Uncivil Communication in Everyday Life: A Response to Benson's "The Rhetoric of Civility"

Shelley D. Lane[*]
Helen McCourt[**]

In his essay, "The Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy," Thomas W. Benson focuses on uncivil communication in the political context. The purpose of the current article is to extend Benson's characterization of civility and incivility beyond the realm of politics. Specifically, this article focuses on uncivil communication in everyday life and the rhetorical processes that underlie such occurrences. Everyday civil communication is characterized as that which is ethical and based on respect, restraint, and responsibility. Aristotle's concept of ethos, Habermas's ideas concerning universal pragmatics and communication competence, and Austin's and Kaulfield's characterization and application of speech act theory are used to explain instances of civil and uncivil communication. Everyday incivility is perceived as a serious societal problem that can be harmful to our mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Both civility in politics and civility in everyday life are governed by shared rhetorical norms that serve as guides for appropriate communication-related behavior. However, whereas political incivility tends to be deliberate and strategic, everyday incivility may be accidental and result from confusion about the rhetorical norms that influence perceptions of civility.

- A car zooms ahead of you in traffic and the driver "flips you the bird."
- A colleague abruptly interrupts you while you express your thoughts at a workplace meeting.
- You can't help but notice someone at the mall who wears an attention-getting shirt on which are the words "@#$% You!"
- Someone discusses personal information on a cell phone just loud enough for you to hear.

It's not difficult to realize that each of these situations illustrate uncivil behavior. Examples of uncivil communication in everyday life occur in various forms of social media, on the playing field, in the grocery store, and on campus. Uncivil behavior is also a common occurrence in politics. In his article, "The Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy," Thomas W. Benson argues that "political crisis and conflict routinely pro-

[*] Shelley D. Lane (Ph.D., University of Southern California) is Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education and Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas. She can be reached for comment on this essay by phone at 972.883.2931 or by email at sdl063000@utdallas.edu.
[**] Helen McCourt (Ph.D., Texas Woman's University) is an Adjunct English Instructor at Collin College. She can be reached for comment on this essay at hmccourt@collin.edu.

duce rude talk and accusations of incivility. Civility and incivility are communicative, rhetorical practices. As such, they are always situational and contestable."[1] Benson further contends that uncivil communication in politics is a strategic behavior and that it is carefully planned as "a tactic in political discourse, employed as an indicator of sincerity, as a maker of the high stakes in a disagreement."[2]

The purpose of this article is to extend Benson's characterization of civility and incivility by going beyond the political context to discuss uncivil communication that occurs in everyday life. The characterization of civil communication is presented and data from opinion polls form the rationale for the discussion of the seriousness of everyday incivility. While agreeing with Benson that what constitutes civil or uncivil communication is situational and contestable, we argue that everyday incivility is not necessarily strategic and that uncivil communication may be understood as a result of norms that aren't shared and norms that are in transition.

Characterization of Civility

Benson writes that "civility as a behavior is fundamentally about communication; our shared sense of the rules of civility governs the way we talk and the meaning we attribute to our actions and those of others."[3] These shared rules, also known as "norms," guide our behaviors and interactions with others. Some of the earliest norms we learn concern what is considered polite behavior; for example, children in Western cultures are taught that it's not polite to point at strangers and comment loudly on their physical appearance. Benson also contends that "our shared concern with civility as a communicative practice also carries with it an implicit sense that talk has consequences and that uncivil speech is not merely rude but that it has effects."[4] To return to the example of politeness norms, children may be chastised and/or punished by a parent if they point at and comment loudly about a stranger's physical appearance. As adults, we may be criticized by others or be "defriended" on Facebook as a consequence of violating the expectations associated with the shared norms of civility.

In addition to shared norms and consequences as components of civility, Benson writes that civility is typically characterized in two ways; that is, in terms of "citizenship" and "social order," as well as cultured and civilized behavior such as politeness, courtesy and consideration.[5] Benson's "The Rhetoric of Civility" and the current article are concerned with the second characteristic of civility. However, Benson's contention that cultured and civilized behavior is defined by politeness, courtesy, and consideration is a limited characterization of civility. Consider the horrific example of a World War II concentration camp guard who expresses politeness and courtesy when he asks, "Excuse me, sir; could you please step into the gas chamber?"[6] This example illustrates that civility exists

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[1] Thomas W. Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2011): 22.
[2] Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility," 27.
[3] Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility," 23.
[4] Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility," 23.
[5] Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility."
[6] Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manner, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York, NY: HarperPerrenial, 1998), 110.

within the same sphere as ethics.[7] In fact, "what gives true civility depth and importance is, first of all, its connection with ethics."[8] This means that a thorough characterization of civility must include the idea of making ethical choices. Ethics is a system of standards that defines what behaviors are right or good and allow us to evaluate and decide among behavioral options. In terms of civility, ethics allows us to make good choices about what and how we communicate.[9] Michael Josephson, co-director of the Joseph and Edna Josephson Institute of Ethics, offers six ethical principles to guide our everyday behavior. These principles are applicable to a number of different cultures and include trustworthiness, responsibility, respect, fairness, caring, and concern for the community.[10] To help us make ethical choices in our communication with others, we can ask ourselves questions that deal with everyday ethical behavior, such as: "Have I practiced any virtues today (such as being trustworthy, honest, and responsible)? Have I done more harm than good today? Have I treated people with dignity and respect? Have I been fair and just today?" and "Have I made my community stronger because of my actions?"[11] These questions and the principles on which they are based are integral to civil communication because "questions of right or wrong arise whenever people communicate."[12]

Ethics in language can also be identified through the rhetorical concept of "ethos." As defined in the Oxford *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ethos is "character as it emerges in language." Ethos, then, is closely connected to the idea of "selfhood" as revealed in language use.[13] Many rhetoricians use Aristotle's discussion of ethos in his *Rhetoric* as the basis of the classical definition. Aristotle states:

> Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak. It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost by called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.[14]

While this definition of ethos is still relied on in formal communication, in modern times it seems to apply mainly to the public/professional sphere.

Just as civil behavior is based on a choice we make to communicate in an ethical manner, civility is the result of a choice we make on behalf of others—disciplining our

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[7] Pier M. Forni, *Choosing Civility* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002).

[8] Pier M. Forni, "Why Civility Matters," *Dallas Morning News,* July 25, 2010, 1P, 5P.

[9] Forni, *Choosing Civility*.

[10] Michael Josephson, *Making Ethical Decisions* (Los Angeles, CA: Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2002).

[11] Thomas Shanks, "Everyday Ethics." *Issues in Ethics* 8, no. 1 (1997), http://www.scu.edu/ethics /publications/iie/v8n1/everydayethics.html.

[12] "NCA Credo for Ethical Communication," *National Communication Association*, 1999, http://natcom .org/Default.aspx?id=134.

[13] James S. Baumlin, "Ethos," *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 263.

[14] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a, ed. Richard McKeon, *Introduction to Aristotle* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 732.

passions for the sake of cooperation and limiting our language to create community.[15] This means that civil behavior requires us to communicate on the basis of respect, restraint, and responsibility.[16]

"Respect" can refer to esteem (e.g., "I respect your mathematical ability"); deference ("I respect your right to hold that opinion"); and acceptance ("I won't impose my will on you"). When we refer to respect for people rather than beliefs, we specifically concern ourselves with the respect that all humans deserve by virtue of their humanity and respect based on a person's qualities, achievements, experiences, or position.[17] Respect also concerns references made to our identity. The creation of our identity or "face" is a collaborative process that involves us and our conversation partners. Embarrassment, anger, and shame may be the result of losing face, such as when disrespectful communication threatens our identity.[18] In general, commenting on or displaying behaviors that communicate a positive evaluation of another's identity shows respect, while commenting on or displaying behaviors that communicate a negative evaluation of another's identity may show disrespect. In everyday life, we can demonstrate respect by listening well to a conversation partner and acknowledging that a partner's opinions have merit even if we disagree with them.

This idea of respectful communication is foundational in Jürgen Habermas's rhetorical theories of language called universal pragmatics and communication competence. Universal pragmatics seeks "open, equitable, ethical, and thus rational discourse aimed at freeing human beings from dominance."[19] In order to reach this level of communication, interactants must possess communication competence. Communication competence "involves the ability to communicate in a such a way that: (1) the truth claim of an utterance is shared by both speaker and hearer; (2) the hearer is led to understand and accept the speaker's intention; and (3) the speaker adapts to the hearer's world view."[20] A conflict, rather than discussion, will result if interactants disagree about the truth or appropriateness of their interaction. Habermas contends that we can avoid conflict by making sure we share meanings and "normative backgrounds" or shared social expectations.[21] There-

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[15] Carter, *Civility*. Carter also describes civil communication as illustrating good manners, politeness, and courtesy; doing good rather than harm; requiring us to disagree respectfully and to listen to others knowing that they may be right and we may be wrong; forgoing the urge to say anything that comes to mind; thinking carefully about how our comments will affect others; and realizing that we don't have to like others to act in a civil manner.

[16] Forni, *Choosing Civility*. Forni also characterizes civility as: abiding by rules; compassion; consideration; courtesy; decency; honesty; manners; politeness; and tact.

[17] Emrys Westacott, *The Virtue of our Vices: A Modest Defense of Gossip, Rudeness, and Other Bad Habits* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). See also Stephen C. Youngbluth and Stephen E. Johnson, "With Respect to Emotion in the Dominion of Rationality: Managing Conflict through Respectful Dialog," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 18, (2010): 211-226.

[18] Sociologist Erving Goffman wrote extensively about identity creation. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1959) and Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public* (New York, NY: Bantam, 1971). See also Sandra Metts and Erica Grohskopf, "Impression Management: Goals, Strategies, Skills," in *Handbook of Communication,* ed. John O. Green and Brant R. Burleson. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001), 357-399.

[19] James A. Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric* (Boston: Pearson Education, 2005), 238.

[20] Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Robert Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1985), 230.

[21] Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Toronto, Canada: Beacon Press, 1979), 3.

fore, Habermas seeks to establish communication norms that allow a conversation to remain rational. The development of communication norms creates the social coordination needed for conversation partners to pursue individual or collective goals while acknowledging the truth or appropriateness of their interaction.[22] Communication norms should include the ideas that all participants must be allowed to speak freely, all participants must be allowed to speak for themselves (to enable them to establish their own ethos or "selfhood"), and that communication should be equal, with no one participant commanding more attention from the others than is afforded to them on their turn.[23]

"Restraint" means that we need not comment on all of our thoughts and that we should remain silent or carefully craft our words for the sake of social harmony. Refraining from the expression of thoughts and feelings that might stall a conversation (sometimes labeled "verbal editing") is a key component of civility. In this manner, "civility works as a filter that selects for expression what is fitting in both content and form for a particular situation, person, and purpose. Civility is a buffer between our primitive expressive impulses and the delicate threads of social life."[24] It's important to note that self-control or restraint doesn't mean that we must restrict our everyday behaviors or that we must eliminate self-expression. However, it does mean that we realize that everything we want to express may not be worthy of expression. It also means that we understand that while "it may appear that we give up self-expression when we exercise [civility], in truth, restraint can be much an expression of ourselves as is unfettered behavior."[25] We can demonstrate restraint in everyday life when we refrain uttering a thought or feeling that may influence another to "lose face" and/or feel anger, shame, or sadness.

"Responsibility," also known as "the social covenant," refers to our individual obligation to society at large.[26] Some believe that while an individual's responsibility to the larger society was once understood and honored, today "we seem less compelled to honor the social covenant, make the communal investment and act as if we owe anybody anything."[27] In fact, the word "civility" derives from the Latin *civitas* or "city." The historical assumption behind civility is that we are to be good citizens.[28] One way we can practice our citizenship is by engaging in the community in a political and moral manner (e.g., by voting and doing volunteer work).[29] In everyday life, as Benson suggests, concern for and responsibility to the community means that we are aware that our communication has consequences; that is, the potential to positively or negatively affect others. This idea fits with the rhetorical theory of "speech acts" that focuses not only on an utterance but on "the product of that act."[30] Speech act theory explains that speech has social power and acknowledges a speaker's rhetorical purpose, whether it is to argue, ask,

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[22] Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984).

[23] James A. Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric*, 239.

[24] Jamie Harden Fritz "Civility in the Workplace" *Spectra* 47, no. 3 (2011): 13.

[25] Forni, *Choosing Civility,* 168.

[26] Leonard Pitts Jr., "Our Coarseness Undercuts the Social Covenant." *Dallas Morning News*, May 8, 2012, 21A.

[27] Pitts, "Coarseness," 21A.

[28] Forni, *Choosing Civility.* See also Forni, "Why Civility Matters."

[29] Richard Boyd, "The Value of Civility?" *Urban Studies* 43, no. 5/6 (2006): 863-878.

[30] Fred J. Kauffeld, "Speech Acts," *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 738.

command, endorse, apologize, etc.[31] In *How to do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin, one of the leading philosophers of speech act theory, describes three types of acts that produce consequences that affect listeners: "locutionary acts," which involve utterances that have a traditional meaning; "illocutionary acts," or utterances that inform, order, warn, etc.; and "perlocutionary acts," which concern the consequences that result from convincing, persuading, deterring, etc.[32] Similar to the perlocutionary act, the illocutionary act, "if performed in conformity with the pertinent conventions, has the potential to impact the social and moral order."[33] In all, being aware of how our communication affects others when we choose to communicate on the basis of respect, restraint, and responsibility can foster cooperation and civil interactions.[34]

Uncivil Communication in Everyday Life

Benson begins "The Rhetoric of Civility" with the example of the politically-motivated 2011 shootings that took place in Tucson, AZ., during which 19 people were shot, including Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. Benson refers to the words of President Barack Obama, who spoke at a memorial service after the Tucson shootings: "It's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not a way that wounds . . . . We may not be able to stop all evil in the world, but I know that how we treat one another is entirely up to us."[35] Obama's Tucson memorial service speech not only referred to civility in politics, but also referred to civility in everyday life. Uncivil behavior in everyday life was recognized as a serious societal problem over a decade ago. The 2002 Public Agenda poll, *Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America*, noted that Americans cited poor customer service, aggressive drivers, rude cell phone users, an onslaught of coarse language and profanity, and badly behaved children as examples of everyday uncivil behavior.[36] Current research and public opinion poll data suggest that this perception hasn't changed. University of Hawaii psychology professor Leon James studied a decade's worth of newspaper headlines as they related to civility. James found articles concerning "air rage, neighbor rage, parking lot rage, sidewalk rage" and "surf rage."[37] Additional examples of uncivil behavior include neighbors who don't control their aggressive dog; disruptive children in restaurants and movie theaters; people at work with specialized knowledge who won't come to your aid when needed; people who send rude emails; people who talk loudly enough for strangers to hear them; people who throw trash everywhere but a trash can; and driv-

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[31] J. Louis Campbell, "Speech Acts," *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*, ed. Theresa J. Enos (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010), 690-691.

[32] J. L. Austin, J. O. Urmson (Ed.) and Marina Sbisa (Ed.), *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

[33] Kauffeld, "Speech Acts," 738.

[34] Shelley D. Lane, Ruth Anna Abigail, and John C. Gooch, *Communication for a Civil Society* (Boston MA: Pearson Education, in press).

[35] Helene Cooper and Jeff Zeleny. "Obama Calls for a New Era of Civility in U.S. Politics." *The New York Times*. January 12, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/13/us/13obama.html.

[36] Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett, and Kathleen Collins, *Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America.* (New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2002), 10, http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/aggravating_circumstances.pdf.

[37] David Zax, "Choosing Civility in a Rude Culture," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 1, 2008, http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/Choosing-Civility-in-a-Rude-Culture.html?c=y&page=1.

ers who tailgate and talk on their cell phones while on the road.[38] In addition, it is widely believed that in today's world, uncivil communication has become commonplace.[39] Although complaints about uncivil behavior have occurred throughout history and across cultures, "what makes our age distinctive is not the presence of such a complaint about the demise of an interpersonally civic society, but rather the intensity and form of the anxiety. A 'crisis' of civility has been identified with greater virulence and enthusiasm than ever before."[40]

The crisis of civility is evident in research and public opinion poll data and support Benson's assertion that uncivil communication has consequences. Study results indicate that there are costs to the individual and society associated with uncivil communication. These costs include increased health problems due to stress; lost productivity at work; accidents caused by aggressive driving; personal injury caused by sidewalk rage, parking lot rage, and air rage; damage caused by acts of violence; and damage to the human spirit.[41] Public opinion polls also support the idea that we are experiencing a crisis of civility. For example, a 2005 Associated Press/Ipsos-Public Affairs poll found that 69 percent of respondents thought that people were more rude than they were 20-30 years ago. Fifty-five percent of respondents frequently encountered people who drove recklessly and aggressively; 54 percent watched rude behavior on television and in films; and 48 percent overheard rude or offensive language in public.[42] Similarly, a 2006 PEW Internet report about "Americans and their Cell Phones" found that 82 percent of all Americans and 86 percent of cell phone users report occasionally feeling "irritated" by loud and annoying communication by those who use their phones in public. Additionally, approximately one in ten cell phone owners admit that they have received criticism (such as irritated stares) when they use their cell phone in public.[43] A 2011 Rasmussen Report public opinion poll revealed that 76 percent of respondents believe that Americans are becoming ruder and less civilized. The poll included questions such as "Is it rude for someone sitting next to you in public to be talking on their cell phone? Are Americans more rude to sales personnel or people waiting on them than they were 10 years ago? Are sales and service personnel ruder to customers than they were 10 years ago?" and "Have you ever confronted anyone over their rude behavior in public?"[44]

Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate, and KRC Research (a public relations agency, a bipartisan public affairs firm, and an opinion research firm, respectively) have conducted

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[38] Pier M. Forni, *The Civility Solution: What to do when People are Rude* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2009). See also Sophia Dembling, "Surrounded by Rudeness." *Dallas Morning News*, March 22, 2010, 15A.

[39] Carter, *Civility*. Carter describes uncivil communication as insulting, abusive, aggressive, disrespectful, discourteous, unmannerly, impolite, and rude.

[40] Philip Smith, Timothy Phillips, and Ryan D. King, *Incivility: The Rude Stranger in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

[41] Zax, "Choosing Civility in Rude Culture."

[42] "Associated Press: Rudeness Study," *Ipsos-Public Affairs,* August 25, 2005, http://surveys.ap.org/data/Ipsos/national/2005/2005-08-24%20AP%20Topline%20results%20_rudeness_.pdf.

[43] Lee Rainie and Scott Keeler, "Americans and their Cell Phones," *PEW Internet and American Life Project,* April 3, 2006, http://pewinternet.org/~/media//Files/Reports/2006/PIP_Cell_phone_study.pdf.pdf and http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2006/Americans-and-their-cell-phones.aspx.

[44] "Questions – Rude Behavior: July 31 – August 1, 2011," *Rasmussen Reports,* © 2012 Rasmussen Reports, LLC, http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/business/econ_survey_questions/july_2011/questions_rude_behavior_july_31_august_1_2011

three public opinion polls about incivility in everyday life. The 2010 report, *Civility in America: A Nationwide Survey*, found that almost one-third of Americans are "tuning out" of social networking sites because of uncivil communication. Specifically, 45 percent have blocked or "defriended" someone because of uncivil comments; 38 percent stopped visiting an online site because of its incivility; and 25 percent dropped out of an online community because of uncivil discourse.[45] The 2011 *Civility in America* poll found that 70 percent of the respondents believe that media, pop culture, and the music industry are hubs of incivility. In addition, two-thirds of the respondents contend that the U.S. has a major civility problem. Eighty-six percent reported that they have been the targets of uncivil communication; specifically, disrespectful and rude behavior while driving or shopping. However, 59 percent of the respondents (about six out of 10 Americans) also admit that they engage in uncivil communication.[46] The 2012 poll, *Civility in America 2012* found that 63 percent of respondents believe we have a major civility problem in America and 55 percent expect civility in American to get worse. In addition, 39 percent of respondents have defriended or blocked someone online because of uncivil behavior and 18 percent have personally experienced cyber-bullying or incivility online.[47]

Uncivil Communication, Context, and Rhetorical Norms

In terms of the political context, Benson contends that "because civility is a mode of speech, it's always contextual and situational, and understandings of civility change over time."[48] He also writes that "rhetoric in practice is always situated in particular circumstances. Modes of speech that would seem uncivil in one situation may be accepted as normal in another."[49] This holds true with Stanley Fish's rhetorical argument that "all speech is situated and purposeful. . . . Fish shows that all free speech advocates will say that there are 'of course' some limits to which speech can be allowed in public. That 'of course' is determined by the social situation, and since all speech is socially situated, there will always by some 'of course' limits."[50] The same holds true for everyday inci-

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[45] "Civility in America: A Nationwide Study," WeberShandwick, January 23, 2010, http://www.webershandwick.com/resources/ws.flash/WS_Civility_Study_Social_Media_Exec_Summary_6_10.pdf

[46] "Civility in America 2011," WeberShandwick, June 20, 2011, www.webershandwick.com/resources/ws/flash/CiviityinAmerica2011.pdf.

[47] "Civility in America 2012," WeberShandwick, June 13, 2012, http://www.webershandwick.com/civility/docs/2012_Civility_ExecutiveSummary.pdf

[48] Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility," 26. See also Westacott, *The Virtue of our Vices*, 46-47. Westacott writes that some of the common civil behaviors that have changed over the past one hundred years include men no longer lift their hats to women; women no longer have to keep their arms and legs covered in public; swearing has become more socially acceptable in private and in public; the occasions during which men are expected to wear ties are far fewer; people have more freedom to grow their hair long, shave their heads, dye their hair green, display tattoos, ornament themselves with nose rings or lip studs, and so on, without making themselves social outcasts; booing, hissing, and catcalling at theatrical performances is no longer acceptable; and dropping round at someone's house without phoning beforehand is now frowned on in many communities.

[49] Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility," 29.

[50] Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Time to the Present* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 1607.

vility. What is considered civil or uncivil is based on a reasonable judgment that is influenced by the particular context in which the behavior occurs. [51] For example:

> Apparent insults . . . can be ironic or affectionate or ritualistic. Swearing might be acceptable in a bar, but not the play park. The N-word can be used between African-American buddies but not by whites . . . . Looking for a cell phone [at the movies] might be rude to some. Not helping look for it might be rude to others. So we should be asking where, when and how people experience something that they interpret as rude, for it is the act of interpretation that makes the rudeness. [52]

Therefore, in the realm of politics and in terms of everyday life, the perception of incivility "is a subjective reality . . . Incivility is whatever is taken as offensive, impolite or crude because human subjects impose meaning on actions . . . . Diverse social groups have varying definitions and boundaries for rudeness and meaning can often be heavily context-bound."[53]

In addition to perceptions of civility and incivility being situationally-based, Benson writes that in the political context, "most of the incivility of which we have all found ourselves complaining lately does appear to be strategic."[54] However, according to the results of the opinion polls mentioned earlier, the types of civility people complain about aren't necessarily associated with politics and aren't necessarily strategic. In fact, much of what we perceive as everyday incivility may occur without much thought beforehand and may even be accidental. This is because what is perceived as everyday incivility may result from confusion about the rhetorical norms that tell us which behaviors are considered appropriate and inappropriate in any given situation.

Benson writes that "our shared sense of the rules of civility governs the way we talk and the meaning we attribute to our actions and those of others."[55] This holds true whether we are considering incivility in politics and democracy or incivility in everyday life.[56] However, we cannot assume that all rhetorical norms are shared or that norms remain unchanged over time. Consider the example of a colleague who is perceived as rudely interrupting another during a meeting at work. If the person doing the interrupting is male and the person being interrupted is female, the situation may be less about uncivil behavior and more about a difference in expectations based on rhetorical norms that aren't shared. Specifically, some researchers who study gender communication contend that women and men are socialized into different "gender cultures."[57] This perspective suggests that men are taught that communication is used to achieve instrumental goals such as power and status, while women are taught that communication is used to build and maintain harmonious relationships. Men view conversation as a way to demonstrate knowledge and gain respect, while women view conversation as a way to foster intimacy and to communicate cooperation and support. These beliefs may influence how men and women communicate in conversation, and each gender culture may have its own rhetorical norms

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[51] Westacott, *The Virtue of our Vices*, 46-47.
[52] Smith, Phillips, and King, *Incivility*, 1.
[53] Smith, Philips, and King, *Incivility,* 11.
[54] Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility," 28.
[55] Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility," 23.
[56] See Jeffrey B. Jurtz, "Civility, American Style." *Relevant Rhetoric* 3 (2012): 1-23.
[57] Julia T. Wood*, Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture* (Boston, MA: Cengage, 2012).

for appropriate and civil communication; norms that aren't shared by the other gender culture. Specifically, it may be considered appropriate and civil for men to speak loudly and interrupt each other to achieve status and respect, whereas it may be appropriate and civil for women to actively encourage the comments of others to engender intimacy and connection. While a woman may interpret a male colleague's behavior as uncivil if he interrupts her during a workplace meeting, he may merely be communicating with her on the basis of rhetorical norms associated with his gender culture. In fact, he may believe that interrupting a female coworker is implicitly respectful since it suggests she is equally capable of achieving status and demonstrating knowledge in a conversation by speaking forcefully and interrupting others when necessary.[58]

In addition to gender cultures, members of social groups such as those based on ethnicity, class, and region may adhere to norms that are neither known nor shared by members of other groups. For example, New Yorkers are described as possessing a "high involvement" communication style that reflects the belief that talk is highly valued. New Yorkers typically expect a short pause during conversational turn-taking and may be quick to fill an "uncomfortable" silence. The high involvement style also includes a norm that makes it acceptable to interrupt a conversation with loud comments or questions to express involvement with and appreciation for a good point or story. The behaviors reflective of the high involvement style may cause others, who are unaware of the norms that influence such behaviors, to characterize such speakers as being rude and pushy when they are merely communicating based on norms that are accepted within their social group.[59] Overall, "the specific behaviors defined as appropriate in one culture, or even in different settings within the same culture, can be inappropriate in others. Because civility is based on cultural norms of appropriate behavior, the definition of civil and uncivil behavior shifts over time and place."[60]

Just as perceptions of civil and uncivil behavior are influenced by norms that aren't shared, such perceptions are affected when norms are in flux. Because we are living in an era of rapid change, confusion about behavioral and rhetorical norms may influence perceptions of uncivil behavior. Rather than deliberately using uncivil communication in a strategic manner to express outrage, indignation or passionate complaint as Benson suggests, we may communicate "uncivilly" because current norms "are unstable and there is consequently some confusion about what they are and what abiding by them signifies. Inevitably, in these circumstances, it will often happen that one person's confusion leads to another person's taking offense."[61]

One reason for changing norms is the rapid cultural and societal transformation caused by technology and its use by the Millennial generation. In general, technological developments have historically generated confusion and anxiety, and today's digital age

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[58] Wood, *Gendered Lives*. See also Deborah Tannen, *Talking from 9 to 5: How Women's and Men's Conversational Styles affect Who gets Heard, Who gets Credit, and What gets Done at Work* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Co., 1994).

[59] Deborah Tannen *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk among Friends* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also Deborah Tannen "'Don't Just Sit There – Interrupt!' Pacing and Pausing in Conversational Style," *American Speech* 75 (2000): 393-395.

[60] J. Cherie Strachan and Michael R. Wolf, "Introduction to Political Incivility." *PS* July (2012): 402.

[61] Westacott, *The Virtue of our Vices*, 51.

is characterized by innovations and transformations that influence how we communicate with one another.[62] Specifically:

> Confusion over what the rules are, when they apply, and to whom, are inevitable in a period of rapid cultural change. And with the coming of e-mail, cell phones, BlackBerrys, iPods, the Internet, Google, Facebook, and so on, the rate of change in the ways we interact has become positively bewildering at times. Such confusion naturally leads to more instances of people violating, or being perceived to violate, social conventions. This creates the impression that civility is on the decline, but the impression may be misleading, more an effect of living in a dynamic modern society than a result of continually deepening moral turpitude of the rising generations.[63]

Because we're unsure of the norms for civil behavior, we may mistakenly perceive that another person's behavior is deliberately and strategically meant to be offensive. However, what constitutes uncivil communication in everyday life may merely be a result of changing expectations regarding what constitutes appropriate behavior. This may explain why a person on a cell phone may converse about personal information just loud enough for passersby to hear. In particular, Millennials abide by new rhetorical norms that reward disclosure and blur definitions of "public" and "private" information in our networked society. Most often, our conception of acceptable communication is based on rhetorical concepts originally designed for the public sphere. Because of our growing use of and dependence on technology, we are able to communicate in a way that we feel is dictated by private communication norms, but do so while we are situated publicly. Mobile devices in particular, influence the change of boundaries related to privacy and identity.[64] This idea is supported by a recent survey conducted by the USC Annenberg "Center for the Digital Future" and Bovitz, Inc., a research and strategy firm. The survey found that age and acceptance of technology influence what is believed to be appropriate cell phone behavior, with 50 percent of Millennial respondents thinking it is acceptable to text during a meal compared with 31 percent of respondents 30 and older. The survey also found that respondents 65 years and older have the lowest tolerance for the presence of cell phones in any context. Survey co-director John Bovitz concluded that "Millennials simply have different mindsets about the role of technology in their lives and determining if that technology is appropriate in social situations . . . Their views are shifting perceptions of how personal technology is tolerated."[65]

Changing norms may explain the case of a communication professor who didn't allow the use of cell phones in his class because he believed their in-class use was rude and uncivil. One day he noticed a student tapping on her phone and accused her of deliberately violating his cell phone policy. She replied that she didn't understand a word the professor had used and was looking it up on her cell. The student turned her phone around to show the professor her dictionary "app" and the word in question. The professor then re-

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[62] Nancy K. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Boston, MA: Polity, 2010).

[63] Westacott, *The Virtue of our Vices*, 46-47.

[64] Janna Quitney Anderson and Lee Rainie, "Millennials will Make Online Sharing in Networks a Lifelong Habit," *Pew Internet and American Life Project*, July 9, 2010, http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Future-of-Millennials.aspx.

[65] "Center for the Digital Future Survey finds Generation Gap in Cell Phone Etiquette." *Center for the Digital Future,* February 11, 2013, http://annenberg.usc.edu/News%20and%20Events/News/130211CDFMobile.aspx.

alized that cell phone use in class need not be an instance of deliberate uncivil communication, but instead may be reflective of norms associated with Millennial students.[66] Another example that illustrates confusion about rhetorical norms concerns the use of email by Millennial students. Some professors suggest that students send emails that are too informal and inappropriate. Students may use slang and computer shorthand, and address faculty members in a too-familiar manner (such as using a professor's first name or using the word "dude" in lieu of a name).[67] However, such students may not intend to be strategically or deliberately uncivil. Instead, rhetorical norms associated with the Millennial generation tend to emphasize informality in face-to-face and mediated interaction. It may be that professors don't realize that rhetorical norms have shifted and are continuing to change for Millennial students, and Millennials may not realize that their professors expect more formal communication from their students.[68] In other words, the modern "generation gap" between Millennials and their elders may not only be a result of a digital divide, but may be partially a result of confusion about changing rhetorical norms.

Conclusion

In the "Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy," Thomas W. Benson focuses on uncivil communication in the political context. He characterizes civil behavior as being polite, courteous, and considerate; asserts that civility and incivility are rhetorical practices influenced by particular situations and are therefore contestable; writes that our shared sense of the rules of civility governs the way we talk and the interpretation of meaning; suggests that uncivil speech engenders consequences; and contends that uncivil communication in politics is strategic and carefully planned. Benson's characterization of civility is limited because it doesn't include ethical choices and the choice we make to communicate on the basis of respect, restraint, and responsibility. However, both civility in politics and civility in everyday life are governed by shared rhetorical norms that serve as guides for appropriate communication-related behavior. In addition, whereas political incivility may be based on strategy, everyday incivility may be accidental and based on confusion about the rhetorical norms that influence perceptions of civility. Perhaps the greatest impact resulting from the confusion about which rhetorical norms apply in any given situation is on the concept of ethos—how others perceive us as we communicate, either directly with them or based upon their ability to "listen in" on our conversation. Baumlin states it best when he contends that this changing behavior

> affirm[s] the mutual risk facing speakers and audiences alike, as well as the need for developing commodious discourse, wherein language becomes the means, not just of

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[66] Andrew F. Wood, "Communicating with Millennials: Closing the Loop with the Always-On-But-Never-Quite-There Generation" (paper presented at the 97th meeting of the National Communication Association, New Orleans, LA, 2011).

[67] Brigitta R. Brunner, Bradford L. Yates, and Jennifer Wood Adams, "Mass Communication and Journalism Faculty and their Electronic Communication with College Students: A Nationwide Examination," *Internet and Higher Education* 11 (2008) 106-111. See also Jonathan D. Glater, "To: Professor@University.edu Subject: Why It's All About Me," *The New York Times on the Web*, February 22, 2006, www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/2006022wednesday.html.

[68] Linda B. Nilson *Teaching at its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors* 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

"composing ourselves," but of making our "world open to the other" – opening a space, as it were, for the copresence of self and other, as "we keep trying to enter their world or bring them into ours."[69]

Whether deliberate or unplanned, uncivil communication can be harmful to our mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Examples of incivility in everyday life include aggressive driving, being interrupted while in the middle of a sentence, clothing on which obscene words are displayed, and people who talk loudly about personal matters on their cell phones. Flipping someone the bird while driving and wearing a shirt that displays the phrase, "@#$% You!," are most likely a result of deliberate and perhaps strategic choices. However, interrupting a conversation may be the result of rhetorical norms that aren't shared, and talking loudly about personal information on a mobile device may result from norms that are in flux due to changes in technology and generational differences. In all, although Benson writes about civility as it relates to the political context, civility in everyday life "is not trivial, because it allows us to be ethical agents in the most common of situations. To put it more simply, civility does the everyday busy work of goodness."[70]

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[69] Baumlin, "Ethos," 276.
[70] Forni, "Why Civility Matters," 5P.