Coarse and effect: Normalised anger online as an essential precondition to violence

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Immediately upon commencing his three years as Australia’s twenty-ninth prime minister, the nominally centre-right Malcolm Turnbull attempted to reframe the scourge of domestic violence by highlighting not merely the horrendous death toll but its underlying sociocultural preconditions (Kenny, 2015). To his enduring credit, it became common to cite the wisdom of his spouse, Lucy Turnbull, who had noted persuasively that an undercurrent of misogyny was the soil from which acts of violence could spring. ‘Let me say this to you: disrespecting women does not always result in violence against women. But all violence against women begins with disrespecting women’, Turnbull told reporters while announcing new funding of $100 million to address the problem.

Founded anecdotally rather than empirically, the couple’s favourite dictum allowed the prime minister to more powerfully enunciate the standard of language and personal deportment he expected from ministers and parliamentary members of his government. By extension, he sought further

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1 The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare puts the number of fatal assaults by men of women at almost one a week, reporting that one woman was killed by a partner or former partner every nine days between 2014 and 2015 and 2015 and 2016.
to lift public awareness, particularly male awareness, of the corrosive downstream effects of an ostensibly harmless, normative culture of male preference and entitlement. Key to this was determinedly broadening the frame of endemic male-on-female violence so as to incorporate within its social conception underlying attitudes too often regarded as unrelated and ultimately, therefore, immaterial. This would include culturally normalised acts of discrimination from verbal slurs, sexist jokes and belittling behaviour, to physical threats and violent assault, the latter being invariably regarded as aberrant, freestanding and exceptional.

This chapter proceeds from the basis that Turnbull’s observation need not be provable in an absolute or literal sense to be valuable. Its verisimilitude justifies its rhetorical deployment for transformative political purposes. That is, it not only rings true, but it usefully ties putatively harmless or merely unenlightened social conduct, particularly because it is normalised, with iterative degradations up to and including controlling behaviour, psychological torture and physical harm. Further, it will be argued that if disrespectful communications hitherto laughed off as ‘harmless’ can be so located on a relational continuum ending in violence against women, then, in all likelihood, a procedural link is plausible between the non-observance of civility in online discourse and the incidence of hate crimes – including gender-related violence – in the physical community.

In other words, a procedural relationship exists between (a) incivility, (b) cyber-hate and (c) physical violence, which, while not strictly causal, is, at a minimum, culturally contiguous and thus concomitant. And, further, that because the online community is potentially so vast – not limited by physical capacity constraints and the dictates of place – this concomitant relationship is anything but statistically unimportant. Indeed, even if the correlation between (a), (b) and (c) is relatively weak, the enormous scale, by way of the sheer number of malcontents reachable online and thus able to be radicalised, makes the security threat of a graduation from rage to intimidation and then to violence, numerically significant.

Previous chapters in this book have outlined the important role played by online, alt-right communities in the Christchurch terrorist attack. Here, the widespread normalisation of incivility and hate speech within online communities is examined in more depth.

Among the things this chapter does not set out to do is advocate new laws governing online presentations that would inhibit reasoned debate, proscribe anger per se, ban profanity or even see digital companies act of
their own volition to deplatform users merely for exhibiting too much passion, poor social graces or for taking unpopular policy positions. While that case can be made, it is a separate field of discussion and raises legitimate concerns over the freedom of the internet, and fundamental questions regarding freedom of expression. Rather, it will be suggested (albeit warily) that just as it was (and is) accepted in pre-internet society that there are agreed forms of social interaction, and that breaches will bring costs from rebuke to social exclusion, such mores could be more consistently applied online by those with notional leadership positions.

In short, socially responsible users of platforms like Twitter could (and should) exercise restraint personally and no matter what the provocation, apply the same standards to their own interactions that they would automatically observe in their face-to-face communications. And they should simply cease to correspond with those who blithely dispense with such civilities, whether through the issuing of physical and sexualised threats, vile and abusive language, wilful lies or discriminatory statements.

**Two different standards of exchange**

Too often, Twitter exchanges proceed past the point of civilised difference or simple information sharing and descend into name calling and bilateral vitriol. This ‘dys-coarse’ (dysfunctional discourse) need not be one-sided or restricted to anonymous or unknown individuals with an axe to grind. Examples abound of prominent Twitterati – journalists, broadcasters, actors and others occupying positions of some social vantage and with large profiles (or followings) – engaging in and thus normalising aggressive/reactive behaviour, behaviour that most such persons would not dream of undertaking during chance conversations in the street, or at the local supermarket or sportsground.

Why does this matter? Because journalists, academics, artists and entertainers wield significant popular capital. That is, they tend to have vastly more reach and standard-setting leadership on social media platforms than do regular individuals. In this regard they are also the links or common points between disparate and otherwise disaggregated agitators who, through deliberate provocation and response-seeking, manage to leverage their online reach.
In 2016, Antoci et al. analysed what they called ‘the dynamics of civil and uncivil ways of interaction in online social networks and their consequences for collective welfare’. They concluded, inter alia, that incivility, including hate speech, false information, harassment and other antisocial behavioural forms, was growing on social networking sites (SNS), while also sounding a hopeful note:

Agents can choose to interact with others – politely or rudely – in SNS, or to opt out from online social networks to protect themselves from incivility. We find that, when the initial share of the population of polite users reaches a critical level, civility becomes generalized if its payoff increases more than that of incivility with the spreading of politeness in online interactions. (Antoci et al., 2016, p. 1)

For prominent public figures, how they go about their online interactions may be as influential – and thus norm-reinforcing – as what they say. If all such high-profile people eschewed vulgarity (except perhaps for the occasional comic effect) and adopted the policy of blocking or muting any interlocutor who crossed the line into abuse, it would not take long for an improved standard to take hold (Antoci et al., 2016). Twitter, for example, offers the ability to block or mute other users; the former notifies the offender that they have been removed from the recipient’s comment feed and the latter removes an unwanted user without notifying the offender. Denied vicarious access entry to the larger followings of celebrities, contributors given to provocative, exaggerated and hateful discourse may quickly find themselves shouting to diminishing audiences.

Opting out of SNS has been the course of action of several prominent figures in Australian politics. One of them, the Labor frontbencher Ed Husic, abandoned Twitter in September 2017, forsaking a large and politically useful following. A year later he explained that the site rewarded divisiveness and aggression:

What gets you a lot of attention is how much you stand out from the last person’s epic sledge. We should ask: is social media acting like an accelerant in an overheated, divisive atmosphere in politics? (Husic, 2018)

Another who opted out was the prominent conservative journalist and commentator Chris Kenny (the author’s cousin), who had become a magnet for left-wing attacks on Twitter.
The town square

Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are often compared to a town square with the aim of lauding their pure, untrammelled democratic and participatory bona fides. It is an immediately attractive idea – particularly within aging democracies succumbing to the now well-recognised signs of institutional fatigue, from declining trust in traditional politics to impatience over political gridlock. Through this frame of reference, parliamentary representation is in practice viewed as an elite and even anachronistic province: restrictive, exclusive, self-interested and, very often, corrupt. And journalists, along with their corporate/establishment employers, are routinely positioned as part of the same privileged ecosystem.

The World Wide Web is different. Advocates celebrate this unedited, non-curated space in which all comers get a voice, irrespective of education level, wealth, political allegiance or opinion. But how good is the village square analogy, really? At their best, the social media ‘disrupters’ – Facebook, Google, Twitter et al. – have been forces for justice, enabling women and other disempowered groups to connect and organise, facilitating resistance to autocratic regimes such as in the Arab Spring Uprising in 2010–11 or the Hong Kong protests in 2019–20. Social media platforms have been instrumental in exposing corruption and pursuing justice for the disadvantaged (Marantz, 2019, p. 3). As discussed by Leitch above, the final report of ACCC’s digital platforms inquiry noted that there have been many benefits for individuals and groups, but significant concerns have arisen also in relation to market power, disinformation and ‘harmful content’. The widespread disintermediation of the information flow brought about by the digital era has shocked the sclerotic institutional machinery of post-industrial societies, bringing powerful interests to new account and dismantling longstanding protections around access to information.

Politicians have read the rage and responded in various ways, from embracing greater openness to ideas and myriad opportunities for community input, broadly describable as democratic rejuvenation, to rank populism and democratic diminution. The former is designed to reinvigorate representation and improve democratic function, while the latter is calculated to capitalise on the electoral dividends available in stoking divisions and ratcheting up community resentment.
Donald Trump, unquestionably the most spectacular and effective Twitter politician yet seen, was one aspiring political leader who quickly understood how to harness the web’s populist potential. Trump demonstrated that the World Wide Web is a demagogue’s dream, offering real-time communication en masse, ideal for emotional messaging and perfect for the weaponisation of inchoate rage. Elsewhere, I have characterised populism as hyper-democracy, but another useful critique comes from the British writer Martin Amis and his 2020 novel, *Inside Story*, in which he describes it as ‘a kind of Counter-Enlightenment’ exemplified by Trump’s comment after his surprise 2016 victory: ‘I love the poorly-educated, we’re the smartest people, we’re the most loyal people’.

Trump’s use of the microblog to speak directly with ordinary voters, bypassing even his own advisers and officials, short-circuited mainstream politics, stripping it of much of its time-worn artifice. Voters – and online citizens across the globe – gained direct and often instantaneous access to the president’s most unguarded reactions, providing a window to his eponymous administration’s avowedly anti-intellectual tabloid iconoclasm. To many political ‘outsiders’, this conveyed a powerful air of authenticity and ownership, of undiluted bottom-to-top representation.

Central to this new relationship was Trump’s demonisation of traditional media, which he successfully portrayed as rent with lies, beholden to special interests, captive to elite sensibility and unpatriotically cosmopolitan. But division is an inherently small project and his administration’s preference for political manipulation over policy rigour was laid cruelly bare amid the catastrophic onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. By election day, 2 November 2020, his populist push had flamed out its subterranean peat-fire of resentment, unable to match the more restorative above-ground promise of the Democrat contender, Joe Biden. A populist disrupter to the bitter end, Trump’s final climax would come two months later when, on 6 January 2021, the defeated president’s ferocious anger licensed his supporters to storm the Capitol to stop the official declaration of Biden as the winner. So fundamental was this challenge to the world’s most powerful democracy, that finally the platforms Twitter and Facebook suspended Trump’s accounts. Twitter did so two days after the Capitol siege, permanently suspending the president’s account while noting specifically how his tweets were ‘being received and interpreted on and off Twitter’ and the risk of ‘further
Facebook also suspended Trump’s account and, at the time of writing, its internal review process had endorsed that suspension until 2023.

Trump’s extraordinary rise owed much to the lawless frontier ethics of the internet, with the president eschewing the usual filters and systems to establish a volatile, if popular movement that took him to the White House and came very close to keeping him there. Even in falling short of victory, Trump secured 74,216,154 votes nationally, which is more than any previous presidential candidate, including all those who won. Biden, however, received even more, at 81,268,924. In any event, Biden easily surpassed the required 270 Electoral College votes, finishing with 306 to Trump’s 232.

It was an administration tailored for the internet age. Trump did not even pretend to govern for the nation, or build consensus across the political aisle. Rather, like the hate merchants of social networking sites, his project was about ratcheting up ever more fervour among those voters already in his camp. By its nature, the disintermediation offered by social media ‘platforms’ and capitalised on by Trump is post-institutional, proving that, as with all metaphors, the digital town square has its limits. These limits are discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

A real civic space would not be so poorly lit that speakers would not be visible or identified. Anonymity is a prevalent feature of online presence and appears to be availed disproportionately by those seeking to harass, intimidate and silence. Neither would a real town square stay peaceful for long if the people gathered together in a face-to-face situation, adopted the modes of abusive behaviour common and normalised online. Which is to say, the debasement of longstanding social mores observable in the flippant recourse to profanity, deliberate trolling, argumentum ad hominem and a rudeness uninhibited by the personal accountabilities attaching to non-digital communication, do not sit well within the town square analogue.

The standard response to such complaints is dismissive: *people swear and make hollow threats, but it doesn't mean anything really. This is what genuinely free and robust exchange looks like.* Thus, we are counselled to
harden up! But why is aggression online given this leave pass, this special dispensation to insult and threaten as if somehow uniquely, in cyberspace, no material harm can accrue, no responsibility need be taken?

While much online incivility is widely considered freestanding and harmless, it might also be viewed as the point of origin for actions of a more physically intimidatory and divisive nature. Or, to adapt Turnbull’s words, not all trolling, racism, religious bigotry, misogyny, defamation, character assassination and verbal abuse result in explosive violence – like the Christchurch massacre – but all such violence begins in these moral badlands.

Moreover, when the wellsprings of such social negatives are tolerated and normalised, and where complainants are derided as ‘snowflakes’ for their ‘over-sensitivity’, a step has been taken away from normative restraints that reinforce respectful boundaries, and towards something else. Indeed, when abuse is laughed off as mere robustness, are we not placing a heavier social sanction on the complainant than the offender? It is as if the act of objecting to trolling, sexism and other vilification is viewed as more threatening to online discourse than these destructive forms.

Trolling alone: From malcontent to mal-intent

Anecdotally, the relationship between hate speech and dangerous escalations motivated by that hatred is uncontroversial. Indeed, such an outcome is explicitly the point. Less settled is the link between incivility and hateful rhetoric. Equally unclear is why incivility apologists are so sure that the deterioration of social interchange has no negative sequelae offline, especially as the practitioners of anger are so frank on this point. Right-wing culture warriors have even been open about the formative radicalising role of hateful rhetoric.

New Yorker writer Andrew Marantz quotes one such self-declared extremist – an actual murderer – charting his own journey from orthodox right-wing libertarianism to violent racism (Marantz, 2019). As Marantz notes, two weeks before using three handguns and an assault rifle in a Pittsburgh synagogue in 2018 to gun down the faithful, the shooter had
reposted a stick figure cartoon specifically detailing what adherents openly refer to as the ‘libertarian-to-far-right-pipeline’. Within extreme right circles, this pipeline is the mechanism by which cyber-rants can be used to deliver staged epiphanies helping inductees to progress in increments of outrage from right-leaning misanthropes to the roiling vengeance mentality typical of far-right extremism.

A crucial element for attracting and recruiting is relatability, the illusion of some measure of normality. In his book *Fascists Among Us: Online Hate and the Christchurch Massacre*, Sparrow (2019) cites mainstream media interviews in Australia with known fascists and neo-Nazis in 2016, including the erstwhile United Patriots Front’s leader, Blair Cottrell, as instrumental in this regard. A self-declared fan of Adolf Hitler, Cottrell was again hosted in 2018 on Sky News Australia by a former mainstream conservative politician, one-time Northern Territory Chief Minister Adam Giles. That interview (the fact of it and its abhorrent content), provoked a reaction within the subscription broadcaster itself and beyond with the then-Race Discrimination Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane (2018) warning Australian media of the consequences of such normalisation via Twitter that:

> We’ve come not to expect much from the nocturnal programming at @SkyNewsAust – but featuring a neo-Nazi with a history of crime and violence is a shameful low. It also highlights how extremists are being dangerously accommodated by sections of the Australian media.

The mainstreaming of extreme political fanaticism such as the airing of Cottrell’s toxic agenda has twin effects. From his point of view, both are good. First, it directly reaches a small but potentially like-minded audience who are buoyed by the publicity, encouraged by their progress, and (no doubt) further impressed by their leader’s perspicacity, courage and media prowess. Second, it has the concomitant effect of de-thorning marginally less extreme right-wing views on race, religion, feminism and white supremacy, rendering them comparatively reasonable. A pointer to this is the clear condemnation of Cottrell’s views across the political and media spectrum, while other embedded commentators proffering similar, but less severe opinions, pass unremarked (Sparrow, 2019).

‘Sky after dark’, as it is known even by working journalists at the broadcaster, provides a line-up of hardline conservatives peddling resentment politics and railing against the inchoate left-wing bias of just about everything.
With some worthy exceptions, and with some differences issue-by-issue, hosts generally propagate extreme right-wing precepts on immigration, climate change, vaccines and, of course, the perceived death of free speech. Falsehoods abound. Denis Muller (2021) recently listed several:

- Rowan Dean’s and Alan Jones’s repeated ravings about the ‘stolen’ US election;
- Peta Credlin’s false claim that Kevin Rudd’s petition for a Murdoch royal commission was an exercise in data-harvesting, for which she had to apologise as part of a confidential defamation settlement;
- Jones’s disinformation about mask-wearing;
- James Morrow calling the Trump impeachment trial a ‘sinister plot by Democrats against the American people’.

Provocative lies and exaggerations are the lingua franca of the rancorous right.

As Leitch notes elsewhere in these pages, a decision was taken in the immediate aftermath of the Christchurch attacks by the Aotearoa New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, backed by multiple other parties including mainstream media organisations, to deny the shooter a name and thus any sense of personal notoriety. Yet against the undercurrent of more mainstream validation of right-wing grievance (as distinct from support for the terrorist atrocity itself), denial of the shooter’s humanity may achieve little.

Sparrow (2019) concludes that a well-intentioned aim of avoiding amplification of the shooter’s message missed the object of his plan, which was to narrow-cast to and inspire a predetermined ‘online audience’. Moreover, limiting public discussion and scrutiny of same helped to obscure the extent to which his manifesto drew on extant strands of populism, racism and conservatism. He surmises that:

A refusal to discuss Person X’s ideas meant in practice, a refusal to acknowledge how many of them were widely shared in the mainstream, including by major outlets. You did not need to search the dark web to find examples of Islamophobia; you could encounter anti-immigrant rhetoric on every TV station and in every tabloid as well as in the statements of major politicians. (Sparrow, 2019, p. 119)
Validation

Crucially, tolerance of threatening and directly abusive language and actions is not limited to right-wing discourse. Aggression has been normalised and implicitly validated by a corresponding left-wing anger, providing extremists of either stripe with what Sparrow (2019) has characterised as ‘cover’ within the noise. Conservative Liberal MP Nicolle Flint announced her intention to retire from federal politics at the next election, citing accumulated trauma from a vicious, highly personalised and ‘coordinated sexist campaign’, much of it online. She named left-aligned members and supporters of trade unions and the progressive activist group Get Up! for the abuse, declaring it left her traumatised:

I ask the Leader of the Opposition, where was he and where was his predecessor and where were the senior Labor women when GetUp, Labor, and union supporters chased, harassed and screamed at me everywhere I went in the lead-up to the 2019 election? (McCulloch, 2021)

She labelled the campaign, which also saw her office defaced with words ‘prostitute’ and ‘skank’, as ‘horrendous, sexist and misogynist abuse’.

In addition, several high-profile Australian public figures of a progressive disposition are known for their abrasive presentations online, presentations that include swearing, impugning the motives and intelligence of interlocutors, and generally displaying abusive and dismissive characteristics that would be unthinkable in direct person-to-person exchanges or in their professional capacities. While, in many cases, one might be tempted to agree with such sentiments, deeper questions of systemic harm arise. That web fundamentalists generally struggle with this concept is as surprising as their arguments are unpersuasive.

Consider this illustration: imagine two numerically similar societies, one in which social norms of basic civility, manners and a sense of proportion guide disagreements, and another one in which no such guard rails exist, where disagreements freely escalate from bitter resentment to abuse and physical threats. Of the two, which would be the more volatile, proto-violent society? This is why every successful community has developed norms of behaviour that set out expectations of how individuals should reasonably conduct themselves. Such social strictures are, of course, never universally observed, and are themselves politically neutral. Doubtless, they have
provided stability and enhanced personal security by cementing a status quo in which the few retain their advantage at the expense of the many. Yet throughout human history such systems have arisen and the durable ones have even proved capable of renewal and reform.

Parliamentary representation is one formalised system that exhibits this combination of rigidity: highly codified expressive forms allowing conflict mediation within time-honoured and repeatedly enforced norms. But there is also a modicum of flexibility granting the latitude required to accommodate new interests and the inevitable undulations of human emotion and subjectivity.

In adversarial Westminster parliaments such as those of Britain and its former colonies, green-carpeted, lower house chambers feature red lines running along in front of each of the two front benches. ‘Members may speak only from where they were called, which must be within the House [of Commons],’ Westminster’s parliamentary website explains. ‘They may not speak from the floor of the House between the red lines (traditionally supposed to be two sword-lengths apart).’ Arcane and ceremonial, this dates back to the earliest parliaments when members (exclusively men) could be armed, disagreements threatened to become physical and a degree of separation was considered prudent. Its policing role now is not literal but normative. It reminds MPs why parliament was first created, and why disagreement is to be contained within behavioural boundaries consistent with even temper, and institutional survival.

Functionally similar principles govern competition in other fields from literature to the academy to sporting codes. Implicit in each is the working acknowledgement that systemic value is always superior to the suasion of any one set of interests, no matter how passionately held. Interest mediation in the digital sphere, though, knows no such bounds. Attempts to moderate social behaviour in the digital realm elicit immediate and ferocious objection, usually in defence of free speech, and against censoriousness.

Circling back to the two societies illustrated above, it becomes clear that the problem is that the system in a cyber sense – the agreed forum for disagreement – has no intrinsic value attributed to it and plays no constraining role. In the internet age, replete with its supranational social media giants, the two social systems coexist: the socially regulated physical world, and the defiantly unregulated frontier of cyberspace.
Yet they are hardly separate. The same actors operate within both spheres, the legally regulated and socially codified real world, and the laissez faire online community where anonymity, deliberate misinformation, physical disembodiment and contempt for social mores mean that anything goes.

The internet, then, is post-institutional: extra-jurisdictional. An ungoverned expanse where spectacular lies compete for space with more mundane truths and excess begets excess. Even the big players, Facebook, Google, Twitter, Snapchat, insist that they are mere platforms rather than publishers. Twitter, until recently Donald Trump’s medium of maximum effect, is notorious for what the author has called elsewhere its ‘brave soldiers of anonymity’ – legions of users cowering behind fake names and joke photographs, an assortment of bots, trolls and digital ne’er-do-wells. Unbound by such personal restraints as would apply in physical interactions, these people are free to parade their partisan rage against any and all who do not assertively promote their extreme position.

Public figures are subject to aggressive personal insults, foul language and, in the case of journalists – especially loathed on the left and the right for not taking a position at all – extraordinary claims of unprofessional bias. Once again, women suffer the most aggressive treatment, often laced with foul language either suggestive of or explicitly threatening direct sexual assault. What follows is one such example, but journalists, particularly women journalists, have all experienced and received such outrageous, unsolicited feedback. Respected Sky News Australia journalist Laura Jayes posted a sample in March of the vulgar abuse directed to her on Twitter: ‘You f*cking idiot c*nt. Your [sic] a disgrace … you are [sic] complete f*ck wit and flop of a journalist’ (Jayes, 18–19 March 2021). The temptation to respond in a similarly aggressive tone is strong. Yet this can be worse than pointless because, for the original offender, such retorts constitute both a vindication of grievance and a validation of their abandonment of civility. Moreover, responding in any form lends the cloak of normality to a mode of exchange that has, as one of its natural progressions, the sharpening of grievance, the deepening of rage and thus a greater propensity to violence.
Terror nullius

The debate about whether social media has generated abuse, or merely laid bare an undercurrent of resentment that was always there, will no doubt continue. But, in one sense, it misses a crucial and observable fact: digital disinhibition has had the effect of normalising the expression of anger and aggression, the articulation of which would have been seen as aberrant in pre-digital times. The effect has been to turn such antisocial behaviour into a less illegitimate, increasingly mainstream frame of public discussion.

One danger is that, for those growing up with the World Wide Web, uncivil social exchange could come to feel passé. For these individuals, the virtual world may already be the dominant mode of social interaction, meaning its relative, or resting, level of incivility becomes the new normal. That said, it is certainly true that the digital age neither created verbal aggression nor pioneered its rapid substitution for sophisticated argument.

Public figures have always been attacked. Charles Darwin, for example, experienced abuse when he published *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* in 1871. In a piece marking the book’s 150th anniversary, Hesketh and Meiring (2021) referenced this harsh reality:

> Leading feminist Frances Power Cobbe rejected Darwin’s theory of morality as ‘simious’ [having ape-like qualities] while *The Times* thundered Darwin’s ideas could encourage ‘the most murderous revolutions’. Darwin also received hate mail from offended readers like Mr. D. Thomas, who referred to him as a ‘venerable old Ape’. Darwin began to be regularly caricatured as an ape in the press.

Typically, these *argumentum ad hominem* were poorly thought through. Indeed, it was the groundbreaking scientist’s very own contention that humans were closely related to primates, and, moreover, that such animals exhibited nobility, aesthetic preference and even moral substance. In the final observation of the book, Darwin confessed he would rather be related to a ‘heroic little monkey’ than to a ‘savage who delights to torture his enemies’ (Hesketh and Meiring, 2021).
Conclusion

The proposition at the heart of this chapter is that a generalised social indifference to vituperative online discourse, as if it has no bleed-back implications for non-digital behaviour, helps to normalise aggression. And, in so doing, it also engenders coarse demagogues such as Trump, for whom personal abuse and derision become an acceptable and effective rallying tool.

Inadvertently, liberal insouciance to incivility may license more severe dysfunctions, specifically by desensitising the broader population – online and off – to the menacing lexicons of misogyny and, therefore, domestic and sexual violence, and racial epithets, from which racial hate crimes arise. It may also enable extremist ideologies to propagate support for real-world terrorist attacks such as Christchurch. It is not necessary to definitively link deliberate online harm to violence in a causal sense, but rather to observe that it is an essential and concomitant precondition.

Criticism of widespread incivility online invariably invites straw man responses alleging fetters on freedom of speech. This rights-based argument has obvious populist appeal because, in common with all populist messaging, it is simple. It is also simply wrong. The right to free expression is already attenuated in multiple ways from cultural norms to defamation laws, and national security concerns. In complex, pluralist societies it carries with it the responsibility of restraint. A corollary is that the absence of vituperation from an individual's public discussions is itself a recognition of the existence of alternative perspectives and communal commitment.

The unstated aim of civil society is its own perpetuation. While there are legitimate critiques of the way power and privilege have been shielded from the morally righteous imperatives of social justice and economic equality under this respectable guise, progress has been possible. Technological leaps since the advent of the printing press have both exacerbated and then ameliorated disadvantage. The internet is one such technology. But its capacity to be used by populists and their divisive agents for social disintegration, violent antisocial discourse and personal intimidation is an obvious danger.

The promotion and reinforcement of an online discourse closer to the mores pertaining to offline society could ensure that this vast meta-democratic communications revolution represents a leap forward, rather than a leap into the dark.
References


