

Social media impact on democratic discourse quality in the German federal election campaign

Wolf J. Schünemann; Hildesheim University; wolf.schuenemann@uni-hildesheim.de

Stine Marg; Institute for Democracy Research, University of Göttingen; smarg@gwdg.de

[DRAFT VERSION, PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION]

Abstract

Internet-based communication such as chat forums and social networks have recently attracted a lot of criticism for damaging the quality of political debate and discourse. In clear contrast to optimistic scenarios of a democratization of societies through internet development and an improvement of democratic deliberation, recent phenomena have raised serious doubts about the quality of political participation enabled by digitization. Especially social media have been criticized for providing platforms for the free expression of uncivilized opinion, including offensive or defamatory posts and comments (e.g. hate speech, flaming, cyber mobbing). All in all, the new forms of online communication seem to be more oriented towards conflict than towards consensus. Stuck in filter bubbles and echo chambers, people tend to share their views, convictions and knowledge with like-minded people, without being irritated and challenged by divergent opinions. In the context of more recent developments, unsocial and uncivilized behavior on the Internet in general and social media in particular has reached the political discussion. This has led to widely shared demands for political regulation of internet communication. Legislation has been drafted or implemented even in European democracies such as Germany in order to fight illegal content in social networks.

The issue of suitable democratic online campaigning and discourse is thus of great political and social relevance. Deepening doubts in the civilizing contribution of internet development might bear a lot of potential for irritations among democratic societies, especially in times of electoral campaigns. However, which are the empirically observable phenomena? And which are rather exaggerated fears that are hyped in the run-up to elections across Europe? Finally, which observations are really caused by the structural changes of political communication in the era of digitization?

The study presented in this paper is a multi-method inquiry of discourse quality in political online communication during the campaign for the German federal election in 2017. Election campaigns are very intensive times of political communication and thus provide a very good context for the analysis of debates and especially with an interest in its affective escalation potential. Firstly, we collected natural data of social media communication (i.e. Facebook) during an extended research period (Sep. 2016 – Sep. 2017). Secondly, we exerted two online experiments and simulated different conditions (e.g. level of anonymity, moderated forum or not) for the test persons. Thirdly, we also included an offline control by conducting focus group studies.

1 Introduction

Internet-based communication such as chat forums and social networks have recently attracted a lot of criticism for damaging the quality of political debate and discourse. In clear contrast to optimistic scenarios of a democratization of societies through internet development and an improvement of democratic deliberation (Bruns 2009; Rheingold 1994; Shirky 2008), recent phenomena have raised serious doubts about the quality of political participation enabled by

digitization. Especially social media have been criticized for providing platforms for the free expression of uncivilized opinion, including offensive or defamatory posts and comments (e.g. hate speech, flaming, cyber mobbing).

The issue of suitable democratic online campaigning and discourse is of great political and social relevance. Deepening doubts in the civilizing contribution of internet development might bear a lot of potential for irritations among democratic societies, especially in times of electoral campaigns. However, which are the empirically observable phenomena? And which are rather exaggerated fears that have been hyped in the run-up to elections across Europe? Finally, which observations are really caused by the structural changes of political communication in the era of digitization?

The paper presents a multi-method inquiry of discourse quality in political online communication during the election campaign for the German Bundestag in September 2017. Election campaigns are very intensive times of political communication in public and thus provide a very good context for the analysis of debates and especially with an interest in its affective escalation potential and possible radicalization. The research design is composed by three main pillars: First, we analyze natural data of social media communication. Given its central role for political online communication in Germany, for the first part of our study we selected Facebook as our primary source of data material. According to Reuters Digital News Report 2017, 51 percent of the German population use Facebook, 25 percent of the interviewees replied that they would use Facebook for political information. We automatically collected all content (posts and comments) produced and published on the publicly visible Facebook fan pages of the political parties with a realistic chance to gain seats in parliament as well as for their leading candidates during an extended campaign period (April 2017 – Sep 2017). In a review of our material the overall election campaign shall be defined as a period starting with the nomination of Martin Schulz as the SPD's chancellor candidate on January 29, 2017.

Secondly, we exerted two kinds of related online experiments. With the first one we simulated an online forum for every test person with bots as other users. Given the dynamic of the ongoing campaign we chose immigration as political topic which promised a higher level of contestation and even affective discourse. The second one was also a forum, however it was not scripted but rather moderated with real people as counterparts. The third pillar, a focus group study, was meant to serve as offline control but also allowed for more detailed qualitative analysis of discourse quality in a face-to-face setting. For the analysis of the different kinds of data we propose a multi method research design including quantitative and semi-automated methods such as corpus linguistics as well as qualitative approaches like discourse analysis.

Preliminary results clearly show elements of uncivilized and offensive discourse. However, this kind of uncivilized discursive behavior seems to be more or less monopolized by one pole of the political spectrum. This observation needs further analytical steps in order to be substantiated. As to possible explanations for the observed phenomena the paper derives three assumptions. First, we start out with the very general assumption of relative anonymity as explanatory factor for uncivilized discursive behavior, which cannot find support, unless in a very strongly modified form. Second, we were inspired by existent theoretical literature and empirical studies on so-called echo chambers. We developed a modified hypothesis that could be examined by content-based, not actor-based analysis. The last explanation follows a reconstructive instead of causal logic. By qualitative discourse analysis, we analyze patterns of communication that allow for individuals or groups to open the gates for a different style in political conversation. The most remarkable patterns of this sort that we would propose for further analysis and discussion at the end of the paper is the one we would describe as “tentative brutalization” and „concealed radicalism“.

2 Theory & state of research

Among other disciplines, social science research on internet and online communication developments have been highly influenced by euphoric expectations of technology-driven democratization, as there has been a widely shared belief that digital connectivity would create more and better participation in politics (Ferdinand 2000; Kneuer 2013a). With the advent of social media and the so-called Web 2.0, euphoric participatory scenarios enjoyed another considerable push. Clay Shirky’s “Here comes everybody” and other general works on structural changes through internet development (Shirky 2008, 2011) are telling in this respect, as are the exaggerated hopes of democratization that the internet and social media got loaded with during the uprisings in many Arab countries (Howard und Hussain 2011; Lotan et al. 2011; general perspective, Diamond 2012). In more complex accounts the phenomena behind the buzz words of *net empowerment* and *networked public sphere* (Benkler 2006; Siedschlag et al. 2001) are explained with an equalization of the chances for participation and a disempowerment of traditional gatekeepers (Bruns 2009).

Those optimistic scenarios have of course been challenged from the beginning. They have been confronted with outright contradiction in recent times. In a considerable number of theoretical contributions, both the augmentation of participation through online communication in number and quality have been doubted (Morozov 2011; Sarcinelli 2012, 2014). Moreover, more and more empirical studies have found little or no support for the equalization hypothesis in

different phases of internet development (Bruns und Highfield 2015; Hindman 2009; Kneuer und Richter 2015; Schünemann et al. 2015; Stier et al. 2017b). Thus, in clear contrast to optimistic expectations, more skeptical observations agree that serious and continuous political participation online is rather seldom. Mostly, what normal users practice is some sort of “clicktivism”, as they tend to support a political message or even sign a petition or initiative via mouse click without delving any deeper into the matter at stake. The best available result would thus be a kind of pseudo-participation (Kneuer 2013b; Sarcinelli 2014).

Beyond that, the internet and social media might even do harm to democratic discourse, as political online communication mostly does not fulfill standards of political deliberation (Buchstein 1996; Kneuer und Richter 2015). While there is probably a similar diagnosis for offline political communication in order, online communication studies have indeed argued that online posts and comments tend to dominant patterns of uncivilized, emotional and affective language and conversational attitudes, including examples of so-called “flaming” or “hate-speech”. The relatively higher degree of speakers’ anonymity is often highlighted as one potential explanatory factor for the uncivilized nature of political online communication (Ho und McLeod 2008). Even established representatives of a participationist approach in democracy development that put hopes into the technological development discuss anonymity and isolation as potential dangers for democracy (Barber 2001, p. 216).

The general skepticism towards political online communication has even grown in recent years as the public attention for phenomena such as fake news, hate speech, echo chambers etc. has dramatically increased. However, up to today there is not a lot of political science research output published from studies that examine the assumed relation in a clear and systematic manner (for an overview see Boulianne 2009, 2015). While the overall effects of social media on political participation have been studied intensively in recent years, empirical studies that examine the deliberative promises connected to the Web 2.0 are still seldom. The most helpful and methodologically innovative approaches can be found in communication science. For example Robertson and McLaughlin (2010) have studied the quality of discussions on economic policy in the British blogosphere applying a content analysis. Another content analysis has been presented by Rowe (2014) who examined the discursive quality of political comments on the Washington Post’s website and Facebook page. Ho and McLeod (2008) exerted an experiment in order to test the readiness of test persons to a free expression of opinion. Their findings clearly support the assumption of a causal relation between the degree of anonymity and the quality of opinion expression. If we look at survey studies, different works in the 1980s and 90s have already established the insight that granting anonymity in a survey

design can result in changes in disclosure of information. Also it does not have to be anonymity in a strict sense, but rather some sort of pseudo-privacy or isolation that has effects on respondents' behavior. Joinson (1999) for instance could show that biases due to social desirability are less likely in online surveys than in face-to-face interviews. As possible explanation for such observations, Kiesler, Siegal & McGuire (1984), following the concept of Zimbardo (1969), already assumed in the 1980s that anonymity and the lack of social control related to this would cause a deindividuation of internet users. Meaning, that internet users perceive themselves less as individuals than they do in offline or face-to-face communication. This perception comes with reduced self-regulation and -control, which again might result in more impulsive, aggressive or offensive discursive behavior.

In clear contrast to the previous proposition, other scholars argue that anonymity and the higher degree of privacy would lead to a stronger reversion to one's own person. This also could result in a more conflict-prone communicative behavior as the speaker/person might be less careful regarding alter expectations and correctness and thus be less willing to produce consent within a community. This assumption however would imply that through anonymity the individual would potentially reach an even higher level of self-regulation (Matheson & Zanna, 1988) as the reversion to one's self would result in a more authentic expression of opinion, which is less biased by situational factors, alter expectations or a sense for "political correctness" (Joinson, 1999).

Reflections on the very concept of anonymity are important for our study. First, there is definitely no kind of anonymity in a strict sense – thus anonymous communication even towards criminal prosecution – available in most of the services that are frequently used and that are discussed here. However, the degree of imagined or felt privacy and pseudo-anonymity of online communication may vary considerably, depending on the sort of service, the platform and provider, ranging from a platform like Facebook where every user is required to create an account with his/her real name plus there is a circle of friends and followers that follow the user's activity, to a variety of online chat forums where sometimes anonymity is given or at least users can decide which information they want to expose to social media platforms which explicitly guarantee anonymity (such as the hyperlocal platform Jodel).

Beyond the question of anonymity, academic literature in a number of related disciplines (communication studies, psychology, political science etc.) has discussed structuring effects of digital media on political communication mostly labeled as echo chambers. The term coined by Cass Sunstein (2009) means that like-minded people tend to build communicative environments wherein their positions are not challenged or irritated by contradictory opinions, but only

echoed and amplified by favorable and complementary statements and arguments. Echo chambers in political communication are mostly examined by different kinds of actor-based studies, such as network analysis. Of course echo chambers are not rigid, closed spaces. There are definitely other arguments to perceive, but it seems as if most people are not susceptible to these, they rather live in a “discursive echo chamber” (Zollo e.g., 2015). Fabiana Zollo noted that the information contradictory to your own worldview leads to mistrust and rejection, therefore giving rise to an intensification of contact with your own echo chamber. These discursive echo chambers, which cannot be found exclusively in internet based communication, are often politically-ideologically highly homogenous and thus characterized by intransigency, high rigidity and distinct emotionality (Lütjen, 2017). There is no social reward/bonus for moderation any more. Only those with a trenchant, pointed emphasis of the already existing position will be rewarded (Lütjen, 2013). One of the project’s goals is to empirically examine the theoretical construction of this kind of discursive echo chambers not only regarding content but also regarding style and tone of conversation.

Thirdly, in our research process we successively developed a third assumption that is thus grounded in our empirical research. In group-based communication online as well as offline we observe patterns of discursive behavior that only allow for a group to silently agree to worsen discourse quality and collaboratively overcome the limits of what normally can be said. As preliminary labels for these patterns we chose “concealed radicality” and “tentative brutalization”.

3 Methodology

3.1 Natural Facebook communication data

We examine our assumptions in a broader research design which combines different sorts of data and analytical methods. Election campaigns in general are very intensive times of political communication. They thus provide a very good context for the analysis of political debates especially regarding its affective escalation potential. For the first pillar of our study, we scraped the public Facebook pages of the German parties with a real chance to win seats in the Bundestag in the election for the German Bundestag in September 2017, thus the Christian Democratic Party (CDU), its Bavarian regional sister party CSU, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Green Party (Bündnis 90/Grüne), the Liberal Party (FDP), the extreme left party (Die Linke) and as a newcomer on the federal level on the far right the party called Alternative for Germany (AfD). Each of those parties’ campaigns was run by one or two leading candidates. We also covered the public Facebook pages of those politicians as long as they had one. This

was the case for nine out of ten candidates. For scraping, we used the Graph API that Facebook provides among its developer tools. In effect, this means that we collected the communication data, thus original posts and comments with content and meta data.¹ For the extended election period that we had technically defined, thus 1 April – 24 September 2017, we gathered 2.2 mio. elements (i.e. posts and comments) in total made by 1.5 mio. single users. In order to handle such an amount of data analytically, we applied corpus analytic tools, e.g. key word generation, n-grams, collocation and other sorts of text-mining. While corpus analysis is very helpful for the exploration of large sets of natural language data, it also enabled us to prepare a qualitative inquiry of sub-corpora and selected sequences that were uncovered by automated methods.

3.2 Two kinds of online experiments

As helpful as the automated analysis of natural data doubtlessly is, the sheer amount of floating communication data, created by hundred thousands of users makes it difficult to trace back the observed phenomena and variation to specific explanatory factors. For controlled variation of independent variables, e.g. for operationalizing a more differentiated concept of anonymity, we were in need of additional methods that allowed for more ex ante control. Therefore, we designed a twofold online experiment, simulating different kinds of web fora.

The first online experiment was composed of a short survey and an unmoderated chat forum. Both steps could only be reached by test persons if they had met the access requirements which we varied along with our independent variable anonymity. When opening the start page of the experiment every test person was initially and automatically ascribed to one group. There were three groups available: a) anonymity – no requirements, pseudonyms allowed; b) disclosure – real name required, pseudonyms not allowed; c) full disclosure – real name plus portrait picture required – pseudonyms not allowed. In addition, for our second independent variable, the degree of political correctness, we differentiated between groups of test persons again, so that one half of the totality of test persons had the additional task to estimate the degree of conformity their opinions would have with those of the majority of the population in Germany (1) while the other half did not have this task but only expressed their own opinions without reflection on the majority sentiment (2). Thus, in effect, we ended up with six groups (a1, a2, b1, b2, c1, c2).

The two steps of the experiment the test persons had to take in order to complete the study were (1) a sequence of 12 political statements which they had to express their agreement with (using

¹ We did not store the user names but only the asymmetrically encrypted user ID which is created by Facebook in order to make single users distinguishable in our dataset.

buttons in a range from -3, agree not at all, to 3, agree completely). The second step was a forum with bots (thus fake accounts created by the designers of the experiment) having a scripted conversation with an empty comment field at the bottom of the page reserved for the user's reaction. Each person had to comment in two forums on a pre-selected topic. Derived from the election campaign on Facebook (systematically observed by scraping of communication data), we identified immigration as a core issue and used it for our scripted fora.

For measuring discourse quality, we used a modified Discourse Quality Index (DQI) as it was designed by Steenbergen et al. (2003) and modified for the evaluation of online fora by Kersting (2005). Both works are built on Habermas' discourse ethics (Habermas 1984, 1996). For Habermas, any act of communication contains validity claims. Deliberation needs to be coherent as regards language and logical convention, truthfulness, correctness and sincerity. Participants in a deliberative process seek to reach agreement in the sense of consensus. They act as equals. Thus they need to fulfill at least five basic criteria: People must be ready to listen to the arguments others make (1), they need to justify their positions and proof their claims (2), they need to show mutual respect (3), they must be ready to reflect on their own position (4) and even adapt or change it, if the better argument makes it necessary (5).

Derived from Habermas' fundamental set of criteria, Steenbergen et al. (2003) designed the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) as a composed index of 7 sub-indices or coding categories: participation (1), level of justification (2), content of justification (3), respect for groups (4), demands of others (5), counterarguments (6), and finally constructive politics (7). As the DQI was originally developed for the study of parliamentary debates it cannot easily be transposed or applied to online communication. This is why Kersting (2005) applied a modified DQI to web fora. As text-based online discussions constitute a form of asynchronous communication, the category of participation measured by whether participants are allowed to speak or are interrupted does not make sense for the analysis of web fora, at least not if it is not checked for any kind of exclusion of participants from the discussion beforehand (e.g. in closed groups). Thus subindex 1 was removed from the DQI by Kersting. In addition, in order to simplify the coding procedure, we merged the sub-indices 5 and 6 so that we ended up with 5 sub-indices or categories of the modified DQI. Beyond DQI but corresponding to our research interest, we added the category of conformity with which we tried to measure to what degree a statement made by a test person corresponds to what could be seen as political correct answer in the current socio-cultural setting regarding the immigration debate. With the help of an intermediary we invited and incentivized respondents from all over Germany to participate in our online experiment. We achieved a number of 276 complete participations in total.

Our second online experiment was of a different kind as it was oriented at the design of a focus group study. Thus test persons were invited to participate in a moderated web forum. All in all, we invited four groups with eight to ten people each, two groups taking place at the end of August and two imminent before the election in September. After an introduction, the moderator confronted the participants with Facebook posts on different central issues on the ongoing election campaign. The information, which topics had been discussed most intensively and which posts and images had been shared most widely within the parties' Facebook page and through conventional media, filtered by terms such as election, election campaign and refugees, we received from our data collection as part 1 of our study. These posts also contained comments from Erdogan not to vote for the SPD, CDU or the Greens, Angela Merkel's expression of condolences towards the terrorist attacks' victims of Barcelona, statements from Martin Schulz regarding fixed-term employment contracts, the rise of the radio licence fees or AfD's declaration that the Islam is not a part of Germany. After the original incentive, the moderator interfered as little as possible, he obtained the participants' opinion about the post and let the discussion develop itself. Each discussion lasted 90 minutes, which included 3 to 5 posts plus discussion. When the time was over, test persons were forwarded to a survey to fill in some additional information such as their opinion towards the election campaigns as well as towards places and people involved in political discussions.

3.3 Focus group study

In a subsection of our project we tried to make out how, in a phase of high political communication (election campaigning for the German Bundestag), internet based forms of communication differ from face-to-face communication, which topics are relevant for the election campaign in offline-debates and how the influencing factors of anonymity respectively the discussion partner's presence or their concurrence in space weigh in on the debate's quality. In addition, we asked if and how online-communication is perceived and assessed as mode of communication or rather if political discussions online portray the same relevant structures and categories as offline-discussions do or if we can observe essential differences between the formats. Furthermore, it shall be determined, how the focus groups participants react to situations of hegemonic opinions or inferiority of opinions and how these processes are generally reviewed. Therefore, six focus groups consisting of five to eight participants with differing ages, from all levels of education and various ranks of income were conducted. In order to recruit test persons from urban and rural areas, these focus groups took place in larger

cities of Northern Germany, thus Göttingen, Hannover or Oldenburg. Relevant selection parameters were the personal interest in politics and a regular participation in political discussions online, so that we invited two groups each with politically interested participants not using the internet and unpolitical, internet affine participants. This way among others, it can be examined, if the use of the internet's intensity respectively communication via the internet has any influence on the political debate culture. For the purpose of interlocking with the project's subsection 2, two focus groups were conducted with participants, who previously had joined in on the online focus group so to make a comparison between online- and offline-behaviour and relevant structures directly possible.

The idea behind (these) focus groups is, that the public political opinion amounts to a rather indistinct sentiment, which predominantly forms in interaction between several individuals and thus can be comprehended and surveyed in a group discussion's communication process. A small group of normally six to nine people functions as institutionalised manufacturing facility for data. In contrast to the conventional usage of group discussions in qualitative social research the moderator in this study design reduced his or her output to a minimum and the discourse impulses were increased to a controversial maximum in order to initiate an autonomous conversation to the respective range of topics between the participants. Only this type of design supports a conclusion towards the quality of the discourse. Just as in 2 of our study two to three current, viral posts served as discussions stimulant. Moreover, the participants were encouraged to discuss the suitability of places, people and opportunities to engage in talks about politics as well as enquiring their opinion about election campaigning.

The focus group's interviews are transliterated word-for-word according to simple transcription rules, and then afterwards deduced in a multi-step hermeneutic procedure especially in comparison with the online-focus groups. Methodologically, we orientated strongly towards the qualitative content analysis by Mayring (2015) as well as the documentary method by Bohnsack (2013). With the help of MaxQDA, codes are formed deductively from the leading question as well as inductively from emerging manifestation. On the basis of codings, hypotheses are formulated and afterwards, because they are controlled by a research team, intersubjectively tested once again on the material and if necessary varied. In addition, the aim is to be able to make statements about the discourse quality despite the method's restrictions, being that the discourse through both, the online as well as the offline focus groups, was steered and influenced by the moderation.

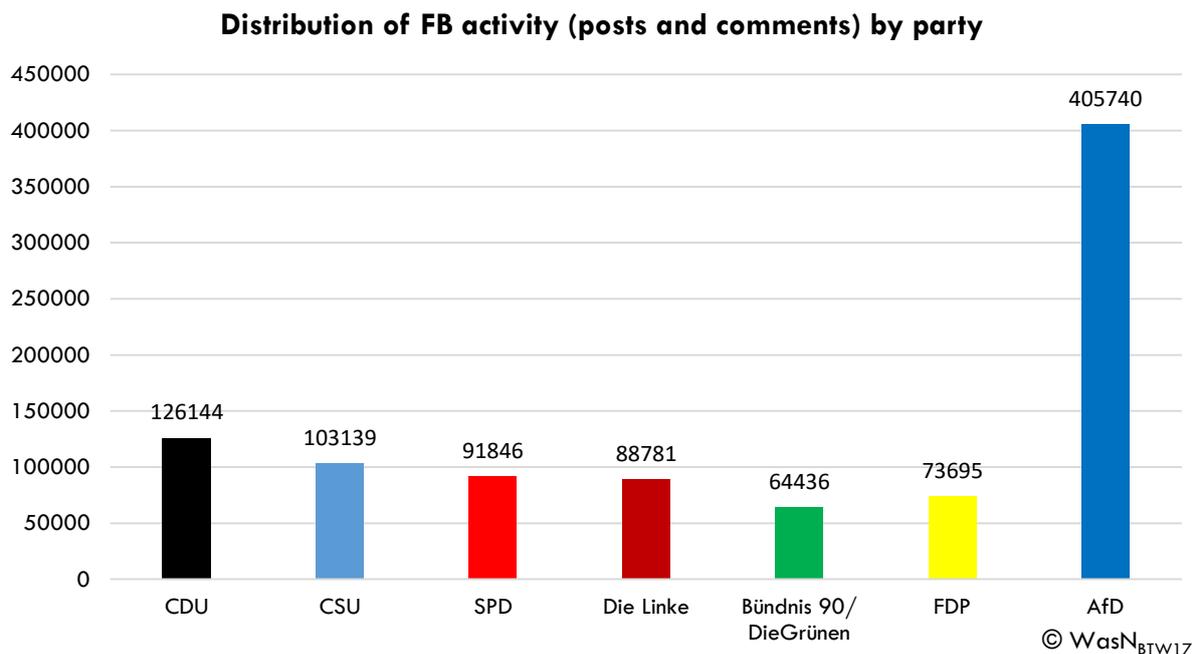
In doing so, we searched for patterns, specific semantics and their use and acceptance within the group, as well as examining the quality of the discourse process and emotionality using the methods described in part 2 of our study.

4 Empirical analysis and first results²

As analyses are still ongoing, in this section we can only present some descriptive statistics and preliminary findings from corpus analysis. First of all, the distribution of FB activity (see fig. 1) measured by the quantity of posts and comments among the parties is a clear illustration of the mobilization through online media especially by the AfD. For this distribution we measured all posts and comments made by users on the Facebook pages of the political parties during our research period. Although the other parties are larger and more established organizations, the AfD comes out clearly ahead of the field regarding activity. Previous studies have already shown how movements and parties of the populist right do well in connective action (Bennett und Segerberg 2013; Stier et al. 2017a). This observation is supported by our findings. There is ongoing discussion on how influential social bots might be in political online communication. As the AfD did not distance itself from the use of bots for political purposes in the run-up to the elections we might need to attribute a considerable share of FB activity for the AfD to automated content-production. However, given the fact that it is far from trivial to design and successfully use social bots in Facebook communication it is very unlikely that this can explain the immense gap between the AfD and the other parties. Moreover, first qualitative insights into the data do not support the assumption of immense bot activity. As to the other parties, it is at least remarkable that CDU and especially CSU as conservative parties who are not known for innovative e-campaigning and even less so for their policies on internet and digitization attract so much activity on their Facebook pages. Especially for the CSU, a regional party that is only eligible in the region of Bavaria activity is impressive. This might indicate that not all the activity is coming from the narrower circles of party members and affiliates but that especially the CSU attracts much activity in form of criticism coming from the populist right as well.

² As the paper presents work in progress, we can only present preliminary results for part 1 of our study, thus the corpus-based analyses of natural data.

Figure 1: Distribution of FB activity (posts and comments) by party



Partly to substantiate this supposition, in a next analytical step, we looked for cross-postings (or better: cross-commentings) measured by users, i.e.: We measured the share of single users that commented on the FB page of party x that additionally have made at least one comment on the FB page of party y. The resulting matrix (see fig. 2) is to be read row by row in the following sense: “13.7 % of users, having been active on the CDU FB page, have at least made one comment on the FB page of the CSU” and so forth. The column containing the highest values is the one of the AfD. That means that for all other parties shares of users that have also commented on the AfD page are relatively high. This general high level of shares can of course be explained with the high absolute number of users active on the AfD page itself. Against this backdrop however, the particularly high shares for the CDU and especially the CSU are again indications for that the pages of the two parties, especially the latter, attracted many comments – arguably much criticism – from users that are mostly active on the AfD page.

This indication is indeed supported even by corpus analysis, as keywords that we have computed for the 1st level of comments, thus immediate reactions to original posts published by the party, include many elements that point to a critical assessment of Seehofer’s appeasement strategy towards Chancellor Merkel and her immigration policy in the months before the election, e.g.: “Obergrenze” (upper limit for immigration), “heiße Luft” (empty talk), “Klartext” (straight talk), “blabla” (blah-blah), “Geschwätz” (gibberish), “labern” (to babble), “Gerede” (chatter) etc. Figure 3 shows the 70 most preferred or avoided terms in a keyword

comparison. Therefore, the corpus of all 1st level comments made on the CSU FB page has been compared to the respective comments of all the other parties altogether.

Figure 2: Matrix of Cross-Postings

Relations between parties, measured by share of users, being active on both parties FB pages

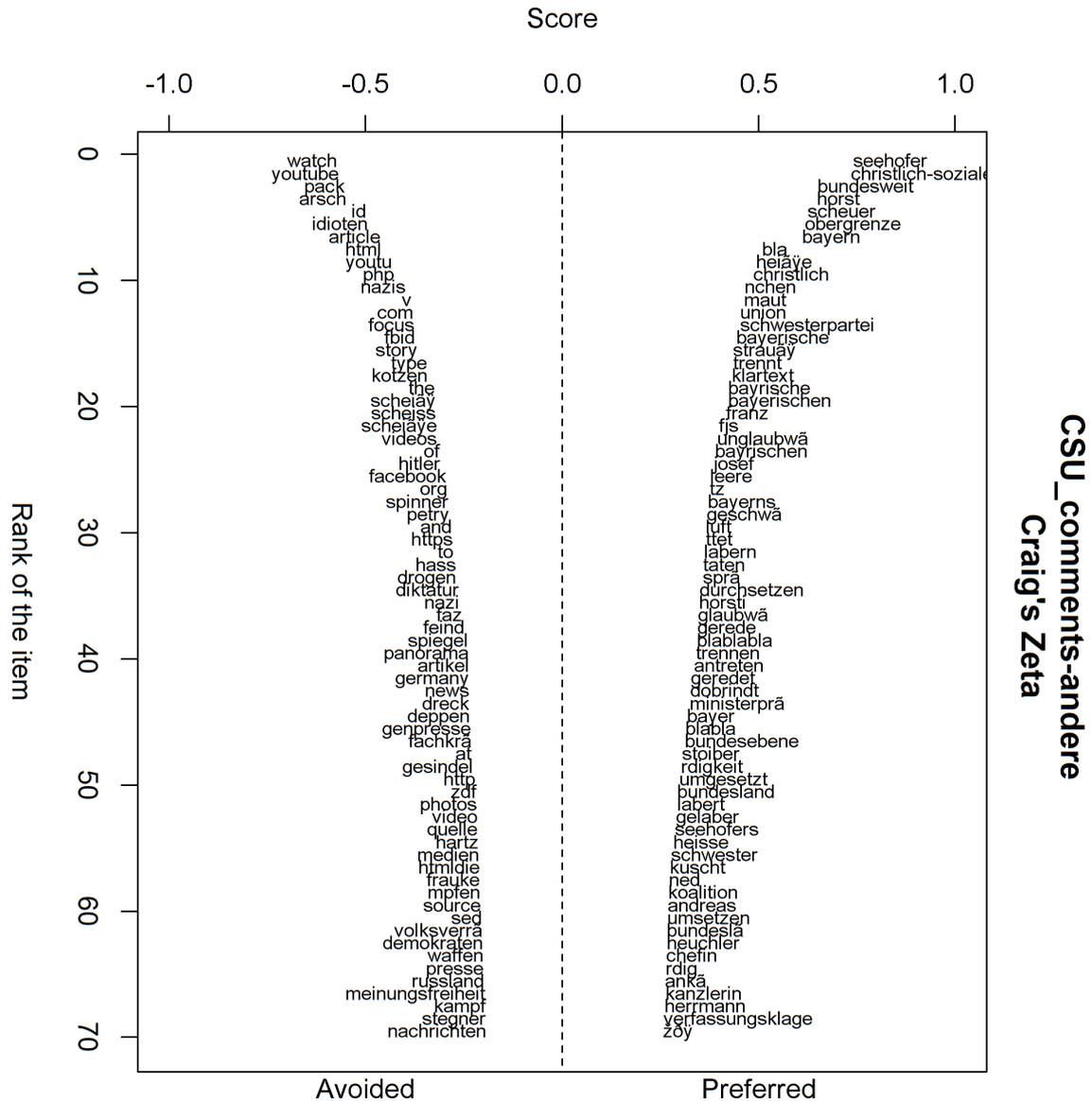
	CDU	CSU	SPD	Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen	Die Linke	AfD	FDP
CDU		13.69%	12.50%	8.48%	8.88%	20.14%	8.16%
CSU	10.97%		7.00%	5.21%	6.71%	21.60%	7.44%
SPD	9.61%	6.71%		6.82%	7.67%	9.20%	6.37%
Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen	11.27%	8.65%	11.79%		10.17%	12.91%	8.29%
Die Linke	7.76%	7.32%	8.72%	6.69%		12.55%	5.25%
AfD	5.92%	7.92%	3.51%	2.85%	4.22%		2.69%
FDP	8.26%	9.40%	8.40%	6.32%	6.08%	9.27%	

To read: 13.69 % of users, having been active on the CDU FB page, have at least made one comment on the FB page of the CSU and so forth.

© WasNB_{TW17}

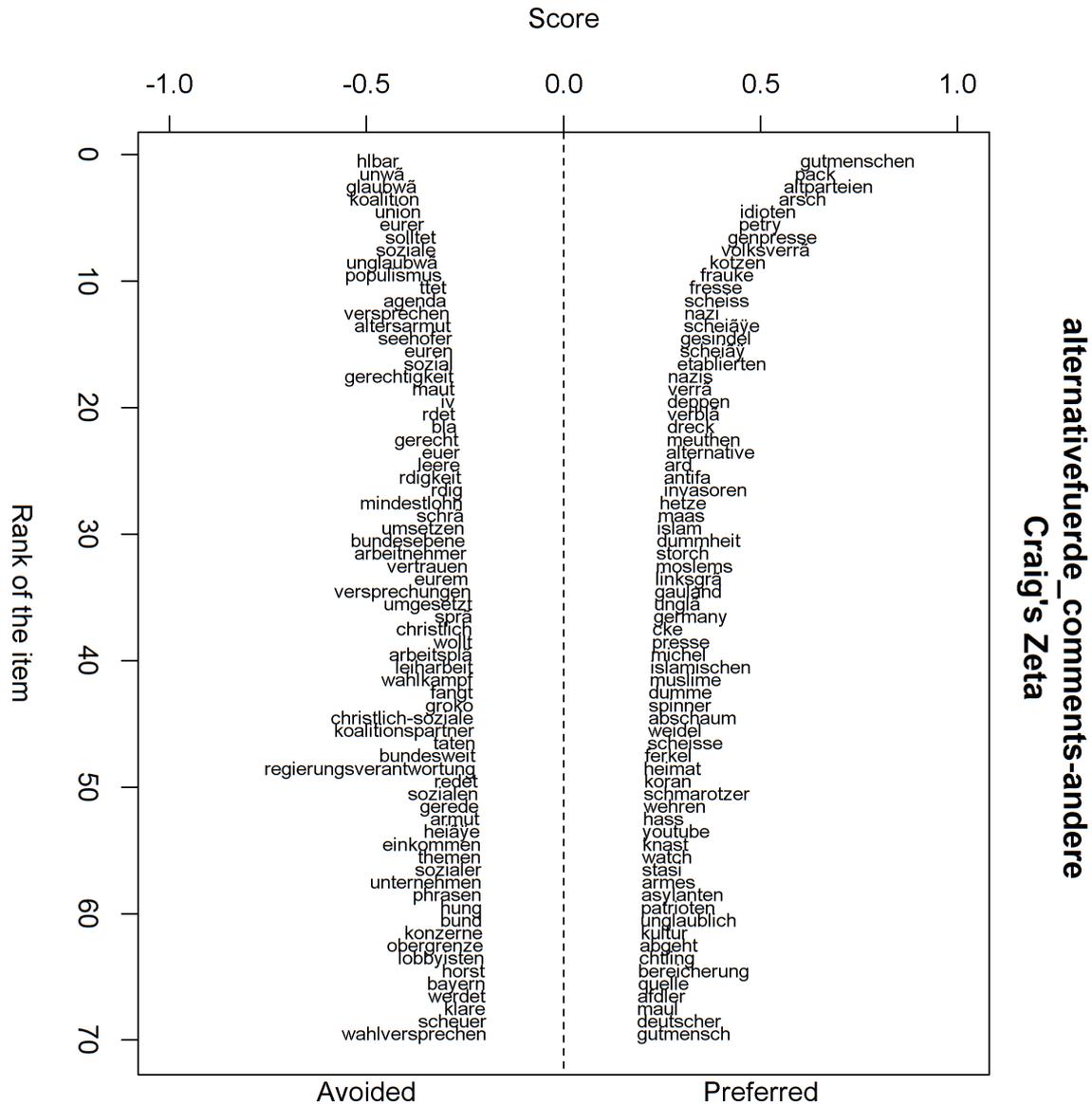
Keyword comparison is helpful to get a grasp on what has been of particular interest for users when commenting CSU political activity and Facebook communication. Although, criticism might prevail in the keyword lists and it is sometimes uttered in harsh words. Regarding the tone and style of the conversation we would still assess this as quite normal discursive behavior in election debates and – although sometimes harsh in tone – rather issue-oriented. The same tendency towards more or less civilized expression in FB comment spaces can be shown for all the other parties except the AfD. The most remarkable variation in keyword comparisons for all the parties we looked at is the relevance and distinctness of the AfD corpus in tone and style of political observation. The respective list of preferred terms (see fig. 4) is indeed full of bad words: “kotzen” (to vomit), “Scheiße” (shit), “Fresse” (derogatory for face); offensive terms: “Idioten” (idiots), “Volksverräter” (betrayer of the nation), “Deppen” (gits); exclusionary and discriminatory speech: “Pack” (vermin), “Gesindel” (rabble), “Abschaum” (scum). As keywords are robust using different corpus linguistic tools, in our next steps it will be important to substantiate these findings by additional text-mining as well as qualitative work.

Figure 3: Keyword-comparison with R Stylo Oppose between first level comments on the CSU FB page (preferred terms) compared to the first level comments of all other parties combined³



³ It is important to note that the R stylo script that we used is not sensitive for mutated vowels in German. This produced some smashed words in our lists. With other tools however, we could correct the result and proof their validity.

Figure 4: Keyword-comparison with R Stylo Oppose between first level comments on the AfD FB page (preferred terms) compared to the first level comments of all other parties combined



5 Conclusion

The paper outlined a major study on discursive behavior in the campaign preceding the German federal election in 2017. The multi-method design combines automated analyses of large corpora of natural data with experimental approaches (scripted and moderated web fora) and focus groups for offline control. So far, we have only started with our first analyses of the immense material generated in the phase of data collection.

Preliminary results, mostly gains through corpus analysis of natural data, clearly show elements of uncivilized and offensive discourse even on the 1st level of commenting on public FB pages of parties and politicians. Thus, on a very general level, the hypothesis of anonymity or felt

privacy creating an individual tendency for uncivilized discursive behavior is to be put in doubt. This tentative answer needs to be substantiated by the results of the experimental study which allowed us to systematically vary the degree of anonymity of test persons.

In contrast, we find much more support for our modified discursive echo chamber assumption, as this kind of uncivilized discursive behavior regarding content and tone seems to be more or less monopolized by one pole of the political spectrum, the populist right in the form of one party, namely the AfD. This observation is perfectly in line with what Lütjen (2013, 2017) for instance has found out for the political discourse in the US.

For the remainder of the chapter, we want to reflect on the patterns of concealed radicalism and tentative brutalization which might explain how discourse quality is worsening in concrete conversational settings. Concentrating on parts 2 and 3 of our study, a first cursory review of the online and offline focus groups' material, suggests that the discourse behaviour in debates concerning political issues with unknown people in both internet-based spaces as well as in those with physically present interlocutors can be described as tentative or even camouflaged talking. The participants gradually approach explicit formulations and statements that are more precise in terms of content, compared to what normally would be accepted within a group or what could perhaps be sanctioned and punished. This holds true both for the quality of the discourse as well as for the content discussed. Thus, throughout the discourse – both offline and online – we observe a kind of tentative brutalization. Critical opinions, sceptical attitudes towards democracy and derogatory attitudes become visible only in the progression of the group discussion. Here we actually observe some variation between online and offline groups. The main difference seems to be that the discussion partners' physical presence is more inhibitive than their absence, that the phase of feeling one's way in the online discussions is significantly shorter, camouflage is dropped quicker. For instance, the group often talks about an issue for minutes, such as refugees, the AfD, or IS terror, without naming or addressing them precisely, but all parties seem to know what it is all about. But if one of the group's members dare to come forward with clearly pejorative vocabulary ("idiots", "Erdowahn", "some migrants" or a comparison between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Adolf Hitler) or a distorted perception about socio-political coherences ("the state" is responsible for electoral fraud; public criticism of the AfD was "fictitious"; parties, such as the Left Party, should have no influence) and if this is not followed by any sanctions and remains without contradiction, this is understood as an invitation to everyone for more radical discursive behaviour as well. Thus, brutalization and radicalization are dependent on the tolerance exercised online or offline towards taboo-breaking by other participants. In this sense it is self-reinforcing, because the participants in a discussion

implicitly and explicitly get to assume that through the tone and content of their discourse they are part of a social normality.

As to the ideal criteria for deliberation reflected in DQI, only in the face-to-face discussion we can observe the search for a consensus, a minimum agreement or a compromising solution by the participants in the course of the conversation. As a result, tentative brutalization and concealed radicalism are interrupted or mitigated. Further analyses for all parts of the study need to substantiate the preliminary findings and the discussion of first results.

Literature

- Barber, Benjamin R. (2001): Which Technology for which Democracy? Which Democracy for which Technology? In: Bernd Holznagel, Andreas Grünwald und Anika Hanssmann (Hg.): Elektronische Demokratie. Bürgerbeteiligung per Internet zwischen Wissenschaft und Praxis. München: Beck (Schriftenreihe Information und Recht, Bd. 24), S. 209–217.
- Benkler, Yochai (2006): The wealth of networks. How social production transforms markets and freedom. New Haven, Conn. [u.a.]: Yale Univ. Press.
- Bennett, W. Lance; Segerberg, Alexandra (2013): The Logic of Connective Action. Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics). Online verfügbar unter <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139198752>.
- Boulianne, Shelley (2009): Does Internet Use Affect Engagement? A Meta-Analysis of Research. In: *Political Communication* 26 (2), S. 193–211. DOI: 10.1080/10584600902854363.
- Boulianne, Shelley (2015): Social media use and participation: a meta-analysis of current research. In: *Information, Communication & Society* 18 (5), S. 524–538. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2015.1008542.
- Bruns, Axel (2009): Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond. From Production to Produsage. New York: Peter Lang.
- Bruns, Axel; Highfield, Tim (2015): From news blogs to news on Twitter. gatewatching and collaborative news curation. In: Stephen Coleman und Deen Freelon (Hg.): Handbook of digital politics. Cheltenham, UK, Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Pub., S. 325–340.
- Buchstein, Hubertus (1996): Bittere Bytes. Cyberbürger und Demokratietheorie. In: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 44 (4), S. 583. Online verfügbar unter <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1298950613?accountid=11359>.
- Diamond, Larry (2012): Liberation Technology. In: *Journal of Democracy* 21 (3), S. 69–83.
- Ferdinand, Peter (2000): The Internet, democracy and democratization. In: *Democratization* 7 (1), S. 1–17. DOI: 10.1080/13510340008403642.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1984): The theory of communicative action. London: Heinemann.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1996): Between facts and norms. contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy. Oxford: Polity Press.

- Hindman, Matthew Scott (2009): *The myth of digital democracy*. Princeton, NJ [u.a.]: Princeton University Press.
- Ho, S. S.; McLeod, D. M. (2008): Social-Psychological Influences on Opinion Expression in Face-to-Face and Computer-Mediated Communication. In: *Communication Research*. DOI: 10.1177/0093650207313159.
- Howard, Philip N.; Hussain, Muzammil M. (2011): The Upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia. The role of digital media. In: *Journal of Democracy* 22 (3), S. 35–48.
- Kersting, Norbert (2005): The quality of political discourse: Can E-discussion be deliberative? (Annual Conference of the British Political Studies Association).
- Kneuer, Marianne (2013a): Bereicherung oder Stressfaktor? Überlegungen zur Wirkung des Internets auf die Demokratie. In: Marianne Kneuer (Hg.): *Das Internet: Bereicherung oder Stressfaktor für die Demokratie?* 1. Aufl. Baden-Baden: Nomos (Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Politikwissenschaft, 31), S. 7–31.
- Kneuer, Marianne (2013b): "Mehr Partizipation durch das Internet?". Mainz: LpB (Zur Sache, 7).
- Kneuer, Marianne; Richter, Saskia (2015): *Soziale Medien in Protestbewegungen. Neue Wege für Diskurs, Organisation und Empörung?* Frankfurt [u.a.]: Campus-Verl.
- Lotan, Gilad; Graeff, Erhardt; Ananny, Mike; Gaffney, Devin; Pearce, Ian; boyd, danah (2011): The Revolutions Were Tweeted. Information Flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions. *The Arab Spring* (5), S. 1375–1405. Online verfügbar unter <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1246/643>.
- Morozov, Evgeny (2011): *The Net delusion. The dark side of internet freedom*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Rheingold, Howard (1994): *Virtuelle Gemeinschaft. Soziale Beziehungen im Zeitalter des Computers*. 1. Aufl. Bonn, Paris, Reading, Mass. [u.a.]: Addison-Wesley.
- Robertson, J. W.; McLaughlin, E. (2010): The Quality of Discussion on the Economy in UK Political Blogs in 2008. In: *Parliamentary Affairs* 64 (1), S. 106–128. DOI: 10.1093/pa/gsq014.
- Rowe, Ian (2014): Civility 2.0: a comparative analysis of incivility in online political discussion. In: *Information, Communication & Society* 18 (2), S. 121–138. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2014.940365.
- Sarcinelli, Ulrich (2012): E-Partizipation in der 'Web 2.0-Demokratie'. Wege und Hindernisse demokratischer Teilhabe - ein Essay. In: Wolf J. Schünemann und Stefan Weiler (Hg.): *E-Government und Netzpolitik im europäischen Vergleich*. Baden-Baden: Nomos-Verlag, S. 435–448.
- Sarcinelli, Ulrich (2014): Von der Bewirtschaftung der Aufmerksamkeit zur simulativen Demokratie? Politische Visionen - Von Platon zum Global Village. In: *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 24 (3), S. 331–341.
- Schünemann, Wolf J.; Steiger, Stefan; Stier, Sebastian (2015): The net neutrality debate on Twitter. In: *Internet Policy Review* 4 (4). Online verfügbar unter <http://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/net-neutrality-debate-twitter>, zuletzt geprüft am 04.02.2016.
- Shirky, Clay (2008): *Here comes everybody. the power of organizing without organizations*. New York, NY [u.a.]: Penguin Books.

- Shirky, Clay (2011): The political power of social media. In: *Foreign Affairs* 90 (1), S. 28.
- Siedschlag, Alexander; Bilgeri, Alexander; Lamatsch, Dorothea (Hg.) (2001): Kursbuch Internet und Politik. Elektronische Demokratie und virtuelles Regieren. Opladen: Leske + Budrich (Kursbuch Internet und Politik, 2001,1).
- Steenbergen, Marco R.; Bächtiger, André; Spörndli, Markus; Steiner, Jürg (2003): Measuring Political Deliberation: A Discourse Quality Index. In: *Comparative European Politics* 1 (1), S. 21–48. DOI: 10.1057/palgrave.cep.6110002.
- Stier, Sebastian; Posch, Lisa; Bleier, Arnim; Strohmaier, Markus (2017a): When populists become popular: comparing Facebook use by the right-wing movement Pegida and German political parties. In: *Information, Communication & Society* 20 (9), S. 1365–1388. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2017.1328519.
- Stier, Sebastian; Schünemann, Wolf J.; Steiger, Stefan (2017b): Of activists and gatekeepers. Temporal and structural properties of policy networks on Twitter. In: *New Media & Society* 44 (2), 146144481770928. DOI: 10.1177/1461444817709282.
- Sunstein, Cass R. (2009): Republic.com 2.0. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Online verfügbar unter <http://gbv.ebib.com/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=581662>.
- Sunstein, Cass R. (2009): Going to Extremes. How Like Minds Unite and Divide. Oxford: University Press.
- Zollo, Fabiana, Bessi Alessandro, Del Vicario Michela, Scala Antonio, Caldarelli Guido, Shekhtman Louis, et al. (2017): Debunking in a world of tribes. In: PLoS ONE12(7): e0181821.