an online petition to influence public policy of the issue more often than the other two conditions. Prior research (e.g., Brooks & Geer, 2007; Hwang et al., 2008b) has demonstrated that individuals are more willing to politically engage in the uncivil condition. This pattern is further established in the present study.

The findings show that individuals become less open-minded and more certain about their attitudes indicating polarized attitudes in the uncivil condition. Hostile attitudes toward the other side brought about by incivility could erode deliberative discourse online. If individuals on different sides of an issue do not respect each other, they could become more polarized through political discourse. This is essentially the opposite of the "virtuous circle" of democratic engagement (Shah, 1998). Ironically, the same uncivil message causes individuals to participate more. Uncivil messages polarized individuals' attitudes, which perhaps led to greater willingness to participate and online participation. Although the findings of incivility effects are important by themselves, the interactions with news frames make the results all the more powerful. The incivility effects in case of participation and attitude certainty are significant only in the value-framed condition. The cynical reactions to strategy frames are evident in these interactions.

Given the rise of the social media environment, the findings from this project have important implications for journalism. It is no longer guaranteed that a *New York Times* article will be read as a print copy or in the *New York Times* web site. Citizens could very well read the news story in a political blog or on their Facebook page. Referring back to some of the questions raised in the beginning of this article, findings show that it does matter where we read the news story. The uncivil message accompanying the repurposed news story influences several democratic outcomes. Therein lies the importance of testing communication concepts such as news frames in the social media environment. The

present project uses one of the common factors of the political blogosphere—incivility, to examine some of these relationships.

A fruitful possibility for future research would be to investigate factors such as credibility of the blog, reach of the blog, and ratings of the blog. These and many other factors could influence how individuals perceive the news in the political blogosphere. Research questions from the present project should be tested in terms of different kinds of blogs. For instance, how do these interactions play out when the blogger is a known journalist? The findings from the present project demonstrate that value and strategy frames could interact with factors from the social media environment in meaningful ways. Future studies should also explore other news frames. The present study content analyzes the news frames used in the coverage of gay rights in the mainstream media to help in the construction of the stimulus material for the first study. Additionally, a content analysis of blogger commentary in some of the main political blogs would help determine the political discourse in the blogosphere.

This project undertook the first step in understanding the moderating effects of incivility on framing effects in the context of the political blogosphere. The findings suggest that incivility can have both negative and positive influences on democratic outcomes. And these effects depend on the kind of news frames individuals are exposed to. Framing effects literature has long established the influence of different news frames. The literature has also demonstrated the different conditions that could moderate the influence of these news frames (see Borah, 2011a, 2011b). Testing framing effects in the social media environment would be one of the new directions for the framing effects research. More importantly, as evident from the findings of the present project, examining other communication theories and concepts in the social media environment is fundamental for understanding communication research in the contemporary media landscape.

## Appendix

### *Willingness to Participate*

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Realistically speaking, how likely are you to take the following actions regarding the issue of gay marriage issue?

1. Contact a news organization online to express your ideas on this issue?
2. Forward an email advocating a position about policy for this issue?
3. Circulate an online petition seeking to influence public policy on this issue?
4. Join a group on Facebook supporting your position on gay marriage?
5. Post a message addressing the issue as your status post on Facebook?
6. Share your opinions in a letter to an editor?
7. Attend a public meeting regarding the issue?
8. Participate in a rally advocating your position on the issue?
9. Post a bumper sticker/yard sign?
10. Contribute money to groups supporting my side of the issue?

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*(continued)*

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## Appendix (continued)

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### *Attitude Certainty*

Respondents' level of agreement on the following two statements: after reading the news article,

1. I felt my opinions on this issue became stronger
2. I felt more confident in my own opinion

### *Open-Mindedness*

1. I felt more open to the arguments on both sides of the issue
2. I got a better understanding of the issue

### *Issue Opinion*

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement:

1. A marriage should only be between one man and one woman (Study 1)
2. Policies toward illegal immigrants should be more restrictive (Study 2)

### *Personal Relevance*

1. Is there anyone among your friends who is gay? (Study 1)
2. Is anyone in your extended family an immigrant to the United States? (Study 2)

### *Party ID*

Which of the following best describes your party loyalty?

1. Strong democrat
2. Democrat
3. Independent
4. Republican
5. Strong Republican
6. Other party

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## Notes

1. The unit of analysis for this study is the article. The search words used were gay rights, gay marriage, and same-sex marriage. Each news story was coded for the presence of the two identified frames: strategy and value. If the story was judged to include the two frames, those were marked "mixed frame." And any story that did not emphasize these two frames but talked about the issue in general was categorized as "none." Intercoder reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa. The percentage of agreement between the two coders was established at an average of 91% on all measures.
2. Due to the controversies regarding the problems of partial  $\eta^2$  generated in the SPSS computer software, this study used  $\eta^2$  for effect size, which is a more conservative measurement than the partial  $\eta^2$  (Levine & Hullet, 2002).

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## Bio

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