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Bachelor Thesis

# Polarization and Conspiracy Theories – A One-Way Road?

## A Discourse Analysis in the Context of the Corona Crisis.

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Abstract

This bachelor thesis aims to observe polarization and its potential links to conspiracy theories within online discourse, which has evolved around the emotionally charged topic of Coronavirus. By means of a discourse analysis, Facebook comments directed to the German media platforms *Die Sueddeutsche* and *RT Deutsch* are examined. Regarding theoretical expectations set by previous literature, the data is observed for characteristics suggesting a polarized debate. Both linguistic and content-related analysis manifest the impression that the discourse on the two platforms is of very different nature. On RT, anger about 'evil government machinations' is vented through uncivilized language and is often based on conspiracy theory-related presumptions. Although on SZ a critical view on government measures prevails as well, it is expressed in a more differentiated way. Direct confrontation of the opposing factions gravitating towards their own *clusters of truths* is rare, which confirms the expected formation of filter bubbles. Ultimately, polarization appears in two contrasting, but colluding forms: *Polarization through enraged apathy* is associated with RT, whereas on SZ *polarization through derogatory demarcation* is apparent. To counteract these damaging phenomena, the government is encouraged to increase accountability for its citizens. Within discourse, a metacommunication detached from emotional conflict must be developed.

*Key Words: Polarization, Conspiracy Theory, Online Debate, Discourse Analysis, Corona crisis*

# Contents

# 1 Introduction

*"Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth than lies."*
*– Friedrich Nietzsche, 1878*

Both the Internet and social media provide an excellent forum for discussions, as they offer the opportunity to disperse information quickly and to stimulate debates involving large audiences (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, Ladwig, 2014). An increasing importance of online interaction can be well observed within the latest developments in 2020: The global outbreak of the virulent respiratory disease COVID-19 (hereinafter called Coronavirus[1]) caused a global crisis on an unprecedented scale and led to citizens having to rely on the Internet in far more areas of life.

The extraordinary nature of this situation calls for equally extraordinary responses from governments in order to control this pandemic. In Germany, a law for the protection of the population authorized the government to issue national orders without further required approval of the other powers. This augmented power of the government, paired with the resulting measures such as temporary curfews and a ban of assembly, occurs to be a source of great concern to some citizens. Doubts about the appropriateness of the measures have been aired and it is assumed that the government is using the pandemic to 'finally' take control. Such insinuations appear repeatedly even in large, presumably reputable media – in social media they are formulated far more drastically and often are accompanied by the demand to resist the measures. Especially in times, when social isolation compels citizens to hold discussions exclusively on the internet, Facebook offers a platform to debate current developments. Many extremely conflicting opinions are being voiced within this heated online debate, which makes it an excellent example of how polarization takes place in general political discourse. Along with the discussion, people's curiosity and desire for information inevitably provides a platform for conspiracy theorists to spread their beliefs throughout social media with the aim of convincing people of certain elites' sinister machinations. Although many of those theories can be easily identified

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[1]Although 'Coronavirus' is not the technical term but the designation for a group of related viruses, it is most commonly used in the vernacular. To be in line with the discourse to be analyzed, it will in the following be referred to as Coronavirus.

as such, they are made for triggering intense emotions and are therefore likely to be circulated (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

Currently being the only opportunity for political opinion-forming process makes online discourse an even more relevant field for political science. Recently, there has been much research about the effects of social media and its impacts on politics. However, research about debates on social media and the interactivity in comment sections is still in its infancy (Jaspal, Nerlich, Koteyko, 2012). Thus, a discourse analysis, which examines the development of polarization and its link to conspiracy theories is highly interesting from a scientific point of view.

Due to the topicality of the Coronavirus there is still little knowledge and it is evident that society would benefit from an in-depth examination, not least due to the war of information that has flared up over the power of interpretation, which urgently needs the reflective viewpoint of science.

Such processes of polarization and the increasing popularity of conspiracy theories lead to the question: Do such processes really only take a one-way road or are there also impulses that lead back to a social rapprochement? This research attempts to not only provide a thorough examination of the mentioned phenomena occurring within online debates, but also strives to provide approaches to solution to counteract those damaging phenomena and present starting points of a possible rapprochement of polarized factions. This research also focuses on approaches to solutions in order to reverse polarization and reconnect divergent social groups.

## *1.1 Research Questions*

In order to investigate behavioral patterns with regard to polarization, this study examines debates on the social media platform Facebook by means of a discourse analysis. This analysis takes place in the comment section of articles by 'Die Sueddeutsche' (SZ) and 'Russia Today Deutsch' (RT), two large German news sites representing two different political angles. The aim of this research is to understand in which way patterns of polarization can be observed and how conspiracy theories play a role within this phenomenon. Coincidently, this research intends to ultimately find initial approaches to

solutions in order to provide impulses to a societal advancement. Thus, to investigate the phenomenon and its consequential effects the main research question of this thesis is:

*To what extent do online debates about the Corona crisis show patterns of political polarization?*

With regard to the main research question, two sub-questions have been developed to guide the analysis and to gain a deeper understanding of polarization processes and possible antidotes. A thorough examination of the farthest edges of opinion implies an investigation of the role of conspiracy theories within societal polarization, which have recently been gaining traction in online debates. To be able to answer the main research question, it is therefore crucial to study the association of conspiracy theories and a polarized debate. Hence, the following sub-question is posed:

*Can the patterns of supporting or rejecting conspiracy theories be associated with a polarized debate between two opposing groups of participants? If so, what is the essence of each group's discourse?*

After conducting a thorough analysis of polarization and its association with conspiracy theories, this research will compare the discovered argumentation lines and mental figures of each side and consequently look for unequivocal consistencies which both factions may share. The goal hereby is not to only focus on the obviously far-reaching discrepancies but discover common underlying values in order to turn these into a potential basis for rapprochement. Eventually, this leads to the development of possible approaches to solutions in order to create a positive impulse to societal advancement. Hence, the second sub-question of this research is:

*How can this polarization be counteracted? Are there unequivocal consistencies in the line of arguments between the polarized factions where bridges towards democratic consensus could be built?*

## 1.2 Outline of the Study

In order to provide a basis to answer the posed questions, the next chapter introduces the concepts of polarization (2.1) and conspiracy theory (2.2). Subsequently, the research design of this thesis is presented in the third chapter (3.1), followed by the concrete explanation of the case selection and its justification. Thereafter, the data is described (3.3.1) and the developed coding schemes are

introduced (3.3.2). The fourth chapter presents the analysis of this thesis. Subdivided into a linguistic analysis (4.1) and a content analysis (4.2) these components deliver important insights in order to approach the discussion (5), where the analyzed data is interpreted and a positioning within the context of the existing research is established. Within the discussion, distinctive features of the discourse on each media platform are discussed (5.1), the role of conspiracy theories and its association with polarization will be outlined (5.2) and underlying resembling structures of both factions including the establishment of specific approaches for resolution are described (5.3). The concluding remarks of this thesis provide an answer to the main research question (6.1), expand on some limitations of this research (6.2) and finally suggest routes for further research (6.3).

# 2 Theory – Polarization and Conspiracy Theories

In order to understand the underlying concepts of this research, the literature review will be structured in two parts. The first section will cover political polarization in society as well as its particular characteristics regarding online discourse. The second section will be concerned with the phenomenon of conspiracy theories and how to identify such. To be able to thoroughly understand individual arguments stated within social media debates, it is necessary to take interdisciplinary theories into account as they provide a basis for in-depth analysis of this phenomenon without limiting explanation to the sphere of political science. Therefore, the reviewed literature also briefly includes scholarly articles from the sphere of communication science, sociology and psychology.

## *2.1 Polarization*

The well-observed phenomenon of polarization is a concern in many democracies across the globe. By and by, society splits along political conflict lines and constructive dialogue is overshadowed by emotion-driven accusations. However, democracy is dependent on dialogue between political camps (Sigalet et al., 2019) and a rising polarization of society may destabilize democracy. According to DiMaggio (1996), polarization can be understood as the "divergence of political attitudes to ideological extremes" (p. 57).

In a polarized society, opposing camps are likely to question the moral legitimacy of the other faction and regard them and their (proposed) policies as an existential threat to themselves as well as the nation as a whole (Pew Research Center, 2016; Garcia-Guardilla & Mallen, 2019). This implies that the factions show a very low willingness to be governed by the opposition and are unlikely to compromise in order to reach solutions to societal problems (Mutz, 2011; Sunstein, 2007). Polarized factions commonly have a high level of subjective (or perceived) political knowledge and are simultaneously convinced that opposing perspectives are not only wrong, but rather inferior, illogical and evil (Abramowitz, 2013; Brasted, 2012; Hacker et al., 2006). These factors facilitate an increasingly negative view of the opposing party, strengthen the perception of *us* vs. *them,* and make a potential rapprochement increasingly difficult.

### 2.1.1 Polarization and Online Discourse.

Despite much research suggesting the cause of polarization to be party politics or a country's constitution as potential factors, there is also a strong focus on media and certain ways of information acquisition of citizens as a driving factor for polarization. With the growth of mass media, named 'engine of polarization' (Mutz, 2006), mechanisms of selective exposure come into effect. People tend to choose sources of information that support and reinforce their present opinions (Mutz, 2006). Besides, political sentiment is more and more dominated by speculation about winners and losers as well as strategizing instead of substantial differences in policies. These actual discrepancies are then abridged and fragmented to a few extreme, emotionally charged differences of opinion. The focus of the discourse is thus concentrated towards respective issues whereas other aspects are disregarded. Encouraged by this drastic black-and-white-view, debates are likely to be more uncivil and dramatic. However, it is precisely this drama and the excitement that the viewers seek (Mutz, 2006).

Another factor fueling polarization are the algorithms most search engines and social networks use. They personalize the web content and filter out unrelated information as well as opposing views based on previous user behavior (Rushkoff, 2010). This leads to the emergence of so-called 'filter bubbles', describing a state of intellectual isolation (Pariser, 2011). It implies that news articles posted by newspapers commonly situated within a certain political orientation are likely to only reach a

particular public. In a pathway based on previous user behavior an article is – consciously or unconsciously – shown. Accordingly, a large proportion of viewers are theoretically expected to align with the content of the newspaper. This isolating filter bubble effect can have negative consequences on the discourse of civil society (Pariser, 2011). Eminently associated with the effects of filter bubbles is the psychological concept of confirmation bias, which describes the tendency to favor and reuse information that confirms personal preferences (Plous, 1993). Even though polarization is a larger societal phenomenon and cannot be solely blamed on online mass media and its likelihood for the creation of filter bubbles, it does have a major impact on the offline opinion of people and is therefore a driving factor for polarization.

## 2.2 Conspiracy Theories

Despite much discussion of what precisely is considered a conspiracy theory, Sustein and Vermeule (2009) defined it as "an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)" (p. 205). Such theories are often accepted by individuals embedded in isolated groups or self-enclosed networks reproducing their own skewed information (Goertzel, 1994). Conspiracy theories often go hand in hand with a dualistic worldview and divide the world into good and evil or *us* and *them*. Even if they purport to be purely descriptive, they operate mainly in the field of normative statements (Hepfer, 2015).

### 2.2.1 Key Characteristics of Conspiracy Theories.

To be able to identify such theories, certain key features are determined. The first key feature is the self-sealing quality of conspiracy theories. "The very arguments that give rise to them, and account for their plausibility, make it more difficult for outsiders to rebut or even to question them" (Sustein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 207). This is connected to the fact that believers of such theories must also accept a "spreading mistrust in all knowledge-producing institutions" (Sustein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 209) like political and economic elites as well as the media. Also strongly intertwined is the extreme resistance to correction, characterizing a further distinctive feature. Counterarguments and contrary

evidence are disregarded by showing that they are a product of the conspiracy itself. Besides that, such theories usually attribute extraordinary power to certain agents, which they believe to plan, control others or maintain secrets. Additionally, Karl Popper (1966) argues that conspiracies are broadly based on the assumption that all consequences are intended by someone. With this "attribution of otherwise inexplicable events to intentional action", they overlook the effects that are provoked by the action of many people, none of whom intentionally caused such effects (Sustein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 208).

Previous research has shown, that "members of a deliberating group typically end up in a more extreme position in line with their tendencies before deliberation began" (Sustein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 216). This, in combination with the increasing isolation from diverse information sources which believers of conspiracy theories are likely to undergo, shows that there is a clear link between these information cascades and the polarization of groups.

Once believing in rumors which trigger those intense emotions, people are more likely to radicalize in a way where they incrementally start to question fact-based, less unsettling information which does not fit into their narrative. By and by, the trusted information sources shift as all information coming from conventional knowledge-producing institutions is undermined by the conspiracy theory.

### 2.2.2 Terminology.

In German research on conspiracy theories there is some controversy as to whether this term is even appropriate or whether one should rather speak of conspiracy myths, conspiracy ideologies or conspiracy narratives (Jaecker, 2005). This discussion is based on the fact that the term 'theory' is to some extent misleading because of its claim to have a theoretical basis that meets scientific standards and if falsified, is rejected. However, this discussion has not yet spilled over to English-speaking research and the term conspiracy theory continues to be used. Since almost exclusively English-speaking literature is consulted within this research, it will be continued to refer to the commonly used term 'conspiracy theory'.

# 3 Data and Methodology

In order to explore the public opinion of the measures taken in the context of the current Corona crisis, the comment sections of online media articles provide context for this study. This chapter below has been structured into three sections. In the first section, the concept of conducting a discourse analysis will be outlined. The second section will provide information regarding choices of the media sites, followed by the third section which is concerned with the operationalization of this paper.

## 3.1 Research Design: Discourse Analysis of Online Comments

To obtain a complete image of the political discourse, it is important to study it on several levels. Amongst the analysis of media articles and political campaigning it is necessary to also examine citizen's discourse on online debates, where argumentation structures can be observed.

### 3.1.1 Discourse Analysis.

The Corona crisis has evoked heated debates and significant reaction online, which provides a broad basis to conduct a discourse analysis. From a discourse it can be derived who, in the opinion of the respective discourse contributors, is responsible for a problem, who is to be held responsible for solving it and which political instruments are appropriate for solving this problem. A discourse analysis is an appropriate method to obtain an in-depth understanding about (perceived) implications of the pandemic as well as developments of polarization within opinion-forming processes of a topical issue. Within the analysis, the linguistic content of the comments is taken into account – with a focus on clear relationships within the text as well as the setting in which it was produced (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). A discourse analysis therefore examines the social and political effects as well as power effects of discourses. It is thus a matter of capturing the understanding the construction of political identities, narrative interpretations of political processes and battles for interpretative hegemony (Zimmermann, 2010). Discourse analysis attempts to analyze and reconstruct different levels of discourse and thereby focuses on the structure of discourse. Questions of interest are for example: Which field of statements constitutes the discourse? Which terms emerge? What may/can be said? What are the speaker positions? What are positions of legitimate speaking?

The following analysis of discourse regarding the Corona crisis on the two chosen platforms focuses on two levels of analysis parallel to the theoretical considerations: content – what is said, and linguistic strategies – how it is said. During this analysis, individual statements are examined in detail to enable a conclusive overall picture of the discourse. In practice, this means Facebook comments on selected articles are collected, then classified within an interpretation cluster and subsequently this cluster is scrutinized for recurring patterns and frequently used motifs.

### 3.1.2 Analysis of Facebook Comments.

For the described discourse analysis, the social medium Facebook was chosen due to its text focus and the fact that, contrarily to Twitter, it does not limit the amount of characters in one posting. In discussions, this gives users the opportunity to outline their argument in full length. The official Facebook sites of media sites regularly post their articles online and consequently trigger a vivid discussion, especially on divisive issues such as topics surrounding the Coronavirus.

Although it is clear that user's comments must not be interpreted as generalizable, these debates may provide a basis for a deeper understanding of people's perception of an issue. This means that the reaction of the commentators may give an insight on how people react to the Coronavirus and reflect individuals' spontaneous, unsolicited opinions (Regan et al., 2014) within such impulsive, fast-paced debates on Facebook. This makes the data unbiased and cuts out interviewer effects, which in turn allows an analysis of news media's comment sections to produce qualitatively interesting implications.

### 3.1.3 Limitations.

To conduct a discourse analysis of Facebook comments also entails certain issues that mirror methodological limitations of this study. The fast pace of Facebook discussions implies a potential threat for this research, as the fluidity hampers its accurate scrutiny and analysis. Moreover, only emotion-triggering topics cause vivid discussion in the comment section. This makes research dependent on issues that arise from disputes and limits down the choice of topics. Although comment sections display vivid discussions of the public, the content of online comments cannot be said to be representative of the general public, as the background of the commentators is unknown (Laslo et al.,

2011; Regan et al., 2014). Moreover, individuals who express their opinion in news comment sections self-evidently must have access to the internet and must choose to read and comment on online news articles (Regan et al., 2014). Besides that, Richardson and Stanyer (2011) argue that those who are likely to comment tend to be 'blindly opinionated'. Thus, their motivation to comment is largely driven by the desire to express their own point without effectively engaging in a dialogue with other participants (Regan et al., 2014). Previous research has also shown that individuals who partake in comment sections online tend to make a negative comment. This means that people who generally agree with the article are not as likely to participate in an online debate, whereas individuals who do not consent to the article's message feel more motivated to comment (Freeman, 2011). For this reason, it is once more emphasized that this research does not have relevant quantitative implications and does not depict the opinion of the general public. Its purpose is directed towards an in-depth analysis of the available argumentation in the commentary columns, which may display how discussions arise among people of diverging opinions, how they engage, what aspects are frequently being addressed and what causes them to react in an emotional way.

## 3. 2 Case Selection and Sampling

Since there are significant discrepancies between the readerships of different news sites regarding their "demographic profiles, political orientations and their perceptions of certain socially charged issues, such as immigration" (Godwin et al., 2018, p. 851), the choice has been made to include one mainstream medium as well as one news medium ideologically located on the right side of the spectrum. As a mainstream medium, the newspaper SZ has been chosen. RT was selected as the latter news medium. In section 3.2.1, further description of the respective news media is provided.

The following criteria have been used to select which articles are to be analyzed: Within the timespan of one week (08.05.2020 – 15.05.2020), all articles addressing the Corona pandemic posted on the two selected platforms were collected. Subsequently, articles with little resonance (below 150 comments) were excluded. Due to its relevance to political science, a focus was placed on articles concerning the measures and consequences of the pandemic. Consequently, three articles of each platform were selected in order to analyze their comment sections. The sampling of those comments is

facilitated by copying them into an Offline-Document, where the data is stored and is protected from any retroactive changes or erasure.

### 3.2.1 Background of the Media Platforms.

In order to fully understand the choice of media platforms, a short digression towards the background of the analyzed media platforms has to be made. *RT Deutsch Production* is a subsidiary of a state-owned Russian media company. As they state in their imprint, RT sees themselves as opposition against the "biased and often interest-driven media mainstream" (RT, 2005). The Russian medium adeptly picks up existing doubts within German society and instrumentalizes them for their own purposes (Spahn, 2018). According to the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, "state enterprises are disguised as apparently independent media in order to conceal their affiliation to the Russian state and to subtly influence public opinion." (German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, 2018, p. 187). Hence, RT attracts a readership that sympathizes with 'alternative media'.

SZ is one of the most widely read daily newspapers in Germany. According to its editorial statute, the SZ strives for 'liberal, democratic forms of society according to liberal and social principles' and is publicly perceived as left-wing liberal journalism (Hachmeister, 2012). SZ has been classified as a leading German medium that shapes and influences societal communication as well as the public (Fengler & Vestring, 2008). Due to its attributed quality, SZ attracts an educated and sophisticated readership whose aspirations, publications and audience differ vastly from those of RT. Thus, differences within the discourse among their readers are to some extent expected. On Facebook, the official page of RT has 488.000 followers, whereas SZ has around 774.000 subscribed users (06/2020).

## 3.3 Operationalization

The data to be analyzed is of qualitative nature and is based on an original data set. It consists of comments which range from short statements to detailed explanations of arguments.

### 3.3.1 Retrieval of Data.

Since the thorough analysis of all comments directed to the chosen articles is far beyond the scope of this study, it has been decided to only focus on comments evoking direct reactions, excluding all comments that did not receive any replies. Thereby, a natural selection of comments completely off-topic, non-substantial comments and comments that do not contribute to a dialogue within the discourse occurs. On Facebook, comments can be sorted in three different categories: 'Most relevant', 'Newest' or 'All comments'. 'Most relevant' displays comments by Facebook friends as well as comments with most interaction, whereas the option 'Newest' sorts comments by their date of publication. If the option 'All comments' is chosen, the viewer will be shown all comments, including potential spam. However, the Facebook algorithm also shows the most relevant comments first. To bypass a predestined selection achieved by the algorithm, the comments will be collected using the display of 'Newest' comments, since this preserves the chronological order and forms the least biased collection.

The comments of a respective article are excerpted to an offline document after approximately one week. Due to its fast pace, debates regarding a post tend to have settled after a couple of days and few new comments are expected to be added. To simplify the preservation and processing of the comments, the program Atlas TI is used. In total, 1104 comments have been collected. The data can be found in the appendices, where each batch of comments is filed as a separate document (Appendices A-F).

In order to fit the scope of the study, the choice has been made to primarily concentrate on the joint discourse evolving around the articles regarding the Coronavirus and not to analyze the discussion of each article individually. This approach fits best in order to answer the posed research question which focuses on the overall discourse arising around the topic. After all, it is not the purpose of this study to explore specific comments concerning individual subtopics but rather to capture the general opinion. Nevertheless, the content of the articles has carefully been read and are used as a basis for the analysis.

To protect the identity of the people participating in the debate, the usernames are anonymized. Also, for readability and clarity purposes, each article is assigned an abbreviation, namely RT1, RT2, RT3 and SZ1, SZ2, SZ3. The usernames are then replaced by anonymous acronyms such as A1, B8,

C12. The first letter represents the article, where A stands for RT1, B for RT2 etc. Also, this system ensures that individuals commenting more than once are identified and their statements can be linked while safeguarding their anonymity. When citing, the authors are referred to in this way (RT1; A1), so that the location of the commentary can easily be recognized.

### 3.3.2 Coding Schemes.

In order to detect patterns of political polarization, the data must be scrutinized under several criteria. Therefore, a distinction between two dimensions of analysis that may display polarization within the discourse has been made. Even though these two dimensions are strongly intertwined and reinforce each other, their detachment is important for an in-depth analysis. For each of both dimensions, a coding scheme is developed on the basis of the theory established in chapter two.

The first dimension is concerned with the linguistic aspects as well as writer strategies operating at phrasal, sentential and discourse level. In order to properly analyze the content, the way of communication needs to be detached from the actual content and provides a fundamental basis for subsequent scrutiny. The linguistic analysis includes e.g. lexical choice, orthography and grammar, application of rhetoric as well as pragmatic functions such as insults, threats, jokes and stereotypes (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017).

Subsequently, the second dimension focuses on the argumentative content that is conveyed, looking for discursive fragments that show patterns of polarization. This includes the focus on certain defining attributes of polarization that are derived from the literature in chapter two and are applied to the comments in order to investigate whether the concept of polarization occurs from a theoretical point of view. In a subsequent joint analysis these dimensions are ought to make an assessment possible as to whether or not patterns of polarization may be present. Both coding schemes can be found in the appendices (Appendix G).

In order to analyze the association of polarization with the acceptance or rejection of conspiracy theories, conspiracy theoretical content that can be found in the data is classified as such. For this

classification, four key features of conspiracy theories were used that could be retrieved from the established literature in chapter two.

Those are:

1. The self-sealing quality of conspiracy theories
2. The attribution of extraordinary power to certain agents
3. The extreme resistance to correction
4. The attribution if otherwise inexplicable events to intentional action

(Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009)

When potential links between polarization and conspiracy theories are exhaustively elaborated, the analyzed data is checked for potential underlying resemblances within discursive fragments. If such can be found, they are examined for potential traces of contingency where bridges towards democratic consensus could be built.

# 4 Data Analysis

As outlined in the methods section, two strands of analysis potentially displaying patterns of polarization within the discourse were established. First, a discursive linguistic analysis will be conducted on the basis of which a thorough study of the content of the comments will take place. The results will then be compiled, and a joint conclusion will be drawn.

## 4.1 Linguistic Analysis

The comments' language as well as the writer's strategies are presented in this section. For illustration, examples are given that demonstrate typical features of the data. The discursive linguistic analysis provides groundwork for the subsequent strand of analysis due to the language's crucial function as a transmitter of the content.

### 4.1.1 Linguistic Analysis of RT Comments.

The lexical quality of comments on RT is of rather colloquial nature and mainly based on simple language. Sentences are usually kept short and no complex sentential constructions are used. Orthography and grammar are applied correctly only to a certain extent, punctuation is placed rather

randomly. Although it is apparent that German is the mother tongue for the vast majority of users, there is limited familiarity with the correct use of linguistic rules. The application of rhetoric is almost exclusively based on the increased use of question and exclamation marks as well as capital letters. Many rely on the use of emojis in order to express the intended emotion. "if really 1 day nobody would work There they would see who is really more powerful !!" ("wenn wirklich 1 Tag kein Mensch arbeiten würde Da würden die sehen wer wirklich mächtiger ist !!"; RT1; A72). As it can be seen in this exemplary statement, linguistic rules are widely disregarded, and sentences are formed as if spoken rather than written.

The use of pragmatic functions such as insults and threats can also be frequently observed. Discussion devolves rapidly to an emotional level, where insults are likely to be hurled. However, insults are not only directed to those in the conversation but also towards political elites. Within the coded data, heavy assaults towards the latter were repeatedly observed and a total of ten death wishes or threats of heavy violence directed towards government members could be found. Additionally, a large number of less severe insults could be identified. Supplementary to insults, pragmatic functions such as jokes and stereotypes are utilized, particularly in which racism is often used as a basis. This includes the constant generalization of the opposing faction.

Notably, the common commenter of RT is, according to their use of linguistic methods, not of particularly high articulateness. The augmented use of uncivilized language including insults and threats towards opponents indeed mirrors an extremely negative image of the opposing faction.

### 4.1.2 Linguistic Analysis of SZ Comments.

The lexical quality of comments on SZ does vary but overall an adept use of language is shown. Orthography and grammar are to a large extent used correctly. Comments usually consist of a sequence of several well-formed sentences with an argumentative structure. In the course of argumentation, explanation of more complex circumstances combined with facts, figures and quotes are likely to be used in order to support arguments. Rhetoric methods such as similes, metaphors, rhetoric questions and symbols are employed to present convincing arguments.

Pragmatic functions of language such as insults are used on some occasions. Remarkably, offenses are usually not made through the use of swear words but are more subtle, e.g. the questioning of the opponent's mental sanity. Concurrently, heavy assaults or threats towards political elites as well as participants in the conversation were not observed, nor does the use of uncivilized language play a major role. Jokes and the use of stereotypes are present to some extent. These then are directed towards the opposing faction, generalizing them as feeble-minded conspiracy theorists: "Is this fan of Xavier Naidoo a bit provocative? Of course, Bill Gates is to blame for everything. He seeks world domination, he wants to inoculate and force you and he erected all the 5 G towers" (SZ3; F53). This quote is only one example of sarcastic provocation directed at critics of the public measures. By the use of exaggerated statements and sarcasm they are mocked and portrayed as mentally unstable.

Generally speaking, the overall choice of language well represents the relatively good articulateness of the majority of SZ commenters. Sentences are well-formed and structured into substantive arguments and few severe offenses are expressed. With the use of jokes and stereotypes, however, a perceptible arrogance and generally low opinion of the opposing faction are visible – especially of believers in conspiracy theories.

### 4.1.3 Conclusion of Linguistic Analysis.

The linguistic features of the two batches of data are of very different nature. On RT, the expression of content shows considerably lower articulateness and lower familiarity with linguistic sophistication than detected in the diction of SZ. This discrepancy can be recognized through the formation of shorter sentences and the usage of simpler language at RT. Insults and threats are by far more likely to be seen on RT, where the severity of insults is remarkable. However, insults do occur on SZ and are only distinguished by a more subtle way of paraphrasing them. Pragmatic functions such as jokes and stereotypes are used on both RT and SZ. By the use of such, opponents are generalized and portrayed as inferior.

## 4.2 Content Analysis

To determine whether a content-related polarization can be observed, the comments upon the articles of RT and SZ will be analyzed. Theories from the literature established in chapter 2 and manifested in the coding schemes are consulted to accomplish the analysis. In the data, people attest their agreement or disagreement towards the content of the article, outline their opinion and react to other people's statements. Therefore, the data contains a wide variety of types of comments, however, certain thought processes and argumentation patterns may reoccur. In this section, the content of the comments will be exemplified by posing typical statements that represent the general discourse. Afterwards, the content of SZ and RT will be compared and conclusions will be drawn.

### 4.2.1 Content Analysis of RT Comments.

From the collected comments on RT, there is a broad consensus conveying a negative opinion regarding the Corona measures. In order to investigate whether the content of the comments shows patterns of polarization, several discourse strands could be derived from the coded data. To give an idea of the general picture of the data, some indications as to the frequency and examples of extreme discrepancies of the respective discourse strands will be given.

Resulting from the coded data, it has been shown that certain features of the previously developed key characteristics of polarization were to be found more frequently than others. Particular specifications as for example 'Low willingness to compromise for reaching a solution for societal problems' could rarely be observed within the comments, albeit the general impression did indeed indicate such tendencies. This also applies for 'Intention of interaction is provocation', which was only present three times within the data retrieved from RT and therefore does not play a major role in the overall sentiment. The following table presents the coded characteristics of polarization regarding content and provides examples of each category.

Table 1

*Coded Characteristics of Polarization on RT regarding Content, including Examples*

| Characteristic | Example |
| --- | --- |

| | |
|---|---|
| Intention of Interaction is provocation | "I recommend a short walk in the evening around 7 pm through Duisburg-Marxloh, then you will understand what I mean by 'qualified workers'." (RT2; B31) |
| Low willingness to reach compromise for problem solutions | "Can do what they want and say what they want I won't be a part of this" (RT1; A71) |
| Call for radical/revolutionary action | "If that happens, let's all take to the streets and show the government who's in power" (RT3; C64) |
| Questioning moral legitimacy of opposing faction | "In my opinion, this no longer has anything to do with the rule of law; it is increasingly developing into a dictatorship." (RT1; A11) |
| *Us* vs. *them* | "But honestly the state is not interested in your opinion, your high moral standards or your sense of freedom ........but it is interested in your money .......and THAT is your leverage!" (C57; RT3) |
| Conviction of opposing perspective being inferior, illogical or evil | "Such completely disinformed and, moreover, obviously disinterested (as well as disloyal) people like you, we soon have to thank you for what is coming, what has been planned for a long time." (RT1; A67) |
| Low willingness to be governed by opposing faction | "Wake up, the only way out of this situation is a radical upheaval like 1989." (RT3; C124) |
| Lumping all opponents together | "The judges are coming from their own ranks. Screw that. Politics, judges, media, it's all a crock of shit" (RT1; A55) |
| Opposing faction as existential threat to themselves and society | "These criminals want to exterminate us" (RT1; A107) |

Notably, characteristics describing a very negative view of the opposing faction are most likely to occur within the data. This includes 'Questioning the moral legitimacy of the opposing faction' which in total is the most frequently applied code, 'Opposing faction as existential threat' as well as 'Conviction of opposing faction being inferior, illogical or evil'. Thus, the general consensus on RT is characterized by a strongly negative view on politics and the opposing supposedly 'pro-government' faction. More specifically, many commenters are convinced of the intentionally sinister machinations of politicians, often connected with a strong feeling of '*us* vs. *them*'. "You get the feeling they really want to see Germans dead, right?" (RT1; A106). Among the replies, general agreement as well as reiterating statements can be observed: "These criminals want to exterminate u*s*" (RT1; A107).

By referring to articles from the German Constitution, such as the Freedom of Assembly or the Right to Physical Integrity (addressing a vaccination requirement mentioned in RT1), users are convinced that politicians frequently break the law while implementing Corona measures. "Hands off the vaccination requirement! This is willful bodily harm and violates the basic right to physical integrity!" (RT1; A54).  In addition, not only the freedom and accuracy of elections, but even their mere existence is doubted repeatedly.

Based on the presumption of the mentioned intentionally sinister machinations of political elites, the selection of RT comments shows a wide range of calls for action: "If injustice is to be acceptable, then resistance becomes our responsibility!!!" (RT3; C27) This presumption facilitates the moral justification of violent protest as well as the wish for revolution.

Such comments are written by users that feel the need to counteract the government's actions in order to prevent worse. This phenomenon manifests in miscellaneous characteristics and was therefore divided into three consecutive subgroups, based on their degree of radicality: The first stage is the refusal to comply with measures to resist alleged political repression. Such statements usually do not evoke many direct reactions but are normally consented to. "I defend myself with all the means AVAILABLE to me against EVERYTHING they have in mind for us! I don't care if they take me to jail! They can fine me, I'll take it!" (RT1; A12). The second stage of rebellion is moderate call for protest and demonstration as well as the boycott of the established parties ('Altparteien') in the next election. "Go take the street and show your displeasure with the Merkel-regime. (…) The people from the former GDR have shown us how to get rid of a government and they stood with one foot in prison during their Monday demonstration (…)" (RT1; A65). The commentator here calls for protest but also implies the pursuit of a revolution by referring to the revolution in the GDR. The comparison aims to justify the use of semi-legal protest methods since demonstrators in the GDR made use of them to overthrow an unjust regime. The third identified stage is a call for radical and revolutionary action, often combined with concrete threats of violence towards political elites. "If [Jens Spahn, CDU] continues to act this way, he'll soon be facing an assassin" (RT1; A9). In total, ten statements classified

as heavy assaults/ threat towards elites could be found in the RT data during analysis. Statements of this kind are likely to be encouraged and rarely face criticism.

A95: "Who remembers the RAF?" (RT1)

A96: "...would really be needed again" (RT1)

A95: "The dictators must be removed." (RT1)

A96: "Yes!!" (RT1)

This short conversation clearly demonstrates how through the affirmation of user A96, user A95 feels supported and repeats his statement in an even more explicit way. Consequently, it is often the case that such comments are only made in response to other statements and intensify in the course of the conversation.

Additionally to the predominant negative view of current politics described in the above discourse strands, the data shows a few voices objecting to the prevailing opinion. Nevertheless, such objection is rare and explicitly opposing statements only make approximately 4,0% of all comments. Still, they usually receive much attention. Thus, an average of 17,9% of all comments are direct reactions to dissenting statements. The objection to a specific topic makes a user target to proponents of the prevailing view. Dissidents will then experience the most vehement rebuttal, frequently paired with personal attacks and defamation. Concurrently, defenders of the predominant view decisively attempt to convince dissidents. Common catch phrases such as 'Wake up!' and calls to 'read between the lines' combined with attached web-links leading to truth-revealing videos and articles are directed at them. To be able to answer the first sub-question of this paper regarding the association of polarization and conspiracy theories, the next section will discuss in more detail statements that feature such content.

Ensuing from the negative view on current politics, tangible conspiracy theoretical content could be identified. Generally, the vast majority of users are strongly convinced of the mentioned evilness of politicians, which indicates the dominance and positive reception that such content receives on RT. A large proportion of comments implicitly or explicitly express this conviction and thus show the commonality that the belief in conspiracy theories holds on RT.

Several comments claim joint malicious machinations of German politicians with 'the evil world elites': "Jens Spahn has the Bilderbergers and Bill Gates behind him as good allies against the people" (RT1; A8). Other users question the actual existence of the Coronavirus. It is believed that either German politics or 'the evil world elites' fabricate the existence of the virus in order to achieve their goals. "If only you could meet someone who's infected. I don't know anyone who knows anyone." (RT3; C12). These statements evoke heated conflict and long discussions which do not find resolution as the opponents usually consult different sources of information conveying conflicting facts.

### 4.2.2 Content Analysis of the SZ Comments.

On SZ too, criticism towards the government dominates the discourse. Even though the general sentiment does display a slightly more positive view on politics, only 4,5% of commenters explicitly express their satisfaction with politics. Codes addressing a very negative picture of politics is the most frequently employed. Whereas 'Questioning the moral legitimacy of the opposing faction' is the most frequently applied code, 'Opposing faction as existential threat' as well as 'Conviction of opposing faction being inferior, illogical or evil' can also frequently be observed. As displayed in the following table, no calls for radical/revolutionary action are present.

Table 2

*Coded Characteristics of Polarization on SZ, including Examples*

| Characteristic | Example |
| --- | --- |
| Intention of Interaction is provocation | "What has actually become of the established conspiracy theories about aliens and Elvis? I liked them better." (SZ2; E79) |
| Low willingness to reach compromise for problem solutions | "Please do not pay attention to those feeble-minded conspiracy theorists." (SZ3; F68) |
| Call for radical/revolutionary action | – |
| Questioning moral legitimacy of opposing faction | "They've been lying to us for years about so many things, little things and big things..." (SZ1; D9) |
| *Us* vs. *them* | "Since when have those morons up there ever kept their promises to us..." (SZ1; D9) |
| Conviction of opposing perspective being inferior, illogical or evil | "People who make such comments usually believe the most bizarre lunatics on Youtube." (SZ2; E44) |

| Low willingness to be governed by opposing faction | "Yes, we, the people, are the doormats of the lobby at the Bundestag. Shame on you!!!" (SZ1; D4) |
| Lumping all opponents together | "But I'm afraid that the crowd of Attila & Ken fans can't be reached by this either." (SZ3; F63) |
| Opposing faction as existential threat to themselves and society | "Shame on you, you are one of those who wants to impose hygiene fascism on our children!" (SZ3; F48) |

The attempt to develop discourse strands similar as in the analysis of the data of RT did not work. This is due to a higher degree of differentiation and sophistication incorporated in the comments. Statements are, generally speaking, far more responsive to the respective article. Even though the comments often comprise critical views, it is quickly noticeable that a rather differentiated and less one-sided view is taken.

The prevailing critical opinion also includes the questioning of the legitimacy of the measures taken by the government to combat the Corona pandemic. Specific petitions are expressed and directed towards political elites, accompanied by supporting arguments and figures. For instance, user D16 demands an increase in the short time working allowance, arguing substantively on the basis of figures and offering constructive criticism (SZ1; D16). Even though comments on SZ seem to usually be based on facts and proper reasoning, the arguments cannot be completely detached from an emotional level.

"After all, it is indisputable that ARD, in its Corona coverage with images from 2013 outside Lampedusa, made a connection to CoVid 19, just as it is also indisputable that several supposedly serious media used images from the same hospital to suggest that they came from Bergamo as well as New York City." (SZ2; E4).

Even though every user subjectively selects the transmitted content of their statement, such comments effectively depict that argumentation is reflective to quite a high extent. This leads to an increased understandability as well as a better possibility for constructive dialogue.

One perennial issue is the discussion about the reasonableness of the taken measures. In this course, also satisfaction is voiced: "I am grateful to live in Germany. Those responsible act to the best of their knowledge and belief." (SZ3; F27). Nevertheless, quite a large proportion of the discussion can

be classified as constructive criticism which does not aim on denigrating accountable politicians but on proposing other approaches for action.

Conspiracy theoretical content on SZ is rather addressed by people speaking about it than by people actually expressing their belief in it. There is a lot of discussion about reasons for believing in it, as one of the selected articles addresses exactly this topic. Many users name factors they believe to be the reason for other people's belief in conspiracy theories. Such mentioned causes include a lack of media competence, dissatisfaction in life and the search for culprits and intellectual overcharge with the flood of information. These arguments are communicated in a fact-based, reflected way and are based on a mixture of anecdotal and evidential knowledge, usually labelled as such.

Another, recurrent form of engagement with conspiracy theoretical content is the sarcastic, purposely exaggerated use of such. An apparent pattern is to ridicule and defame such theories and people who believe in them, often based on the assumption of being superior. Only an extremely small number of SZ users express their actual belief in conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are not actually permeated here, but some users subtly defend 'critical thinking' and the 'questioning' of the mainstream press and thus in fact indirectly promote the belief in 'alternative truths'. "So anyone who thinks critically, researches and doesn't blindly believe the media is called a conspiracy theorist?" (SZ2; E32) Reactions to such statements range from heavy critique, questioning particular aspects of the argumentation, but also insults and defamation. As there is a strong predominance of believers in science on SZ, the 'critically thinking' person is likely to be cornered.

### 4.2.3 Conclusion Content Analysis.

It becomes apparent that discourse on RT is based on a more biased, subjective manner than discourse on SZ. Although a vivid discussion takes place on both platforms, the debate on RT tends to incorporate a one-sided view taken by the commenters which is associated with little willingness to attentively listen to other people's comments. Views of other people are not comprehended and arguments do not specifically respond to other comments on a content-based level. A truly content-based discussion is rare, argumentative conversation is likely to drift onto an emotional level including insults and defamation of the opposing faction. In contrast, SZ comments are usually based on content-based

argumentation specifically directed at the subject of the article or another user's comment. Due to this higher sophistication leading to a greater individuality of statements, it has been more difficult to formulate universally applicable schemes that cover typical discourse strands within comments. The content of comments on RT is influenced by the message of the article only to some extent and apparently many people only read the headline. Statements repeat themselves, which makes it approachable to classification into certain categories such as clearly allocated discourse strands.

## *4.3 Conclusion Remarks*

The joint consideration of linguistic analysis and content analysis intensifies the impression that both platforms are shaped by a very different type of discourse. Even though they are both marked by ample criticism of government action, this criticism is expressed in very different ways. Accompanied by insults and threats, anger is vented on RT, expressed in simple language without long presentation of arguments. Doubts about the effectiveness of the measures are raised and it is assumed that the government is using the pandemic in order to extend their power. With a miscellaneous but more sophisticated discussion on SZ, criticism is expressed in a more differentiated and thereby more constructive way. The longer average length of sentences and comments is one clear indication of this observation. Notably, conspiracy theories do play a role on both platforms, even though in dissimilar ways. While being treated as a widely accepted opinion on RT, they are more of an object of observation on SZ and are strongly countered. On SZ, this manifests itself in the augmented use of sarcastic, exaggerated jokes about conspiracy theorists, entailing a discernible arrogance towards such people.

It is, however, remarkable that discourse on both platforms does in fact feature certain similarities. Thus, it is evident that the majority of comments voice a critical view on politics. On RT in effect, this is manifested through the expression of dissatisfaction and anger, ultimately resulting in several calls for radical action against the government. SZ users in turn are more likely to address reproach in an argumentative, fact-based way and express criticism in a constructive manner. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the discourse on SZ is quite heterogeneous and by all means, emotional, subjective statements can be found. Among all criticism on both platforms, a conveyed desire for good governance and personal security prevails. This may be expressed in several implicit or

explicit ways. The entirely novel situation of the Corona crisis is contributing to a great degree of uncertainty regarding the future. Hence, the great desire for effective governance combined with much-expressed anxiety about the future is, as noted, articulated in extensive criticism.

# 5 Discussion

This section is used to structure and relate the analyzed data to the concept of polarization as well as its links to conspiracy theories in order to draw substantial conclusions. Additionally, there will be a focus on the observed similarities between the opposing factions. With account to such apparent and unequivocal consistencies, it is explored how such polarization can potentially be counteracted and bridges towards democratic consensus may be built.

## 5.1 Destructive vs. Constructive Criticism? Typical Characteristic of each Discourse

Taking into account the findings of chapter four and the background information on the media platform provided in chapter three, the observed outcomes can now be presented and interpreted within appropriate context. So, what do these main outcomes imply? To summarize, discourse on RT is prevailingly concerned with doubts about the general legitimacy of the government and the effectiveness of the measures that are creating room for widely accepted conspiracy theories. In contrast, discourse on SZ is shaped by a broader variety of opinions, which tend to be voiced through more differentiated argumentation. Critical voices expressing their concern and dissatisfaction towards the government are also prevalent on SZ, but the form of expression differs from that on RT, where the augmented use of uncivilized language and emotional blanket-criticism dominate. Thus, the linguistic characteristics of discourse on RT suggest disadvantageous substance in terms of sophistication of discussion as well as a lower intellectual quality of argumentative ability.

The contrasts in content, type of criticism, radicality, language and way of argumentation between the readership of RT and SZ indeed hint at the presence of polarization. Although one might assume that polarization implies a direct, intense confrontation of factions, in the data, this only occurs to a limited extent. However, the very nature of polarization in fact implicates a separation between the opposing groups and does therefore not necessarily include acute confrontation. This finding confirms

the in chapter two established concepts regarding the formation of 'filter-bubbles' (Pariser, 2011) and effects of selective exposure (Mutz, 2006; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2011), which are factors that reinforce the polarization in between divergently opinionated people.

Within both data batches, the inclination to comment seems more often to be a release of emotional dissatisfaction, which leads to a large proportion of critical comments and few statements expressing positive, reinforcing perspectives. As alluded in the theory, certain effects do indeed come into place where consenting views are by far less likely to be expressed than disagreeing views (Freeman, 2011). These expressions of frustration regarding government action and the lack of opposition lead to a disproportionate number of critical opinions and facilitates a shift towards a more extreme position. Hence, a breeding ground for conspiracy theoretical content is established and enables the opportunity to reach persons that are potentially at risk of shifting in such mindsets.

## 5.2 Shifting *Clusters of Truths*

The findings show that the appearance of conspiracy theories and polarization are in a way mutually dependent. An acceptance of conspiracy theoretical content mirrors the fringes of the spectrum within polarized debates on which a fully dispassionate, even mechanical confidence in science would constitute the other extreme. The belief in conspiracy theories is inherently polarizing, as it facilitates the discreditation of all legitimacy of opposing views. Constructive dialogue is no longer possible since two conflicting realities clash due to the implementation of a personal, holistic *cluster of truths*. This phenomenon describes precisely such information reproducing systems on the basis of which self-enclosed networks, as introduced in chapter 2, operate and construct their own realities. Rational argumentation based on objective facts cannot break through because the facts themselves have been replaced by alternatives incorporated in such a *cluster of truths*. Contrary to the conspiracy theory-based *cluster of truths*, a science-based *cluster of truths* is existent.

So, what can be concluded from this? The belief in one or another *cluster of truths* is by no means absolute – individuals are often likely to believe in truths disseminated by each of the clusters, even if they are contrasting. This is not least due to the often non-obvious nature of information, which

can be highly difficult to recognize, especially in case of low media competence. On this basis, it becomes apparent that the affinity towards conspiracy theories is actually a phenomenon in flux. The alleged clear distinction between two opposing homogenous groups appears to be a dichotomic construction: In fact, people believe in conspiracy theories only to some extent and still accept large parts of the science-based *cluster of truths*. To illustrate this outcome, Figure 1 displays the spectrum between the belief in a conspiracy theory-based *cluster of truths* and the belief in a science-based *cluster of truths*. It serves to visualize the extreme difficulty in distinguishing conspiracy theorists and believers in scientific data as two immobile, non-intersecting groups.

*Figure 1.* A Phenomenon in Flux: *Clusters of Truths*.
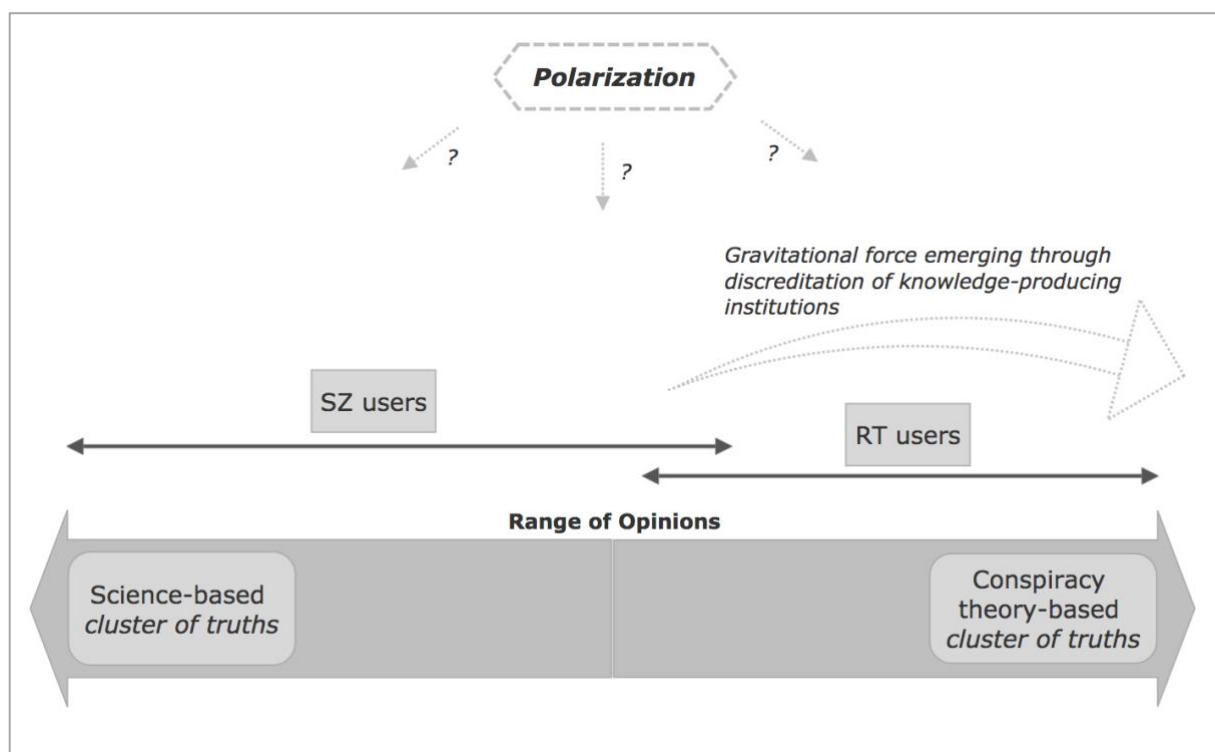


On both platforms, users believing in conspiracy theoretical content are present, which does not necessarily make them extremists. An aspect that the implications of Sunstein & Vermeule (2011) add to this scale is the likelihood to radicalize incrementally once starting to believe in conspiracy theories (see chapter 2.2). A certain gravitational force emanates from these, which is due to the conveyed mistrust undermining knowledge-producing institutions. Trusted information sources shift

once fact-based knowledge begins to be questioned. As a result, a movement in the opposite direction towards a science-based *cluster of truths* is far more challenging to achieve.

The tendency of gradual convergence towards such theories is what makes it an important factor to consider regarding polarization. Immanently, conspiracy theories facilitate and even boost polarization. At the same time, polarization and its inherent capacity for generalizing and lumping all opponents together makes a simplified *us* vs. *them* worldview more likely. Thus, a polarized debate with its outer fringes of opinion spectrum provides a particularly fertile ground for the dissemination of conspiracy theories.

## 5.3 'Polarization through Enraged Apathy' vs. 'Polarization through Derogatory Demarcation'

The recognized mutual dependence of these two phenomena connects to the complex deliberation of the observed polarization. As established above, patterns of polarization can be determined in between the factions associated with RT and SZ. In accordance with the assumption based on background information about the respective media outlet, a more polarized debate, leaning towards a conspiracy theoretical side, could be observed on RT. SZ, as a generally accepted mainstream medium covers a broader range of views and does not provide as much polarizing content. However, one must not be blinded by this enticingly simple outcome, since such complex phenomena must be regarded more differentially. In fact, taking the high degree of blanket-categorization and feeling of superiority towards the opposing faction on SZ into account, it can by no means be assumed that polarization is not present. Hence, this results in the assumption that two different types of polarization must be discerned: On RT, allegations are expressed in an emotional, vociferous way based on a feeling of disempowerment by the system. To precisely describe this complex phenomenon, it therefore has been named *polarization through enraged apathy*. Antithetic to this type of polarization, the discourse on SZ is shaped by differentiated criticism of the government and a simultaneous demarcation of those who think differently. By immediately denouncing such people as conspiracy theorists a strong feeling of superiority is conveyed. Thus, this type of polarization can be described as *polarization through*

*derogatory demarcation*. These two types of polarization are mutually dependent and jointly reinforce the effect of polarization from both sides.

*Figure 2*. A Phenomenon in Flux: *Clusters of Truths* and Types of Polarization.
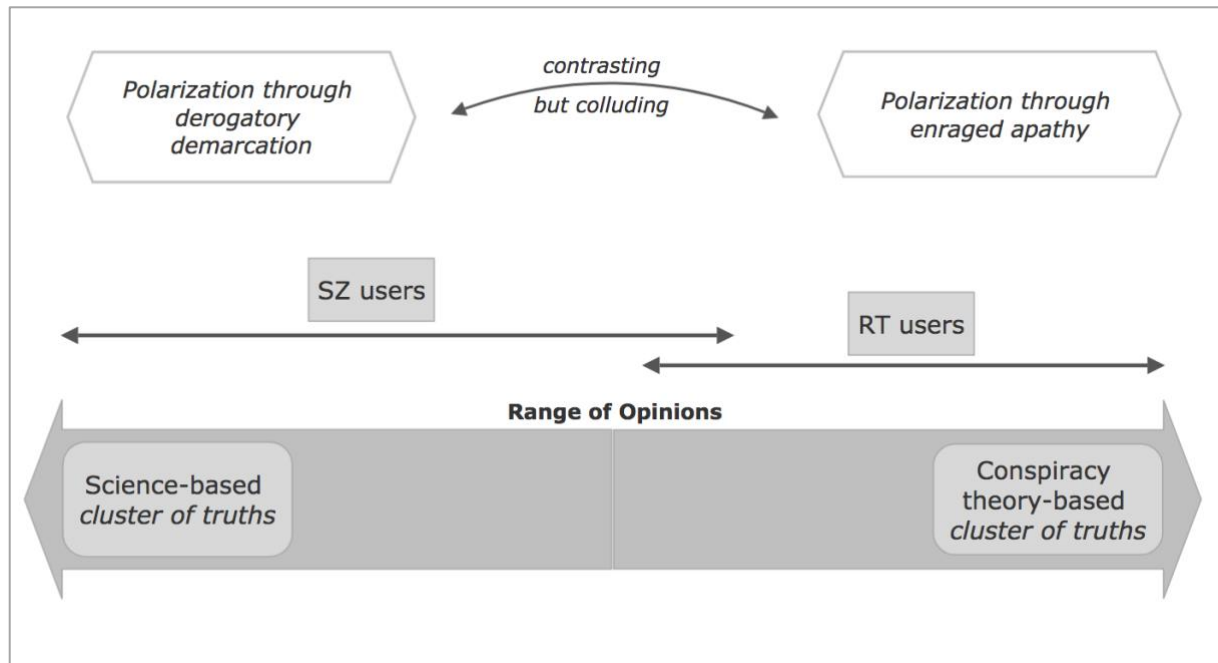


However, it must be clear that both types of polarization cannot be assumed to be equally damaging. While the polarization on SZ and its detrimental effect of excluding the other faction with a certain conveyed arrogance is typical, the polarization on RT reaches a much more radical level. With numerous cases of severe insults and death wishes, heavily racist statements, hostility towards certain marginalized groups and even calls for violent revolution, polarization on this front has developed into being far more radical and bigoted. Certain forms of expression within the polarized debate must therefore implicitly be regarded as far more detrimental and harmful to democracy.

## 5.4 Unequivocal Consistencies: Desire for Reliability *and* Desire for Social Affiliation

In order to begin to counteract this polarization, argumentative similarities within certain underlying structures could be identified. Within these structures, two distinct facets were discerned. The first facet regards the omni-present criticism of government action. This recurring motif gives rise to the presumption that it emerges from the subjacent desire for good governance in this unprecedented

situation. Accordingly, the much-expressed criticism of both factions is rooted in a deep *desire for reliability* as well as for leadership and governance in a dynamic situation. However, the notion of this desired reliability is defined differently among the opposing factions and thus comes to light by means of divergent criticism.

The second facet hypothetically indicates a deep-rooted *desire for social affiliation*. The data instantiate people's urge to position themselves in a social communion, which is achieved by being able to project a sense of social belonging on societal processes. This happens first on a personal level, for example through the feeling of belonging to a particular group, whose collective patterns of orientation are then directly projected onto societal level. Social affiliation thus has the purpose of defining one's own identity in order to simultaneously take up a position in society. Wherever a person considers themselves to be most understood or valued plays a decisive role when consciously or unconsciously choosing one side. With increasing adherence to a science-based *cluster of truths*, complexity of the discourse increases as well. Thus, this complexity reduces comprehensibility and contains a risk that some people feel more understood by complexity-reducing populist theses and conspiracy theories.

## 5.5 Bridges towards Democratic Consensus

The heavy criticism towards policymakers observed in the course of this study now raises the question of how policymakers may deal with such negative attitudes towards them. With account to the outcomes of this study, the notion of the two underlying facets as the *desire for reliability* and the *desire for social affiliation* may be deliberately addressed within two dimensions. The first dimension regards the macro level, on which accountability needs to be made tangible and transparent. This means that accountability before citizens should be a major government objective and serve as a main, explicit policy aim in policy-making processes. Another way to generate accountability could be the increased implementation of participatory formats on local, state and national level.

The second dimension approaches on a micro level and ultimately aims to prevent people from turning to conspiracy dispersing groups. Since fact-based argumentation seemingly does not reach people who already believe in parts of conspiracy theory-based *clusters of truths*, it seems necessary to

implicitly focus on the mentioned *desire of affiliation*. More than elsewhere, this rethinking must also happen in online discussions and discourse must shift to a relational level where deliberate metacommunication[2] is established (Mateus, 2017). Accordingly, communication quality has to be in the focus rather than the content of supposedly logical arguments. Blanket categorizations such as 'tin foil hats' (SZ3; F86) are reflexive rhetoric figures and reinforce the artificial construction that there are only two poles which oppose each other. By using such rhetorical figures, one can reproduce vivid images within discourse, or choose to disrupt the vicious cycle by consciously considering communication quality within the debate. But how can a good quality of communication in discourse be achieved, although political communication is most likely to be conflict communication? Regarding this issue, Rußmann (2015) set up an index for communicative orientation ('Verständnisorientierung') in the context of the quality of communication within discussions on Facebook. The extent to which online discussions are communication-oriented is therefore greater, the more frequently the participants:

- justify their positions on political issues and the more demanding these justifications are;

- in the case of contentious issues, come up with proposals for solutions and/or mediation and the more concrete these proposals are;

- treat each other with respect;

- the more discursive the contributions to the discussion are, i.e. the more doubts about communicative claims to validity are articulated

 (Rußmann, 2015, p.181)

These criteria of communicative quality show that discourse is far more than simple exchange of information. Once these facets are considered in debate, polarization is less likely to gain a foothold

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[2] So far, government members have implemented content-shifting strategies in order to retain favorable public opinion (see e.g. Horst Seehofer (CSU) on the refugee issue). Counteractively, shifting opinion content-wise seems to be the wrong approach, as one is considered far less trustworthy, if his/her point of view suddenly changes. This reaction is rather mimicry and confirms that 'those high up' are not being honest. Such metacommunication could potentially evolve political controversy without anyone having to disavow themselves (Mateus, 2017).

and, on the other hand, an adherence to those criteria can then counteract an already polarized debate. Consequently, communicating responsibly will contribute to breaking the vicious cycle of generalization and is an approach to combat the polarization of debates. Due to the scope of the study, these two dimensions of solution can only be briefly touched upon in this paper, however, they represent a promising approach to how polarization may be addressed.

# 6 Concluding Remarks

Having attained these outcomes, the conclusion now summarizes the central findings in order to present an answer to the main research question. Moreover, this chapter recognizes the limitations of this research as well as potential routes for further research.

## 6.1 Answer to the Research Question

The data analysis of the two media platforms RT and SZ answers the guiding research question of this paper, which focuses on patterns of polarization within the analyzed discourse. With account to the first sub-question addressing conspiracy theories, it is clear that conspiracy theories and polarization are mutually dependent. The belief in conspiracy theories is inherently polarizing, as it facilitates the discreditation of all legitimacy of opposing views. Concurrently, a polarized debate with an *us* vs. *them* mentality and its far-out fringes of opinion shifts the discourse towards the extreme and thereby fosters a breeding ground for the dispersion of conspiracy theoretical content.

Ultimately, the question of whether patterns of polarization are present can be confirmed. Polarization is especially evident between the two opposing factions on RT and SZ, each gravitating towards their own *cluster of truths*, which contradict each other. However, a direct confrontation occurs rather infrequently due to the separation of the platforms' discourses.

In order to represent the diverging forms of polarized debate observed on each platform, two profound groups of polarization have been defined. On RT *polarization through enraged apathy* is evident, which is characterized by the emotional, vociferous expression of allegations towards politics which are based on a feeling of disempowerment by the system. Contrarily, discourse on SZ has been

described as *polarization through derogatory demarcation* and is shaped by differentiated criticism of the government and a simultaneous demarcation of those who think differently. By immediately denouncing such people as conspiracy theorists a strong feeling of superiority is conveyed. These two phenomena jointly reinforce the process of a polarized debate from both sides but can by no means be regarded as equally pernicious. Discourse on RT with its numerous anti-democratic, bigoted statements and tendency to promote conspiracy theoretical content is significantly more harmful to democracy and society in general, as it promotes wrongful information and is clearly directed against both democratically elected officials and marginalized groups.

In order to counteract this destructive process of polarization, solution approaches within two dimensions could be contrived. An approach targeting (1) the macro level regarding the government's perceived lack of accountability involves the development of accountability for its citizens to be a major government objective and main policy aim. The second dimension addresses (2) discourse on a micro level: with account to the human desire of social affiliation, discussion – especially online – must focus on the relationship level of communication and the establishment of a metacommunication detached from emotional conflict. To achieve such communication, an index for communicative orientation measuring the quality of communication in terms of justifications, proposed solutions, respect and doubts is to be consulted. These two approaches may give an insight into how the complex and damaging phenomenon of polarization may be counteracted and a rapprochement of estranged groups within society may find a way to re-engage on the road towards productive democratic discourse.

## 6.2 Limitation of the Study

Due to the scope set by the research question as well as the aim of this study, consequential limitations must be regarded. A major challenge of this study located in the coding process is the treatment of occurring vagueness among the comments. Many comments do – to a greater or lesser extent – convey certain characteristics of polarization as well as conspiracy theoretical content. However, such statements are often made implicitly and the boundaries are fluid. This ambiguity in the coding process is aggravated by the fact that the data was analyzed by a single coder, which creates a natural bias and contributes to the inferentiality of drawn conclusions. As a result, quantitative details

of coded characteristics in particular are difficult to be mapped out. In order to help the reader to get an approximate assessment for the proportion of observed characteristics, certain numbers are nevertheless included in the analysis. Within the analysis of the two data batches, no detailed examination on how discourses differ in relation to the content of each article and whether some subtopics of the Coronavirus fuel a particularly polarized debate could be conducted. Finally, the research has no implications as to what kind of people engage, what their inclination for commenting is and how the discourse in the analyzed commentary sections are different to the general public's discourse.

## 6.3 Implication for Further Research

Further research on the individuals that decide to engage in online discourse as well as the difference of such online discourse to that of the general public could yield highly interesting findings. This may happen via a quantitative approach with a larger sample and a representative questionnaire survey or via a mixed-methods study also including interviews. Also, a longitudinal study conducted over a longer period of time could highlight yet more interesting outcomes during transition of discourse. Due to the multi-dimensional subject of the study touching expertise from the fields of political science, communication science, sociology and psychology, an interdisciplinary study design would be highly relevant. Such an approach would bring necessary expertise to areas of the topic neglected by this political science study, such as e.g. individual processes of approaching conspiracy theories on a sociological and psychological level. Moreover, quantitative approaches to this topic and its implications of the polarization towards the Corona crisis are much needed, which is presently affecting such fundamental societal issues, e.g. by possibly comparing it with other polarizing issues or polarization in other countries. Due to the topicality of the Corona crisis, little research has been conducted in this highly dynamic field, leaving room for further study on the issue either in more depth and/or on a larger scale. Only then has this phenomenon the potential to be fully understood – and a way out of this presumed one-way road of polarization may be found.

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