

IKMZ Speaker Series

Is constructive engagement in mediated debates a lost cause?

Hartmut Wessler, *University of Mannheim*

Monday, 4 April 2022

16:00 – 17:00

Location: AND 3.02

Civility has become a contested concept in communication research. While some uphold it as a necessary precondition for truly democratic contestation, others reject it as a means to silence marginalized voices. There is also conceptual confusion in delineating civility from neighboring concepts such as politeness, recognition, and tolerance. In this talk I first offer a more nuanced conceptualization of civility than in existing scholarship. Then, based on a large-scale content analysis, I identify systemic, cultural, and technological determinants of destructive incivility in different types of democracies and different discussion arenas (e.g., newspapers, blogs, online news, and social media). The emerging picture is complex. For example, I find that majoritarian democracies feature more outrage in online user-generated debates than other systems, but in newspapers and online news, outrage is higher in mixed systems than in majoritarian or consensus systems. In interpreting these and other results, I offer some perspectives for a more differentiated theorization of civility.

Hartmut Wessler is a Professor of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Mannheim and a Principal Investigator at the Mannheim Center for European Social Research. A recurring theme of his research relates to the possibilities of assessing the quality of mediated contestation against diverging normative models of democracy.

