

**Civility Society and the Incivility of Social Media**

**Word Count (excluding abstract and references): 3107**

**Gary Wickham**

**Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Murdoch University**

**Email: <G.Wickham@murdoch.edu.au>**

**2014 TASA Conference, University of South Australia, Adelaide**

**For presentation in the Cultural Sociology section (also a submission for the published proceedings)**

**Please do not cite or quote without the permission of the author**

Thanks to Barbara Evers, with whom I have co-authored articles on aspects of this topic (and continue to do so) and to two anonymous referees for their suggestions on an earlier version.

## **Abstract**

Social media are probably a positive addition to social life, but they do have a dark side. This paper is concerned to explore the historical importance of dealing with the incivility of certain social media users. It seeks to place this incivility in the context of the development of what is called here civility society. This is the type of society in which the damage caused by passion-fuelled violence is kept in check by the promotion and maintenance of techniques of restraint, such as manners and decorum so as to create a sphere in which people can live out their lives free from the danger of being killed solely on the basis of their beliefs.

**Keywords:** civility, incivility, social media, civil violence, manners, decorum

In May of this year, in Santa Barbara, California (in a wealthy enclave of this wealthy city), a young man named Elliot Rodger took out his frustrations about his self-identified lack of success in attracting female sex partners by stabbing and/or shooting seven young people to death before killing himself. Not long before he took this drastic course of action he used social media to condemn his likely victims, on the grounds of them being: men who had enjoyed too much success in attracting female sex partners (as judged by him); women who had enjoyed rejecting him (as judged by him); or women who were likely to enjoy rejecting him (again, as judged by him). This bizarre ‘pre-confession’ was not the only use of social media involved in this incident. Rodger was also a frequent user of a website dedicated to the hatred of women, one which received a large number of contributions after the murders hailing him a hero.

Social media are probably a positive addition to social life, but, as the Elliot Rodger example indicates, their dark side is not negligible. This paper focuses on the threat posed by negative uses of social media, such as the uses by Rodger and those who praise him, the uses in fostering terror in the civil wars in Syria and Iraq (see esp. Blogs and Bullets 2010; Blogs and Bullets II 2012; Blogs and Bullets III 2014), and the uses by ‘trolls’ who persistently, and often mercilessly, savage other users, even those who are attempting only to mourn publicly the loss of their loved ones through RIP sites (see for example Kenny 2014; Williamson 2013).

Social media (of whatever form) are social in more than just the most basic sense of society – as the mix of on-going and past interactions of human beings. Crucial to this paper is the more complex sense of society as the mix of on-going and past interactions of those deemed members of an informal collective of formally defined nation states linked to one another by a shared and widely acknowledged heritage of individual rights and freedoms. This is to say that the paper is solely concerned with those negative uses of social media that threaten this type of society, a type the paper will refer to as ‘civility society’, a term which more accurately defines its development than do terms like rights and freedoms.

In this way, the paper is not a directly sociological paper, though the author is keen to acknowledge that many sociological perspectives are currently being used to productively examine many aspects of the use of social media (for a recent scholarly guide see Lupton 2014). It does however loosely follow a somewhat underappreciated sociological tradition around the notion of civility (see esp. Shils 1997; see also Krygier 2002) and the notion of incivility (see esp. Smith, Phillips, and King 2010). The paper will concentrate on the way civility society is historically part of a system of rule which features forms of personal restraint, such as decorum and manners. This system of rule has, in the territories in which it operates, come to depend upon these forms of restraint to limit the violent excesses of human individuals and organizations (including armed forces and governments).

Civility society first emerged in England, France, the Netherlands, and Germany in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as these countries struggled to overcome the debilitating

effects of 150 years of civil war. It later spread to other parts of Europe, to North America, to Australia and New Zealand, to some parts of Asia, and to some parts of Africa. Despite its reach across so many countries, civility society is nowhere strictly defined. More than this, it has at some times and in some places been plagued by wars, slavery, depression, and other miseries.

Nonetheless , the claim of this paper is that under civility society many more lives have been lived and are being lived without the threat of being ended simply because of people's beliefs than has happened at any other period of history or is happening now under any other type of society. In other words, while its record is hardly brilliant, it is better than any other large-scale options that have been tried or are currently being tried (for a somewhat similar argument, see Morris 2014).

A full list of the thinkers behind the early modern development of civility society would be too long for a paper of this size; mention will be made here of only Jean Bodin in France, Justus Lipsius in the Netherlands, Thomas Hobbes in England, and Samuel Pufendorf and Christian Thomasius in Germany. By far the most striking feature of the society these thinkers sought to change – the society of unrestrained passions – was the debilitating effect of long running civil violence born mainly of religious differences.

To cut a very long story short, society in these European countries was, in this period, in the grip of seemingly intractable disputes about the way humans should live and die. As the disputes focused on questions of God, heaven, hell and, even more perplexing, questions of eternal judgment and damnation, they stimulated passions to the point that excesses became the norm. In the society of unrestrained passions, this is to say, passions were all too often completely out of control. Civil wars broke out regularly and lasted for many years, with great loss of life. The main cause of these wars was usually the confessional divisions between Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism, but they were also about many other divisions, some on the scale of disputes between landowners, some on the scale of disputes between family members, and some to do with long running hatreds with no clear logic. Such is the nature of the society of unrestrained passions.

Realities like these sharpened the minds of the thinkers in question. Bodin, for instance, in struggling to make sense of the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572, when in a single day French Catholics slaughtered thousands of French Protestants, proposed that passion-driven civil war is the '*summum malum*' for any society, 'the uttermost evil to be avoided at all costs' (Holmes 1988: 7).

Hobbes mostly described the society of unrestrained passions indirectly, in describing the type of human beings who made it up, arguing that humans are more passionate than they are reasonable (1845: 173), inevitably hot blooded (1845: 314), never able to forge 'a constant

civil amity' (1845: 701), and 'live, as it were, in the precincts of battle continually' (1845: 165), always ready to either 'hold the sword' or 'hire others to fight for them' (1845: 333).

Pufendorf, who was a keen follower of Hobbes, also described this type of society in describing the types of human beings who make it up. Each one of them, he contended, is,

a creature whose weakness ... necessitates sociality for survival but whose "vices render dealing with him risky and make great caution necessary to avoid receiving evil from him instead of good". Unlike the beasts, man's appetites for sex and food are limitless and impossible to satisfy ... Man's petulance, his capacity for giving and receiving offence, combined with his extraordinary capacity for violence, makes his natural condition a very dangerous one, particularly when one takes into account the great divisions in human beliefs and ways of life (Hunter 2001: 171-72, quoting Pufendorf).

So much for the society of unrestrained passions the early modern thinkers sought to change. Before considering what they proposed by way of making it into a much less frightening form of society, it has to be added that one does not have to think back to early modern Europe to understand just how dreadful this form of society can be. One need only cast one's mind back to 1994, when the world watched in horror as unrestrained ethnic passions led to the slaughter of nearly a million people in Rwanda in a matter of months, mostly with machetes and spears,

as ethnic Hutus killed ethnic Tutsis (and other Hutus), for a variety of reasons, which all seemed vital to the killers at the time. Even more recently, one can consider the almost total breakdown of civil peace in Syria since 2011 and the even more recent return to civil war in Iraq in 2014. Whether it is religious passions or ethnic passions or some other sort of passions that are out of control, whenever human passions are unrestrained, society is a dangerous place.

In considering the early modern situations, we cannot know whether the social media of the twenty-first century would have served to limit the violence or exacerbate it (though it seems reasonable to suggest that once passions get out of control social media are more capable of fanning flames than of extinguishing them). Even in Rwanda in 1994 social media were not available (sadly, word of mouth and traditional forms of communication were sufficient for the carnage to spread as fast as it did). In Syria and Iraq, however, social media are being used; in the negative ways mentioned earlier.

For the likes of Bodin, Hobbes, and Pufendorf, the only way to stop passion-fuelled violence escalating into civil war was to use strong political authority as a means of fostering greater civility. Here too the main arguments were posed via arguments about human nature.

The most important of these arguments was that because humans, by another side of their nature, were seen to be driven by fear, especially the fear of death, a leader (whether a single

individual or an assembly) with the authority to take the life of any subject will have the authority to impose restraint upon all subjects. In other words, nature, for this way of thinking, was both the key to understanding the society of unrestrained passions and the key to overcoming it. While humans are by their nature driven to dreadful passion-fuelled violence, the same nature, in that it includes a fear of death and a concomitant keenness for self-preservation, will lead humans to fear any ruler who is strong enough to gain the power of life and death over them.

But not just any strong leader could become sovereign. The sovereign needed (and still needs) more than mere strength. It would not be enough, the civility-society thinkers argued, were the sovereign to be feared simply as just one more person or group driven to mass killings by unrestrained passions. Strength was a condition of sovereign rule, but it was not its goal. Its goal was the creation and maintenance of a sphere of human interaction in which people could go about their lives without having to worry about being slaughtered for some or other difference of belief.

No ruler could become sovereign, then, without being able to demonstrate restraint to the people. In this way, the people came to recognize as sovereign only a ruler who or which proved capable of achieving widespread and lasting civil peace. This is to say that strong sovereign rule could not exist without civility society, just as civility society could not exist without strong sovereign rule.

Without strong sovereign rule, as is evidenced by our Rwanda, Syria, and Iraq examples and by our early modern European civil war examples, the peaceful interaction of humans taken for granted in modern civility society – the recognition of the place and rights of others, the regularity of polite exchanges with people we hardly know or know only as fellow commuters or fellow shoppers, the capacity to enjoy or at least endure those with whom we must share cities, roads, planes, the countryside, and so on – would not exist. The order of the day would, rather, be fear, loathing, and violence. And without civility society fostering and being defined by these and similar characteristics, strong sovereign rule would descend into authoritarianism, whereby authority is used only or mainly to cement the authority of the ruler, rather than being used to deliver to more and more people the very basic right of being able to live out their lives in peace.

The forms of restraint put in place by the new system drew heavily on the two main themes of the early modern revival of ancient Stoic and Epicurean thought: strength of mind and control of the emotions. At first only a small minority – mainly the ruling elite and those on whom they depended (soldiers, officials, etc.) – were expected to demonstrate greater restraint. The sixteenth century work of Lipsius was important in fostering restraint among this elite.

Lipsius had become convinced that reason-based forms of Greek philosophy were of little practical use in dealing with the violence all around him. He turned instead to the Roman Stoicism of Seneca and Epictetus. There he found what he regarded as invaluable lessons about three particular techniques – *constantia*, *patientia*, *firmitas* – by which individuals can

remain strong and patient in troubled times, lessons he wanted to quickly pass on to his country's rulers, soldiers, and officials (Oestreich 1982: 5-9, 13-15, 31). His book *De Constantia*, first published in 1584 (Lipsius 2006), became essential reading for rulers and officials across Europe.

Moves to have the wider population adopt techniques of restraint were more evident in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Hobbes provides good examples of mid-seventeenth century moves while Thomasius does the same for late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century moves.

Hobbes contended that if the passions are balanced by the will – that is, if excessive desires are checked by appropriate fears – then the passions will be tempered such that they produce actions that promote human life. But if the passions are not balanced in this manner, they will continue to produce actions that destroy human life (Hobbes 1845: 40-48). He argued that in being the strongest force available, the sovereign had the sole responsibility for training the wills of subjects.

Hobbes's direct suggestions as to how the sovereign might go about this task are, taken at face value, somewhat heavy handed, to do with direct instruction of the people by the sovereign (see for example Hobbes 1845: 326-30). But this is somewhat misleading. As Peter Johnson (2008) argues, Hobbes was vitally concerned with 'the necessity of manners':

Hobbes speaks about manners as those qualities which promote peace and unity and he considers them to be distinct from the “small morals” which concern matters such as “how one should salute another, or how a man should wash his mouth, or pick his teeth before company” ... [T]he importance of manners is not found in the way they protect us against petty annoyance or because they embellish an otherwise dull existence. It lies in their contribution to peace (Johnson 2008: 68, quoting Hobbes).

Writing many decades after Hobbes, Thomasioius offered powerful arguments for the importance of decorum. With the Thirty Years War nearly half a century in the past, Thomasioius argued that Europe was still allowing religion too prominent a place in the civil sphere. He wanted a more instrumental, non-confessional set of ethics for regulating behaviour in everyday life. Like Lipsius, he developed a triad of ‘conceptual categories’; his featured *honestum*, *decorum*, and *justum*. Where Lipsius had treated his ethic of *constantia* as a neo-Stoic device for achieving ‘inner-distance’, Thomasioius wanted his ethic of *decorum* to be a form of personal accountability, ‘not to be identified with cold rationality of the calculus ... [but] a certain weighing of costs and benefits, and a “reckoning” of consequences’ (Barnard 1988: 590-91):

The *honestum* is the sphere of moral conscience and governs our actions by inner piety and the spiritual pangs of conscience. The *justum* is the sphere of law and governs our actions by public legal sanctions. The *decorum* is the sphere of manners and politics,

governed by social norms ... Thomasius's aim was to insulate law and manners from the devastation that religious conscience and moral absolutes had wreaked when pursued into reality (Saunders 1997: 92).

Thomasius's notion of decorum, this is to say, was a form of regulation which is still extremely familiar today in civility-society countries: 'Decorum governed actions in accordance with norms of civility and peaceful sociability, a prudent middle way between religion and law' (Saunders 1997: 66).

The paper has confronted the possibility that the civility documented and promoted by the likes of Bodin, Lipsius, Hobbes, Pufendorf, and Thomasius is under threat by certain negative uses of social media, such as those pointed to throughout this paper. This is not a threat to do with grand entities like 'freedom of speech', but a threat to something just as important, perhaps more important – a threat to the slow process whereby members of civility society have accumulated a great many different modes of being civil, modes which they pass on from generation to generation. Some of these modes are as small as moderating one's voice in public conversations or allowing another driver to go first at an intersection, others are as big as learning to calm one's anger when offended or learning to talk a heated person out of resorting to violence. In saying these things, the paper is suggesting that forms of self-restraint are not the opposite of individual freedoms and rights but are in fact longstanding mechanisms which help to build and maintain these freedoms and these rights. The restraints in and of themselves are what must be protected if civil society is to be maintained.

## References

- Barnard, F.M. (1988) 'Fraternity and Citizenship: Two Ethics of Mutuality in Christian Thomasius' *The Review of Politics* 50, pp. 582-602.
- Blogs and Bullets (2010) 'New Media and Conflict' <<http://www.usip.org/publications/blogs-and-bullets-new-media-in-contentious-politics>>
- Blogs and Bullets II (2012) 'New Media and Conflict After the Arab Spring' <<http://www.usip.org/publications/blogs-and-bullets-ii-new-media-and-conflict-after-the-arab-spring>>
- Blogs and Bullets III (2014) 'Syria's Socially Mediated Civil War' <[www.reddit.com/r/.../blogs\\_and\\_bullets\\_iii\\_syrias\\_socially\\_mediated/](http://www.reddit.com/r/.../blogs_and_bullets_iii_syrias_socially_mediated/)>
- Hobbes, T. (1845) *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury: Now First Collected and Edited by Sir William Molesworth, BART, Volume III: Leviathan: or the Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil*. London: John Bohn.
- Holmes, S. (1988) 'Jean Bodin: The Paradox of Sovereignty and the Privatization of Religion', pp. 5-45 in J.R. Pennock and J.W. Chapman (eds) *Religion, Morality, and the Law*. New York: New York University Press (*Nomos XXX*).
- Hunter, I. (2001) *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, P. (2008) 'Hobbes on human nature and the necessity of manners' *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 3:1, pp. 67-76.

- Kenny, C. (2014) 'Why the unbearable darkness of the twittersphere has made me quit Twitter' *The Australian* 22 March, p. 22.
- Krygier, M. (2002) 'The Quality of Civility: Post-Anti-Communist Thoughts on Civil Society and the Rule of Law' in A. Sajó (ed.) *Out of and Into Authoritarian Law*. Amsterdam: Kluwer, pp. 221-56.
- Lipsius, J. (2006) [1584] *De Constantia*, trans. J. Strandling, intro., notes J. Sellars. Bristol: Bristol Phoenix Press.
- Lupton, D. (2014) *Digital Sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Morris, I. (2014) *War: What Is It Good For?: The role of conflict in civilization, from primates to robots*. London: Profile Books.
- Oestreich, G. (1982) *Neostoicism and the early modern state*, ed. B. Oestreich and H.G. Koenigsberger, trans. D. McLintock. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Saunders, D. (1997) *Anti-lawyers: Religion and the critics of law and state*. London: Routledge.
- Shils, E. (1997) *The Virtue of Civility: Selected Essays on Liberalism, Tradition, and Civil Society*, ed. S. Grosby. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Smith, P., T.L. Phillips, and R.D. King (2010) *Incivility: The rude stranger in everyday life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Williamson, G. (2013) 'Call for civil action against the tyranny of trolls' *The Weekend Australian* 7-8 September, 'Review' section.