

# Beware attempts to suppress conflict on the internet

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Andrew Stafford offered [a new version](#) of a well-worn complaint in The Age yesterday, arguing that online incivility threatens rational political debate.

An online mob, he says, is "coarsening" our public discourse. Far from expanding the reach of democratic discussion, he thinks, the comment threads of political websites - from blogs, to magazine sites, to the websites of major mastheads - may actually be circumscribing debate by excluding those who can't handle the abuse that flies at anyone who sticks their head above the parapet.

There are some specific beefs, which are also familiar. He worries about astroturfers manipulating public opinion with organised attempts to change the course of public conversation.

Wearily conceding that "the genie is out of the bottle", he still wishes that "anonymous" commentary could be stamped out (presumably he means pseudonymous commentary here as well); that "personal abuse" could be clamped down on; and that a greater weight could be given to comments that "expand discussion".

This worry is as old as the internet itself. Along with its mirror image - the utopianism of deliberative "virtual communities" - it is an evergreen, normative, foundational story about the changes set in train by the internet and the practices of ordinary users.

For years now, many have looked to the internet to either redeem democracy, or for proof of democracy's final corruption.

The difficulty is that the more jaundiced tradition, in which Stafford's piece is just the latest entry, echoes a longer tradition of pessimism about democracy itself.

The worry about anonymity, for example, which is always raised in complaints about comment culture, has a long history that is intrinsically bound up with a hostility both to the broader circulation of information and the widening of public debate - both of which have been fundamental to the expansion of democracy.

While journalists now are professionally motivated to claim bylines, in the nineteenth century, when parliamentary and political reporting was in its infancy, they struggled to maintain their anonymity in order to preserve their safety.

The middle 1800s saw French and British parliaments debate compulsory bylines - politicians wanted to know who was criticising them and why, in the hope that identifying them would moderate their criticism.

This debate even managed to enter the canons of Western philosophy. Arthur Schopenhauer (no friend of democracy), in part exercised by anonymous reviews of his books, demanded an end to anonymity in his work *The Art of Literature*:

*"Anonymity is the refuge for all literary and journalistic rascality. It is a practice which must be completely stopped. Every article, even in a newspaper, should be accompanied by the name of its author; and the editor should be made strictly responsible for the accuracy of the signature."*

The ostensible reason for wanting to end anonymity, then as now, was the accountability of critics, but the real desire - to avoid criticism and, in the case of politicians, democratic accountability - is obvious.

While Stafford allows that people in authoritarian regimes may have reasons to be anonymous in order to preserve their safety, he thinks that citizens in Australia's liberal democracy ought to have to stand by their words. But this misses the fact that even here, anonymity or pseudonymity is a condition of possibility for online political discussion for some citizens.

While the lives of Australians may not be endangered by their political opinions, their livelihoods might (and I know many public servants, for example, who are in this position).

A default to real names may or may not buy heightened civility, but the price will be the exclusion of a great many people from entering online debate at all.

Similar points were made during the 'nymwars' that intensified around the launch of Google+ last year, when many users argued that they had good reasons for preserving pseudonymity online, and Google's demand that they use their real names effectively excluded them from using the service.

Google themselves quietly dropped the requirement for real names recently in the wake of this user revolt.

Stafford's piece also hews closely to the generic conventions of pessimism about the internet and democracy by proposing a narrative of decline, wherein the internet's capacity has uniquely enabled a fall into generalised incivility, and wherein that incivility now is worse than it ever has been.

But is this narrative really sustainable? As antagonistic as political debate might be now, surely there is no adverse comparison to be made with the big strikes of the 1920s; the street fighting of the 1930s; Menzies' attempt to outlaw communism in the 1950s; the conflict around Vietnam or Springbok rugby tours from the late 1960s; or the acrimony around the dismissal of the Whitlam government in the 1970s.

Australians have had long, acrimonious, impassioned and even violent political conflicts long before the world wide web came along. Democracy has survived.

Indeed, there are many political scientists and philosophers who argue that we need to turn the question on its head by seeing argument and conflict as part of the essence of democracy, not as its problematic excess.

Political scientist Susan Herbst, in her 2010 book *Rude Democracy*, starts with the proposition that arguments proposing that incivility is worsening or improving are senseless, unable to be settled, and miss the point of how civility and incivility function in democratic debate.

Overall levels of civility and incivility may fluctuate in accordance with circumstances, but it is difficult to sensibly measure them. Better, she says, to think about civility and incivility as strategic assets which can be deployed in rhetorical conflict.

Rather than seeing incivility as an "end state" into which a society can fall, we will achieve more by inculcating a "thick-skinned liberalism" in younger citizens by teaching them to argue, and just as importantly to listen carefully to those with whom they disagree.

More radically, the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe has elaborated over time a theory of agonistic democracy that embraces conflict, replacing it at the heart of democratic processes, casting impassioned dissension as democracy's essence.

She thinks that the idea that eventually rational consensus on controversial issues is possible - a belief that underpins deliberative models of democracy - is a dangerous illusion.

The radical pluralism of modern societies means that liberal consensus can only be imposed. Rather than seeking it, we should institutionalise and channel inevitable conflict in a way that allows us to be adversaries, not enemies, and in a way that reverses the long process of political disengagement in Western democracies:

*"Far from jeopardising democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence. Modern democracy's specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order."*

For Mouffe, conflict can only be repressed - it always re-emerges elsewhere. And one suspects that many of the complaints about the internet's role in promoting incivility are actually reactions to its emergence and sudden visibility.

In a world formed by what Brian McNair calls "cultural chaos", where elites and gatekeepers have lost control of political debate, it is more difficult to ignore dissent, conflict and the political passions.

These views of incivility and political conflict make it possible to understand it as something which is essential to democracy, which ought to be seen in a broader perspective, and about which empirical questions can be asked. It allows us to move beyond the old normative stories to consider incivility's part in the functioning of our democracy.

In collaboration with [Ethos CRS](#), I and other researchers will be asking such questions in coming months. Stafford's point about the danger that incivility may deter entrants to political debate might be pointing to something important, but what is the scale and nature of that problem? How does enlarged democratic debate affect those at the frontlines of democracy - political staffers, politicians, journalists, bloggers?

In a context where impassioned political conflict is more visible, and final consensus on big-ticket issues is unlikely, how can important policy best be made and enacted? We hope to have some answers later this year.

Such views of conflict and incivility also give us some grounds for guarded optimism. At its heart, after all, the modern unfolding of democracy has been about an opening up of public spaces, including discursive spaces, to broader participation.

It proposes a radical equality. It means accommodating the unpractised speaker, impassioned voices, new modes of dissent, new styles of argument.

We need to look carefully at demands for politeness: they often function as demands that only a certain kind of speech be heeded, and a certain kind of speaker be admitted.

Our starting point should be a recognition that conflict is a fundamental part of democracy, and not something with which we ought to accuse it.

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**Topics:** [internet-culture](#), [government-and-politics](#)

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