

# Experience of Applied Researches in Online Deliberation: An Analysis of Civility in American Online Discussions

Daniil Volkovskii<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*St. Petersburg State University, 7 Universitetskaya Emb., St. Petersburg, 199004, Russia*

## Abstract

In this study research focus is on the culture of speech in online discussions, therefore, the purpose of the paper is to analyze the civility (culture of speech) in online deliberations on political topics. Civility in American online discussions is analyzed according to the criteria of the deliberative standard developed on the basis of the Habermas theory by Misnikov. It reveals what criteria are used to describe the culture of online communication and what factors can potentially influence it. To assess the level of communication culture it is necessary to analyze how participants relate to each other, their positions and comments towards objects of discussion. The author comes to conclusion that American discussions can be characterized positively from the point of view of civility and called rational as small percentages of rude attitude were recorded.

## Keywords

Deliberative democracy, deliberation, online deliberation, social media, civility.

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concepts of democratic deliberation have been intensively developed as they are aimed at significantly expanding the opportunities for active inclusion of citizens in politics and their participation in it [1]. As a result of democratization, individuals and communities were empowered and became key figures in political decision-making. In the theory of deliberation politics does not focus on state centrism and political representation but primarily concentrates on social power associated with the ability of reflexive citizens to make responsible, reasoned decisions in everyday life [2].

Since in a deliberative democracy citizens play the main role in socio-political processes it is assumed that they should be both political actors and bearers of a certain set of abilities, namely, have the qualities of a political leader. For instance, the ability to conduct a dialogue, articulate and take into account interests, values of other citizens, to analyze, discuss and feel responsibility for the problems of society as well as the desire to implement decisions reached in practice. Accordingly, high levels of political and legal literacy of population, its desire to take part in a political process are one of the main conditions for the viability of a deliberative democracy.

Thanks to the analysis of online discussions, it is possible to determine not only what participants think on a particular issue, how they argue their positions, what format of communication they develop, how the dialogue between them is constructed but also the culture of civic communication, the levels of development of politeness, the tolerance of the participants in relation to each other and the statements of other communicators. It is important to take these parameters into account as they allow to assess the level of development of society, the mechanisms of communication that exist in it as well as the quality of citizens' participation in politics.

The article will further reveal a research of American discussions on socio-political themes of current interest on social media. As an example, discussions were on Facebook and dedicated to the

---

*IMS 2021 - International Conference "Internet and Modern Society", June 24-26, 2021, St. Petersburg, Russia*

EMAIL: daniil.volkovskii@yandex.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-9568-1002



© 2021 Copyright for this paper by its authors.

Use permitted under Creative Commons License Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

CEUR Workshop Proceedings (CEUR-WS.org)

second impeachment of Donald Trump. The main purpose of the article is to show the civility (culture of communication) between participants of online discussions on relevant political themes.

The main research questions to be answered:

Q1. What exact criteria allow to determine the culture of communication in online deliberations?

Q2. How can American discussions be characterized in terms of a culture of communication?

Q3. What factors determine the communication culture of participants in online discussions on political topics?

## 2. Theoretical basis

To understand what role online deliberation on political issues plays in improving the quality of citizen participation in politics and decision-making, turn to various foreign studies conducted by J.S. Fishkin, V. Price, R. Cavalier., M. Kim, Z.S. Zaiss, J. Kelly, D. Fisher, M. Smith, A. Lev-On, B. Manin, D. Schloss-berg, S. Zavenoski, S. Schulman, P. M. Shane, T. Ohlin, J. Wung Ri, Y. Mi Kim, S. Wright, G. Leshed, M. Trenel, K.S. Ramsey, M.W. Wilson.

J. S. Fishkin [3, 4, 5] examines the historical background and theoretical foundations of "deliberative polling", analyzes the results of polls conducted using the voice interface. The researcher notes that the results of online survey are broadly similar to the "deliberative weekend" in which participants meet face-to-face. We suppose that the author of this article came to approximately the same conclusion in his studies devoted to the analysis of citizens' discussions on raising the retirement age in Russia in which the results of online deliberation and a sociological survey were compared. We believe that online deliberation is more convenient and flexible as well as low cost compared to opinion polls. Based on this we optimistically assert that this method can be extended to longer periods of time, more issues discussed which will ultimately lead to better political judgments.

V. Price [6, 7] demonstrates the results of two of his extended surveys of invited contributors to online writing on presidential elections and health policy. He was able to establish a positive correlation between the participation of individuals in these sessions and their political involvement. Based on the results obtained, it can be assumed that online text chats contribute to a more even distribution of the participation of individuals in the discussion than face-to-face format. Indeed, based on our analysis of civic discussions on social networks, we can say that participants are approximately equally involved in online deliberation.

R. Cavalier, M. Kim and Z.S. Zaiss [8] are conducting analysis in the field of structured online deliberation and they used a multimedia environment where participants of discussion communicated with the moderators via audio and video channels. Experiments have shown that there are no significant differences in the values of the measured dependent variables compared to face-to-face discussions constructed in a similar way.

J. Kelly, D. Fisher and M. Smith [9] analyzed the debates unfolding in the politicized newsgroups of the Usenet network, which is part of the Internet. They found that such groups are usually ideologically heterogeneous and that most commentators are more inclined to debate with opponents than deliberate with like-minded people.

H. Lev-On and B. Manin [10] are considering whether the Internet is conducive to network clustering of like-minded people. Based on their empirical data, they believe that communication on the Internet generates mixed trends in the context of online deliberation. People are trying to filter out content that is foreign to their views and with the help of various tools that help isolate opposing opinions.

Another group of studies is devoted to the tools that the state uses to involve citizens in online discussions of political decisions made by it and tries to establish how it can improve the effectiveness of civic participation in decision-making and making both at the local and regional levels. For example, D. Schlossberg, S. Zavenoski and S. Schulman [11] in their study did not find any fundamental differences between the comments of citizens on bills submitted to government agencies in electronic form and in the traditional (paper). At the same time, they tend to believe that the websites of authorities have potential, though underestimated because they contribute to the receipt of suggestions, comments from specific individuals who, in certain cases, can have a greater impact on politics than comments

presented in format of letters by organizations whose ambitions and efforts are aimed at mobilizing their voters.

P. M. Shane [12] believes that the potential of online public consultation allows the modification of government work towards the cyber-democratic model of Empowered Participatory Governance (EPG), which was proposed by A. Fang and E.O. Wright [13]. In their view, the model seeks to "broaden the ways in which ordinary people can more effectively influence the policies that shape their lives." P.M. Shane simultaneously analyzes the technological and inertial barriers to the development of both "empowered government" and a more advanced form of online public consultation than the one practiced by the US federal government and concludes that it is necessary to apply local efforts to push the US federal government towards a new model that allows for more inclusive and wider citizen participation in lawmaking and policy making. This point of view should be taken into account, since it may be relevant at the present time for the Russian authorities both at the federal and local levels.

T. Ohlin [14] analyzes the outcomes of a public consultation using a combination of face-to-face formats and networking, in which many senior citizens of one of Stockholm suburbs actively participated in the discussion of priority areas of urban planning.

We will pay special attention to research devoted to various ways of promoting deliberative forums and the introduction of factors on which their quantitative and qualitative characteristics depend. This group of papers can answer questions about whether moderators influence the course of discussion, what is the impact on the discussion of such variables as anonymity, the composition of the deliberation group and the system of reward, reward of participants.

Joon Wung Ri and Yoon Mi Kim [12] analyzing the results of online field experiment with the electorate who participated in the Korean general election in 2004 concluded that moderation reduced the number of voter posts in the forum, anonymous participants were more active and the system incentive points for participating in the discussion had a positive effect.

Scott Wright [15] touches upon the problem of moderating discussion forums initiated by the authorities. He notes that such moderation can take many different forms and based on the results of previous studies argues that the functions of filtering messages (censoring) and facilitating discussion should be differentiated between different moderators, and the function of deleting messages in case such a need must be fulfilled by independent body in accordance with publicly available rules, regulations.

Gilly Leshed [16] presents the results of a natural experiment in which the company's management drew on the possibility of anonymous employee participation in the internal online community of the organization after a series of inappropriate messages emerged. It can be noted that the results obtained by Jun Wung Ri and Yoon Mi Kim are to some extent confirmed, and the author himself points out a noticeable decrease in the number of posts and dialogues due to the removal of anonymous commentators in the online community.

Matthias Trenel [12] based on an analysis of a field experiment conducted in an online forum where the future of the territory (where the World Trade Center was located in New York) was discussed came to the conclusion that a more pro-active approach, i.e. facilitating discussion may involve under-represented categories of participants.

Kevin S. Ramsey and M.W. Wilson [12] criticize the current practice of online consultation and offer recommendations on how to increase the ability of panelists to critically reflect on the information provided to them during the discussion.

In our research an important role is played by the concept of deliberative democracy by J. Habermas, his theory of communicative action and discursive ethics [17, 18]. We assess the quality of deliberative discourse in order to identify characteristics, patterns, models thanks to which the process of deliberation, in particular online deliberation, can be improved both between citizens and between civil society and the state. In this study focus is on the culture of speech in online discussions, therefore, the purpose of the paper is to analyze the civility (culture of speech) that develops in online deliberations on political topics. The object of the research is the quality of online deliberation and the subject is the culture of speech in online discussions. Accordingly, our main hypothesis (H1) is that American discussions are civil, i.e. participants are polite, tolerant, neutral towards each other, statements of other participants and objects of discussion. Accordingly, we assume that the main factor determining the culture of communication in online discussions is the political development of the country, especially the level of democracy.

### 3. Research data

The empirical material for the discourse analysis was online discussions on the second impeachment of US President Donald Trump on Facebook pages of the leading American printed and TV media distributed into three categories in dependence of affiliation to political parties (conservative and liberal). We have selected two media sources for analysis: the conservative Washington Times and Fox News, the liberal New York Times and MSNBC, as well as additionally we took a neutral Wall Street Journal. In the Facebook accounts of these media, discussions were chosen on the topic of the second impeachment of the American president in connection with the attempted capture of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. A total of 2,931 comments were analyzed.

### 4. Research approach and findings

To achieve the goals of our investigation we used discourse analysis which is simultaneously a key moment and a method of online deliberations' research. Our analysis is based on a modification of the methodology developed by UN expert Yu. Misnikov (in line with the ideas of Yu. Habermas), already tested by us earlier and presented in previous publications [19, 20]. The scientist has generated «deliberative standard to assess discourse quality» where thematically different discursive parameters of the deliberative standard, corresponding to specific research issues and using for guiding the process of encoding messages of Internet discussions, are described.

In Misnikov's methodology civility is a synonym for speech culture which is used to characterize the qualitative nature of a public online discussion and is associated with demonstrating a tolerant attitude towards the participant in the discussion, his position and the object of discussion. Data about it are not so easy to interpret since there is no universal approach to its definition [16]. There are situations when messages contain both polite and impolite speech aspects which causes difficulty in post's coding. In addition to the use of harsh language that clearly demonstrates willful impoliteness, some messages may only imply unpleasant connotations, irony and sarcasm. If we talk about polite messages, then they can have a special purpose and be addressed to certain participants in a more personalized manner both with the mention of the name and with emphasis on some aspects of the topic which contributes to more involvement of people in the discussion in dialogic form.

We analyzed the civility recorded in the discussions on the topic of pension reform from two positions (see Table 1):

- interpersonal character = posts are directly addressed to another member with a mention of the name or personal appeals:

- (a) posts do not relate to issues, i.e. they are exclusively personalized;
- (b) posts are clearly rude and offensive in relation to a person, his nationality, religion, ideology, etc. (distinguish from irony, humor, sarcasm);
- (c) posts are clearly rude and offensive in relation to the objects of discussion;
- (d) posts are clearly polite and respectful towards a person (may contain irony, humor, sarcasm in a positive aspect);

- posts do not include an explicit mention of the participant's name, can be directly or indirectly addressed to a specific person, someone else or all people:

- (e) posts contain rude, offensive language, vocabulary in relation to the participant (irony, humor and sarcasm are excluded from this category);
- (f) posts contain rude, offensive language, vocabulary in relation to the objects of discussion;
- (g) posts are clearly polite and respectful (include deliberate politeness, irony, humor, non-offensive sarcasm).

According to the results of the analysis of civility (see table 1), we can see that their percentages are not high (they do not even exceed 10%), respectively, the general indicators of negative civility are low which means that such discussions can be called rational. According to the aggregate calculations, users on republican media were more polite than users on democratic media, however, the lowest percentage of overall negative civility was recorded on a neutral platform, where, on the contrary, opinions polarized in approximately equal proportions clashed. It is interesting that the participants practically did not distract from the discussion of the topic, did not discuss each other and the percentages of rude

attitude towards the participants were minimal while more negative and intolerant statements were directed towards the objects of discussion (D. Trump, his supporters, Biden, the Democratic Party, N. Pelosi and politicians in general).

**Table 1**

A civility analysis in American online discussions (in percentage)

	Liberal		Conservative		Neutral
	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News	The Wall Street Journal
Thematically empty posts with participant name's mention, only interpersonal communication	0	0,1	0	0,8	0
Posts with participant name's mention, discussion on topic, but rude towards participant	0	0,8	0,75	0,2	0,5
Posts with participant name's mention, discussion on topic, but rude towards object of discussion	0,2	1,2	0,75	0,8	1,9
Posts with participant name's mention, discussion on topic in a polite, tolerant way	0,6	0,1	0	0	0
Posts without participant name's mention, with discussion on topic, but rude towards participant	0	0	0	0,2	0
Posts without participant name's mention, with discussion on topic, but rude towards object of discussion	7,1	4,4	2,8	7,2	1,4
Posts without participant name's mention, with discussion on topic in a polite way	0	0,1	0	0	0,1
Negative civility towards participant	0	0,8	0,75	0,4	0,5
Negative civility towards object of discussion	7,3	5,6	3,55	8	2,3
Average negative civility in dependence of parties		6,85		6,35	2,8
Total civility	7,9	6,7	4,3	9,2	3,9

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, we can confirm our main hypothesis and provide an answer to the first research question (Q1). To assess the level of communication culture it is necessary to analyze how participants relate to each other, positions and comments of other participants, objects of discussion. It is important to clearly and specifically formulate the criteria in order to assess the diverse palette of cultural interaction which has been demonstrated in this work. American discussions can be characterized positively from the

point of view of civility and called rational as small percentages of rude attitude were recorded, moreover, in relation to the objects of discussion. In general, Americans are neutral and without excessive respect for each other, insults to participants in online deliberation are kept to a minimum. Mostly, abusive behavior was demonstrated in cases where the participant's position was different and when the participant did not understand the other's point of view despite different forms of argumentation. Then, instead of a rational force, an emotional one appeared, manifested in the form of a non-rude or very rude insult towards another participant. It is significant that the participants focused on the discussion of the problem and not on meaningless interpersonal communication distracting from the topic for the sake of which people gathered (Q2).

It can be assumed that such indicators of civility and such a culture of communication, especially in relation to the participants, are justified not by the heterogeneity of positions, indicators of the quantity and quality of argumentation, dialogicity, the degree of dialogue but by factors correlating with the mentality, socio-psychological attitudes, values, upbringing, education and culture in general, including political, the level of political development, especially democracy. We cannot determine with 100% accuracy which factors influence the level of civility but we can definitely understand the culture of communication and interaction of participants based on the analysis of this parameter which is important when studying online deliberation as a form of civil interaction (Q3). If the participants are able to conduct a discussion based on respect for the positions and personality of each other, especially if this is a format of discussion, polemics where participants are trying to win and not come to a consensus and mutual understanding, then, no doubt, there are wide opportunities for genuine public dialogue between representatives of civil society and government authorities in the development and adoption of decisions on significant political issues.

In the future we will analyze Russian discussions on acute political topics in social networks according to various parameters of the deliberative standard for assessing discourse including civility. The results will be compared with the results of analysis of participants' civility in American online deliberation in order to determine the set of potential factors influencing the communication culture of participants in the online environment, especially those related to the political development of the state as well as criteria for assessing the quality of deliberation. Moreover, in addition to social networks, we will take forums for analysis since there are discussions initiated not by the media as the discussions taken for this study but by the citizens themselves. Consequently, the culture of communication and its levels can differ significantly, as, for example, there are no moderators and other restrictive factors as in the case of Facebook media pages.

## 6. Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Russian Science Foundation, project No. 21-18-00454.

## 7. References

- [1] D. Held, *Models of Democracy*. Moscow, 2014.
- [2] D. Chandler, Democracy unbound? Non-linear politics and the politicization of everyday life, in *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 17, N 1, 2014, pp. 42–59.
- [3] J.S. Fishkin, The nation in a room: Turning public opinion into policy, in *Boston review*, 2006.
- [4] J.S. Fishkin, The televised deliberative poll: An experiment in democracy, in *Annals of the American academy of political and social science*, Vol. 546, July, 1996, pp. 132-140.
- [5] J.S. Fishkin, Virtual public consultation: Prospects for internet deliberative democracy, in T. Davis, S.P. Gangadharan (Eds.), *Online deliberation: Design, research, and practice*, Stanford, CA: Center for the study of language and information, 2009, pp. 23-35.
- [6] V. Price, Citizens deliberating online: Theory and some evidence, in T. Davis, S.P. Gangadharan (Eds.), *Online deliberation: Design, research, and practice*, Stanford, CA: Center for the study of language and information, 2009, pp. 37-58.
- [7] V. Price, J.N. Capella, Online deliberation and Its Influence: The electronic dialog project in campaign 2000, in *IT & Society*, 2002, Vol. 1 (1).

- [8] R. Cavalier, M. Kim, Z.S. Zaiss, Deliberative democracy, online discussion, and project PICOLA Public informed citizen online assembly), in T. Davis, S.P. Gangadharan (Eds.), *Online deliberation: Design, research, and practice*, Stanford, CA: Center for the study of language and information, 2009, pp. 71-79.
- [9] J. Kelly, D. Fisher, M. Smith, Friends, Foes, and Fringe: Norms and Structure in Political Discussion Networks, in T. Davis, S.P. Gangadharan (Eds.), *Online deliberation: Design, research, and practice*, Stanford, CA: Center for the study of language and information, 2009, pp. 83-93.
- [10] A. Lev-On, B. Manin, Happy accidents: Deliberation and online exposure to opposing views, in T. Davis, S.P. Gangadharan (Eds.), *Online deliberation: Design, research, and practice*, Stanford, CA: Center for the study of language and information, 2009, pp. 105-122.
- [11] D. Schlosberg, S. Zavestoski, S. Shulman, Deliberation in ERulemaking? The problem of mass participation, in T. Davis, S.P. Gangadharan (Eds.), *Online deliberation: Design, research, and practice*, Stanford, CA: Center for the study of language and information, 2009, pp. 133-148.
- [12] T. Davies, R. Chandler, Online deliberation design: Choices, criteria, and evidence, in Nabatchi T., Weiksner M., Gastil J., Leighninger M. (Eds.), *Democracy in motion: Evaluating the practice and impact of deliberative civic engagement*, Oxford: Oxford univ. press, 2013, pp. 103-131.
- [13] A. Fung, E.O. Wright. Thinking about empowered participatory governance, in A. Fung, E.O. Wright (Eds.), *Deepening democracy: Institutional innovations in empowered participatory governance*, N.Y.: Routledge, 2003, pp. 3-45.
- [14] T. Ohlin, Local democracy in the telecommunications age, in *Svenska dagbladet*, August, N. 1, 1971.
- [15] S. Wright, The role of the moderator: Problems and possibilities for government-run online discussion forums, in T. Davis, S.P. Gangadharan (Eds.), *Online deliberation: Design, research, and practice*, Stanford, CA: Center for the study of language and information, 2009, pp. 233-242.
- [16] Y. Misnikov, *Public Activism Online in Russia: Citizens' Participation in Webbased Interactive Political Debate in the Context of Civil Society. Development and Transition to Democracy: PhD thesis ... Ph. D. / Leeds*, 2011.
- [17] J. Habermas, *Involvement of the other. Essays on political theory*. SPb., 2001.
- [18] J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Beacon, Boston, 1984.
- [19] O. Filatova, D. Volkoskii, Key Parameters of Internet Discussions: Testing the Methodology of Discourse Analysis, in Alexandrov, D.A., Boukhanovsky, A.V., Chugunov, A.V., Kabanov, Y., Koltsova, O., Musabirov, I. (Eds.), *Digital Transformation and Global Society (DTGS 2020). Proceedings of the 5th International Conference*, St. Petersburg, 2021, pp. 32-46.
- [20] O. Filatova, D. Volkoskii, The online discourse as a form of e-Participation: the experience of internet discourse research, in *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance (ICEGOV2020)*, Athens, Greece, April 1–3, 2020. ACM New York, NY, USA, pp.326–333. doi: 10.1145/3428502.3428547