The Emergence and Persistence of Online Civic Intervention as a Discourse Norm: A network simulation model

Maier, Daniel; Porten-Chée, Pablo; Kunst, Marlene

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Maier, Daniel
German Cancer Consortium (DKTK)
Frankfurt (Main), Germany
daniel.maier@kgu.de

Porten-Cheé, Pablo
Heidelberg University
Heidelberg, Germany
pablo.porten-chee@uni-heidelberg.de

Kunst, Marlene
Freie Universität Berlin
Berlin, Germany
marlene.kunst@fu-berlin.de

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Disrespectful, pejorative, and vulgar speech has become a widespread threat to the deliberative potential of today's online discourses (Chen, 2017). Yet, while platforms often fail to moderate uncivil content properly, ordinary users increasingly take on responsibility for a functional discourse online. Thus, the present study builds on the concept of online civic intervention (OCI), which is defined as actions taken by users to fight disruptive online behavior (Porten-Cheé, Kunst, & Emmer, 2020). This study follows a dynamic perspective and aims to investigate how OCI emerges, diffuses, and persists as a discourse norm over time.

We focus on counter speech as one specific type of OCI. Counter speech are verbal responses to uncivil users, which aims to deescalate the situation by, for instance, calling for a respectful tone. Drawing on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), we assume that when individuals are exposed to counter speech online, they may feel compelled to engage in counter speech themselves. Their counter speech may, in turn, be observed by other users and encourage them to engage in counter speech as well. Given these expected dynamics, we aim to explore whether counter speech as an individual-level behavior may form an inter-individual discourse norm over time. For this purpose, we designed a simulation model that allows us to investigate the interplay of individual-level and contextual-level factors with regard to the formation of discourse norms. Factors, such as individual willingness to engage in OCI as well as exposure to platform policies that encourage users to intervene (Naab, Kalch, & Meitz, 2018) are included in the simulation because they have shown to affect OCI. Eventually, we aim to answer the following research question: How do individual and contextual factors contribute to the emergence and persistence of OCI as a discourse norm? We draw on the results of an empirically informed stochastic network simulation model. The model consists of agents who participate in discussions on platforms. The platforms, in turn, allow agents to mutually observe the discursive behavior of all participants. The model's logic is straightforward: The observation of OCIs lowers the agents' tolerance level for incivility and, thus, increases their willingness to intervene. In contrast, if agents observe that incivility is ignored by others, their tolerance level for incivility rises over time, which, in turn, decreases their willingness to intervene. To find out, how platform policies play out on the dynamics of OCI as a discourse norm, different scenarios are modeled, where content moderation and encouragement for OCI are systematically varied. Overall, our simulation model may serve to identify the conditions under which individual discourse behaviors form persisting discourse norms that are key for a functional public discourse online.

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