Improving civil discourse: Speaking is a more humanizing form of discourse than writing

Ideological disagreement between political parties is at record levels in America. Increasingly, people not only disagree with but also dehumanize their political opponents (i.e., believing others have deficient mental capacities). To “humanize” the opposition, some have suggested encouraging conversation among opponents, allowing them to share their perspectives. But how should these conversations be structured to optimize humanization? The current research examines whether conversation is more effective for overcoming dehumanization when it is spoken (e.g., face-to-face) versus written (e.g., online).

In two initial experiments (Exps. 1 & 2; n=800), people predicted how having a ten-minute conversation with an ideological opponent via video-chat, phone, or writing (three conditions, within-subjects design) would change their assessments of the opponent and their experiences. Predictors expected no differences in how much they would humanize the opponent or change their own attitudes across conditions, but reported a strong preference to write compared to talk or video-chat, driven by the belief that the conversation would be more enjoyable and less conflict-ridden.

We next tested the actual effect of communication medium in eight more experiments. In Experiments 3-5 (n=1,550), laboratory participants who strongly disagreed on pre-selected controversial topics conversed in different ways (e.g., speaking, writing), and subsequently reported impressions of their conversation-partner (i.e., humanization) and their conversation experiences (i.e., perceived responsiveness, conflict). Across these experiments, pairs who spoke (vs. wrote) humanized each other more, and experienced more responsiveness and less conflict. Furthermore, the effect of medium was robust to how long pairs engaged (e.g., 6 vs. 12 minute conversations, Exp. 4) and the level of synchronicity in the interaction (e.g., monologues vs. dialogues, Exp. 5). Two follow-up experiments (6 and 7; n=800) demonstrated that external observers rate spoken conversations as more polite and civil than written conversations. Finally, we partnered with an organization trying to increase civil discourse (Bridge USA) to run a series of field experiments across college campuses (UC Berkeley, ASU, and MNSU; Exps. 8-10; n=423 conversations). These experiments replicated the lab experiment results and further suggest the effect of communication medium may be moderated by the extent of disagreement.

In aggregate, these data indicate that although people seem to prefer writing to (versus speaking with) an opponent, in fact speaking is a more humanizing and conflict-reducing form of discourse. These findings have implications for how communication technology (e.g., social media) may shape discourse. Dehumanization is born not just from disagreement but from the structure of a conversation itself.